

CAROL BROWN

# SIGHT LINES

## OVERWRITING PERSPECTIVES

*"My body is everywhere: the bomb which destroys my house also damages my body insofar as the house was already an indication of my body."*

–Jean-Paul Sartre, BEING AND NOTHINGNESS ❁ **CHAMBER HISTORY** If all work can be said to begin from a condition of homesickness, I have for many years improvised my way out of this longing and nostalgia, by a process of being domiciled in the act of performance. As a movement artist, making a home for myself in the apparatus of performance means creating a fragile shelter, a contingent space for the staging of corporeal presence. Performance becomes location but not destination; an arrival here, here and here; an assemblage of soft-core actions and de-familiarized behaviors; and a collection of arterial routes. The body becomes a place of passage and a conduit sequenced by the trajectories of the history of spaces. A dance becomes a series of grasped moments and the flows that occur in the intervals between bodies and spaces as bodily *stages*.

To the touring artist the stage is a temporary arena, a working environment, existing within the time of fit-ups and get-outs, like a shelter it is not presumed to be lasting or enduring, it is a contingent space. Each form of staging enables a different form of incorporation, for the corporeal subject is shaped according to the contours of the built environment and the practices of space it enables. The stage becomes a sheltered housing system, a site for the dehiscence of the stable subject and a platform for vaga bondage. I am constantly on the move. ❁ **CONTINGENT SPACES** How are we installed in the world? As a movement artist I build structures in which to site and install corporeal presence. Some of these structures contest traditional assumptions about what a stage is, others work within the boundaries of the convention to de-familiarize it. I use performative presence to explore the limits of the body within fabricated spaces. As a contemporary artist for whom touring is an essential means of survival, I am forced to negotiate my inventions within the space of the given, the 'always already' conditions of perspectival thought and the traditions of theatrical staging. Against such conditions, I fall into ditches [**Nerve**]. I balance on shelving systems [**Shelf Life**]. I make a machine house [**Machine for Living**]. But I cannot exorcise the deep print of theatrical space from my skin, for deep binding is involved. ❁ The theatre is an inside without an outside. It assumes the significance of a universalized model of space and encourages the forced perspective of the paranoid. While acknowledging the tempo of history within the staging of dance as representation I am seeking to develop work which foregrounds the simultaneity of perceptions accreted through shifts in temporality and spatial thought. In this sense the moving body becomes a repository of a plurality of spaces, a linkage between theatrical presence, presentation and signification and a signpost pointing to a range of different kinds of spaces. It is as much a resistance as a negotiation.

<i>black box space</i>	<i>penetrate</i>
<i>white cube space</i>	<i>float</i>
<i>monumental space</i>	<i>disinter</i>
<i>corner space</i>	<i>hide</i>
<i>hair space</i>	<i>disrupt</i>
<i>holy space</i>	<i>hand</i>
<i>factory space</i>	<i>articulation</i>
<i>virtual space</i>	<i>intertwining</i>
<i>street space</i>	<i>cut</i>
<i>transit space</i>	<i>passage</i>
<i>perspectival space</i>	<i>deep map</i>
<i>tower space</i>	<i>dive</i>
<i>opera house space</i>	<i>placement</i>

<i>park space</i>	<i>interference</i>
<i>desk space</i>	<i>play</i>
<i>screen space</i>	<i>compose</i>
<i>body space</i>	<i>dissect</i>

Though I continue to feel the collective weight of the past in paradigms of performance which reinscribe the tempo of history in perspectival space, I reach towards a counter-spatial project which cuts against the normalizing tendencies of modernist, universalist and hygienic space. Thus the theatre space is both a physical stage for the meeting of bodies, and an ideological site for the intersection of bodies of thought. ❁ **DISAPPEARANCES** Her appearance is not separated from her materiality, the theatre becomes her: In this text I am going to speak between performances within theatrical and non-theatrical contexts as a way to expose the shifting territories and investments of their body/site relations and the axes of power these differing contexts of performance give rise to. These perenigrations will focus on the relationships between figure and ground to create an interplay between body, home, city and stage. This work can be considered an attempt to make transparent the body boundary so as to stimulate greater fusion between personal and environmental events.

**URBAN DANCE ONE—PERFORMANCE EDGE OR HOW THE CITY GRAZES THE BODY DANCED**  
 In Opera Romana Iasi, Romania (20 March 2002) dancing flesh text [Flesh.txt]: Strangers assemble quietly beside me, in the wings, in the margins of this deep space, watching, they are also whispering. I can hear them more than I can hear myself. A woman called stage manager sits poised, expectant in a glass cubicle on the corner of the stage under a soft light. Her hands are empty there is no script, no score, no set of instructions. The audience is distant. There is an ocean between us; A pit without an orchestra and no conductor to suture the spaces of this ancient model, this house for the body as representation, as sign; for this space is divided according to the order of the same, it is upstage and downstage, foreground and background, onstage and offstage, it is going black and lights up [little city]. ❁ I experience the city of Iasi through its theatre: The Opera Romana, a late 19th century neo baroque building in the Viennese style. Small and perfectly formed according to classical proportions, its fan-shaped auditoria elaborately decorated in gold stucco provides a rich architectural platform for our bodily stages. This theatre is a persistent monument within an otherwise volatile urban space. Elsewhere, there are communist era concrete shells and external wooden scaffolding propping up ancient Romanian orthodox churches. This theatre is like



and unlike other theatres: It is in the center, the place of maximum visibility and the place of intersecting stories. But it is also on the cultural periphery, in a place stranded by history and the exhaustion of ideology. We experience the anomalies of being guest artists from London, here to represent some alternative stylizations of flesh to the centrality of the classical; to displace the center with some culture from the margins but within a cultural economy described by local artists as, 'periferic' and a province of global capitalism (Alexandru Polgar, The "Cultural Periphery" as province of global capitalism, in [periferic:5] THE PERIFERIC BIENNIAL 2001, pp.156-159.) ❁ We engage in an exercise in cultural translation, trying to negate the transcultural tendencies of the theatre with its universalism and 'always already,' by jamming the discourse of sex, dressing the stage with narratives of dogs, divas and dancers. But in this overwriting of perspectives, we experience the rub of contrasting ideologies and cultural economies. In this meeting of movements and

places across history and culture, our small bodies amplified by the apparatus of performance take on an iconic status at odds with the counterspatiality to which we ascribe. Fault lines figure as prominently as sight lines. ❁ The problem remains how to suture the interior lived spatiality, inscribed through our gesture-words, to this inside-without-an-outside of a theatrical ruin. I look outside to its edge and opening and shifting ground, and contemplate the slippage between place and site. ❁ The entry from the outside befits the grandeur inside. A sparse row of trees and some stone dead fathers of the city form an avenue. We bypass a group of artist-hustlers selling cut-price oil paintings to occasional strangers. The edges of the facade of the opera house are crumbling into a moat of sludge which encircles the theatre as site. [In London, much later, I will clean my shoes of these traces]. ❁ There are some huts for migrant workers in the garden. From my dressing room I can watch homeless and sick dogs wander between these huts. From a distance the silhouette is baroque exuberance from up close it is a crumbling museum of a theatrical past. The theatre as survivor, of post-Stalinist totalitarianism and the existential mutations of post-communism, becomes a meeting point for histories and bodies. The ground slips beneath my feet. In this performance without a conductor the body becomes a hinge, an articulation between inside and outside, here and over there, past and present, east and west. In this double gesture, you should be a bridge for me, as I should be one for you. But these bridges are not the same our relationship puts power into play. For though we denounce the tyrants of the past we deny the ideological tyranny which continues to circulate between us [Luce Irigaray, *TO BE TWO*, (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), p. 43]. ❁ *A man called Machinist wears a blue uniform and stands in the lighting booth at the back of the theatre with a sequenced array of dials and dimmers. He lives off in one month what we are provided with in one day as per diems courtesy of the British Council. (Later that day I will be asked to supplement the workers wages.) A woman in a tracksuit, a former Olympic gymnast, will offer us back massages in the basement of the hotel's swimming pool. A girl in the workshop the following day will lie exhausted on her back, she tells me she has tuberculosis.* ❁ **URBAN DANCE TWO—SHIFTING GROUND**  
**Ocean Skin** [the body swept by waves and multiple fluctuations becomes a theatre of murmurs, pulses, jarrings, power surges and lunges] I am making my breath audible by breathing into a microphone concealed inside my jacket as I make circles by running around the perimeter of the stage. I am running fast drawing energy into the center as if dragging these silent spectators with me or into me. I am also angling myself to the contours of the stage, glancing the sidelights so as to catch the edge of the visible. The space splinters, I ride concentrated pockets of turbulent air to the point of exhaustion. The theatre fragments. Into this poetics of

exhaustion the fixity of the surrounding space, its persistence as a stable object loosens its hold. Head to the floor with legs balanced behind, one elbow as a prop and wrist holding all, I become a levered fulcrum, *a mechanic of fluids*. Flesh, that “invisible-linked signature of the living” becomes the developer [Rebecca Schneider, “Performance Remains” in *PERFORMANCE RESEARCH* 6(2), pp. 100-108, (Taylor and Francis Ltd. 2001), p. 104]. I no longer remember where up is, where down is, how to be up-right, how to be-have. Turning into the center of the stage I am holding a course and I am on the verge of losing control. I slip up. The floor is greasy with the accumulated traces of the past. Last night, Bizet’s *CARMEN* was here, does she linger in the curious gazes of these silent bystanders, in the empty hands of the silent stage manager, and in the unexpectedness of this? ❁ A thin line stretches from wing to wing in front of me, a horizon line beyond to inscribe the lifeline within. *We tug the tension wire between these two invisible lines in performance towards the vanishing point.* The narcissistic subject is at home here in her dark chamber. But the underside of her constructions reveals her bruised and torn skin which stains the floor. In this moment she hovers between a narcissistic identification with the role of performer and a strangely powerful will to lose power experienced as the loss of her body. ❁ “*What remains to be given is a perspective to perspective itself.*” –Luce Irigaray, *TO BE TWO*

**[LEAKAGE]** In the theatre, through its walls and surfaces and frameworks for seeing, we enter a pictorial world governed by geometrical order and classical ideals. Into this space there is an irreversible asymmetry of flesh for frontal perspective assumes the impossibility of seeing things from the other side. Blind faith, we enter the dialogue of performance in a state of suspension—suspension of disbelief, suspension of time in being plunged into ‘going black.’ An aporia which leaves us blind to the ending. How will it end? ❁ The perspectival setting as a visual metaphor for transcendence does not hold sway. We are writing against the traditional unity of place. I am searching out spaces which cannot be seen, dancing beyond the ending, escaping the imaginary totalizing fixity of the eye/I, for the everyday has a strangeness to it. This strangeness surfaces only in split second moments of recognition and incisive disturbances it is an undercurrent outlined against the visible in fractiousness. History has ignored this seepage and continued blind to its accumulated residue. For the theatre persists as a stable object whilst the world changes around it. ❁ **MORE HISTORY** I spend three years undoing the accretions of ‘Woman as sign’ within the boundaries of theatrical space, I spend the next five attempting to push, prod and disintegrate the intrinsic authority of perspectival vision within this body of work.





**URBAN DANCE THREE—PRIVATE ROOM** *Machine for Living* Greenwich Borough Hall, London 9 November 2001. there are several partial rooms. they are porous. the performers move from room to room. they angle themselves around the edges, they press into and create small vibratory moments of tension enlivening dead steely surfaces. they are interpenetrated by light. animation creates shadows on the walls and floors extending their morphology into an ecology of perception. each Other presses into and holds compressing skin and enfolding in fleshy exchanges. the space binds them together in their collective fantasies. there is no front, no back, no inside and outside. rooms which unfold and concertina. sight/site lines mutate as we move in a constant dance of sensual unrest. here there is attraction and repulsion. ❁ I'm all yours say the performers all of my sidedness and surfaceness and I forfeit my authorial position to your grazing gazes. one body becomes a meeting place for another; a shelter for a whole community of others. outside the Law. ❁ being in close proximity the body becomes a hinge, a fold disrupting concepts of vision based upon transcendental perspective. I feel the brush of air against skin. in this close hushed space air compresses and is agitated between us. sweat flickers leaving a luminous flux.



**[ENFLESHING]** In dancing we flesh out space with our gestures and gesture words. We alternate between movement and posture, our doubled vision simultaneously dissolving and constituting in an oscillation between memory and invention. Something supplementary to my body, a corner, a word, a sound is recomposed in flesh, and an interior becomes shaped by an exterior. The organic space of the body blends with the space in which we perform, hence our bodies are never reduced to a state of naturalism and we are dressed even when naked. The body provides the organic tissue through which the city is experienced in the theatre.

**URBAN DANCE FOUR—POROSITY** *Sleeping in Public* ZKM, Zagreb, 9 June 2002. The history of dance is contingent upon the history of spacing. We alter the depth of the space and we change the performance. In Zagreb, I estimate the distance between you and me, mapping out the performance, measuring the fit between body and ground, its geo-metry in traveling from one end to another end. I sit in the empty auditorium and look at the blank stage. Outside, Croatian football supporters are jubilant at their World Cup victory against Italy and occupy the streets and squares with spontaneous parties. Inside, I test your capacity for vision from here, here and here. There is a power in this geometry, which Foucault notes as being mapped to oligarchic structures. The body-building anthropomorphism, as an originating point of central projection is placed in question by devices which extend, fragment and disembody. The performer hovers between narcissism and its opposite in her displacement of the powers of speech. ❁ How do I sound? I reassure myself that when you are here my voice will not sound so thin, it will deepen because your body will absorb it, thicken with it, we will be in sound. I imagine how your bodies will fill the thinness of my sounds as I attempt to speak. A shotgun mike is placed on the floor between us. It stands on the stage apart from my body but unseen. The house becomes flooded with the body of sound. But I am disembodied for nothing attaches to my clothes, to my skin. "How can I touch you if you are not there?" (Luce Irigaray, *TO BE TWO*, 2000, p. 96). What is the relationship between the you who exists in space and the voice inside my thoughts? Our hands touch without taking hold (this is a performance after all) and I am becoming porous, subject to leakage between body and ground.

**[INDIVISIBLE]** In the staging of our performance the light upon us does not disclose us it caresses, different gradients, different degrees of dimensionality. This distance between us allows attraction without consummation (a flirtation of sorts). Were we to dissolve this boundary there would be touching but no sensing. For

we do not yet know how to look at or listen to each other attached as we are to a centered gaze, a fixed sight. As Irigaray reminds us, we still have everything to know, like how to leave space and air around and within the other. ❁ *I look at someone who, to a certain degree, remains invisible to me. I refuse the separation between the visible of this world and the invisible of the beyond. I look at you who are invisible against a background of invisibility: a background composed of our interiorities, our becomings.* —Luce Irigaray, *TO BE TWO*

**DISMEMBERED** The body as experienced in contemporary performance today is radically different from that at the center of humanist tradition upon whose proportions and perceptions the European proscenium theatre was founded. The body as experienced in this contemporary past is in pieces, fragmented, prosthetically extended, divided. Its limits, interior and exterior are ambiguous. Its power lies, "no longer in the model of unity but in the intimation of the fragmentary, the morselated, the broken" [Anthony Vidler, *THE ARCHITECTURAL UNCANNY*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 70]. The body in this sense is no longer centered and binding. The dismembering of the classical body is an ongoing project. In experiencing the theatre as site and de-familiarizing its conventions, performance becomes a bodily staging towards the breakdown and reinscription of spaces. ❁ **DEEP SURFACE** The power of performance is contingent upon me taking up a position in space here and you taking up a position in space over there. It is a spatial matrix of histories and bodies, of feet and surfaces. For the movement artist, the body as home creates a condition of travel as a mobile stage. We are imminently tourable. We venture into unfamiliar territories with our performance texts and make them fit, tailoring them to the conditions of each venue, to their conventions of staging, we are continually rehousing ourselves. The theatre across time becomes a living archive of the body and its traces. The dead are its masters. I can smell them in the musty wings just as I can hear the voices of dissent interpenetrating their walls.

*Finally she speaks:*

*I was swimming and I saw you, you were underneath my skin,*

*I was swimming and I saw you half under,*

*Shed skin, shed kin, shed in.*

*Are you reading me? Are you reading me? Are you reading?*

*This is the story of a dead girl, this is her autopsy.*

*Is she listening to me? Is she listening?*

*(Spoken text from Ocean Skin)*

**CHANGING ORTHOGRAPHIES** I leave some gaps in my spacing, not mapping the entire trajectory of my dance so that the feel of the space will direct its orientation rather than its rational breakdown. ❁ We escape our limits by listing them. I make a list of my neuroses—being lost, forgetting, breathing difficulties, aphasia—fears which form the terrain which borders each performance. I have no sense of direction, my internal compass gives off confused readings. My journey to the Opera Romana in Iasi is confused by my attempt to follow a map which lists different street names to the ones I encounter en route. I realize that the Slavicised orthography introduced as a process of Russification of the Romanian language in the 1950s is being changed back to its original Latin form. I read one city through another. The journey from the Hotel Moldova to the Romana Opera House requires a process of backtracking and renaming in this process of changing orthographies. ❁ Inside the Opera Romana with its whispers and shadows in the wings, the spatiality of my perception is altered, my dance develops new fronts. My forehead transposes to other zones of my body. I am leaking sidewise. The same music is played again and again and again. Into this repetition is an absence—no choreography, no predetermined gesture or movement—there is a not-knowing and there is an improvising. Into this accidental space, this ruptured continuity, (how many times have I performed this gesture this sequential phrasing of movements), comes something new something different because it resists my repetition of the same. In this moment I realize I will never perform this again. Invention requires an absence. In the shifting grounds of histories, places and bodies, performance as what does not remain, becomes a living archive a troubled disappearance, an encounter which reverberates as a spectral haunting of the present, a ghost in the bones.