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## And then again I draw myself to the detail

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# 'And then again, I draw myself to the detail'

## Capturing experiential states in contemporary dance making through Expanded Fields

RUTH GIBSON AND JENNY ROCHE

What are the complexities of perception within a dancing moment? Even a split second of action holds a richly interwoven circuit of information that often passes unperceived by the dancer they process the various strands of sensation, imagery, intention, imagination and environmental stimuli.

*The doubts are there before the push—the multitasking of all that thought. I have to manage everyone else as well as my own body, reaching a tipping point—a tipping over. Before the point of no return. All of the noise, that readjustment... it's all minutiae. Once I've committed it goes quiet. The sensation of being in my body and where it is in space. That's the moment; it's like flying. I reach across my torso, arm down to my leg, down to the heel and out through the middle finger. I'm looking from inside, seeing with my anatomy, not looking with my eyes but visualizing the length of my middle finger going forward. I'm visualizing through my spine. I see bones and vertebrae, the skeleton... it's a 3D image of the space. Not one-dimensional; it's anatomy, shapes, geometry, architecture, all coming together to strike the right chord, like the line of a poem.*

The passage above articulates a dancing moment from *Expanded Fields*,<sup>1</sup> the outcome of a collaborative process between the authors, visual artist Bruno Martelli and composer Mel Mercier, with dancers Kévin Coquelard, Henry Montes and Ursula Robb. The piece exists as a gallery installation encapsulating live performance, video, sound and virtual reality (VR), exploring the various and often invisible layers circulating in the performance of choreography and inviting the audience to experience the 'material' of the work in a range of different ways. The recording of this account from dancer Ursula Robb is played during the performance to highlight other dimensions of experience that cannot be overtly perceived when watching the dance. The dancers' perceptions were a central aspect of making the piece and inspired many of the creative responses from the collaborators, including the composition of the VR spaces that

formed part of the installation experience between live performances.

Prior to working together in the studio Ruth Gibson, Bruno Martelli and Jenny Roche established a focus on bringing the audience into proximity with the movement and experience of the dancers, thereby shifting audience awareness from a predominantly visual perspective. Placing the work in a gallery assisted this process, as it immediately gave each audience member agency in choosing and adjusting their 'point of view', rather than the generally fixed frontal view determined by a theatre setting. The inclusion of various perspectives of the choreography through video, recorded text, sound and VR was designed to heighten awareness to the 'liveness' of the dancers when they were in the space and to sensitize the audience to some of the other sensorial dimensions of sound, touch and kinaesthesia when experiencing dance.

The studio developments began in May 2019 in Limerick where we established a choreographic source structure that we then expanded on through various modes of capture. A central trio and series of solos emerged from movement improvisation sessions that Jenny Roche undertook with choreographer Liz Roche (who joined the process for the first few days) and the dancers. The resulting choreographic material was formed from a simple task using the directions *Brush, Rebound and Jolt* that each dancer would embody in a different order. The dancers developed movement responses to this simple score that became the structure through which they danced together and was later developed into larger sections so that the full piece was replete with diverse iterations of this original material. The dancers formed individual solo material from a written response to a movement exploration that was overlaid with their personal associations. The trio choreography worked as a relational structure

<sup>1</sup> *Expanded Fields* was presented live at Limerick City Gallery of Art in 2019 and due to COVID-19 was subsequently presented online in Mozilla Hubs in Live Collision International Festival in November 2020. This online project developed in parallel to the Experience Together Network, which was funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Irish Research Council under the UK-Ireland Collaboration in the Digital Humanities Networking Call

through which the dancers interacted in various degrees of proximity to one another, with the solos being individual explorations that were semi-improvised. The intention was that the movement material did not have any meaning in and of itself other than the history of the three dancers devising it together, to allow these simple structures to be further expanded within the framework of the gallery installation. Gibson and Martelli joined during this week to witness the devising process initiated by *Brush, Rebound and Jolt*.

Gibson led Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) sessions with the group, inviting a deep exploration of somatic experience. This technique of *Releasing* in dance is a system of kinaesthetic training in which principles of relativity are discovered and applied by the individual through the integration of the mind-body complex within an image forming process. The technique is not linear. A does not lead to B, and B to C. Rather it is web-like. It is customary after class to draw or write in journals as a reflection on experience. This activity of writing helps to bring awareness back into the room from sometimes deep states of exploration. Throughout the creative process, all of the movement explorations led into writing and drawing as a means of capturing perceptions of experiential states. At the end of this first week, composer Mel Mercier<sup>2</sup> led a session in the Gamelan room in the Irish World Academy through which the whole group explored making sound together and various ways of listening. This session followed an SRT class that had cultivated integration of inner and outer awareness, suspension and buoyancy, principles carried with us as a collective team and resonating in the Gamelan room.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Mel Mercier is the director of the Irish Gamelan Orchestra and chair of Performing Arts at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick.



■ *Expanded Fields* performance, Limerick City Gallery of Art, 23–24 November 2019. Photo Maurice Gunning.

#### ARTICULATING LIVED EXPERIENCE

As Mercier led the team through some simple shared exercises to find rhythmic cohesion together with the Gamelan, he drew our attention to the various dimensions of listening. This listening expanded into the courtyard outside the room, where voices carried from there into our space as if there were no external walls. This heightened awareness of how sense perception can shift radically when its appearance is examined somatically was an important theme throughout the making of the piece and was informed further by one of the primary methodological inspirations for this work, the Micro-Phenomenological Interview (MPI). Originally developed by Pierre Vermersch and further expanded on and taught by Claire Petitmengen, this interview process explores the possibilities of evoking and describing lived experience in detail. Petitmengen *et al.* (2019: 692) describes the interview process in the following way:

The specificity of the micro-phenomenological interview method is that it focuses on a singular experience. The premise of the method is indeed that only the exploration of a singular concrete experience makes it possible to practice an *époche*: to ‘bracket’ or suspend our preconceptions and theorizations about experience, and notably our implicit belief in the existence of an objective world independent of experience. This act enables us to leave our ‘natural attitude’ of absorption into the content of experience (the ‘what’), to reorient our attention towards the way this experience appears to us (the ‘how’). (Petitmengen *et al.* 2019: 692)

The structure of the interview process helps the interviewer navigate circulating spaces, called ‘satellite dimensions’, where judgements or conceptions about the experience can cloud the raw experience of a singular moment (Petitmengen *et al.* 2019: 694). These dimensions contain ‘generalities, comments, beliefs, judgments, explanations or theoretical knowledge’ rather than the prenoetic (Gallagher 2005) experience that may not be fully analysed or processed but can be evoked as a transmodal (multi-sensory) lived moment through the interview (Petitmengen *et al.* 2019: 694). This is achieved by bringing attention to various sensory experiences and the ways in which they may be registering simultaneously.

Roche undertook a week-long training in the MPI method in October 2019, and this informed discussions and impacted on the fine tuning of the choreography in the lead up to performance. The perspectives elicited by the MPI evocations added another choreographic dimension to the solos, where the dancers were asked to play between the two planes of wall and floor, as if viewing the same moment from different visual perspectives, which is a common experience in the interview whereby the interviewee sees images of themselves doing an action from various viewpoints. Some moments in Coquelard's solo were inspired by developing multi-faceted iterations of his movement that progressed forward and retrograded backwards through the movements, also fragmenting and cutting the flow of the material, to evoke a sense of remembering an action in all its multiplicity.

The influence of the MPI produced a meta level of engagement, exploring layers that were not immediate to our awareness, eliciting a sense that the dance is itself a trace and resonating with André Lepecki's writing on the Derridean concept of the trace in relation to dance and writing. Lepecki (2004) outlines Derrida's critique of the weight of presence as a site of true knowledge in Western metaphysics by exploring how this has influenced the turn towards archiving and notating dances but paradoxically can arrest or 'still' the dancing body when we try to capture it. Lepecki references Mark Franko's notion that 'complexity hinges on asking how much of dance [...] materializes as visible, or should be understood in visual terms alone' (Franko cited in Lepecki 2004: 133). This idea that the dance may not materialize fully but be co-located in other, perhaps virtual spaces to be incarnated in the moment of performance and in various stages along the process (captured through the writing, sound recordings, video and motion capture) underlies much of the thinking in *Expanded Fields*. Indeed, Lepecki's view resonates with Henry Sayre's analysis of Derrida's concept of the trace, when he proposes 'considering dance's materiality not only as that physical motility temporally and spatially enclosed within the frame of the stage and the dancer's skins, but also as a symbolically charged imaginary space'

(134). This corresponds with the endeavour to explore the perceptual spaces of the dancers in their embodiment of the choreography by capturing various materializations of experience, thereby proposing a fluidity and multi-dimensionality to being-ness that is brought to light by the different manifestations of the choreography across multiple media.

As a means of articulating these imaginary spaces that shape the movement, language has a key role in this work. Teresa Brennan (2004) describes the role of languaging experience in freeing up perception in her exploration of affect. She outlines how 'feelings are sensations that have found the right match in words', explaining that experiencing a feeling without a name causes consciousness to constrict, whereas naming a feeling releases consciousness (Brennan 2004: 5). She continues,

It then behooves us, as a species, to reconnect language and understanding with the fleshy and environmental codes from which our consciousness has been split... those natural pathways do their best in the dark, but bump into each other without the regulating force of living attention. (Brennan 2004: 149)

This is reflected in the MPI process as a way of describing 'dimensions of experience where the distinctions we usually consider as given—between inside and outside, between mind and body, or between sensory modalities—weaken' (Petitmengen *et al.* 2019: 698).

As Petitmengen (2006) outlines, it can be highly challenging to track a lived moment as we are often absorbed in the objective of our actions and not in *how* we carry these actions out. Furthermore, it is easy to become distracted by other thoughts or to slip into more culturally determined descriptions of what we are doing than to access the original moment as we experienced it. Finally, maintaining a dual focus on the content of experience and how it appeared to us, while finding the language to capture this, adds significantly to the complexity of the whole process. When focusing on a dance context, which operates in what Pouillaude (2017: 241) describes, after Goodman, as the 'syntactically and semantically *dense*' analogue environment of the dance studio, the volume of information

and complexity of the internal and external milieu can be overwhelming. Fortunately, dancers are generally well positioned to direct awareness with clarity and to pragmatically differentiate between personal 'feelings and emotions' and relevant insights, as they can often be required to 'mine' personal perceptions and associations during a choreographic process. During *Expanded Fields* Coquelard, Montes and Robb were asked to write from their experiences of moving in improvisations and when dancing the choreography. These vignettes were audio recorded and then interwoven throughout the sound composition by Mercier for the live performances and arranged by Martelli in the VR spaces.

#### THE INSTALLATION

The decision to have a contrast of pastel and colour costumes was a deliberate choice, led by Gibson and Martelli's idea of a technicolour, saturated and soft-focus look and feel—and how the rendering of the avatars might take shape in VR. They flipped between foggy and sharp. The pale putty colours appeared very crisp in the video so that the edge of the body can be seen and the vibrant primary coloured costumes blurred to out of focus re-emphasizing what emerged from the MPI, a blurring and sharpening of image and memory. In performance, the perceptual difference of the costume colours for both the dancers and audiences created a continual liveness of shifting perspectives.

■ *Expanded Fields* performance, Limerick City Gallery of Art, 23–24 November 2019. Photo Maurice Gunning.



The trios, duets and solos were all filmed from varying angles, exploring degrees of proximity to the body, evoking the experience of the dancers' visual perspective of one another while in movement. This loosening of the point of view intended to capture how the dancers might appear to one another in moments of dancing together. This was quite pronounced in the trio, while, in contrast, the solo material was filmed as a kind of mapping of stages of rehearsal along the pathway to the more refined and finished material in the performance. Descriptions elicited throughout the *Expanded Fields* process informed the design of the video shoot, editing and VR, revealing the diverse ways of 'seeing' among the group. We used processes inspired by MPI to enable us to discover ordinary inaccessible dimensions of our lived experience and describe them. Articulating from the outside about the inside requires certain commonalities to be established and recognized. When we are recalling, retrieving in MPI we seemed to create memory images, or 'image clusters' (Skura 1990: 11) as described by Joan Skinner in relation to SRT. These often find expression through poetic language forms as a means of capturing the 'symbolically charged' multi-sensorial experience in MPI. The interview has a rhythmical quality, like a poem, as the interviewer repeats and re-iterates the descriptions of the interviewee to build a framework in language to travel back to the moment in question. Unspecified verbs are explored to create more accuracy of articulation in MPI instruction, then these verbs inhabit the questions. A dancer is asked to recall a moment in their dance as their improvisation unfolds: Where is your arm in relation to your torso? Where does your weight lie? Are you seeing anything at this time? Are you aware of any sensation? How do you know you are feeling this? Equally, repetition of verbs in the language of SRT is extremely important and interwoven in haiku like prompts. The gentle attention placed on the student in SRT and interviewee in MPI helps them to let go, relax and break habitual patterns in order to delve deeper. The softness of the voice in the delivery of SRT teaching and MPI interviewing technique offers new pathways to experience, to enable discovery.

As we investigated the MPI and SRT processes parallels began to emerge. Realms of ‘experiencing and knowing’ (Skura 1990: 12) identified by Joan Skinner in her process of creating SRT spoke to Petitmengin’s (2011: 47) ‘unrecognized character’ of lived experience and how we are unaware of our experience. A key SRT principle is cultivating kinaesthetic awareness. In ‘Releasing, images need some kind of poetic metaphor to represent them, to *pre-sent* them to one’s experiencing’ (Skura 1990: 11). Skinner believed that archetypes lie underneath her releasing images, that ‘the image is a poetic metaphor for the archetype’ (ibid.). Both SRT and MPI guide the student/subject into being receptive and accessing what is beneath or at the edges of conscious control and to awareness of states that are generally not articulated and, therefore, remain (un)known.

#### CAPTURING TRACES

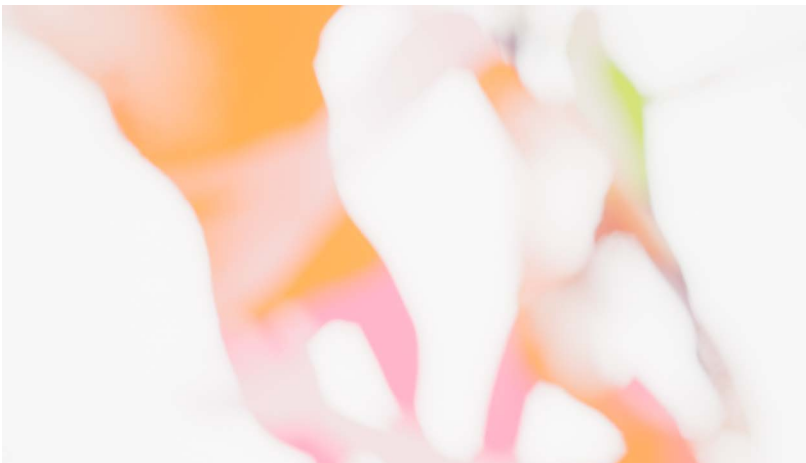
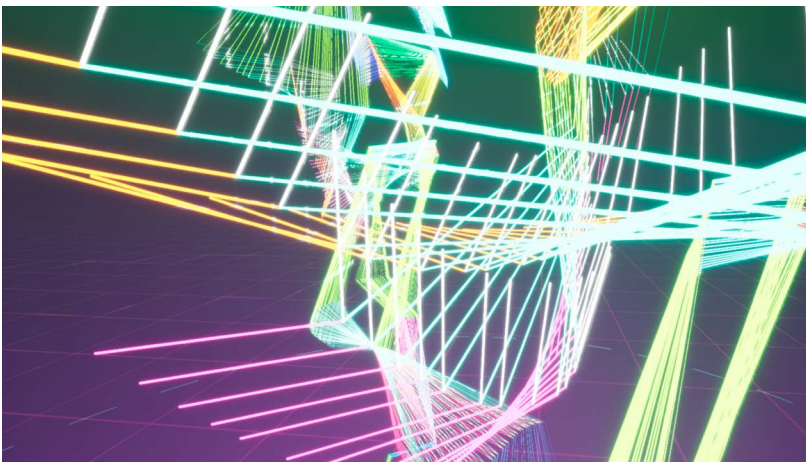
Choreographic choices influenced the editing of the films—spatial pullings apart, repeats, refreshes, gaze orientation and touch. However, randomization and improvisation were also used, cutting together and out of sync, reshaping the order of the original material and using the choreographic form to influence the process. Having exhausted all avenues of positioning the trio and solos spatially in the studio, we wanted to explore how the material might transform if we put the three dancers in very close proximity. We pitched them up against the wall and overlapping. They were so close they could hardly perform the material. The ‘Squash’ as it became known revealed a determination in the dancers and the movement that came to the fore that disintegrated the clarity of the initial instructions *Brush, Rebound and Jolt*. The wall became another surface like the floor, a *tableaux vivant* and reconstructed the material. The tenderness and the clashes held a sense of boundary, not resistance, letting the body decide its pathway through gravity—a sense of bodies drowning.

The production pipeline for the motion capture (mocap) process began by capturing the trios, solos and duet material and also some improvisations that emerged from working

with the mocap system. Varying combinations and structures of the choreographic make-up were discussed and explored. The sensorial map, metaphors and associations allowed the memory to have a charge, body part proximities defocusing to focus, before and after the frame; *whispering encounters in a liquid space*. We did not want to infect the movement material itself with the experience of VR—the dance is what it is rather than altered in that space.

Mercier developed a sound score that was both recorded and live. Using Gamelan instruments positioned in the largest gallery space, he overlaid recorded material with his synchronous responses to the dancers’ movements. The connection through sound was integral in maintaining cohesion for the whole performance as the sound drew the dancers and audience closer towards him through the various gallery spaces. The interaction between Mercier and the dancers enhanced the sense of ‘liveness’, an important dimension to the work, which could not be captured to the same degree in the mediated moments from the dance that were shown on various screens and projections around the gallery spaces. This tangible sense of liveness was always impacted upon by the audience’s agency and where they chose to position themselves in the gallery and was further explored once the live performance ended when the VR environments could be accessed. Two at a time, the audience members wore a headset and backpack PC, allowing them free movement around the large gallery space to encounter three VR environments.

How they transitioned through the scenes was defined by where they were positioned in space. Freed up, they did not have to navigate controls; there was no right or wrong and no fixed duration. Randomization was embedded in the motion capture files and the lighting and sound were spatialized, so that moving around would bring them into different scenes. The simplicity of these rules gave the audience an experience of complexity, similar to how the various iterations and versions of the source choreographic material produced complexity in the performance and throughout the installation footage.



■ Dancer Avatars *Expanded Fields* Virtual Reality, 23–24 November 2019.

#### SHAPING THE AVATARS

Motion capture could be perceived as a way of capturing dancers' anatomical reality. To render these bodily experiments in *Expanded Fields* we used motion capture and VR to create what Karreman (2017: 181) describes as '[k]inesthetic

renderings', or 'the bodily basis of digital traces of dance'. Movement explorations were captured in the mocap studio, and the recall of material learned and improvised was conjured through referring to the documentation from the studio explorations and remembering the impetus and triggers for the content. Usually, this is represented through a process of cleaning the data, making the skeleton, modelling the character/avatar and editing the sequences and phrases so that they can move and travel in a virtual world.

Typically, when you are designing a computer game character, it is about its external appearance. The character has a mesh, and the mesh is articulated with a skeleton inside; the motion capture drives the skeleton, and the skeleton moves and deforms the mesh. We endeavoured to reveal something of the inside of the experience of dancing, more from the inside than the outside, following the concept of the project. One character looks like tubes and is an animated spline curve—this spline curve is a joining together of all the motion capture points, like 'connecting the dots'. As the motion capture points are on the outside of the body, you derive the position of the skeleton from those points and the skeleton becomes animated. Usually, the skeletal animation shapes the external mesh but with the spline solution, we are seeing the motion capture itself stripping away the person and showing an inside view, producing a strange representation. The single path joining the splines is not necessarily logical, it just follows the top-down order of where the motion capture balls are situated on the body during capture. There are no bones in this form and because it is a spline it bends in unusual ways from endpoints similar to a *Bezier* curve.<sup>3</sup> You can tighten the splines to produce straight lines, giving a robotic look, but we did not want that. These tube-shaped characters are the same size as the performers, when they move slowly, and you can stand inside them. This was a specific design development for *Expanded Fields*.<sup>4</sup>

Another set of characters that look foggy replicate the film footage where we shot the trio material out of focus. This scene gives a cinematic, dreamlike feel that is created using a depth-of-field effect. The information

is mainly about this vibrant diffused colour, so you see it, and it appears out of focus and when you get close to it, it dissolves. This created a space where there is no solidity and some visual confusion about depth. This connected the gallery white space to the VR 'void' as two similar white spaces. Overall, in the VR intentional choices were to move away from a hard-edged solid physical reality into something more mutable and fluid, creating unknown entities that allowed audiences to discover moving colour and forms rather than defined figures, reflecting the MPI and SRT explorations. As Martelli (2020) described, this VR environment should feel 'like experiencing weather' for the audience.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Brian Rotman (2008: 53) describes how operating in the expanded field of technological capture and digital manipulation of body movements allows us to create 'selves, subjects and subject-positions' that are 'differently operative and differently sourced from those available in alphabetic writing'. He proposes that the alphabet imposes particular relations to 'existing semiotic body practices' of co-presence and exclusion, as a necessary condition for its operation (15). Technological mediation creates potential for the dispersal of the body as a fixed site to become 'a site of a movement to and from the outside of the human'—an oscillating movement between proximity and distance that the camera lens captured and the VR space expanded on further in the work (53). The concept leading *Expanded Fields* was to enable various degrees of proximity to the dance, getting closer to it as an idea, a trace and imaginary space, supported through the investigations elicited through SRT and MPI. In the gallery the audience could control their proximity to the dancers, and, in the final section of the performance, the dancers moved around the audience, sometimes reaching close to and even touching them. This was intended to break down barriers of perception, to invite the audience into a more intimate way of experiencing. In the VR space, it was possible to enter another degree of proximity to the

'kinesthetic renderings' (Karreman 2017: 181) of the dancers, as the imaginary spaces of the choreography had been dispersed and dislocated from their physical selves. This allowed the audience to scale the character up and down, vacillating between the usual representation of a human where you experience them as a separate individual to morph into the expanded field within and around them.

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<sup>3</sup> Named after the French engineer Pierre Bézier, a Bézier curve 'is a line or "path" used to create vector graphics. It consists of two or more control points, which define the size and shape of the line' (TechTerms 2014).

<sup>4</sup> The VR version of *Expanded Fields* was presented at Gazelli Art House, London in the exhibition 'Enter through the Headset 5' in September/October 2020.