On physical theatre: A roundtable discussion from ‘Not Yet It’s Difficult’ with Peter Ekersall, Paul Jackson, David Pledger, Greg Ulfan

Peter Ekersall

Established in 1995, the Not Yet It’s Difficult performance group (NYID) has developed a range of innovative performance techniques and styles that relate to the visceral and intensive use of bodies in performance. The interactive presence of media and design – often in non-traditional theatre spaces – and a blending of dramaturgical strategies that draw widely from sources that include theatre, popular culture, interviews, history, and media are other characteristics of their work. Performances include Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (1995), William Shakespeare: Hung, Drawn and Quartered (1996), The Australasian Post Cartoon Sports Edition (1997), and Chicago Chicago (1998). In 2003 NYID’s production of K (2002) will open the Vienna Festival and Scenes of the Beginning from the End (2001) will also tour to Europe. NYID has been the subject of numerous critical essays and has won a number of awards. Their three year research collaboration with Japan’s Gekidan Kaitaisha (1999-2002) called ‘Journey to Con-fusion’ is the subject of a new book called Alternatives edited by Peter Ekersall, Moriyma Naoto and Uchino Tadashi and published by PIE Peter Lang in 2003.

Although NYID is ambivalent about the term ‘physical theatre’ as a descriptor, their groundbreaking and sometimes provocative use of bodies in performance and their innovative and influential use of corporality as a dramaturgical mode has meant that NYID is often associated with the physical theatre genre as it has been widely defined. Their influence on the development of a more intensive use and interrogation of bodies in performance, alongside director David Pledger’s continued work with bodies as a core element of theatricality, places NYID at the forefront of developments in and around this seemingly emergent theatrical form.

In this themed issue of Australasian Drama Studies, the roundtable discussion below is designed to explore some of the issues about physical theatre from the perspective of one group of artists who are at the coalface of production. It is neither an exhaustive critique of physical theatre nor an attempt to speak for artists in general. The participants and their roles in

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NYID are: David Pledger (artistic director), Paul Jackson (technical manager), Greg Ulfan (actor) and Peter Eckersall (dramaturg). All have been members of the company since its inception. The editing has tried to keep the flavour and flow of the vernacular.

ECKERSALL: I thought we might begin this discussion by offering a few questions: the first and most obvious is perhaps the question of what physical theatre is and whether or not the concept is a helpful one? Is the term physical theatre something that’s too narrow and limiting? Is it something conceptually that we can relate to, or is it something we want to contest? Is it a tag that’s passed its used-by-date? Related to this, is the question of NYID being characterised as a physical theatre company. Is there such a thing as physical acting – or is all acting physical (which seems obvious)? Are there specific directing approaches for a physical theatre that NYID exemplify? Likewise, is there a physical theatre approach for designers, dramaturgs and so on? Are there problems or risks associated with being tagged a “physical theatre company”? Where is the audience for physical theatre? Is a changed relationship to the audience presumed within a physical theatre model?

We might reflect on the fact that Suzuki Tadashi’s company manager – after viewing a tape of NYID’s Sports Training Squad (1996) – described the work to me as ‘militaristic’. People who know Suzuki’s disciplined actor training system might find this comment ironic, however, the question might productively be asked: does physicalised theatre make for a military style aesthetic?

JACKSON: Perhaps we can start with a general rhetorical strategy, which is to say, ‘what theatre isn’t physical theatre?’ Obviously the notion of physical theatre has been deployed to categorise something in a particular kind of way, thinking about this is one way of tackling the definition or question. I think physical theatre is generally a term that’s been coined by people who don’t want to do naturalistic box-set kind of work (but) what that work would be … (is a vast question).

PLEDGER: Physical theatre has a kind of history; it’s the Australian version of ‘dance theatre’ which emerged in the mid 1970s through practitioners like Pina Bausch. It has that kind of cultural ontology. However, the kind of physical theatre that developed in Australia is not really dance theatre, it’s more theatre of representations – theatrical representations through physicalised means, with a primacy of meaning being physicalisation as opposed to verbalisation.

ECKERSALL: I might add to that ontology. Circus and street performance made large contributions to defining notions of physical theatre in Australia. In the early 1990s, some of the dance theatre you mention went under names like ‘visual theatre’. But such categories have become a problem. I remember going to performing arts markets where physical theatre seemed to
mean chunky bodies doing circus type things. Many artists were upset by this kind of colonisation of the notion of physical theatre by the circus and street performers. It seemed to take away from the wider possibilities that physical/dance performance had offered – its association with postmodern theatre, Pina Bausch’s theatre, and so on.

JACKSON: And in Australian theatre history you trace that movement back to Circus Oz, to the APG (Australian Performing Group)....

ECKERSALL: Yes, APG work is often discussed in somewhat nostalgic terms as a sort of robust acting style ... essentially what they’re saying is that it lacks subtlety and that it’s ‘in your face’; it’s a rough and ready style.

JACKSON: A vaudevillian, larrikin, rough and ready ... (theatre).

ULFAN: I find it interesting that the distinction between the visual and the physical in relation to theatre is discussed at all. Because the fact is, all performance that involves a group of people watching a group of people is visual and physical, given the fact that there are people doing stuff. So all performance is visual and physical. This also includes the verbalisation of ideas, because verbalisation is a psychological process expressed through human behaviour. Therefore, human beings are watching other human beings utter words and behave. I’ve got a few problems with this whole categorisation: a particular definition of physical theatre rejects another as ‘not’ physical theatre, and so on. ‘No. We’re not physical theatre. We’re theatre of ideas,’ or what not. It is also curious that naturalism has steered away from the notion of physical theatre. I’ve got a feeling that the death of naturalism (its move away from emphasising the physical) has impoverished theatre. (Gone is) the physical aspect, and the visual aspect of engaging the audience’s kinaesthetic empathy, and giving them a tantalising experience visually, not just with the use of lights and set changes, but through the exchange between human beings that the audience is observing.

PLEDGER: Yours is a more faithful and rounded version of how Stanislavski thought of the body – which is essentially about setting up a series of physical environments which interact with all the other elements in a way that is visceral and profound. In that way the idea of a category of ‘physical theatre’ is tautological. It’s all just theatre.

I’m always interested in awards - the way that awards categorise things and break down the totality of theatrical meaning. The new national award system (the Mo’s) and the Greenroom Awards (Victorian theatre awards), have a category called Drama, not Theatre. Drama refers to play production. The fact that they don’t have a theatre award though sets up a measure of what is and what isn’t drama. This leads to an identification process. So you come up with ‘physical theatre’, ‘music theatre’, ‘multi-media theatre’, blah, blah, blah....
JACKSON: In many ways the term physical theatre has been ousted by the term performance.

PLEDGER: I always like to use the term performance because I think it is inclusive whereas I think the way theatre is often used is as an exclusive term. As a term, performance tends to be progressive, whereas theatre is often talked about as being in stasis. Performance has possibilities whereas theatre has closure.

JACKSON: That brings us back to the point I made before – this idea that physical theatre sets up divides to be read in particular ways; that the term physical theatre is claimed as a way of differentiating itself from mainstream play productions. And that term actually has a very short life, I think. Although people might be happy using the term performance as an inclusive term, I suppose the question then becomes what do you want to signal by using that terminology? How do you want to be approached, or read, or understood, or make work? I think performance is an inclusive term, but it also clearly does exclude mainstream play production; it is the main way of defining one’s work aesthetically.

ECKERSALL: I think there are two different ideas at work here. One is the physicalisation of acting and the historical modes that acting has gone through, whether it’s related to Stanislavski or various actor-training modes. One can see over time – mainly through acting on film – different attitudes to the body in performance. I’m thinking, for example, of some of those American actors from the 1960s who came through the method laboratory. They’re very visceral; they’re very physical – going through to the early 1970s when you see films like The French Connection and performers such as Gene Hackman and Al Pacino …

PLEDGER: Robert DeNiro in Taxi Driver …

ECKERSALL: Those actors are very physicalised, with energised bodies, and they’re using those bodies very expressively.

JACKSON: But that’s also related to a new cinematic vocabulary of the mid-shot and close-up – the experience of the full-body presence on the screen.

ECKERSALL: That’s a kind of parallel discourse to the history of Australian acting and its relationship to what was perceived to be English theatre acting – acting of the voice. The need to re-energise acting through a kind of Australian physical sensibility was very much the kind of rhetoric that evolved at the APG and Nimrod. This was perhaps taken into companies like Anthill and also, along a very thin thread, into Bell-Shakespeare and the idea that you do a more ‘robust version’ of Shakespeare.

ULFAN: It sounds like we picked up the short end of the stick, if we picked up that English tradition. We’re talking about a narrow English theatre tradition that is less than one hundred years old. But the English tradition of
theatre goes back to the troubadours and pagan rituals, which were also physical.

ECKERSALL: It's the political issue for this generation of artists that I was talking about. The complex view of history that you refer to was downplayed.

JACKSON: It's the big scheme of English theatre that we picked up. It's middle-class, provincial rep that got transported to Australia. And can still be seen in Gilbert and Sullivan culture, Bell Shakespeare, and pantos for that matter...

PLEDGER: I think it's an interesting point, that the sixties generations set themselves in opposition to that idea of the colonisation of Australian culture. But I think what's really curious about what's happened since then, is the way that physical theatre embraced a whole series of other potentials that lay outside of that anti-colonial dialectic. By the 1980s people were looking at Eastern European and Asian theatre practices as a way of intervening in the codification of the body in Australian contemporary theatre.

ECKERSALL: Jerzy Grotowski being one of the key influences there, and then Suzuki Tadashi in the 1990s. There was also the influence of Jacques Lecoq; during the 1980s he was popular among many artists here.

JACKSON: I wonder in that case do you then look at physical theatre as a term that in many ways was deployed by the cultural establishment to make sense of a new multi-culture – for want of a better word – a term to categorise those productions that looked beyond simply the Anglo inheritance.

PLEDGER: No I actually think that what happened was artists who were doing that kind of theatre named that practice. My feeling is that people who make up the theatrical establishment have no idea of what you're talking about when you mention physical theatre. They have no idea of the kind of circles around physical theatre. One of the interesting things about the whole idea of physical theatre in Australia is that it really was generated by artists who were outside of those establishment circles of cultural production. And they made a decision that they were going to work on the body, and that the body was going to be a primary thing in the theatre they made. In a way it was a generational shift; I think the 'baby-boomer' generation of 1968 was working with a sense of resistance to the English tradition, whereas the succeeding generation looked at the tradition that had been created by the baby-boomers and worked in opposition to that. What is interesting is the way in which that has unravelled over the last ten years to become something else again. I think that physical theatre is most useful as a term in that transitional, seminal moment in Australian contemporary theatre practice over the last ten or fifteen years. That moment has in turn spurned a whole range of activities and maybe the term has passed out of relevance.

JACKSON: I agree. Clearly the term has a sort of dense moment of correspondence where a whole lot of influences and factors have come into
play. I mean, it's about multi-cultural Australia, it's about the minds of
groups like the APG and Nimrod.
PLEDGER: An interesting thing about the term itself is that it's a purely
formal term.
ECKERSALL: But the body takes on all sorts of meanings in the performing
space. We have seen the rise of not only identity politics, but also sexual
politics, and gender politics coming to the foreground of theatre in Australia.
Suddenly those bodies become very coded, and so, whether or not they're
actually doing physical theatre and constructing a sort of abstract physical
aesthetic with the body, the body itself is presenting other narratives, not just
text.
PLEDGER: That's right. In the first half-dozen NYID productions, with Greg
Ulfan, Kha Viet Tran and Paul Bongiovanni — it was very rare to get those
kinds of cultural histories represented by the body on stage in a contemporary
theatre production.
ULFAN: But that was to do with the institutions that were responsible for
theatrical representation as well television and radio. If you look at television
today the faces you see standing next to each other on screen are not the faces
you see driving round in police cars, serving you in shops, people behind the
counter at Centrelink and so on. They've made a transition in that they have
non Anglo-Celtic names, but they're still Anglo-Celtic people representing
the people with non Anglo-Celtic names. The police officers are Arabic, or
Greek, or what not, but they're still being played, with minimal exceptions,
by the ocker, aussie actor.
JACKSON: Can you actually say then, that when physical theatre becomes a
useful term, the body can no longer be presumed? I mean, the fact that the
theatre takes for granted an Anglo-Saxon body, or an Anglo-Celtic body as
the norm was never in question. But with the rise of multi-cultural Australia,
with the influx of immigration and so forth, all of a sudden, the body as
difference ... is given prominence. It just seems to me that in light of all of
that, physical theatre is such a poor term.
ECKERSALL: It's a very poor term, partly because what we associate with
the narrow category of physical theatre today has very often rejected
opportunities or possibilities for the body to be used in a much more
provocative and intelligent, consciously creative light; a consciously
problematic light, too. That's why I would reject the term physical theatre
associated with a company like NYID, which for all its use of the body is
often about asking questions about the body. Whether these questions are
about identity, the body's intensity and strength, or relationship between
bodies, what is crucial is how the body develops its own languages. This is
all something that could be associated with physical theatre, but the term
seems to have been appropriated by a very narrow section of the performance
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community, which have rejected all that. The term seems to be reductively linked to a series of physical tricks.

JACKSON: The physical theatre conference in 1999 – where NYID did a workshop – was basically a circus conference. And circus in Australia, with the exception of The Women’s Circus, is not predominantly a social-critical form. It’s the pure celebration of the body that can do things, but not do things that you then necessarily think about; they’re things that you just look at and gaze and applaud. Circus is not an investigative form in that sense; it’s a carnivalesque form, and that generates meanings in a much different way.

PLEDGER: There is a moment in NYID’s K when Greg Ulfan is continually thrown against the wall in a process of interrogation. Greg’s non-Anglo, European body, face, and physiology is thrown against the wall by an indigenous Australian body (Tony Briggs) in a way that invokes the moment when a body starts to break down and implode. That’s a physical theatre moment. It was framed as something leading to the consideration of a larger point. Often in physical theatre you’ve got people that go ‘oh, wow, wasn’t that physical’, instead of going ‘Jesus Christ, that really got me in the gut!’

JACKSON: It’s a kind of narrow formalism. You’re concentrated on the actual physical dynamics of how something is conveyed, achieved – perpetrated might be a better word – rather than actually being directed to broader issues, again with the exception of The Women’s Circus.

ECKERSALL: Let’s come back to Greg’s point that acting ‘speaks’ or embodies ideas. Very often with a narrow definition of physical theatre you’re left watching a body doing a trick. It is a spectacular form that ends with the spectacularism. Sometimes when I watch this work I am thinking ‘well, come on, do another trick … Is that all?’ ...

ULFAN: But the only potential for drama in these situations is when people fall or make a mistake. I hate watching them because I want them to fall, cause I want the drama. Of course I don’t really want them to fall, but I’m put into a position of having to want them to fall. If they work without a net, I leave, I can’t watch, because I want them to fall.

I want to go back a little to the notion of physical theatre. One of the things responsible for the evolution of the term lies in the innovative new works funding criteria of the Australia Council. The appearance of new form drama as a funding possibility meant that physical theatre was a way of responding to the category. But essentially the physical aspect of theatre is just one of the layers of the vocabulary of theatre. Again, I’m harking back to the idea of a kinaesthetic empathy that is experienced by the audience as being the foundation of theatre and of acting.

ECKERSALL: David, you’ve often talked about the body as being the organising principle in theatrical space. NYID has utilised the notion of gestural choreography, a style of performance that physically represents a
text and progressively throughout the work evacuates the text and replaced it with a series of gestural codes. One of the other innovations lies in the use of groups of bodies as a chorus, whose choreographic form actually defines the space as a whole. I’m also thinking about the use of things like martial arts—that stunning fight that moved through the audience in WS: HDQ using Vietnamese martial arts was a singular moment of danger and political comment the audience responded to. The use of beating and violence is also something that NYID is known for ...

JACKSON: And sport as well ...

PLEDGER: This is not only an interest in the body. It’s not just an agent of design in the space, but also an agent of design in the meaning of the material. I think the crucial thing is that if you use the body, you use it for a reason. I think one thing about physical theatre in a lot of the ways that it gets made is it’s actually not the motivation for using the body as the primary agent of meaning. It is about formalism as opposed to its use motivated by the content.

ECKERSALL: Although coming from a very different context, Stelarc talks about the need to evolve the body from an object of design to an object of designing. In NYID we’ve done a series of performances that have taken place in very open spaces, and those spaces have been designed by the presence of the bodies in the space, and bodies moving through it in various ways. In this sense the body has been an object of designing.

PLEDGER: The openness of the space is critical. I mean it’s always been something about turning the conventional mode of stage design on its head, but it’s also been about trying to replicate the sensibility of the outback of a large country, and the people on the coast as an abstraction. The idea is to open the space up and to continually close it down, or to shift the audience around. This is one idea of physical theatre that the company has used which actually doesn’t immediately relate to the performers, it relates to the audience. The idea that the audience is physically in the theatre, and is constantly reminded of this when they’re moved around the space, or forced to walk through a maze to get into the space ... I think that becomes a physical theatre motif that the company has really developed over the last eight years.

JACKSON: Emptying the space around the performer is also about reopening the possibilities of the body to have agency. So much of stage design is actually about determining how the body can inhabit the space by controlling the space. If you emptied the space, then all of a sudden the decisions and movements of the body become more apparent. The body is given a kind of agency that it can’t handle in a normal, traditional play production setting.

PLEDGER: The minute you open up the space, the performer is more exposed. The proscenium arch environment enables a certain veneer of
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security in which you can retreat. But if you’re in an open space and the audience is always around you, every movement you make has meaning. So, issues of stillness and action become important. The movement when shifting from a still body to an engaged body in actual motion is something that is embedded in the training that we do. Sitting, being still in the space, finding out where you are in relationship to the space, and where the moment of momentum is in each movement – these are crucial skills if you’re dealing with people in a more spectator-like environment.

ULFAN: I’m not sure that I agree that the proscenium arch is responsible for not translating stillness and movement; I think it’s simply the fact that such questions of acting are not really being addressed by theatre-makers. As a performer working to engage the audience at every single moment, I find it more difficult to perform in the round. Everyone gets a different story depending on where he or she happens to be sitting, and a different reading of the body – it’s similar but different. Obviously the same thing occurs in the proscenium environment, but everyone is getting the same picture. In proscenium, it requires less effort to give everyone the same picture, from which they can form a reading of the piece. I don’t think the proscenium arch is blocking-out physicality; it’s simply that physicality is so often ignored by theatre makers. The proscenium can be a space of physical engagement as much as any other spatial configuration in the theatre.

JACKSON: I think you could say though that the physicality of the audience is not being used in the proscenium theatre. You could argue that the proscenium arch nowadays is used for theatre of illusion, where in fact the audience is being asked to deny its own physicality – that is to say, you are no longer present in the building, you are present here with actors in front of you, but you are imaginatively somewhere else.

PLEDER: How you arrange the audience is a really critical thing. The line I’ve always wanted to take is that the catharsis is with the audience and not with the performers, and I think inevitably, that architectural configurations for theatre – the way that theatres have been codified over the last century has supported a certain kind of pathology in the theatre. The proscenium supports a certain kind of thinking and the minute that you open the space up and have people in the traverse, for example, this changes. Suddenly people have a radically different relationship to the performance.

JACKSON: So I think it’s true to point out that the proscenium arch isn’t by necessity a convention of passivity, although history has often classified it as such. In many ways that also leaves us with physical theatre often being a corrective. There is no one essential theatricality, there are just ways of interrupting various conventions. But the question then is; if we do recreate a theatre where self-consciousness is a part of the audience’s physicality, where the audience are present in a particular kind of way, what possibilities do we shut down at the same time that we open up new ones? Greg’s
comments remind us that there are things in theatre that are shut down that Greg very much wants back. Interestingly enough, some of the other companies I'm working with are starting to rethink going into proscenium spaces because they want to open up those possibilities again. So maybe the corrective moment of physical theatre has passed. Certainly within the subcultures we work in, those conventions have been addressed, and now we can actually start to explore other possibilities again.

ECKERSALL: Looking again at the relationship between bodies and space. The proscenium in the nineteenth century theatre was the theatre of emergent spectacle; it was designed to hide the stage technology that could provide slide shows, and grand illusions. And then in the twentieth century, with the rise of modernism, we have the idea of the reflective theatrical space. The apron theatre stage, which was supposed to transcend the barrier between performer and audience, came in its time to be seen as a hindrance to the reflective relationship.

JACKSON: But apron stages existed in the nineteenth century. And you overlook the popularity of vaudeville, for example. Vaudeville was always performed in the proscenium or its equivalent, but you couldn't imagine a more interactive situation between performer and audience... including throwing things back and forth at people, and pulling people out of the audience... and those hypnotism acts from the nineteenth century... I don't think there is anything inherent in the proscenium arch that leads to a certain type of passivity. Certainly, for Chekhov it was quite the opposite. For naturalism the proscenium arch allowed certain things that couldn't have happened without it.

PLEDGER: Even so, I think it engenders a very physical passivity. I mean, you're sitting down, and you can't move. So it is passive, and if you're sitting down and you can't move, then there's a whole series of consequences.

JACKSON: Against that idea — which is sometimes the argument made about the novel as well — is that through the stage you open up a possibility for social change. By a person being able to imaginatively go elsewhere than where they are, things can be seen as changeable.

PLEDGER: But that possibility is also included when the audience moves.

ULFAN: I think moving the audience can be distracting and can interrupt the audience's ability to engage with the piece. It interrupts the flow of kinaesthetic empathy that is experienced by the audience.

ECKERSALL: Brecht's correction to this was the 'smoking theatre' — where one reflects on the action with a sense of detachment.

JACKSON: But this is the argument between Brecht and Lukacs — is social realism the form to actually allow social change, or does it need to be more avant-garde or non-narrative or whatever. The answer depends on what
historical perspective you have and on what the dominant modes of cultural production are. Because what is actually important is the process of interrupting the dominant form of cultural production, there is not anything inherent in either side of the debate. I could well imagine a situation where the proscenium arch is an extremely revolutionary interruption. And I can imagine that moment coming back now. For me, physical theatre is about creating a term that’s an interruption of the dominant modes of cultural production, rather than necessarily having an inherent value of itself as a term, or mode, or methodology.

ECKERSALL: In NYID productions the audience is constantly reminded of the fact that they’re watching an actor. In *Scenes of the Beginning from the End*, for example, the piece begins with the exhaustion of bodies, as the actors are forced to run for fifteen minutes in an intense display of physical strength. Immediately following this they move into a dramatic style of naturalistic acting, and then move to a space that requires a heightened satirical style of acting, which then returns to choreographic gestural codes, and so on. The audience has no sense of watching any notion of stability and/or character progression. Character is interrupted as a part of the overall fragmentation. How does an actor respond to this?

ULFAN: I have subscribed to the school of thought that the actor serves the process rather than the character as such. ‘I’m being somebody,’ is too narrow a formation of acting. Rather: ‘I’m doing a collection of things that fulfil my function of representing an individual in a particular situation, for the audience,’ is my approach. I think of every moment on stage, irrespective of whether it’s linear narrative or naturalism or NYID’s more physical work in this way. Irrespective of what the genre or the style of performance is, my focus is always on where my current task ends and the new task begins. So I have a super-task (a super-objective) and a collection of mini-tasks. It’s a collection of transitions that I go through, of seamlessly finishing one task and commencing another. Through that, an audience has a chance to witness a human before their eyes.

PLEDER: I think that kind of approach is absolutely critical – a kind of actor dramaturgy that can be deployed in different styles of work with the result that different meanings get created. It’s also important for the dancers who are working with the company. Their own dramaturgies are very specific in as much as they’re very similar to the way that Greg describes it, but you might substitute ‘motifs’ for ‘character’.

ECKERSALL: We seem to be talking about performance as a series of actions.

JACKSON: Viewed from a theoretical framework, people might say that this is a theatre version of secular criticism. NYID is secular theatre, but there is a kind of spiritual thing called the character that somehow lives outside of you, that you have to somehow inhabit or be possessed by. There are a series of
words, actions, and inflections that add up to the experience of this thing. There is no secret ... though. There’s just a series of techniques, decisions, investigations ...

ULFAN: It’s really important that we don’t buy into this (semi-mystical acting method). I think that’s the problem with this whole notion of ‘the method’ – that watching an actor cry on stage makes it somehow magic; ‘wow - cause I can't do that!’ ‘They’re really ‘in character’. That’s technique…!’ Our function is not to resemble reality but rather to represent it for the audience.

ECKERSALL: We find this in some physical theatre modes that move towards performance-as-catharsis. I’m thinking of Butō, for example, or abstract intense dance performance, where the actor undergoes some kind of psycho-physical catharsis in the space, and that is essentially what the audience is expected to watch and respond to. Some of these kinds of physical performance seem to be quite closed-off and impenetrable.

PLEDGER: I think that was the problem that the company eventually had with Gekidan Kaitaisha – the revelation of closure in the final part of our collaboration became about just that, the sort of psychokinetic environment that was being inhabited was in fact the performance and that was where it finished. It’s a deliberate journey to go away from those ideas ... it’s not progressive in a social-political environment.

ECKERSALL: Why do you say that?

PLEDGER: Because I want to find a series of landscapes which problematise the very thing we’re experiencing at the moment; which is an internalised ego, which is particular to an economic environment that we live in, it’s a first world environment, it’s the environment of the privileged. Okay, we’ve got a lot of people that look internally for the answers. The approach I propose is to look at oneself in a way that relates to the rest of the world.

JACKSON: And also if you have a work of art, a performance, or a performative self, that is made up of a series of conscious decisions, then other decisions are possible. By being able to say this is a constructive process, then other possibilities could be constructed elsewhere.

ECKERSALL: I think this is important because it allows NYID to negate the two dominating modes of physical performance – the ecstatic mode on the one hand and a kind of acrobatic Australianness on the other.

JACKSON: I wonder could you talk about NYID having gone through a physical theatre period within its work?

PLEDGER: Yes you probably could, but largely because there was no money to mediate the ideas in any other ways than through the body. However, there was and is a genuine seminal interest in exploring the idea of the body as an agent of design in the space, and as the primary agent of communicating the ideas of the material that we were working with, but
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when we actually had money to utilise other media and frame the body in
different ways, we actually stopped being a physical theatre company, and
worked with the notion of being a multi-media performance group, yet
another ‘category’.

JACKSON: What’s interesting is that the body undergoes a transmutation in
that shift, from being the primary locus of agency in meaning, to being one of
a number.

There’s another danger with the body in multi-media performances – that
goes down the Thomas Berringer path – which says that multi-media
performance re-essentialises the body, and that there’s a real danger (of
mediatisation). If you start to have this dynamic between the virtual and the
physically present, then you start to polarise or re-essentialise the body, so
the ‘live’ body becomes some quintessentially human thing again, which in
turn sets up a whole different range of problems.

PLEDGER: That’s about the space between watching a performance that has
the presence of media as a communicator and watching TV. In K you can see
the implosion of Greg’s body in front of you, and you also see the way in
which that moment can be represented to you through media. This becomes a
kind of carnival of images; the vision is switched from one perspective to
another. And that’s the space I think that is interesting ...

JACKSON: The status of the body shifts enormously once you start to tackle
the notion of the virtual, and those notions weren’t inherent in any of the
physical theatre stuff happening in the 1980s and early 1990s. The
technology in the last five years has completely reshaped what physical
theatre can possibly be. It’s completely changed our social experience. Our
primary metaphors for the connections bodies make in theatre are now
networks and so forth.

That dynamic and that danger is actually the dynamic and the danger we live
daily.