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Nomadic Diagrams: Choreographic Topologies

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The primary aim of this performative paper was to respond from a choreographic perspective to geographer Nigel Thrift's challenge that nonrepresentational theory is best interrogated through performative means (Thrift, 2009). Drawing on experiential knowledge gained from my work as a choreographic installation artist, this paper constituted an experiment in interweaving theory and artistic practice such that full value was given to both. The paper took the form of a series of movement activities, interspersed with a spoken discussion of the theoretical concerns inherent within them[1]. In contrast to many performative papers, the performativity was the province of the participants, not the presenter, for I delivered the theory between activities in order to bring to the participants' attention the concepts they were exploring through their collective action[2].

Introduction

Nonrepresentational theory is a term coined by Thrift (2009) to describe those modes of thinking that do not depend on verbal discourse to articulate their concerns. These include the modes of thought employed in artistic practice. Movement is used as a leitmotif throughout Thrift's discussion. Non-representational theory suggests that human movement and our "rhizomatic, acentred" brains co-evolve, arguing that much of our thinking does not involve the internal manipulation of conscious reflection or picture-like representations to make sense of the world. Of particular relevance to this paper, it also maintains that intelligence is a distributed and relational process in which a range of 'actors' (including texts, devices or objects. people) are active participants. Finally, it suggests that space, a central means of understanding, and operating in, the world, is not *a priori* but evolves from performative activity. It is the last two arguments that this performative paper addressed through practice.

Geographers have become increasingly interested in movement, the body, and performativity. Derek McCormack (2008;p1822) notes that:

> …bodies move in more ways than one: they move physically, but they also move affectively, kinaesthetically, imaginatively, collectively, aesthetically, socially, culturally, and politically. [B]y moving in these different ways, bodies can 'produce' or generate spaces [inasmuch as] the quality of moving bodies contributes to the qualities of the spaces in which these bodies move.

This represents an explicit acceptance that space in not simply something that surrounds us, or we occupy, but that it is generated by those who inhabit it, and is affective, qualitative, as well as material. Understood in this way space is less a noun than a state of affairs.

It is this kind of space that de Certeau (1988;p112) identifies when he notes that

> …space [only] exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities and line variables. This space is composed of intersections of mobile elements …actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it.

This is relational space, a spatio-temporal space active with rhythms that translate into a qualitative, and thus affective, dimension. This is choreographic space.

My interest in the notion of space as relational arises from the consonance between Thrift's theories and postmodern choreographic processes, particularly non-linear group choreographies. These are characterised by a complex interweaving of trajectories, vectors, rhythms and the multidirectional dispersal of dancers across the stage and are evident in the work of artists such as Merce Cunningham, William Forsythe, and Trisha Brown, particularly earlier works such as *Set and Reset* (1982) and *Opal Loop* (1980). These works, and the choreographic strategies that gave rise to them, incorporate some of the central characteristics of nonrepresentational thought.

In many ways this paper is a also means of coming to understand the relevance of the choreographic decisions made during the collaborative processes that led to the digital installations that I have been working on for 15 years. Retrospectively, it became apparent to me that the conceptual analyses of space and of thought undertaken by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Henri Lefebvre, Nigel Thrift and Michel de Certeau were embodied in the complex, immersive

interactive environments that dominated my artistic practice during this period. The installations present as choreographic topologies through the shifting inter-connections established between a) the individual behaviours of the participants and the interactive system and b) the participants themselves. These create a complex relational network of behaviours between participants and the interactive system through which the installations were actualised as events.

For this paper movement activities were devised that emulated these processes. These interrogated, through practice, the ideas that permeate the work both of these writers and the installations – notions of the diagram and nomadic thought, distributed intelligence, the concept of topological space, Thrift's view that space itself is generated by performative activity, and Deleuze and Guattari's notions of the 'diagram' and 'nomadic' thought (1987).

This use of the term diagram refers to an 'organisational technique' (Deleuze:1986,p.32) rather than a reductive representation such as an architect's diagram or a map[3]. Indeed, the notion of *the***,** or *a*, diagram, is misleading, for the diagram is not an entity like a map, or if it is, it constitutes an entity-in-the-making. Therefore it is perhaps better to say that one diagrams whilst simultaneously generating *a* diagram, a processual entity which by its very nature never achieves a final form.

This diagram is mobile, relational, affective, comprising an active, intricate interweaving of multiple strands of thought, activity, behaviour and concepts, and can only be generated by engaging in diagrammatic activity (Ednie-Brown:2000). This new form of diagram does not *reduce* experience, like the map or the plan, but *enriches* it as it establishes resonances between the individual elements that interweave within it, generating affects and connectivities, and the very space within which we move.

The diagrams produced during our movement activities manifested as multiplicities constituted from diverse paths and differential forces,

> …a succession of spatial accidents, bifurcations, loops, crossroads between various spaces that ha[d] no common measure and no boundaries in common." **(**Gibson**,** in Thrift:2007,p.119)

Crucially these diagrams are embodied, experiential**,** not something to be observed and studied, but something that must be experienced at first hand.

We interrogated these theoretical notions by working through a series of linked movement activities that explored the way in which certain choreographic strategies constitute a choreographic diagram, a movement of collective, potentially discursive, thought.

I set a choreographic frame for the movement activities, asking the participants to underplay the 'dancerly', in order to see whether simple movements could give rise to an intricate collective movement of thought, and through it a complex diagrammatic/ choreographic entity. The participants were asked to:

- consider themselves as just one of MANY individuals engaged in what Steve Paxton refers to as a 'small dance'[4].
- concentrate on the processes of navigating the space, rather than on the actions performed in order to navigate the space (thinking not so much of dancing, but of wayfaring).
- consider the emerging textures of the motion, and the effects these have on the texturing of the environment, rather than focusing on movement as expression.
- avoid the temptation to make things happen (individual thought), rather let things happen in order to open the way to the generation of a collective movement of thought.
- Finally, avoid actual contact, however close they might get to each other, concentrating instead on the spatial tensions that obtain between them.

These instructions established the conditions that could generate a multiplicity that

> …deploy[ed] itself beyond the individual, on the side of the *socius*, of preverbal intensities, indicating a logic of [porous] affects, rather than a logic of delimited sets. (Guattari:1992, p.9)

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Initially, a preliminary practical experiment was undertaken in order to reframe the qualities of the environment in which the performative paper took place by giving it an affective dimension.

1st MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

- *Find an empty space in the room. Close your eyes.*

- *Imagine that you are in an expanse of land…a desert, moor, plain, ice field… imagine that there is nothing that stands out as a marker our between where you are standing and the horizon, only a gentle curving of the ground from time to time.*
- *Turn slightly to find a different view of the landscape…allowing its understated topography to form itself up in your mind.*
- *Move within this new space….endowing certain areas with a texture….a temperature on the surface of the ground…or in the air…or an emotional or affective sensation.*
- *Remember the location of these affective 'islands'.*
- *Send your attention to your horizons, where sky meets land…what lies there?*
- *Feel the environment on your skin.*
- *Open your eyes. The imaginary topography that you have just generated is available for recall to disrupt your sense of the material space you are moving within.*

- *Take a pen and paper and trace the shaping and texture of this imaginary topography on the pieces of paper…use shading, words, anything to provide a map that reflects your imaginary land.*

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This activity generated the starting point for the collective diagrams that emerged during the practical experimentation. By engaging with their individual performative diagrams the participants were creating collective choreographic entities. As such they explored performatively the notion that intelligence is distributed. The intricate relations, and rhythmical and affective interplays that obtained between the conceptual, physical and affective forces as they moved determined the expressive force (content) of each emerging choreographic form. What was important was that content (expression) did not precede the form, nor form content, rather the two co-evolved.

The performative diagrams that the participants created were therefore not a descriptive plan, but a starting point for activity. Both form and substance of the diagrammatic/choreographic entity could only emerge from the collective diagram's gradual actualisation. Collective diagrams have a double aspect, being both experienced affectively from within as a movement of individual thought, connectivities, interrelations and sensations, and observable from without as a fluctuating form. The resonances that emerge from the interweaving of several individual diagrams (movements of thought) give rise to observable choreographic entities.

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2nd MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

- *Recall the imaginary topography that you generated earlier. Reclaim this imaginary space both spatially and affectively.*
- *Move within in, feeling its textures, its topography.*
- *Re-identify your 'islands' of affect.*

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The affective space generated on these movement activities is a nomadic space, a multidirectional environment, akin to the depths of the desert, the Arctic wastes, the Mongolian steppes, a space without predetermined conduits or bounded regions, a field of possibilities unmarked by human intentions.

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3rd MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

- *Keeping this space in your mind's eye. Find a space in the room that feels comfortable to you. Close your eyes. Allow your proprioceptive senses to take over….sense the proximity of artefacts, people, light, shade. When you find a space that feels comfortable, keep feeling the space…the feeling of comfort might change if the configuration of the group changes.*
- *Concentrate on the back of your body as well as the front. Let the space be felt on your skin.*
- *Keep moving position until you find just the place you want to be. Don't expect the first place you stop in to be the final one…what feels right might change as the environment shifts around you…take your time.*[5]

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The space that the participants generated during that movement activity became a space of forces rather than fixed co-ordinates. It was experiential, haptic, rather than Euclidean or Cartesian. The individuals moving within it became an integral part of the relational structures between forces that generated the space, the space itself becoming a manifestation of the forces that we exude as living beings, forces that go beyond the confines of the skin. The space was not something around them, nor were they additions that inhabited the space, rather "both body and space…were experienced as alive with potential movement" (Manning:2009,p.15.)

Theoretically the space generated constituted a nomadic diagram. Nonmetric, acentred, rhizomatic, it was a space that "provided the room for vagabondage, for wandering and drifting between regions...in a polyvocality of directions." (Casey:1998,pp303/4). As the linkages between the participants changed their alignments, the relations and strengths of the forces moving between us changed. This was an affective space, but one with no overt expressive intent. At every moment, this mutating environment had to be navigated as if for the first time. Such a space can only be understood through physical engagement, for we do not see this kind of space from a distance, but are always within it, part of the mutating environment we create as we move. An observer, however, can perceive the group as a fluctuating, diagrammatic entity that shapes the material space that it inhabits.

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Participants were then asked to consider themselves as an element of the environment, an integral part of the topological space that it had become. In this way they would become part of a collective movement of thought, and not simply someone intent of achieving their personal expressive ends.

We took one step further into this experiment in non-discursive thinking, and began to explore the notion of choreographic topologies

INTERIM MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

- *Choose another place. Keep shifting to a new place as and when the environment changes its configuration.*

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My choice of title for this workshop was not accidental, for a choreographic topology and a nomadic diagram are so close as to be almost one and the same thing. Topologies, like the diagram, are dynamic[6]. Although it has structural characteristics, a topological entity is not a structure, rather it is a structure 'taking-form', constituting "a continuity of transformation that alters the figure, bringing to the fore not the co-ordinate form, but the experience of it" (Manning:2009,p.165). We feel the vectors that stretch, curve, bend as the surface of the entity shifts.

Manning's introduction of the term experience extends the use of the term topological beyond the purely mathematical *geometric topology*. The latter is best represented by the notion that a form is topological if its surface shape can be transformed from one shape to another by stretching it or bending it – but never cutting or rending it. (It is sometimes known as 'rubber-sheet' geometry.) By judicious stretching and bending a coffee cup (which has a hole in its handle – on the side) can be transformed into a doughnut (which has a hole at its centre).[7] The architecture of the surface topology of entities such as this/these is thus not static, but dynamic.

In *architecture* the use of the term topology is also used to refer to dynamic geometrical designs, such as those created by Greg Lynn (1999) or Zaha Hadid (2009). Here a mesh-like design is stretched and deformed in order to create a building that seems to flow in space. However, it has also been used to refer to spatial effects such as social, spatial or phenomenological interactions which cannot be described by topography. For example, perception of a dynamic architectural space can be generated by the movement of a crowd in a piazza, or created by the changing texture of light in a room as the sun moves across the sky and hits different surfaces of the building. This becomes part of the topology of that space.

Finally, in the last few decades the notion of *network topology* has emerged to accommodate the structures of computer, neural, communication and social networks. Network topologies articulate the pattern/s of interconnection, both physical (material) and logical (virtual), between the elements (nodes and linkages) of dynamic networks. Communication networks are defined by the *traffic of communications* and "by identifying from moment to moment what is connected to what, rather than identifying the geographical alignment of those connections." (Castells (1996) in Adams:2009,p.2).

These networks can be relatively stable physically (e.g. the landline telephone system). Here the nodes (the telephones and the transmitters from which signals are sent) are geographically stable, but the pattern of linkages (transmissions) between the nodes change according to who is connected to whom. Or the network can be dynamic (e.g. the mobile telephone system). Here neither source nor recipient of the signal is geographically stable. Thus not only are the linkages mobile but also the nodes themselves. The link between nodes (phones) could be generated from any transmission mast, anywhere, to any other transmission mast, anywhere. Nevertheless, the basic property of the topology of the network (i.e. the open system of relations that obtains between nodes) remains.

Similarly, in a social network at any given time the

topology of the network remains structurally, though not physically stable, for the nodes (people) are constantly relocating geographically[8]. In addition, because the people in one social network might share connections with people who also operate in other social networks, an interweaving of multiple networks occurs, leading to an intricate system of relations.[9] This eventually creates a porous, multidimensional, rhizomatic, network of communication. Such networks generate a "topology of flows" (Castells, in Adams:2009,p.2), which emphasise the *flows* of connection between the elements to generate a spatio-temporal topological space. This is clearly relevant to the notion of a choreographic topology.

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We then experimented with generating a space of flows.

4th MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

- *Re-find your 'perfect' place in the room. Recapture the affective space that you identified at the beginning of the session. Remember your 'textured spaces' and respond as you pass through them.*
- *Individually, and without signalling your choice, identify one person in the room – they can be close to you or on the other side of the space. As you move maintain the distance between you and your unwitting 'partner' and move at exactly the same speed.*
- *Move slowly to start. Feel the link between you, and the ebb and flow of the proximities of your companions as they follow the same instruction.*
- *Momentarily pause from time to time (either from your choice, or your 'partner's' choice. Count at least 10 seconds before you move on.*
- *As you move on make a tiny gesture. Pause again. Select another individual, maintain an an even distance. Keep moving, be willing to move faster when you feel more confident.*

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5th MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

- *Find another space in the room that feels comfortable to you. As before, keep moving until you find that this is just the place you want to be.*

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Observers of this choreographic topology perceive shifting relations of forces within the group. By generating a flow of relations between forces, and thus affects, we simultaneously created and activated a topological space, modulated by the participants' proximities, rhythms, trajectories, pauses, sensibilities, feelings, intentions as they attempted to find their 'perfect' place in the room. The choreographic entity thus constituted itself as a dynamic relational space – part form, part process, part texture.

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6th MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

- *Repeat the 5th movement activity. This time consciously watch, listen, feel as you move.*

Be particularly aware of the proximity of people close to you and what affect this has on your sense of the environment, "your entire being alert to the countless cues that at every moment prompt the slightest adjustments to [y]our bearing [in the space]." (Ingold:2007,p.78)

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This simple one-rule choreographic improvisation established a fluid active cartography…one that did not *represent* a pre-existent world, but generated a fluctuating, inhabited environment which was simultaneously entity and process. We generated the choreographic entity which *actualised* the relations between forces that were taking place "not above, or outside, it, but within the very texture of the entity that [it] produced" (Deleuze:1986,p.37). In any space the multiple rhythms that permeate it (visual, sonic, olfactory, haptic, cultural or social) create an affective layering, and thus generate a textured sensory environment (Manning:2009,p.139). These qualitative textures may not be consciously felt in our everyday life (nor always in a dance context, for dancers may not pay explicit attention to the intricate interweaving of rhythms that make up the dynamic network of movement of the group).

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We continued to explore these ideas.

7th MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

- *Return to creating a connection between you and another member of the group (4th Movement Activity)*
- *Occasionally shift that connection to someone else. Keep feeling the spaces between… and changing the person with whom you are connected*
- *Repeat, maintaining the distance between you and your 'partner'. Identify the affective flows that*

emerge in the interplay between you and your partner' to generate an affective social network.
- *Allow the links with others in this open-ended relational system to generate a more complex space.*
- *Now remember where your affective 'islands' are.*
- *Allow these to affect your way of moving in those spaces. These become your way of 'worlding' the space.*

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de Certeau (1992,p.93) observes that

> …the networks of moving, intersecting [individual] writings compose a manifold story that has neither author, nor spectator.

This collectively generated 'story' is characterised by the rhythms and trajectories generated by the interplay between individuals' intentions as they navigate space. These intentions are constantly being reconfigured through the rhythms and trajectories generated as participants abandon proposed pathways when they are interrupted or appropriated by others, and commence new directions of intent. A composite rhythm emerges that propels the force of movement, and thus the topology of the space. As such, a collective choreographic entity evolves from the collective movement of thought created by the interweaving of individual subjectivities.

But Deleuze (1986;p34) asks us to take one step further, for he suggests that such an event is not entirely at the mercy of an obedient collective thought for

> …there is no diagram that does not also include, besides the points that it connects up, certain relatively free unbound points, points of creativity, of change and resistance.

These can generate an unexpected, potentially subversive, coalescence of individual movements and intentions within the emerging space, which shifts the directional force of its flows. As this takes place the activity creates a very particular cartography – one permeated with lines of desire or intention. This cartography is

> …composed not only of cognitive references [but also] rhythmical and systematological ones, within which it position[s] itself in relation to affects…and attempt[s] to manage its inhibitions and drives. (Guattari:1992, p.11),

embodying a different tenor to that of cartography as representation.

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8th MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

- *Recall the spatial locations of the affective 'islands' you created earlier. Trace your spatial cartography mentally out in the space, observing where your individual cartographies pass through those islands.*
- *Action this spatial and affective cartography through improvisation*

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9th MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

- *Repeat the 8th movement activity, but phase the commencement of your individual cartographies. Take a moment…close your eyes. When you feel ready, begin to re-trace your personal spatio-temporal and affective cartography.*
- *Become aware of when your cartographies interweave with those of others.*
- *Thread your way through the emerging environment…create new cartographic traces.*
- *Conceive your experiential cartographic trace as a continuous gesture in space and time, and yourselves both as moving points and 'attractors'.*
- *Pause if you feel that you are deliberately trying to shape the emerging choreographic space, or have 'lost your way'. Move. Feel your own rhythms, and the ebb and flow of the rhythms that surround you.*
- *Allow your personal lines, flows and affects to be transformed as other lines, rhythms, movements act upon them.*
- *Slowly bring the event to a close.*

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This last activity produced a complex social space, "produced by forces deployed within the spatial practice…embody[ing] properties which could be imputed…[only] by the occupation of space." (Levebvre:1992,p.88). Observers see

> …rhythms in all their multiplicity interpenetrate one another…in the body and around it, rhythms forever crossing and recrossing, superimposing themselves on each other, always bound by space. Through the medium of rhythm an animated space [came] into being, [a space] which was an extension of the space of bodies."(Lefebvre:1974.p.205)

Here the textures of the individual and collective environments subsumed by the earlier cartographic exercise were reclaimed, returning to the maps their mobility and affective textures.

Conclusion

It is notable that Thrift and his colleagues have proposed, but not undertaken, the practical experimentation with their concepts that they recommend in their writings. In this performative paper we gave material substance to their claims, by weaving theory into the body of a performative experimentation with theoretical concepts. However, rather than solely dealing with non-discursive thought (Thrift:2007) the movement activities were structured in such a way that, for the experienced, theoretically informed dance practitioner, a form of non-verbal discourse emerged within the performative activity. As such, the movement activities, without reverting to representational thought or symbolism, constituted a discursive interrogation of the insights offered by Thrift and his colleagues.

Endnotes

[1] Feedback from participants indicated that I did not achieve a comfortable balance between the delivery of the practice and of the theory. The latter followed a relatively formal standard presentation mode, which forced an uneasy shift from a performative state of mind to focused attention on complex conceptual issues. My management of this shift made it difficult for participants to achieve the transition. A more relaxed delivery of theory, without compromising the conceptual content seems to be needed. It was also suggested that I should participate actively in the movement activities, not direct them from without. This strategy would allow me to assess sensations more accurately, also appropriate timings of the transition between the two modes of attention, affording greater insights into the relevance of the activities to the theoretical content, and whether the movement activities achieved their theoretical ends.

2 Practical activities and theoretical discussion are identified typographically (*practical activity in italics,* theory in standard font).

3 Maps originally emerged from the act of travelling, that is, from a practice. Eventually they became substitutes for the practice, erasing the ”way of being in the world” that gave rise to them.

4 See http://myriadicity.net/ci36/satellite-events/the-small-dance-the-stand.

5 Manning (2009,p.14) argues that “proprioception provides us with the clues that proceed our cognitive understanding of where we are going.”

6 Topography refers to the surface shape and features of a region or entity (as in a relief map) and to features in the landscape such as vegetation, human-made features, local history and culture.

7 See http://plus.maths.org/issue10/features/topology.

8 That said, social systems are subject to regular change in their structure as connections emerge and disappear.

9 It is from this that the notion of ‘six degrees of separation’. emerges.

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