

From Direct Action to Being There: Choreographing Communities in Dance and Occupy protests

This paper is based on my ongoing research into, and practice of, community dance in the UK and inspired by the global Occupy movement. I am going to propose some starting points for thinking the connections between these two phenomena in order to suggest how some of the strategies and techniques of the Occupy movement of the late 2000s can politicise UK Community Dance – in particular site specific events - and in turn how the study of certain community dance events could serve as a method for understanding aspects of Occupy, using Randy Martin's rationale that '*a study of how dance is made, through the explicit direction of the body, can....serve as a map for those felt but perhaps unknown reaches of social experience.*'

Susan Foster of course has already argued for *Choreographies of Protest* (2003) in which physicality plays a central role in 'constructing both individual agency and sociality' as well as in the tactics of specific protest events. She also warns of constructing such events as 'dances' which would as she puts it 'radically de-contextualise their motivation and intent' (p396). Similarly, in articulating relationships between UK Community Dance events and Occupy protests I in no way intend to speak for those who practice Occupations. Furthermore, when I refer to Occupy I am aware of the problems of naming it as one thing and that as professor WTJ Mitchell puts it, it feels faintly ridiculous to be writing a paper in the midst of revolution. However I offer this today in the spirit of Occupy which has itself become a kind of meme and is rhizomic and multifaceted in its methods. As Occupy Wall St themselves have put it: 'Occupy is more than a protest, more than an occupation, and more than any tactic' ...significantly they too represent this excess, the 'more than' through the image and idea of the dancing body as seen in their inaugural poster:



fig. 1

What I want to propose in this writing also comes weighted with a personal desire to politicise my own practice because despite the continuing dialogue of dance scholarship with politics and political thought, much of the discourse surrounding Community Dance practice in the UK has been of an uncritical and apolitical nature due to the reliance on reports and evaluations which often have an imperative to present success stories, and what is more the evaluative meaning of community associated with a cosy, rose-tinted past which can often lead, in community dance practice, to sentimental representations of this very idea. I believe the UK to be a world leader when it comes to Community Dance and am one of its biggest advocates, however I also recognize the need to critique its ethos and practices.

This apolitical tendency though is not only to do with discourse. Community Dance in Britain has always operated within and through governing bodies, indeed its point of origin is seen as when three community dance amateurs, as they were called then,

were appointed by local government authorities in 1976, and as Linda Jasper pointed out at the time ideologically 'it is difficult to be radical or alternative when funded by state quangos'. As such the historiography of community dance in Britain already disassociates itself somewhat from some of the more radical aims of certain Community Arts projects (Inter-Action/The Blackie) or indeed experimental, interrogative choreographic practices, such as those of the X6 collective in the UK who were operating at the same time. The relationships between UK community dance and political praxis I propose, could be helpfully reconfigured through the lens of Michel Foucault's episteme.

Not one of his most prolific concepts (he later critiqued it), but his notion of the episteme suggests an epistemological field which manifests *conditions of possibility* rather than as he puts it in *The Order of Things*: 'growing historical perfection'. The episteme therefore offers a horizontal, synchronic perspective of history. Both Linda Tomko and Alexandra Carter use it in the context of dance studies, citing Foucault's suggestion that 'it is possible to observe how a culture experiences a propinquity of things, a history of resemblance' (p2, 2005). The episteme then also provides a framework to understand the resemblances I propose today between British community dance and the Occupy movement, the idea that people gathering in public space in the late 2000s although in very distinct cultural spheres share something at a phenomenological level and that the practices of community dance embody a politics that can be theorized - or indeed politicized - through certain strategies of the Occupy movement.

The first resemblance can be seen in the ambiguous stance of both movements. Owen Kelly wrote of British Community Arts in 1984 that 'the movement has staggered drunkenly from one direction to another' citing a 'liberal pragmatism' to get funding as glossing over any explicit political agendas or subject specific discourses, echoing Jasper's sentiments. Similarly, there continues today to be many cyclical debates in the sector about the purpose and function of community dance practice, and indeed the role of the term community, given its many and various models and aims in Britain alone.

While Kelly construes this as a weakness in community arts, one of the most significant things about the political orientation of the Occupy movement is its refusal to be categorized in terms of specific demands. As Mitchell writes:

‘The Occupy Movement....refuses to describe or define in any detail the world it wants to create, while showing the world in its actual presence as a nascent community’ Mitchell 103

As such, Occupy confounds expectations and understandings of conventional political categories while instead enacting or indeed *performing* its proposal for what a community can be. Although this has also since been critiqued (See Kersten Forkert) as there are branches of Occupy that have indeed made specific demands, the plural and discursive nature of these demands arguably still generates what Lorna Sanders refers to in a dance performance context as a ‘productive ambiguity’. Rather than a lack of focus, the multiple and divergent aims of community dance could be seen (as in occupys terms) as producing alternatives to a taxonomic box-ticking politics.

What Mitchell articulates as showing the world a ‘nascent community’ can also be seen in community dance works – Including those by Rosemary Lee and Charlie Morrissey – that I will refer to briefly today. These works are not necessarily about social inclusion or personal betterment as many government agendas since New Labour in the 1990’s might have all community dance justify its existence by; but instead propose modes of relating through the methods they use. Not only as performance but through the processes used to create said performances which arguably embody how community can function corporeally as opposed to – or in addition to - representing an idea of what community should look or feel like (cosy, safe, nostalgic). In a similar way to what I suggest, Andrew Hewitt proposes social choreography as ‘the enactment of a social order that is both reflected in and shaped by aesthetic concerns’ (p2).

British choreographer Rosemary Lee is often associated with her site specific participatory dance events such as *Common Dance* created in 2009. It took place in a former town hall, using the civic history of the place as common ground for gathering as a starting point. She writes of the performance that:

...it is a community dancing itself out for people. Watching groups of strangers come together to create something that requires risk-taking, patience, trust, compromise, surrender and co-operation is profoundly humbling and affirming as it reminds me that humanity does have something to offer when I feel darkly about our collective failures...

The collective failures Lee refers to are also what Occupy protestors claim are the result of the plutocracy they endeavor to undermine. But more importantly, the qualities she describes are all modes of relating that Michael Taussig infers in his situated ethnographic writing on Occupy Wall Street. These qualities come about, not in a metaphysical way through unspoken communal understanding, but because of operational relationships within Lee's choreography and that the Occupy protests similarly require: the responsibility of carrying someone's weight, the practicalities of putting up a tent, of sustaining the occupation over time, of making the performance happen, say I am *with* you in an ontological sense as proposed by french philosopher Jean Luc Nancy, and it is through such acts that community is arguably choreographed. Not the longed for community of the past which by definition can no longer exist, it is in Nancy's terms in-operative, but an embodied experience of community in the here and now.

For Nancy, as mentioned, community is an ontological proposition because 'being with' others in plural singularity is the very basis of existence. This is important also because political action – gathering or assembling - never happens alone. As Judith Butler argues, it is always *supported* action. The notion of being-singular-plural that Nancy argues for does not require an 'in common' that becomes a body of identity, or a self referential community closed in on itself, united behind a common cause. This is significant also due to the increasing tendency of site-specific community dance to use movement choirs, often due to the scale of numbers of people involved, propounded by initiatives like Big Dance which is a UK wide promotional

initiative. However, as Jessica Berson points out 'forms too have a history' and that of the movement choir is not an entirely unproblematic one given their use by the National Socialist Party which used them as an attempt to transcend individuality to achieve what Berson refers to as 'a mystical sense of unity'. Nancy's relational ontology is useful then not only because of Occupy's purposefully ambiguous stance but also because it refutes the possibility of objectifying large gatherings in public space as the mindless masses, subsuming their singularity, an important ethical stance in these situations to oppose violence carried out by the state.

Where The Land Meets the Sea was a large scale community dance performance, part of Big Dance 2008 and relied heavily on movement choirs to maximize aesthetic impact in the expansive site of Brighton beach and to manage the sheer number of bodies taking part (roughly 100). I was part of the choreographic team and used the project as a case study for my Masters research. My focus was to discover whether the quantity and scale of the event – which could be seen as ticking the boxes for increased participation in dance in one fell swoop - impacted the quality of experience for participants.

Through this qualitative research, in interviews participants revealed that they had largely felt empowered by being part of a large group moving together, rather than subsumed. They referred to a sense of extending themselves, being connected to others and to their physical environment – Nancy's 'being with' others potentially. The kinds of experiences that came to the fore through these interviews were articulated as important to participants as a way to experience their ability to act within and on the world, not mystical but practical and rooted in the material.

Clearly, Occupy protests are not movement choirs as such but both Occupy encampments and site-specific community dance events like the ones I have mentioned gather groups of plural singular bodies in public. Or perhaps as Judith Butler puts it 'bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public' and as such they produce in Hannah Arendt's terms a 'space of appearance' in which Butler suggests the true space is not that which is preordained as public but that which lies *between*

the people. It is therefore a totally transposable space which is significant for the global orientation of the Occupy movement.

Rather than, than the objectifying of large groups of people in the name of power or an imagined national identity into a uniform mass as the Nazi party did, Occupy movements tactics and Lee and Morrissey's choreography allow for variation and adaption and as such people reveal their singular presence, highlighting the space *between* each existent allowing them to appear to one another, and as such resisting homogenisation. Berson refers to this as the 'messy appearance' found in Rudolph Labans movement choirs which is perhaps what Dance critic Sanjoy Roy referred to as aiding him to see both the wood *and* the trees in Lee's *Common Dance*.

The messy appearance can also be seen in what Todd Gitlin calls 'Occupy's expressive impulse' in which 'The disorder of what happened confronted the order of the authorities'. Unlike protest marches that have a designated route, a start and an end point, with speakers that are authorised to deliver a unified message, Occupy as a strategy presents new challenges to the authorities and illustrates how certain movement techniques of the community dance performances I refer to are relevant to understanding it as an embodied practice. Techniques such as the movement choir, but also a version of this I have heard referred to as 'flocking'. Flocking was used in both *Common Dance* and *Where The Land Meets the Sea* in which leadership in a moving group constantly changes and which requires a resonant articulation of movement qualities as opposed to the precise embodiment of form. This echoing technique can also be seen in Occupy's use of the mic-check, in which announcements are made by multiple people, across space, and which avoids becoming simply a dogmatic repetition through the singularity of those who stand up to utter the same words but distinctly. Methods that emphasise non-hierarchical, co-operative means of communicating associated with a functioning community.

Whether choreographers such as Lee and Morrissey would refer to their works as community dance is itself questionable, however they are often aligned with the practice due to their interest in working with performers without rigorous technical

training. Their reasons however as I said do not usually align with the personal betterment of conservative community dance agendas in the UK but are instead to do with a qualitative presence, or indeed aesthetic which is sometimes precisely due to a lack of training in discipline specific forms. This does not however make it apolitical, but its politics are as I pointed out informed by the choreographic methods in a productively ambiguous way.

Similarly, what the nascent communities of Occupy require instead of clear goals and aims, in Mitchells words is 'an insistence on being seen and heard before any specific political demands' the singular beings that make up its entirety will not be subsumed under the naming of a particular cause...it is in effect what has been referred to as 'a demand for presence' (p103). This is the same demand that Lee makes of her dancers trained or not, which is what she describes as...

...A sense that the dancer is overtaken with the activity they are engaged with in such a way that every cell in their body seems involved. They are in synch, they are whole, they are present.

Presence in this sense can be seen in terms of 'being there' as a specific choreographic and political strategy. In addition to the site-specificity of the examples I refer to which thereby requires physical presence in a particular place, choreographically there is an emphasis on stillness, minimal movements and slowing down in order to allow for the involvement that Lee refers to, Andre Lepecki's 'slow ontology' perhaps. I have worked as her rehearsal director and seen these qualities take shape over long periods of time. They are perhaps what Ramsay Burt suggests as paradoxically 'passive performance strategies that enable a focus on the potential strength of action'. (Burt in Kolb).

In the context of protest as my title suggests I propose that although closely aligned 'being there' differs distinctly from the idea of direct action. Direct Action can be seen as a technique in which specific physical acts are both dramatic and functional – they aim to stop something happening through as April Carter puts it – 'physical intervention and obstruction' –climbing a tree to stop it being chopped down for example. The body is implicated through its vulnerability in relation to the act it

aims to prevent. Occupation though is less about these particular dramatic acts – or indeed their accompanying individual martyrs - and more about simply being there, being *with* others. When I say simply it is because of the requirement of presence over and above any specific virtuosic physical techniques, either in protest or in movement terms. It is therefore an ontological proposition.

Similarly, Lee writes of her impetus to create Common Dance:

In the cut and thrust of modern life, how can we be brave enough to seek, touch upon even for a moment, a more poetic existence without going anywhere else but here?

Lee on Common Dance

Or as Taussig states of Occupy:

‘man does not live by bread alone....This is not only a struggle about income, disparity and corporate control of democracy. It is about the practice of art too, including the art of being alive.’ (p18)

Community dance in Britain as a poetic rather than an institutional practice has the potential to create revolutionary actors who experience the phenomenological potential of agency that appears (to use Arendt’s term) between people gathering in public in their plural singularity. This is significant not only for the politicization of community dance but for reclaiming the very idea of what a community can be and for revolution that does not depend on its violent, immediate successes but rather as Mitchell states of Occupy, is ‘something that *feels* like revolution to those that participate in it.’

This phenomenological emphasis demonstrates the importance of articulating experiences of those participating in the creation and performance of community dance in order to construct its political position, rather than relying on the rhetoric handed down via governing bodies or indeed projected onto it by scholars (such as I might be doing!). Through engaging in the idea of the episteme the methods and practices of artists such as Lee and Morrissey can play a meaningful role in articulating the prefigurative political alternatives that the Occupy movement of the late 2000s seek, because as Antonis Vardis, writing of the Occupy gatherings in

Athens in 2011 states - we need to 'create new understandings of what is political' (p63).

This is not to say that community dance practice has to be political in order to be valid but this is something that is increasingly important to me as a dance artist and academic in the United Kingdom currently where governance from a small majority has come at the cost of many voices not being heard; including many of those who are advocates for dance and its place in the world.