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## *Emerging site-specific screendance and the constraints of Covid-19*

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***Emerging site-specific screendance and the constraints of Covid-19***

Abstract:

This article explores how Covid-19 has produced new, highly constricted sites for performance, giving rise to a new vocabulary for site-specific screendance. It begins with online screendance collaborations created in response to the constrictions of Covid-19 lockdowns in Melbourne. It then describes how external and internal constraints impacted on the author's own site-specific, practice-led research project, with reference to Rudolf Laban's movement analysis. It draws on the Japanese space-time concept *ma* (間) to examine the importance of interval and pause when developing site-specific screendance works while restricted to sites at home, including the couch, the shower, the bed and the car.

Biographical note:

Amelia Latham is a graduate research student completing practice-led research in the fields of site-specific performance and screendance. Amelia has trained in dance for over twenty years and performs on stage and for the camera. She has been a registered teacher with the Royal Academy of Dance for over ten years. Amelia's award-winning film, *A Pas de Deux with Memories* (2018) was produced as part of her Honours research.

Keywords:

Site-specific performance; screendance; Covid-19; *ma* (間); Laban movement analysis

## Introduction

Site-specific performance and screendance are two fields of study that have a rich history. This article contributes to both these fields through the examination of site-specific work made for live performance and specifically for the screen. I begin with an examination of site-specific dance research conducted by Victoria Hunter before engaging with my research question: does dance in the time of Coronavirus (Covid-19) need to look like “dance” to still be considered dance? To answer this question, I draw on two examples of online collaboration that respond to the constrictions of Covid-19 and I describe my research into screendance conducted within the confines of my home during two lockdowns in Melbourne in 2020. I examine the Japanese space-time model, *ma* (間), drawing on Richard Pilgrim and the work of John Cage to highlight how this concept is helpful when investigating and writing about a screendance vocabulary born from constricted spaces shaped by Covid-19. I conclude with the argument that a distinctive choreography emerged from my attempts to dance in highly constricted sites, using Rudolf Laban’s movement analysis (Baron & Carnicke, 2008, pp. 188-207) to identify these dance movements.

## Dance and site-specific performance

The word dance holds a great significance to all cultures around the world. Its history, spanning thousands of years, can be traced through the documentation and art depiction of humans dancing in ceremony, ritual and celebration. Sondra Fraleigh (1999) defines dance as a name given to a wide range of activities and behaviours: it can occur in play, socialising and entertainment, and it can serve spiritual and therapeutic purposes (p. 16). Dances can be “contextualised events; they are cultural, historical, and experiential. They require at the very least the dancer in motion” with their intrinsic values deriving from human movement (Fraleigh, 1999, p. 16). In the research that informs this article, movement has been explored within constricted spaces, during Covid-19 lockdowns, in order to develop a new vocabulary of dance through everyday movements.

Defining site-specific performance is a process I have been navigating as a dancer and filmmaker, most recently in my Honours thesis and film, *A Pas de Deux with Memories* (2018) and in my current Masters project. Miwon Kwon (2002) states site-specific practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s incorporated the physical conditions of a particular location as integral to the production, presentation and reception of art (p. 1). Since then, the terms site-determined, site-oriented, site-referenced, site-conscious, site-responsive, site-related have emerged to account for various permutations of site-specific art. These new terms could be regarded as distinct from or an expansion of site-specific performance. Anna Macdonald’s *This is for You* (2013) is a piece where one audience member watches a solo dance performer on the opposite side of the street. The work of Eiko and Koma spans decades, highlighting the introduction of technology, media and the use of camera in their site-specific works, such as *Tentacle* (1983) and their more recent dance and camera work *Wake* (2011) in collaboration with James Byrne. The documentary *Pina* (2011) directed by Wim Wenders reframes and pays tribute to contemporary dance choreographer Pina Bausch. Wenders showcases some of her best-known

works inside Tanztheater Wuppertal and in a number of outdoor sites around the city of Wuppertal, Germany. The range of work demonstrates the intricacies of screendance in specific sites, with an added dimension in the 3D version of the film.

Victoria Hunter, a prominent voice in site-specific dance research, explores how site-specific works have the potential to be moving and evocative in an experiential sense, while also taking the “opportunity to reveal the site in which the work occurs in a new light, as a place of performance” (Hunter, 2015, p. 1). Hunter argues that the fixed identity of a site, building or location can become disrupted and problematised through the introduction of a performance work: performance work in a site can celebrate, contest or contradict the habitual function of the site (Hunter, 2015, p. 1). The concept of contradicting the habitual function suggests that a specific work could be purposefully made *not* to fit a site, challenging the idea of where such work can take place. For Hunter, the physical construction and design of a site can directly dictate the manner in which we physically engage with space. For example, “road systems and one-way traffic management schemes dictate how we enter cities and towns. Entrances and corridors determine how we navigate our journey through buildings” (Hunter, 2015, p. 27). Examining this, my mind is filled with images of orderly lines of cars moving in both directions. Following the rules of the road while driving a predetermined path, each car branches off at some point to reach its destination. Hunter’s example demonstrates a rule-bound structure that is known and not to be tampered with.

When we use entrances, exits and corridors to move between rooms and buildings, our movement is motivated by a desired destination. Yet, how often do we stop and think about what such spaces mean to us and their influence on our perception of where we are going? Lucinda Child’s performance piece, *Street Dance* (1964), is a case in point. Dancers in the street move among pedestrians while an audience watches from an upper-storey window, listening to commentary on the architecture and the weather. *Street Dance* is often cited as an example of early site-specific performance where the choreographer questions space, place and human engagement with the built environment in a particular way. In my practice-led research I am particularly interested in sites that offer constraints, placing myself in a site that challenges me to rethink dance. In *A Pas de Deux with Memories*, for example, I explored the restrictions of dancing in and with a wheelchair. Further experiments with constricted spaces return me to my research question: does screendance need to look like “dance” to still be considered dance?

### **Covid-19 as a site-specific constraint**

Covid-19 produced a site-specific constraint on the research for my Masters project. Dancers around the world experiencing lockdown, quarantine and isolation have been forced to find spaces, wherever they can, to dance. Kicking kitchen cupboards, bumping into couches, avoiding furniture and pets, dancing in the courtyard, the garden or rooftop of an apartment, dancers have had to adapt how they train, condition their bodies and produce dance performances. The pandemic has caused artists to seek creative outlets online to a level that has not been seen before, utilising video and online platforms to collaborate and to document new work. Site-specific work is being created and shared around the world. Dancers are creating in spaces that they may not have explored if it were not for Covid-19 forcing them to

stay home and physically distance from their companies. Forced to create under new constraints including social distancing, dancers have been responding to Covid-19 by becoming immersed in site-specific, online collaborations, producing a new dance vocabulary. For example, Russian ballet dancer Ivan Vasiliev created a video, *Miss You All* (2020), for Mikhailovsky Theatre, one of Russia's oldest opera and ballet houses, while he and his fellow dancers were restricted to their homes. In the video, each dancer recreates a scene from a classic ballet at home, using household objects. One ballerina performs choreography from *Don Quixote* (1869) in her kitchen, while another (doing the washing up) uses a dinner plate as a fan as she moves around a fallen knife. *A pas de deux* from *Giselle* (1841) sees a man gracefully carrying a woman from the kitchen to the table while she stirs a sauce. The informal domestic space, in which each dancer performs, contrasts with the centuries-old choreography normally performed for live audiences in grand theatres. Arguably, a new dance vocabulary is emerging within constricted domestic and online spaces, incorporating ordinary gestures of washing dishes, cooking and cleaning. Performed by isolated dancers across multiple domestic spaces, *Miss You All* draws on the classical ballet repertoire and transforms it for online audiences who are, in turn, restricted to their screens by Covid-19.

*Gently Quiet* (2020) is a screendance film project by Peter Leung and filmmaker Altin Kaftira created for the Dutch National Ballet. It features eleven short dance videos, recorded in empty outdoor locations around Amsterdam during lockdown. Leung states that when creating the piece he imagined the artists as butterflies wanting to fly outside and be free to dance. With advanced use of camera and cinematography, visuals and music by Setareh Nafisi and Nicholas Robert Thayer, the video is an exploration of specific sites during a pandemic. The choreography is full of breath, and perfectly placed moments of stillness. It is a visually haunting experience to watch the dancers move against a quiet, still backdrop. *Gently Quiet* exemplifies the evolution that digital dance is making during the pandemic as highly produced works are being created and premiered online. While site-based choreography has long been significant in performance, Covid-19 has highlighted the specificity of everyday sites, in and around the home and the city, for choreographers creating new work for online platforms.

### **Towards a site-constrained dance vocabulary**

Placing a dancer in a constrained site, the choreography has to adapt to the space and reimagine how dance is presented. Navigating two Covid-19 lockdowns in Melbourne, my own practice-led research has demonstrated that, in constrained spaces, a hand movement, a head turn, a glance, an inhale/exhale can all still be considered dance. The site I chose in which to devise my first Covid-19 screendance was my car. Moving between front and back seats, I investigated how restricted space and the obstacle of a steering wheel would influence my dance improvisation. As a dancer and choreographer, the idea of challenging movement by the tight space around me, was not limiting, but in fact exciting and perhaps liberating. The process was to begin each improvisation with stillness, playing a piece of music that would accompany me throughout my exploration. Sitting in the stationary car (in my driveway) with the windows open and my camera set up in the corner of the car, I focused on my breathing before slowly leaning forward and placing my head on the steering wheel. Moving my hands, fingers

skimming the steering wheel, head lolling side to side, I explored the space on either side of the headrest. With the intention to explore the car fully as a dance space, I slowly drew my feet underneath me so I could move from the driver's seat into the back of the car by leaning over the seats, through the centre, arching my back and twisting my body. Returning to the driver's seat and refocusing my breath, I reached my hand out of the window, moving and gliding as if playing in water. The piece finished where it started, with me slowly focusing my gaze out over the steering wheel, through the windscreen. Choosing to open the windows for the improvisation allowed me to reach beyond the physical constraint of the car body, creating the feeling of an option to leave or not to leave.

Choosing the car as a constraint on performance challenged the perception of an everyday site and its specific purpose. As this piece continues to develop, I am careful to not lose the feeling of improvisation within the choreography. There is an interesting relationship and fine line between linking sequences of movement and over-rehearsing to the point of losing the feeling of improvisation and the focus on breathing and feeling centred. While aiming to create something reproducible, each performance is a unique response, through movement, to a constricted space, to a moment in time, and to a select piece of music. I have yet to introduce the camera to this piece. Upon doing so, the camera will add another layer of movement, and allow an exploration of the physical constraint on the camera itself in the space available.

### **Time, pause and the concept of *ma* (間)**

The space-time model *ma* (間) is a concept that encapsulates the feeling and meaning of time and pause between movement. Richard Pilgrim states that *ma* is a reflection of a "Japanese religio-aesthetic paradigm or way of seeing" (Pilgrim, 1986, p. 255). Further, *ma* means an interval between two (or more) spatial or temporal things and events: it is not only used in "compounds to suggest measurement but carries meanings such as gap, opening, space between, time between and so forth" (p. 255). Pilgrim explains that a room can be called *ma* because it refers to the space between walls, and to a rest in music shown in the pause between notes and sounds (p. 255). Objectively, *ma* may be located as intervals in space and time, but ultimately it transcends space-time and "takes us to a boundary situation at the edge of thinking and the edge of all processes of locating things by naming and distinguishing" (p. 256). The character *ma* (間) is made up of two elements, the character for gate (門) and the inner character for sun (日) (present day depiction) or moon (月) (original depiction). The visual image or character representing *ma* 間, suggests a light shining through a gate or door. As Pilgrim explains, *ma* is "not a mere emptiness or opening; through and in it shines a light, and the function of *ma* becomes precisely to let that light shine through" (1986, p. 258). In my exploration of movement in the site-specific work of the car, the moments of stillness, quiet breathing and soft shifts of my fingers or eye-line are all examples of *ma*. The space and interval between the larger movements are as expressive and if not more expressive, than movements more recognisable as dance. The demonstration of *ma* in this example highlights how dance can be a breath or the shift of weight.

A parallel can be drawn between the Japanese space-time model *ma* (間) and the work of composer John Cage. Cage explored silence, nothing and noise. Joan Retallack states that “Broadly understood, Cage’s redefinition of silence entailed a realization that what we are not noticing is just as present, just as – if not more – interesting than what is consciously perceived at any given moment” (2015, p. 378). Cage’s understanding that the phenomenon of true silence and “the search for nothing or for silence will always conclude with the production of noise” (Smith, 2020, p. 177). It is in these moments of silence and interval that something else can be revealed, for example the sound of breathing, a noise that can be lost in performance, can emerge in the space of silence and be treated “with the same attention as conventional music” (Smith, 2020, p. 176). Cage worked closely with dancer Merce Cunningham, investigating the connection between music and dance. For Cage, the form “of the music-dance composition should be a necessary working together of all materials used. The music will then be more than an accompaniment; it will be an integral part of the dance” (1961/2011, p. 88). Cage claims that from an independence of music and dance “a rhythm results which is not that of horses’ hoofs or other regular beats but which reminds us of a multiplicity of events in time and space – stars, for instance, in the sky, or activities on earth viewed from the air” (1961/2011, p. 94). From the perspective of *ma* (間), Cage and Cunningham’s work highlights that pause, interval and moments of silence are not empty. It is important to not fill all silences with words, sounds or movement as the power of silence and stillness can be as profound as the spoken word, music or the body moving.

*Ma* can be applied to other art forms, whether architecture, performance, and even everyday conversations and interactions. When reading about *ma* for the first time, something clicked for me; here was a concept that beautifully expressed my feelings for and understanding of dance. For example, in ballet you should always be moving, even when you are standing still. Whether through breathing, elongating your spine, or shifting the line of your head, energy should always be running through you. Being able to hone the skill of pause and interval takes a performer from executing steps to dancing. My discovery of *ma* has shed new light on my site-specific, screendance research. The space and time I spend in a site, the movement I create within the site, and the physical reaction are all interlaced with *ma*. And poignantly, my discovery of this concept came during Covid-19 which has made everyone examine time and space differently.

### **Constraint, dance and Laban movement analysis**

My current research explores how a site can influence and impact dance specifically made for the screen. I investigate how the literal space that confines the dancer can change the physical movements of the dance and I explore the relationship between dance, camera and site, asking the question, does dance in the time of Covid-19 need to look like “dance” to still be considered dance? A site will inevitably have an impact on the performance: where it is, what it is, inside, outside, compact, expansive, quiet, loud, rural, urban and so on. My aim is to explore how sites are used and viewed by people and how placing a choreographed dance piece in a site can question the perception, functionality or purpose of the site. My creative practice tests the limits

of a site, of the space it holds, perhaps disrupting its perceived use or enhancing and complementing it.

For example, the car piece, explores how movement is influenced by the literal space around a dancer as well as contesting the expected use of the site. The process of developing this piece looped between watching the recording, writing and reflecting on the movement, emotions and site while continuing to improvise in the car in order to develop a dance vocabulary based on constraint. Covid-19 introduced a confined space in which to experiment at home with lockdown restrictions enabling new sites of dance to emerge. I have improvised movement in a car, a shower, a couch, a bed, a staircase and a hallway, paying close attention to the limitations and possibilities of movement with each site.

During lockdown I underwent abdominal surgery and my recovery entailed further restrictions. As I returned to movement I was faced with a new constraint, a physical limitation. External restrictions and internal limitations created new conditions for my research that demanded a more gestural and constrained dance vocabulary. I experimented with physically constrained movement post-operation. I chose the site of my back decking (a reasonably small space) and it was the first improvisation I conducted outside. The wind rustling the trees and the birds singing produced a natural and calm ambiance. I began sitting down, breathing in and out, rolling my shoulders and neck with my hands placed palm down on my crossed legs and fingers moving as if playing a piano. My movement to stand was slow and considered. I experimented with my weight placement, rose up on the balls of my feet and rocked back and forth, testing my balance. At one point my hands dragged up my legs to my lower abdomen, feeling my breath expand and contract underneath my hands. Reviewing the video recordings, it is apparent that many of the movements resemble everyday gestures. However, compiled together, they provide a fluidity that better resembles dance.

These movements can be clearly identified using the Laban movement analysis (LMA) developed by Rudolf Laban. Laban believed that the language of movement could be studied on its own terms and developed a system of analysis and notation of movement (Groff, 1995, p. 27). As a system, LMA “provides a comprehensive vocabulary for identifying the ingredients of movement expression” and forms knowledge in movement description, interpretation and prescription (Groff, 1995, p. 28). Using LMA I identify the four main categories: Body, Space, Shape and Effort and the sub-categories of Effort, Weight, Space, Time, and Flow (Tsachor & Shafir, 2019, p. 3). Examining my post-surgery dance improvisation I use the category Effort and its eight elements as a qualitative description of movement to help provide “a vocabulary for articulating the dynamic changes in movement expression” (Groff, 1995, p. 29). For example, my fingers playing the piano on my leg can be classified as “dabbing”, a direct, quick and light movement. Or, when I raise up on the balls of my feet I demonstrate “floating”, a sustained, light and free movement. Notating with LMA allows me to identify the movements within this new constrained dance vocabulary produced under the constraints imposed by Covid-19 and the personal physical constraints imposed on my body. It demonstrates that constraint can release and encourage creativity in new ways.

## Conclusion

My practice-led research project to date has explored the constraints placed upon dance improvisation by available sites and limits on movement due to Covid-19 lockdowns. Working with these limitations I generated a new dance vocabulary of constrained movements. These movements were developed in site-specific screendance works while I was restricted to sites at home, including the car, the couch, the shower, the bed and the deck. These dance movements were further developed under the physical limitations I experienced post-surgery, imposing a further constraint. The dance vocabulary within the car for example, includes curling, tucking, unfurling, and extending around and through obstacles. The space was limited and as such I was unable to leap or turn in ways linked to dance. The improvisation in the shower constrained my arms from fully stretching out sideways from my body, forcing an angular vocabulary of dance. In this site I explored gliding movements, pushing and counterbalancing against the walls while playing with my weight placement. The placement of the camera produced a further constraint, forcing decisions for direction and body placement.

My screendance film, *A Pas de Deux with Memories*, investigated the relationship between the camera and dancer, allowing the dancer to move within and out of the frame. Taking this as an example of how the dancer's body does not need to be fully seen at all times to express dance, I allowed myself to explore specific sites while still thinking about my body's relationship to the camera. The conditions imposed upon me by the constricted spaces in my home dictated the types of movements I could create and explore. Within this time of developing a constrained dance vocabulary, I explored the relationship between dance and the Japanese space-time concept *ma* (間). The vocabulary I was developing through site-specific dance improvisations was interlaced with *ma*, with an emphasis on interval and pause between movements. The video recordings demonstrate how a focus on inhaling/exhaling, along with a constrained series of movements can become profound moments of dance. My site-specific experiments, alongside the many collaborative online works discussed above, show that Covid-19's highly constricted sites for performance are giving rise to new vocabularies of site-specific screendance.

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