

TRANSLATION: words < - > movement < - > bits

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(This extract is taken from the author's original manuscript and has not been edited. The definitive version of this piece may be found in *Sensualities/Textualities and Technologies* edited by Susan Broadhurst and Josephine Machon which can be purchased from [www.palgrave.com](http://www.palgrave.com))

Microsoft Word Dictionary Definition: *Writing - Words or other symbols, for example, hieroglyphics, written down as a means of communication.*

When I reflect on the words used to describe the term “writing” in the Microsoft Word Dictionary, I see just how open the meaning of this word is. The definition speaks about what we do with writing but it doesn’t say precisely what writing is – leaving that as broad as possible, symbols that are written down somewhere (page, space, computer chip) as vehicles for communication.

As a choreographer, I use visual symbols to communicate. Significantly, my creation of physical movement begins with language and words. Informed by decades of journal writing, inventing movement, and working with computer systems, my creative practice is a fluid interchange of languages, a series of translations between words, movements and bits. Troika Ranch, the company I co-founded with composer/media artist Mark Coniglio, develops and presents works that use a hybrid of disciplines and techniques. Given this, I find it important to note that for many years our creative process always began with words. A single word [for example, “body”] would be the impetus for an entire evening-length work [*Vera’s Body (1998)*]. In one work, [*The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkruetz (2000)*] the alphabet served as the basis of an algorithmic system used to generate choreography from texts. I frequently examine movement sequences as a playwright would, for the content and meaning of dances as if the dances were spoken monologues. Often our completed performance works will also include literal translations - writing, semaphore, and projected texts that appear on stage for the viewer to read. Part of my long-term creative practice is an investigation of a language-based improvisation, which provides an open system that I’ve successfully transferred into a movement-based improvisation. The conflict that arises between the translation of languages – the written and the physical – is, for me, a creative fission. It is the directness of words that attracts me to them and it is the enigmatic that draws me to movement. A colleague once relayed to me that in his etymological conception of performance, dance began with movement and theater began with text. For me both are necessary and transposable.

To “write” in 21<sup>st</sup> Century terms, seems to mean so much more than what Mr. Webster originally conceived. This Century provides us with a multiplicity of means for communication, the Internet being the obvious means that I am going

to refer to here. With the onslaught of digital reproduction tools and with so many keyboards and perceptions that can touch and alter the initial “symbol” sent out to the world, it is as if our “writing” can be more democratic, less precious, more fleeting, more passionate, less planned, more improvised, more interrupted, more like a conversation with a very large, and often unseen audience/reader. I recently saw a discussion on Charlie Rose about the fact that newspapers in Los Angeles and New York City have been letting go of their film, music and dance critics and that to fill the gap of critical writing, blogs and websites have been popping up all over. The writers on these blogs and websites are just average people interested in the mediums on which they are writing. They don’t have the credentials of the prescribed “experts” that were previously writing for the respected newspapers, however, they have enough passion and interest to want to start and maintain a blog or website and many readers who respect their opinions. Because of this lack of critical writing in the newspapers and the shift to the Web as a place to find information, the role of the “expert” is being called into question and the opinions of many are being considered as valid and useful. I was also recently exposed to Twitter, a social network where the only question is “what are you doing” and the answer must be 140 characters or less. You then get “followed” by other invited or interested Twits. I find this fascinating because the point of Twitter is to be in conversation with lots of others. Just that. Spontaneous, down and dirty, and instant – reach out and touch and be touched. There is something immediate and self-governing about this kind of communication. Nobody is excluded. All can speak about a topic. Anyone can be an expert. I will come back to more about the importance of this later.

As a maker of live performance, I tend to work in conversation with a limited few, at the opposite end of the continuum of communication that I described as happening in places like Twitter. I work slowly and thoughtfully in a closed environment and with chosen experts. This is a very different process to the way I share my work outside of the studio and stage space at this point in my career. For the public sharing of my work I take advantage of the (relative) democracy and access of the Internet. I post videos on YouTube and have a MySpace and FaceBook page for Troika Ranch so that my work can be viewed, discussed and shared with the multitudes of interested people representing many walks of life, with varying expertise and perspectives. In essence, there are two kinds of writing that I engage in around my work; the making and the sharing.

The Making: *A description of two Troika Ranch works where significant procedural shifts occurred in my process, each of which demonstrates different aspects of my translation of words to movement to bits*

I think in words. I feel in images. I get up and make movement from those words and images. A computer then touches those movements. Computers are numbers. There are already a few layers of translations of symbols going on

here, a few kinds of communicative writings in progress. Language is born of action, witness, recording. What inspired the first pictures and turned them into words? I can only imagine that it was early man's desire to be connected to others and unlock the contents of his own mind and body. Symbols were first made to encapsulate complete ideas. We use single symbolic gestures that mean complete ideas – peace, fuck you, ok, and thumbs up - for example. And there are all those little “emoticons” and ascii symbol pictures that provide us with a minimal way to add an emotional framework to the words we write in chats and emails. Neither word or movement or image can speak a whole.

I have always seen dance and word-based language as two sides of a coin, the expressiveness of each being in their context and presentation and not in and of their discreet parts. Meaning does not come from phonemes but from collections of phonemes that have been trained to mean something. There is no universal repetition of movements between makers of dance that allow a general public to grasp the exactness of an implied meaning. Therefore each choreographer is creating his/her own set of phonemes that are organized into a kind of language. In dance there is no solid signifier or signified (as in language) yet I believe these are always implied, and that audiences try to find and understand them. Equally important to the equation is that dance makers can't help but provide them. In my opinion, humans always try to make meaning out of their experience, even when the experience is not necessarily trying to convey a specific story or emotion. We can't help it. We seek to communicate. We are not abstract. We can be poetic and can find multiple and discordant meanings in single events but we seek meaning constantly. We are narrative. We are the meaning of narrative.

My work with Troika Ranch over the past 20 years has been a series of narrative expressions made through a translation of symbols via words, via the body (gesture), via the projected image, via computerized systems and via the stage. Since 1987 my collaborator Mark Coniglio and I have been in quest of a hybrid language comprised of these symbolic elements. I realize now that I believe humans are already fluent in hybrid language. We experience our world on many levels at once through the myriad symbols that surround us and we decode those symbols with all of the senses available to us. As an artist I simply try to mirror the fact that we humans do this already. I attempt to assist in the *understanding* that this multiplicity and hybridization already exist in our communication with each other.

### ***"RAPPING" THE BODY***

As a concrete example of how the translation of words to movements to bits occurs in my work, let me go back to 1990. While living in Los Angeles, Mark and I studied “performance art” techniques with theater director Scott Kellman. One of the exercises we learned is called “Rap” and is a series of instructions that allow you to continuously speak improvisationally for a very long time. While it took me some weeks to become comfortable with the idea of speaking with my mouth rather than my body, once I did, I found an enormous potential for directly

tapping into my subconscious mind and applying what I found there to my artistic practice. I used Rap in its original form, as spoken language, in several Troika Ranch works between 1990 and 2000. I used the technique in two ways: improvised on stage and as a means to develop monologues, dialogues, projected texts and overarching themes during the creative process. In 2001 I had the insight that the “train” that I was on with words while rapping, was the same train that I was on in my movement improvisations. I began to apply the specific instructions used in "Rap", which allowed me to speak for lengths of time, to my movement improvisation practice in order to understand, codify, and teach what I was already doing.

The first time I used this technique abundantly as the basis for choreography in a full work was in the creation of our 2003 work *Future of Memory*. I call this practice “Instant Choreography” and the rules of the game are as follows:

#### Instant Choreography Elements

**WHOLE BODY:** Utilize the whole body while containing it and staying open to potential.

**ENERGY:** Bring energy to it.

**CYCLE IT:** Arbitrarily grab a small bit and cycle it. Explore it. When informed change via Shift, Transform or Develop\*.

**BECOME IT:** Arbitrarily or when informed, first person it. What is it like? What are you? Who are you? What are you doing? Explore that.

**SPEED IT UP:** Arbitrarily or when informed, speed up your tempo without losing energy and commitment.

**SLOW IT DOWN:** Arbitrarily or when informed, slow down your tempo without losing energy and commitment.

**RHYTHM:** Seek the rhythm of what you’re doing and play that.

**BREAK THE LINEAR LINE:** Arbitrarily change the type/quality of movement you are doing. Give up on it.

**FOLLOW THE LINEAR LINE:** Stay with the type/quality of movement that you are doing. Don’t give up on it.

\*Shift: An instant pop into another form. Transform: Let the cycle evolve into something new. Develop: Go deeper into the “intention” of the cycle.

The Four Considerations:

Dance Ability (All you know about dancing)  
Changes (Shift, Transform, Develop)  
Qualities & States (Textures, Tones, Imagined Realities)  
You Now (Your Life, Your Memory, Reality)

It has always been clear to me that when using a sensory system such as the MidiDancer (Footnote 1), that improvisation is crucial for the dancer to truly take advantage of the media at her disposal and “play” that media freely in the moment. In *Future of Memory* each dancer was equipped with a MidiDancer and now I had a method for improvisation with the device that unified the creative individuality of the members of the company. The piece centered on the social need to memorialize and how individual and collective memories fade and change over time. This theme lent itself to the constantly shifting elements of the improvisational practice, as we were literally *in the moment* - defining, making and altering our recollection of a moment and the work at large, as we moved through it.

I still use this system regularly as a pure improvisational practice and as a means to generate choreography. I improvise, videotape myself, bring the material into iMovie and then select the most interesting moments. I place the selected fragments next to each other and edit them together to make a new phrase for the dancers to learn. I do this because I am interested in the conversation I am having with myself in the moment of improvising. I do not like to plan or organize too much. I like to stay connected to my subconscious mind and let it come through my body. This makes it hard for me to be a writer (you may find that all too apparent here). My nature is one of spontaneity. I live and move in the moment, and I want to capture that essence. This desire, I think, relates to what chat networks and streaming video web sites are also trying to tap into - this moment now.

### *"LOOPING" A PHRASE*

I love the edit because it is humanly impossible to reproduce. The attempt at achieving an edit in real time/space movement causes first, a disruption of reality in the mind and body and, second, a shift which forces the dancer to make an individual choice of how to physically get from one place to the next. The dancers bring themselves into the phrase in this moment in an unprepared, unexpected way. In our work there is also a second translation that occurs through the computer when a dancer's actions are observed and turned into a series of numbers via a sensory suit like the MidiDancer or with a camera tracking system such as EyesWeb (Footnote 2). The relationship between the mover and the media on the stage become linked in time but there is no automatic linkage to what is being signified by either the movement or the resulting image or sound.

One of my tasks as a choreographer is to highlight the links between the movements and the imagery and sound that is conjoined with the movement. I often describe this connection as the *metaphoric* linkage, it is the fact that the

mover and the media ARE linked that is the real message. The nature of the linkage itself must sit well within the overarching context of the work I am making. What I mean is that the nature of the linkage plays as big a part in the meaning as the images and movements themselves. If a dancer is being tracked by a camera, then there is a kind of surveillance going on that can not be ignored in terms of content. If they are wearing a sensory suit, then there is the addition of the "exoskeleton" to be taken into consideration. Each kind of system also requires a certain kind of choreography to make it function. I choose the kind of sensing system based on the kind of metaphoric meaning I want to add into the piece side by side with the kind of choreography I want to see and use.

A language translation occurs when the movements sensed by the electronic systems become data that can be processed as bytes/numbers. The language of computers is numbers. Only that. The most exquisite gesture is reduced to a string of zero's and one's and it is up to the artist to re-expand those two numbers back into meaningful images, sounds and connections. Troika Ranch has spent 20 years grappling with this phenomenon.

This string of translations occurs in all of my works but in 2007 another layer of translation was added when Troika Ranch began developing our current work entitled *loopdiver*. In our initial discussions of the work, we decided to abandon our frequently successful process of using a word as impetus. For *loopdiver* we wanted to begin with a physical process and let the meaning be born from that. Out of our rehearsals we developed a new three-step system that combines a number of languages and translations.

- 1) The dancers and I improvise using the *Instant Choreography* elements;
- 2) We video tape the improvisations, bring them into iMovie and put segments together to make phrases in exactly the way I described above;
- 3) Translation through technology: Mark created a special looping tool inside his Isadora® software (Footnote 3). The tool allows me to bring the movement material into the computer and impose complex loops on it.

A loop is a construct of audio and film technology and has been expanded upon and made more easily usable by *digital* technology. A loop differs from a natural cycle in that such cycles (e.g., the seasons) always vary to some degree, and a loop does not. To illustrate a digital loop, imagine a recording of someone speaking the word "machine." A computer can generate loops from the individual sounds that make up the complete word in myriad ways; growing loops (m ma mac mach), shrinking loops (machine machin machi mach), sliding loops (mac ach chi hin), etc. Once these loops have been applied to the movement material, the performers then attempt to learn the computer-generated looped phrases, a task that is daunting but critical to conveying the essence of the piece (it turns out). These strict, unrelenting loops serve as a powerful metaphor for the loops of

the mind, the prisons of repetition that occur when we experience a violent or traumatic event in our lives. Or even the simple result of living 40 years and having done a lot of things over and over again. By imposing the computerized looped material onto the dancers and pitting it against their inability to precisely perform the loops, the situation itself causes a stringent reverberation out of which they must dive and transcend. This is the theme that has become the cornerstone of this work. We could not have arrived at this thematic positioning without going through the rigors of the physical process first. Success.

A “loop technique” is emerging from this process that demands a physical virtuosity based on several technical skills:

- 1) The Edit; a true edit requires no acceleration or deceleration on the part of the body - humanly impossible but the attempt provides an example of dealing with an external violent force.
- 2) Molecular Pause; a tiny but perceivable full body stop that exaggerates the end and beginning points of a looped moment.
- 3) Backwarding; identifying the reverse initiations of movement.
- 4) Speedshifting; identifying the various increments of potential speed and being able to move between them instantaneously.
- 5) The 4I's Improvisation; Imitate (try to loop like the computer), Internalize (put loop state in your mind/body/psyche), Inspiration (treat the loops you feel and see as a score for other movement invention), and Ignore (don't loop).

In addition to the technical aspects of looping, and because of the physical process, we have unearthed important psychological facets. After weeks of the dancers learning looped material from the computer, we realized that a psychological and physical “violence” has been imposed. As in previous works, we again used “Rap” as a means of tapping into subconscious contexts and subtexts. In the dancer’s solo monologue sessions each spoke about violence, trauma, anger, disintegrating bodies, not being able to breath, change/don’t change, the flight of birds (a symbol of freedom), all leading to the deeper psychological content. After synthesizing these experiences into the overarching theme of violence, we discussed how this violence reverberates through the body and psyche until one has the realization, strength and fortitude to break the patterns that set in. Transcending the violence is the focus for developing the “*loop divers*”. The *loop divers* are performers, who over time, and with increasing frequency, destroy the loops. They are the source of unpredictable turbulence that force change for the inhabitants of this world. Any performer can assume the role of a *loop diver* under a set of instructions with which to redirect the action. As in any kind of recovery process, a community can provide an environment to assist, but it is only the individual who can make the necessary break from

pattern. The *loop diver* is the key to transcendence and change.

My next step choreographically is to explore the use of “perpetual” motion in contrast to the intensely looped first half of the work. The interruptions of the “*loop divers*” will intensify until the world shifts into a perpetually moving, non-repeating commotion of activity using some of my Instant Choreography improvisation elements. At first this shift feels like freedom and resolve but over time it becomes clear that by never repeating an action we again find the performers in a kind of stasis.

Thus far we are not using any kind of sensory technology in *loopdiver* to track the dancers and manipulate media. Instead, the bits and bytes exist inside of the choreography itself - alongside the words and the movements. All encapsulated into one hybrid expression.

Now, more than likely, none of my elaborate processes are visible to an audience. They only see the physicality of what’s in front of them. So, again, there a translation; my intention to their viewing. I appreciate and accept that individuals walk into the theater with their own history and have a singular perspective from which to view my work. It is only in their mind that any real communication, and therefore meaning, happens.

The Sharing: *How I communicate my work to a larger, undefined community on the Web.*

Let me return to the conversation I began about Twitter and the Web. Of course here I am writing for an academic journal, a chosen set of experts, which is a fine place to share. But usually, at present, I share my work through vehicles like facebook and YouTube and, eventually, maybe even Twitter. As I have mentioned, the creation process of my work occurs in a closed space with my chosen experts and takes quite a long time. But how I choose to communicate my work to the public now includes the open, anti-expert, instantaneous platform of social networking sites. When Troika Ranch began to make *loopdiver* we decided to draw on the Web for a kind of immediate experience. We wanted to reach more people, to get in-the-moment feedback from various kinds of people with various kinds of perspectives and expertise, and to join in the on-going dialog that is turned on even when your Internet Airport isn’t.

We made a MySpace page for the project and began to blog about our process daily. We were in fact in the moment of *creating* the process. The blogging was a liberating experience because it allowed me to freely and immediately reflect on that day’s progress. It was an improvisational approach to discussing my work. To fulfill my desire to stay in the moment as I do with my Instant Choreography, these writings were not thought over, edited or scrutinized before posting. Just posted and read and responded to by others. Several people asked deeper

questions and requested explanations of some of the obscure and specific elements of our process. These questions caused us to ask ourselves deeper questions, come up with clearer definitions of the specifics and to reflect on the process in the moment we were in. These interchanges were exciting and broadened our creative discourse. They brought more voices into our closed system putting us into “Instant Conversation” with a more general public and bringing the wisdom gained back into our process in the moment of being in it. The blogs also provided me with a documented reflection of my process that I could refer to days or months later. Not unlike the journals I had kept since I was a child only now they were public and fluid. Looking back on those words nearly a year later brought me right back to that moment in the process, which allowed me to approach the process of *now* with information from *then*, a translation from physical process to words (writing) back to physical process again.

In addition we posted video clips of *loopdiver* as it was progressing on YouTube. We received many comments from the faceless audiences of the Internet that provided us with insights on how the material was being perceived and reflections on them as tiny “films” in their own right. Troika Ranch has not gone so far as to willingly put *all* our materials on the Web, but we are sharing clips of our performances and films and process more freely. In the beginning there was fear. Our sacred, expert world was now open to scrutiny and plagiarism by the masses. When we first put up a clip of a prototype of a film we were making, we felt a certain amount of ownership to the concept and techniques and didn’t want any of it to be stolen from us. It would seem, at this late date though, that there are no new ideas, only one’s individual take on or re-contextualizing of the ideas that exist already. At this stage of my career, it now feels more valuable to me to allow people who might never see my actual performances or films to be able to experience some version of them rather than keep them from experiencing any part of them due to our own fear of being copied. Who hasn’t been copied? Didn’t somebody important once say that plagiarism is the highest form of flattery? And in the end, by putting Troika Ranch’s work out on the web, we have received more feedback and praise and criticism than if we limited our audience to only those who had the privilege to get their butts into a theater chair.

In summary, Troika Ranch performances, which themselves consist of a translation of words/movement/bits, now get “written down” to the space of the Web to be, in turn, written about, blogged on, danced from, stolen, experienced and Googled again and again. As a society, we are all engaged in endless translation, a never-ending loop of transcribed symbols into multiple meanings. Ours is a hybridized language and one that we already speak fluently, despite transformations occurring instantly and constantly during this first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Each mark we add to our alphabet is a symbol written down to communicate. These creations are what I love and work with - the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’s writings which are for me the language of the body, of technology and of art.

Footnotes:

1) MidiDancer, created by Mark Coniglio in 1989, is a costume embedded with up to 8 flexion sensors that wirelessly transmits movement data to a computer.

2) Eyesweb is a camera-based tracking software created by Antonio Camurri from Italy.

3) Isadora is a graphic programming language developed by Mark Coniglio that provides real-time manipulation of digital media, [troikatronix.com](http://troikatronix.com).