



Experiencing affect through site-specific dance



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ABSTRACT

Our embodied experiences of affect, feeling and emotion within the context of site-specific dance are the focus of this article. The specific sites of our dance are designed gardens and our performances are offered within the context of an arts festival. In performing within these gardens, we aim to complement and enhance the site through our embodiment. Both as dancers in, and as audience members of dance, we recognize that affect, feeling and emotion arise during special live performance events. We understand affect as a fluid and relational, collective experience that extends beyond our individual experiences as performers to being shared with and between particular audiences at particular times and places. However, it is often difficult to express these embodied, collective experiences. Drawing on a feminist and phenomenological approach, we offer vignettes of key moments in these performances to illustrate the affective practices in our work. These vignettes draw on moments when we felt we shared an experience with audiences, supported by written responses, recorded anecdotal comments from audience members, and discussions between performers. We conclude by reflecting on how we might offer our community an enhanced emotional experience of the gardens.

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1. *Whispering birds* (Fig. 1)

Whispering Birds, an island of imagination, an island in the Chinese Scholars Garden. In the quietening moments, bird's wings, rustling breeze in the bamboo. Close, wrapped in the intimacy of the garden. Around a stone table, a refined flowing conversation, a gentle and unhurried grace, limbs curving, sweeping, suspending and spiralling through the luscious textured greens. Making time to gesture, to whisper and to allow the next to expression to emerge. Today, like generations past, a moment to honour relationships between people and with the garden. A simple moving reminder of the wonder of day-to-day ordinary living and the peaceful flow of time.

1.1. Introduction

The focus of this article is to examine and share our embodied experiences of affect, feeling and emotion within the context of site-specific dance. We draw on a feminist and phenomenological approach in which we recognize and value our lived experiences as researchers, the experiences of our group of performers and those of audience members attending performances, as key in

articulating embodied knowledge. As dance artists, embodied expression is our favoured means of sharing our lived experiences, and as writers confined to a page, narrative representations and photographs are key in representing our embodied experiences.

Feminism provides the broad context for our research, in which consideration of what knowledge counts and who can be a knower is integral; in which personal lived experiences are recognized and valued as reflecting and contributing to our social and political understandings; and in which women's embodied experiences (as well as those of minority groups), offer nuanced and specific knowledge in contrast to the dominance of white, Western, male knowledge that tends to masquerade as 'truth' (Code, 1991; Du Plessis and Alice, 1998; Stanley, 1990). As dance researchers, our feminist perspective is thus philosophical, political and practical, expressed through embodied knowledge in dance performance, and through our representations and discussions of dance performance on the page.

Phenomenology provides a complementary perspective to our feminism, as well as practical methods in which investigating our movement experiences becomes the center of research. Central to phenomenological perspectives are the notions of 'lived experience' and the 'lived body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1964): crucial understandings in the 'corporeal turn' in social sciences. The aim to describe human experiences as lived in the body, has led to (arguably) more holistic understandings of 'embodiment' and 'animate form' in the aim to validate the epistemological

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Fig. 1. Claire Gray dances on The Island of Whispering Birds in *Whispering Birds*. Photograph by Marcia Mitchley.

significance of movement and kinesthetic sense (Braidotti, 1994; Grosz, 1994; Gatens, 1995; Sheets-Johnstone, 1999; Weiss, 1999; Williams and Bendelow, 1998). Complex and contentious to describe in non-dualistic terms, (and beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in further detail), we use 'embodiment' to simultaneously and holistically incorporate our differently nuanced and experienced constellations of cultural, social, intellectual, political, historical, spiritual, biological, artistic, environmental and emotional lives, as gendered, racialized, sexualized and differently able, fleshy and specific beings (Barbour, 2011). In moving through our worlds, we experience and express ourselves as embodied. In particular, in dancing we express an aesthetics of embodiment.

Dance phenomenologist Sondra Fraleigh (1987, 2004, 2010) describes that,

Because dance is in essence an embodied art, the body is the lived (experiential) ground of the dance aesthetic. Both dancer and audience experiences dance through its lived attributes – its kinesthetic and existential character. Dance is the art that intentionally isolates and reveals the aesthetic qualities of the human body-of-action and its vital life. (Fraleigh, 1987, xiii)

Dance phenomenology thus necessitates qualitative, interpretive and embodied research engagements and, for us, aligns closely with aesthetic, choreographic and narrative, autoethnographic representations of knowledge. A feminist and phenomenological perspective thus suggests the description and interpretation of diverse embodied experiences, with a particular emphasis on validating women as knowers and as contributing alternative knowledge. Although often under-recognized within academia, it is our contention that through dance, performers and audience members have the potential to experience and witness embodied knowledge. In addition, the unique combination of all the elements of site-specific dance can offer a holistic, aesthetic embodied experience to performers and audiences alike. That is, the specific environment of the garden and weather, the music and dance, along with remembered repertoires of the site and previous affective practices, all interact within the moment of performance and enhance the potential for embodied knowledge to be expressed and experienced.

Informed by our feminist and phenomenological perspective, we investigate experiences of affect in relation to specific dance performances of *Whispering Birds*, created for the Chinese Scholars Garden in the Hamilton Gardens Arts Festival, Hamilton, New Zealand (Barbour, 2012a). Karen was choreographer and a performer in the work and Alex a performer, both of us researching experiences of affect in relation to this site-specific dance season. The cast included four other female contemporary dancers and guest artist guzheng¹ musician XiYao Chen. The cast and design team embody New Zealand European and Asian cultures, while all sharing a depth of experience in contemporary practices of dance, design and composition.²

In order to share our experiences, we weave together representations of the embodied experiences of those present for *Whispering Birds* (both performers and audience members), with discussions of emotion and affect, of site-specific dance performance, and of feminist and phenomenological methods. Utilizing autoethnographic methods we represent our 'findings' throughout the paper in vignettes of key moments, attempting to reveal embodied affective practices (Ellis, 2004; Ellis and Bochner, 2000, 2006; Richardson, 1997, 2000). Photographs from the performance open up possibilities for further engagement for the reader and provide detail of the garden.³ Finally, we offer reflections as to how

¹ A guzheng is a traditional Chinese instrument, like a zither, with 21 strings. For more information about the guzheng and artist XiYao Chen, visit <http://www.newzealandpostgraduate.com/inspiration/stories/the-sound-of-history/>.

² With appreciation, we acknowledge the work of all the performers with us in *Whispering Birds* (XiYao Chen, Patti Mitchley, Marie Hermo Jensen, Olivia Buchanan and Claire Gray), costume designer Kartika Leng, photographers Marcia Mitchley and Grant Triplow, video artists from Nimbus Media (Sasha McLaren and David Woodcock), our performance guides, the Hamilton Gardens staff and the Arts Festival team, funding groups, friends and audience members. As a culturally diverse cast and design team, we nevertheless relied on the guidance of artist XiYao Chen in researching and working in a culturally sensitive manner in the Chinese Scholars Garden, while also responding to the garden site as contemporary artists.

³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in a discussion of visual methodology and use of photography as a method of representation. For insightful discussion of how visual methods assist in representing sensory experience, see Pink (2009).

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