

The secrecy of consensus and the conspiracy of decision: Public Recordings' *relay*

I would like to open by proposing the following thesis for *relay*: "the individual is in a constant state of negotiation vis-a-vis a socio-cultural role, made all the more difficult by the perpetual unfixeness of that context and the inevitability of one's symbiotic effect on it, whether acting in compliance or non-compliance with the perceived order."

Please allow me to illustrate.

Figure 1: A group of birds

Positing that the collective noun confers the predominant attitude of the species, whether a gaggle of geese or a parliament of owls.

Imagine a group of birds flying in a loose pattern, one determined bio-evolutionarily. One bird is at the front of the flock, suffering the wind drag on behalf of the others and seeming to dictate direction; a second later, they are moving in another direction; one has dropped away from the lead and another has taken its position. Without any individual dictating the shift unilaterally, the whole has reconfigured itself.

The word "relay" proposes the handing off of status, or signification, or programmatic information (if a verb, as in communications); a group of individuals in a chain of other, similarly-tasked groups (if a noun, as in economics); a triggering and re-triggering (if a noun, as in electronics); an athletic contract (if a noun, as in sport ["when the baton hits your hand, you run"]). We can therefore think of Ame Henderson's choreography in this case as a dramatic appropriation of biological models, and a sociological repurposing of dance vocabulary.

With *relay*, Henderson is developing the Cageian idea of the artist as a creator of a system by which the thing-event is made, rather than a surgeon who manicures the thing-event itself. The relevant model is therefore of biological evolution rather than construction. Of course, this is the secret shame of all live performance; there is always discrepancy, always a shift, between performances. We often pay lip-service to this idea by suggesting that, say, a play will feel different from one night to the next. However, we don't really mean this as anything but rhetorical; unless cautioned otherwise, we expect performers to know their lines, to provide them in the same order and within the same story from night to night. We may console ourselves with the thought that some performance is improvisational, with spontaneity and the impromptu being paramount, but that's also not what Henderson is after.

The way *relay* challenges these existing models is that rather than viewing mutability as something to be minimized or placed at the core of the work, Ame Henderson has made our discomfort with mutability—as audiences and performers—the focus of her practice. Just when a pattern starts to emerge, it starts also to mutate into a new pattern.

Figure 2: The purported similarity between zen and jazz

Some traditions recognize that we need the imposition of contrivance in the short term in order to be freed of contrivance in the long term; or, the study of doing things artificially results in our doing them naturally.

As the performers on stage (for indeed the term “dancer” here is suspect, as the hierarchy it implies is part of what this work seeks to problematize) negotiate the presence of their own bodies with those of their collaborators, the audience, and the built environment, they slide in and out of what we might perceive as patterns. This may lead us to consider conformity as the subject of the work, but it’s about conformity only to the extent that agnosticism is about God; Busby Berkley can have the totalitarianism of conformity—*relay* is about democracy.

Here, paradoxically, the group is mutable while each performer is indispensable. Because of Henderson’s conceptual approach to dance—and indeed by raising the very subject of “belonging” as centrally as *relay* does—the individual character of each performer is made profoundly evident. Consider Fancello’s frequent upward gaze, in a gesture alternately of denial and desire; Jensen’s facial expression that tells us just how badly he wants to be fully here, now; Filgate’s noble intensity that is both wolf-like and administrative; the lithe, Grecian quality of Forté’s postures and stature; Ferlin’s hard contours and wiry, expressive dramatism; Pallomina’s alternation between ecstatic springing and mournful collapse; Ewald’s paradoxical combination of athletic expressivity and vulnerability; Dembski’s visible determination to merge with an existing process as a deeply invested latecomer; Cheneau’s constant, not-quite-dejected pacing serving to illustrate his structural role as the troupe’s metronome; and Craven’s hunched position in the pit, at once onstage (with “them”) and offstage (with “us”).

Some of *relay*’s performers lead overtly, and others more subtly (or subliminally). The tracing of these patterns of influence and their constant presence and their ability to surprise us—even after extensive, close observation—are at the core of Henderson’s undertaking. It is therefore also how we find ourselves encountering the work, trying to form behavioural analyses that must, by their nature, adapt to new evidence as the work progresses. For the performers, as for us, the cognition and the intuition come in waves.

Figure 3: The mise en abyme

Originally a heraldic practice in which a shield or coat of arms is placed in the middle of a larger coat of arms; the smaller changes the meaning of the larger, while the larger contextualizes the smaller.

relay is metaterpsichorean. While it can easily be argued that it is “about” social relationships (warm) or “about” the negotiation of those relationships (warmer) it employs movement-based strategies while taking those strategies as its subject (hot, hot, hot). It confronts dance methodologies, histories, and typologies with no less direct a form of address than their verbal revisitation through anecdote and their re-enactment at a Chinese Whispers level of remove.

As viewers, we are placed in a space of negotiation from the beginning of the show... or before it, depending on what you choose as the beginning. We encounter the performers in the lobby without knowing who they are. We enter the performance space and, upon realizing that we are now supposed to be watching something, we begin to adjust our own bodies out of (or into) the sightlines of other viewers or performers. We become aware of things like proximity, direction, influence, pressure, absence, irritation, comfort, even if we do not name them consciously at the time. This encounter foreshadows the content of the work. It offers a direct experience of the tentative, unspoken collaboration that forms the performance that follows. We see echoes of it throughout, in the Ouija-like use of a table, or the collective recollection of performances past, or the web of hands that builds a chair-tower.

I would like to close by offering humble advice to the reader who has not yet seen *relay*: go into it curious. Approach the work like a citizen, approach it democratically—enter the room without having made up your mind. Appreciate, in the work and in your experience of the work, its inevitable and perpetual negotiation.

—Lee Henderson, July, 2010