***Moving Sites:***

***Investigating Site-Specific Dance Performance***

**Introduction**

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What intrigues and compels me to seek out and attend site-specific dance events is the promise of the unknown and the potential realisation and revelation of new-found realities in familiar and un-familiar places. This book stems from my own fascination with site-specific dance performance as an event experience that rewards those intrepid and brave enough to engage with the genre with, an often revelatory experience, one that reveals to the experiencer not only something of the site in which it is housed but also exposes their own processes of being-in-the-world.

The title of this book, ‘Moving Sites’, alludes not only to the potential for this work to be moving and evocative in an experiential sense but also to the opportunity for it to reveal the site in which it occurs in a new light, as a place of performance. This temporary act of transformation challenges perceptions of familiar places by moving them ‘forwards’ into direct consciousness as sites of play, engagement and interaction as opposed to ‘background’ facades or statutory components of a common cityscape or rural scenery which we pass by or move through en route to somewhere else. Site-specific dance performance and dance sited in real-world locations holds the potential to create fractures of disruption to often assumed and comfortably familiar encounters with the urban and rural environment. In her discussion of site-specific art and locational identity Miwon Kwon (2004)observes that, through this process place becomes a ‘phantom’ (p.165) as the site-specific event invokes a liberating ‘deterritorialization’ (p.165) of site. In so doing, the fixed identity of a site, building or location becomes disrupted and problematised through the introduction of a performance work that might celebrate, contest or contradict the habitual function of a site.

Site-specific dance can be defined as dance performance created and performed in response to a specific site or location. The practice is wide-ranging and varied in terms of its aims, location and focus, from the rural to the urban, the political to the spectacle. This collection of chapter presents a series of discussions that shed light on practical approaches to making and producing site-specific choreography and theoretical and conceptual approaches to reflecting upon, evaluating and making sense of this type of dance practice. The edited volume combines critical thinking from a range of perspectives including commentary and observation from site-dance practitioners and academics from the fields of dance and performance studies, human geography, architectural and spatial theory, dance anthropology and digital performance in order to present interdisciplinary discourse and a range of critical and practice-led lenses. This book questions; *How do choreographers make site-specific dance performance; What occurs when a moving, dancing body engages with site, place and environment; How might we interpret, analyse and evaluate this type of dance practice through a range of theoretical ‘lenses’ and; How can this type of practice inform wider discussions of embodiment, site, space, place and environment – what does it reveal?*

Site-specific dance performance is considered here as a well-established contemporary dance form possessing a discernable set of characteristics, practices and conventions. The genre is also considered as a distinct form of dance practice that, through its engagement with everyday rural and urban environments presents opportunities to explore space, place and environment through corporeal means. In this sense, the book moves beyond description and discussion of the genre as a spectacle or novelty and considers site-dance as a valid and vital form of dance practice that explores, disrupts, contests and develops understandings and practices of inhabiting and engaging with a range of sites and environments.

Through the contribution of scholars and practitioners researching encounters with space, place and location this book extends its remit to considerations of the body’s movement and mobility in, across and through a range of real and virtual environments in a broader sense and challenges the reader to consider the role that dance knowledge and embodied understandings might bring to interdisciplinary discourses. Through this self-reflexive approach the book also exposes ambiguities, contradictions and conflicts that arise when attempting to pin down definitions of a dance-form that, through its engagement with an ever-mobile world is itself in a constant state of flux. It questions some of the definitions, terminology and conceptual arguments often applied to discussions of site-specific dance practice and explores what the form can and might consist of and what it might tell us. For example, through a consideration of embodied engagements with architectural design, immersive performance and mobile technology as an extended form of site-specific ‘dance’ performance what new knowledge and understandings of practices of engaging with the world emerge? In return, this process of questioning contributes to and extends ubiquitous questions of what constitutes ‘dance’ in this context, what is ‘dance’ here and where and when it can literally ‘take place’?

Whilst the wider fields of site-specific devised, visual and text-based performance are well documented (e.g. Hill and Paris 2006, Wrights and Sites 2000, Kaye 2000, Pearson 2010, Birch and Tompkins 2012), little academic research into site-specific dance performance and its creative methods currently exists. A key development in the field emerged in 2009 with the publication of Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik’s excellent volume *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces* in which the editors successfully capture the voices of a range of site-dance artists making work in the United States and offer insights into the artistic motivations and contextual conditions informing this work. In the U.K. a number of dance practitioners and dance companies create and produce dance work for presentation in non-theatre locations[[1]](#endnote-1), but few appear to engage in articulating notions of specificity and site-specific choreographic processes in depth. Where there is evidence of artistic research and development being conducted by practitioners (Susanne Thomas, Lea Anderson, Paul-André Fortier and Rosemary Lee for example) the knowledge often remains tacit and contained within the field of professional practice. As a result, site-specific dance performance, its creative practices and theoretical approaches remain under-explored within the wider field of choreographic and site-specific (performance-led) discourse. Accompanying discourses surrounding the practice have sought to define and articulate the nature of the work through the development of sub-category definitions such as site-generic, site-adaptive and site-sympathetic (see Wilkie’s articulation of Wrights and Site’s model, 2000) and, in the U.S the term ‘site-dance’ is employed as broader umbrella term under which the term ‘site-specific’ dance sits (see Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009:19 for further elaboration).

Site-dance as an evolved terminology functions as an inclusive label that embraces a multitude of performative approaches. However, the term site-specific dance performance is retained in this publication as (in the U.K in particular) it is commonly applied as an umbrella term that encompasses a broad range of practice. The term is also attached to the work of a number of well-established companies and dance artists and is used throughout many Further and Higher Education dance and performance studies institutions worldwide to refer to a certain type of non-theatre based dance performance and, as such the nomenclature provides a useful point of reference.

This publication acknowledges the evolution of this field of practice through the incorporation of a varied range of chapters that address these concerns and perspectives from a range of angles. The chapters are arranged into five sections that address the following themes:

* Approaching the Site: Space and Place
* Experiencing Site: Locating the Experience
* Engaging with the Built Environment
* Environmental and Rural Practice
* Sharing the Site: Community, Impact and Affect

Some of the chapters address site-specific dance and its creation and reception in a very tangible sense through artist-researcher accounts of their own creative processes or through theoretical and analytical reflections on site-dance experiences. Other chapters however question notions of what constitutes this field of practice and challenge the reader to consider what constitutes site-specific dance practice in the twenty-first century. The chapters therefore provide space for a range of ‘voices’ to appear in a number of ways from the subjective and (often) autobiographical registers of artist-practitioners for whom experiences of body-site and self are interwoven to the analytical and objective essays presented by academics and theoreticians. These essays cover a diverse range of practice including screen dance, mobile technologies and body-architecture relationships and through doing so raise questions regarding the ‘location’ of this work and our relationship to it as viewers and participants.

*Historical Influences:*

Dance in non-theatre locations can be found in many countries and in many contexts around the world. A wide range of folk, religious and indigenous dance practices take place both in specific sites (for example in places of worship and sacred spaces) and more generic outdoor locations as a component in festival and ritual performance. The placing and presentation of dance in non-theatre locations as part of a celebratory or festival event or as a component within Western indigenous folk dance practices (i.e. Morris dancing, mystery plays, religious dance ceremonies and American pageants) can be viewed as potentially influential and resonant with contemporary incarnations of site-specific dance performance. Components such as promenade performance, folk dance informed group dance patterns and formations, audience interaction and performer-audience proximity, for example are often included within site-dance performances that invoke and respond to a myriad of folk dance traditions[[2]](#endnote-2). Whilst acknowledging these forms of (often) culturally specific dance practices and their alignment with some of the discourses presented in this volume, a deeper consideration of these forms lies beyond the scope of this work.

Contemporary discussions of site-specific dance performance are informed by a line of influence originating from early dance explorations that engaged dance practitioners with outdoor dance performance, through to the more formalised presentation of work in non-theatre locations by practitioners such as Isadora Duncan and Ruth St Denis, the Happenings of the late nineteen fifties and the experiments of artists at Black Mountain College in the United States. Influences from the natural dance movement in England and continental Europe and explorations of the body’s relationship to the environment within the development of the German modern dance tradition must also be acknowledged.

Developments in live art practice from the 1960s and early 1970s that called for a re-consideration of where art can be placed and performed, and its influence on the Judson Church postmodern choreographers’ experiments with dance in non-theatre locations again provides a useful point of departure from which to consider the evolution of contemporary site-specific dance performance. As with any attempt to provide a definitive and monolithic account of dance history however the aspiration to present single-lineage account of the development of the form is essentially flawed[[3]](#endnote-3). Certain dance developments, practices and the work of particular dance artists are referred to here in an attempt to capture a range of influences that, through a process of historical evolution, can be considered as influential and potentially impressive upon practitioners interested in alternative modes of presenting dance performance.

Specific dance practices developed both in America and Europe from the early twentieth century that engaged choreographers and dance artists with explorations of the body, dance and the ‘natural’ environment can be viewed as highly influential on the development of contemporary dance practices that consider the body’s relationship to the world as an intrinsic component within the dance-making process. In America, artists such as Isadora Duncan and Ruth St Denis explored notions of nature and beauty and a fundamental sense of connection between body, earth and environment through their work. In Europe, the development of a German modern dance genre that incorporated an interest in the body-environment relationship as a key component in developing a strong and healthy body was also beginning to emerge. This incorporated a form of dance practice evident in the work of practitioners such as Rudolph Laban, Jacques Dalcroze and Mary Wiedman that was often performed (and photographed) in the open air, reflecting an ethos that celebrated the life-enhancing, vital energies of the natural world. In the U.K the ‘natural dance’ movement developed by Madge Atkinson and Ruby Ginner explored the rhythms, forms and energies of the natural world through embodied expression. This often over-looked period in British modern dance history is well documented in Alexandra Carter and Rachel Fensham’s (2011) work; *Dancing Naturally: Nature, Neo-classicism and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Dance*. The volume considers how notions of nature and the natural were conceived and explored by dance artists and how their work was influenced by the concerns and performances of Isadora Duncan and other artists from the United States and Europe. Central to the development of this work was the simultaneous development of dance education and choreographic teaching practices that encouraged students to experiment with relationships between dance, location, space and time as such investigation was often housed within dance education or teacher training colleges such as Black Mountain College and Jacobs Pillow in the U.S. Through the establishment of Dartington College in the U.K and subsequently Bretton Hall College in the North of England there evolved a rurally-based arts-college tradition where dance practice evolving out of and through the dancing body’s response to the natural environment was explored, encouraged and given space to flourish.

Developments in European philosophy, psychoanalysis and experimental literary and performance practice in the early nineteen sixties gave rise to new ways of considering, experiencing and thinking about space, place and environment. Guy Debord’s ideas and the emergence of the Situationist movement’s practice of the *derivé* as a means of engaging in processes of psychogeography and the experimental, site-specific writing of George Perec for example presented novel and alternative approaches to engaging with urban environments. In the late nineteen sixties and the early seventies, through a questioning of modern art and its concepts, site specific art works began to emerge as a reaction against modern sculpture and art with its emphasis on the artwork as ‘autonomous and self referential’ (Suderburg (ed) 2000:38). Real places became the new places of art as opposed to the gallery space that served merely to house the artwork:

Site-specific work in its earliest formation; then, focused on establishing an inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and its site and demanded the physical presence of the viewer for the work’s completion.

(Suderburg 2000:39)

This notion of the viewer or audience member being present with the artwork began to shift and develop conventional understandings regarding the role of the observer; in the emerging genre of site-work the audience became an integral part of the creative process implying a shift from the visual towards a more phenomenological appreciation of art:

During the sixties, the idea of an artwork as ‘environment’ was elaborated beyond the basic fact that the spectator should, rather than looking at it, inhabit it as he or she inhabits the world. A key figure in this development was Robert Smithson, who formulated the distinction between a site, a particular place or location in the world at large and a non-site, a representation in the gallery of that place in the form of transported material photographs, maps and related documents.

(De Oliveira et al, 1994:34)

The emergence of land art practices in the late nineteen sixties and early seventies involved artists such as Robert Smithson and Dennis Oppenheim in the development of large-scale projects that created art interventions within a diverse range of landscape settings. Jane Rendell in her publication *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (2008) provides a comprehensive overview and discussion of this work in her chapter ‘site, non-site, off-site’ (pp.23-40). Smithson was a key figure in the development of site-specific art practice though which he encouraged his peers to take work out of the studio and engage in a more authentic manner with the subject matter and the world with which it conversed, in doing so he identified ten points of difference between sites and non-sites:

**Site** **Non Site**

Open limits Closed limits

A series of points An array of matter

Outdoor coordinates Inner coordinates

Subtraction Addition

Indeterminate creativity Determinate creativity

Scattered information Contained information

Reflection Mirror

Edge Centre

Some place (physical) No place (abstraction)

Many One

(in De Oliveira et al, 1994:38)

The mantras of authenticity, real-world engagement with subject matter and a questioning of what constituted art practice and where it could be situated was also explored by a number of conceptual and performance artists of the era who began to challenge the notion of site further still. Conceptual artist and author Sophie Calle extended the themes and philosophies of the early Situationists through her work *Suite Venitiene* (1979) in which she (covertly) followed a man she met at a party in Paris to Venice and recorded her experiences of surveillance, subterfuge and getting lost as key elements in an experiential, living artwork-experience. ‘Body Artists’ such as Chris Burden and Vito Acconci questioned the viability of the art-work as a product and turned their attention to the ‘body as site’ creating a new sense of immediacy between the artist and the artwork, addressing questions such as, how do I move in real space, what makes me move and what are the possibilities of the body? [[4]](#endnote-4)

In the fields of theatre and performance Richard Schechner’s environmental theatre began to challenge the theatrical usage of space and sought to explore alternative spaces for performance, concerned with exploring spaces in their totality:

The first scenic principle of environmental theatre is to create and use whole spaces. Literally, spheres of spaces, spaces within spaces, spaces which contain or envelope, or relate, or touch all the areas where the audience is and / or the performers perform.

(Schechner 1994:2)

Notions of play, participation and the materiality of everyday life informed the work of artist and performance practitioner Allan Kaprow whose experimental ‘Happenings’ of the 1960’s and ‘70’s paved the way for collaborative explorations of art and everyday life, Kloetzel and Pavlik observe:

The Happenings, in addition to minimalist efforts among visual artists, joined with developments among modern dancers to create the elemental stew for site-specific dance.

(2009:8)

In the world of dance, Merce Cunningham began to challenge notions of space explored in the modernist era, famously adopting Einstein’s mantra of ‘there are no fixed points in space’ and, through his collaboration with composer John Cage pushed the boundaries of modernist compositional structures. Cunningham’s employment of chance procedures and his interest in the incorporation of film and technology within his work produced dance performance work that challenged Euclidian notions of space in relation to both the situation of the audience and the siting/location of the performance work itself. His concern for the democratisation of stage space informed post-modernist concerns with space that highlighted issues of the body and representation and led to experimental approaches to producing dance work that challenged the audience-performer relationship. In New York, the Judson Church Group began to present work in non-theatre spaces, Trisha Brown’s early works famously involved walking down walls, performing on rooftops and intimate performance events in private apartments. Judith Mackrell (1991: 40) observes:

Cunningham’s ‘Events’ took dance out of the theatre and into gyms and galleries; Trisha Brown had her dancers crawling up walls and over rooftops; and in Lucinda Child’s *Street Dance* (1964) two dancers moved among pedestrians in the street while the audience watched from an upper storey window, listening to a commentary on the architecture and weather.

Lucinda Childs’ work *Street Dance* (1964) is often cited as an example of early site-specific dance performance as it exposed the choreographer’s overt questioning of space, place and human engagement with the built environment in a particular manner, dance historian Sally Banes describes the work in detail:

For *Street Dance,* Childs placed herself and one other performer, James Byars, both dressed in black raincoats, in a very particular area on Broadway between 11th and 12th street. Watching from loft windows above and across the street, the audience observed the pair highlighting the details of the site, such as a display window and objects in it, as well as integrating seamlessly with the bustle of the street. During their observation, Childs’s taped voice – emanating from a recorder inside the loft-reinforced the audience’s perception of these details by providing them with exact verbal descriptions of the site’s features.

(1987:135-6)

This work and many others created by postmodern choreographers including Simone Forti, Douglas Dunn and Meredith Monk reflected the sentiments of Yvonne Rainer’s famous ‘no’ statement[[5]](#endnote-5) eschewing conventional proscenium-arch based presentation modes for dance and incorporating often mundane activities alongside surreal components in an act of eclectic collage:

Meredith Monk's *Juice* (1969) roamed all round the Guggenheim museum and the island of Manhattan - taking in an exhibition of Roy Lichtenstein's paintings and later involving the dancers in the chanting of biographical recita-tives, the frying of chops and the dismantling of a log cabin to reveal a violinist surrounded by books, a quart of milk and a Lichtenstein print.

(Mackrell, 1991: 46)

Other movement practitioners such as Deborah Hay, Mary Fulkerson, Steve Paxton and Anna Halprin explored what might be referred to as more body-based approaches facilitated through dance improvisation and, in the case of Halprin’s work a return to exploring the natural environment through the placement of dance improvisation and performance in open air and landscape environments. These performances, experiments and improvised events whilst not labelled as ‘site-specific’ at the time can be considered as closest in resemblance to contemporary incarnations of the form and instigated practical methods and creative approaches that are reflected in the site-dance work of today. The legacy of this work in the U.S continues to inform the evolution of the form and its establishment as a distinct genre of dance practice supported in part through the many experimental art and site-specific dance festivals such as *Dancing in the Streets* (New York) *Bates Dance Festival* (Maine) *Westfest* (Wesbeth N.Y.C) and *Jacob’s Pillow* (Massachusetts) that either focus solely on site-dance performance or devote a significant part of their programming to the form.

The lineage of the early experiments with dance and site in America can be further traced through the development of the British New Dance scene that developed in the nineteen seventies and early eighties. This period of dance development in Britain was heavily influenced by the experimental nature of the American postmodern dance scene whilst also reflecting the changing and challenging socio-economic climate of the time. The work of the experimental X6 collective in particular challenged understandings of where dance could be presented and what themes and issues could be explored. Choreographers such as Emilyn Claid, Maddy Duprees, Fergus Early and Jackie Lansley, created work that challenged contemporary dance aesthetics through both content and form. Writing about the collective’s performance work *by River and Wharf* (1976) Anastasia Kirillova observes:

Summer time provided further possibilities in the X6 quest to explore movement, space and their relationship to the audience. For an iconic event called *by River and the Wharf*, that took place in the summer of 1976, the collective brought together hundreds of performers and organised an afternoon-long festival staged all around the Bermondsey docklands. Jacky [Lansley] was performing a version of the dying swan on a wooden pallet in the mud of the River Thames. Fergus [Early] was hidden inside a movable bush, performing alongside a Morris dancer in the grounds of the housing estates down river. Mary [Prestidge] joined ten other dance artists in a bicycle piece, riding in unison around the area. Spectators would gather at Tower Hill tube station and were led by tour guides over Tower Bridge to the north side, then back and around Butler’s Wharf, into some of the inlets, where performances culminated.[[6]](#endnote-6)

A key figure in the development of experimental dance in the U.K. at this time was the choreographer Rosemary Butcher whose work drew influence from visual and live art and explored the potential and possibilities of staging dance in non-theatre locations:

She saw the stage as a live visual field in which bodies could be disposed in space, textures of movements contrasted. She was fascinated, too, by the effect of placing dance within different frames - creating works for non- theatrical spaces like Paternoster Square, galleries or open fields. In the 1980s this extended to working within sculpted installations such as Hans Dieter Pietch's grey ragged screens for Imprints (1983), which stood side by side in a pool of light.

(Mackrell, 1991:48)

This period of British dance history is further documented in Judith Mackrell’s publication *Out of Line* (1992)and Stephanie Jordan’s work *Striding Out* (2000)both of which capture the experimental spirit of an emerging contemporary dance scene that paved the way for the emergence of small, avant-garde dance companies and independent dance artists who sought to develop their artistic voices outside of the mainstream.

Theatre and performance derived site-specific work began to emerge as a recognizable genre in the U.K in the late nineteen-seventies to early eighties through the work of companies such as Brith Goff, Wrights and Sites, Welfare State, I.O.U and Corridor Theatre Company. From the late eighties and early nineties, independent dance artists and choreographers such as Lea Anderson, Mark Murphy, Shobana Jeyasingh and Jacky Lansley began to experiment further with site-specific dance performance alongside the development of their work in proscenium arch environments. This type of work emerged alongside developments in video and ‘screen dance’ as dance artists began to experiment with new camera and editing techniques and played with ideas of placement and staging. In works such as Lea Anderson’s *Flesh and Blood* (1989) and *Perfect Moment* (1992) and VTOL’s *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1995) dancers interacted with urban locations and the built environment, in Jonathan Lunn’s *Mosaic* (1992) the interior of an art gallery provided the place of performance. From this period onwards the term ‘site-specific’ dance began to emerge and was applied by practitioners and theorists to describe a form of work that very clearly concerned itself with attending to and exploring the particular non-theatre location in which it was created and performed. The work of Seven Sisters dance company and choreographers such as Rosemary Lee, Carolyn Deby, Rosie Kaye and Cscape dance company has contributed to the development of a clear and increasingly established ecology of site-specific dance practice in the U.K. that, over the past twenty years has been enhanced further through the development of site-dance festivals such as the Greenwich and Docklands Festival in London and the coastally-based *Salt* festival in Cornwall. Most recently, increased funding availability arising from the hosting of the Olympics in London, 2012 provided opportunities for site-dance artists to present work as part of the U.K’S Cultural Olympiad programme. A number of these works focussed on the spectacular and celebratory potential of site-dance such as Rosemary Lee’s *Square Dances,* a large-scale community-based work that engaged intergenerational groups in dance performances within the communal squares and parkland lining the River Thames. Elizabeth Streb’s spectacular work *One Extraordinary Day* (July 2012) celebrated the athleticism of the human body as her dancers abseiled down London’s City Hall and bungee jumped from the Millenium Bridge. Whilst these works focussed on developing large scale events and participatory opportunities other events arising from the Cultural Olympiad focussed on more specific explorations and interactions with their locations such as the Quay Brothers’ *Overworld and Underworlds* (July 2012) project situated in the city of Leeds, an ambulatory performance that engaged audiences in a performance trail across the city. In this project the artists approached the whole city as a stage in which ‘every person strolling through the city will contribute to the choreography’[[7]](#endnote-7) achieved through the audience member’s process of journeying through the city during which they encountered moments of dance performance in the streets, under bridges and in shop doorways.

Contemporary incarnations of site-specific dance can be found in various formats around the world, and, as the genre continues to evolve it has incorporated a wide variety of performance components including, circus skills, aerial performance, walking, durational and immersive performance elements evidenced in the work of numerous companies and choreographers. International artists engaging in this practice either as the main focus of their work or as a development or alternative to their proscenium-based work include, in the U.S. Stephan Koplowitz, Jennifer Monson, Heidi Duckler and environmental dance artist Joanna Stone, in the Netherlands, Frank van de Ven, Company Bewth and Krisztina de Chatel, in New Zealand practitioner-academics Karen Barbour and Sue Cheesman, in Australia practitioner-academic Peter Snow and choreographer Paula Alexander Lay, Chinese dance and installation artist Shen Wei, French choreographer Noémie LaFrance and Paul-Andre Fortier in Canada.

*Categories, Approaches and Contentions*

Nick Kaye refers to site-specific practice as a form that ‘invariably works to expose that which confines it’ (2000:218) and, in their own work Pearson and Shanks propose a ‘theatre/archaeology’ approach to making site-work through which the resulting performance material effectively ‘recontextualises’ (2001:23) the site. Movement artists Miranda Tufnell and Chris Crickmay (1990, 2004) prefer an embodied approach to experiencing space and place resulting in ‘place-specific events’, an approach that chimes with the work of environmental movement artist Helen Poynor[[8]](#endnote-8) involving a process of listening, waiting and responding corporeally to a kinaesthetically attuned ‘sense’ of place. Choreographer Rosemary Lee’s (2006) discussion of her own approach to working in the site-specific context outlined in her essay ‘Expectant Waiting’[[9]](#endnote-9) describes her exploration of a; ‘profound connection between environment and character, and a sense of place’[[10]](#endnote-10) invoked through stillness and attending to the energies and essences of site. A multitude of practices, models and approaches to making site-specific dance exist, emerge and converge at various moments in time.

The interdisciplinary nature of the theoretical frameworks running throughout this volume illuminate the depth and diversity of approaches to analysing and conceptualising site-specific dance and performance work and in doing so reveal the complex and problematic nature of categorisation. As opposed to pursuing fixed definitions of site-specificity it is perhaps useful here to consider how particular theoretical ideas might contribute to the development of a broader, more fluid understanding of site-specific dance performance.

Ideas drawn from the fields of spatial theory and human geography for example, facilitate an awareness of the scope of spatial information contained within sites and the potential for developing performance material from these experiences. The so-called ‘spatial turn’ within the humanities and social sciences has facilitated the valorising of subjective experience, placing the body-self at the centre of debates and provoking theorists to consider further how individuals construct and encounter spatialised experiences of the world. Critical geographer, Edward Soja’s (1986) work for example presents the notion of a ‘third space’ in which historicity, spatiality and sociality combine to inform ontological experience. In his publication *Environmental and Site-Specific Theatre*, Andrew Houston proposes that Soja’s work is particularly significant to the study of site-specific performance as his theoretical attempts to ‘develop a more thorough understanding of the world’ (2007:xiv) share the same concerns reflected in the practical explorations of site-specific dance and performance artists. Similarly, the work of spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre challenges artists to consider the rhythmic nature of space and spatial organisation alongside embodied notions of ‘socially’ and ‘personally’ constructed space, (1974:7). Michel De Certeau’s discussion of walking through the city as an embodied practice and his definition of space as a ‘*practiced* *place*’ (1984: 117) and Edward T. Halls’ (1975) discussion of the ‘transaction’ between humankind and their environment serve to further develop understandings of environmental engagement occurring at the point of interaction between individual and site. Yi Fu Tuan’s discussion of ‘Topophilia’ (1974) pertaining to the human tendency to couple sentiment with place and environmental psychologists Proshanky and Krupat’s (1983) discussion of ‘place identity’[[11]](#endnote-11) are useful concepts when considering how individuals might relate to places and develop individual constructions of ‘located-ness’. An alternative perspective however is presented by French theorist Marc Augé (1992) who proposes that contemporary practices of ‘super modernity’ have resulted in the production of ‘non-places’ such as airport lounges and shopping malls in which individuals have no sense of a relationship with the places that they pass through, pass-by or connect with through virtual media. From the field of human geography, Doreen Massey’s ideas have been broadly adopted within the field of dance research, notions of ‘co-evalness’ and spatial simultaneity challenge the concept of a singular, fixed ‘present’ (2005) and she alternatively proposes a form of spatial existence that is in a constant state of production resulting in a simultaneity of ‘here and nows’; whilst I am experiencing this place, another individual is simultaneously engaged in their own spatial experience next door, in the next street, or on the other side of the world. This notion of multiplicity is a potentially useful tool for expanding artistic approaches to engaging with space, place and site as it encourages us to consider the complexity of sites as they are made up of many factors co-existing at any one time. Similarly, ideas emerging from the work of Nigel Thrift (2002), John Wylie (2007), Tim Ingold (2011) and Peter Merriman (2012) within the field of human geography and non-representational theory have informed many site-dance researchers in their articulation of tacit knowledge contained within spatialised movement practices.

Phenomenological theory and, in particular Heidegger’s (1962) concept of dwellingand ‘being-in-the-world’ informs the work of many dance practitioners and theorists featured in this volume. This philosophical approach places the body-self and its perception of the world at the centre of lived experience thereby valorising corporeal and sensorial knowledge. Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) development of Heidegger’s theories, in particular notions of the lived body and phenomenological explorations of the relationship between self and other inform a number of chapters in which practitioner-researchers consider in depth relationships between themselves and the site-world. The writings of dance theorists informed by phenomenological theory including Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1979) Sondra Fraleigh (1987) and Janna Parviainen (1998) develop (amongst others) notions of reversibility and bodily knowledge proposed by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, concepts that are re-examined here through their application within site-specific choreographic discourse. Similarly, a number of contributors to this volume refer to the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) whose non-hierachical, multiplicitous considerations of engaging with the world have helped them to articulate their own work and theoretical concerns explored through practical inquiry. The list of theoretical frameworks presented here is by no means exhaustive, particular ideas emerging from the fields of psychology, science, mobility studies, geopolitics and geopoetics, ecology and gender studies for example do not feature explicitly in this brief introductory discussion yet can be found within a wide range of site-specific dance and performance discourses. Reflecting the ever-expanding and ever-curious nature of the genre this list continues to grow as the real-world nature of the practice demands a form of engagement with wider fields of discourse that enable practitioners and dance artists to make sense of their practice and the world in which it exists.

The approach to site-specific dance performance presented in this volume is, therefore deliberately and necessarily inclusive. As opposed to a position of absoluteness, the definition of the genre presented here is intended as a point of departure informed by developments in the field that have seen the genre expand to encompass a wide and diverse range of practices. In essence, site-specific dance performance has, in many ways, departed from approaches informed by the pioneering mantras of the visual and live art movement of the nineteen sixties and seventies in which the quest for specificity dominated and, as sculptor Richard Serra (1994) later proposed; ‘to move the work is to destroy the work’ (in Kaye 2000:2). From this perspective it has evolved to encompass a broader range of site-generic and site-adaptive, installation, walking practice, flash mob, intimate performance and digital art practices that are less concerned with absolute specificity *per se* as the primary driver and instead address and interrogate broader notions of mobility, presence, subjectivity, affect, disruption and resistance.

Attempts to categorise and ‘fix’ definitions of artistic genres, outputs and types of work are, by their very nature, contentious. However, it is perhaps useful here to acknowledge and explore some of these attempts as a means of identifying prospective ‘ways in’ to making site-specific dance performance and the potential application of category definitions as useful tools for analysing and evaluating the aims and outcomes of this work.

Fiona Wilkie (2002) conducted the first ever survey of site-specific performance in Britain and through doing so aimed to categorise a range of site-specific practices and identify some of their key characteristics. Whilst containing some information gathered from dance companies the survey predominantly referred to site-specific work derived from theatre and performance disciplines. In her article *Mapping The Terrain,* she presented a model of ‘specificity’ proposed by the performance company Wrights and Sites as a continuum that includes distinctions between ‘site-sympathetic’, ‘site-generic’ and ‘site-specific’ work:

**Site-sympathetic**

Existing performance text physicalized in a selected site.

**Site-generic**

Performance generated for a series of like sites (e.g. car parks, swimming pools).

**Site-specific**

Performance specifically generated from / for one selected site.

Layers of the site are revealed through reference to:

- Historical documentation

- Site usage (past and present)

- Found text, objects, actions,

sounds etc.

- anecdotal guidance

- personal association

- half truths and lies

- site morphology (physical

and vocal explorations of

site)

**In theatre building**

**Outside theatre**

e.g. Shakespeare in the park.

**Fig 1: Model of site-specificity (Wrights and Sites cited in Wilkie 2002.)**

Reflecting on this model thirteen years later it is clear to see that it represents a field of practice that, at the time of construction was still in its infancy and grappling in some ways to capture and encapsulate the commonalities and differences between distinct creative approaches and performative outcomes. For example, at one end of the scale presenting a re-working of *Hamlet* on a castle ramparts and, at the other end creating site-specific performance such as Mike Pearson’s *Raindogs* sited in Cardiff in 2002 informed by a creative process defined as one of ‘deep mapping’ (p.68) arising from the artist’s engagement with complex layers of site information. In her accompanying description of the model, Wilkie observes that a qualifying component of the site-specific category is the notion of a ‘sense of fit’ whereby performance work situated in this category contains a sense that ‘the performance ‘fit’ the site and vice-versa’ (Wilkie 2002: 149) working with the site rather than imposing itself upon it.

Site-dance practitioners and scholars Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik (2009) propose four categories or approaches to site-dance making in their publication *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces* that allude to a practice-based approach to experiencing site and developing dance material into performance work. In their first category; *Excavating Place: Memory and Spectacle* they refer to creative processes that engage choreographers with researching historical site information in an attempt to ‘unearth the memories linked to place, the details of bygone eras’ (p.27) and cite works by Meredith Monk and Joanna Haigood. Their second category; *Environmental Dialogues: Sensing Site* explores interventions in public sites that utilise the choreographer’s and performers’ sensory responses as a means of developing dance content. In this category they refer to the work of Olive Bieringa and Otto Ramstad’s Body Cartography Project and the work of Leah Stein. The third category or approach is defined as *Revering Beauty: The Essence of Place*, one that draws on phenomenological and aesthetic explorations of site as a means of ‘restor[ing] people’s communication with place by enhancing their admiration of it’ (p.178), exemplified in the processes of Eiko Otake’s *Breath* (1998) and *Tree Song* (2004). The final category *Civic Interventions: Accessing Community* refers to examples of the politically-driven work of the experienced and prolific site-dance artists Martha Bowers, Jo Haigood and Jo Krieter and, as a category it encapsulates applied site-dance work and its potential as a vehicle for community engagement with site and environment.

U.S based choreographer Stephan Koplowitz, a key figure in the development of site-specific dance has been producing performances in a range of locations since the early nineteen eighties. His own category definitions of site-dance echo those proposed by Wrights and Sites in many ways. Koplowitz proposes four categories of site-specificity arising from the choreographer’s artistic intention; site-specific, site-adaptive, studio-site and reframing the known.[[12]](#endnote-12) In the first category Koplowitz refers to the ephemeral and unique nature of site-specific dance performance arising from the choreographer’s engagement in a process of dialogue with the site, Koplowitz’s own work *Babel Index* (1998) performed in the British Library, London provides an example. The second category; site adaptive work, involves a process in which all artistic decisions are inspired by the site, its design, history, current use and community, however the site in question is generic and the work can be re-made and adapted to numerous sites. This aligns with Wrights and Sites’ ‘site-generic’ category and is exemplified by Jacky Lansley’s work *Standing Stones,* (2008) a dance work that toured to a number of cathedrals in the North of England. In the third category, Koplowitz introduces the notion of ‘reframing’ in which a choreographer intentionally takes an existing dance work and places it in a specific location. In this process of reframing Koplowitz proposes that there is some degree of a relationship between the location and the work and, from this starting point the choreographer might alter or amend discrete elements in relation to the site’s physical components; the site influences the work’s presentation but not its thematic content. An example of this process can be seen in the reframing of DV8’s work *The Cost of Living* (2000), a work originally created for stage and subsequently adapted for the screen, in 2003 this work was re-staged in London’s Tate Modern gallery and re-titled *Living Costs*, audience members followed the work around the site in promenade format and experienced the physical re-staging of the work whilst the thematic content remained unaltered. Koplowitz’s final category ‘reframing the known’ refers to a process of placing an existing performance work in a non-theatre venue, effectively reframing the work and presenting it in a different context for a (potentially) different audience. The performance of Merce Cunningham’s work in outdoor locations and the re-presentation of Trisha Brown’s *Accumulation* (2010) in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, London provide examples of this kind of work. Whilst this final category may appear somewhat sanitised and distanced from earlier, reactionary examples of site-specific dance practice the notion of reframing is perhaps useful when considering the affect and impact of placing theatre-dance in real-world locations. This subtle infraction in a small yet significant way forces a shift of perspective regarding considerations of where dance can take place and where audience members might locate themselves physically and conceptually in relation to it.

These models and category definitions provide useful starting points for discussion when considering how to identify particular types of site-specific work and working methods in relation to artistic aims and objectives. However, in many ways they fail to capture the breadth and richness of many site-specific performance encounters. For example, Wrights and Site’s model (no doubt due to the era of its construction) does not reflect the current expansion of site-specific practice into digital and interactive domains. The model, perhaps requires additional categories that can encompass works such as Sophia Lycouris’ *City Glimpses* (2013) in which dancers performed simultaneously in three urban locations via live streaming and Anna McDonald’s *This is For You* (2014) in which a single audience member situated in a shop window ‘receives’ a dance from a solo performer in the street. Similarly, Angela Woodhouse’s dance installation work *Court* (2006)[[13]](#endnote-13), a touring performance for two dancers and one audience member sited inside a temporary tented structure located in a gallery space creates an intimate performance ‘space-within-a-space’ in which the dance experience unfolds. The model could also perhaps expand to consider the proliferation of dance work appearing within festival events that prioritise spectacle and the spectacular by programming several dance works in quick succession within the same site. Melanie Kloetzel (2014)[[14]](#endnote-14) observes that this work is often site-generic and un-related to the contexts in which it appears and offers a consideration of this type of work as simply ‘on site’ and ‘non-specific’. Reflecting positively on this work however she suggests that it potentially acts as a; ‘place magnifier, enabling new angles on a place to be witnessed as opposed to a singular vision presented by one choreographer’, as the consumer-festival goer becomes the creator of their own event experience by selecting which works to view. She further argues however that without a sense of conscious curation there is a danger that festival work encourages us to slide into placeless-ness as site-dance events become commodified and effectively less site-specific.

In recent years there has also been an upsurge of non-theatre based performance ‘events’ involving durational components, audience choice and autonomy, for example Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No* *More* (2011-12) performed in a disused New York hotel and *The Drowned Man* (2013-14), an episodic, promenade performance work sited in a disused London warehouse. Both works enabled audience members to choose the duration of their ‘visit’ and the order in which performance episodes were viewed. Louise Ann-Wilson’s *Fissure* (2011) involved walking and dance performance that unfolded over a three-day period in the Yorkshire Dales and performance company Duckie’s work *Lullaby* (2011) invited audience members to spend the night at the Barbican theatre, London as the work lulled them to sleep. This type of performance work invites the audience / experiencer to ‘live’ alongside the work as it unfolds and encounter aspects of site-performance making in real-time and places the body-self at the centre of the experience. Similarly, the work of more ‘self-specific’ approaches practised by environmental movement artists such as Helen Poynor, Gretel Taylor, Tamara Ashley and Sandra Reeve in which the body’s immersion in the landscape constitutes the central core of their dance practice and, the movement outcomes may (or may not) be presented for sharing with others, does not appear to be fully aligned with any of the categories referred to above. These performance examples and practices, and many others challenge category definitions presented in the models discussed here and introduce possibilities for a re-consideration of site works as multi-layered, mobile and unfixed.

Returning to Wilkie’s discussion of ‘fit’ it is perhaps useful here to pursue further an observation posited (but not pursued) by Wilkie that ‘the ‘fit’ may not be a comfortable merging with the resonances of the site but might be a reaction against them’ (2002:149). The expanded range and scope of diverse performance work discussed in this volume and encompassed under the umbrella term ‘site-specific’ provokes a necessary re-examination of the notion of ‘fit’. I would contend that the definition of a sense of fit could be many and varied encompassing a range of practices encompassing *senses* of fit that range from the congruous to incongruous, respectful and irreverent, elaborate and incongruous, overt and covert. Furthermore it would appear that the questions and complexities associated with exploring senses of fit have occupied the concerns of many site-dance and performance artists developing this type of work in the 21st century as they question and explore what constitutes a sense of fit between site and work, body and site, individual and world in a range of urban, rural, globalised and mediatised contexts.

These concerns illuminate the complexity of engaging with research into space and place, and attending to the minutiae of rhythm, materials, energies and essences that shift, change and develop both when we notice and when we look away. The perpetual motion of space and place and its dynamic affect, the ability for sites to change before our very eyes becomes illuminated, brought forward to consciousness through the site-specific research process. For the site-dance practitioner therefore, interdisciplinary dialogues present other ways ‘in’ to considering and experiencing space and enhance understandings of the mobility of space and place as unified entities possessing fluid and permeable boundaries. In turn, these dialogues enable a ‘freeing up’ of category definitions and support a mobile conception of the genre that encompasses a myriad of practices, approaches and methods. From this perspective, dialogues from practitioners and academics from Australasia, Europe, Canada and America contained within this volume converge here to collectively develop understandings regarding the practices, challenges and potential of site-specific dance performance.

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1. Dance practitioners and companies engaging in this type of work include Susanne Thomas, Rosemary Lee, Shobana Jeyasingh , Athina Vahla, Rosie Kaye, Gerry Turvey, Lea Anderson, Ascendance Rep, Coiscéim Dance Theatre, Motionhouse Dance Theatre. Not all of these practitioners engage exclusively in site-specific work and some are engaged with exploring notions of specificity more than others. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For further information regarding folk dance and anthropological perspectives see Farnell, B and Williams, D. (2004) *Anthropology and the Dance,* Illinois: University of Illinois Press. And Buckland, T. (2007) *Dancing from Past to Present*, Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a discussion of re-defining dance history through a multi-layered approach see Carter, A. (year) *Re-defining Dance History*: London: Routledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Vito Acconci in conversation, *Lumen* lecture, University of Leeds, 5/11/04. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a detailed discussion of this statement see Banes, S. (1987) *Terpischore in Sneakers.* Wesleyan: Wesleyan University press. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. [www.http://bonnieparker.tv/writing/the-landing-of-the-x6-2/](http://www.http://bonnieparker.tv/writing/the-landing-of-the-x6-2/) accessed 29/10/2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The Quay brothers in interview with Joe Brean and Morishka van Steenbergen, *Guardian* Newspaper, May 18th

   2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Walk of Life* workshop Dorset, May 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In Bannerman, Sofaer, Watt (eds) (2006) *Navigating the Unknown: The Creative Process in Contemporary*

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10. Rosemary Lee in conversation with Donald Hutera (2009). [online] [ accessed 16/6/2009] Available from

    world wide web. www.danceumbrella.co.uk [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Referring to the individual’s identification with place as an influencing factor upon the construction of self-identity. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Koplowitz, S. Lecture notes ‘Creating Site-Specific Dance and Performance Works’ online lecture, Coursera, Calarts, Dec 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See: <http://angelawoodhouse.co.uk/recent-past-work/court-2003-06/> [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Kloetzel, M. (2014) ‘Site Work on Tour: Labor, Mobility and Critical Engagement’, conference presentation, *Performing Place Symposium*, University of Chichester, June 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)