

About *Performance*

No. 8 2008



Still/Moving: Photography and Live Performance

DEPARTMENT OF PERFORMANCE STUDIES
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About Performance is concerned in the broadest possible way with the phenomenon of performance and with the processes involved in its production and reception. We are interested in all genres of aesthetic performance and live art, as well as social/cultural performance, ritual, and other forms of performative activity. The journal provides a forum for analysis, theorisation and critique by academic researchers and performance makers. We welcome articles that bring theoretical perspectives derived from other disciplines to bear on performance practice.

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STILL/MOVING: PHOTOGRAPHY AND LIVE PERFORMANCE

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ORACULAR PRACTICE, CRIP BODIES AND THE POETRY OF COLLABORATION

A Meditation hosted by Petra Kuppers
with Aimee Meredith Cox, Jim Ferris, Alison Kafer, Neil Marcus,
Nora Simonhjell, Lisa Steichmann, and Sadie Wilcox

Writing about performance, photos like pearls glide through our fingers. The sensuality of touch and words is at the heart of *Tiresias*, an Olimpias performance project I directed in 2007/8 at the University of Michigan. In this essay about collaboration, our voices braid together.

Over the course of a year, *Tiresias* welcomed collaborators in performance events and photo-shoots in California, Rhode Island and Michigan. We met for a few days in various locations, both inside studios and out in nature, danced together, and posed for Lisa Steichmann's camera while talking about disability culture, erotics and difference, and the poetics of becoming visible. In February 2008, the *Tiresias Project* culminated in a community performance with students from the University of Michigan and community members of the Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living, an organisation run by and for disabled people. In between our meetings, the US and European artists engaged in this project discussed their experiences and connections on a list-serv. The materials of this essay – fragments, gazes and touch – emerge from these email conversations. In this essayistic photography/performance meditation, disabled and non-disabled artists and academics, queer and straight, white and black, all beautiful, explore what it means to perform, nude and dressed. We engage in oracular practice: we call a new land into being, unclear, shape-shifting, and built on the terrain of our bodies. The essay fragments meditate on a dance session/photo shoot in Ann Arbor, Michigan and an outdoor photo-shoot in Rhode Island as part of an arts and ecology conference. Throughout the essay frame, I am shifting positions myself: I write as a director, a performer, a theorist, a critic, and as a friend in a collaborative experiment.

WHO IS TIRESIAS?

The figure of Tiresias penetrates Greek drama - the hermaphroditic shape shifter who has lived both as a man – as Zeus's priest – and as a woman – as a prostitute of great renown. Tiresias was blinded for knowing the secrets of man and woman, but was given second sight. Since then, Tiresias wields his and her staff throughout

Antigone, Oedipus Rex, The Bacchae and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* where his blindness, her crippdom, offers special status as advisor to the mighty.

What is seen, what is known, what is spoken: these are the questions around photography and performance that fuel our exploration. I first became fascinated by Tiresias after reading disability culture poets' reworking of ancient myth, and when I watched Martha Graham's *Night Journey*, in which the Oedipus myth is retold through Jocasta's eyes, with Tiresias as the time-keeper. Graham created her feminist version – how can we as disability culture artists do the same? What happens when we make the shifting crip elder the focus of our work? What can I find here for my own body, shifting in time?

In our workshop/performances, we take Tiresias out of the background fabric of history. Now Tiresias and his disability, her undecidable bodily status, the malleability of his body, the shimmer of her gender, her tri-pedal step and his blind/seeing eyes become the focal point of disability cultural work. This is an erotic show. We open ourselves up to an exploration of boundaries, try to reclaim seduction for disability: not as a freak parade, but as sensuous bodies engaged sensuously with the world. At the heart of our show are images of seduction, an erotics of encounter with disability's difference which problematises conventional notions of disabled people as tragic, sexless or deficient. Through photographs, poetry and dance, we remember our future.



Fig. 1 *Tiresias* – videodance, directors Petra Kuppers and Sadie Wilcox

Sadie Wilcox is one of the videographers of the project, and a disabled woman. She writes about her approach to the combination of text and movement in photographed images:

SADIE WILCOX

IMAGE CAPTURE: DISABILITY, AESTHETICS, AND MULTIMEDIA REPRESENTATION

“The construction of disability on digital television...has direct implications for what is often called ‘cultural citizenship.’ By cultural citizenship we refer to the right and opportunity of citizens to participate in the cultural life of a society. Television, video, and radio are important ... are media in which culture in its diverse contemporary forms is reproduced, created, and transformed, in which culture unfolds and happens. . . .”

(Goggin & Newell 2003, 102)

Between April and May of 2007, I documented a series of performative interactions between *Tiresias* collaborators on digital video. The artists explored the use of physical touch, improvisational gesture, and seductive movement as a bodily form of communication. As video editor for the project, I found that the process of organizing the raw video footage required aesthetic choices, such as combining the video and audio assets to fit seamlessly into a six-minute videodance, as well as practical considerations, such as how to address the topic of disability and intimacy without relying on a singular mode of communication. I designed the subtitles to improve access to the audio work, while simultaneously enhancing the aesthetic experience of the video as a multimedia production.

During the first shoot, I had the opportunity to observe and document the interactions between members of the *Tiresias Project* as they performed for the camera. Their movements were spontaneous, playful, and deeply affectionate. Often the dancers continued their movement or gesture even after the cameras had stopped rolling. The performance extended beyond the viewfinder of the camera, and the movements in between the segments of the shoot became an integral part of the collaborative process. As I captured the footage, I attempted to incorporate the emotion and sentiment of the collaborative performance into the video editing process. When choosing which clips to include in the videodance, I recalled the closeness of the performers on the stage and began to identify video sequences that best represented the intimate environment during the shoot.

During the first video performance, for example, poet Lynn Manning and dancer Aimee Meredith Cox engaged in a close caress. Manning and Cox did not speak, but rather allowed movement and touch to replace verbal dialogue. The video camera captured the exchange as the artists explored the physicality of their bodies and responded to each other through skin on skin contact. In editing this shot, although

I had captured the complete interaction, I chose to include only a few selective fragments of the footage in the videodance. The embrace emerges on the screen at intermittent moments. The audience is then required to fill in the gaps between these sequences, to create their own interpretation as the artists disappear from view. In this sequence, the video editing process juxtaposes an act of public performance and an expression of private communication.

In the opening shot of the videodance, performance artist and dancer Neil Marcus transfers from his wheelchair and lies gracefully on the floor of the studio. Marcus's deliberate gesture integrates daily movement with improvisation and creative expression. The distinction between dance and daily life is blurred. Outside of the shoot, Marcus continues the gesture. In the hallway surrounding the video studio, for example, he leans sideways in his chair in a position of balance and poise. He smiles enthusiastically for the onlookers. I recalled these informal performances, the in-between moments that defined the collaborative process, when I edited the video work with Petra.

In a last section of the videodance, the video is shot from above as poet Jim Ferris reaches across the frame of the camera to pull Petra's empty wheelchair off the set. Animated text appears across the top of the screen in a subtle cross-fade of white font. The words, "You cannot explain why you lean the way you do," hover as Ferris reaches precariously across the video frame, reaching for the edge of the chair. Simultaneously Ferris's voice reads the written text, a verse from a series of poems written and recorded for the *Tiresias* videodance audio track. Gripping the bright, yellow dance frame of the chair, Ferris wheels the object out of sight and exits the viewfinder. The words on the screen fade out and new words appear, "why you taste the way you taste." The text then shifts scale and the voice rises "why you chose to nourish." The text, coupled with the distinctive audio-video track, invites the audience to participate in the video work on multiple levels, or in the specific manner that they deem most engaging.

Our process – in the performance, in the photograph, in this writing – is the point of our project. No single message emerges, but instead new constellations of myth appear: we take stories, fantasies, and spin them on.

Not all of our images are for sharing, and many of the photos generated in this project are not seen by the public, they are what feminist disability scholar and activist Alison Kafer calls a 'secret game of cards.' There is a power in being visible, and in being invisible: in our *Tiresias*, we are working on this limit.



Fig. 2 *Tiresias* – videodance, directors Petra Kuppens and Sadie Wilcox

ALISON KAUFER: HOLDING

“Which photos do you want to release?” Petra and Lisa ask me, aware of my wariness about my naked images. Their question, while welcome, carries me far away, pushes me and pulls. *Release* makes me feel as if these images are birds that I have locked away, birds that rightly deserve free access to the world around them, birds born to fly. Why insist on holding them back?

Holding. Hold. What hold do these images have on my psyche, and what holding do I require in return? If these images are birds, I imagine someone holding them in their hands, a physicality of touch echoing the physicality of the images. Small, dainty bird, fragile, downy, soft: I think of the vulnerability in Nora’s steady gaze, the care in Jonny’s self-embrace. Or, remembering Aimee’s strong, sure stance, the sheer muscularity of Neil’s bare back, I imagine osprey, red-tailed hawks, herons. Holding these image birds in my imaginary hands, I feel the erotic charge of our bodies together, finding affinity in our shared Tiresian doubledness of ecstasy and loss, fear and strength. I hold your images against my skin, feeling myself grow into your openness, hoping to discover it in myself: baby bird learning flight patterns from its peers.

But birds belong not in the hand, so what damage is done in the holding?

I remember the feel of hostile stare across this skin, feel the seared imprints of ableist scorn overlay my scars. Holding these images back from public view feels like an acceptance of that scorn, an acknowledgement that some bodies, some textures, some skins are not worth seeing. Why deny the pleasure I feel in seeing the curve of my body captured against the curve of the sky?

Yet this hand typing these words longs for both the bird in flight and the touch of another, feather touching skin touching dream. What damage, then, is done in the refusal to hold, the insistence on letting go? Petra's body my sure boulder in the woods that afternoon, the bumpiness of my burned skin finding its aesthetic contrast in her milky smoothness. Must I share that blending of textures, or can I hold it close to my chest, the winning hand in a secret game of cards?

I find myself sketching wings on these photos, not the wings of angels transcending the barriers and delights of these bodies, but the wings of birds, birds touching and releasing this warm loamy earth. Can't you see the traces of wings on my shoulder blades, see their contours in the shadows Lisa has captured on the wall?

Strong wings, these.



Fig. 3 Alison
photograph: Lisa Steichmann

Kafer adds to her image her voice and creates a frame of words for her picture. In this move, she shifts from memory to drawing, from being caught to creation, towards a grounded freedom.

Lisa Steichmann is the photographer of the *Tiresias Project*. For this essay, she speaks through her images. She also shares the statement below as a response to all our writings, with urgency and the speed of electronic writing, non-capitalized, not beholden to the logic of the well-formed sentence.

shifting mirrors, faces, roles. slipping thru the glass, breaking the surface, skin over bone, flight. not being held to this place, this limit, gravity defied. rupture. yielding boundaries. expansion. to move against what everybody knows, faces look like this, bodies move like this, skin feels like this. as strong as the weight of mountains, knowing that pushes against the world.

What is the weight of appearing? Steichmann speaks about the forces alive in the photographs, the connections between flight and gravity. What is at stake in becoming visible, for disability artists? Performance artist Neil Marcus uses his form of communication to speak about his experiences:

can you become visible

I could not look at people eye to eye when I first became disabled.
Why? I feared what I was. feared what they would SEE.
I felt like I was a monster. How can a monster exist in this world.
The worst moments were the taking of the school photograph. I just didn't fit in.

I came to know better
I did belong
I wasn't a monster
I dared to do this thing called human
I looked people in the eye
I dared to love them

It was always hard to have a dystonic face
All kinds of varied expressions, involuntary
Would just pop up
No control
These I felt like especially hiding

There is another way of seeing it now
Its called "acting"
A cheeky disabled person who acts unabashedly in public
Maybe its a cheap shot; but its been working for me
And seems to be a revolutionary idea

My mission now is cultivate the spaz
Embrace the spaz
Play with extreme labored speech
Use peoples curiosity/astonishment
Perform
My body becomes a very new art form
Shockingly new. A disabled body defined in artistic terms
People will give me a chance, if I believe in it
Art Performance Disability Body. My mantra

Now comes the camera
Go for it
There's no thing to hide
Its all out anyway
I am visible
At least my body is

I have found it fun to now play with the camera
Tho most fear it i have found my Art.

The director tells me "I am overacting"
I see that overcompensation happening.
I can tone it down
To just be

What can I be?
Theres things I want to be in a photo
But in the end I think im in Lisa's hands now

Forget self



Fig. 4 Shadow Play
photograph: Lisa Steichmann

As the host of this essay, the creator of a collage, I am intersecting my thinking about Lisa's image with the image creations of two other Tiresian collaborators: Sadie Wilcox and Neil Marcus. It is their shapes that appear in the shadow photo above, and looking at it, my memories of both dancers as artists inform my thinking. To open up the meeting points of poetry, performance and photo at the site of Tiresias's dancing body, I wish to talk about their art work as it relates to photography, performance, mark-making, and memory. In this writing, I focus on the nature of oracular and poetic practice. The oracle is at the heart of all the art work that happens under the Tiresias umbrella, under the mark of Tiresias, who acted as an oracle, merging past and present and future. Tiresias made these links unstable, like water, like photographic emulsion, like words jumping on the page, like bodies in motion. No one could fathom Tiresias, and thus he and she evade the certainty of

enunciation. Tiresian practices are under the mark of the shapeshifter who queried the ‘naturalness’ of bodies. They are erotic practices, touchings, undecidable, where something moves against something else, and boundaries are not clear.

ENGAGING BODILY

Jim Ferris writes for our show this song:

And today gives way
to tomorrow,
which becomes today,
and not, and energy
resists sorrow,
but it’s sad, and so sweet,
and nothing is neat
as today reaches back
what never was
from what always is
in the promise we think
we can borrow
from today and today
and tomorrow

I read this poem as a song, enfolded, in movement, a wistfulness of folds. It captures something I experienced in the *Tiresias* dancing, in the gliding across skins (folds, nooks, openings, smooth and rough). I listen to the words, yes, but I also listen to the rhythm, to the repetitions, the marks made in the flow of my breath as I am reading this. Words as breath, material practice, become available in sensation, on my tongue, my mouth, against my teeth and in my lungs, and in my head and my shoulders as I move while I speak. Read it out loud, reader. For sensation – physical, emotional and intellectual – are important to the reception of our art practices, to the weft that is emerging.

EMBODYING POETICS: SADIE WILCOX

Even before she came to the *Tiresias* Project, text, bodies and videography shapeshifted into one another in Sadie Wilcox’s work, began a dance designed to re-capture agency. Wilcox is a burn-survivor, and a survivor of violence. In her art practice, she draws upon the medical notes made about her recovering body. These notes are cryptic, scribbled in a scrawl hard to decipher, a specialist language of cc’s and Latin abbreviations. A visual artist, Wilcox uses the scrawl as notational marks: she dances the cursive script, aligning her whole body in space and photographing this shaping. These are not marks disembodied on a white sheet of paper, the

shape the medical notes had in the medical archive. Instead, one of Wilcox's videos shows herself, her body dressed in comfortable white cotton clothes, contorted to resemble these cryptic marks, in profile on a black background, rotating in space.

and nothing is neat
as today reaches back
what never was

The performance is legible to me: all the strange alphabetic, runic forms tremble with her movement. These are marks in vibration, full with the life of her performance, not static traces of medical decisions and diagnostic categories.

Photo-therapy, reintegrating a patient's story into the patient's medical history, is a well-explored avenue of community performance practices, art in medical settings, and art therapy. But Wilcox's work does not easily align with these categories. The scripts she spins into the dark outer space of the black screen remain shrouded. This is an oracular practice, not one that relies on a legible expression that celebrates new-found unity. Oracular: not signifying clearly, upsetting time and space, speaking as the blind seer, speaking where others can't hear, using sound and sight as dense planes on which to dance. To unfold signals from this noise requires an ear, an eye, a body attuned to poetic practice.

But what do I mean when I call visual work and dance work poetic practice? When I say this, I want to draw attention to a particular function of poetry as a form on the edge of writing and speaking. A single word, a single mark, vibrating on the page, is energetically linked to the river of language, the everyday uses of words, and to the river of poetry, the heritage of an ancient art form. At the same time, that word is a single drop of water: the instance of breath and bodily shape that gives form to a word. If prose naturalises all utterances into the flow of communication, poetry holds open the singular and the communal: shrouded personal meaning in interaction with the wider field of social communication. In poetry, language's material assaults, seduces, soothes and upsets you.

Words jump out.

Words unmake sentences.

Line breaks isolate words.

The page lets a word flower.

For me, practices such as Wilcox's work with unknowable bodily alphabets, translating the specialist language of the medical into her personal physical expression, engage in poetry: delicious destabilizing.

Thinking about Wilcox's work from a Tiresian perspective, I can see this healer as trickster: there is no way to capture just one story and presence from what is on offer. One of Wilcox's signature positions for the choreographies she creates for her camera is an up-side-down body posture. The burns on her feet and legs compromised her

circulatory and lymph system. To be up-side-down is a position of relief. Up-side-down, painful pressure is alleviated in a body position that would register as uncomfortable for many non-disabled people. And having danced with Wilcox, I know that these preferred bodily arrangements are not merely alleviations of pain, but pleasurable engagements with ways of imaging bodies in space. I can feel her desire to be upside down, feel her energy going up, converted, as playful as it is serious.

Sadie's and Lisa's cameras are trained on us. We are moving, dancing, by ourselves or in groups. So what does it feel like? In front of that camera? And what do we hold on to, in words? How do we experience our bodies, ourselves, in the captured time of the photo, or in the moving time of the film? Languages emerge, the touch of words on flesh. Tiresian timeshifts are the heart of the photography meditation by Nora Simonhjell, a Norwegian poet.

NORA SIMONHJELL: TIRESIAN TOUCH

Touch keeps us moving, but standing in front of the camera I literally froze. I could feel my heart punching as if I have been running, and I had to use all the strength in my concentration to look calm and cool – or – I thought I had to do so. So I did, and when I look at the picture now, several weeks after it was taken, sitting in front of my computer on another continent, it both feels and looks so different. It is like it never happened. It is like it isn't me standing there. I can recognize my eyes, my face and my body, but it is as if the person captured in that moment, the person in front of the camera, is another person, but it is me.

It was a time I hardly went anywhere without my camera. But one day I stopped taking pictures. And for several years I didn't take a single photo, and I tried as hard as possible, not to have my picture taken. It wasn't that I would like to be invisible, but I didn't like the thought of being visible in past movements. I thought that memories were pictures good enough. A part of me still thinks like that. The photos ability to freeze time and expressions is such a powerful intervention. It transforms time into something else. It transforms persons into something else: An imprint? A frozen gaze? A story?

I love looking at photos in galleries, and especially looking at pictures of people I don't know. I like the anonymity in the unfamiliar faces and the presence of unfamiliar bodies. The distance between my eyes and their bodies makes fiction possible. And when I look at the lovely persons in the Tiresian-pictures, I get some of the same feeling. They are not anonymous. They are not strangers, but more or less familiar to me. I both know and don't know them, and I know it is very possible I never will meet most of them again. And as I look at the marks on their bodies, and look at the trace

my body has made on the roll of film, I think this is *our* bodies. Those pictures are *our space* in time. Those pictures are our common presence.

They create a beautiful distance, and a dialogic space. Distance is a privileged presence and an encounter for hidden possibilities. We have been touching each other in writing, and some of us have been touching each others bodies. I press the keys at my computer and reflect upon the necessity of distance in writing, and how the photos of our bodies insist on their own kind of being. In a way I think distance has its own kind of weight, and that it might be a kind of embodiment in itself. I'll try to touch this space.

In all writing a body is traced, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy writes and argues that "A body always weighs: it lets itself weigh, be weighed. A body does not have a weight, it is a weight. It weighs, it presses against other bodies, onto other bodies. All bodies weigh against one another" (Jean-Luc Nancy 1994, 25). The quality of space is difficult. The space around a body is also an imaginative room for our selves. The importance of being visible and to take place, to be aware of the space around the body, and to be aware of the surroundings; emotionally, tactile, erotic, historic, social and aesthetic, are all part of the encounter of bodies and time: Our time. Our space: We weigh against each other. We lean towards each other over oceans and flying hours. In solitude, in dark rooms, in nature and embraced; photographed alone and together: writing presence.

Perhaps the body doesn't move into time and space, perhaps the body transforms time and space into presence? Is it possible to touch that presence? Is it possible to touch a moving space if the space is both our agony and joy, our fear and curiosity, our doubt and love? Come take my hand and lead me, Tiresias asks a young boy in *Baccane* – we have followed him to unknown places. I'll embrace that place, its people and thoughts; lean towards memories of touch, unspoken words and the invisible space around us. Touching bodies never stop. This is not a poetic. This is not a poem. And as I remember different gazes and warm arms, I'll welcome the possibilities of clicking lenses.

How do you perform? What do you perform? What do you know? We lean into time, and touch its gravity. Memory and difference dance in the meditation by Aimee Meredith Cox, a dancer and anthropologist tuned into our behavioural scripts, the un/naturalness of bodies, space and time.

AIMEE MEREDITH COX: EXPECTATION

There is a picture I absolutely adore of my sister and I sitting cross-legged on our living room floor on Christmas Day. She is six and I am four. We are both smiling and looking wide-eyed, boldly into the camera. We know what is expected from us: look happy and sit still. As I got older, the rules governing having your picture taken seemed to change... drastically. I started to first notice this in college where everyone seemed to have a disposable camera at the ready to take pictures of their own and others most scandalous moments. In these pictures it was expected that you look slightly deranged, overtly sexy, impossibly beautiful, ugly on purpose, or involved in some unidentifiable illicit activity. From what I can tell from my mindless wanderings through Myspace and Friendster web pages, things haven't changed all that much for the high school and college set.

During the *Tiresias* photo shoots, I felt a very different kind of photographic expectation. I watched from the sidelines as Lisa moved through her choreographed photography. She bent and stretched; encircled her 'prey'; stepped in and moved away, sometimes stopping to tilt her head or pause to squint and create a new line of sight. It felt more appropriate, or perhaps I just felt more comfortable, focusing on Lisa rather than whomever she was shooting at the time; the person being photographed already seemed so obviously the subject and, therefore, overexposed and vulnerable to the display. Lisa, on the other hand, appeared in control and protected. I envied her and had conflicting thoughts around her position of power. I wanted to snatch the camera from her hands and force her to pose for me, but also, even more than that, wanted to get in front of her lens and become worthy of her lovely, deliberate camera dance.

I am not sure what the others -- Petra, Jim, Nora, Sadie, Neil, Lynn, Alison, and Jonny -- felt in front of the camera, but I felt the intense pressure to perform. Sitting still and smiling would not fly here. Somewhere between the obedience that was expected of me in childhood and the rebellion mandated by adolescence, was the adult me in front of the camera without an utter clue of what to do. When there were other bodies moving in the shot with me, things were much easier. I let their weight, momentum, breath, and touch guide the movement of my limbs and direction of my gaze. Alone and standing barefoot on the cool black Duderstadt floor, I felt lost without those warm visceral clues. I was aware of the tension in my body and the thoughts racing through my mind: *Does this seem forced? What are the others thinking? Is Lisa disappointed? Is this right?* Many times a day, our bodies, our movements, our ways of taking up and moving through space are identified and evaluated. Some of us notice this more than others, but we all take this information in and allow it, on some level, to colour and shape what we think about ourselves. And, it is this uneven, sloppy combination of external and self-assessment that informs how we feel within and move in (and sometimes out of) our bodies. I am not thinking all of these things when I look into Lisa's lens, however. Instead I inhale deeply and try to remember the feel of Jim's arm hair tickling the back of my neck, Petra's soft fingers on my calloused feet, Nora's breath on my thigh, Lynn's fingers on my face.

And again: what does it feel like? What is hidden and what is revealed, what can you remember, and what is the space between words? Neil Marcus writes about his exposure: performing the photograph.



Fig.5 Neil Marcus
photograph: Lisa Steichmann

NEIL MARCUS: THE NUDE

Nude we are
As sunbeams
As light
As moonlight
In darkness

There is a slow burn in the nude
A passion
An expression
That only a nude can tell
An opening into another dimension

soft flesh, hard muscle, gentle hair, speaks quantities
Elegant
Needs no explanation
Or justification
Just is
Can only be
What we cannot say with words

We are cripples
We are exquisite creations
Is there a shame to resolve ?
Freaks of nature or Precious Beings of another kind of second sight
Look again
Think twice

I wish to speak the unspeakable
The hidden
The secrets I have hidden
Insatiable DESIRE
Longing intimacy
Fierce intimacy
Ravenous touch
Total exposure

I wish to expose My Gender. My Sex. My Love. My Passion
These words are not just hollow affirmation
I dare speak clearly only in silence

They are my form
My disability
Naked to the world

Spasm to the world.

MAGIC/MARKS: NEIL MARCUS

In the Tiresian shadow photograph (Fig. 2), Wilcox's upside-down body moves with Neil Marcus's shadow shape. And again, the shaping and shaped shadow of life notation inserts itself into my reception. For looking at the shadow image and Marcus's centaur photograph, I recall Marcus's calligraphic work, dance paintings, another notation of life in flow.

Before I met him, I knew Marcus through his poetry and through a series of drawings: shapes like hieroglyphics, or Chinese characters, brushed onto large canvases. And these shapes are again undecidable in the way Wilcox's bodily alphabets are: I see these paintings as both representing forms, wheelchair users in flow, and as markings of energy, the distribution of Marcus's weight on a brush, the whooshing of his limbs past the canvas, the rhythm of his breath and his muscles finding form on paper, black on white, white on black.



Fig. 6 Calligraphy, by Neil Marcus

When I asked him about these paintings, Marcus answered me thus:

my 'calligraphy' comes from fred astaire who danced with a broom.gene
kelly who danced with a mop. a wonderful taiko drummer from japan
who drew with a mop onstage and the fact that my brother is indeed a
calligrapher and from my learning that life is a dance as the world is a
stage. (email communication, April 2007)

Marcus's work never seems isolated to me: again, poetry as something on the limits of the personal and the public comes to me as I read his lines, in which he talks about his work as a dialogue with dancers and artists near and far in both space and time. I see his art work as a script for a language we might wish into being, a language known to many, but not regularized.

in the promise we think
we can borrow

Photography and performance: Marcus sent me a number of photos that document his drawing of the calligraphic shapes. I look at one which also presents a shadow dance, like Lisa's *Tiresias* photo. Marcus is in silhouette, standing upright with his electric chair behind him, his arm raised, a brush in his fist. The brush touches the human-sized paper sheets. The sheets curve upwards at the bottom, accentuated by the shadows thrown in this photograph into the light. Marcus's arm arches above his head and curves downward: an ellipsis appears in the photo, the circular shape of the energy that hums between the flat body of the paper and the human deep shape with its protrusions and hollows. And the shapes appearing on the paper are sinuous, curves and lines, shapes that intersect lines and circles, shapes that hold marks of the drag of Marcus's fingers. As a performer, I can't write about the paintings without remembering the drag of his hand on my own skin in our Tiresian dances, and the sensations raised there, on my skin: performance sensation triangulated across images, times and spaces. I try to remember: how did I receive Marcus's images before I danced with him? Now, I cannot see them without remembering the strength of his arms, and the muscular effort that shapes all his movement, the calibrated attention to levels of touch.

yesterday
must give way
but today becomes tomorrow,
resists, insists,

To see these traces on paper now, I see a contact improvisation between strength and delicacy, a balance that does not rip the paper, but allows shapes to emerge. Oracular practices, again: time and space become enfolded, and bodies in motion, like Marcus's, like mine in our *Tiresias* shoot, turn in the words I make appear on this computer screen. They remain oracular, not merely memory devices that tell you what you already know. Oracular: they are shrouded, leave marks that are recognizable as marks, but unknowable, that can't translate into the language of the here and now.

Marcus's paintings make artful, calligraphic, the 'handicap' of the disabled sign. They find flow in shapes associated with negativity, find lift in them. In his alignment of line and curve, these lines and wheels make speed, slip past the easy signs, the known iconographies. And yet, these signs never lift off to become some romantic image of utopia: the effort remains legible.

today dies in tomorrow,
yesterday insists on sorrow,
yesterday lives on,

The dances of Wilcox's and Marcus's shapes in Lisa's shadow photo are not just ghosts of past events, but reservoirs of sensation that call me to the surface of the image. They make me wish you could hold Lisa's image in your hand: this is a wet-process, optical photo, not really a digital image. A double of a double of a double. I love the surfaces, shapes and edges that emerge when I hold her photo in my hand.

Wet-process. I shift register, and find myself in my own meditation, on my own photo.



Fig. 7 Petra Koppers
photograph: Lisa Steichmann

PETRA KUPPERS: BEACH

Yesterday, I swam in the Pacific ocean, off Alameda. 5pm, it was just before the turn of the tide, and the swells came in much higher than usual in that bay. Buffeted and swaying, my mind drifted to one of our *Tiresias* images: myself, on the beach.

I enjoy having this image of me in the collection: I like its brightness, the light of sand and sea, the fresh light of seaside salt air. The image has three bands, graduation of light, and sea and sky are only visible through association: my nude body, sand on my wet legs, and that luminosity that speaks of mirroring horizons of water. Here are other creatures near: the footprints around me do not look human-shaped, but seem to be paw-prints, strangely spaced, unfamiliar physiques, gaits, a different world.

I sit tight in that unboundedness, my eyes closed to the world of the photographer, private and yet open. My posture speaks of different draws to me. Of course I remember the cold of that day: Alison, Jonny, Lisa and I were giggly with chattering teeth, dropping our clothes on a public beach on a cold spring day, the madness of it all exhilarating. Some of those beach images we are not sharing show Jonny and me hopping about like mad birds, doubled over with laughter at our adventure. Some other images not to be shared show Alison and myself from the back, us two leaning into each other for warmth, arms around each other, looking out to sea. But here, I am all alone.

Lisa liked some other images from that day: one that shows me from the back, half-squatting on my heels, my generous body folds creating an interesting amphora-like shape, a strange new classical form. I wasn't that embarrassed by my full figure, so I am trying to work out why I chose this one, instead. And I think the answer lies in those arms that hold me against the cold. I am alone, and yet not alone. The cold isn't easily readable in the image as I look at it now, look at the enigmatic half-smile on my face: I see a touch of self as other, a relational situation, playing across a body's surfaces. Hands touch arm, touch leg, leg touches leg, neck folds touch collarbone, breast touches hip: my body, drawn in and expanding at the same time, conscious and unconscious, a landscape of encounters. That's what I like about the image in preference to the more statuesque, more formal shape-image. Tiresian shapeshifting: this image holds for me the body-in-pieces, Antonin Artaud's fantasy of the dispersed body that performs its own dissolution and assembly in space and time. The heart athlete (another enigmatic term from Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*): assemblage of the moment, pulling in my emotions through touch/sense/kinesthesia/feeling.

On the beach: on the liminal space between habited land and elemental ocean, body emerging. The assembled body of Osiris, Aphrodite's shell: so many sacramental rebirthings rock me in the cradle of my body, in the sea off Alameda, in the frame of a photograph, in the sound of words. Sea photographs hold such different tensions from our studio shots, from the enclosing embrace of trees and lake space, from the angularity of Neil's photo in the Michigan fields, where a geometry of paths query the

body within its grid. Here, although my body is bounded, light and shadow moulding photographic emulsion into colour value, there are all these bleeds: the light on the upper part of my body merging with the sea, my liquid salty blood, my kinesthetic movement memory that so loves the water. A photograph to rock me. Words to rock me: a poem, for birds, for boulders.

EGG

Zydeco rhythm in the swamp
rolls me in the reeds
rolls me in the heron's nest
in the tall tall grass
my hand on my ankle
my thigh against my breast
my hair grows wild and long
twists into the folds of my form
I kick my heel
beat the ground
open the wings
of my collarbone
of my pelvis
of the small bones in my toes
and emerge
wet inside my ears
as the shards fall away
bright violet in the evening light
dappled, patterns familiar
a map of my time
a map of a beach I cannot remember
a map of a water course that bore me
shards crumple beneath the sole of my foot
stance shift dance step release moist earth
stone shift weed blade cling yellow petal
there, in that moment, the smell of the nectar and
I come to the sea.

MATERIAL PRACTICE

In his response to Lisa's photo and my first call for writing on our *Tiresias* list-serv, Marcus wrote these lines, in red, and words become colourful shapes, already, not only placeholders for face-to-face communication.

If we surrender to life
we create magic. Art with our selves
deep knowledge of the universe.
Love
this photograph holds the spirit in a
moment of creation

Like Lisa's photo, I think of Marcus's emails as tokens of contact, not only messages in themselves. Just as Lisa's printing of the 'Kodak' sign, and the paraphernalia of the photographic process, draws attention to the materiality of the photo as an artifact, so Marcus's messages signify beyond the words, making effort, play and artful intention palpable.

When Barthes writes, "Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see" (Barthes 1981, 6), I can relate his words to Lisa's photo, Wilcox's videos, Ferris's poems, Marcus's paintings, all our Tiresian meditations, remembering ourselves. All these practices draw attention to the distance between the thing and the thing represented. My own artful attention to all these practices, my choreographic desires to see them weave into each other, articulates this trajectory. Nothing is natural here, the ground is shifting. All of these practices do what they do not by exposing the 'lack' or 'loss' of some original in its representation. Instead, the communications shapeshift, find lift and dance within stabilities of meaning.

From moment to connection. From drag and its infinity of separate touches, to the continuity of breath blowing over one's skin. In this essay, we bare our memories of performance moments. We celebrate our physical and poetic diversity. We touch words and skin to one another. Tiresian movements, unstable, unclear, end this essay in Ferris's song, in which connectedness wrestles with itself, emotions, human-shaped, speak of sadness, and yet poetry and its rhythms circle on and on:

yesterday
 must give way
but today becomes tomorrow,
 resists, insists,
till there's nothing left
 to borrow,
yesterday holds sway,

 today gives way,
resists, insists,
and today becomes tomorrow,
today dies in tomorrow,
yesterday insists on sorrow,
yesterday lives on,
 it's never all gone,
yesterday lives on
 in tomorrow.

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