

Charlotte Nightingale

Stuttering Birds

I know that this is about training, about not having spent enough time working with the body - with the communication between head, muscles and skeleton. But the desire to make work, to make work together, not only using the body, but considering the space holistically, is stronger than the constraints of our untrained bodies.

NOW

I do not know how to write this, because I am at the beginning of everything. It is chaotic, murky and I am nervous - about making decisions.

I am learning about violence, violence towards women and now I see it everywhere. I am trying to work out how to respond to it, to resist it in a way that is functional. I am working with Jill Greenhalgh and she asks me to make an act with light.

I respond in images. I go into a dark room and play with tunnels of light from torches, trying to happen upon images through giving myself tasks within the darkness, images with a shadow that I can't see.

I go back to the artificial lights of the studio. I have brought flour with me. I use it to make mounds, an image I have been drawing in my notebook repeatedly.

I was thinking about holes, the hole that can be penetrated, and the hole that can be climbed inside. I was thinking about lines of cocaine - blowing away lines of white powder. I make mounds of flour with indentations in them. I distance them five centimetres apart, in a straight line, using a tablespoon of flour. I make eighty-two.

I darken the room, light the line of mounds with a torch. They look like volcanoes, like piles of drugs. I fill them with red using a teaspoon because I remember a teacher telling me that women lose a teaspoon of blood during their menses. In actual fact it is more like four or five tablespoons - but that is the memory, a bit less daunting for a girl.

I turn out the light, lie down and blow on the mounds one by one. It takes about forty-five minutes and my lungs start to hurt from the effort by the end.

When I turn on the light there is a sheet of white: untouched territory. It is preceded by a line of equally placed red dots, seeping out from their circular boundaries, attacking the brilliant white.

I am overwhelmed; I am not sure what I have done.

It reads in so many ways and all that I have been studying, feeling, seeing translates into this image, this action, this moment.

BEFORE

We formed a group, upon graduating in Performance Studies in 2004 from Aberystwyth University, and called ourselves Bachi. The group consisted of five women; an Italian, a German/Chilean and three British. We first made a piece that attempted to deconstruct notions of the family and of the female. When we began last year to work together, our reserves of performance technique and construction were filled with what we had learnt from Jill Greenhalgh, Mike Pearson, our scenography tutors and other artists we encountered through books and video throughout the degree. We worked in a drill hall and didn't have to pay for a space. Some of us held down jobs for the duration of the process and some of us just got further into debt. Using methods our pedagogues had taught us, we approached the process of making work conscious of having a clear concept, of layering the material through choices that held meaning within the structure.

We began collecting, experimenting, refining and weaving that material into a tangible logic. We had one concrete idea: the notion of exploring roots through a combination of action and painting. We questioned whether we, as women from different countries, different backgrounds could deconstruct ourselves, to understand what in our bodies, and our gestural language is inherited and what is inherently female.

We wrote lists of body parts, noting familial associations, family anecdotes. We told reams of stories, collected objects, smells, tastes, textures, sounds and images. We made physical scores from these images and one of us would take the role of

directing the articulation of these actions. We went into a sound studio and made a sonic score of recorded spoken text that resonated for us, and interesting rhythms from sounds of the kitchen. We layered all these fragments on top or beside each other weaving a logic instinctively and methodically. Time began to run out and it became more difficult to be objective about the separate fragments, repetitions staying in that should have been cut. At the point when we could have gone deeper, when we needed someone constructive on the outside, it was time to show a finished performance. It was also the end of the time we had set to work together.

THE NEXT STAGE

A year on from working on that first piece, we each came with different experiences of performance practice and training: workshops taken in Contact Improvisation, Suzuki, Indian dance and from actors at Odin Teatret. We chose a proposal for the project: the migration of birds, the changes in their bodies before, during and after flight and the idea of them as a metaphor for our own lives. Again we had problems with the time within which to make this work, but we put less pressure on ourselves to make something complete. We acknowledged that it would get to where it got.

We went on imagined journeys dictated by a member of the group. We focused on our faces, testing what varying speeds did to changing facial expressions. We waded through sounds, trying to find a vocal dialogue, getting stuck on stutters - grasping at language. We told stories, interrupting each other, letting each other stretch out stories that had clearly finished. In all of this beginning process, we were and are just trying to experiment. To try and work out what is engaging and what is not, whether you can keep someone's attention through a

still body and a journey made only with the eyes.

During one session Sandra was directing us. Kathleen sat, eyes closed, legs crossed, whilst two of us moved her into six undetermined positions. She had to remember the positions; the timing of our manipulation, the exact tensions we created in her body in making those positions, without seeing them. What we did was very simple and as we sat back to watch her - eyes still shut, struggling to be exact, to remember the tensions, the imprint of our skin upon hers - she became like someone moving on thin ice; delicate, fragile, light and searching. She was aware of every part of her body and I was absolutely moved by her. We repeated this with each one of us, and it became part of the performance. The problem I encountered was that the more I did the movements, the more I lost the energy my body had when I was searching for the imprinted skin of my colleagues. I found this frustrating, and although I understand that to make a physical action alive, it needs layers of intention/energy, I didn't know how to recapture that same quality of intention/energy. I know that this is about training, about not having spent enough time working with the body - with the communication between head, muscles and skeleton. But the desire to make work, to make work together, not only using the body, but considering the space holistically, is stronger than the constraints of our untrained bodies.

We made hollow cages, wire torsos because that is where our ideas led us. We sewed skirts from bed sheets with an old Singer sewing machine - one of us instructing the cloth whilst the other turned the wheel. Put together they looked like lamp-shades. We spent hours trying to work out how to light them so that a clear shadow could be seen through them. We tried touch lamps and torches. We had to wait each day

until it was dark before we could experiment with the light because the drill hall has huge windows that cannot be blacked out. We were striving to keep everything simple but the most appropriate method was the most complex to set up. We used what little we had earned the year before in box-office takings; we used our own money.

The importance to me in working with this group of women is to discover ways of articulating our experiences in the world. To talk about what our generation of women are experiencing. To acknowledge the choices we have. To talk about capitalism, globalisation, poverty, human rights. To talk about the myriad of things that are wrong in the world and the myriad of things that seem right. To say what isn't being said. To find beauty and humour. To not be afraid of time. It is important to me to find a way of working together.

CHARLOTTE NIGHTINGALE (Britain) was brought up in Worcestershire and currently resides in Wales. She studied her degree in Performance and Scenographic Studies at Aberystwyth University, Wales, in 2004. Upon graduating she performed her piece *How Little I Know About*, at Experimentica 04 in Cardiff's Chapter Arts. She formed a performance group, Bachi, with four women after graduating. She has worked on various performances and collaborations, most recently performing in *Young People*, *Old Voices* with Raimund Hoghe. Charlotte is continuing work with Jill Greenhalgh.