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Context, Discipline, and Understanding:  
The Poetics of Shelley Lasica's Gallery-Based Work



Fig. 1. Shelley Lasica, Deanne Butterworth and Jo Lloyd, *How How Choreography Works for 2016* (2016). Performance as part of *Choreography and the Gallery*, a one-day salon on 27 April 2016 at the Art Gallery of NSW, presented by the 20th Biennale of Sydney in partnership with School of the Arts & Media, UNSW Sydney. Courtesy Biennale of Sydney. Photograph Document Photography



Video documentation of Shelley Lasica, Deanne Butterworth and Jo Lloyd, *How How Choreography Works for 2016* (2016)  
<https://goo.gl/emD7ir>

*To align dance with other art forms such as the visual arts, to beg that it be seen and given the same critical space and import; or to allow dance to find its own language and sources—to see it for what it is and not in terms of “the other” ... but perhaps it is not an either or situation.— Shelley Lasica (1987, 25)*

Shelley Lasica begins typically: unannounced, just a slight shift in her attention, a movement beyond the pedestrian, something playful.<sup>1</sup> She is running on the spot, little flicky runs that pitter-patter. The audience drops from a babble to silence, as the exhibition space also becomes a performance space. Lasica’s energy ripples across the onlookers who freeze or move out of the way, negotiating the transformed conditions. Two other women (Deanne Butterworth and Jo Lloyd) emerge from the crowd, each moving in a different way. They dance close to the audience but their gaze is soft as they attend to the action with their other senses, unlike Lasica who makes direct eye contact. The difference between the audience and the dancers stays slight—their dancing is not spectacular, but casual, relaxed, matter-of-fact. The tone is easy; they don’t care whether we watch, giggle, chat or walk away. They are assured, but unassertive.

The dance unfolds like a serious game. The three dance artists move in and out of contact; their hands gently resting on each other, taking off quickly down the room with twisting running steps, sitting with legs apart and thrusting their pelvis, frozen in standing shape-clusters. Sometimes Butterworth and Lloyd appear like Lasica’s back-up dancers, rocking in rhythm before she joins them regally on the floor at their feet. Choreographic commands are mumbled between all three and they listen for more than words. They are tuning their attention to other things: unseen forces, an expressive charge, potential pathways, familiar gestures, repeated phrases. What can the audience see? This “pointy-end” of dancing bodies in gallery spaces is *sensational* in the Deleuzian sense; where sensation is defined as the corporeally-grounded aspect of perception where “the imagination [is] freed from the legislation of the understanding” and remains with the terms of the work itself (Smith 2002, xvii). We complete that work with our presence and attention.

This is a description of *How How Choreography Works for 2016* (2016) by Australian choreographer Lasica with co-creators Butterworth and Lloyd. It was performed in the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) as part of *Choreography and the Gallery*, a one-day salon presented by the 20th Biennale of Sydney in partnership with UNSW Sydney on 27 April 2016 (it was also recorded and can be viewed here <https://goo.gl/emD7ir>). It was a one-off reiteration of *How Choreography Works*, which itself premiered at Melbourne’s West Space in 2015.<sup>2</sup> I will return to discuss that iteration of the work, but will first focus on the 2016 performance as this—alongside Lasica’s quote above—open onto some of the key themes of this article that focuses on Lasica’s gallery-based works. *How How...* (2016) is part of a series about Lasica’s body of work, which Butterworth and Lloyd are immanently familiar with as regular dancers with Lasica, and as such, I discuss this co-authored work in relation to the choreographer’s larger oeuvre.

Lasica describes the co-authored 2016 performance as “a lot of situations jammed together and so, extremely challenging” (Lasica 2016). The work was part of Lasica’s contribution to a mixed forum of talks, interviews and performances focused on “exploring the creative and discursive territory between ‘the choreographic’ and the institutions and practices of art” (Biennale of Sydney 2016). She had spoken earlier in the day offering a poetic text that listed, briefly, the existing types of discourses on dance and the gallery, and then offered details of the three artists’ choreographic focus in *How Choreography Works*. For those who had attended the earlier talks, the performances brought all of the prior discussion into the light of ‘the thing’ itself – “the thingness of choreography that is not a thing – that’s the thing,” to quote Lasica (2017c). The performance was also framed within AGNSW’s *Art after Hours* program, which brings a broad cross-section of the public into the gallery in the evening, once a month. This audience had no framework for what they were seeing, bar some standing signs and printed Salon programs.

In addition to the impact of the earlier talks and the *Art After Hours* program, the work was also shaped by the performance program in which it was presented. Butterworth, Lasica and Lloyd’s work was performed between Helen Grogan’s “performative sculptural situation,” *OBSTRUCTION DRIFT (AGNSW)* (2016), and Lizzie Thomson’s dance titled *Tacet: Rhythmic Composition (After Roy De Maistre’s Rhythmic Composition in Yellow Green Minor (1919))* (2016).<sup>3</sup> And finally, the venue of the gallery brings its own specific and substantial weight; it is Sydney’s major museum of art covering the entire gamut of Australian art, from its extensive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art collection, through colonial to modern art.<sup>4</sup> So, while many saw the three women dancing in the gallery as seemingly transposed there from another space-time-culture, those dancers were engaging deeply and persistently with a context thick with all the resonances brought to their work by the four frameworks of the day-long Salon, *Art After Hours*, the performance program, and the gallery space and context. Those resonances covered the political (dancing as public programming, not part of an exhibition), historical (one iteration in an ongoing series, one dance in a history of dances in this gallery), economic (who is being paid? what is there to buy?), material (dancing on marble), social (what is between the dancers, and between them and us?), and aesthetic (what media? what kind of dancing?).



Video documentation of Helen Grogan, *OBSTRUCTION DRIFT (AGNSW)* (2016) <https://goo.gl/A9ij8q>



Video documentation of Lizzie Thomson, *Tacet: Rhythmic Composition (After Roy De Maistre’s Rhythmic Composition in Yellow Green Mirror (1919))* (2016) <https://goo.gl/fekU3K>

So *How How...* (2016) deals directly with context, and this is the singular most pronounced theme in Lasica's work. The dance is "in-situ"; it is not transposable from site to site, and becomes affected by the space-time in which it appears. In the gallery context, and amongst other works of art, dance and performance have the unique capacity to adapt to their environment. They can be in an evolving dialogue with their context, enabling the processual development that embeds the situation in the work. This preoccupation of Lasica's is clear in the names of her works: for example, *Behaviour* (1994–95), *Situation* (1996), *As We Make It* (2016), *Happening Simultaneously* (1991). Other themes in this broader body of work that are evident in *How How...* (2016) include the critique of the dancing subject as singular, authentic or unique through the circulation, reuse and self-reflexive performance of material from across Lasica's work and between the three dancers, and the distinction between what the dancers are doing and everything else in the space, including audience behaviour.

The spectacular physical virtuosity normally associated with the dancer is redirected into a virtuosity of attention. This transforms a multiplicity of stimuli from the given context(s) into spontaneous decision-making that remains open to the many possibilities at hand. As the conflation of both dancing subject and art object, the dancer works at the site of sensation where perception becomes action.<sup>5</sup> And the role of the spectator is revealed as the provocateur in Lasica's work through her direct gaze and nonchalant presence. In Lasica's most recent iteration of her critique of visuality in relation to dance, she asks: does it matter if I can be seen at all? Lasica's group work at the AGNSW in 2016 and her quote from 30 years ago, used here as an epigraph, pose an important question that this essay will approach through poetics. Can we consider how dance might align itself with other media through an artist's choice of aesthetic preoccupations, working methods or presentation context, yet still "see it for what it is," honouring the specifics of its form? The political dimension of what some have seen as the "colonisation" of dance by the visual arts frames this consideration of the discipline of dance as it emerges in dialogue with the visual arts in the work of Shelley Lasica.<sup>6</sup> What is centrally important is that Lasica's work is an instance of *dancing in the gallery*. In response to the expanded use of the term "choreography" within contemporary arts, Lasica states, "let's reverse this and get very specific about what we mean by choreography, both in terms of movement analysis and philosophy ... It always comes out of a physical practice" (Lasica 2017a).<sup>7</sup> This material aspect of what has become an expanded field of choreography, and the fundamentals pertaining to the dancing body, is my focus in what follows.<sup>8</sup>

Lasica has been occupying this creative territory for over 30 years, creating her first work for a gallery space in 1986.<sup>9</sup> I have been watching Lasica dance since the early 1990s when I saw her at Performance Space in Sydney, in works like *Square Dance Behaviour—Part 6/version 4* (1997) and *Situation Live: The Subject and Dress: a costumed performance* (1998). Lasica has not received the critical attention she warrants, and this article offers something towards redressing this situation.<sup>10</sup> But across the three interviews conducted with Lasica, the challenges of translating her choreographic method into language persisted and are writ large in the co-authored text that accompanied *How*



Fig. 2. Shelley Lasica, *Dress: a costumed performance* (1998), in collaboration with designer Martin Grant. Photo Kate Gollings.

*Choreography Works* (2015), an article written in a challenging style full of circularities, ellipsis and ‘ungrammatical’ writing. In this she states:

There’s something about the method of knowing or the medium of knowing and its relationship to the actual, what it is that you need to know or find out. I guess in a way because I don’t, I don’t know. It’s not about indecision. It’s just about well, a lot of it’s got to do... about language [sic]. If I can tell you the thing that I want you to know I’ll just tell you. (Lasica, Lloyd and Butterworth 2015b)<sup>11</sup>

So I openly acknowledge the limitations of this analysis but turn—earnestly and unfashionably—to consider some dance fundamentals as a methodological grid through which to articulate the poetics, and material conditions, of Lasica’s work.

## Poetics as Method

*A poetics seeks to define and uncover in a work of art what touches us, animates our sensibility, and resonates in our imagination. Thus, poetics is the ensemble of creative conducts that give birth, meaning and sensuous existence to a work. ... It does not only tell us what a work of art does to us, it teaches us how it is made.*

—Laurence Louppe (2010, 3–4)

The recent interest in intermedial practices across dance and the visual arts, such as those undertaken by Shelley Lasica since the late 80s, which must be considered within a lineage that originates in experiments between media in the mid-twentieth century, calls for new methods of analysis.<sup>12</sup> Attention to intermedial creative methods requires compositional analysis due to the innovations occurring at a material level. So I turn to ‘poetics’ as my analytical method, which French dance theorist Laurence Louppe describes as being focused on “the resources that the practice itself has chosen” (Louppe 2010, 12). As the opening quote describes, poetics is focused on the internal operations (practices), sensuous form (products) and spectatorial affects (sensations) of a work of art, understanding the latter through the former. It is not autonomous of its affects, but is constituted through them; as Louppe states “every work of art is a dialogue” (4). It is not, as Louppe points out, an analytical method that takes up “a critical position outside the making of dance” (6). The work of Louppe in her important book, *Poetics of Contemporary Dance*, provides a model of poetics for this article.

For Louppe, a study of the poetics of an art form throws light on its operations and practices; Louppe is not interested in an approach focused on interpretation and decoding meaning, but rather “the implicit prerequisites out of which the realm of appearances opens up” (2010, 46). Louppe’s understanding of poetics allows for rigorous attention to the characteristic elements, terms of production and mode of circulation particular to a given art work. This attention to *the work of the work* as it exists in its encounter with the world sits squarely with Louppe’s aim to assert the discipline of dance within its 20th-century milieu.<sup>13</sup>

Louppe’s book, *Poetics of Contemporary Dance*, is important for returning to a model of choreography that is committed to its corporeal foundations, offering key elements (via Rudolf von Laban and other pioneers of dance analysis) that are particular to the operations of the body; namely *breath, weight, tone, movement (qualities), force/energy, rhythm* and *(un)form*. These elements are couched within—and reciprocally constitute—the space-time of the dance, and considering them as distinct from each other contradicts their relational mode of operation. As Louppe states after Laban, one must insist on “the purely relational character of their becoming in our experience” (2010, 69). We must also always acknowledge that there can be no question of constructing a comprehensive account of such materials. In my current research, these “dance fundamentals” are framed within broader “foundational principles”; *the mind-body, singularity/collectivity, presence/participation, process/change, imagination* and *space-time*. While I will undertake to unpack and qualify these terms in detail elsewhere, I mention them here



briefly to establish some “limit-features” that constitute the grammatical parameters of dance which can then be applied in analysis. I will then describe the elements through my discussion of Lasica’s deployment of them.

To supplement Louppe’s dance perspective, I turn to the field of poetry studies and the experimental edge of this field where we can find a compelling account of poetics as a model for both creative process and its analysis, and one that resonates with dance as an art form. English poet and academic Jeremy Prynne refers to “poetic thought” as a model of thinking that is not bound to a singular discipline (i.e. the thinking that poets do), and thus offers a “generic” model of poetics and its operations (Prynne 2010, 596). Prynne is describing an experimental thought practice that supports the production of experimental compositions, and those practices and outcomes can be applied to any or multi-mediums. As choreographer Jonathan Burrows states, there are “many affinities between dance and the way Prynne describes the paradoxes, sidesteps and transitory qualities of poetics” (2012).

Prynne understands thought in this context as something “like the active process of thinking, mental energy shaped to some purpose or tendency: I think of it as poetic work” (595). This is not mere “thoughtfulness,” but rigorous thinking bent to a particular purpose.<sup>14</sup> So it is active, processual, directed, and applied. But what does Prynne mean by “poetic”? He doesn’t mean “merely ‘expressed or set out in the forms characteristic of poetry’ or ‘contained within a discourse belonging in a category of poetical composition’” (596). He states:

The activity of [poetic] thought resides at the level of language practice and indeed is in the language and is the language; in this sense, language is how thinking gets done and how thinking coheres into thought, shedding its links with an originating sponsor or a process of individual consciousness. (596)

So this kind of thinking is poetic in the sense that it engages deeply with “the resources that the practice itself has chosen,” the medium and its parameters (its language). Here we take language to be the expanded media of any given form, constituted by discipline specific fundamentals in the first instance, but engaging with broader resources in intermedial work (as I will go on to consider). Experimental practices are not separable from the thinking that they entail, and the thinking occurs through the media. Poetic thought is in fact stretching thought through an experimental approach to a given media—involving “the internal energy of language under intense pressure”—and the language produced is then equivalent to the thought and exists independently as its representative in the world (598).

This model of poetics as a “reaching towards” across thinking and practice (materials and actions) can help demystify creative processes too often mythologised or avoided. Poet-theorist Lyn Hejinian puts this co-dependence of the labour of poetic thought, practice and reflection this way:

But it would be a mistake to regard the poetics represented here [in her essays] as a discourse for which poetry is merely exemplary, one for which poetry stands at a distance, objectified and under scrutiny. Rather, these essays assume poetry as the dynamic process through which poetics, itself a dynamic process, is carried out. The two practices are mutually constitutive and they are reciprocally transformative. (Hejinian 2000, 1)<sup>15</sup>

Poetics is the process, fact and account of this dynamic working with the materials at hand, but working always at the limits of the media. Poetics as method is, in this sense, self-reflexive, testing the chosen medium's parameters. This is how Prynne describes the resulting condition of the work of art forged through poetic thought:

the focus of poetic composition, as a text takes shape in the struggle of the poet to separate from it, projects into the textual arena an intense energy of conception and differentiation, pressed up against the limits which are discovered and invented by composition itself. (2010, 596)

Modifying Prynne's idea here, slightly, I take this passage to suggest that the energy or force of creativity or 'conception' lives on in the work in the way that it differentiates itself from other phenomena, articulating its own aesthetic parameters as it does so. It can only be understood then in relation to a field of practice, a set of disciplinary fundamentals, which are "reinvented," "transformed" and articulated anew through this process and the resulting work. But poetics also exceeds the work produced; it "is a process, not a definitive act; it is an inquiry, a thinking on." So the work of art that represents it in the world is part of a larger project being undertaken by the artist through the practices of thinking and doing (Hejinian 2000, 2).<sup>16</sup>

Prynne describes the pressure between the "limit-features" of a media or discipline (in this case poetry) and innovation:

Some of the limit-rules here are already inherent in language as a system of social practice and grammatical construction; some of the limit-features have to do with a text's not breaking the bounds of poetry altogether. But, these powerfully signifying limits are valorised by the internal energy of language under intense pressure of new work, new use, new hybrids of practice and reference and discovery. (2010, 598)

Here, the existing limits of the medium are both tested and validated by the pressure of innovation, a pressure driven by the energy of this very frisson. In intermedial work, the question of parameters, limits and the new are linked to notions of sociability, grammar and systems. In terms of Lasica's work for example, practical negotiations between artistic media are an opportunity for dance, as a relatively "unassertive" art form, to sharpen its own terms *through* active, dialogic deployment.<sup>17</sup> This happens as the form expands itself towards and *through* the terms of its "other." In such instances, the conflation of



*interdisciplinarity* with *innovation* will only ring true when the constituent elements are also working at the limits of their own measure, creating a unique and unclassifiable rhythm between those elements at the intermedial interface.<sup>18</sup>

I'd like to propose that progressive intermedial creative methods involve a relationship between poetic thought, language/media/materials, and experimental composition that involves *the expanded media of the form*. Much creative work could be described as an *expanded practice* where various media are in a continuous and rigorous dialogue. In most cases it is also expanded in reaching through and amongst specific art works to encompass an ongoing practice and process. In the case of Lasica, she describes an interest in the modes, practices and culture of visual arts that test the very sociability or grammar of her "home discipline" of dance, and articulates an ongoing method that works through serial and "edition" formats.

Of interest here is how Prynne's model of poetic thought draws out some affinities between dance and poetics, a relationship that is often cited but rarely interrogated. Prynne concedes regarding a similarity between such a process of bringing a work of art into the world and the act of composition as it pertains to poetry as a self-reflexive mode:

some part of the constraints which give form to energy of conception are intrinsic to the specific character of poetic discourse, to the practice of poetry, which is always in some sense its own topic-focus; if only because it will be under intense pressure of innovation and experiment, not just wilfully crushing the natural grain and rhythm of language but discovering new reflex slants and ducts and cross-links that open inherent potentials previously unworked. (2010, 596–97)

Here Prynne provides a new basis for an analogy between dance and poetry. In the past, the similarity may have been based on a superficial notion of both poetry and dance as, in Prynne's words, "impressionistic ... just because they seem rich in fancy, in colourful images, and suggestive turns of expression," and as both being more personal and less "rational" (596).<sup>19</sup> However, here Prynne gives a clue as to the real affinities of poetry and dance in their more contemporary and progressive forms.

There can be something very "up front" about composition in dance because it often lacks pre-existing or externally articulated reference points. As we shall see, Lasica's work is primarily concerned with "choreography," and eschews external literary or other sources with limited exceptions.<sup>20</sup> In his essay, "Dance as a Metaphor for Thought," French philosopher Alain Badiou writes: "The dancing gesture must always be something like the invention of its own beginning" (Badiou 2005, 57–58). The dance does not even belong to the dancer but to its own coming-into-being; as a "wheel that turns itself ... A circle that ... draws itself" (58).<sup>21</sup> In this sense, the form and structure of the composition can be "on the surface" of the work, which often means on the surface of the body/bodies. Prynne describes this as the poetic characteristic of drawing attention to the act of its very creation through exposing or imbedding its "thinking" in its form—that is, a

poetic work is “always in a sense its own topic-focus.” The poetic thought *is* the language, just as the poetic thought *is* the dance. The originating poetic thought does not exist outside of, or independent of, the artistic medium so can only be found through close attention to specific work, often in a series of work as the poetic labour develops.

What also resonates for dance in Prynne’s model of poetics is his focus on compositional *actions* that contain within them directives for movements and a kind of dance through, in and around the material at hand; “crushing” apparently natural rhythms and textures in favour of exploring the potential in “reflex slants,” “ducts” and “cross-links” in “tight local intensities of challenge” and tensions across “large and extended structures” (2010, 596–98). He evocatively describes the poet “at maximum energy and indeed vigilance, riding through the supple evasions and sudden blockages of language just prior to its emergent formation” (597). When Prynne talks about poetic thought as active, energetic and purposeful, we are reminded that the mind is a muscle and belongs to the body as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

So how does a corporeally-based, experiential practice figure here as a foundational source? How does dancing as a type of thinking contribute to the poetics of a dance artist? We could merely translate Prynne’s model in this way: the language of dance (in this instance) is physical movement. Poetic thought in dance is stretching physical articulations through experimentation, resulting in movements which cannot be separated from the thinking itself but then exist independently as the original thought’s representative in the world. It has been well-documented that the body “thinks”; it “knows” before we can formulate phenomena and sensations into structured thoughts and language.<sup>23</sup> So dancing could be described (in some instances) as a physical manifestation of a ‘pre-thought’ zone. Dance and choreographic practices bring somatically-charged forces, direct and unmediated, into play with composition, constituting a specific mode of the kind of pressure that Prynne finds in innovative practices.

Lasica’s work, along with other examples of dancing in galleries, offers a chance to jettison interpretation, evaluation and translation in favour of a focus on poetics in these specific instances where the material grammar and disciplinary terms of one form are brought into direct and physical contact with a new context. This intermedial work is rigorously self-reflexive and critically engaged with what is going on in the moment of its unfolding, and with the terms of its production amongst multiple art forms and their material conditions. The special condition of dance mentioned in the introduction, especially being adaptive to its environment throughout the processual development of its emergence, allows it a privileged access to this poetics of intermediality. So the focus here is on the art form’s sociability and exchange with the other arts, particularly when it presents itself in its most ‘grammatical’, disciplinary form as live, dancing bodies in a choreographic work.

## The Poetics of Lasica's Gallery-Based Work

*All I know about method is that when I am not working I sometimes think I know something, but when I am working, it is quite clear that I know nothing.*

—John Cage (2011, 126)

What is at stake in Lasica's work is a challenge to assumptions about the source of compositional terms circulating in the contemporary arts at the beginning of the 21st century, and the role of dance and choreography in this broader exchange. In tackling the fundamental language of dance and choreography in creative production, my aim is to address a situation where dance language is often being misapplied and misunderstood in the other arts, while highly innovative practices involving dance circulate as invisible forces amongst these other art forms. Lasica, as an important and singular Australian pioneer in the field, is one example amongst many internationally who mobilise dance as a powerfully innovative force that is in constant dialogue with the other arts, driving new discoveries as they occur at the level of what choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker refers to as simultaneously "the most ancient and most contemporary"—the body (Brannigan and De Keersmaecker 2012). I return to the key themes in Lasica's work (choreography, context, authenticity/subjectivity, process, spectatorship), drawn from the AGNSW/BoS20 performance *How How Choreography Works for 2016* (2016) with Butterworth and Lloyd, to demonstrate how the specific explorations of Lasica's oeuvre interface with the compositional concerns of the visual arts, while sharpening the disciplinary inquiry in her work. Some visual arts elements that Lasica's choreography dialogues with here include materiality, authorship, presence, process, objecthood, and the two elements shared by all the arts (according to Gilles Deleuze); space and time (Deleuze 1987).

### Choreography

As the title of the work suggests, the 2015/2016 work is about choreography, as is all of Lasica's work. The choreographer's oeuvre is deeply self-reflexive and self-consciously engages with the tropes of choreography. Yet Lasica's quote above regarding her pursuit of a very specific notion of choreography, linked to "a physical practice," sits beside another desire: "I want people to be able to see this choreographic stuff unhinged or uncoupled from theatrical modes—music, drama etc.—to be able to make different sorts of relationships" (Lasica 2017a). Lasica purposefully recontextualises choreography to draw the discipline in high-relief, for example, playing with the shift from the everyday into virtuosity, riding that moment between walking and dancing that can feel so very strange for the unexpectant viewer—or indeed any viewer in proximity to dancery behaviour outside the stage. Some audience members may struggle to read degrees of virtuosity unhinged from physical spectacle. As Lasica states, "what you bring to [the performance]—the range of physical thought and expertise and training—it's not nothing, [but] it might not be recognisable" (Lasica 2017a).<sup>24</sup> The moment of recognition that someone is dancing is a place of acute attention for Lasica. In a video of *Behaviour* (1995), by Margie Medlin, Lasica is talking to someone she knows in the space while

subtly stretching an arm awkwardly behind her, hand splayed. It seems as though that arm's disassociated activity slowly draws her focus and she moves away from her acquaintance and into the dance. It is as though Lasica literally points a finger at the moment of transition, drawing attention to it as if to ask, "am I dancing yet?"

Other choreographic staples that Lasica plays with include presence and an association of this with authenticity; "how I might appear to be telling the truth by performing choreography very close to you" (Lasica 2017c, 210). Proximity, a direct gaze, a force of energy rushing past... Lasica "plays" her presence with a vibrant knowingness before disappearing behind a supporting beam that interrupts the gallery space, subtracting visibility from the game. The very notion of choreography as a form of composition is also under pressure, and thus, in focus. The line between her movement archive, historical references, and new movement is perceptible for many in the audience, especially in the group performances such as *How How...* (2016). Seeing Pablo Bronstein's 2016 commission at Tate Britain in London, the strictly choreographed sequences (performed when I was there with a palpable boredom and nonchalance beyond a stylised attitude), approached the repeatable object of art, demonstrating a clear choreographic process that had occurred in the past and was being rolled out with each iteration of the work.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, in *How How...* (2016) the collision of disparate modes, energies, scales, speeds, the details of movement, and the consistent grouping of Butterworth and Lloyd as a couple in relationship to Lasica, had all the energy of an unscripted catch-up, an excited back-and-forth of shared references, surprises, responses and challenges, issued on the spot and never to be repeated.

### **Context**

Returning to the question of *context*, Lasica has learnt a lot from "people not realising what the situation is that they have set up" (Lasica 2016).<sup>26</sup> When the three women moved into the AGNSW atrium space at the conclusion of Helen Grogan's work, the aim to "change the conditions of the space" had a palpable force. The dancers cut through, herded, stopped near, created a tableau afar, stared people down, ran to the far end. This was not a performance to watch from a distance, judge on its structural merits, critique for its use of light or costume, remember to compare at a subsequent "exact" iteration. This was dancing in the here and now of a large white cube, surrounded by local and international masterpieces, and layered with all of the mashed up contexts, audiences and expectations described earlier.

Lasica states that she didn't start in theatres as most dance artists do. Her first piece in 1977 at The Modern Dance Ensemble studio, Melbourne, was focused on spectatorship and perspectives, and was inspired in part by seeing the Merce Cunningham Company as a teenager at Adelaide Festival in 1976 who performed at the Apollo Stadium. Her mother, Australian modern dance pioneer Margaret Lasica (1926–1993), exposed her to a broad spectrum of dance work and related literature (Lasica 2016).<sup>27</sup> She was also aware of the work of other Australian artists, including the "Art Projects" gallery and group, occurring in alternative spaces in Melbourne (Lasica 2016). She states:

I had been in other people's works in non-theatrical contexts when I was very young and observed how audiences responded, the functionality of things—a control and release regarding setting up a situation for something to happen. It's how I work with dance artists as well. It wasn't a move away from theatre, but a logical place to start. (Lasica 2016)

This interest in creating “situations” rather than tourable choreographic objects for standard theatre spaces is, as Lasica notes here, not limited to performance but is applied to her compositional processes as well. Lasica describes how “the longer I make work, the methodology of building the work, practical things—who and where, become the most interesting things ... rather than replicating a particular way of moving.” So the act of choreography becomes one of “noticing things, understanding how things might happen, identifying and understanding the difference between things.”<sup>28</sup> Contingency and agency become the compositional framework, rather than plans, methods, or inventions.



Fig. 3. Shelley Lasica, *The Shape of Things to Come* (2017) in *Superposition of Three Types*, Artspace, Sydney February 10–April 17, 2017. Photo Jessica Maurer.

### ***Authenticity/Subjectivity***

Lasica is deeply interested in the material presence of the dancer and traditional associations made with *authenticity* or physical truth.<sup>29</sup> Justin Clemens describes Lasica's attitude as “the performance of performance,” a knowing play with the unrepeatability of the art form and a conscious engagement with “self-similarity under variant conditions”

(2014). Gertrude Stein's text on Isadora Duncan "doing dancing," "Orta or One Dancing," conflates the action and the thing, the subject and the object, in a phrase that underlines the dancer's conscious relationship with their performance (Stein 1993). This mode of commentary seems to be imbedded in Lasica's performance and is linked to the poetic self-reflexivity she maintains. However, "doing dancing," as and in performance, is one part of an ongoing process for Lasica that could all be described as "doing dancing," beyond the moment of spectatorial complicity. As Lasica writes elsewhere in this journal,

What is the practice of the artist in this situation, or indeed the work of the artist as an ongoing practice. Is the doing, the performing—is that the only aspect that is identified with work? ... Because although the doing is not always witnessed, it is always happening. (2017c, 206).

So while Lasica maintains that the performance of dance in a particular situation can't exist outside the conditions of its viewing, dancing as a practice is not limited to moments of performance and the contingency of the same on visibility. In *How...* (2015), one preoccupation was the artists' choice between "display/not display/showing" in a set-up that included live performances and "an existing installation of works – objects and screens showing my works from my archive" (Lasica 2016). When I viewed this exhibition in Melbourne's West Space, Lasica was often only partially visible from where I was standing in amongst the work (we were free to move into the "performance space"), behind wall sections that were dispersed throughout the gallery space. In *The Shape of Things to Come* at Artspace 2017, as part of *Superposition of Three Types*, Lasica was even more committed to experiments with spectatorial perception, an invisibilising process ironically approached through an expansive costume that made her at once visually compelling and oddly object like.<sup>30</sup> Lasica had not performed in a context where visitors were so preoccupied with other "attractions" for some time, and the lack of attention opened onto a new focus for her on how much she could withdraw her presence *while in plain sight*.<sup>31</sup>

### **Process**

In tune with the poetic emphasis on process and continuity of practice, Lasica sees her performances as windows onto an expanded situation that encompasses past, present and future, and a gamut of activities and degrees of visibility. In the case of *How...* (2015), and the scheduled events in the gallery space, she states,

We were interested in how these events were happening there in real time ... we called them "live sessions" rather than performances because I think it's a way of marking out how it exists in a larger continuity of work. "Performing" is just about doing something in front of other people. "Live sessions" is about what's happening now, in relation to what's happened before and what will happen in the future. It's ephemeral and we won't repeat it. (Lasica 2017a)



Fig. 4. Shelley Lasica, Deanne Butterworth and Jo Lloyd, *How Choreography Works* (2016). West Space, Melbourne, October 2–November 7, 2015. Photo West Space.

Choreography is not reducible to performance, and this underlines the material conditions of dance in relation to art where “painting” can be the equivalent of a commodified, singular object. In the catalogue for *How...* (2015), the trio write that each event in the space is a “solution,” “contract,” or “proposition,” “findings,” “scenarios,” “session,” “a space of time,” “it’s like the other side of performing or the whole performing,” a “situation,” “there is no definitive and it’s not that it’s not finished” (Lasica, Lloyd and Butterworth 2015b). The processual nature of the work is in the language of this catalogue text that holds a sense of improvisation, interruption, and open-endedness in its form.

### ***Spectatorship***

One of the most enlightening comments Lasica made in our interviews, with my own experiences of her work in mind, was the following; “you’re not there to look after people’s experiences. You are just there” (Lasica 2017a). Lasica’s performance quality has always reminded me of a cat; she doesn’t appear too fussed whether you are there or not,



nor whether you are attending to her, but everything in her energy expresses a “to be looked at-ness,” a careful, self-aware, almost preening grace that is riveting and dismissive at the same time. Lasica does not demand attention but is open to our gaze, and always aware of the audience and where they are in the room. There is a scanning quality to her vision—a soft yet dispersed gaze that takes in the whole, and her choreographic decisions are responsive to what and who she is perceiving.

There is a matter-of-factness about her presence that does not request our approval or engagement, but respectfully leaves us free to do as we wish. She goes on to say, “that’s the problem with participatory work,” but does not specify any particular artists. Having experienced Tino Seghal’s *Carte Blanche* at Le Palais de Tokyo last year, I appreciate her attitude all the more.<sup>32</sup> Seghal’s program of works led us into black rooms where we could hear dancers moving and singing, but could not see or interact with them, engaged us in conversations with a string of partners on set topics that deflected any reference to the actual and immediate situation, had us listen to performers monologue about white walls while they stood facing white walls with their backs to us, and witness dancers moving, singing and running in a set choreographic form, a machine that ran regardless of who was in the space. For Lasica it is, rather, a more nuanced, specific and responsive situation. She is interested in “how to understand and not control that particular exchange with the audience—the power relationship and the level of activity or passivity in both roles” (Lasica 2016). While Lasica dances, we are at liberty to do as we wish but always with an awareness that we are part of the situation also, and that our agency, attention and experience are not a pre-determined quantity that the work will drive through regardless. There is a palpable experience of being a part of a choreography in the here and now, an unrepeatably composition that occurs *between* whoever and whatever is in the space.

## Conclusion

The disciplinary-interdisciplinary interface described here, through Lasica’s recent work, is consciously deployed as her field of practice. She states:

In this time of adaptation, co-opting of languages, there is also the reverse: engagement with the specificity of the particular practice of dancing and the structure of choreography whilst allowing this modality to expand into many areas (Lasica 2016).

Specificity and expansion are not contrary terms in this body of work that refuses to abandon the rich history and practices of dance, but test the “limit-features” or “grammar” of the art by moving it into new contexts and relations. In a period of flurried writing on the burgeoning field of practice across choreography and the visual arts, it is important to acknowledge innovators, both local and international, who have been engaging rigorously with the associated issues over decades of work. Current “innovations” need to be seen in light of this deeper historical context to better account

for the important disciplinary and intermedial work that is continuing poetic experiments across art forms.

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### Notes

1. The following two paragraphs first appeared in Brannigan (2016). This article follows on from my discussion of Lasica’s work there in the context of a recurrence of dancing, as a material practice and physical presence, in gallery spaces in the Biennale of Sydney 2016.
2. Shelley Lasica, Deanne Butterworth and Jo Lloyd, *How Choreography Works*, West Space, Melbourne, October 2–November 7, 2015. <http://westspace.org.au/event/how-choreography-works/>
3. Grogan was assisted in her performance by Geoff Robinson. For more information on Thomson’s work, see Brannigan (2016).
4. This was a conscious choice for the Salon organisers, to place the discussion of this contentious new area of gallery practice in our most conservative art institution, with the generous support of AGNSW.
5. Gilles Deleuze describes sensation as between/both subject and object: “Sensation has one face turned towards the subject (the nervous system, vital movement, ‘instinct’, ‘temperament’ ...), and one face turned toward the object (the ‘fact,’ the place, the event)... it is the same body that, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation” (Deleuze 2005, 31) For this reason I would argue that dance is the art of sensation par excellence.
6. See for instance, Tate Modern Performance Curator Catherine Wood, who suggests we need “to ask new questions about contemporary art’s limits and its needs, its rapacious consumption of other disciplinary specificities” (Wood 2015, 129–30).
7. For Lasica, solo practice and performance specifically is where a physical practice is born, being for her “a research model and a discipline” (Lasica 2016).
8. As I have previously noted, amongst the dance-related work in BoS20, much of “the work of the work’ manifested as dancing in the gallery,” as opposed to the translation of choreographic practices or processes into or onto other media (Brannigan 2016, 27).

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9. Shelley Lasica, *Describing the Perspective of Time, It Promises You Nothing*, Reconnaissance Gallery, Melbourne, 1986.

10. Unfortunately this is not unusual for Australian choreographers with only a handful of publications devoted to a critical engagement with our most important artists. See for example *Shaping the Landscape—Celebrating Dance in Australia* (India: Routledge, 2011), edited by Stephanie Burridge and Julie Dyson, *Bodies of Thought: Twelve Australian Choreographers* eds. Erin Brannigan and Virginia Baxter (Kent Town SA: Wakefield Press, 2014) and the *Writings on Dance* and *Brolga* journal series.

11. This text is based on a conversation at their last rehearsal together before the season—“before it starts unfolding”. A longer version is available as an audio recording, see Lasica, Lloyd, and Butterworth (2015a).

12. This history has been revised and unpacked in the work of Meredith Morse, *Soft is Fast: Simone Forti in the 1960s and After* (2016), Susan Rosenberg, *Trish Brown: Choreography as Visual Art* (2016), and Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (2008) among others.

13. Louppe’s work often contains comments such as the following: “There is, in filigree detail, a wide range of body work which still remains to be considered, and re-considered again and again: today more so than ever” (1996, 13).

14. Prynne is clear on the rigorous labour of poetic thought: “thoughtfulness may be a kind of conscience-money paid for the tacit avoidance of ardent, directed thought” (2010, 597)

15. She goes on in a manner that chimes with Prynne: “It is at least in part for this reason that poetry has its capacity for poetics, for self-reflexivity, for speaking about itself; it is by virtue of this that poetry can turn language upon itself and thus exceed its own limits” (2001, 1). I go on here to argue that poetics can be applied to all experimental creative practices.

16. This speaks to Hejinian’s book title and resonates with the processual nature of both poetry and dance.

17. I discuss the condition of dance as open to other disciplines, and thus relatively unassertive or undisciplined, in Brannigan (2010, 9).

18. This notion of rhythm is taken from Gilles Deleuze (2005, 37). Here, Deleuze draws on Emmanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and the description of the relation between subject and object in an encounter with the sublime (what is beyond thought) as an unstable rhythm, to describe the relation between elements in a creative encounter committed to the “non-rational logic of sensation” (xxvii). “What is ultimate is thus the relation between sensation and rhythm” (37).

19. Some references to dance as being similar to poetry include Louppe’s “Dance, which can be considered the body’s poetry” (2010, 5).

20. *Vianne* (2008) is an exception. She states: “The name is an anagram of Vienna and the work was drawn from the many conversations I had with my grandmother about her life in Vienna and my imaginings of that place and time that no longer exists” (2017b).

21. On the following page Badiou cites Nietzsche, however he never links the wheel metaphor directly to dance in *Thus Spake Zarathura*. Badiou applies Nietzsche’s image here of the innocence of the child to his discussion of dance as a metaphor for (philosophical) thought (58).

22. This is, of course, a reference to Yvonne Rainer’s choreographic work, *Trio A: The Mind is a Muscle (Part 1)* (1978).

23. See for instance Massumi (1995).

24. Lasica believes we underestimate audiences’ capacities to “read” dance: “I’m interested in the way that everyone has a capacity to read other bodies—we do it all the time, the way people walk and stand—but because it’s not ‘logocentric’ it’s a capacity that is undervalued” (Lasica 2017a).

25. Pablo Bronstein, *Historical Dances in an Antique Setting*, Tate Britain, London, April 26–October 9, 2016.

26. She goes on, “It’s incredibly important, whether it’s a proscenium theatre, a museum, or on the street. Not having asked certain questions or being aware of the implications of certain things, renders a situation unexplored” (2016).

27. The Cunningham performance Lasica refers to, March 26 and 27 1976, was one of his ‘Events’ and drew from *Scramble*, *Canfield*, *Loops*, *Changing Steps*, and *Cross Currents*. (<http://adelaidefestival.ruciak.net/archive/1976%20Booking%20Guide.pdf>)

28. Shelley Lasica, *Voiceover*, for *Leap into the Modern: Dance Culture in Australia from the 1930s*, August 12, 2017, National Gallery of Victoria. <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/program/leap-into-the-modern/> Elsewhere she describes “knowing what to do to set up the right conditions for the possibility of something to happen” as a kind of “virtuosity” (Lasica 2017a).

29. Lasica states: “for me it’s always a little red flag when [people] start talking about physical truth because it reduces everything to something less complex—things are much more unstable and contextually driven, subject to many things” (Lasica 2017a).

30. Shelley Lasica, *The Shape of Things to Come*, in *Superposition of Three Types*, Artspace, February 10–April 17, 2017. <https://www.artspace.org.au/program/public-programs/2017/performance-the-shape-of-things-to-come-shelley-lasica/> Lasica states, “well at Artspace people didn’t seem to really see me ... and I kind of like that. At the opening when there was 500 people there, people didn’t even know I was doing anything and it was perfect” (Lasica 2017a).

31. Lasica was listed in the “public program” of this exhibition, and registered her frustration during our interviews at this bracketing of choreography from visual art in such contexts.

32. Tino Seghal, *Carte Blanche*, Palais de Tokyo, October–December 2016. Artists included; Daniel Buren, James Coleman, Félix González-Torres, Pierre Huyghe, Isabel Lewis and Philippe

Parreno. Lasica also makes a distinction between her work and “performance art” (Butterworth, Lasica and Lloyd 2015), another clear division between the body as object in such work (for example Abramovic’s *Luminosity* (1997) as seen in *13 Rooms*, [Kaldor Public Art Project #27, Pier 2/3, Sydney, April 2013] where naked young women were mounted on the wall atop a bicycle seat, making a star shape with their limbs), and the agency afforded her and her colleagues in Lasica’s work described here. In *Luminosity*, disconnection between performer and audience is complete and incontrovertible in contrast to Lasica’s keen attunement to the presence of audience members who are nonetheless left to their own devices.

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