Dancing the threshold: Liminal space and subjectivity in practice and performance.

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‘Dancing the threshold: Liminal space and subjectivity in practice and performance’, is a practice-led research project undertaken between 2011-2013 at the Victorian College of the Arts as a Master of Animateuring by research. There are two components of the research: a performance outcome and an exegesis. ‘The Blue Hour’ (30min) was performed in December 2011 and documented in July 2012, and is available for perusal via video format. It is accompanied by this exegesis of 15,000 words.

The practice-led inquiry seeks to illuminate the relationship between vivid imagining and the dancing body and to determine how liminal spaces can act as sites for the emergence of character states whereby fixed notions of identity are transcended. The inquiry incorporates both a personal account of practice through dancing and writing and a critical reflection on the relationship of the research material to the fields of anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis. Rather than critically analyzing the content of these writings I instead reflect on the connection they have to the studio practice and how they may extend the depth of meaning that emerges from it.
DECLARATION

‘Dancing the threshold: Liminal space and subjectivity in practice and performance’

This is to certify that:

(i) This thesis comprises only my original work towards the Master of Animaturing Dance (by Research)

(ii) Due acknowledgment has been made in the text of all materials used

(iii) The thesis is 14855 words in length, exclusive of figures, bibliography and appendices

Michelle Ferris

Signed:

Date:
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INTRODUCTION

Precedents

In reflecting on the lineage of my dance practice I am inclined to describe the experience of knowing as circular, moving forward making connections only to find myself at the beginning again. However, to write this exegesis and tell the story of my practice, I find it serves me well to mark this territory of knowing in a linear fashion, and will do so throughout this thesis.

My interest in identity and subjectivity in dance performance grew out of a creative crisis. I was bored with the predictability of my own dancing. As my interest in dance and performance making had largely been concerned with improvisation and live composition, a difficulty I often faced was how to overcome this predictability by transcending habit. Australian dancer Dr Phillipa Rothfield recalls watching an improvised performance and remarks that what she sees is people showing the audience what they think dance is, "For one person, that meant a series of lunges, spirals and turns across the room, legacy probably of having done lots of phrase material in class" (Rothfield, 2011). I too would find myself moving in familiar ways, dancing my ideas of what I had come to see dance as being composed of in my body.

At the same time as I was experiencing this boredom in my dance practice I was increasingly intrigued by what I noticed happening in my body and in the bodies of those I was observing, outside of the studio. During the day I was aware of an ever present undercurrent of movements within my body that were often restrained from expressing themselves but would sometimes slip out. A sharp in-breath. Chest rising. Fist clenching. A quick footed step and a jump. A 'la la la' under my breath. At night, vivid dreams would leave my body twitching, arms flailing about. Jumping
out of the pathway of an imaginary tiger. This noticing of my own experience was
coupled with years of working as a social worker with women who were struggling
with some form of mental illness. The chatter in their heads often made its way
through their bodies in movements such as repetitive shaking of the head or
stiffness up one side of their torso. I was keen to determine the conditions that
could enable a more overt expression of these undercurrents of movement in the
body as I felt they spoke to something that had been restricted or suppressed.

During my studies of somatic practices such as Body Mind Centering, Skinner
Releasing and Alexander Technique I had experiences that offered me an
alternative to the habitual experience of myself in movement. In particular I
remember being in a workshop with Alice Cummins in which we were working
with the kidneys and I became aware of a moment where a shift occurred in my
consciousness. As I danced the ‘mind of the kidneys’ I was delighted to find myself
in new territory. The practice not only unlocked a doorway to new information
about my body in movement but also about myself, or who I thought myself to be.
My experience of the “I” who dances was altered.

In 2009 I was a participant in Deborah Hay’s Solo Performance Commissioning
Project (SPCP) where Hay teaches a solo she choreographed to dancers who have
commissioned the work from her. The dancers then have to practice the solo
daily for three months prior to any public showing. The dance I commissioned
was titled ‘At Once’. During my time with Deborah and the following three months
daily practice, I was intrigued by the way character states would arise seemingly
out of the blue. Rather than this feeling like I was acting, the experience felt like
an authentic expression of a self that was not fixed or singular but multiple and,
at times, paradoxical. I was interested in how the practice challenged not only my
habitual movement pathways, but also the habitual experience I have of myself, my
identity as a self.
Later that year there was much discussion in the media about the director Roman Polanski who had fled America in 1978 to escape sentencing for rape charges he had pleaded guilty to. What dominated the media were comments made by Whoopi Goldberg on American television show The View that Polanski was a genius movie director whose crime according to Goldberg, was not ‘rape rape’. What was relevant for me in these discussions was an apparent inability on Goldberg’s behalf to step outside the duality of good/bad, hero/villain. Was it so impossible that someone could be a great artist and also a rapist? The practice of being with paradox, which I encountered during my work with Hay, seemed to be a way to overcome this duality. Just like habit, it restricts one’s ability to experience life in all of its complexity.

If my improvisation work is about making choices in the present moment with my body in space then finding ways to transcend the habitual choices, extended not only my repertoire of movement but also my experience of myself as a self. I delighted in the characters that arose during practice and was keen to determine what the conditions were for them to arise. I could see from my experience of the experiential anatomy techniques and from working with Deborah Hay that being with the tension between multiple foci of attention was key to creating the conditions in which I would experience of myself as an ‘other’, as someone or something outside of my usual experience of self. The use of image in these techniques felt like a rich resource for me choreographically. During the research I experimented with ways of using image both in practice and in performance to elicit this state of multiplicity in a liminal environment.
Précis

In Chapter One, I discuss my attempt to destabilize the ‘I’ who dances through a process of separation from my habitual self. I detail the strategies I used in the studio practice; cellular body, listening, seeing, ‘what if’ questions and working with opposing elements. These strategies promote a separation from a fixed singular notion of myself and through a process of unfixing, move toward an experience of a multiplicity of selves. This chapter also introduces the writing of Anthropologist Victor Turner and his concept of liminality. The relationship between liminality and my studio strategies is explored, with a focus on how the strategies work to encourage this multiple expression of the self.

In Chapter Two I discuss how I used imagery both in the studio practice and the final performance components of the research. It is divided into four sections: The image, working with dream imagery, working with found imagery and the problem of re-inhabiting. I introduce a Jungian term ‘active imagination’ to describe how I worked to promote an environment where the aliveness of the image was maintained in the studio practice and could extend into the performance. I discuss how a state of self-induced hypnosis, whereby my attention was focused in a general way on multi-sensory experiences rather than on a particular image, best promoted the ‘aliveness’ I needed in the performance of ‘The Blue Hour’.

In Chapter Three I look to theorists from other fields such as anthropology and psychoanalysis to derive further meaning out of my experience. The chapter is divided into three sections: social structures and the temporal, social structures and the spatial and the ambiguous self. I explore how being in a liminal space
acted as a catalyst for the emergence of different personae to arise through the moving body and how social structures regarding the temporal and the spatial are subverted through the use of liminality in dance practice and performance. I also address the resonance liminality has with Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject to illuminate this phenomenon.

Methods

The research developed through a combination of dancing, writing, reading and attending workshops. In the studio, the movement research was grounded in an improvisational practice. Whilst formal structures were used in the final performance of The Blue Hour to pin down various states, the movement itself was composed live. I acknowledge this approach as following a lineage of dance improvisation that harks back to the Judson Church Theatre in the 1960's in New York. The content of the exegesis details what particular methods were used in the studio practice.

After moving I would always spend time writing down what I noticed. Sometimes this writing took more of a poetic form as I sought to record what had just occurred without trying to understand it. As American dancer Nancy Stark Smith warns, “An inspiring dance can be quickly flattened when the mind closes in around it, trying too quickly to define and enclose the experience” (1982:45). Journal writing finds its way into some sections of the exegesis in italics, to allow for an opportunity to re create some of what was alive in the studio at that time prior to any analysis.

The writing in the exegesis contains a mixture of sources. I looked to other dance practitioners and theatre makers such as Deborah Hay, Stephanie Skura, Meg Stuart, Jenny Kemp and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen to elucidate and support my own experiences and findings in the studio. I also engage with practitioners from other
fields including anthropology, psychotherapy and psychology to derive further meaning from the experience. Whilst the academic writing occurred after the period of making the performance 'The Blue Hour', the video documentation of the performance occurred six months after the final presentation to a live audience. This meant I had to re-enter the work after a period of time in which I had been solely writing rather than dancing. As will be discussed, this allowed for further meaning to unfold as I wove the academic writing and reading of practitioners outside of the dance field into the research and subsequently into the studio practice.
CHAPTER 1: SEPARATION: DE-STABILIZING THE ‘I’ WHO DANCES

In the studio, I was interested in defining particular tools which would enable me to experience myself as an other, as a character or being that was outside my usual experience of self without having a predetermined idea of what this would look like. In order to do this, I had to determine how to separate from this dominant state of the ‘I’ who dances. When I refer to this fixed, singular notion of myself I am referring not only to habitual movement pathways in the body but also to aesthetic preferences and attachments to beliefs about what dance is and what movements are acceptable. This fixed notion of self is a well-spring of distraction, filled with thoughts which cut me off from the embodied experience and inherent potential contained in each moment.

In Anthropologist Victor Turner’s seminal text, ‘The Forest of Symbols’, he discusses his research into the ritual process of the Ndembu people of Zambia. When entering a ritual, says Turner, ritual subjects leave behind their previously held status positions and not yet arriving at their new role or status, enter a realm where anything is possible. “...transitional beings are neither one thing nor another or may be both or neither here nor there or maybe even no where (in terms of recognizable cultural topography) and are at the very least ‘betwixt and between’ all recognizable fixed points in space time structural classification” (Turner, 1967:97). Turner used the term liminality, originally coined by Anthropologist Arnold Van Gennup to describe this in between zone.

Turner theorizes that in order to enter the liminal, one must firstly enter the separation phase. “The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a state), or from both” (Turner, 1969:95). Here Turner refers to ‘state’ as being different from ‘transition’. Whilst one can be in a state of transition, Turner writes that he prefers
to understand transition ‘as a process, a becoming’ whilst a state is a stable location including social position. Transition on the other hand is akin to ‘water in the process of being heated to boiling point, or a pupa changing from grub to moth’ (Turner, 1967:94).

What strategies could I use to affect my perception about who I think I am and what I think my body can do? How could ‘I’, filled with aesthetic preferences and corporeal inscriptions, get out of the way of the dancing to enable something or someone other to arise? This chapter discusses the strategies I gathered in the studio to move into a liminal space where I could access this separation from a fixed notion of myself as a singular identity and transition toward an experience of a fluid multiplicity of selves. These strategies acted as warm up exercises at the beginning of the studio practice. Then as the work developed into performance, sat beneath the choreographic direction, acting as a foundation to the movement. If I found myself to be stuck I would return to one of these tools as a way to keep moving.

The strategies I describe are: cellular body, listening, seeing, what if questions and working with opposing elements. The strategies were gleaned from a number of sources, namely through Deborah Hay’s performance practice and my experience of experiential anatomy practices such as Alexander Technique and Body Mind Centering. During the studio research these tools acted as warm up activities and foundation elements to the movement material that was generated for the performance outcome, ‘The Blue Hour’. I place them alongside writing from other artists.
Cellular Body

During the 2009 SPCP, Deborah Hay directed me to attend to the practice of relationship with my whole body as made up of trillions of cells. The direction from Hay was, 'What if every cell in my body has the potential to invite being seen not being fixed in my fabulously unique three-dimensional body?' As cells are constantly in a state of flux, both dying and rejuvenating at once, they cannot be fixed. If I could perceive myself as made up of trillions of cells and that I was inviting being seen from each cell, then my perception of myself as a singular entity shifted and a multiple, three dimensional perspective of myself arose. Hay writes, “The basis of my work is breaking up ones fixed identity by imagining one’s cellular identity... constantly getting through this idea of fixity in the physical body, and also getting rid of the idea of the attachment to physicality” (Hay, 1993:7).

Every day I could experience myself differently from the day or even the moment before. The directive challenged my attachment to habitual movement pathways and enabled an experience of separation from the notion of myself as a fixed entity. Hay states, “I am doing a practice of inviting being seen, changing, not being fixed, really not being identifiable in my fabulously unique, different from yours, three – dimensional body” (1993:6). In a research group led by Body Mind Centering practitioner Kim Sargent-Wishart in 2011, we are working with the cellular body. My journal notes read;

*There is a light buzzing all over*

*Like a swarm of bees resting in mid air, wings beating so fast it holds them still*

*Perfectly balanced, independently breathing*
The image of the cells as bees independently breathing shifts my sense of self from a fixed position, a stable sense of ‘I’ to a multiple sense of “I’s, not fixed but fluid. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, founder of Body Mind Centering writes, “Cells are the microcosm of our individual self. Each cell is an aspect of our self, of our unconscious and conscious behaviour, and manifests as both our body and our mind” (2008:159). Imagining ones cellular identity means recognizing the multiplicity of possible selves in any moment, both conscious and unconscious. Rather than sticking with the known fixed identity, one moves into the unknown, the multiple self. During this period of research I would often use Hay's direction as a way to tune into this possibility and to enable me to shift my perception from a fixed notion of myself to a multiple one.

**Listening**

Hay writes, “It is a sensing mode that includes perception beyond the three dimensions. It includes extra sensory perception; it includes a belief that all knowledge is present always and that in listening you can hear anything” (Hay cited in Drubnick, 2006:52).

*I am a human body made up of trillions of cells standing. I see a plane fly past, blue sky out of the corner of my eye. I come alive to all my senses. Feeling floor under feet, the sound of warm air pushing through the heating vent, tickling my skin. I feel the presence of someone behind me.*  
*(Journal notes, ‘The Blue Hour’, 3/7/11).*

When I enter the studio I listen to what is there in that moment. Attending to what is there, I allow myself to be affected by the feedback I’m receiving through all my senses. I use the term feedback to denote the range of sensory information I receive including sight, sound, touch, smell, taste and kinesthetic sense or proprioception.
The feedback from the senses comes from anything that is alive in the room at that time including from the imagination. The process of listening to the feedback contains two steps. Being available to noticing the feedback from the senses and allowing myself to be affected by the feedback.

In ‘New Self, New World’, American writer and theatre maker Phillip Shepherd discusses the difference between pretending to listen when one is acting, rather than actually listening. Shepherd cites the American actor Alan Alda as stating, “Real listening is a willingness to let the other person change you. When I’m willing to let them change me, something happens that is more interesting than a pair of dueling monologues” (Alda, cited in Shephard, 2010: 23). Rather than representing what listening looks like, one actually listens and has an authentic response. As Shepherd discusses further, “When you pretend to listen either onstage or off you are paying attention to your own ideas about how to react ... when you really listen, you abandon the foregone knowledge of how to react and, willing to ‘be’, you pay attention to ‘what is’ (2010:23).

To enable myself to listen to what is there in that moment and to be affected by the feedback rather than merely representing how it felt last time or how I’d like to look from the outside, I had to confront those areas that appeared fixed and inflexible to the changes I was experiencing in and around myself. Two areas appeared to be inflexible to change. These were the facial muscles and the voice. I worked in the studio with loosening my facial muscles and allowing sound. I found this a particularly quick way to challenge my habitual self as ‘I’ don’t normally make sound like that, or contort my face like that. Once I had broken through this fixity, I could trust that the experience of listening to what was present in the studio at that time, would affect my moving body and this would sometimes mean that movement would ripple across my face or cause me to make sound.
Choreographer Meg Stuart writes of the tendency in post modern dance for the performer to have a neutral face and her desire to transcend that. “After studying Yvonne Rainer and the Judson Church group, I had a sense that when pedestrian movement was brought into the frame, it always had a kind of neutrality about it. But somewhere in between lingers a space where you can show that things affect you” (Stuart: 2010:20).

Obviously there was a fine line between ‘putting it on’ and it coming from an authentic place of being affected by the feedback. This line did not always correlate with a subtlety in the expression. What was key for me was to not be overly conscious of what was going on in the face or voice but allowing movement and sound to arise there whilst still paying attention to other areas. Hay’s direction during the SPCP to ‘surrender the pattern of fixing on a singular coherent idea as a way to notice where you are’ was key for me here. It acted as a reminder to attend to a multiplicity of foci rather than indulging in one at the cost of losing contact with the others.

**Seeing**

The way I see in this practice was of vital importance to enable me to enter this liminal space. In Hay’s work I was encouraged to notice the feedback from my visual field and be aware that this noticing should include everything I could and could not see. This encouraged a softening of my gaze to include attention to the back space as well as awareness of what I was seeing in front of me. During the 2009 SPCP, Hay referred to this experience of the visual field as ‘grazing’. In this sense, grazing meant I was lightly consuming my visual field, never fixing on the one spot for too long. To shift the feedback I received from the visual field, I had to simply shift the position of my head.
In an Alexander lesson I’m instructed to ‘see without looking’. Rather than reaching out to see, putting something extra onto the seeing, the eyesight stays embodied. This soft focus is what I found helped me enter the liminal space in my research. I worked with attending to the internal experience, the sensation of moving and the sensation of an image, whilst also attending to what I could and could not see in the space around me, the external environment. To be true to both internal and external environments I found that I had to soften my focus to enable myself to balance on the threshold between the two rather than fixing on one or the other. This simultaneity of attention created this liminal experience whereby through balancing on a threshold between the interior and the exterior I was positioning myself in a third space which only existed in relation to the other two.

To see without looking one has to release attachments to what one is seeing. To encourage this ‘seeing without looking’, I had to see without labeling. I found this applied to both the experience of internal seeing and the external seeing. Shepherd cites the title of a book by American non fiction writer Lawrence Weschler, “Seeing is forgetting the name of what one sees”, to illustrate this point about how we cut off from the present when we label what we see around us. “You cannot find presence, freedom or creativity inside a world arrested by description—which is also to say you cannot find wholeness there—because any such world is a mere duplicate that has severed ties with the world it purports to represent” (Shephard, 2010:24). By labeling what I see when I dance I place limits on the potential of my body to respond to the feedback. Forgetting the name of what one sees allows for an experience to occur without the limitations of definition. By not labeling what I see, I am experiencing rather than doing.

In ‘Deborah Hay: A performance primer’, Jim Drobnick describes the experience of undertaking Hay’s practice as ‘positionlessness’. He writes, “Non-attachment, declining to judge, restraint in taking a stance or being fixed... It rests upon our humility and the willingness to accept every experience or perception regardless of one’s beliefs or preconceptions” (2006:54). To release myself from a fixed position,
I found it helpful to balance the seeing between the experience inside myself and the experience outside of myself. As Skura notes,

“... our goal is to have awareness of ourselves and still live in the world, to have an awareness of the world without losing ourselves, for a relationship to be really inside of ourselves but also be very aware and responsive towards another person. To be there and to be attentive and aware without losing oneself...There is so much need to go inside that there is a danger of not being in the world anymore, or on the other hand, to be so in the world that you lose yourself. You have to change constantly; you have to be aware of yourself and what your impulses are at any given moment. So it necessitates a great amount of awareness. It is always a challenge to keep doing it and not an imitation of it” (Skura, 1993:16).

If I was neither here nor there but ‘betwixt and between’ then this state of non attachment was more easily accessible. Being distracted by the feedback coming from either the internal or external experience would result in a loss of tension that seemed pivotal for the work to exist. For it was this liminal space, this ‘positionless’ place that this experience of non-fixed identity arose.

**Working with opposing elements: Entering the unknown**

Hay writes, “My body feels weightless in the presence of paradox” (2000:74). The experience of working with paradox was something I first encountered in Deborah Hay’s practice. Below is a segment from the choreography in ‘At Once’ that directed the dancer to perform joy and sorrow at the same time.
“I sing a song that arises from and combines joy and sorrow into a single wordless song that resonates through my poised bones. Barely expressing a sense of history, my face reflects the transience of joy and sorrow” (Deborah Hay, At Once, 2009).

The first thing I remember was a feeling of hardening as I toiled with the impossibility of the direction of holding both joy and sorrow at the same time. As I softened, and allowed myself to sit with the terror of not knowing, something interesting occurred. My face rippled in unusual ways, beyond anything I could have made up and this resonated throughout my body in a twitching fashion. In this moment, my normal sense of agency shifted. It was as if I had been taken over by something.

Feeling my feet on warm floor and the length of my spine. Head tips slightly forward. Whole body, practicing relationship to this space. Sensing the space behind as vast, the distance between here and the wall shortens with a few little steps. Turning shifts the visual field. Imaginary eyes all around. Everything inside body and everything outside, inhaling and exhaling. Attention flicks around, acknowledging the sensation of this particular spatial location. Joy and sorrow. Joy and sorrow. Emotions rippling through body and breath, contorting the face. Joy and sorrow in the audience, through my body. (Journal notes, SPCP, 2009).

To endure this tension of combining joy and sorrow simultaneously whilst attending to the relationship of my whole body to the space where I was dancing, I found myself entering into a liminal space whereby I was balancing on a threshold between each element rather than landing on one in particular. I noticed that it was in this position of being in the unknown place between joy and sorrow that a space opened up for something to arise in the body that was unfamiliar and often surprising. It was as if the tension between opposing elements collapsed to expose
something outside of usual experience. Following my experience of working with Hay I wanted to continue this exploration of the potential inherent in this tension between inner and outer worlds. During my own period of research I asked, ‘If I could rest my attention between inside and outside, not falling into one or the other but remaining on a threshold, what could arise in the dancing body?’

Australian theatre maker and director Jenny Kemp also uses opposing foci to elicit a particular state of attention. Kemp states, “It’s more to do with working on layers; an emotional layer, a thinking layer, a physical layer all at the same time” (Gallasch, 1999:34). I attended a workshop with Kemp in 2011 where we worked with multiple focus points. Some of these included impulse, orientation, imagination, perception and kinesthetic suggestion. For example, I worked with keeping the gaze far from my self whilst saying a key word from the text whilst imagining that I was walking on dead bodies. Kemp states, “At any moment, what seems more important is that there is some sort of duality or ambiguity or more than one thing happening rather than a didactic form” (Kemp cited in Gallasch, 1999:35). Attending to multiple foci resulted in the performer entering a liminal space. The effect opened up a space for something other to happen which was outside of usual experience and conscious control.

‘What if’ questions: Using language to effect habit

During the SPCP, Hay proposed a number of ‘what if?’ questions that I continually returned to during my own period of studio research as they supported this process of separation from the habitual. When I was incorporating dream imagery and found imagery into the work (this will be discussed in the following chapter) these questions always sat underneath, as a foundation to the practice.
The questions from the SPCP 2009 that I continued to work with during this research:

1. What if I can invite being seen from 360 degrees as I practice relationship with my whole body as a teacher, in relationship with the space where I am dancing, in relationship to my audience?

2. What if every cell in my body has the potential to invite being seen not being fixed in my fabulously unique three-dimensional body?

3. What if I can surrender the pattern of fixing on a singular coherent idea as a way to notice where I am?

Below is a note from my journal that describes an experience of working with the directives.

*My attention rests in many places at once. What I see in my visual field, wooden floor, the foot of another, a discarded hair tie. What I perceive is behind me and below me. I tell myself silently, whole body my teacher, notice time passing. I take it in without holding onto any of it. I stay here. My head cocks to the side and my right arm jettisons forward pulling me into a duck feet stroll. I am surprised. My movement choices surprise me.*

That my movement choices surprise me is a key here. The habitual I, filled with aesthetic preferences, judgments and beliefs about what this should look like has been forced into the background. Instead something other to my usual experience of self arises through the body. As Foster notes about Hays work, “Body does not succumb to the dancers agency – striving, failing, mustering its resources to try again. Instead it playfully engages, willing to undertake new projects, reveal new configurations of itself with unlimited resourcefulness” (Foster, cited in Hay, 2000:xiv).
Writer and performance maker Margaret Cameron explains her experience of working with these what if questions.

“The artist perceives and plays in the feedback of possibilities in a space generated by a question in order to participate in fresh relationships to what is known, and to what is already happening. The thing that is on her is the thing she works with. She tricks it. Working with what she knows but also with what she doesn’t know, the artist is in the practice of supporting and being supported by multivalent propositions. Overthrowing knowing, she practices a question of unknowing” (Cameron, 2012:54).

That the questions allows for the creation of space is important here. In order to break out of the habitual self there needs to be space for something new to arise. Hay states, “History choreographs all of us, including dancers. The choreographed body dominates most dancing for better or worse. The questions that guide me through the dance are like tools one would use for renovating an already existing house”. (2007: 3)

In a fixed environment there is no room for something new to arise outside of usual experience. Hay’s directives challenge fixity in the physical body by encouraging the performer to step into the realm of the unknown. In Performance Research, 14, Bojana Bauer writes about the effects Hays practice has on dancers as they struggle to let go of what they know (their training) and dive into this realm of not knowing.

“The body’s knowledge is not articulated as something fixed and stable, not put to use and delineated as merely functional skill. Hence the dancers body is asked neither to fit into a choreographer’s writing nor to demonstrate or quote its bodily identity. Stripped of the choreographic grid that conventionally would give structure and meaning to the dancers movement, in these dancers the perceptive and sensory work of the moving body is laid bare, offered to the sight as a dance in its own right” (2009:76).
Something shifts and I go from doing movement to being movement. It has a life of its own. It arises, comes through the body. Don’t force it. Be with what's there first (Journal notes, ‘The Blue Hour’ 6/5/11).

In an Alexander Technique lesson I am instructed to let go of my idea of what standing is. Firstly I become aware of how I usually stand. This way of standing that has remained relatively unconscious until now is automatic. It is a habit developed over many years and influenced by many things including my own personal history and heritage, my sense of self worth, the corporeal inscriptions prescribed to me through dance training, yoga and other somatic practices and the culture to which I am part.

The teacher encourages alternative directions in my body through gentle touch. I notice an instant widening of my back and as I let go of the idea of holding my body upright, I balance instead. Both the language of the instruction and the thought image of the alternative directions enabled this experience. The habitual self and the imagery used in Alexander Technique as a method for confronting habit is discussed by Rothfield, “…the direction-image is a means of overcoming, a technique of the body oriented towards the overcoming of that which constrains life. It assists the subject to get out of the way, that is, to inhibit established inhibitions that limit as well as facilitate what a body can do” (Rothfield, 2011).

To become conscious of habit is to become aware of choice. When I let go of my idea of what standing is something other to my usual experience of self arises. I realize that what I thought of as fixed was merely the taking of a position that had been rendered unconscious. The founder of somatics, Thomas Hanna states, “A soma that is maximally free is a soma that has achieved a maximal degree of voluntary control and a minimal degree of voluntary conditioning. This state of autonomy is an optimal state of individuation ie one having a highly differentiated repertoire of response possibilities to environmental stimuli” Hanna, cited in Hanlon Johnson et al, (1995:351).
Whilst my Alexander practice continued alongside this period of studio research I also incorporated some of the language commands such as let go of your idea of what standing, walking, running, and lying down is. I found this encouraged me to meet those activities in a new light each day and allowed the possibility that the undertaking of those activities was not fixed in process or outcome. American choreographer and dancer Meg Stuart writes, “Often I say to my dancers, ‘Your body is not yours’. This idea allows them to push past their physical taboos and often, strange new movement surfaces since they no longer feel responsible for their actions; more that their body parts have lives of their own” (2010:179). When I say everything inside body and everything outside body, I distance my sense of ‘I’ from the body and this in turn frees up the potential of the movement.
CHAPTER 2: SENSING AND IMAGINING IN THRESHOLD SPACE

“... the invisible, intangible, inaudible psyche, perceives invisible, inaudible, intangible essences” (Hillman, James, 1990:62).

In the studio practice I employed the preparatory strategies mentioned in chapter one in addition to a variety of poetic images. These included my own dream imagery, the photography of Gregory Crewdson and the spontaneous imagery that arose whilst moving. This chapter details how I worked with image in the studio practice and final performance work ‘The Blue Hour’.

Fig1. ‘The Blue Hour’ (2011) Image: Jeff Busby
Whilst the preparatory tools discussed in chapter one worked to shift the habitual notion of myself as a singular identity, adding a layer of found and spontaneous imagery worked to intensify the oppositional relationship between interior and exterior. Vividly imagining and noticing sensation whilst also remaining acutely aware of the space around myself, created a tension and through this tension of opposition, a third space arose. In this third space, this threshold space, I would experience myself as other, as a character or being that I perceived as separate from my usual experience of self. This experience of otherness will be discussed further in chapter three. The following text seeks to set out what I did in the studio during this period of research and how this impacted on my understanding of the potential inherent in this liminal place of transition. I place this articulation of studio practice in relationship to other performance makers and writing from the field of psychology.

The image

Notably, when I refer to vivid imagining I am doing so with all my senses, not just what I see in my mind’s eye. The neurologist Antonio Damasio states that images are not just visual. “By the term images I mean mental patterns with a structure built with the tokens of each sensory modality –visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, somatosensory. The somatosensory modality includes varied forms of sense: touch, muscular; temperature, visceral and vestibular... thought is an acceptable word to denote such a flow of images” (2000:318). When I refer to imagery I am using Damasio’s definition; that imagery is a thought composed of a rich layering of sensory information.

Rather than attending to the image in a trance-like manner such as with the eyes closed, completely inside the experience of the image, I followed on from my experience of Deborah Hay’s performance practice where I was directed to
incorporate the balance of attention to the imagery and the external environment simultaneously. To position myself in a threshold space I had to be between imaginative space and my immediate environment. In the studio, my attention roams between noticing the sensations elicited from my moving body in the space where I am dancing and noticing the feedback I receive through my body from the image through all of my senses. I experience this as a feedback loop of information from sensing and imagining to imagining and sensing.

Thomas Hanna has written extensively on the subject of the soma, the lived experience of the body and explains this feedback loop. “The human is not merely a self aware soma, passively observing itself, but it is doing something else simultaneously: it is acting upon itself; ie...it is also engaged in the process of self regulation... We cannot sense without acting, and we cannot act without sensing” (Hanna, 1993, 44-45). A note from my journal below is an example of my experience of this sensing, imagining feedback loop.

*I see the corner of the ceiling. There's a feeling of being stuck between a pane of glass, hot and steamy. Sweat glistens on my skin. It's very soft and quiet, only small steps at a time. Moving from ball to whole foot, parallel or turn out causes directional shifts. These changes are obvious and I pronounce them with rhythm. Underside of my arms rotate towards the sky, cobwebs on the surface of my skin (Journal notes, 'The Blue Hour', May, 2011).*

Elizabeth Dempster writes, “Images may precede movement, or may emerge from within it, and sometimes image and movement are occurring simultaneously. The malleability of the relationship between images and movement is not always recognized. A confusion slippage, between movement and image often occurs spontaneously ... the “territory-between” exists as a rich and under explored resource in the choreographic process” (Dempster, 1985:20). This territory between sensing and imagining, this threshold place of becoming is the focus of
the work, slipping between what is known and what is not yet known to enable something other to arise.

**Working with dream imagery**

During the beginning stages of the research I worked with an image from a dream I had of a woman standing on the edge of a cliff looking over at a dead body that had fallen. This practice culminated in a performance titled Basement that was shown at the VCA in 2010. By translating my memory of the dream into a somatic form I was able to move with the residue of the dream corporeally. This process of embodying the dream was always attempted within the threshold space. I didn’t close my eyes to see the dream. Instead I saw the literal space I was in and felt and sensed the dream through my moving body.

*She’s standing in front of the audience. There’s a dead body. Sniffing the sea with her limbs, she notices a frantic state arising but tries to suppress it. She moves with strong arms and legs, clenching her fists then opening her palms. She tries to hold onto something but it keeps slipping from her fingers. She lets the energy take her momentarily. She stops. She’s surprised. Little shudders continue to ripple though her chest, affecting her breathing. She walks backwards out of the light (Journal Notes, ‘Basement’, 2010).*

Later in the research, when making ‘The Blue hour’, I worked with a dream I dreamt during the Black Saturday bush fires. I grew up in Marysville which was destroyed during these fires. During the performance of the piece, I stand under a lamp. The audience is barely visible but I see them. I hear the fire and my head starts to shake. With the tip of my nose I’m tracing the road into town called ‘The black spur’. I see the audience. I see smoke and trees. I hear roaring fire. I hear silence and the sound of my breathing. All at once I experience these things. I am between the performance space and my dream of Marysville.
Jung uses the term active imagination to describe the process of attending to the images that come up through the unconscious. Stream of consciousness writing, painting or drawing is used to attend to imagery such as that derived from dreams. Jungian analyst and dance therapist Joan Chodorow discusses that it is the tension between conscious and unconscious that is the essence of active imagination. She quotes Jung as saying, “A product is created which is influenced by both conscious and unconscious, embodying the striving of the unconscious for the light and the striving of the conscious for substance” (Jung cited in Chodorow, 1997:10).

The process of undertaking active imagination entails two parts that may occur separately or simultaneously. Part one is ‘letting the unconscious come up’ and part two is ‘coming to terms with the unconscious’. Chodorow discusses that in order for this to happen a suspension of our rational thought process needs to occur in order to give free reign to fantasy (Chodorow, 1997:10). What is interesting in relation to my research is the second part. By bringing the image from the unconscious into the conscious dance experience I had gained access to an array of corporeal sensations and further images that had remained dormant until that time.
The tools I used to affect my perception as discussed in chapter one, along with my recall of the dream image enabled this suspension of rational, fixed thoughts concerning what was acceptable dance movement, and what was possible in my body.

When I was with this tension between imaginative space, in this case the dream image, and the external space where I was dancing, movement would arise that was not predetermined or forced and had qualities to it that surprised me and felt out of my usual range of experience. I would find myself shaking, growling and crouching in corners. The world of the dream imagery seemed to be the perfect juxtaposition to the external reality of the space where I was dancing for it created such extreme opposition. It thickened the tension between interior and exterior space, creating a threshold space where something other could arise.

Moving in a threshold space between the dream image and the space where I was dancing highlighted for me an interesting tension between the two worlds of my public and a private self. The movement that arose through my body as an effect of the corporeal resonance of the dream image seemed to come from a private part of myself that was not usually given expression. Despite this feeling that she belonged to me, she also felt foreign to me. In chapter three I will discuss this aspect of the work in more depth when I connect to Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject.

Kemp discusses this tension between the public and private worlds in her own work. She states, “I started off saying I was interested in internal action, but I’m not interested in that in isolation – it’s its relationship with external action. I’m looking at how what’s happening internally is in disjunction with external ‘reality’... and to recognize the disjunctive existence we have with what is at the surface a highly organized, constructed society with this massive chaotic element inside’, (Kemp, cited in Minchinton, 1998:79-80). By using the dream imagery in the studio practice, I was able to access the peak of this tension, where the private spilled
Fig3. The Blue Hour (2011) Image: Jeff Busby
over into the public realm. I also chose to use this element, when the monstrous elements of the dream world could impose themselves on a controlled domestic environment, in my construction of the set design for The Blue Hour; a basement lamp, a lounge chair and a pile of dirt, all in relationship with each other in the same space.

Whilst the practice of embodying the dream imagery was a rich resource in the studio practice, it posed problems for the performance aspect of the work. During the performance season of Basement there were nights when the vividness of the dream imagery was not as accessible as other times and this had a deleterious effect on the dance. Rather than the dance itself being a bridge between consciousness and the unconscious dream image, without the vividness of corporeal residue of the dream imagery it felt like I had to act or represent how it had been in the past. Going forward with the research, I was keen to understand this element more and find ways to keep the imagery alive during the performance and for the dance to be an authentic expression of the tension between holding these elements simultaneously rather than as a representation of them. I will touch on this aspect more in the section ‘The problem of re-inhabiting’.

**Working with found imagery**

During a writing workshop with Jenny Kemp in 2010 in which we used found imagery and stream of consciousness writing as a generative tool I was introduced to the American photographer Gregory Crewdson. The pictures from his ‘Twilight’ series, 1998-2002, were of particular interest to me as they seemed to capture subjects that they were in two places at once; in a domestic suburban environment and off somewhere in their imagination. Crewdson’s father worked as a psychoanalyst in the family home when he was a child and he would listen in on the sessions of his fathers patients through cracks in the floor. This became a clear
influence on his work, juxtaposing the banality of domesticity with the fantastical nature of repressed desire.

There were two images I chose to work with in the studio practice to generate movement material that was later included in the final work, The Blue Hour. The first was an image of a woman floating in a house filled with water and the other was of a woman digging flowers into her lounge room floor. These images highlighted a tension between interior and exterior space by positioning elements that were usually considered 'outside' such as dirt and water alongside a subject in an interior space. In ‘Gregory Crewdson 1985 – 2005’, editor Stephen Berg notes this tension between opposing elements, “Gregory Crewdson’s photography revolves around a single large theme; the penetration of the repressed, eerie, and inexplicable into a supposedly protected pretty world” (2005:11). The effect was one in which the wildness of the outside was impinging on the ordered and controlled environment of the domestic space.

Whilst the dream image had left a corporeal residue that was instantly accessible in the early stages of the research, working with found images that did not come from me meant I had to meet the image in a different way. I used stream of consciousness writing as a way to find my own personal associations with the images and then I took this into movement. I found this writing had a rhythm that translated into a particular musicality in the movement. The sense of stillness or moment in time captured by the photographs also elicited a feeling of reverie and pause that made its way into one of the first sections of The Blue Hour when she is slowly rolling across the room to a pile of dirt.

After moving with the image I was aware that whilst my attention was committed to the image, there were times when it was as if the image was located outside of my body, as if I were dancing in the lounge room of the image itself. I noticed that in this instance my attention was not balanced in the space between sensation and
imagination. I was in a world but I was not here. The problem seemed to be that I
was not giving equal attention to the space I was dancing in and rather than meet
the image corporeally I was merely visualizing it with my minds eye and therefore
not seeing the performance space around me. So how could I overcome this
problem? Could I merely tell myself to experience the image in my body rather than
in my minds eye? This command proved difficult to grasp.

American performance scholar Shannon Rose Riley discusses the problem of
the body mind split in language in relation to image-based work in performance
practice. She points out that even if a theatre maker directs the performer to
experience the image somatically, through their body rather than in their mind
they are buying into the false premise that the mind and body are separate and one
is preferable over the other.

Fig4. The Blue Hour (2011) Image: Jeff Busby
“If and when the body, experience per se, and/or ‘self’ are reified as an essential ‘real’, it problematically assumes the subject or ‘self’ is a stable location, and that a particular experience or transcendental self exists as an ideal or originary construct or essence. In some improvisational, bodily and/or experientially saturated approaches to acting where being in the moment is emphasized, a Cartesian dualism is simply reinscribed... Neither provides an adequate account of the ‘body’ in the ‘mind’, the ‘mind’ in the ‘body’” (Riley, 2004:446).

Telling myself to place the Crewdson image inside my body rather than as a picture in my minds eye was not helpful. My body experience of the image couldn’t be separated from the visual picture I had of it. Trying to do so merely bought into the idea that body and mind exist as separate entities. To address this problem, Riley proffers something akin to Hay’s and Kemp’s practice of holding multiple foci of attention simultaneously which she terms ‘perceptual polyphony’. This state is one in which the actor can ‘problem solve with his/her entire organism, (and) ... hold simultaneous attention on various psychophysical processes, to perception of one’s being in relationship with others and the environment’ (Riley, 2004:448).

American choreographer Stephanie Skura also notes the importance of working with multiple foci of attention in her work.

“I think of consciousness existing on many different layers, some more out, some more in, just different kinds of things going on in you at the same time. Like we’re talking sitting here and I am looking in your eyes and they are blue, and somewhere in my consciousness is maybe an association to the blue of your eyes, such as swimming in the ocean...I might skip to all these different things that are going on in me at any different moment, and each of these might have a movement analogy... you can express something that is going on in you visually, you can express something that is going on tactiley,
and express something that is going on emotionally and intellectually. Your body is always expressing on different layers…” (Skura, 1993:14).

In the case of working with the Crewdson image discussed above, rather than telling myself to put the image in my body, I needed to work to notice the multiplicity of sensory experiences that were occurring in relation to both the image and the space where I was dancing simultaneously. The importance of maintaining the connection to one’s outer environment at the same time as attending to the sensory feedback from the image seems pivotal here, and extends beyond the performance environment to suggest a multifarious model of subjectivity.

This concern with inner/outer perception is also explored by American philosophy scholar Helen Tallon Russell who notes, “Human subjectivity is a both-at once-ness in existence, a simultaneity of divergent elements and their relationships. The tension must remain “liminal” in the sense that the presence of the self is found in preserving rather than resolving the tension between the polar ontological elements” (2009:8). One is always in relationship; to space, to oneself and to others. It is this being in relationship to something, this both-at-once-ness that makes the self. In order to work with the multiplicity of the self in performance, I found that these relationships needed to be recognized.

Whilst I had encountered ways to work more effectively with the Crewdson images, a problem arose as the work progressed regarding the strength of corporeal resonance from the image. There were times when these images did not give as strong an effect corporeally as they did at other times and this greatly affected my ability to use them in an improvised performance setting. If the image was not giving me any feedback then it was easy to fall into a single focused point of attention and lose contact with the other foci. What did I need to do to ensure the aliveness in the image? Using dreams that had corporeal residue proved to
be easier to access somatically compared to found imagery such as the Gregory Crewdson image. But if this corporeal residue faded over time, as I found happened during the length of the project, I needed to find other ways to connect to the imagery without representing how it had been in the past.

**The problem of re-inhabiting**

Having decided to redo the documentation of The Blue Hour six months after the work had been shown to a live audience, I faced the question about how to re-enter the work after a period of dormancy. Whilst I was aware the layering process of foci was a key I also felt that there was a particular quality or attention I needed to access to enable me to attend to the threshold space between poetic image, sensation and the external environment. What I found to be most useful was something akin to a dream-like state in which I knew I was dreaming.

In the past I have had experiences as I enter into sleep of feeling as if my body is rising off the bed and flying around the room. In the studio I attempted to capture this feeling of being between wakefulness and dreaming as a corporeal memory and move from this place. At the beginning I would lie down and get sleepy but over time I found I could access this feeling more immediately. Jungian analyst Robert Bosnak describes the importance of being in a particular meditative state in order to practice active imagination. “If you do not begin active imagination in such a state of consciousness there is a chance that you will just fabricate stories, which produces a sense of unreality. In active imagination you don’t have a feeling of unreality; it is rather as if you participate in two equally true realities simultaneously: the world that is actively imagined and the world in which you know that you are involved in active imagination” (Bosnak, 2007:45).
Fig 5.6. The Blue Hour (2011) Images: Jeff Busby
Psychologists refer to the state between wakefulness and sleep as ‘hypnagogic’. In a study by psychologist Andreas Mavromatis, he guided his subjects through a relaxation process that allowed them to hover on the borderlands of sleep and then report what they had experienced. An example of one of the subjects: “I had a very pleasant floating sensation. I had lots of images of mansions, castles and houses. I heard the sound of wind whistling through trees and had a general feeling of calmness...it felt as if I were looking into the future” (1987:21).

Like the subject of Mavromatis’ study, when I was able to position myself in a borderland state between wakefulness and dreaming, spontaneous imagery arose in a variety of sensory forms. Mavromatis states, “Hypnagogic phenomena occur in all the sensory modalities, that is there are visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile experiences as well as somaesthetic, kinesthetic, thermal and speech phenomena: and they range from the most vague and faintly perceptible to concrete hallucination” (Mavromatis, 1987:14). When I was with the dream of Marysville during the performance of The Blue Hour, I could smell smoke, see flames and at once see the outline of the audience and sense the presence of the walls encasing my body in the room I was performing in.

To maintain the presence of this state, Mavromatis proffers the importance of being in an open and receptive place, not unlike meditation: “...that over alertness tends to put an end to the process points clearly to the receptive attitude required for its maintenance and the learning to balance oneself in this state” (1987:112). Recalling the corporeal state of being between dreaming and wakefulness in a general way, rather than using a particular dream image or found image was key to preserving my presence in the threshold space over time. If I could enter into this place then spontaneous imagery arose that contained the strong corporeal vividness that I was seeking.
That a general rather than a specific state was required to elicit this spontaneous emergence of vivid imagery meant I had to take a creative risk. To be open to the new material that would arise on any given day I had to let go of my attachments to how it had been in the past or what I had liked about it last time.

On the opening night of The Blue Hour performance I found that I did not enter the state that felt as if I was between wakefulness and sleep and subsequently held on too tightly to the specific imagery in the choreographic score. The effect for me as the performer was a sense of rigidity as a result of trying to ‘do’ it rather than ‘be’ in it. There was no flow of spontaneous imagery. After experiencing how it could go wrong, I approached the next evening’s performance in a different way. I spent an hour in the performance space, in the dark, on my own prior to the show starting. During this time it felt as if I experienced a shift in consciousness into a mindfulness state of attention. In this state, sensory information was ramped, reducing the chatter of the waking consciousness.

In the late stage of the research when I was attempting to re-engage with the material after a period of time, I found that recalling the corporeal memory of a hypnagogic state was akin to a kind of self imposed hypnosis. Mavromatis notes that hypnosis shares phenomenological features of hypnagogia. “Hypnotic induction may be seen as the disruption of our usual, wakeful, state of consciousness and the re-patterning of a new (hypnotic) state” (1987:221). Through a process of relaxation and contemplation of sleep, Mavromatis states that this process along with restricting the subject’s sensory motor relationships “...has the effect of putting a person in a state of ‘partial sleep’ in which ‘dissolution of Ego boundaries’ takes place, so that ‘incoming stimuli become indistinguishable from the self, seemingly as endogenous as the subjects own thoughts and feelings’”(1987:220).
The tools I used to effect my perception as discussed in chapter one contributed to this self-imposed hypnotic state by dividing my attention between multiple foci and promoting a state of confusion and ambiguity which I experienced as a place of unknowing. On the second night of the performance of The Blue Hour I was able to find this altered state of attention. This occurred following the opening night that I thought had gone badly and had felt upset about. After working through those feelings and ‘getting over myself’, I came to the second night of the performance in a place of surrender and openness. This and the induced state of partial sleep that I was able to access prior to the show starting, allowed for the ‘dissolution of ego boundaries’ to take place. The incoming stimuli such as the presence of the audience and the choreographic scores associated with the imagery were not separate from me. The outside and the inside were indistinguishable from each other. This enabled the vividness of spontaneous imagery to arise and feed the live dance.
Fig7. The Blue Hour (2011) Images: Jeff Busby
CHAPTER 3: THRESHOLD SPACE, TIME AND PERSONAE

“Liminality can perhaps be described as a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to and anticipating postliminal existence. It is what goes on in nature in a fertilized egg, in the chrysalis, and even more richly and complexly in their cultural homologues” (Turner, Edie cited in St John, Graham et al, 2008:298).

What happens at the boundary between interior and exterior, when a dream or imaginary space meets the external environment? When I was with this tension between opposing elements of interior and exterior, dreaming and wakefulness, noticeable form or character states would arise through my dancing body seemingly out of the blue. There was an old lady hobbling, reaching out her hand, a small child crawling and a growling monster in the swamp. Sometimes the form was more ambiguous and rather than a particular character, it felt as if what had arisen was a subversive state, a particular ‘something’ that was unacceptable.

By positioning myself on a threshold between interior space and exterior space the duality inherent in such notions collapsed, challenging what I considered to be acceptable social behavior and my perception of myself as a singular fixed entity. I looked to Turner’s writing to understand what was particular to the liminal space that allowed this experience to arise. Turner writes, “If our basic model of society is that of a ‘structure of positions’, we must regard the period of margin or ‘liminality’ as an interstructural situation” (Turner, 1967:93). By entering this interstructural situation, one steps out of social structures and fixed notions of time and space and enters a ‘moment in and out of time’, and ‘in and out of secular social structure’ (Turner, 1982:24).
To enter threshold space, one must first enter the separation phase. Turner states, “The first phase of separation clearly demarcates sacred space and time from profane or secular space and time (it is more than just a matter of entering a temple – there must be in addition a rite which changes the quality of time also, or constructs a cultural realm which is defined as ‘out of time’, ie beyond or outside the time which measures secular processes and routines)” (1982:24).

Time and space are linked in philosophical thought, and so too for performance makers who are orchestrating an experience in time and space for themselves and the audience. In order to experience this phenomenon of being outside of social structures that delineate time and space I first had to undertake the process of separating from my fixed notion of self. The preparatory tools discussed in chapter one; cellular body, listening, seeing, working with opposing elements and ‘what if’ questions, acted to loosen up my perception of who I am and what my body can do. Using the tools along with the general state of being between wakefulness and sleep was akin to a ritual process whereby normal experiences of time and space are altered.

**Social structures and the temporal**

In Turner’s research he noted that when entering the liminal period in ritual, the Ndembu people of Zambia would strip themselves of all previously held social positions and identifying status roles. Turner writes, “Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank and role, position in a kinship system” (Turner, 1969:95).
In this space between, these ‘liminal entities’ stepped out of a fixed social structure (their status positions) and a fixed notion of self as singular. By placing themselves outside of these structures they existed in a threshold place where ambiguity surpasses meaning. Turner writes, “During the intervening liminal period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the passenger) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner, 1969:95). Leaving his previously held position in the community and not yet arriving at the new state or status position, he exists in between.

In a performance context, the maker is often concerned with inviting an audience into a similar ‘in between’ zone, where they are more easily led into their imagination. For example, in Kemp’s play ‘The black sequin dress’, there are four female performers playing the same character and appearing on stage at the same time. The liminal space she creates on stage between internal space and external action is resonant with the multiplicities inherent in the psyche. Not fixed. Not singular. Multiple, paradoxical and rich in ambiguity. Jungian analyst James Hillman writes, “The psyche is not only multiple, it is a communion of many persons, each with specific needs, fears, longings, styles and languages. The many persons echo the many goads who define the worlds that underlie what appears to be a unified human being” (Hillman, 1990:37).

Tait (1994) discusses how by attending to the language of the psyche, Kemp’s work acts to effect an audience’s imagination. “She sets up space for the spectator to wander around in with their minds, to roam in, amble through, fantasise about, get lost in, to daydream in” (1994:86). To enable this ‘setting up of space’ to arise for the audience to ‘wander around in’, Kemp recognizes that the usual experience of time needs to be altered. Kemp states, “To become internally active, society’s linear time frame needs to be arrested. We have to depart from cause and effect, beginning, middle and end; to stop travelling in a horizontal direction and open up
a vertical time frame. In vertical time we exist in a space where past, present and future coexist; a space where there are states of being to do with memory, dream, reflection, emotion, imagination simultaneity and psychic phenomena. My interest in these areas is primarily an interest in the creative capacity of the psyche” (Kemp cited in Minchinton, 1998:80).

Hay too notes the importance of such an alternative time frame in her work, “... rather than make the invisible visible, I am trying to make timelessness visible... There is no time, that is the quintessential experience when I am in the moment of the dance. There is no time. I am outside of time” (Hay, 1993:8). When I was working with Hay’s practice during the SPCP I experienced an altered sense of time. Following the direction from Hay to, ‘notice time passing’, I would find myself in a place whereby my usual experience of time ticking by was suspended and instead each moment stretched out.

“Where am I? Tucked away in the corner I can feel the presence of vast space behind me tickling my back. Face is squished against the wooden floor, breath pushes particles of dust away from me. Then gravity shifts and I’m suspended from the ceiling. I’m floating here. I notice space in my hip sockets and the spaces between the inhale and exhale. I’m caught in a web, hanging by a thread. I’m resting. Hanging here to catch the next moment or opportunity to move. There’s the sound of the heater and cars going by. Life both outside and inside. The sound of my breathing” (Journal notes, ‘The Blue Hour’ 6/9/11).

Social structures and the spatial

During the research I was interested to find out more about how my spatial location was impacting on my experience of “I” during the dance. Could a particular spatial composition encourage this experience of a multiple self? In her
book ‘Space, time and perversion’ (1995), feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz discusses the notion of spatiality and its effects on identity in relation to the work of French sociologist Roger Callois. She describes how Callois’ research into the mimicry of insects showed that mimicry has no survival value and as such is due to a confusion between the insects understanding of itself as separate from the space it inhabits. Grosz states, ‘Mimicry is a consequence of the representation of space, the way space is perceived’. To be able to position oneself as a subject, one needs to locate oneself in space. Conceiving of oneself as a unified subject involves locating oneself in a single spatial position. In mimicry, this fails to occur. Speaking of insects engaged in mimicry, Callois states:

“I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I am at the spot where I find myself. To these dispossessed souls, space seems a devouring force. Space pursues them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar. And he invents spaces of which he is the convulsive possession” (Callois, cited in Grosz, 1995:90).

For the insects, the spatial confusion is dangerous and leaves them out in the open, easily eaten by prey utilizing their sense of smell rather than their vision to hunt. For performance makers, this can be fruitful. Callois’ statement propels me to return to the genesis of this research when I worked with Deborah Hay and was met with the proposal that how I perceive when I am dancing is the dance itself. As Deborah states, ‘My perception is the dance’. Including an awareness of what I can and cannot see, ‘breaking the boundary of my skin’ by perceiving myself as taking up space outside of the room I am dancing in, changes the way I perceive space and myself in space. ‘I’ extends beyond the boundary of my skin and I no longer
experience myself as separate from the space I inhabit. Here I can be many things, not just the habitual me. For example, in Hay’s solo ‘At Once’ there is a section where the choreographic direction is as follows:

“**I perform market, a contemporary market, a mall. Without creating a mall I notice it wherever I am. (Note: I attend to my perception of space and time in order to distract myself from predetermining the outcome of this exercise. It is an effort to refrain from creating a mall. Instead copious instances of a mall appear and disappear)**”, (At Once, 2009).

Through juggling this direction to ‘perform a mall’ along with all the other directions (for example the ‘what if?’ questions discussed in chapter one) at the same time, this state of ‘perceptual polyphony’ alters my experience of ‘I’. Rather than representing what a mall might look like, in this moment ‘I’ becomes a mall.

Grosz suggests that the depersonalization that occurs in mimicry is akin to psychosis in humans. She states, “This means that both the psychotic and the imitative insect renounce their rights, as it were, to occupy a perspectival point, instead abandoning themselves to be spatially located by/as others. The primacy of one’s own perspective is replaced by the gaze of another for whom the subject is merely a point in space, and not the focal point around which space is organized” (1995:90).

Is this ‘other’ that Grosz speaks of ourselves also? Do we become other to ourselves, adopting the perspective of observer? Whilst I can experience myself as other, the presence of my habitual self remains. As Grosz noted, the primacy of a singular perspective is replaced by ‘the gaze of another’…and yet is this other perspective also me? Even as ‘I’ become dispersed/displaced across multiple personas, I retain a portion of myself as a witness. Spatially this is akin to Grosz’ observer perspective. The loose grip of attention to multiple foci means I can...
move fluidly between both, balancing between habitual self and other. Dancing from multiple perspectives, or keeping multiple balls in the air is a state that could flip into chaos at any point, as noted by Bosnak in his writing on the use of active imagination work with dreams: “An ongoing relationship between the habitual self and the other presences, keeps one always a bit off balance, unsettled, on the verge of being out of control, somewhere between chaotic fluidity and the solidified self” (2007:25).

*Repetition of my hands pulsing towards each other as my knees give in to gravity. I notice a judgment arise and a desire to shift follows. I don’t respond. Instead I notice time passing. I remember Deborah saying, ‘There is no repetition in live performance’, the cells are always rejuvenating. Mouth opens. I bare my teeth like a monkey. My attention darts around my body so as to not become fixed on the parts that are moving; back of my head, torso and feet, buttocks belly. My eyes respond to this experience of sensation. I am more than just me. I am you. I am. (Journal notes, ‘The Blue Hour’, 3/7/11)*

The ‘renouncing of rights to occupy a perspectival point’ that Grosz speaks of is analogous to the ‘positionless’ state proposed by Hay and the experience of being in between multiple foci of attention. When working with the imaginary material along with the spatial structure of the performance space, I am neither here nor there. If this is so, then where am I? To repeat Turner, I am “...betwixt and between all recognizable fixed points in space time structural classification” (Turner, 1967:97). Like the psychotic and the imitative insect, I loosen the fixed notion of myself as a singular identity. I can be mud, or the monster in the mud or part of the wall breathing silently.
The ambiguous self

Once inside the liminal space between imagined reality and my immediate environment, between the sensation of my body in space and the space where I was dancing, character states would arise through my moving body. The presence of these character states suggested to me that the boundary between opposing elements enabled the creation of a third space whereby my usual sense of agency was disrupted and dislocated and something other was allowed to exist.

_She’s low today. Crouching like a frightened child or an old disabled man. Shuffling her way forward. Her hands are not hands. Don’t pick things up. Instead they hang limply until weight falls through them pressing into the floor. She shifts direction. She’s in the corner of the room, noticing time passing, breathing, sensing space behind her, seeing the floor in front. For a moment it’s quiet. She is one with this space. She is part of it in the same way the wall is part of its structure. Then, grunting, grunting disabled man arises again. Prehistoric, pre language, shuffling around the floor._

*(Journal notes, ‘The Blue Hour’, 19/04/11)*

Here my experience of gender and age is ambiguous. I am at once old man and frightened female child. The movement acts as a sieve, fluidly alternating from one persona to the other, or experiencing both at the same time, in the same body. The position and form of my body in the space gives a clue as to where I am in each moment such as the crouch forward of the thoracic spine or the lightness in the legs and hands.

During the period of research I found that focusing on a particular character or element meant I moved into a representation of it rather than a genuine experience of its presence through my moving body. I was reminded time and time again that the way into the material was through multiple foci and layers of imagery including
allowing spontaneous images to arise whilst moving in the threshold space rather than focusing on a particular element or character. If I created the conditions, then they arrived voluntarily.

The themes that arose continuously in the threshold space are worth noting. These included, darkness, night, mud, rain, monsters, swamps, an old decrepit body of ambiguous gender, a lost child and a desperate woman unable to speak. I wondered what was it about the liminal space that created the ground for these darker elements and characters to arise? Turner states,

“The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (threshold people) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space...Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to the eclipse of the sun or moon” (Turner, 1969:95).

Anthropologist and partner of Victor, Edie Turner points out the commonality between Turner’s theory of liminality and feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection. ‘Abjection which is above all ambiguity might be regarded as ‘dirt’ or liminality from a psychoanalytic perspective” (Turner, E, cited in St John, 2008:301).

In ‘Powers of horror’, Kristeva explores the concept of the abject, that which has been cast from the symbolic order. She states, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982:4). In the liminal space between subject and object, that which is unacceptable, such as these darker elements, arise. Kristeva uses the
example of a corpse to describe the effect of abjection on subjectivity.

“There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border than has encroached on everything. It is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without a border?” (Kristeva, 1982:4)

Early in the project, the image of a cadaver recurred in my studio explorations, as if signaling the play of borders that would come to characterise my research. I have used the following journal writing earlier to describe moving between sensation and imagination with a dream image. Here I repeat it, pointing to the abject material that I encountered in this liminal space.

She’s standing in front of the audience, on the edge of a cliff. There’s a dead body. Sniffing the sea with her limbs, she notices a frantic state arising but tries to suppress it. She moves with strong arms and legs, clenching her fists and opening her palms. She tries to hold onto something but it keeps slipping from her fingers. She lets the energy take her momentarily. She stops. She’s surprised. Little shudders continue to ripple though her chest, affecting her breathing. She walks backwards out of the light (Choreographic notes from ‘Basement’: 2010).

During the practice I would often find myself in unusual positions such as crouching low, growling into a corner. I was not sure in these moments if I was human or animal. Turner writes, “If liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal social modes of social action it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs ... normal limits to behavior are undone” (Turner: 1967:156). During these movement experiences it felt as if I were breaking a rule about what was an
acceptable expression of my body. By evading specificity of character or a fixed notion of the self, my body experienced the freedom to be multiple, ambiguous and at times abject.
CONCLUSION

‘Dancing the threshold: liminal space and subjectivity in practice and performance’, grew out of a desire to transcend my habitual self in my performance improvisation practice. Having encountered moments in other practices such as Body Mind Centering and Alexander Technique where I experienced myself in new ways in movement, I could see that in order to transcend this dominant fixed identity I had of myself in my dancing, ‘I’ had to get out of the way of it to allow for something other to arise.

Prior to embarking on this research project, the experience of working with Deborah Hay in 2009 had been particularly profound. During this time I found myself balancing on a threshold between my internal world and the external environment and delighted at the various character states that arose spontaneously in this liminal zone. Here, my body seemed to have a life of its own. Having had these initial experiences, I began the research first to understand how these experiences might occur and secondly how I could use this knowledge to construct my own performance work.

First I worked to define the tools which could help me detach from the habitual experience of myself in movement and would loosen up my perception of who I think I am and what I think my body can do. Later, I worked with different ways of using dream imagery, found imagery and spontaneous imagery in a studio practice and performance setting along with the initial tools to trigger the spontaneous arrival of these other selves.

What was apparent early on was that it was through working in a liminal space where my attention was dispersed across a range of sensory experiences and images that enabled this experience of an altered sense of self to arise. Holding too tightly to a particular image did not allow for the corporeal vividness I required.
in a performance context. Attending to spontaneous imagery whilst remaining alert to my immediate environment best promoted the conditions where I could unfix from my habitual self and experience this state of multiplicity and ambiguity. In order to achieve this in a performance context I realized I needed to access a layer of consciousness that was akin to a state of partial sleepiness or self induced hypnosis. Accessing this state prior to walking on stage was key to enabling me to attend to the liminal space and have an authentic experience of multiplicity in the moment of live composition rather than merely imitating what it had felt like last time.

Through making the connection to Turner’s concept of liminality I was able to flesh out the effect that being in a liminal state had on my perception of time and space and how this affected my subjectivity. By extricating myself from my usual fixed position and repositioning myself in a ‘positionless’ place, I subverted both my experience of time being linear and a belief in myself as separate from the spaces I inhabit. In this new zone I could be many things, not just the habitual me. I could be at once old man and frightened female child. I could be mud, or the monster in the mud or part of the wall breathing silently.

In reflecting on the impact this research project has had on me as a maker and performer I return to the desire I had at the beginning of the research to transcend predictability in my improvisation practice and am reminded of a quote by Hay, “My body is bored by answers”. By attending to the tension between my inner and outer worlds and stepping in to an unknown realm, I found I could transcend my beliefs about what was possible. The character states I generated in the liminal space seemed to speak to something that was usually kept outside of social order, something under the surface, challenging not only what I considered to be dance but also who I think I am and what I think my body can do.
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