CREATING NEW NARRATIVES THROUGH SHARED TIME AND
SPACE: PERFORMER/AUDIENCE CONNECTIONS IN MULTI-SITE
DANCE EVENTS

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...when the sky is the backdrop and the same wind that ruffles the
trees and your hair makes the dancers’ costumes billow, that fourth
wall becomes just a little bit more porous. (Jowitt, 2009: 27)

Introduction: Perspectives on site-specific performance and
dance

Dance, as bodies moving through time and space, provide an
evocative vehicle to engage in a creative dialogue with, and
interrogation of, site. Yet in the arts milieu site has often been more connected with sight than with kinaesthetic experiences. Site-specific art, at least in a contemporary sense, in the form of public or installation art, has been primarily a visual encounter. Babb (2008) suggests that it was the more performative “happenings” in the 1950s (p. 63) with artists such as Allan Kaprow that were the forerunners of what is now site-specific performance in its many guises. Performance is also visual but importantly encompasses “acting out” its particular narrative in various other ways. Site-specific performance became a feature of the experimental years of the Judson Church in New York with artists such as Meredith Monk creating Juice at the Guggenheim Museum in 1969, Vessel in a Soho church in 1971, and Trisha Brown with her seminal 1969 work Man Walking Down the Side of a Building (1969). Whilst these works and many others around the world may have produced a kinaesthetic empathy in the viewer they were still, however, primarily works of visual spectacle. The late 70s and early 80s saw the rise of the community arts movement in which site-specific performance not only had a socio-cultural and often political purpose but encouraged the participation and contribution of the audience through a more direct experience of a sense of place and identity.

Current practices continue to embrace the above aspects as well as incorporating digital technologies and interactivity, with sites encompassing virtual as well as live environments. Contexts, processes and outcomes may differ, but there are certain definitional precepts that underpin site-specific art and performance. It usually

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occurs in a public place through what Hunter (2007) calls a “process of ‘interruption’” (p. 112) and Klein (2007) refers to as “interventions.” In their encounters, artists use the site as a stimulus for the conceptualisation and creative realisation of these interventions. Kaye (2000) emphasises the temporality of this interference in suggesting that “the creative process in site-specific performance acts out a ‘writing over’ the site”; a kind of palimpsest which is written on and then rubbed out again (pp. 1-8).

UK-based Red Earth performance installation company describes site-specific performance as “inspired by and designed to integrate with the physical and non-physical aspects of a specific location” (in Wilkie, 2002, p. 149). Similarly, Hunter (2007) suggests that site “comprises both tangible (location, architecture) and intangible (atmosphere, phenomenon) components and has the potential to influence and shape the creation of movement material, dynamic content, structure and form” (p. 113). Thus, site becomes the source and not merely the repository of creative ideas, which delimits the work from being transferable to another site or context, due to what Hunter calls (2009) “a specific interdependence between the site and the performance” (p. 399).

So what is the differentiating factor between site-specific performance and site-specific dance since both contain embodied presences in the site? The simple answer is that the latter uses dance and movement as the dominant performance element. A deeper difference is the embodied nature of dance which pre-supposes a heightened kinaesthetic awareness of the site through being present in the lived moment; “a bodily process whereby the individual experiences the site-phenomenon corporeally in an immediate process of ‘transaction’” (Hunter, 2005, p. 368). Such an experience happens when the creator (choreographer) and the performer think and communicate directly with and through the body without the intermediary of translation; what Carol Brown (2003) poetically refers to as “the wisdom of the body moving through interrogating spaces” (n.p.).

**Audience experiences of site**

In site-specific dance and particularly in multi-site promenade performances, it is not only the performers who are interrogating space through movement. This experience also extends to audiences who physically journey across and within sites, enabling them to choose (to a greater or lesser extent depending on the nature of the work) how and from what viewpoints they experience the performance and the site. Thus the audience as well as the performer are endowed with performative agency. Conventional proscenium arch venues, on the other hand, create a “fourth wall” which pre-supposes a no-man’s land between audience and performer, with the former usually in the dark and the latter in light. This configuration limits viewers to a two-
dimensional experience of a three-dimensional space due to the pre-determined spatial and visual relationship between audience and performers.

In addition to a diverse choice of audience viewpoints, site specific work is also defined by its capacity to play with notions of scale. Because of the ability to move around in promenade site-specific work, it is not only the director/choreographer who plays with degrees of scale, but also the spectator who can explore differing proximities of site/performer/self from close up and intimate to long perspectival distance. Although an expanded choice does not necessarily mean maximised viewing of the work, it does in many ways disallow the passive gaze. Being immersed within a site or between sites infers a changing but partial viewing experience, which lends itself to myriad readings and encounters since the unseen and unheard leaves room for speculative yet active experiences. Such immersion affects not only how we “see” but how we inhabit the shared space, contributing to the kinetic pathways of the journey and thus the evolving story of the site and its interventions. Indeed the audience plays an important role in contributing to practices that Kaye, (2000) calls a “performance of place” (p. 3).

Thus a triangulated relationship emerges in site-specific performance comprising creator/performers (and the work), site(s) and audience. In some instances, as in busy public places, the audience may be less embedded but rather ‘fluid and provisional’ (Wilkie, 2002, p.154) or even serendipitous, and only pass through the performance transitionally. In others, which Mason (1992) terms “audience-specific” (p.137), performances are made with and for a local community who “take new forms of ownership of site, re-interpret the site, keep its history and presence alive” (Peta Kuppers quoted in Wilkie, 2002, p. 154). The other scenario is perhaps more familiar in which an audience consciously chooses to visit a site for a theatrical experience through an advertised arts or festival event. What is common to all three contexts is that the performance or event in some way transforms the site so that for the audience the familiar is re-imaged and re-imagined.

Sense of time and duration is also experienced differently in site-specific performance, particularly the promenade style; as the real or ‘everyday’ time of traversing and/or being placed within public locations becomes intermingled with the suspended time of the theatrical experience. It can also be argued that sensory perception works differently in site-specific environments, predominantly for two reasons. The first is that one’s perceptions are not directed towards a single focus as in a theatre, where, even with olfactory stimulus to expand sensory experience, the event takes place in a closed controlled setting. Secondly, particularly in outdoor settings which comprise two thirds of site-specific performances (according to a UK survey in Wilkie, 2002, p. 154), senses other than sight and sound are heightened, such
as: smell and touch (deliberate or accidental); bodily sensations like wind, rain, heat on the body; changes in texture of surfaces; and importantly, direct kinaesthetic participation through a physical exploration and experience of site. Such an holistic and actual embodiment of site, I would argue, leads to deeper shared experiences with the performers and greater potential for shared meaning-making or for creating one’s own narrative along the site-specific journey.

*Accented Body: a case study of audience engagement*

The above perspectives have been reinforced and informed by a large dance-led promenade performance event that took place in 2006 across four outdoor and two indoor sites at a newly created Creative Industries Precinct and artificially built park in a still under construction urban village in Brisbane. In choosing the sites, as creative director and producer, I was aware of the social and personal construction of space elicited by these urban architectural spaces (Lefebvre 1991, Bachelard 1964, Lawson 2001) as well as the political ideology of the “creative city” (Landry 2000) and in this particular setting the informing concepts of the “communiversity” and a creative hub of innovation where one could “live, work and play.”

The thirty key artists invited to participate from Australia, Taiwan, Japan, and UK, by and large were not particularly enamoured of the Creative Industries Precinct which was the major metasite. I myself found it cold and somewhat brutal, but it was appealing for two reasons: firstly, it was full of technological potential with its fibre optic cabling and large outdoor and indoor screens, and secondly, its history was yet to be written (although there was an interesting pre-history which surfaced as part of our interrogation of the site but that is beyond the scope of this paper). It was a somewhat sterile environment that needed to be brought to life. We were constrained to an extent by the physical layout of the buildings and surrounding spaces which as Hunter (2009) points out “directly dictate the manner in which we physically engage with the space” (p. 401). However, in terms of potential for a poetic and theatrical transformation, the site was full of live and virtual possibilities, with large open spaces and interesting transitional corridors, or as UK based site-specific artist Bobby Baker suggests (in Wilkie, 2002), “spaces that can be transformed into something unexpected” where we could “project our own reality onto the locations” (p. 156). The inclusion of digitally interactive screens was another way to transform the sites, exploring both real and virtual space “in relation to each other and as they impinge on each other” (Olympias, in Wilkie, 2002, p. 146).

The three-part brief given to the six site teams, all directed by artists with a dance background, was the concept of “the body in site,” “the body as site,” and “connectivity.” Each team was allocated a site with one team (“Global Drifts” directed by Sarah Rubidge and Hellen Sky)
traversing all the sites, live and virtual, providing an ongoing connective link conceptually and physically. Whilst each team created its own discrete response and, therefore, individual performance installation, connections were made consciously and subliminally with performers, sound, images, and aesthetics flowing between and within sites, creating a sense of narrative that was both episodic and integrated. Whilst space prevents a full description, the titles of each site work give some indication of their nature and feel: “prescient terrain” (in the more organic space of Kulgun Park); “separating shadows” (in three different time segments using an indoor corridor transformed by shadows, real and screen-based); “ether” (an abstract “temple” created with 13 kilometres of rope in an amphitheatre space infused with interactive sound); “living lens” (a black box interactive installation exploring interdependencies of body, sound, and image); “global drifts” (appearing across all sites and the seven outdoor screens, with distributed presences in Seoul and London); culminating in “dissolving presences” in a large plaza where fragments (choreographic, musical and visual) from the other sites made connections, and metamorphosed into something new.3

The play of light on the architecture, as well as on the park and the construction sites beyond, was essential to create a magical and at times surreal world beyond the actual performance sites, as was the distributed sound and imagery across and between the sites. All of these interventions served our intention of making work that, as Ledger (in Tang, 2007) describes of his own work, was “elliptical and impressionistic” and which served to “reveal the shape, line and gaps” (p. 99) of the exterior and interior of buildings and their surrounding spaces. Whilst our stimulus derived from the sites, it was the movement of the body as site and in site that created the connectivity between space, time, and narrative. That “body” encompassed the performance body and the audience body.

**Audience relationship to site and the journey**

Hunter (2005) proposes four phases in creating site-specific dance: experiencing the site, expressing the site, embodying the site, and receiving the site (p. 367). These stages are also useful in examining audience engagement with site, although this mainly occurs only for the duration of the performance, compared with the much longer engagement of creators and performers. In Accented Body the audience experienced the site as a sequential and kinaesthetic journey, led by guides who ensured the safety of the audience and a certain amount of crowd control, since the final performances attracted between 400 and 500 each night. One doctoral arts student (24 June 2006) in the creative development stage, responded in an e-mail questionnaire4:
I enjoyed the promenade style. There was a sense of community. But moving between tight hallways was sometimes difficult and broke the atmosphere. This is a difficult issue to resolve!

The sense of community when traversing sites during a performance is picked up by Lucy Richardson (in Tang, 2007: 111) in describing one of the Phakama projects in which “the promenading... allowed an interaction between individuals, who were able to talk about the performance during it” (p. 111). Traffic noise, wind, extraneous outside sounds, and visual distractions also encourage audiences to converse with one another more freely in shared performance spaces than in an acoustically and visually controlled stage environment.

“A Prescient Terrain” from Accented Body, Kulgun Park, Brisbane. Photo: Seo Hyojung

A promenade performance of course has its own set of limitations. In Accented Body, frustration at not seeing everything for its duration in some sites was expressed by the following couple, themselves theatre practitioners (16 August 2006):

Generally we felt that the movement of the audience from piece to piece was well managed. Both nights however we felt ushered out of the topmost room whilst the performance was still in progress. One of us had to ...... [give] up the pre-conceived desire of moving at one’s own pace and will between, to and from, installation/performance sites. Staggering the audience into smaller groups was effective – allowing one group to experience the installation downstairs while the

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other saw the performance upstairs, then vice-versa.

For others, however, being guided through the sites was reassuring, as expressed by a legal practitioner (18 August 2006) who commented that “the site was utilised brilliantly and innovatively, with the ushering sensitively and helpfully moving us as the audience through all the twists and turns of the performance; over time, place and transition.”

Although the journey was somewhat prescribed, audience members were still able to linger in a particular site, take another pathway between sites or traverse a site differently if they chose. The respondent above also suggested that he enjoyed,

the fact that we the audience, were in the thick of it for much of the time, and we could choose to some extent where we went and therefore what aspect of the performance we saw....

For a dance educator and her husband (10 August 2006) the same site from differing viewpoints invited the following reflection.

The site provided a rich texture to the performances..... 'Separating Shadows' was an example of this as I viewed it from one end, whilst Ross saw it from inside. The juxtaposition of the spiraling text and the spiraling plastic was a lasting visual image. My husband, as a non dancer, was enthralled with the text and the symbols created by the performers. He also commented on the use of the foyer space as a place for entering into a building and the fact that the multi dimensional nature of the performance really acted as an entry point for him as far as the other pieces were concerned.

In terms of Hunter's notion of “embodying” the site, from an audience perspective, it seemed in Accented Body to be closely integrated to audience immersion in the changing perspectives brought about by the promenade experience and thus changing perspectives of both site and performance. It also produced a heightened sensory awareness, remarked upon by reviewer Michele Boylan (2006, n.p.).

As I moved across the venues, I unexpectedly found myself becoming more sensually aware, not only of the different surfaces around me but of my own body as I noticed texture and temperature.

The physical journey assisted in making causal links between the sites and the performance content, creating stories emanating directly from place which Wilkie (2002) suggests are “more often abstract and imaginative than purely literal” (p. 156). This is borne out the following observation from an academic spectator (17 August 2006):

I liked the way the journey/story unfolded, with the earthy landscape leading on to the urban landscape; starting with a ‘primitive’ theme and then moving through to more engagement with technology. Very poetic.

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Whilst experiencing and embodying the site can be seen to apply to both audience and performers, one might view Hunter’s “expressing” the site as being firmly in the domain of the performers/creators of the site work. However, through a phenomenological and kinaesthetic experience of spatiality, “expressivity” of site may indeed also be applied to audiences. One architect audience member (18 August 2006), described *Accented Body* as:

> an animation of landscape and architecture through choreographed movement. Even the un-choreographed movements of the audience contributed to this, with the various new spatial orientations created allowing for a realization of the potential of the spaces to be used in many different ways.

**Performer/audience connections**

Whilst the above section has discussed from an audience perspective, three of Hunter’s phases of site-specific performance (experiencing, embodying, and expressing the site), it could be argued that the final and most obviously audience-centred aspect of “receiving” the site occurs primarily through the intervention of the performers, who translate and communicate a particular engagement with the site. This mediation of site by the performers for the audience, as well as the shared space they both occupy, does not necessarily infer that there is a closer relationship (except at times physically) between audience and performers. This tends to be more so in community site-specific performances where performers often directly address audiences or invite participation. However, in the highly stylised, theatrical, and interventionist nature of *Accented Body*, the performers did not engage specifically with the audience. Rather the audience/performer engagement occurred primarily through their shared connectivity with the site.

An architect respondent (18 August 2006) remarked that “interaction in terms of body and site was strong; however, interaction in terms of performers to the audience was a little weaker.” Although, she added that “the fact that an audience member was free to more or less choose where they wanted to sit or stand during a performance did allow for an extent of interaction.” As a website developer (7th August 2006) remarked, *Accented Body*’s “power of absorption and immersion….embed the viewer within the performance transcending the usual viewer/performer relationship.” The following comment by the previously quoted dance educator (10 August 2006), reveals how proximity and the power of a performer in a shared setting can impact significantly through a strong physical sensation. In describing the reaction to Tony Yap’s “Ether,” she recalls that “my husband and I were once again in different parts of the audience, but both experienced an actual physical reaction to his performance: sweating hands, tension, just mesmerizing.”

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Many of the performer/audience encounters were quite controlled with guides leading viewers to particular parts of the site. However, for the audience the performers’ appearances were sometimes unpredictable such as when they occasionally stepped out unexpectedly from the crowd to initiate their performative engagement. From the performer’s point of view the unpredictability of performing in a shared space, at first disconcerting, became an integral part of the performance as Ko-Pei Lin explained:

Having the audiences close to the performers meant that they could be in your way (or even sitting in your spot!). As a result, each night of the performance became a unique experience. You never know what the audience will do, and you had to react to their presence, forming a connection that is otherwise not usually present in pieces performed on the stage.

Elise May also commented on this aspect of interaction with the audience simply stating “that the audience, too, are encapsulated by the shared space.” In these instances as Kiek (2007) describes in her work Circulate, the viewers’ “tactile and kinaesthetic experiences” are enhanced by the “fluid and porous boundaries between audience/performer and site/bodies” (p. 29).

Interestingly, reviewer Mary-Ann Hunter (2006, 10) commented on the sometimes distancing effect of the performers:

we encountered the “global drifters”.... who didn’t really claim space or make transaction but arrested us with their presence. As one might expect of drifters, they did not invite us to settle but their role as provocateurs was integral: in the new global order do we make space for them or do they make space for us?

Although space does not permit a detailed analysis, it is important to briefly mention that one of the most persuasive mediators of the sites was the technological interventions using 5 existing screens and several other specifically constructed portable screens, many of which were interactive. This was a more subtle element of the connectivity between performers and audience as the latter serendipitously and often unknowingly mingled with the performers in the parallel virtual environment. Mary-Ann Hunter (2006, 10) commented on this in her review “The Body Transported and Transformed”:

As the audience moved with performers to the grand outdoor staircase of the main Creative Precinct building, cameras were tracking, making us aware of our role in peopling the landscape and, in turn, effecting the creation of images and sounds in other mediated sites—both locally within the precinct and beyond in live streaming to London and Seoul.
Shared meanings and connective aesthetics

One of the most intriguing questions concerning multi-site performances, is how audiences create meaning from their diverse experiences. One respondent, a legal practitioner (18 August 2006) attributed the nature of the promenade journey as the key to meaning-making for him:

the fact that we the audience followed the action over all the different parts of the site meant that our viewing connected the different aspects of the performance. The serial nature of the different aspects of the performance unfolded like a petal opening, with further layers becoming apparent as the work proceeded.

Van Erven (2000) refers to place (or site in this instance) as “space made meaningful by human actions” (p. 27) and it is in this context that the audience in Accented Body contributed to, altered, and indeed created for themselves the metaphorical and intertextual narratives which emerged from the performances and their juxtaposition in the sites. The site itself provided connections to meaning: poetic, symbolic, and ambiguous. As one viewer experienced it:

Walls, windows, stairs and elevators become key elements breathing new dimensions into narrative and story. I found the use of light particularly successful in transforming normally unemotionally cold concrete into a warm, emotional viscous material (website developer, 7 August 2006).

“Dissolving Presences” from Accented Body, Creative Industries Precinct, Brisbane. Photo: Seo Hyojung
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The audience also created personal meaning from the particularity of their experiences and interests, such as the following reaction:

I am a local architect that heard about the ‘accented body’ production at Kelvin Grove and went along for a look. I was interested in the connection between dance and architecture.... It provoked thoughts architectural, photographic, and physical condition of the body’ (17th August 2006).

Another architect (18 August 2006) believes strong notions of connectivity were enhanced by “the feeling of anticipation that was created, as the audience moved from one area to the next.” Although noting that each site was visually and aesthetically different, she felt connected “in terms of the audience’s emotive transgressions, as it is invited to form different emotional responses to each separate performance.” Thus duration, immersion, and promenading were fundamental to the shared and personal narratives resulting from the relationship of site/performance/audience.

The interventions over six sites through bodies, light, sound, installations, projections, and movement revealed an array of different aesthetics and yet we strove as the creators to provide a sense of coherency to the event, through “connective aesthetics” (Suzi Gablick, in Babb, 2008, p. 64). Differing aesthetic interventions of each site were brought together, primarily via three means: bodies, soundscapes, and screens. Firstly, performers infiltrated each other’s sites at certain moments of the performance and/or appeared together during transitional performative moments between sites. Secondly, fragments of various sound scores from each site were captured and integrated in real time at certain times and in certain sites throughout the evening. Thirdly, both pre-recorded and live interactive footage and imagery via the eleven screens played with overlapping content in both literal and abstracted variations. Through these means, we worked with “double-coding,” a phrase coined by post-modern architect Greg Jenkins, referring to the “deliberate utilisation within one work of multiple aesthetic codes to address multiple audiences” (in Babb, 2008, p. 72).

It was in the transformation of site through all of the above methods and “interferences” as well as via the dynamic relationship between performance/performer, sites, and audience, that narratives could emerge and a kaleidoscope of shifting, transient, symbolic meanings could be created; then, taken away as shared memories. Perhaps it is best articulated by an audience member (10th August 2006) who reflected:

The project did not “animate” the urban landscape; it gave it new meaning and depth, making the audience examine each of the sites in a new light. For me, it was interesting that on returning to the site after the performance, I looked at the spaces in a new light, reflecting, not
on the performance necessarily, but on the notion of the flexibility of architectural spaces and the limitless possibilities of creativity.

Notes
1. The Kelvin Grove Urban Village was conceived and built through a partnership with Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and the Queensland Government to house the world-first Creative Industries Faculty which included an enterprise centre for start up businesses and an interactive design research centre. A series of building sites at the time of the performances, this area now contains low and medium cost purpose built housing, a boutique shopping and amenities village, other QUT buildings, and a high school. The quotations refer to the rhetoric at the time to encourage investors, residents and to impart the message of connectivity in an age of technological innovation.
3. Key Accented Body personnel were Cheryl Stock creative producer / director, Daniel Maddison logistics and technical coordinator, Bridget Fiske curatorial assistant, Tony Brompton sound coordinator, Justin Marshman & David Murray lighting design, Rosa Hirakata costume design / realisation

Prescient Terrain: Richard Causer choreography, Madeleine Flynn and Tim Humphrey sound score, Maria Adriana Verdaasdonk performance concept

Separating Shadows: Vanessa Mafé direction, Jondi Keane installation & performance, Avril Huddy movement & performance, Charlotte Cutting video designer, Jason Hargreaves cinematographer, David Pyle multimedia

Ether: Tony Yap director/dancer, Madeleine Flynn composer/musician, Tim Humphrey composer/musician, Naomi Ota visual artist/sculptor, Ria Soemardjo vocalist

Living Lens: Maria Adriana Verdaasdonk creative concept and project deviser, Tetsutoshi Tabata visual media & artistic technical direction, Takahisa Sasaki media programmer, Junji Watanabe moving ultrasonic speakers, Elise May, Ko-Pei Lin, Richard Causer, I-Pin Lin performers, Luke Lickfold sound design and live sound manipulation (performance), Philippa Rijks sound design (installation)


Dissolving Presences: Cheryl Stock concept/direction, Sarah Rubidge & Tetsutoshi Tabata visuals direction, Madeleine Flynn & Tim Humphrey sound direction, Richard Causer, Bridget Fiske, Liz Lea, Ko-Pei Lin, Elise May, Ria Soemardjo, Tony Yap and Prescient Terrain cast, performers

4. Following both the creative development in November 2005 and the full production in July 2006, e-mail feedback via a series of questions was received. The names have been omitted for confidentiality reasons but the profession of the respondents are included to give a sense of the diversity of audience members who attended and responded. As in much site-specific work, audience members were not necessarily regular theatre goers.

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Quotations from the performers are taken from unpublished reports written as part of the artistic acquittal required by funding bodies at the close of the performances. They also form part of the documentation for Accented Body as a practice-led research project.

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**Biographical Information**

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