Border Country: Looking at Rosemary Butcher's work from a visual arts perspective

Fine art sensibilities

Rosemary Butcher doesn't go to see dance very much, but she visits a lot of galleries. Her formative experience, as other writers in this collection also indicate, was working at Judson Church in the late 1960s and spending time in New York in the early 1970s; her encounters with people like Robert Rauschenberg and Philip Glass, Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer she freely acknowledges as highly significant. She has had, it seems to me, a life-long feeling of identification with fine art practice whilst remaining an impassioned devotee of the infinite possibilities of the human body as a source of expression. This had made for a struggle: firstly, because her own personal demon is that she wants 'to make things' but hasn't, at least until now, quite had the feeling of having done so and, secondly, because her particular approach to choreography has often been placed on the margins of 'dance' as a defined area in terms of funding and support.

A fine art sensibility, then: Butcher pushes at the studio door. She tries to get as close as she can to that feeling of 'making things'. She thinks of her choreographic work, though rooted in improvisation in terms of actual process with the dancers, as being more akin to a painter who scrapes away paint then replaces it with more. The painting is thus achieved by accretion, the traces of previous working at the surface remaining as an accumulation of striving, a weighty evidence ... I was writing recently about the abstract painter George Blacklock, and though I apologise for quoting from myself, I do so because this kind of language seems so appropriate when talking about Butcher's art:

The canvas can be thought of as a kind of photographic paper retaining evidence of the artist's endeavour. The scale of the paintings is appropriate to his own body. The swirling shapes which occur again and again seem likewise to be a record of their making: they are pregnant with movement. Blacklock makes them seem so satisfyingly considered and the product of great care and control yet they possess the obsessive physicality of a doodle, that mysterious vigour of something that has leapt, pristine, from the uniqueness of a single sensibility.[1]

Butcher often refers to 'space' - again, this is a visual artist-like attitude, reminding me of remarks made by Ron Haselden, an artist with whom Butcher has worked on two occasions.[2] Whether he's making work for a gallery or for another place (he has a very established practice as an artist working on public sites) the nature of 'the space' is always the starting point.[3] In the case of Body as Site (1992-3), for example, the dancers were in a sense working with the artists Butcher had brought into the piece; as a totality, dancers, sculptures and choreography together absolutely occupied the space, reaching out and animating every last bit of it - and shared that space with us, the audience. The dancers brought bodies, the artists had left sites. In the first part, when I saw it performed, dancer Henry Montes took up beautiful positions, seeming to cling, upside down, to the walls like a lizard while another, Fin Walker, had her own motif of a scuttling movement along the floor like a creature on the sea bed. To set such anthropomorphic moves against a precise mathematical form and the neatness of the gallery space created a wonderful dialogue, an illuminating collision.

One of the dilemmas with which Rosemary grapples is that on the one hand she wants to reach out to the space, to engage with that architectural framing of choreography, and on the other hand she needs a clarity, a lack of clutter of irrelevant detail. A temporary occupation of space which is likely to be full of such detail (the 'empty warehouse' syndrome, in other words, the kind of space Robert Wilson might be happy to take on) is not for her. Again, her sensitivity to space means that she prefers not to present work in a theatrical environment where space has been zoned; that is to say, where part of it is declared to be for spectacle (the stage) and other parts declared to be invisible (backstage, offstage, blacked out ceilings, etc.), while a third part is for the audience (front of house). All this means, in sum, is that what she really wants is a gallery, the proverbial white space - and that is hard to find. It shouldn't be, but it is: crossover is more talked about than actively embraced. The problems which often arise can be quite technical, problems of practicality: galleries are typically not structured to accommodate real-time based work which needs rehearsal, preparation, fees, ticket sales, etc .... and then Health and Safety starts to loom and fire exits have to be considered ... and then the whole nature of what Butcher wants, which is an intimate contract between watcher and dancer based on a simple democracy of shared space, becomes fraught with difficulty.

Collaboration and related issues

The tradition in fine art is to focus on the individual. Famously Christo 'came out' as a partnership when he and his partner Jeanne-Claude declared, many years after international fame had been achieved, that 'Christo' was both of them, a kind of corporate identity. Since then other 'partnerships' have emerged and some have been very notable, be they twins, siblings, lovers or friends. But in a sense such partnerships remain an individual - separate elements in the finished work are not separately claimed.

Butcher has been noted for her collaborations - not, it has to be said, with other choreographers, but rather with people established in other areas - be it music, architecture or art - particularly, and most notably, art. I want to focus on this in the context of Rosemary Butcher's work because it brings us by another route to the fact that she has chosen to occupy 'art'. I have to admit, too, that collaboration has been a major element in my own practice as a writer working in cinema and television and gives me, I think, an insight into both the positive and negative aspects of it. I think as well that film/video is of particular significance in looking at Butcher's work now, a point I'd like to return to later.

Whatever her doubts - to which I also return later in this chapter - Butcher has, it seems to me, embraced at least to some degree both the stimulus and the restriction of what I would call collaboration, and I hope she will forgive my persistence on the point ... Artists like Anya Gallacio and Ron Haselden, with both of whom Butcher has worked, had well developed practices and certain ways of working, certain preoccupations which accorded with things Butcher herself was wanting to work with and hence her approach to them. With specific regard to Body As Site, she asked them to provide 'sites' in which her dancers could work and, in the case of Gallacio's sculpture particularly, this set up considerable restrictions on the moves which the dancers could make given the clinging nature of the horsehair which covered the floor. Rosemary accepted those restrictions, she worked with them.

Body as Site involved the contributions of four artists and one of them, Paul Eliman, led to what seemed to me a simple but inspired idea which was to place a grid of road markers ('cats' eyes') on the floor of the gallery in which three dancers then performed. Like the game of 'battleships' I played as a child, it was a grid of dots and thus the dancers could make lines, and endlessly shifting ones at that. Perhaps this idea emerged from the kind of mutual searching often characteristic of collaboration?

Collaboration is not easy. It is not friendship, necessarily, though it might encompass it. Rather it is a matter of creative conflict. That is not to imply shouting necessarily, though it might include that. It is rarely, if I may say so, a matter of equality. Personalities have different weights. Indeed one only has to look at the dancers in many of Butcher's works to see those weights in disposition before one's eyes: the duality of the conflict/collaboration often lies very deep in the work. This is powerfully in evidence in Fractured Landscapes, Fragmented Narratives (1997, 2002), which explores, via Butcher's intense engagement with physicality, issues of dependence and trust, revealed vividly by the interactions between two dancers. The image referred to earlier of an upside down figure is found here too, but in an enormously different way: instead of the solitary engagement of one figure with a wall, we have a charged entanglement, with one dancer literally holding/held by the other - feet to shoulders, hands to ankles. I have spoken (nervously) of that particular piece as 'dealing pre-eminently with angoisse'.[4] But Rosemary herself was ready to accept that comment. She has said of her work that 'the physicality is the driving force' but she is nonetheless happy to acknowledge the emotion lying within it and indeed speaks of 'the need for it to be exposed.'

Talking to Rosemary recently, I found that she now doubts 'whether she has ever truly collaborated' - by which she means, I think, that she has never quite been in the position of working with someone on a basis of completely shared endeavour, and more crucially, not in a position of complete equality. But are such collaborations perhaps only made in heaven?

How does any creative work come about? One might pose this as a rather foolishly over-generalised question. Heaven was characterised by Talking Heads as 'a place where nothing ever happens' but let's float into that celestial studio - and there we find the individual creates something and there it is: the painting, the sculpture, the whatever. Art history js a process of reinforcing this paradigm: collaborations go in final chapters, add-ons ... But in the real world with all its mess and muddle and love and hate and pressures and glories, what might one's answer to that foolish question be? We interact, we exchange, we borrow.

Moving towards the future

I see collaboration as a mutual sifting - one person places stuff on the table and another person is sifting through, accepting some things, rejecting others. They are like dealers. This is arguably true too of the working relationship Butcher has with her dancers - particularly so with a piece like Fractured Landscapes. It is such a personal piece, about such intimate communication between the dancers that in re-presenting the piece with different dancers, the piece has to be rebuilt anew, though the essentials remain.

Butcher's inspiration is such, I suspect, that she needs the dancers she works with to help to articulate the ideas which she brings as inchoate

beginnings, to help those ideas 'become form' – to borrow from the title of a famous exhibition.[5] As another artist said to me once, 'We don't know what we're looking for until we find it.' This would mean, if I'm right, that Butcher needs her dancers to be very generous, she needs them to be creative yet ready to surrender that creativity. This is akin to what is required of the actors who work with Mike Leigh.

But collaboration is, as Butcher has said to me, very time consuming. Moreover, it can leave one pent up with the feeling that without it, one might have done better, mistakes might have been avoided. We return to that dealing table if only in our anxious memories, we sift through the stuff again and perhaps we forget the good we took from the other side of that table and our minds instead close tightly over things we let go at the instigation, or so we remember it, of the other partner.

Our culture is increasingly posited on the individual. In the arts, therefore - where marketing is as crucial as it is with everything else - to attach any created thing firmly to an individual is increasingly the preferred option. There has emerged in recent years, in the world of cinema, something known as 'the possessory credit'. That is to say that we find a person's name above the film title with an apostrophe 's' after it, or a phrase like 'A Roman Polanski film'. In the twenty-first century, the biggest issue with which we shall tussle will be intellectual property rights. Billions are spent already on securing patents, on trying to sew up ideas so that they can be controlled and sold as clean goods with no claims being made by others. Our culture is also increasingly occupied with 'being creative'. Everybody wants to be creative: the booming subjects at universities are those which encompass such longings. When these two tendencies come together, we are likely to find tensions. Who is to be credited? Who claims what? At the serious end of the spectrum, there can be heartache, not least because we live in very competitive times, and one's 'credits' become crucial.

Perhaps sensing these things, Butcher wants more and more to be completely in control of her work and she characterises the future she wishes to map out as one in which she might be working more with technicians rather than with people possessing what one might term a definable artistic identity. In other words, she sees collaboration - no matter to what degree she has engaged in it - as something she is leaving behind. She wants, one might say, to push herself closer to that paradigm which has arguably haunted her - the artist in the studio.

Flying solo! These issues might resolve themselves in a shift by this choreographer towards the wonders of computers, so that the 'physicality' she speaks of, that essential inspiration, becomes raw material, captured digitally and then available to be worked on and shaped subsequently. Having myself worked in the theatre, I know that I return to film as my first love because it is something that is built rather than something that happens (even if, as the screenwriter, I'm not that much on site once the footings have gone into the ground). The screened material in Fractured Landscapes may be a clue to where Rosemary is headed. The ice white squares of light projected down on to the floor in Still-Slow-Divided (2002) could be taken as additional signposts - they are as close to cinema screens as one can get, and the dancers enter and leave the frame as if it were film.

This observation puts me powerfully in mind of After the Last Sky (1995), a piece Butcher first showed at the Royal College of Art. Because I thought this such a fine piece, and one which embodied both the dilemmas and the triumphs of Butcher's practice, I have reproduced below my review of it, with the kind permission of Frieze magazine. And though it was several years ago, I still think it might be a pointer to the future...

It is not for me to speculate where Rosemary Butcher is headed. Wherever it is, though, that she does turn out to be headed, she will doubtless take a trail which takes her across difficult terrain, just as she has always done. Doubtless, too, others will not allow the jungle to grow over the path she has taken: they'll be following. In this publication, we are also looking back, in celebration of a career of many years duration, and in that spirit I'd like to conclude by giving the final word to George Blacklock, about whom I wrote above - himself of much the same generation as Rosemary and, indeed, of myself. Much has been accumulated...

An artist's work isn't necessarily about what he or she says it's about. Artists hope their work is about what they want it to be about but there's always an undertow. We are unreliable witnesses ... But we mean everything, we meant it all, and that can be frightening when we look back on it.

Endnotes

1 Meridiano de Greenwich, Madrid and touring UK 2002

2 After the crying and the Shouting (1989), Body as Site(1992-3)

3 Art and Architecture, no.53, 1999

4 Taped interview, March 2002

5 When attitude becomes
form, Berne and London, 1969-70