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A Holding Space

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by Vicky Hunter



About the Artist

Vicky Hunter is a Practitioner-Researcher and Professor in Site Dance at the University of Chichester, UK. Her research explores site dance and corporeal engagements with space, place and lived environments. Since 2004 she has presented site dance in a range of sites including basements, woodlands and beaches. She is co-author of *(Re) Positioning Site Dance: Local Acts, Global Themes* (2019) with Melanie Kloetzel and Karen Barbour, and editor of *Moving Sites: Investigating Site-Specific Dance Performance* (Routledge, 2015). Her monograph *Site, Dance and Body: Movement, Materials and Corporeal Engagement* was published by Palgrave in 2021.

A Holding Space

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During lockdown the lack of touching and holding our loved ones was expressed as a significant loss by many. As we emerged from lockdown in the summer of 2021, individuals, friends, and families were able to touch and hug each other. However, this also required a process of adjustment to the new normal in which proximity and touch with those outside support bubbles and family groups needed to be navigated and managed. Alongside this phenomenon, during lockdown a significant number of people discovered renewed pleasure and comfort through engagement with nature spaces and woodland sites. This writing introduces early reflections on a site-specific micro dance project, *A Holding Space* (2021), which was conducted from June to Sept 2021 in West Sussex, UK.¹ The work was performed by dancers Natasha Margerison and Kate Welch, choreographed by Vicky Hunter, and filmed and edited by Jack Leslie.

This practice-based research project asks: How might dance in outdoor nature spaces play a role in facilitating this transition and open conversations regarding touch, proximity, and holding / supporting one another to navigate the new landscape together? How do we re-negotiate contact with fellow beings (both human and nonhuman) and respect boundaries? How might woodlands, trees, and forests offer a holding space where we relearn how to be together—where other moving, breathing bodies are no longer fearful and to be avoided? How might these encounters in nature spaces encourage us to get out into the world whilst moving closer to one another and move us through a transitional space of healing as we co-create a new normal?

Through site-dance film, site-responsive performance, and participatory workshops, this project aims to develop confidence in being outdoors, being with others, and touching and holding one another again following the pandemic.² Following the initial performance, participatory workshops were held in Kingley Vale Nature reserve in West Sussex and in The South Downs Green Fair in Petersfield UK. The film work was created as an interpreted document of the live performance and as a vehicle through which subsequent public participation for future woodland-based workshops might be

developed. The purpose of the film work, therefore, is to encourage future participation in an accessible manner as opposed to producing a work that pushes the boundaries of the site-dance film genre in experimental or avant-garde ways.

The creative approach to both the live and recorded work is informed by feminist-informed new materialist theory, in particular, themes of co-constitution and entanglement between humans and nonhumans as explored by scholars such as Karen Barad (2003), Donna Haraway (2016), Astrida Neimanis (2019), and by the nature writing of Robert MacFarlane (2019) and Mary Oliver (2016). The artwork is also inspired by movement artists such as Andrea Olsen (2002) and Paula Kramer (2012), in which anthropocentric superiority is challenged and symbiotic approaches to “co-constitution” and becoming-with nature spaces and the nonhuman are championed (Hunter 2021). These ideas and practices raise awareness of human-world engagement and foster a sense of shared engagement with others that are both human and non-human, thereby opening up a space of thinking and doing in which we might “surround ourselves with the possibilities of being otherwise” (Grosz 2011, 14).

The live and recorded work explores ten stages of engaging with the woodland site and with co-inhabitants in the holding space. These stages were used as a template to frame the participatory workshops:

Arriving / Demarcating the Holding Space
 Taking “in” the site (canopy swirling)
 Telling the story of “lost touch” and processing loss
 Sharing stories and listening to/ observing another
 Encountering another
 Joy / Play
 Touch—offering touch, accepting and giving in to touch
 Moving together
 Retreating and rewinding
 Leaving and acknowledging the space and the activity left behind.

Following the live performance, workshop participants selected their own location in a woodland space and employed the themes above with a partner to make their own response to this notion of holding space. The resulting work was open to interpretation, outcomes included physical movement practice, conversation, exploring nature together, or discussing experiences of lockdown and the challenges of re-emerging and re-engaging with others. In this sense, the original duet work acted as a catalyst for interaction, discussion, and sharing of experience through physical, verbal, sensory, and haptic exchange with other bodies, and with the trees, flora, and fauna present within the holding space. At the end of the workshops, participants re-grouped to discuss and share their experiences as a collective.

The notion of a holding space stems from Donald Winnicott's (1960) work in psychotherapy and describes the entwined, subjective yet objective mother-child relationship. According to Winnicott, mothers hold space for children to be nurtured and make discoveries whilst contained within a safe, nurturing environment. Whilst there has been feminist critique of Winnicott's work, this model of holding space is useful to describe a temporary, malleable, and ongoing place of process in which relationships are forged and self-identity and self-awareness are fostered. Ideas of the holding space have been taken up by Authentic Movement practitioners in their modelling of the mover/witness relationship in which the participant/observer format creates and holds a temporary space of encounter in which certain sets of information, experiences, and embodied legacies are exchanged. These exchanges are reliant on a willingness and acceptance of openness, non-judgement, observation, and reciprocity, working as key operations enacted through the holding space interaction. Similar processes were set in motion in my project, both through the devising and choreographic processes and through the participatory activity.

In this project, I define a holding space as a space of encounter between body and site in a woodland space demarcated by the temporary form of the trees and the clearings made as part of their natural formation. The temporary, living form of the tree is defined by its ongoing-ness, as trees are not static objects. Tree time is slow, and their evolution is not overtly perceptible or apparent to humans. The movement of trees emerges in relation to weather, wind, and to other species and the other bodies they engage with, but the overall impression is one of shelter and sturdiness, and in the case of the Kingley Vale trees, over 400 years of situated-ness.

The notion of nature as a potential holding space was central to the project design because it is conceived of as a supportive environment in which we care for each other and nonhuman others. It promotes engagement with each site and its unique qualities as sites of enclosure and calm with natural rhythms and tempos to present and "hold" the participatory work and discussion. Exploring these sites requires physical and sensory skill. For example, we must care for ourselves and the woodland environment; navigate our way around tree structures and flora and fauna; and negotiate the terrain in a manner that brings us back to our bodies. Importantly, this approach invites a re-consideration of the natural space not solely as a backdrop but as an integral part of our choreographed movement in site. Through doing so, the project encourages participants to explore not only how might they duet with one another, but, also with the environment itself.

In this manner, the notion of a holding space becomes commensurate with the situation and situated-ness of entities who are held by the space of encounter—created through the intra-action (Barad 2003) between bodies, trees, and woodlands spaces.

Returning to Winnicott's proposition, through the practice-based enquiry, this piece expands towards a model of a processual holding in which human-nonhuman entities of bodies, trees, materials, fungi, soils, and sunlight are already entangled, enmeshed, and engaged with their environment. As opposed to Winnicott's holding space in which there is an objective distance between mother and child, the holding space proposition presented through this project is a space of entangled intra-action, enmeshment, and site specificity. Through its very form and structure, and through our moving engagement with its material affect, there is a sense of the environment as a potential holding space for processing and exploration with human-to-human and human-nonhuman relationships as well as pandemic experiences of loss, trauma, and anxiety.

Notes

¹ See the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIDHIFNJUHk>.

² The artwork was made quickly due to limited funding and, in many ways, was rather DIY. For instance, the costumes were provided by the dancers, the soundtrack was performed by myself and my daughter and then mixed by my husband. Similarly, the film was edited by the film maker in his bedroom using shared resources. The production itself reflected the lockdown, restricted conditions experienced during the pandemic and the creative solutions individuals, artists and makers of all kinds worked with to ensure that things were made. In this way, creativity was sustained, and tangible outcomes and outputs were realized.

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