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experimentation.’

**Warren Burt:** Experimental dancing, as far as I could see, in the '70s in Melbourne, was the occasional visits of Dance Exchange to Melbourne, and what went on at Extensions, Margaret Lasica's studio.

I didn't know the scene very well, but that seemed to be the scene to me. It seemed that both of those activities were very endangered, and none of the participants had any sense of confidence in the longevity of what they were doing. Both in the case of Margaret and with all the Dance Exchange people, it seemed that the attitude of both groups was that they were trying to introduce something into a climate which seemed slightly favorable at the time, but in which it was still a very big adventure to introduce those ideas.

## The '70s in the '90s

Warren Burt interviewed by Libby Dempster

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**Libby Dempster:** Well I think you are right about the dance scene at that time. When I recall the vitality and optimism of cultural action and critique in the early '70s I'm recalling a lot of performance activity which was not specifically dance, but which was cross-disciplinary, arising out of situations like the Fine Arts Workshop/The Tin Sheds, at Sydney University for example.

## One: The role(s) of criticism and alternatives to the sales culture

**WB** The question of critique is an interesting one. I remember the new music scene in Melbourne in the '70s. I wasn't here for the founding of the New Music Centre, which went from '72 to '74, but when I arrived here in '75, I participated in the setting up of the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre, which had a very interesting history over seven years. CHCMC was specifically set up as a venue for experimentation, as a venue for developing ideas, for trying things out. From the very first, we discouraged the mainstream press from coming, we actively said to them, "We don't want you." We did that not only because the people writing for them were incompetent, but also because we wanted a critic-free zone for work to develop in. Later, in '78, Les Gilbert and I founded the New Music Newspaper to publicise new music activities in Melbourne in general, and at CHCMC in particular. What I said to students at the time was "In a situation like Australia's, which at the moment is a pioneering situation (and not only in music, but also in the visual arts, in the development of Australian nationalism, in dance, in literature with experimental poetry – this was the very exciting period of, for example, the Fitzroy Concrete Poets), where new ideas are being born, it's not enough to just make work and perform it, you also have to document it because the critical community isn't going to catch up for another ten or twenty years." And so we published three issues of the New Music Newspaper in '78-'79. Then, in '79, Phil Brophy started New Music which was a publication which had quite a different format. For every concert that occurred at Clifton Hill a member of the audience would interview the performers and that interview would then appear in the next issue of New Music. It often went on a rotating basis, so you were performer one week and then interviewer next week; at times there was a sort of a chain there. That went for about two years. Our attitude at Clifton Hill was that "No careers are to be made here, business as usual is not welcomed here, this is a place of experimentation."

When Clifton Hill finally fell apart was when *Art & Text* began writing about events at CHCMC, when the visual arts scene 'discovered' Clifton Hill and began treating the events there as if they were important. Suddenly, there was a huge schism at Clifton Hill between people who were ambitious and wanted careers and people who just wanted to keep doing things and trying things out. Eventually, I felt, the place fell apart with fairly rancorous feelings because it had become a stepping stone to a career. One of the lessons a number of us learned from this was that the autobiographical, critic-as-hero mode of writing, promoted by *Art & Text*, was very destructive to the development of creative work. In fact, when Rainer Linz founded *New Music Articles* in 1981, (which published ten issues in, I think, eleven years from 1981-92) he did so specifically to encourage serious writing about music, and he specifically said that he did NOT want autobiographical, critic-as-hero writing in the magazine.

Later, in 1987-88, when I was part of the group that set up the Linden New Musicales, at the Linden Gallery in St. Kilda, we made sure that it, too, was a critic-free zone. This series lasted longer than CHCMC, and criticism had nothing to do with its demise. A change of administration at Linden Gallery accomplished that. When Kevin Wilson was directing Linden, it was fantastic – he was very easy to work

with, and very supportive, very encouraging. When other people took over, it became very difficult – everything had to be done by the book, you had to apply for everything; support was much less forthcoming. It became much more bureaucratic and so we decided we didn't need it. For me, then, when I came back from a year in the States in '95, I noticed that things were happening very nicely at Cubitt St., Al Wunder's late, lamented space in Richmond, so I thought I'd put my energies into that place. And again, it was a space that was outside the mainstream, and away from the critical apparatus, which I felt was very important.

This is an interesting attitude for me to have, considering that I've recently collaborated with Nicholas Zurbrugg on a book called *Critical Vices – The Myths of Post-Modern Theory*, which is about to be published by Gordon and Breach in New York. As someone who makes a considerable part of his living doing cultural theory and critique, I'm very concerned with keeping that stuff away from art in its developmental stages. Otherwise, you end up with a kind of perpetually student-stage theory-driven art, which I really do believe can only be backward looking.

I've written all the standard articles on experimental music in Australia that are now used in all the universities – the *Leonardo Music Journal* one, the *Sounds Australian* one, and I'm just about to write three hundred words on "Experimental Music in Melbourne" for the *Encyclopedia of Melbourne*. So I do believe in documenting and promoting the stuff as it occurs, but I try to keep, if I may make up an adjective on the spot, a "Real-Time-ian" sense of personal opinion and condemnation out of the writing. I often say, when I see in a review, "I would have liked to have seen..." I know I can stop reading the review right there, because I'm not reading about the work now, I'm reading about the desires of the reviewer, I'm reading their autobiography. And if I want to do that, I'd rather just ask them about their life.

LD When you describe the early years at Clifton Hill it's apparent that it was important as a site of aesthetic experimentation and also for its investigation of new social formations. The artistic activity arose out of and was implicated in the process of rethinking and reformulating relationships between audiences and art works. The type of conservative critical intervention you spoke of would seem to impose the view that experiment is not of intrinsic value. It's not worthwhile in its own terms, but must be interpreted as a stage of development; that is, people will pass through a period of experimentation on the way to growing up and becoming what we already know as certain kinds of easily categorisable artists/composers/ whatever. So I hear in that story a refusal to recognise or to concede the possibility of other kinds of social formation – other kinds of artists.

WB Yes, there is a silly attitude that says, after you experiment for a while, you get serious, and you put your work out in the public market place where the standards of, say, commercial cinema are applied to you. This is an utter nonsense. It's not only necessary for the creators and performers of a work to learn to think differently about what they're doing, it's also necessary for audiences to think differently as well. To know that there are different modes of perception, different ways of seeing, and that to judge, say, an experimental work by the production values standards of, say, the Australian Ballet, is as much a mistake as a performer playing a C sharp where a C natural was written.

For example, I just got some anonymous feedback from the Australia Council about *Diversity*, the performance I did at Dancehouse last June, and again, I learned nothing

from the critique other than about the reviewer. It seemed the reviewer wanted to see whizbang technology being manipulated, whereas we tried to keep the technology as invisible as possible. So I learned a lot about them – that they were applying the standards of the video game and commercial cinema to a work that was actually standing in opposition to the video game and commercial cinema. Kenneth Gaburo has a wonderful essay called “The Beauty of Irrelevant Music,” written in 1971, and which I feel is just as relevant today as it was back then, in which he says, *Equally significant is the fact that this unsaleable music to which they persistently refer is not, and was not ever made to sell. Its structural nature resists selling, and thus it puts forth its own alternative.*

It’s important to make this point very clearly. Much experimental work in music, dance, drama, etc. is put forth as an ALTERNATIVE to the sales culture. To judge it by the standards of the sales culture is simply wrong. There ARE other ways of seeing. Which is not to deny that certain ideas from experimental work cannot be adapted and used in various forms of commercial culture. For example, the many appropriations of experimental music into Techno Music have produced some wonderful music made by some very talented people. However, it’s important to understand the nature of publicity. For example, the rock’n’roll world has a certain kind of publicity machine. Seventy people can be in the Punter’s Club and hear a band and everybody in town hears about it, but seventy people are in an Art Gallery, and a few people (who read the art press) hear about it, or seventy people can be in an alternative space, and nobody hears about it. This is simply a function of the quality of the publicity machine covering a particular scene, and says absolutely nothing about the work. (Actually, I know several people involved in the Techno scene, and they aren’t making any money either!)

**LD** Sometimes the ’70s are described as the period in which it became possible for young Australians to imagine a future for themselves in the arts. This was the period in which a number of tertiary institutions established new courses and training programs. The Australia Council was offering some support for non-commercial work and a number of new dance companies were established. So, you could “have a career” as a working artist in Australia. Well I still think that’s quite preposterous... at best, it’s unrealistic.

**WB** We were young people in the ’70s.

**LD** Indeed we were. But I think all that’s happened is that some people have this delusion that in order to be a successful (dance) artist they need to grow up fast, learn the craft and become credible in quite traditional terms. Nothing has changed. And there’s a fairly thoroughgoing misunderstanding of postmodernism; here it is stripped of any radicalism and reduced to some sort of ill-defined style. But it’s not a “style” of dance; it’s not a “thing” at all.

**WB** No, it was a group of people who felt that working with process in various ways was important.

I noticed just at the end of last year, when I was organizing a number of improvisation events, that there were groups of younger people, in their early twenties, who once again were not concerned with a career. I had noticed a period from the early ’80s to the mid ’90s, when most people, with rare exceptions like Rodney Berry, said, “Okay, I’ve got to go to the film school and learn how to be a film

composer,” or, “I’ve got to get my critical theory together so I can be an academic,” and so they were trying to find career paths to fit into. As opposed to the way I had felt in my twenties, which was, “Well, the economy is shot (so much for all that mythologizing about how the ’60s and ’70s were good economic times!), and I will never make a living out of this, so I might as well do whatever the hell I want.” And I noticed with these young people last year, whether they were dealing with cheap electronics, or were writing for orchestra, that they had the same attitude that a career was probably impossible, and so they felt free to do whatever it was they wanted. And I thought, “Well, this is refreshing!”

I think with the arts funding... boomlet, let’s call it a boomlet – there really wasn’t a lot of money around – there was the illusion that careers could be made. And also I think because in the visual arts world careers could be made for a while, people were fooled. The visual arts world works on a different economic scale than the world of performing arts, and that gives the false impression in the other arts that there is some sort of trickle-down effect. One of the reasons I dislike the visual arts scene in general is its arrogance in assuming that it’s the engine that drives the rest of the arts. It isn’t.

LD How so?

WB *Real-Time* for example would never have occurred if there wasn’t a visual arts scene to drive it, it would not have come out of say, just dance, or just performance, or just music.

LD Not enough money?

WB Right. It had to come out of a visual arts dominated context. (In fact, I’m probably correct in guessing that they aren’t making any money either. We’re probably talking here about the difference between hanging on by a thread, and falling into the precipice!) However, the visual arts world has saleable objects and a whole support mechanism of words (‘criticism’, ‘theory’) that supports the non-verbal visual objects that can only exist through metaphor.

LD In dance some choreographers found it useful to define or describe themselves as artists because that term implied a commitment to process and to the development of an ongoing practice over time. It was thought preferable to the term choreographer which has at times been understood in limited craft terms (ie. choreographer as step-arranger).

WB And also there was that wonderful sense of the importance of cross-disciplinary thinking. I was especially lucky in that I went to an undergraduate school in a period in which we were taught interdisciplinarily. For example, I had a course called, “The Arts, 1600–1900” or something like that, which was taught by a literature person, a visual artist and a composer. They just took us through twenty-five year blocks – here’s an opera, here’s a painting, here’s a novel, look at the common structures, right up through the revolutions of the early 1900s with Stravinsky, Picasso, and James Joyce; with Schoenberg, Kandinsky, and Kafka, things like that.

We quickly learned there were no such things as individual art forms, only art which was expressed in many different media. Recently I was rereading Marshall McLuhan – a new collection called *Essential McLuhan*, and as early as the late 1940s he was saying that the separation of disciplines within the academies had to stop and we had to have

cross-disciplinary training. It didn't happen, and I maintain that the reason academia is experiencing a melt-down at the moment – we can talk about budget cuts and other 'real' reasons – but an underlying cause is that none of the departments ever cottoned on to the fact that they had to be multi-disciplinary. There was a failure of nerve in the '70s – a structural failure of nerve in the '70s was an underlying cause of the financial collapse of the system in the '90s! Boy, does that sound pretentious! (laughter)

LD Well, a sort of ossification occurred, and a retreat to and policing of disciplinary boundaries, when perhaps the opposite should have been happening.

WB Well, the few examples of places that are thinking in cross-disciplinary ways, such as your course at Footscray (Performance Studies, VUT), or David Worrall's Australian Centre for the Arts and Technology at ANU in Canberra, are I think, doing a great job, but they're all hanging on by a thread. David has to spend most of his time just keeping the place afloat, just keeping its existence justified, rather than developing new programs, or getting new staff in, and so on.

## Two: Radical amateurism and homemade art

WB Going back to the seventies, I remember that we had a sense of tolerance for each other's aesthetics, and a sense of support for each other's work, even if we didn't immediately approve of it.

Perhaps I was being overly tolerant, both then and now – one of my chief criticisms of other people, in fact, is that they are too critical of other people's ideas, craft and aesthetics. I noticed especially in the '80s there was a much less tolerant attitude to a variety of ideas than there was in the late '70s. For example, I recall that in '77 or '78, Dance Exchange was trying some really wacky things in structural terms. I remember *Red Paper Piece* as a wonderful example of tomfoolery that actually produced very beautiful motion. By the mid '80s this sort of experimentation would have been very disapproved of, and as a result, a sense of fantasy and adventure was sadly missing from so much dreary, career-oriented mid-'80s work – for me, anyway.

Another example of the positive effects of this tolerance towards each other's work in the '70s was with the work of the video artists Robert Randall and Frank Bendinelli. Robert and Frank are two of my dearest friends, so I think they will not be offended when I say that some of their earliest work was frankly godawful and appalling.

(laughter) You know, sometimes I would go home with my head in my hands saying, "How can they be so corny?" (laughter) But I supported their work, and pushed their work because there was a real energy and integrity there – even if I disagreed with the surface of the work, I could see that there was a political undercurrent there that I felt a great affinity with. And by the time of the late '80s, with *War Story*, their videotape installation work, this political consciousness came to the fore. On the surface, *War Story* is a parody of every war movie that ever existed, and is very funny, but underneath is a very powerful parable about aids, the destruction of the gay community and the seductiveness of fascism. My point is that their powerful work of the late '80s probably would not have happened without that tolerance and support that we gave to each other in the '70s. I'm intolerant of intolerance because it closes off potentials for powerful expression.

There is another point to be made here, and that's about what I call a sense of 'radical amateurism.'

A student of mine, James Hullick, went to Germany to study with Karlheinz Stockhausen at his summer intensive composition course. Stockhausen is one of the world's great teachers. You do a two-week intensive with him and your life changes. Mine did in 1970. So did James' in 1998. However, Stockhausen has done a lot of music-theatre pieces in the past twenty years, and the criticism of the pieces in general is that the music is really professional, but the theatre is really amateurish. You know, the costumes are homemade, the dance is hokey, etc. etc. I've seen some videotapes of some of these pieces, and I thought that some of them were a little corny, but when James and I were talking on his return, I realized, "ah, it's not corny – it's amateur in the best sense in that it's homemade." Then I had this real flash of insight, which may be totally wrong, but I'm willing to go with it and see how it develops. It's this: musical serialism – all of it, from Schoenberg's first efforts in the 1920s up to the present day – is homemade. It's very amateurish. A lot of psycho-acoustic research has been done in the past twenty years that has repudiated the structural bases of serialism – the work says things like, the human ear does not work that way, serialism works against the nature of human hearing, etc. etc. Anyway, my response to all that research is bunco. For me, serialism is interesting precisely BECAUSE it is written AGAINST so-called common-sense ways of hearing. So I think that serialism was a homemade structure, in much the same way that Harry Partch's wonderful homemade musical instruments were a homemade structure, and I think if we understand Stockhausen as an example of the essential homemade composer, then the amateur theatre fits in perfectly.

I just read an article by my friend James Harley, a Canadian composer living in L.A., about Richard Barrett, an English composer living in Amsterdam. He was talking about Barrett's aesthetic as being one of failure, that the pieces are failures, and he's consciously promoting a sense of failure, deriving from Samuel Beckett more than from purely musical sources, and I thought that that made sense. To me, there is in all of the avant-garde arts, a sense of amateurism, a sense of homemadeness, a sense of 'do-it-yourself,' which is very much opposed to the slick production values of the Australian Ballet or Hollywood cinema. One of the best examples I know of this 'radical amateurism,' which people always laugh about, but which I take as a very serious thing, was the Portsmouth Sinfonia in England in the '70s, a group of amateurs playing classical music badly. The result was hilarious, but it was also very serious – if you listened carefully there were all sorts of interesting things happening in their music. At the time, in the early '70s, I was a member of a similar group in California, called Fatty Acid. We were a trio of violin, mandolin and accordion, with an occasional clarinet added. We played the popular classics, but we were more highbrow than the Portsmouth Sinfonia. They played Beethoven, we played Wagner.

LD (laughter) On violin, mandolin, and...

WB And accordion, yes. With the *Rite of Spring*, by Stravinsky, we added a clarinet and did some multitracking, but basically, violin, mandolin and accordion was our trio.

What we said at the time, with our tongues firmly in our cheek, but with our critical theory firmly in place, was that we were the contemporary continuation of neo-Classicism, the movement that Stravinsky, Satie, and Ravel had been so much

involved in setting up. In the neoclassicism of the 1920s, an object from the past, such as a piece by Bach or Handel, was put through the distorting lens of your own technique, and a new, relevant, contemporary piece was created. Stravinsky's case with *Pulcinella* is the classic example. He composed right on top of photostats of the scores – which were early 18th century scores attributed at that time to Pergolesi, an Italian baroque composer, revising them as if they were an earlier work of his own. And through the distorting lens of his technique the Pergolesi scores emerged as a piece by Stravinsky, a new work. (It's interesting to note that Stravinsky only abandoned his neo-Classicism after 1951. After this time, he began composing with Schoenberg's serial technique. Schoenberg died in 1951, by the way, so at that point he became just another part of history, and it's curious that it was only after Schoenberg was a part of history that Stravinsky felt he could use his ideas.)

We felt we were continuing neo-Classical thinking with our incompetence.

Remember, these are three boys in Southern California, just down the road from L.A. where Schoenberg and Stravinsky had lived in the '30s, '40, and '50s, and so we were continuing the tradition of taking objects from the past and putting them through the distorting lens of our technique and producing new objects. Our technique happened to be incompetence; Stravinsky's happened to be his studies with Rimsky-Korsakov, but still, the idea of technique as a distorting filter was similar. And it was at about this time that Ron Nagorcka, who was also in San Diego then, came up with the statement, "The very essence of electronic media is distortion." No matter how you record the Cleveland Symphony and put it on a record, it's still a recording. You're distorting the social occasion of the concert, you're distorting the music, its sense of spatial reality, etc. and therefore, what we WANT to do with technology is to actually produce those distortions. So much of electronic music of that period, including the whole cassette recorder movement, also shared that sense of the desirability of distortion.

There have been several books written about the international cassette recorder movement of the early '80s, such as the very wonderful *Cassette Mythos*, edited by Robin James, but nearly all of them overlook what went on in Australia during the period of the mid-'70s, where the ideas of cassette culture were already developed fully. Ron Nagorcka was one of the key figures in that development. And so that was another example of neo-Classical technique; with crummy little cassette recorders, we took material from the past or the real world and put it through a distorting lens and came up with a unique object. And just like serialism, these were radical amateur activities. I think critics have not understood this. In fact, they've gotten in the way of these ideas being understood. I'll just single one out, with no malice at all – my friend Richard Toop in Sydney has written many valuable articles for reputable musicology journals. Now as valuable as these articles are, perhaps they lend to the work a patina of professionalism that in the coming years we will see was not really justified. (Parenthetically, I might mention that one of the logical outcomes of my idea that much of new music is radically amateur would be that it's not really suited for performance by that most professional of organizations, the symphony orchestra. I mean, even composers as professional as Xenakis, Cage and Babbitt may have at the core of their music a radically amateur, 'do-it-yourself' nature that is absolutely opposed to the professionalism of the orchestra. A radically amateur art is not designed to be a commodity; the orchestra as it exists, can ONLY be a commodity, and



so there's an essential contradiction in the very act of writing for the orchestra. This doesn't mean, however, that it's not worth trying, just that using the inflexible beast that the orchestra is is fraught with daunting musical, sociological and political contradictions. It may be that it's only at places like Cubitt St., or at Linden, or at Dancehouse, where that sort of radical amateurism can actually thrive and survive.)

LD John Berger writes about this issue in his 1980 essay "The Primitive and the Professional" He makes the point that the 'primitive' artist (your term would perhaps be 'the radical amateur') refuses the conventions of professional practice because she understands that it cannot speak her interests. She recognises that her experience cannot be rendered in the language or terms of the given tradition.

WB In Berger's article he mentions Grandma Moses. Where I grew up in the States, she was the local famous artist. A couple of years ago, I saw an article about her – her sketch books had just been published, and they were filled with collages, things cut out from magazines and put together with an almost Picasso-like sense of construction and trying again and again until she got just the right composition with the perspective distorted in the best naive way, and then she painted from that. And so she's an amateur, but she is amateur like Rousseau, like Erik Satie, or Harry Partch, whom that amateur charge was also thrown at. These are people who know the scene very well and know what they want to do, and know that there was no place for them inside the professional scene. Melbourne had a good example of that in Syd Clayton (1939–1994). Those of us that knew him knew he was brilliant, but he never tried to promote his work, he just did it at La Mama.

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WB Well, let's sum up what we've covered so far. We've talked about the experimental nature of the work, the fact that it WAS experimental, we've talked about the whole idea of the radically amateur, and we've talked about the role of publicity and critique in the work. In hindsight, I can say that it might have been nice to have had a writer on the level of a Deborah Jowitt or a Tom Johnson working here, but there simply wasn't a media outlet for work of that calibre here at that time. Tom Johnson's *The Voice of New Music*, published by Apollohuis in Holland (which has also just had ITS budget cut), is a wonderful example of what good writing about a developing scene (in this case, the birth of New York musical minimalism) can be, but without writing of his quality, I prefer, as I said earlier, to have no writing at all.

The problem with the academic critique mob is, as I said, they're generally ten years behind the issues. For example, last year I received a request from a Sydney academic to answer a questionnaire (at this late date, 15 years after the event!) about minimalism. The questions, in essence, added up to: "As an Australian who is a minimalist composer which overseas composers do you imitate?"

LD What an extraordinary question!

WB Yes, there are all sorts of unfortunate things implied there. I just had to write to the person and say, "I'm sorry, but I was involved on the ground floor of that

movement, you know. And the three or four American names that you mentioned were only part of an international gang back then. That they actually became the prominent exponents of minimalism is as much an accident of history and promotion as anything else.

Another example of this kind of thinking: I remember doing a performance piece in Melbourne in '79, and a local curator came up to me afterwards and said, "Oh, I didn't know you did that Laurie Anderson stuff!" and I replied, humorously, "No, no! Laurie Anderson is doing that Warren Burt stuff!" Which, in fact, was just as untrue. What was true was that all over the world there were a whole bunch of us fooling around with various ideas of multimedial performance. And this is again about the publicity power of the rock 'n' roll and/or the visual arts worlds. Laurie had gotten publicity in the visual arts world, and so therefore an Australian curator seeing someone in Melbourne in '79 doing a piece like that, someone coming out of the same scene, with the same lineage at the same time, assumed that the Melbourne person was an imitator of the New York person. This is an example of a cultural imperialism which is willfully adopted, rather than one that is imposed from the outside.

Which is not to minimise the enormous forces of cultural imperialism that are at work on us in Australia everyday. Australian commercial TV, for example, is completely American controlled. The tragedy in this particular case was that it took an American emigre into Australia in the late '70s – one who was frequently accused of being an agent of cultural imperialism – to point out to Australians that in non-commercial areas, they were culturally imperialising themselves.

There is this wonderful political cartoon by American cartoonist Tom Tomorrow. His main character is a talking penguin, and in one of his cartoons he has the penguin talk about U.S. atrocities in Guatemala that were not reported in the mainstream press, and the final panel is this little penguin looking out at the audience and saying "You know what the biggest tragedy of this is? The biggest tragedy is that you had to find out about this from a talking penguin in a comic strip!" And that's the way I felt when that curator made that comment.

But this happens everywhere, not just in Australia. I'll give you another example. I was introduced to Reinhard Oelshlagel, who is a very brilliant German musicologist. He promoted Cage's work for years, he's got an incredibly brilliant mind, and even he was not immune to it. He said, "So play me some of your Australian music." I played him three pieces. To the first he said, "Oh, you're imitating Robert Ashley." "No", I replied, "though Bob is a good friend." To the second he said, "Oh, you're imitating La Monte Young." Again, I assured him that this was not the case. To the third he said, "Oh, you're imitating Brian Ferneyhough." I assured him that at the time of writing that piece, I hadn't even heard of Brian. At the end of this, his question was, "I don't understand. Being in Australia must be like being in Norway. You are so far from the centre, you must be imitating someone." And I had to point out to him that I wasn't far from the centre; that as far as I was concerned the Monarch Cake Shop on Acland St. was "the centre," and that, to me, Koln was a peripheral scene. He was actually a bit offended by my attitude, but in spite of this, we did eventually become quite friendly.

Basically, I feel that we're back in a medieval cultural setting, where there is not ONE centre, but there are many centres. (Actually, capitalism is certainly advancing to a

state of medieval feudalism with all these multinational corporations beholden to no government and no people, but that's another issue.) For example, I just spent eleven weeks in the States, and I felt that what my colleagues in San Francisco were doing was more adventurous than what my friends were doing in New York. And I regret not hearing what my friends in Boston, Minneapolis or Seattle were doing on this trip. (Not to mention the European, New Zealand or Asian colleagues, but I guess those are for other trips!) So a many centred... (sung to the tune of "Love is a Many-Splendored Thing") Arrrrrrttt... is a Many-Centred Thinnnnnnnnng! (laughter)

LD For dance artists though the question of access to work, of direct experience of embodied traditions, is a real issue. This question of body to body transmission is perhaps not so crucial or so problematic in other areas of practice.

WB Well, I actually agree with that view to a certain extent. With rare exceptions, being in a world wide situation, it's really necessary to travel, to experience your colleagues in other places. (This is probably the upside of globalisation which I acknowledge has many, many dark sides.) Even if you have a negative experience, travel is necessary. One young composer was sending me emails from Holland saying "Is it just me, or is the music in Holland less interesting than in Melbourne?" And I emailed her back, saying, "Well, they're dealing with different issues there, so find out the issues that excite them and see how they're working through them." And she did that, and was still disappointed. But I think it's really essential to have that 'out-of-town' experience, otherwise I wouldn't have said to my student, "Yes, spend two thousand dollars and go sit at Stockhausen's feet for two weeks and learn all you can." And so I think you are right about embodiment. In other fields, in other body disciplines, this is also true. All those people that went over last July and worked with Joan Skinner in Seattle, all those people that go to the Alexander School in Melbourne, or some other school. You're right, certain sorts of body dynamics can only be passed on in the hands-on way, body to body.

However, to then criticise other people's aesthetic decisions, which are made fully consciously, on the basis that they haven't had that body-to-body contact, is, I feel, an error in judgment. SOME post-modern ideas have to be communicated on a body-to-body basis, which is why people go overseas to study. On the other hand, a LOT of post-modern ideas were conceptual ideas, and those ideas do not require an embodiment, they require something clicking in the mind, and then movement happening as a result of that, and to criticise THOSE kinds of practices because they lack a sense of embodiment is to miss the point rather magnificently. As Chris Mann says, "You're stuffed. Not because you're wrong, but because you're looking in the wrong direction."

LD Well, Australian dance culture continues to be deeply inflected (and I would argue, constrained) by ballet. The tradition of classical ballet is very powerful; that form of embodiment is not easily countered or supplanted and at times I have thought it might be better if we could somehow situate new dance practices within some broader arena. The appellation 'dance' still suggests an extremely narrow frame of reference, governed by classical paradigms and this is not very productive.

WB Yeah, yeah, well for example, the work I saw at the Theatre of the Ordinary, in the 1997/98 Year of Fridays project was as much based in acting and in music and in

experimental poetry as it was in dance. A number of my more conservative composer friends would come along and see one event and be bewildered, because I wasn't doing music.

Also in Australia, we've had the birth of the 'sound art culture.' It's happened world wide, but it's been especially intense here. People have been saying, "I don't do music, I do sound art." This is the same thing that you're talking about in dance. It's a linguistic oppression you take on yourself. People see this thing called 'music' and this creature called 'the composer' and they say, "No, I'm not a part of that. There is a certain level of pretension there; there is a social world I'm not a part of. Therefore, I'm going to use another term for what I do, to describe my different scene." That term is sound-art, so when people say, "That's not music," one can reply by saying, "That's right, it's sound art." People can't quarrel with that. And it's the same thing – there's this dance establishment and you're oppressed by that, so you say, "I'm not dance, I'm a performative tradition" or whatever. As opposed to biting the bullet and saying, "No, what I'm doing is dance, goddammit, and you'd bloody well better accept it!"

So I see those as self-adopted oppressions. Although I must say that I'm probably a bad person to talk about this, because my dance world in Melbourne is exclusively Theatre of the Ordinary, Dancehouse, Cecil St Studio, Extensions when it was existing, and my friends who are independent choreographers, and what's going on out at Footscray. That's my entire dance world. I'm not oppressed by the Australian Ballet, because I've never been to it. Even Graeme Murphy's work I've only seen once – *Vast* in 1988, of which I found the sixty-part canon that opens the work extremely beautiful. But even Graeme's work is outside my normal purview of dance. As a kid, I saw the New York City Ballet every season – by the time I got out of high school, I'd seen all the Stravinsky-Balanchine collaborations, but by the time I was in grad school at San Diego in the early '70s, my dancer colleagues were all post-modernists, and I never looked back to ballet at all.

LD You have an ongoing working relationship with Eva Karczag which began back in the mid '70s. Could you talk a little about that now? As I recall, in that period Eva's relationship to structuralist or analytic approaches to choreography was somewhat vexed. She was an astoundingly proficient dancer but the choreographic role, as it was traditionally conceived, required a kind of detachment and authority which did not match her disposition. Neither did it support her dance interests. The early Dance Exchange concerts encompassed quite diverse choreographic interests and strategies, though, if reviews are anything to go by, that diversity may not have been apparent to audiences then. I'm thinking particularly of the contrast between Eva's interest in improvisational process and the more analytic problem-solving approach of Nanette Hassall.

WB Yep. The difference between my working relationship with Eva and my working relationship with Nan, having worked with both of them, is that with Eva we developed this really collaborative relationship where ideas are tossed back and forth and we developed a really easy way of being with each other. With Nan it was a very autocratic relationship – she knew precisely what she wanted, and I was the composer who was providing her with material, or I was one of a number of content providers within her structure. I had a very cordial, friendly relationship with Nan, but it shows the big difference between the two. It's also important to consider the fact that Eva

went so much into improvisation, but Nan's work, although there may be improvisatory elements in it, is always very structured. Also, consider that Nan came out of the Merce Cunningham environment, but Eva went into Trisha Brown's company to get a sense of structure that she felt she lacked, and that when she had that, she left Trisha's company. I look upon my working relationship with those two choreographers as a sort of paradigm of the differences between them and their attitudes to structure.

It was interesting from a musical-structural point of view, being in New York and watching Trisha Brown's work developing in the late seventies. It was very curious for me that Trisha at that point was working with composers like Robert Ashley and Laurie Anderson, who were the archetypes of what came to be later known as musical post-modernism and post-minimalism. It was very curious because, to me, what Trisha was doing was much more in line with the intense structuralism of someone like Milton Babbitt, who was regarded, at that time, antithetical to the interests of the musicians she was working with. Which is not to say that I didn't thoroughly enjoy her work, just that I felt it expressed, for me, a real structural contradiction.

### Three: 'De-orbit Burn' at Judson Church

LD You've recently returned from the US and from performing with Eva Karczag and Chris Mann in the Seventh Annual New York Improvisation Festival. I've heard very positive things about that festival.

WB I had real good feelings about the organizers, the space, and the energy behind the festival even though I was only in one event. All the people we worked with were competent, enthusiastic, and helpful. It was a big audience; it filled the Judson Church. I'm guessing now, but I think it was about four hundred people. And it seemed like there was good audience energy because of the fact that it had been going for seven years. This year there was also quite a sad added focus in that the festival was dedicated to the memory of Nancy Topf. There was quite a lot of feeling about Nancy from all the people she had taught and worked with – which was basically everyone who knew they had a psoas muscle! – and so that gave the festival, like I say, a very sad added focus.

I've also heard good things about the festival from the other Australians who preceded us in earlier years. Trotman and Morrish liked playing there, Five Square Meters felt they were well received, and there was an incredibly warm response to what Eva, Chris and I did. So, yeah, I think it's a very nice open event and it's not, say, just New York looking at its navel. In this year's festival there were people from other parts of the US, us Australians, and a group from England. I think they had a very small budget so they can do maybe one foreign event a year. Certainly the \$80 bucks US I got paid doesn't indicate a large budget.

LD How was your project set up?

WB Okay, so we started emailing and Eva said the title of it was *De-Orbit Burn*. The metaphor Eva had for that was that when you have a satellite in orbit, it fires its rockets to come down; after it fires its rockets, it's in free-fall, it has no control, it just plunges through the atmosphere, and until it hits enough atmosphere for its

parachutes to work, there is no control. It just has to free-fall through that particular period, and the de-orbit burn is the last time energy is put in, and then the satellite is purely at the will of gravity until it gets into the lower atmosphere. So she wanted to do a whole bunch of decays, a whole bunch of hurling yourself out there and watching where the energy went. So that was the image she had, and she said that she also wanted a lot of silence. And I said that that sounded good to me, and began thinking about sounds that each had some aspect of decay, some element of free-fall, about them. She also wanted Chris to be involved, and Chris had a text which was a whole bunch of one-liners, the longest any one would last would be around fifteen seconds. Two of these texts are:

**Opportunity is a positivist. Cheap. Hygienic. A knowledge tax.**  
**Stupidity the length. With string.**

and

**Meaning is experience. And defensive.**  
**A private modeling of listening for the 'nonyous. Playing ing with chasey.**  
**Explanation the ornament.**  
**Pragmatically 'stract.**

Around August, I proposed to her that I could also modify Chris's voice, and promptly forgot about having made that suggestion. Then I was travelling, and was out of email contact for three months, so when I emailed Eva to tell her what I had been doing, she replied that that wasn't what she wanted at all; she was thinking that I would mostly be modifying Chris's voice. So for me it was back to the drawing board. I had Chris phone me up from New York City – I was in upstate New York at my parent's place – and had him read his text over the phone and I taped a microphone to the telephone and made a very low quality recording of his voice. I then put that recording into the computer and boosted the hell out of it so that Chris's voice was audible, but of course there was a ton of noise on it. And here we get into radical amateurism again. Computers have all these wonderful noise reduction facilities now, and if you know how to use them, you can take almost any bad recording and clean it up superbly. But more importantly, if you know how to use them badly, you can take a bad recording and turn it into a legible, but incredibly distorted recording. The essence of electronic media is distortion. And so I distorted Chris's voice and we had twenty-three fragments from the fifty fragments of his text, and then I also used some of the electronic sounds I had made.

When we got together, it was the first time we had seen each other in months. It was noon on the day of the performance, and in a rehearsal studio, we tried out the ideas. I made the sounds with lots of silences between them, Chris read his text sporadically, and Eva moved. Eva wanted the piece to be twenty-eight minutes long, which sounded like a good length, so we did that, and at the end we talked about it and we all agreed that it felt a bit crowded. Then we did it again, and were much, much sparser, and although Eva was very jet-lagged, having only arrived from Holland the day before, we felt that it really worked well. We all had this sense of space, and we were playing off what each other was doing. I would watch Eva, for example, wait till she had one of her delicious tiny little movements and use that to trigger off one of the decaying sounds.

When we got into Judson Church Chris decided to bring his own huge sound system, and install it on the floor of the church so his voice could be heard really clearly. I

worked with the sound system in the ceiling of the church, which has a long echo and is very boomy, so we had a very different acoustic for our two sounds.

LD It's a large space?

WB A very large space, with a big vaulted ceiling. Before the show, we ran the opening twice, to see how Eva would come out, and how we would start. And when we did it, we left lots of space for each other. I remember in the performance using Eva as a trigger a lot, but once I was performing I was using a particular computer program where I had to look at the screen, so for those fifteen or twenty seconds I couldn't watch her, but once that sound was over, I went back to watching her. Also I was watching Chris who was seated something like fifteen metres away from me, and being very aware of his sense of phrasing and timing, so that he could say a few words, pause, then have a few more words, and in that pause I would throw in a fragment of a different one of his sentences. So we got all these little plays back and forth, and it seemed to work very well. It came out of a sense of being comfortable with each other and working on that good will of all those years of working together. And having a sense of each other's timing.