

OUR  
**DANCE**  
DEMOCRACY



Claire Cunningham  
and Jess Curtis,  
The Way You Look  
(at me) Tonight.  
Photo: Sven Hagolani

## Thresholding

Dramaturg, writer and curator **Ruth Little** discusses the act of ‘thresholding’ within an expanded movement practice, exploring the potential of the threshold as a place in-between, of suspension before transformation. As she identifies in her paper – dance is an enquiry into how things can change

**Edges and thresholds – both natural and social –** are described by scientists as the most interesting places on earth. They’re the places where different ecosystems meet, places of rich entanglement and biodiversity. The etymology of the word threshold is uncertain. It may once have referred to a space within a household where corn was threshed. But it now most commonly refers to the narrow margin between inside and outside, host and guest. It’s the space we step over, and so negate, in our arrivals and departures. We tend not to think of it any more as a space for work, for inhabiting, for moving within, for thrashing things out, for being held.

The verb ‘to threshold’ isn’t in our dictionaries, but in fact we perform the action of thresholding all the time, whenever we pass, or invite another to pass, from one place, circumstance or context to a new one. It’s an action that has real bodily repercussions, and it’s one we can all become more skilled at, more aware of, if we think of it as both an actual form of movement and a metaphor for new and enabling modes of encounter.

One of the 12 principles of permaculture is to make use of edges and meeting places, extend them where possible, and learn to value the marginal. What might happen if we try to think of the ‘margin’ of performance – the threshold between the work and its publics, as the core of the practice? If the edge becomes central? What new forms of movement, insight and encounter are possible when we incorporate the audience into the making or meaning of the work? >



I'm interested in an expanded movement/performance practice that pays greater attention to what goes on in the space between. Between dancer and spectator, individual and institution, stage and auditorium, between casual and ritual forms of movement, between one another. Too often, we settle for a stark and arbitrary division between the observer and the observed. As Barbara Ehrenreich points out in her book, *Dancing in the Streets*, European and North American audiences still play a role allocated to us during the Reformation: a role which demands of us stillness, separateness, invisibility; a numerical presence but a kind of bodily absence. It wasn't always like this, but this settled witnessing which accompanies our increasingly distributed, screen-based, static and synthetic experience of the world, this somatic obliviousness, is a kind of extinction of keen embodied knowledge, of communality as synchrony, felt and experienced in the incorporation of our individual bodies into the body of society, body of the world. It's part of the extinction of the commons, this spreading ignorance of how our own and other bodies move and relate together, share space, make meaning, articulate. It raises fundamental questions about representation and participation; the same questions that stir our engagement, or lack of, in our embattled democracies.

What happens if we think about performance thresholds as spaces where audiences too can move and be moved, can become aware of their own mobilities and fixities, interdependencies, participant capacities and prejudices, and also of the different potential and mobilities of others, as well as their conspicuous or more subtle absences?

A threshold is also a level at which one starts to feel or react to something, and on it we may experience profound disorientation, our own bodies unbalanced and unsettled by displacement. It's the point at which we recognise our own responsibility, or, as artist Shelley Sacks puts it, "ability-to-respond"; to act with agency on culture's threshing floor. (1)

Brazilian choreographer, Lia Rodriguez's *Pindorama* is a dance work created in Rio's violently policed Favela da Maré. It's about the country's oppression of its indigenous population and its poor. On entering the space we're asked to remove our shoes. We stand barefoot on a cold, wet concrete floor among the dancers, who are naked throughout. We stand looking down on the performers, our bodies clothed and apart, our power in our position relative to theirs on the floor. Perspective matters, and the old Renaissance static, head-clamped, one-eyed, ethnocentric,

patriarchal, normative vanishing point perspective no longer suffices. We have to move with and around one another's bodies to understand them, to see them as whole, not as incoherent or incomplete, not as one-dimensional targets to line up and shoot down. Sense-ability. Response-ability.

Director Louise Lowe and ANU productions' *Laundry* (2011) led us into and through the abandoned Gloucester Street Magdalene laundry in Dublin, restoring narrative and voice through intimate choreographies to the silenced lives of 'fallen' women forced to labour there until 1995. We knocked at the heavy wooden door and were ushered inside one by one. I moved, my hand in the hand of a performer whose story had been handed to her by a survivor of that blasted place. I was moved, beyond words. *Laundry* ended for each of us with the gift of a bar of stinking red carbollic soap. It began on an actual institutional threshold and ended inside its audiences, in an antiseptic inhalation that crossed the boundaries of our bodies, that changed our emotional chemistry. We became the threshold of the work. When other stories become part of us, we have to take responsibility for them. "Bare lives", says the poet Fred Moten, "turn out to be bare only insofar as no attention is paid to them". (2)

Thresholds are spaces of unlearning too. In Scottish choreographer Claire Cunningham's *The Way You Look (at me) Tonight*, the audience joins the performers on stage and Claire moves among, between and over us, bringing her idiomatic form of movement and her sensitive attention to physical space up against our prone bodies, which become variously obstacles or affordances and are wordlessly incorporated into her reflections on the social model of disability. By teaching us how to be with her, with open, sensing bodies, we become aware of detail we might otherwise have missed – the sensitivity of her fingers to the tips of her crutches ahead of her on the floor, her walking as a form of 'reaching', searching out. Claire's articulated and articulate body teaches others in specific contexts how those contexts can be reshaped to enable the expressive movement and presence of all of us, differently, together. This is her poetic, productive, crip-tic gesture in the world.

When performance makers ask an audience to attend, they don't only mean to turn up. They mean *a-tendre* – stretch towards, be present with all our senses, pay somatic attention. They invite us to feel and acknowledge the contradictions in us all: the hypocrisy, the vanishing points of our perspective, the curiosity, commonality and variety. Expanding the threshold on which we





Above:  
Entelechy  
Arts, Bed.  
Photo: Emily  
Valentine  
Photography

meet increases the lines of connection between people and ideas through improvisation, chance and adjacency, creating multiple pathways of thought, influence and action.

Across our cities, these threshold places – places of encounter and exchange – are diminishing as actually, or even notionally, public. Anti-homeless spikes, commercialisation and privatisation of communing spaces, and relentless, orchestrated flows of people, traffic and information reduce our experience of lives lived at other speeds, lived with less or different liquidity, mobility, opportunity. Corporate culture would have us move algorithmically, not rhythmically, through these spaces. Entelechy Arts in London performed an act of thresholding as a quietly disruptive insertion into the social fabric with *Bed*, co-created with a group of artists in their 70s and 80s. An elderly woman lies in a bed in the middle of a Dublin, London or Leeds street. People stop, confused and concerned. She speaks to them about loneliness, about our aging population and its social invisibility, about fragility, resilience, care. And they speak back; they stop passing by. The performer in the bed gently encourages this dialogue. In acts of thresholding the performer herself becomes what philosopher Ivan Illich calls

a ‘tool of conviviality’, whose aim is to help us render one another capable in actual encounters.

Edges are tactile, relational and incomplete. Things there are always becoming. The threshold is, in a real sense, a queer place, an entangled, rhythmic, fluid, non-binary place ripe with possibilities for change, disruption, novelty, surprising adjacency. It’s a place of resistance because it’s always unsettled; it has not yet settled for normative acts, presences and behaviours. The threshold of land and sea – the intertidal zone or ecotone – is full of resourceful, flexible, convivial organisms. It’s a place of opportunity, resilience and mischief characterised by the openness of its matter and interactions. Together let’s bring the vitality and democracy of the ecotone into our all our forms of invitation, making and meeting.

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