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Welcoming the unknown territory

Dance Artist **Paula Turner** and ethnographer **Dr Trish Winter** have been collaborating for the past two years on an ethnographic research project with Grand Gestures Elders Dance Group in the North East of England. Here, Paula writes about what this collaboration has brought to her practice

In my role as an artist researcher, I have been able to spend considerable time reflecting with Trish on how work with Grand Gestures, an Equal Arts five year project, is developing me as a practitioner and enabling me to commit to and honour the process of cultivating 'present awareness'. Trish has a background in dance with a knowledge and understanding of the particular approaches that underpin my work. Consequently, we have a shared language, which is crucial, particularly when talking freely and openly about the body and embodiment. Working with Trish has meant that I can articulate my experience as it happens in a language that suits me, within my own frame of reference.

I don't always know what it is that I am doing as I am so caught up in the experience of it, but Trish welcomes this unknown territory as a place to dwell in and explore. Through this process comes a deeper understanding, absorption and celebration of what is happening. As a consequence, I have become very aware of the language that I use and the landscapes that it speaks of, the way in which imagery can lead to the opening of experiences and an honouring of sensation as it arises. I have been overwhelmed by how the exploration and experience of the lived-in moment, just as it is, has been a liberating and radical process for members of Grand Gestures and myself. It is an unfolding of

understanding. Being in the moment and processing your understanding whilst being free from producing anything, is what I have relished the most about our research partnership. The dance is the point and there is a total commitment to taking this 'being in a body' business seriously. My practice is about consciously noticing and responding and I have grown clearer, bolder and braver about what I do. My ability to claim this and to know this is through the process of the in-the-moment conversations with Trish or with the group, bringing what is experienced on the inside out, and then distilling it and absorbing it back in.

A broader context

Over the four years of being lead artist for Grand Gestures I have continually experimented, questioned and taken risks with the content of the classes whilst trying to make them inclusive, enjoyable and suitable for the people and the context I am working in. Trish's approach makes me aware of the importance of these processes and of their wider cultural and political significance. Through our collaboration, I am also made aware of how my work sits within broader related areas of research. I therefore get a sense of endorsement and of belonging to a wider realm, which is often lacking in the world of





Above and left: Grand Gestures. Photos: Frances Anderson

the freelance artist. It has also led to increased and wider opportunities to share practice and we are only just beginning to explore the development of these relationships.

The research approach

Trish often chooses to dance with Grand Gestures. This is important as it doesn't feel like we are treated as research lab rats! When she dances with us, she is part of the group – she fully explores and contributes – and is not separate, simply looking in at us.

This research project has been distinctively different from project evaluations where there is the burden of proof in order to justify the project's existence, targets to be met or useful quotes to be gathered. Within our partnership, there is a joyful

acceptance of being present and open to the possibilities that are emerging and making themselves known; an acknowledgement of the power and meaning of being in a process first and foremost. What we are learning is rooted in the particularities of who we are and where we are, and is far more important and vital than focusing on what we can measure. Much of our research partnership has therefore been about having an alternative approach to instrumentalist ideas about dance and art, which seem to pervade so many projects now. Trish and I have been determined that our work with Grand Gestures is an open ended process and that learning and dissemination of that learning is a shared process for us all and not imposed either by me as lead artist or Trish as the academic.

Info

Paula Turner (www.paulaturner.org) is also a founder member of Dry Water Arts (www.drywater.org) and has a longstanding relationship with Equal Arts as a freelance artist and trainer (www.equalarts.org.uk). She is also a Churchill Fellow.

Dr Trish Winter is Programme Leader for the BA Media, Culture and Communication course at the University of Sunderland. She is an ethnographic researcher and former director of the Durham-based community dance project Tandem Dance.

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