

STEALING, INFLUENCE AND IDENTITY

Susan Rethorst

In 1980 I made a piece that I titled Stealing. For the publicity, I had a photographer take a picture of me looking as close to Laurie Anderson on the cover of her recently released Oh Superman album as we could get and wrote STEALING across the top of the page. I sent a copy to Anderson on which I wrote 'They say stealing is the most sincere form of flattery - hope you agree!'

I had no expectations that the title would be taken literally. I was wrong. Several people who saw it told me which choreographers they 'saw'; I had put none of them in there, and had to search back in my mind for which parts of the dance they might mean.

The title referred to the kind of movement making/thinking that was concerning me in those days, a particular mode of observation and response in my movement making that I called 'placement', and tried (in retrospect) to define as an awareness of architectural 'places' and 'traces' of the body and their accompanying emotive and psychological implications.

In an attempt to articulate the methodology that arose from this, if not the basis on which it stands, I had settled on the question 'what kind of 'information' can I "take" from the previous move?'

A descriptive example of what I mean might sound like -

Starting with the arm extended in front of the body in a curve, I lie my head in the negative space thus created, and my gaze falls to the floor to the right of me. I follow the line of that gaze with the top of my head. I step on the spot on the floor where this gaze would land were that line extended. I turn into the path of the trace of that motion. I describe with my arm the plane implied by that trace, etc - each movement creating an infinite number of architectural 'leavings', or 'artifacts' to trigger a response, before and beyond words.....as I 'follow' the seeming instruction of each move, I am aware also of the detailed and subtle differences of the areas of the body that are moving me - the palm of the hand strikes a different chord - of intimacy, softness, interiority, - than does the back of the hand; the part that faces the world, its skin both metaphorically and literally tougher. These subjective readings of places of the body influence my choices, and the choices are made quickly enough that the awareness stays in the realm of the physical.

In introducing others to this mode of work, the task came to include one person taking a curve off another and placing some transformed-by-having-gone-through-her trace of that curve in yet another's lap, so to speak. Because we (me, Eva Welchman, Paula Kellinger; and Susan Braham) were all moving simultaneously, the taking and receiving were often done without the consciousness, cooperation or even awareness of the other - stolen. As we got comfortable with this, it began to seem that we were passing an intangible something in and around between us - slippery, inarticulated,

elusive and minute attitudes of the body, with tiny and cumulative jokes, comments, surprises. And there was an edge to it, lent by the privacy and intimacy that studio studies and long acquaintance with an investigation can engender - to one-up, to outwit, to challenge each other; and in consequence, the form.

And, as it became more of a form, it came to suggest to me a means of conversing that telescoped and magnified the slower more sober but just as intangible, slippery and elusive passing of information that occurs in the larger world. - akin to the way influence travels, full of misunderstandings and misreadings as well as recognitions - this combined with our teasing irreverent tone led to the Stealing title and poster:

Following the performances, I made calls to some of the choreographers that audience members had 'seen', saying that I had had no intentions to copy or mimic or impersonate. There were some conversations around town that I got wind of, about whether or not it was ethical to steal in art, accompanied by some upset and indignation. I mostly stayed out of them, due to some combination of surprise and curiosity, and the fact that it had long been my habit, when misunderstood, to shut up - a kind of protective mechanism. I thought a lot about how what happens in the studio changes when it meets the air outside, how the laboratory results need a frame, and a title will do fine if another isn't presented. Above all, I think I was intrigued and taken aback at the nerve I'd inadvertently struck, and wanted to lay low and ponder the implications. Consequently and subsequently this nerve came to be a mine of information and inspiration.

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By 1994, I had been teaching choreography for a lot of years. I'd realized, through the articulation and challenge to assumptions that teaching forces, that one of the things I take for granted is individuality of voice - It may require unearthing from received information and self censorship, but never protection or cossetting. I think in fact, the opposite; self is a constraint from which there is no escape, that unique inner world never quits; trying to communicate that and in spite of that, is one of the impulses that leads to art. Many students I had had however; seemed to find the task of being 'true to oneself' a never ending battle, causing agonies about overinfluence, going too close to someone else's work was as if too close to a flame....questions about how and why someone else proceed feel threatening. So I thought, let's have a test -you think you're in danger of losing yourself, try it...put your money where your mouth is, put your practice where your question is, wrasse with it - which I suppose is one of my ideas of the function of making dances in the first place.

So, to a group of students who had worked long enough to be able to identify the inclinations of the others in that group, I gave the task of trying to make something from another's sensibility. Not as a game, or impersonation, no guessing about who was 'doing' whom, but a serious attempt to put one's self into the body/mind of another - try to imagine and make what might come next from that person.

Well, can't be done, proof positive that there IS somebody home, somebody particular: The attempt can take you into areas that you thought you couldn't go, or that might not occur to you, but what you find in going there is that you take yourself. You can never approach someone else's work as you can your own - you can take something of the surface, which can tell you something of the depth, but you can't have gotten to that depth by the same route; you begin to color something even in the act of perception. Misinterpretation is just another way of saying point of view. But the attempt provoked as well the question - 'if it's not possible to steal, what's the problem?'

Sometimes as I examine an issue with more than one group of students, my previously inarticulated thinking comes to feel adamant by virtue of repetition. I then must find out if I believe it as strongly as I begin to imagine I must sound - I have to do battle with it, see if it can hold its end up. I felt an obligation and a curiosity to go the distance with this one.

I approached Tere O'Connor, a good friend, as well as someone whose work I'd known and admired for years; also someone whose work is very different from mine - 'other'. I asked him to come into my rehearsal process for a piece called Little By Little, She Showed Up, and to do what I subsequently called 'wreck' the dance. By this I mean that he entered into the rehearsal process and looked at the piece as though it was to become his from that moment forward, changing it to his liking, imposing his own aesthetic with complete disregard for my intentions. The very things that I would never have imagined being different were the ones that he changed; the experience was akin to culture shock; disorienting, the center of gravity shifted. I then took back the rehearsals, with the same attitude toward his changes. The piece took on some attributes of his aesthetic; directions were opened that otherwise would not have been conceived of, moments exist in the piece for which no one can claim ownership, and yet there is no question of its authorship. As if, in forcing a move that comes from outside oneself, the self imposes itself with more clarity.

In my next piece Don't Go Without Your Echo, I wanted also to address head on what I had begun to think of as an unfortunate territoriality amongst choreographers. Fear of influence on the one hand and fear of being stolen from on the other; have themselves become influences in the community, so;

I began from self consciously borrowed sources, engaging in the transformation that occurred as they filtered through me;

I attempted to force an 'inclusive' aesthetic on myself, in response to so many years of 'fearless' editing..again watching the transformation that takes place from the setting of an unrealistic task; tried in other words, to slip into another's skin, knowing full well the impossibility of the attempt, using it rather as a means to expand my own definitions. And by so doing, I meant to force my own definitions of what's possible to put on stage by searching out the awkward, the uncool, the ridiculous, the 'untrue to oneself', the simply untrue, etc.

Though I have never been interested in interpretation, in keeping with these concerns, I decided to also risk super interpretability by placing neon quotation marks on either of the two upper corners of the back wall, creating the appearance of a flat page, with action sitting inside quote marks, provoking questions of originality and ownership of ideas; to make it appear as if parts had been appropriated, to suggest that any part of any dance, aided by the power of suggestion (be it quotation marks or a title) can be said to be derivative or referential.....

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