

**Methods, Memories, Body-possession**  
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*Listen to the sounds of the place I live in, the country of the Gundungarra and Darug people of the Blue Mountains. Right now, the ferocious psithurism of winds howling through the casuarinas, ghost gums and golden red-orange Japanese maple leaves, combined with the aeolian hum over the mouth of the kitchen rangehood pipe.*

*Imagined realities, syncretising, shifting, marking time. After several decades absorbed in Australia's contemporary cultures, I am still deeply rooted in older, ancient ways, visible and invisible. I have been plotting paths through the Southeast Asian culture and mythology of my childhood to witness rituals of possession, practices I see as some of the oldest forms of transformative theatre.*

*Through celebration, divination and healing, a community transitions together from one significant event to another. I see the evolution of these rituals as medicinal...*

*I am interested in the creation of images and themes that stretch our imagination, question our presence on this earth, and attempt to create a social balance. How extraordinary is the honesty of human living...the absurdities, the deviations and cosmologies, the systems and symbolism that define, yet preplex identity and destiny? How are these tied to the naming of people and things?*

*I am looking for values in living...the different qualities that have endured the intervention of time, as we know it. Names, labels and identities may morph and be subsumed, but there are thingnesses which persist, reverberate.*

## *Questing, Speculating*



How can one extricate stories and jumbled images that reside in the body, as well as the confusing trails and vague webs that were apparently experienced by ancestors on both sides of the family; the memories of shared collective rituals; the discrepancy and syncretisation of the inside lives of a familial and racial culture, alongside other migrant cultures, and that of a different external ruling culture? A rich inter-faith milieu framed by a government which uses politics to emphasise its dominance, lest migrants who settled several generations ago forget their status as a 'comer' from other lands. How does one live as a permanent 'newcomer', knowing that you will never build a home on the grounds that your forebears are from?

In 1989, I jumped ship midlife to come to Australia and found myself realising that I have ridden on the back of a colonial political system to gain entrance into the country; wherein I have yet to complete the journey of acknowledgement and welcome from the original Owners of the lands. How does one live as an unacknowledged person on these lands? Considering this, I wanted to find ways to liberate my body to physicalise images and thoughts that arise unbidden as I meander through everyday existence. I was able to gradually release deeply held self-censorship by perceiving these images and thoughts as stories from the body.

## *Ruminescing*



The *Stories from the Body (SFTB)* is a performance series of ongoing life work. When conceived in 2014, the original thinking was that it would be the vehicle for re-tracing lineages that have been disrupted as a result of my ancestors' migration journey over the last 100 years, from the South Fujian Province of China to Java, to Singapore and Malaysia.

Emerging from the premise that all human living is performed, I choose to activate this process of uncovering, reclaiming and reimagining through my body and its voice – the hypothesis is that my ancestral template and its accompanying memories and stories are embedded within my physiological being. I'd like to consider the thoughts and methods that influence this life series. For the sake of brevity, I'm going to concentrate on some of the elements that inspire the image, action or scene, in terms of the role of the body, its accompanying psychology and history in process.

## *Memory Body*

The body is a collector: retracing and deconstructing myths I've grown up with and their associated images, tied up with the geocultural history of the place I'm in.

## *Concept Sketching and Memory Body*

Using what is retained in my memory, and the natural course of memory fragmentation as the device/structure, loose images and atmospheres can begin with a mark on paper – small parts of the story paraphrase, even if only one word is retained. The concept sketching process has become more integral to how I devise performances now, in that, the act of sketching itself also instigates the beginning of physical movement for me. This can trigger a process of remembering. At the same time, I allow myself the freedom to roam, to dream, to depart from the initial motif and fuse with other associations. I consciously allow parallel images and concepts to unfold, regardless of how unrelated they initially appear. Trust what the body retains.

## *Improvisatory Practice and Memory Body*

One can also access the Memory Body through both vocal and dance improvisation. My introduction into dance improvisation methods began in 2010 through creative development processes with Alan Schacher, my life partner and collaborator, who is an improvisational dancer informed by Post-Modern, New Dance methods, and Min Tanaka's Maijuku Butoh Company in Japan. My other influence is Tess de Quincey's Impro-Exchange environment which generates dialogue, exchange and discussion about improvisational strategies and processes, which have a foundation in the principles of Min Tanaka's BodyWeather and related discipline.

On the other hand, my experiences in sound improvisation began in the 90s with jazz and classically trained instrumentalists, and then with more experimental electronic and deconstructed instrumental improvisers where the process of making (or live composing) is laid bare; where the evocation of process IS performance. To stay in the stress of not knowing, or to act from a space of an existing performative vocabulary is a constant tension of resistance and collusion. I can sometimes locate surprising things with the vocal-body under duress. The intention is to continue attempting movement, actions, and structures that I am not familiar with, and give myself permission to fail. This is not unlike how musicians will play on instruments they are not formally trained in. Another perspective into this practice is building the capacity to hold an experimental and attentive observation to a process that is unfolding before you.

## *Historical and Memory of Site*

Memories also extend beyond the body. When I enter a location where a performance or 'a happening' is proposed to occur, I often ask myself, "how am I able to commune with the space?" Until I ask the question, the location remains a 'site'...impersonal, distanced...I imagine how the construction of a building appears on the outside; off a plan; outsourced to the cheapest builders who may or may not have lived in the area or its surroundings. There is no relationship...yet.

My body has been encultured and acculturated in *an-other* place over a few generations' worth of migration journey. I am, even by inserting my historical body into a performative space that holds a different sociocultural timbre, already contributing to a combination of heterotopia, hybrid cultural place-filling and place-shifting. Thus, how can I access the memory of a site? Play with body, sounds, material? Sit for a period; physicalising my 5-Element Mandala practice (Pancha Tanmantra); sleeping in the space; returning to the site at different times of the day and night? Asking the site questions, out loud? Researching oral histories and stories that may have built over time? How much time does it take for inhabitation of a place to occur? I guess I am reflecting on the social language of body in relation to space; how the way a body inhabits space can contribute to a form of temporary place-making, home-making.

I contemplate the past, to analyse the making of a body-based work in the present day context, and to consider how such a work can temporarily shift meanings or impact the future of our social relationship and its accompanying language...or not. This requires a generous dose of active listening, imagination, and wonder in order to evoke the history a location has had compared to what it is now; how it was used; the accompanying cosmogenesis; its human and non-human activities.





### *Pancha Tanmantra and Memory Body*

Here, I'd like to address other areas that have served me well in exploring ways in which to access my memory body. Pancha Tanmantra as a West Javanese practice has three aspects to it, but I will only touch on the vocal-body aspect called 5-Element Mandala. It is a non-combative form of vocal-bodywork which circulates the energies that are tied to emotions. The practice allows these emotions to come up, and harnesses them into particular body formations and specific screams/roars. It facilitates the generation and contemplation of the immaterial, the formless, the unconscious and the emotive body, which appears to take a form temporarily, and then passes like a storm cloud; a physical reminder that even as we cycle through the elements that our thoughts and emotions exists in temporary forms; they are not fixed.

Pancha Tanmantra insists on observing the light and shadow aspects to every emotional trait. For example, the qualities of discernment and quick judgment are two sides of the same coin, which accompany the soft and hard body formation of the Wood element. The practice is to cultivate the balance of sensing when the appropriate moment is to use either.

When I contextualise the 5-Element Mandala practice with the concept of memory body and its history, this is what I sense:

*I lay bare my physical processes as I search for an image through key body-posture motif(s) inside my body, through my mind's eye, as part of the dance; time and structure teeter and I feel as if I am on the verge of 'not making it', and sometimes I don't...I often feel as if I'm trying to stretch or crack open the body to reach the spirit of an image and/or body-posture.*

*When I'm sitting in this kind of physical process I imagine that I am in the midst of creating my own personal archetype. I am also open to the possibility that I'm drawing upon embedded memories that may be residing within my body.*

*This can reach into spaces of the unconscious or what Jung calls the shadow aspects. My shadow-selves personify everything that I refuse and am refusing to acknowledge about myself. So, I feel as if I require a softness and kindness to myself in order to meet and flesh them out. How can I allow this body of knowledge to reassemble itself?*

### *Mimicry of Spirit Possession; Body in my Body, and Memory Body*

Considering the notion of the beyond-human, to reach for an image with my body that is humanly impossible to complete, but supernaturally possible with the force of imagination and a leap of faith, I experience it as a method of shaking loose the fragments and traces of knowledge and memory which reside in my body, and the act itself begs the question of what it is to be human.

My son calls the spirit possession rituals we have witnessed, and sometimes been a part of as "in-ordinary human acts". He cannot understand why people were subjecting themselves to the peculiarities of these acts? I had no answer for him – realising there may be no clear answer I could uncover made me see the value and power of witnessing the incomprehensible. Being startled by the incomprehension of acts of ritual arouses curiosity about 'who, what and how' of the ritual-makers and their culture. In this respect, I begin with the simple act of ATTEMPTING to physicalise a particular body-posture or movement that appears to assist the transition into a trance state. It is the image of the 'in-ordinary' that I am trying to access and this is the point of departure. I leave an imaginative space for experimenting with different approaches to the physicality of spirit possession which I have witnessed, or read about in the writings of anthropologists like Jeanette de Benardi and Felicitas Goodman who have given a structured perspective into trance and ritual-making. Many of these rituals' include (amongst many other things) the facilitation of healing. As an outside eye, what I perceive is the body-to-ritual object capacity to create imageries and actions that are unfamiliar and sometimes shocking, thus creating a disruption to the socially normative behaviour between people. This can potentially shift ones' perception towards a situation, personal or health dilemma, expanding perspectives or pathway possibilities, possibly affecting the relationship towards health, mortality and behaviour.



### *Witnesses and Audience members / blurring the demarcation of...*

All of the above-mentioned processes collude with other phenomenological forces. Are audiences your collaborators? And what is the difference between an audience member and a witness? Asking someone to be a witness changes many aspects of performance, I think. When you call someone to witness something you are asking them to be present to a phenomenon.

This appears to shift their mindset away from the formulaic, to expect the unexpected, and to give them permission to not have to understand.

Performance is indeed something that really requires another presence. I often wonder what would happen if it could be creatures and plants instead of humans. Perhaps, all that is required

for the phenomenon of performance to occur is merely the act of witnessing by another living presence. I see works that unravel without technological documentation to be the disappearing phenomena, sitting truly in the ephemeral, where once that was part of the course. Perhaps if we perceive living witnesses to be the deeper documenters of creative activities works, it could create some balance to how live performance is experienced.

The witness is important for their capacity to feed back into the performance and there is something about 'presence' that is part of the 'necessary' structure. Witnesses offer alchemy to a performance, galvanising motivation and moral support.

What I should attempt as a performance essay is to conduct the action of wiping my hair on the grounds of the bush trails as presented in *The Ground, My Home* without live-streaming or documentation.



Can one enact for the presence of place without a human witness with the same intensity as performing for a human presence? What about the presence of the place itself? How do you generate and maintain that sense of self-commitment to an action whether or not you have that human presence next to you? Can we value presence without forming the presences into a hierarchy?

My mind makes a jump now, and I am haunted always by this other eternal question: what are the things we use to prop our self-esteem? If we dismantle these props gently, with kindness, what is left?

*...often the pain of the mental and emotional body is more unbearable than physical endurance...*

### **Methods, Memories, Body-possession**



These creative methods aside, I often perceive performance as an embodied form of ferocious active prayer which requires faith, but the kind that is neither prescriptive nor attending to any God or gods. A system that can be torn apart and recreated again and again with the potential to question the narratives that we hold close, transforming the body into a vessel to access deeper forms of communication, opening to what remains unknown and elusive to us; a way of casting our unconscious into the light... Even as we are present in our bodies now, we extrapolate backwards to an imagined way of being, even as we wonder about the glimpses of how future generations may live. This accepts and factors in the fragmentation of stories over an extensive age, where the pondering and the peeling away process is perhaps about the uncovering of essential questions regarding the phenomenon of human consciousness. A questing for spirituality in a growing secular age which is wary of the common human malaise in which the (unconscious and conscious) need for power and oppression plays itself out again and again in a self-delusional cycle.

The questions and the re-framing of questions, are possibly the most important remnants. They make up much of the background hum in my life, and form the trickling effect for my creative processes.

So, what of *Stories from Other Bodies*?

*...miasmas and sojourns  
returning from pale shadows of twiworlds.  
unrelenting, the bewilderer emerges to remind us that we are not  
what  
we  
think  
we are*

*to recontextualise,  
of insight,*

*to collect ruptures,  
this new dialogue with the dead,  
living thickly,  
worshipping material,  
living,  
intra-worlding,  
coexisting in fluid gossamer,  
refracting dew glimpses,  
fleeting,  
interweaving sinews and tendons, erupting,  
daynight,  
flowing,  
nightday,*

*with darkness that you can run into: and darkness that you have to scurry away from*

## *Participatory, Perspectives*

Observing rituals with attention, and intention to deconstruct its compositional structure has allowed me to be aware of certain elements: the process before the ritual occurs in which small responsibilities and tasks requested from the community living and working in the area of where the ritual will take place; I see it simply as 'asking for help', which opens up conversations at an individual and a group level that can possibly be seen as building relations. It offers a perspective into personal histories, within the socio-cultural context of the location. It can offer a foundation from which the materialisation of the work becomes affected by the place and its people, not just site. So I am beginning to perceive a relationship occurring between the memory of body and place. I use the term 'memory' consciously as a more expansive term that can include history but is not limited to the mere facts and chronological sequence of history.

There is a growing awareness of how each person, given their memories and values will find their relevance pathway in different ways. The question is "how can a performance system allow this expansiveness and freedom of realisation to take place?"

Within the framing of *Stories from other Bodies* as a vehicle to devise participatory works, I continue looking at disruptive actions and imageries that can open up narratives, where a new groove in the psyche may be formed; a little like working against the image.

There is an energy of oscillation between the devising process for solo and group performance which inform each other. The works are gradually evolving as the insights feed into each other in a drip-filter manner. I am beginning to view performance creation as a social device or a series of social devices.

## *Transjectivity*

I have always been interested in the inter-relationship between things, people and situations, similar to what I mean when I am attempting to sense 'the invisible' when I observe rituals. The question is "what am I not seeing?". An approach I am toying with uses the concept of the transjective space, which can be useful in deciphering the relatedness between elements. In this instance, the performing body, the public, the socio-cultural context of place and the variables that occur in the process of making the work and while the work is unfolding.

The transjective space also provokes you to look at an image as it stands materially in front of you, and at the same time look through it, to capture the sense of its relatedness of the material image within the context of the environment it is situated in. I am also suggesting that if this concept sits gradually more in the forefront of processes that this complexity of relatedness becomes more embedded in the works or the manifestation journey.

*to be continued at the next juncture of insight, 21 March 2024  
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- <sup>1</sup> Images of *Stories from the Body (SFTB) #1*, Melati Suryodarmo's Undisclosed Territory#8, Indonesia, 2017. Photo: Watan Wuma. Page 1
  - <sup>2</sup> Image of *SFTB #7*, The Kiosk 3X6, invited by Jacqueline Drinkall, Page 3
  - <sup>3</sup> Image of *SFTB #3 - spice trails*, Interchange Festival, Critical Path. Photo: Heidrun Löhr. Page 4
  - <sup>4</sup> Image of *SFTB #6,#7 - egress, emancipation*, CONSENT, Carriageworks Nights. Frame Grab: Denis Beaubois. Page 6
  - <sup>5</sup> Image of *SFTB #3 - spice trails*, Interchange Festival, Critical Path, Photo: Heidrun Löhr. Page 7
  - <sup>6</sup> Image of *The Ground, My Home*, Flow Symposium Live-streaming, Europe and Chicago. Photo: Yaslene Ho-Schacher. Page 9
  - <sup>6</sup> Image of *SFTB #9*, Buffalo Field Bangkok initiated by Ploy Yamtree and Mike Hornblow. Photo: Buffalo Field. Page 10