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Performing Community / The Pride of Promenade: Site specific performance and the construction of collective urban identity within post conflict landscape

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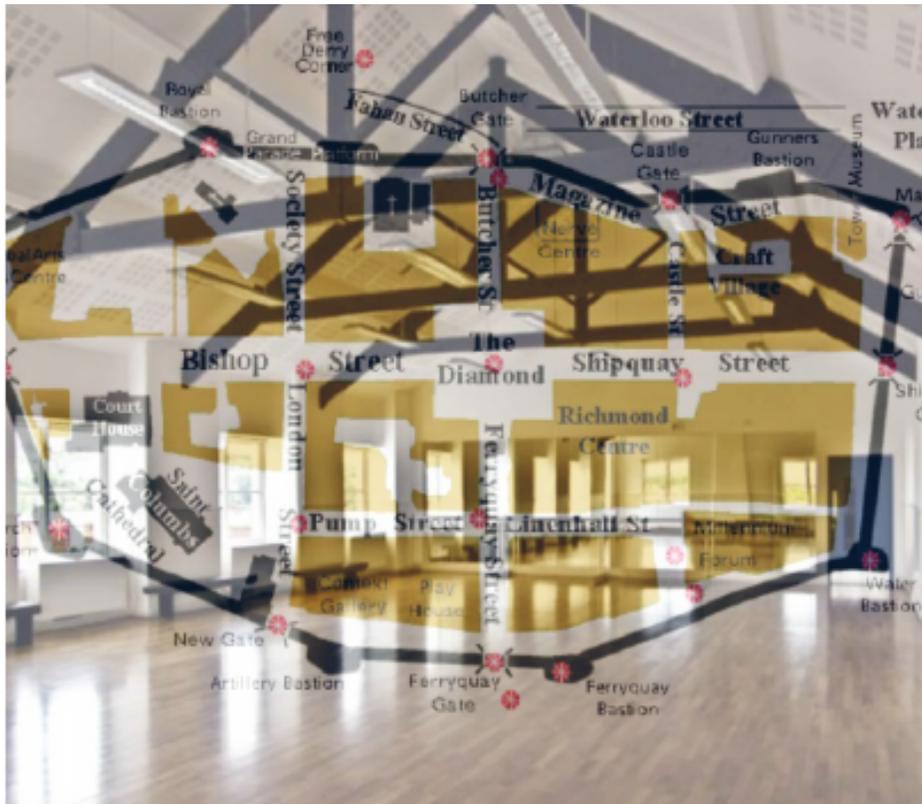
This work examines the function of dance as social apparatus and reflects on practices that enable dance to become a social vehicle for individual expression. My case study, developed in the City of Derry (NI), demonstrates how site-specific choreographic practice became symbolic of political expression in the dimensions of social and collective memory. I consider choreography as a mode of social expression that can perform cultural critique within spatial and architectural environments.

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Perhaps best to first unpick the title. The space between experience and text concerns me. I think in my mind to the scene of 40 bodies dancing in the community hall, and for those moments, the dance was all there was. Political, social, community divides dissolve momentarily and the dance unites. The issue perhaps in terms of qualitative analysis is how far such utopic unity persists and remains; can such unity truly unite and how far does such unity promote a foundation for more long standing strength in intercommunity relations.

I would like to digress from the term performance and perhaps lean towards terms of enactment, embodiment and even exorcism in the context of an eight month workshop series of workshops I led in the City of Derry. The act of enabling and facilitating the body; using movement as medium to enact, explore, respond and recreate the issues, complexities and realities of everyday life. I call everyday life; 'Practice.' In this sense all experiences we are granted, which we endure, protest against, fight for, these form the substance of the reality in which we situate ourselves. I am keen to see the term; 'Performing Practice' as in reality; a strategy of *performing life*. A means of communicating and finding strategies, which convey a means to explore the nature of daily experience. What does it mean to perform **place**, to embody place, to seek to enable the body to become a sensitive platform for the experiences of everyday life; how can the sensation of being a 'part' of place form an embodied expression.

"I wouldn't ever perform, and there is no way that I would dance, but here we found something, I don't know really what to say it was, it was like we were moving the city, the city was, well, in us and when we moved, it was there, not dancing, not showing off, but something like moving." (Research participant: feedback evaluation forum April 2014)

The city street is an essential communication network for city dwellers, a place of activity or calm, used to wander, rush, sit, passively or creatively. Activating a heightened sense of connection between participant and landscape encouraged the development of a critical review of their own spatial practices and their influence on the political daily realities of urban life. The body collects landscape, gathering, forming, sharing, revealing, fragmenting, traces and lines of terrain. This study explored current themes in choreographic practice which question how the body can become the mirror to its surroundings, asking, through embodied practice, photography, film and installation—how does the body become a living archive for its experiences and lifeworld; how can such experience be documented to reflect the process of the body immersing itself into landscape to construct a meta-narrative of the terrain it inhabits.

The context of City of Derry, Co. Londonderry

This case study sought to develop and nurture a stable open space in which the body could manifest the impact of the Troubles. The issue however in the creation of such space of personal and political disclosure was the confidentiality. To maintain the confidence of all research participants in the still volatile and turbulent nature of daily life in the City of Derry, all participants' identities remain undisclosed, ensuring total anonymity of each participant. The main purpose of this process has been to create a transferable methodology which illustrates the function of choreographic methodology as social platform, indeed this research methodology has later been developed in the cities of Berlin and Bucharest. Daily urban life in the City of Derry was a stimulus for the nature of choreographic progress, a resource and stimulus for movement material and examination of the position of the body as socio-spatial archive. The participants' committed involvement, including workshops in the rain, tears, miles walked, enabled such a methodology to take shape, though some participants were unhappy that their involvement should in any way be academized as one participant stated:

“It is hard, thinking that you are writing about us, and we are living as us, and I don't want nobody looking at me too much, I get what you are doing, and the thing is, I want to do this with you, but I don't want no one looking at me too close, as this is me and I want to change and this helping, its good you show that but not to show me up.” (Research participant: feedback evaluation forum April 2014)

This feedback was quite typical of participants who often feared close scrutiny, for this reason, critical evaluation took the form of a wider socio-cultural perspective, with great appreciation and respect for all those who took part in the process, maintaining a commitment to their anonymity. Cultivating specific external tools (performances, workshop sharings and exhibitions) this research expanded a public application and potential legacy in the forms of;

- Heightened body awareness (internal and external)
- Potential for the body as archive for spatial experience
- Potential for performance as multiple socio-spatial platforms for the re-alignment of social spatial use.

The moving body was the stimulus for increased urban awareness of patterns and structures within the contemporary urban post conflict environment.

The City of Derry is not a *'dancing city'* and so to simply arrive and want to make a series of choreographic interventions would not be appropriate. The

social landscape of dance becomes crucial in the construction of a movement dialogue with city residents striving to represent the culture of the city. It becomes essential, therefore, to reflect on the role of movement in everyday life, the role of dance as codified movement and as social platform in the city: hence the initial stage of evaluating the role of dance in the city becomes synonymous with the notion and intention of creating choreography with the city. The more general exploration of movement in the city began to infiltrate this project as conversations turned to Orange Parades, Marching Bands, the IRA, social dance gatherings all of which in turn came to reflect key involvement with participants' notions of the city.

This case study developed a role of social meditation that stemmed from the intention to include all political backgrounds within the workshop structure, this strove to explore the role of the process to become a potential tool of unification and empowerment. The research was supported by the initial 45 interviews conducted at the start of this case study with local residents, dancers and non-dancers exploring the existing relationships to dance in the city; this coincided with social and spatial observation by the researcher and the attendance at local classes and groups to raise awareness about the case study and allowed the researcher's integration with daily urban life adapting to meet existing cultural and social limitations. This research demonstrated how site-specific choreographic practice became symbolic of political expression in spatial practice through exploring the dimensions of social and collective memory. It considered how choreography might function as a mode of social expression and how cultural forms of social expression can become a means of exploring and exposing specific social issues.

At the beginning of this work the immediate issue arose of how to initiate a social choreographic project? The need to construct a social life-world in order to establish a mode of social interaction was clear; the role of participation had to be set so that a sustained and sustainable project might emerge. This raised the issue as to whether the mode of social interaction constructed a social bias: a system of awareness that is not choreographic yet relays a choreographic approach more so than social dance might itself.

The relationship of the participant's body to the city carried issues of sensitivity and intimacy. This ethical dilemma was presented openly to participants and allowed the research to take up a humanistic perspective. The role of the choreographer as social conduit became clear, as the process highlighted the choreographic workshop role to locate the potential social facilitation, and to an extent the need to maintain a stance of personal distance from the life-worlds of the participants.

This raised the critical issue over the social position of the researcher as a 'social misfit': somebody involved in society as a voyeur, appearing a part of the society and place and cultural activity yet in reality somewhat withdrawn, as

participation occurred in order to gain a reflection of social engagement in order to present research.

A crucial part of this practice has come in the acceptance of subjectivity as a mode of social practice. When exploring Derry's public spaces this history emerges through the participants' discourses, notably with the elderly workshop participants. For some the sites upon which reflected for movement material were sites, for example, where their brother or father was shot, where they were hit with a plastic bullet; where they witnessed a dirty bomb: these histories and narratives became poignant in their explanation relationships to space. Reflecting on the movement in a present which invariably seems calm, unhurried, and potentially dull, becomes more complex as the space exists threefold in this exercise:

- Their own spatial history (drawing upon specific cultural, political or social contexts and personal histories, either as primary or secondary experience)
- The immediate atmosphere of the space (e.g. particular social relationships they have with the space, passers-by as friends, family or colleagues)
- Participant's reactions to the task of producing movement in public space: i.e. sensations of embarrassment, discomfort, fear, social or personal anxiety, desire to over-perform)

No exercise was taken on face value and the review and commentary which participants provided became essential in establishing how the exercises were understood. When people have agreed to take part in the workshops their rationale may be multi-faceted: their agreement to partake may be to extend an existing relationship with dance, social inclusion and participation or desire to explore site-specific performance.

This research' primary objective has been to facilitate processes which allow researcher and participants to review the spatial container of the human form, the land, the city, space.

Embodied spatial practice as method of urban public space engagement: Defining the dance of choreographic fieldwork

The research began with a series of conversations with local residents which explored the relationship between the participants, dance and the city; enabling a form of consensus and by implication the social role of the choreographic ethnographer. This raised the issue: *how far does the choreographer need to immerse themselves in the life-world of the participant in order to establish a relationship of trust and a foundation of local knowledge.*

Choreography can function as a social apparatus and then reflecting on the cultural context for social application and asking how does this enable or disable certain forms of social and or political activity.

What happens when movement is so heavily politicized that a man will not attempt a collection of steps as they represent the other? What happens when he attempts these steps and they dance them together? That was a cold day in December 2012, the eighth workshop, swapping the marching bands steps, and their sons led the workshop. The community hall was cold and there was tension as ice to snap with each step. One step, two, suddenly they are smiling, racing even, falling over each other, moving and dancing, we have begun .
(Researcher's personal notes in fieldwork diary)

By working with an existing cultural infrastructure to infiltrate social groups I was able to generate interest amongst city residents who have an existing interest in movement and hence resume a more socially receptive position as to the mode of choreographic encounter desired for this research. The daily task of creating systematic and relevant encounter; the yoga classes in a cold school hall; conversations as to what choreography might mean and how it might be seen; all of this forms an essential role in gaining entrée to the city.

Circumnavigating evaluation contexts: The Choreographer is present (absent)

This research explored the human form and movement in a politicised setting as an apparatus to reflect upon spatial negotiations in post urban conflict zones on a simple level of the observation, mimicry and intervention through practice to explore how workshop participants 'felt' in public space. Seminal to this exploration is the ability to conceptualise the human form as both dominant and submissive to negotiations of other human forms and the spatial container, which becomes seminal tangible entity for these vivid intersections. Each choreographic method effectively relies on the same principles.

This can be summarised as the following process:

- **Observation:** (This can be defined as ethnographic immersion studies; immersion of researcher in social context of the research site.
- **Interaction:** (This can be on a quotidian level, allowing the position of the researcher as an 'outsider' to become interactive, generating networks and communication pathways) primarily on a verbal level, taking opportunities to comprehend locations from those who are situated within and amongst it.

- **Mimicry:** based on the concepts developed through Practising Space Research Lab, this position takes specific observations of urban action placing them as stimulus for the development of movement material and site specific movement vocabulary. This takes the form of a personal embodiment of the research context which can be used as a point of reference when approaching participations.
- **Participation:** this is a grounded process of direct contact and involvement with chosen research site; in the form of either:
 - Stimulation: (specific workshops and activities in location) and intervention (Staging performances and sharings generated works). The participation level is dependent upon the willingness and socio-political mobility of the participants. Although there was a clear intention for each research site, the participation levels or responses in each site could not be predicted.
 - Choreographic product and deconstruction of social and political context. The processes which each site aims to produce through documentation or live performance for a local audience. The relationship formed with the site determines each locations outcome. What emerges from each site was to a certain extent predictable, but ultimately participation and involvement of the research process presents challenges and resummptions to these predictions to be explored. Focus groups within the research process allow the choreographic 'product' to be situated in the social, cultural and political context of the performance.

The City of Derry. Derry. Londonderry. County Londonderry. How to say the name of city, how to dance each street, how to learn the narrative of the street corners.

The initial walks with participants became a reflection of the co-existence of the normal daily activities with an underlying resonance of the turbulence still nestling on street corners in silent murmurs and the occasional outburst. A conversation with Sinead about the St Eugene's cathedral's flowers quickly turned to memories of Bobby Sands;

"I come up the cathedral every day I love this walk, the flowers are a pride and joy here, and they really shine for us. There are the small things like here; Bobby would come down here for his dinner; he was a quiet lad, never brash like some of them; he didn't take to the drink. I wish our Adrian was more like that. You see now, its desperate for the lads, back then they used to have spirit; we didn't mind

clearing the smashed windows as they were smashed for a point; but now; we are trying for peace; us mothers still clear the broken glass but now we don't know what for." (Notes from transcript; interview with Michael. December 2011)

Sinead's memories on her visually 'mundane' route home were so layered by the poignancy of her narrative that the landscape began to embody her distrust and hope for the future. When Sinead began to develop emotions explored through walking into embodied expressions of improvisation, a haunting fierce and powerful series of gestures appeared to grip her body; she explained:

"It's different, when I am doing this, I feel as though I can say more, walking and talking in a way people might hear, and this way, perhaps no one knows what I am saying but I feel it." (Notes from transcript; interview with Sinead, December 2011)

Talking to planning officer Mark, at the city council his reflection was clear;

"We never know if we are doing the right thing, are flowers too brash, like we don't remember what happened, but then you put flowers on graves, but then are we making our city a cemetery, it's good to hear all this." (Notes from transcript; interview with [name withheld] from Derry City Council)

"But are we speaking the same language?" Evaluating the ephemeral within embodied dialogue, movement analysis

When shifting between movement and speech participants often reported a sense of personal conflict, highlighting that through the practice of movement they were unable to communicate something that they were not able to do within the constraints of language. In one workshop two participants were arguing about the nature of the Troubles as a hindrance or a mechanism for the image of the city: when they were talking their words were irate and there was a deep sense of frustration. However when they moved into an energetic duet they were able to work through this sensation of frustration and reach a dynamic series of supported balances through movement. In another session with a group of young adults with very troubled relationships to each other, they were asked to run to the centre of the large rehearsal space from opposite ends of the room and crash into each other with all the rage and anger they felt for each other. At first there were lots of fists and pain but gradually they realised through the act of repeating this exercise over and over to the point of exhaustion, if they met each other with softness on contact it was less harmful for both parties. This simple exercise was then performed in the Bogside as an intervention

performance and many of the young adults' friends came to watch. At first there was leering and jeering at the scene and wanting a fight: then, as the participants gradually found softness and performed a series of lifts and weight balances with each other, there was a silence and awe from the crowd. However within the post-performance discussion many of the young adults disliked speaking or expressing their feelings towards the actions which had occurred, saying simply, "can we learn more lifts, miss?" One participant commented quietly and personally; "this is better than fighting, we are learning about each other this way.

The key issue in assessing validity was to outline the sub-discipline within which it can effectively be assessed. This research can be considered within the following categories:

- Somatic Practice
- Live art / intervention performance
- Sociological engaged art practice

The need for categorization became problematic when addressing the contexts of stakeholders. Within a frame for stakeholders concerned with the result of the choreographic material generated rather than the process of personal urban recognition of the participant. This raised the issue of whether choreography can communicate effectively within multiple socio-political frames of reference and the scale of relativity in which they are judged.

How can residents of areas in need of regeneration, beyond highlighting the apparent 'hot spots' in need of action, change and renewal, actually have the capacity and infrastructure to create their own self-supported networks for actions which exist beyond the policy infrastructures presented by the local authorities? This was a keynote for research carried out in City of Derry. In an interview conducted with The Bogside Artists it was apparent that for community-based art works, working without government support was an integral aspect of their independence; the network they had created with the surrounding community existed outside any formal government recognition. The Bogside Artists are a key example of how public art work as social process can be a facilitator within post-conflict social neighbourhoods' reconciliation to generate a sense of community cohesion and locality. This may not be formally recognized, but it can be reviewed as socially generative and enable a sense of belonging and community progression, with the additional advantage of external public success which creates the benefits of tourism, social recognition and which enables a clear point of communality within residents' experiences and impressions of their local landscapes. It was clear from the initial research carried out in the City of Derry that the murals as a social-arts project generated a communal sense of progression and an atmosphere for progress, independent of government overlays to the socio-physical landscape. Key points arose from

the interviews which all became concerns with regard to the relationship between the community aspirations and the reality of such changes.

The space between language and expression in movement was a void for many participants: in evaluation sessions, participants joined 'movement response circles' where participants firstly gave one sentence about their movement experience in the workshop, then one word, then one movement, then one movement phrase. The concept behind this is to escape the '*mystification of words*' which Sartre defines, and enables participants to develop alternative strategies to verbal clarification of the nature of their experience in collaborative scenarios.

The contrast between movement and verbal expression was radical and at times created an entirely different approach to the workshop. The movements often reflected a series of how radically different words, to create a value system for such differences in expression would be to denote an importance of either words over language or language over words when they are both relevant signifiers of experience as Sartre indicates:

Man is for himself and for others, a signifying being, since one can never understand the slightest of his gestures without going beyond the pure present and explaining it by the future. Furthermore, he is a creator of signs to the degree he is always ahead of himself, he employs certain objects to designate other absent or future objects. (Sartre 1963, 152)

He extends this critique action to highlight how,

Everything at every instant is always signifying, and significations reveal to us men and relations between men across the structures of society. But these significations appear to us only in as far as we ourselves are signifying. Our comprehension of the other is never contemplative, it is only a moment in our praxis, a way of living, in the struggle or in complicity, the concrete human relation which unites us. (ibid., 156)

This case study culminated in a series of sharings: the participants then created an active social network to maintain their connections and had plans for future workshops. A great sense of pride in the city emerged during this process which participants referenced in post process evaluation with terms of gratitude and opening up. The general consensus from each feedback session was the sense of potential created by the workshop methodology, nurturing a platform for concepts of a more unified approach to shared public space with post conflict inner city landscape.

Sartre's remark is illuminating on this subject:

But within this living universe, man occupies for us, a privileged place. First because he is able to be historical, that is, he can continually define himself by his own praxis but means of changes suffered or provoked and their internalization, and then by the very surpassing of the internalized relations. Second because he is characterized as to the existent, which we are. In this case the questioner finds himself to be precisely questioned or if you prefer, human reality is the existent whose being is in question in its being. (ibid.)

This case study encouraged an openness to the creation of a shared and collective presence within public urban space, which honored a commitment to the memory of conflict and sense of historical division but was invigorated by a the commitment of participants, through the workshop process to reevaluate their sense of pre-judgement or sense of existing personal social boundaries. The evaluation process, due to its sustained and longitudinal nature facilitated a vision as to how participation within the research process allowed a sense of openness between previously closed social relations:

“I can’t say that it is over, we all know it’s not, but sometimes in this process, for maybe the first time, I asked myself the question, why was I still holding on. I actually danced with a man who I never thought I would even bring myself to look at, and we are never going to be friends or like that, but it shows maybe we don’t have to be like we were.” (Name withheld. Post evaluation feedback forum: Six month review session. November 2014)

With recognition as to the issue of ‘truth’ and validation within qualitative creative based action research, this statement stands as testament the process of this case study creating a framework which validates choreography as a social platform on which to evaluate and reconstruct socio-spatial relationships in the post conflict landscape.

The experience of moving, of seeking a pathway towards pure expression of self through the dancing and moving form successfully indicates the power of the discipline of choreography to function as social apparatus, to successfully allow the body to become pure symbol of expression of life world. As Nelson asks aptly: *‘what is dancing actually? My experience separates it completely from improvising, which is to make something. But to dance is not to make something. To dance is to channel, but you don’t have to know what you are channeling. Its something that moves you that is invisible. You’re following something. You’ve been moved by something. So that is a very big question.’* (Nelson in De Spain 2014, 84) The process by which the body has been moved to the point of pure expression and driven by the need and desire to express the state of being is a state to a degree of extremity which can allow such an opening to the potential of embodied expression that the participant maybe over whelmed to realise: as De Spain concludes:

To avail yourself of the transpersonal is to be open, permeable. As we seek those openings, though, the danger (in practice, in life, and in an analytical research project such as this one) is that the more you try to define and delineate the edges of all the things in your world, the smaller those openings become until you can no longer sense this invisible dance. You have to try without trying. You have to prepare yourself for inspiration without being able to command it. You need to have faith in the power and presence of something you cannot completely grasp. And with language like that we are clearly in the realms of the gods. (2014, 89)

The need and desire for such openness and transparency within choreographic research has remained central to each case study, affording a sensitive and dynamic openness within each case study and towards each participant that allowed each workshop space to be that of potential reimagined terrain. This research process has enabled both participants and researcher and potential research legacy to articulate the body as conduit and catalyst for the review of the position of the body in society and how far the position and situation of the body within society consequently reflects upon, within and through the body: as De Spain articulates: *'Our bodies are both a moving conduit for the flow of information and the fleshy core of our expressive selves.'* (ibid., 93) This platform this research has enabled to profile the body as social conduit has enabled specific mechanisms within each city for ways in which the body can be reviewed as social articulation as De Spain furthers: ‘

The idea of the body as an imagined condition is a powerful tool for breaking out of personal or culturally ingrained habits of body use and body awareness. If our sense of oneness is conceptual, in a pragmatic way of functioning within a much more complex system, then we can also use our imaginations to reconfigure our understandings of the components of that system. (ibid.)

De Spain's perspective usefully frames how the ideas which are constructed of and through the body through the process of improvisation lay root for the further conceptualization of the body within a wider social ecology, attending to the process and evaluation of movement as schematic to a broader socio-cultural concern: *'As much as we construct the idea of our bodies using conceptual systems to expand our imaginings or imaginings to expand our conceptual systems, our bodies also construct an idea of ourselves.'* (ibid., 94) Each case study systematically highlighted specific socio-cultural aspects and issues prevalent within each post conflict urban framework: within City of Derry; this was specifically the need for a collective envisioning of collaborative urban future; within the reactions of each participant; due to the nature of daily life within the realm of post conflict urban infrastructure the need to allow memory a space and role within the present future was essential to full participation within the choreographic process: De Spain articulates: *'Memory is not a process of being in the past. Rather it is a process of*

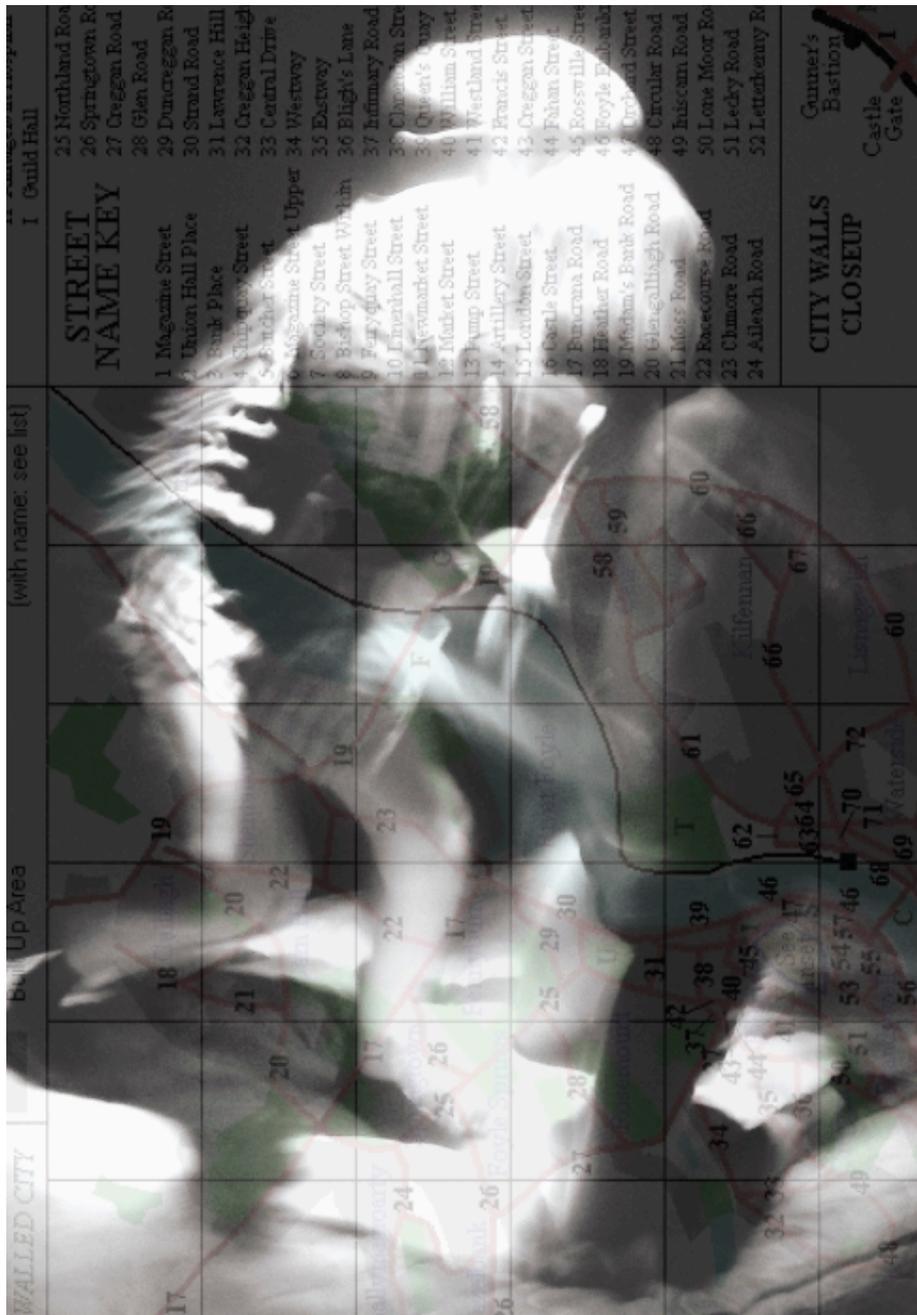
allowing the past to enter into present circumstances.' (ibid., 152) Memory within this study was constant continuum; the perception of each task and each relational account to the urban infrastructure was based and rooted strongly with an attendance to the nature of relationship to pastness and the need for the alterity of the relationship of the past to the future: as Bergson observes,

In fact there is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses, we mingle thousand details out of past experience. In most cases these memories supplant our actual perceptions, of which then we retain only a few hints, thus using them merely as "signs" that recall to us our former images. The convenience and rapidity of perception are brought at this price. (Bergson in De Spain 2014, 151)

This research has been developed with the integrity and preservation of all participants key concerns and has become a highly tuned developmental methodology which has allowed choreography to exist in a wider socio-cultural frame, attesting to the power of the discipline of choreographic practice as mechanism for advanced study of social practice. The issue with such subjective results of artistic research is the nature by which the results can be articulated in such a way that allows a value schema to be extended beyond a primary immediate audience. The focus groups and extended research review groups allowed a certain degree of secondary level analysis to take place to allow the reach of the research to take place within local community infrastructures, facilitating a wider form of analysis to shape by the ways in which the research process allowed a more detailed vision as to how it was possible to deem the research as socially useful. As Manning indicates: 'Nietzsche implores: 'Value! Don't evaluate!' He proposes we conceive of value as a differential vector in the process of creation. Valuing is a form of prearticulation tantamount to the incipient process of creation. It underscores the force of expression. In language, valuation is how words are culled from the nexus, their enunciation always coupled with their force of expression. Foregrounding valuation within language emphasizes the amodal relays which make words felt.' (Manning 2009, 218) The need for synergy between language, movement, reception and affect within this research process enabled a deeper need for the effective communication on so many levels between researcher, participant and research reviewer; the stratification between language, movement and experience symbiosis through the process of choreographic practice instigated within this research and each movement sequence and happening which occurs during the research process allows a way for choreographic enquiry to take a level of sustained and in-depth enquiry. As Manning further indicates: 'To be conscious of movement is to have known that movement moved you. Movement felt is available to consciousness only in terms of how it was left behind a as a trace for the next

movement moving.' (ibid., 47) How this research is valued and disseminated can be assessed perhaps not in relation to the aims but rather in the overall reception and participation of all those involved and how far the choreographic methodology enabled them to achieve a greater understanding of their relationship to their own bodies and environments: as Manning summaries: ' We are moved to think.' (ibid.) This research process has created a clear line between body, space, action and place, allowing such coordinates to be united and more coherently interlinked through the choreographic process.

Tours of the City of Derry exist, in the lines of the hand, in the passages of feet, in the movement of an arm, the jumps of the legs, the frowns of a face, the city flashes in the improvisation of two bodies standing body to body, face to face, eye to eye, two versions of a city, one dance, and so the city begins to appear.



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