

## The Making of 'Oh Monster!'

An article written by Chris Crickmay in collaboration with Ellen Kilsgaard, 1.1.2012

*'Oh Monster!' is a dance/theatre/visual art performance piece created jointly by dance artist Ellen Kilsgaard and visual artist Chris Crickmay, who both also perform within it. Starting as a performance research project and then developing into an actual piece, first a solo and then a duet, it has been developed intermittently over a period of four years and performed in a series of showings of work-in-progress in the UK and more recently in Copenhagen. In giving an account of a particular piece and how it was made, the article has general things to say about collaboration across art forms, about working methods in devising, and about the aesthetics of relationship in performance. It also looks in some detail at the use of objects as part of a performance landscape.*



### Note on the arrangement of this text

Throughout the text excerpts from our working notes and some additional information are included in text boxes, or set between asterisks. Readers preferring continuity may choose to skip these, or possibly return to them later. A brief outline of the piece from start to finish is included at the end.

## **Starting points**

### **Chris's starting point**

I have always been interested in making things and in the processes through which things are made. I am ever curious about the way fresh ideas emerge and take form and how people create things that are original to them – things which they alone can make. My involvements over the years have carried me from architecture and design, where I started, into sculptural installation work and then into improvisation in dance/movement and writing. By temperament I like to work with others and much of my work has been collaborative. My interest in the creative process led me to collaborate with Miranda Tufnell in writing two handbooks intended to stimulate performance work<sup>1</sup>. The thinking behind these books reflected our own practice and teaching as well as work we had come across over the years. This investigation is a continuing one.

Performance allows me scope to explore several of my interests. One is quite simply that I love to arrange things, whether this be objects and materials in a chosen space, or assembling the ingredients of a whole piece. Because of my sculptural interests, objects do play an important part, but so does space and light and movement. I came to movement relatively late in life (in my late 30s) and have been fascinated ever since by the importance of embodiment in our lives and the role of the senses as a starting point for working. Improvisation has been a primary interest, especially in the way it can spring both from immediate awareness (of body and surroundings) and the wider world of one's life experience – often what we pick up from our surrounding world without realising we have done so. I think of my medium as 'performance landscapes', where people, objects, projected images, light and colour interact in ever changing patterns. Because of my art and design background, I am inclined more to gallery-type situations where audiences come and go. 'Oh Monster!' has therefore been a bit of a departure, being made for a seated audience, somewhat theatrical in style and more of a set piece than most of my previous work. If asked what inspires me, I am bound to say it could be anything at all, since it depends on my state of receptivity at the time. When open and receptive enough, certain details or relationships in the surrounding world seem to 'light up' unexpectedly and become significant. These are my starting points.

### **Ellen's starting point**

'I am spacious singing Flesh: onto which is grafted no one knows which I – which masculine or feminine, more or less human but above all living, because changing I.' H el ene Cixous<sup>2</sup>

In my work as dancer and dance maker I explore the area between sensuous perception in the body and the production of aesthetic form – how the perceived is integrated and made one's own, and how these perceptions stimulate action, how they are articulated and expressed in movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Miranda Tufnell and Chris Crickmay, *Body Space Image, notes towards improvisation and performance* Dance Books, 1990 and Miranda Tufnell and Chris Crickmay, *A Widening Field, journeys in body and imagination* Dance Books, 2004

<sup>2</sup> From H el ene Cixous and Catherine Cl ement *The Newly Born Woman* I.B.Tauris, 1996

I work with dance as my primary point of departure – movement in the body, but also the movement of things, experiences and meanings. I relish the humour when things and events move and are no longer what one thought they were at first. I relish the humour and pleasure of play – play with people and things. I strive to enter a ‘wheel’ of exchange, a wheel of dialogue that engulfs my whole sensuous/thinking body. This is play that reaches perceptive antennas in (at least) two directions at once: attention towards a deep bodily response, and simultaneously attention to everything around ‘me’. This embodied resonance, exchange, or dialogue with something that is outside oneself – other people (performers and audience), objects, images, spaces – is for me an engine of creativity, firing off abundantly in all directions.

In harnessing this ‘creative engine’, I explore what it might mean to create space for poetry, a poetry that arises in the gaps between things and experiences, poetry as finding a new meaning, a re-configuration of perception and of what was understood before. This interest in the poetic seems to lead me to things that one cannot necessarily pinpoint as one single truth. It leads me towards ambiguous expressions and unexpected reconfigurations of known elements – images, feelings and situations that often contain contradiction. Perhaps one could call this work a kind of poetic learning. My exploration of embodied relationality has led me to various collaborative projects with other dancers, musicians and artists including this work with Chris Crickmay.

### **On collaborating**

We are talking here about collaboration within a very small scale performance project – just the two of us, who came together to make something, working on an equal footing without any of the traditional hierarchies and specialised roles that typify larger scale conventional practices. Factors that seemed to count in our favour at the outset were:

1. We shared a particular interest within performance – an embodied practice combined with an outwardly directed focus towards surroundings and other performers.
2. We shared an aesthetic – broadly, the same kind of things excited/amused us and we tended to agree on major issues of taste and judgement.
3. We shared a preferred working method – through the body and through improvisation with a predilection for play, and a step-by-step approach to working, where the outcome remains uncertain until the end.
4. Despite our different backgrounds, some of our skills and experience overlapped – e.g. my interest in movement, Ellen’s interest in light – making it easy to exchange ideas and to move all aspects of the work forward with both of us actively participating.

The fact (built into this kind of collaboration) that we each presented the other with a provisional audience was especially valuable, each of us acting sometimes simply as witness to the other, sometimes as advisor/director, sometimes as foil (as in a duet). Often in working, the emerging thoughts and performance material seemed to arise, not from either one of us, but somehow from the space between.

## Why monsters?

The title of this piece, ‘Oh Monster!’ arose out of a piece of spontaneous writing, a regular feature of our early working sessions. Aside from its simple reference to size, as in ‘monster pack of biscuits’, the term ‘monster’ usually evokes an archaic world of fantasy and fable. Monsters have been a staple of fairy tales through the ages, intended to scare, to caution, or to delight children.

Whether we are talking extremely large and angry sea creatures, or dinosaurs, or unspeakable visitors from outer space – or possibly something completely unknown, misshapen and uncanny lurking out there in the dark – the word ‘monster’ often implies things that are both frightening and absurd at the same time. This mix of contrary feelings has become a source of interest to us and we have tried to situate our piece on an edge between tragedy and comedy.

‘The tragi-comic and the comi-tragic: serious about their comedy, frivolous about their tragic destiny’. Richard Gough

Fictional monsters seem to proliferate at times of rapid change and anxiety, just as science fiction monsters once did in American films of the 1950s. Not surprisingly, fictional monsters are also popular today. But we also tend to see monsters all around us; it is our tendency to project monstrous qualities onto things and people outside ourselves, rather than accept them as part and parcel of our own human nature.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon alone makes the whole topic of monsters particularly worthy of our attention. It is something we have found it interesting to explore in the piece, setting up deliberate ambiguities as to who or what is the monster of the title.

Finally, the expression, ‘oh!’ as in ‘Oh Monster!’ is an interesting one, since it means different things according to context and how you say it. For example, it can be affectionate, or just surprised, or indicate some sudden realisation, or perhaps disappointment (as in ‘oh no!’). All these inflections have their place in the use of ‘oh!’ as part of our title.

**Note to ourselves:**

How to meet at the dangerous edge of each other’s monsters?

Play out cruelty and humour.

Explore our theme – are you/ am I the Monster, or is it outside of us?

We are each other’s monsters.

We are each other’s voices.

We are each other’s projections of our inner monsters.

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<sup>3</sup> A persuasive and informed account of this phenomenon is to be found in: Mark Patrick Hederman *Kissing the Dark Veritas*, 1999

**A summary of the piece (see a fuller outline of the piece at the end)**

The piece is roughly 35 minutes long and is divided into 14 loosely linked episodes. The audience sees two characters, a woman and an older man take part in a series of actions, some with a specific dance flavour, others semi-theatrical, but largely without dialogue. The action takes place within an undisguised performance setting, constantly modified by light, sometimes suggestive of the interior of, say, an empty office building or a warehouse. Once or twice the characters do speak, either to the audience, or to a hidden companion. A projected moving image and occasional recorded sounds are further ingredients that appear at certain moments. Much of the action takes place around a series of props, which at times become focal, almost characters in themselves, and these materials are in a constant state of motion and re-combination. The style of action is melodramatic and surreal, some of it suggesting the enactment of a crime story. But the piece holds back from developing into an actual narrative, and characters and events remain fluid and suggestive rather than literally portrayed. The mood of the piece hovers between the ominous and the absurd. Apart from one improvised section, most of the piece is set. There are sections, which are predominantly duets and ones that are predominantly solos, although both performers interact to some degree throughout.



## Image and Idiom

We have approached the forming of the piece in terms of an assemblage of images, where the word ‘image’ is used not just in a visual sense, but broadly in referring to all ingredients, just as a dream image may be visual, but may also include locations, actions, things said, sounds, gestures, etc.<sup>4</sup>

In this piece we have chosen to use certain suggestions of character and narrative, but to use them out of context, as images, letting them float freely in an abstract space, so that they become open to interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Characters feature in the piece as unstable entities, liable to change their nature, or to be discarded at particular moments. Where we deploy a hint of narrative, we present it in terms of a series of ‘situations’, ones that are not causally or logically linked. This then invites completion – a process for the audience of dreaming-into the images presented. In this respect we have been interested in creating not so much a story as a ‘world’ in which certain qualities, moods, behaviours, impressions, coexist and interact with each other.

As image material, we have frequently drawn upon stock characters and situations, taken, for example, from the classic detective story. These ready-made images already exist in our collective consciousness – they instantly evoke a certain style and attitude and have their own comic potential.

Our formulation of the piece in terms of images is more than just a stylistic choice. It is based on the belief that all our thinking, perceiving and experiencing as human beings is infused with image or metaphor. The evidence is in our dreams and even in our everyday spoken language.<sup>6</sup> Image as a language of the psyche has been well explored in psychoanalytic literature, perhaps most eloquently in the writings of James Hillman.<sup>7</sup> Through image we find form for what is often hidden within us, a level of deeply felt personal meaning. In a collaboration, the search for resonant images goes beyond anyone’s own personal imagination and becomes a kind of shared dream (later shared with an audience).

In addition, we have found it interesting to vary the performance idiom by shifting between abstract dance/ movement, and various forms of theatre, including straight address to the audience, narrative action and clowning. We have used silent action as well as speech or song; at times the action shifts to

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<sup>4</sup> This conceptualising of the work in terms of image connects into a major strand of post-modern dance, theatre, and film exemplified by the work of Robert Wilson, Tadeusz Kantor, Pina Bausch, Andrei Tarkovsky, David Lynch. In its attitude to structure and meaning, such image-based work can be compared to dream or poetry, rather than to prose.

<sup>5</sup> Developments in theatre since the 1970s, which challenge the traditional use of text, plot, character etc., are described in Hans-Thies Lehmann’s highly articulate and informative book, *Postdramatic Theatre* Routledge, 2006

<sup>6</sup> See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Uni. of Chicago Press 1980.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, James Hillman, *An Enquiry into Image*, pp 62-88, Spring Journal, 1977. A collection of his papers on the theme of ‘image’ (the latest in a large series of his collected papers) is due to be published during 2012.

purely visual effects. Using these sometimes abrupt changes of idiom has the potential to create gaps or dislocations in our assumed sense of things, a space for the imagination.

**Working Method – improvisation, the body in movement, and sensory awareness as a doorway into a wider world of perception and meaning.**

Our working method uses improvisation to generate performance material. This is of course a widely used approach. It seems to lend itself to generating performance material collaboratively. Central to our working approach is a performer's own sense of existing *in relationship* to every other element of the piece – a recognition of being one-among-many. Performing is then an engagement in a conversation that is constantly in play between elements.<sup>8</sup> The question in our minds as we work is not so much, 'what shall I do?' but, 'what am I noticing?' 'what am I drawn to?' and 'what do I find myself doing in response?'. This is an intuitive and interactive way of working, with an emphasis on attention or 'listening' to what is there, rather than on deliberately trying to make things happen, or to demonstrate a pre-conceived idea. The spirit of play<sup>9</sup> has been prominent in the making process and is hopefully still present in the over all feel of the final piece. While each fragment of the work begins at a purely sensory level, it also quickly gives rise to associative imagery in the mind of the performer. This sites the movement within the performer's wider world of experience, feeling and imagination. The performer strives to keep the different levels of awareness going together, thus staying physically grounded, while allowing the imagination free play around what is happening. In fact it is actually *by* staying physically grounded that the imagination is allowed free play.<sup>10</sup> This multi-layered mode of awareness has interested us both from the performer's and the audience's points of view. In 'Oh Monster!' what the audience sees are very small encounters with objects, bodies, spaces – also between two people in a room. But our hope and intention is that every so often what had seemed a laughably small and trivial action may suddenly loom terrifyingly large in its emotional significance. It is these moments that interest us and which we have tried to foster within the work.

Note to ourselves:

Listen to the other person, to the object and to the surrounding space – sensory cues coming from all three. Fully commit to any action/ sensation (including the sense of being lost or stuck!). When any of this gets self-conscious, commit more to the chosen action, not less.

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<sup>8</sup> In early rehearsals we explored the use of microphones throughout the workspace – a sensitised environment. In the end, this idea became more a metaphor for the whole field of relationships which would be of this sensitised nature.

<sup>9</sup> On this front see: Simon Murray, *Training for play, lightness and disobedience in the pedagogies of Jacques Lecoq, Monika Pagneaux and Phillippe Gaulier* In: Alison Hodge, ed. *Actor Training* Routledge, 2010. (pps. 199 - 215)

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Keleman has something to say about this in his little book *Myth and the Body*, a colloquy with Joseph Campbell, Center Press, 1999

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### **Early work session, Apr 2008**

In this exercise, one moved, the other watched, then both wrote spontaneously – a way of finding a personal link into the imagery of the piece and of tuning into each other’s image worlds.

#### **Chris responds to Ellen moving plus flag and microphones:**

She turns to him and says, “Was that too much?”

“Of what?” he asks.

Sometimes in the night she wakes and hears crying from another room. She is on the point of searching to find the person in distress, but then the crying stops. In the morning the house is always empty. Now, she stands in a large room with high ceilings. She hears the wind blowing as if in the tops of trees. She listens carefully and again there’s a faint but distinct voice – perhaps she is being summoned. In her hand is an old fashioned ticking clock. She looks down, as if surprised to find it there, smiles at the absurdity of it, lets it fall and it shatters. Small springs, cogs and wheels scatter across the floor. As they roll they seem to have a will of their own and the floor is momentarily alive with small spinning objects. But then she shouts loudly and the objects stop dead in their tracks, lying there as if they had never moved.

#### **Ellen responds to Chris moving:**

Have I been here before? No. I don’t think so. Something is so unfamiliar, but you know, I am not afraid of that. If you don’t mind I’d like to show you around. Sudden shifts are needed to re-locate the flocks of birds and sheep. One shift in the environment will alter the course of the whole flock. I know that even though it seems like I am new around here. Anyway I will show you a few things about me. Water coming into the nose (salt water always) a light feeling in the throat and chest like sunshine or something, in flashes – a ball game and test-machine, space rocket, echo device.

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### **Transformations and changes of identity**

Overall, in terms of time and the pattern of events, we have been interested to explore the transformative nature of things. In this piece, performers, objects, spaces, in fact all the ingredients, are set afloat in a state of constant becoming – of continually re-defining themselves.



The woman seems at first to exist in the present day as a ‘real’ person, perhaps some kind of agent or investigator. But at other times she also switches her identity, to become for example: a hidden force concealed in a parcel, momentarily a corpse, a floating presence, an ocean wave and whirlwind, a



clown, a night club singer and much else besides. Late in the piece she heroically attacks and kills a monster.



The man on the other hand begins as a purely fictional being, a stereotyped detective in a different time-zone to the woman (and to the audience), as if he had just stepped out of a 1940s *film noir* movie. As such he exists somewhat as a comic book figure, almost a cardboard cut-out, but he can also, like the woman, become ominous and may in fact be a ghost, or just a figment of the woman's imagination. At times he assumes the role of a real person, as when he tries to introduce himself to the audience. In the event, his account trails off into vague references to the dangers of his position. Both characters are of uncertain reliability, sometimes benign, sometimes less so.



The ongoing relationship between these two characters varies from overt to hidden, but in performance terms is highly active throughout. The implied balance of power between them swings to and fro from one to the other. In their exploits they are sometimes rivals, sometimes attempting co-operation, with varying success.

Note to ourselves:

Ellen's character is often quite flamboyant, so Chris's could be more ordinary/ everyday – perhaps have his own set of objects: a desk? a telephone? a torch?

Chris's character as a really different kind of person – an independent presence, responding and responded to by Ellen's character obliquely, but not in the same movement language, or from the same imaginary circumstance.

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**Score for a movement duet incorporating the mic. stand**  
**See episode 7 in outline of the piece at the end**

This is an improvised section created afresh in each performance from certain agreed principles, or 'rules of play' which are described in detail below:



**What happens**

The episode involves a constant and unpredictable switching of roles between dominance and retreat and occasional co-operation. It is an exercise in timing and unexpected shifts. The episode typifies one of the main performance ideas in the piece – namely the focus upon *relationship* as a generative principle. The strategy is to keep trying to read the other person's intention, then to respond in order to surprise them – generating a highly charged relationship between the two performers. There is also the question of the mic. stand which becomes an active player. Is it friend or foe? In fact, we could call this a trio rather than a duet.

**A repertoire of performing states:**

curiosity; superiority and attack; fright and submission; disappointment; delight.

**Possible actions:**

give, take, abandon, give chase, force upon, tease, snatch, recoil, become threatened, attend to a detail, co-operate, wait.

**Notes to ourselves**

Take your time at the start. Then, vary pacing and scale of action on impulse – fast slow/ big small.

Use the element of surprise.

Use the gaze – make eye contact, look away, look at the audience, scrutinise detail.

Allow the mic. stand to make its own moves, to swing round, hinge down, undo, concertina, fall, become a sudden barrier, etc.

Allow the possibility of linking a sequence of moves, or repeating a move.

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## **Viewing the work through various lenses**

If the idea of a lens suggests a way of seeing, then various 'lenses' have been applied to this piece by virtue of the different disciplines and trainings we have brought to it. Sometimes the most relevant lens has simply been the one that most closely fits the dominant mode of the piece at the time – a movement lens for a movement sequence, a visual art lens to a visually-oriented sequence, etc. But a more interesting possibility has been to apply each lens throughout, irrespective of the nature of the material, so that an embodied, kinaesthetic approach can be applied just as much to say a piece of spoken text, or a visual/spatial approach applied to a movement sequence. This possibility of re-framing material, or seeing it simultaneously in terms of various aesthetics, is of more than academic interest, since it freshens one's seeing and opens up the thinking.

### **The lens of dance**

Through this lens we think of the whole piece as a movement experience, a dance piece, even if it pushes at the conventional boundaries of dance. Attention in the body is the basis of all action even if expressive movement is not the focus at a certain point – for example where everyday movements, or work with objects are the mode of action. Each action/ movement/ situation has its own specific sensory place in the body, a bodily quality and movement expression.

In approach the piece belongs within idioms of contemporary dance informed by improvisation. These are approaches where movement ideas emerge (and later in the process re-emerge), from the dancer's own sensory awareness and movement impulses, rather than from externally imposed and pre-determined movement. But whereas in some contemporary dance, the resulting movement vocabulary remains abstract and is seen in its own right, 'Oh Monster!' as already indicated, belongs in a category that plays not just upon abstract form, but also upon the associations and images arising from it.

The lens of dance also addresses the larger scale choreography of a piece – the movement, grouping and patterning of all ingredients in space, how one thing/ person moves with, or against another. For us it is hard to say where these kinaesthetic concerns leave off and where a primarily visual/spatial concern takes over.

### **The lens of visual art**

The lens of visual art is a multifarious one – one might say it is a wide-angle lens or perhaps a set of interchangeable lenses. In addition to the traditional fine art areas of painting, sculpture and drawing – each of which, one might argue, requires its own lens – in modern times such fields as live art, conceptual art, installation art, video art, and site-specific art imply extremely diverse ways of seeing and conceptualising material beneath a broad visual art umbrella. If there is any common factor between the many areas of visual art, one might argue that it is a spatial approach to conceptualising material. Thinking spatially about a performance (something that crucially exists as a sequence in time

as well as in space), already has the potential to yield different results. Arguably it is just such a non-linear way of thinking about sequence that has led to much post-modern performance.

In our own case, sculptural installation as an art form and a general pre-occupation with the object are the primary lenses that we have applied to our work.

Besides this there are clearly design issues that are brought to bear on any performance work. But one should not assume that artists and designers necessarily use the same lens here. For example, few sculptors would be satisfied with the illusions of material solidity or scale that are the bread and butter of conventional scenography. In our own case, the use of real objects is consistent with an approach to movement based firmly in the anatomical and sensory realities of the body.

In thinking about physical ingredients, we return to the issue of relationship. The natural assumption is that visual concerns should be considered from the outside – standing back to see how things look. In contrast, we have tried to attend to visual/spatial matters not just from the outside, but also from within the work – the performer being constantly aware of and responsive to physical surroundings as much as to other performers. This is also where the sense of touch joins the visual sense and becomes a key ingredient in spatial awareness and a creative response to objects. Objects and materials not only feature strongly in the work but have been generative in a primary way in how it developed.

As part of our own interest in space, light and place making (the piece effectively creating a place within a place), the architectural character of each venue has of course played a key part in the development of the piece. The size and proportions, the incidental detail, the surfaces and surface colours of walls and floors, have been an active, rather than a neutral aspect of the work. Thus, a change of venue, such as the recent one to Copenhagen (working in a black theatre space rather than a white dance studio), has triggered new developments we could not have foreseen in another venue.

### **Other lenses<sup>11</sup>**

Aside from the above, it is worth also mentioning that film (literally seen through a lens) and comic books have provided us with lenses that we use throughout. Because our culture is saturated with these media, they instill in us styles of perception in which everyone can be something of an expert. As already stated, both the forming of characters and some of the action in ‘Oh Monster!’ has a definite *film noir-ish* flavour, albeit filtered through a comic book mentality that favours over-the-top melodrama and cartoon-like action.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Theatre practitioners would no doubt find it useful to apply the lens of theatre to this work and some indeed have done so in advising us from time to time.

<sup>12</sup> As well as a film-inspired way of seeing, an actual film, David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (one that incidentally includes a monstrous apparition) has informed certain episodes in our piece.

## An Equal Relation to Objects<sup>13</sup>

Certain key objects – in particular: a microphone stand, a flag, a black cloth and the carved head of a sheep – play a prominent and active role in the piece.

Central to our approach is finding ways to be in an equal relationship – in ‘conversation’ – with these inanimate things. To do this one needs to set aside an ingrained habit of manipulating objects. The performer needs to be prepared at times to be taken over by an object, rather than vice-versa. As we ‘listen’ to them, objects and materials, normally held to be inert, will seem to come alive.<sup>14</sup>

Our starting point, as in all our improvised work, is to start with sensory experience – to address the physicality of each object and material, its weight, its sounds, its textures, the way it moves, its affect on the body.<sup>15</sup> Then gradually to allow this sensory experiencing to give rise to associations, to ‘dreaming into’ what is there, while still remaining grounded and present – in touch with the object itself.



### **The flag**

Made from a smooth orange coloured plastic lighting-gell substance, the flag is both reflective, transparent and surprising noisy when flapped or shaken. The material itself was one of the first of our acquisitions in making the piece – its unusual physical properties generating some of the early ideas. It later acquired a pole.

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<sup>13</sup> Within the category ‘object’ we include large and small material things from furniture and fabrics down to small artefacts. These may be made or found.

<sup>14</sup> The writings of David Abram are relevant here, where as he claims, we don’t fully engage with things unless we to some extent, animate them. See: David Abram *Becoming Animal* Pantheon 2010

<sup>15</sup> This is in contrast to an approach to the prop where its identity is accepted as given and the plot of a drama may hinge on its significance as a cultural sign or symbol. Use of certain emblematic objects in this way is explored historically in: Andrew Sofer *The Stage Life of Props* Uni of Michigan, 2003

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### **An exercise in exploring an object**

With eyes closed or open, one person speaks out loud his/her own track of attention while handling, or moving with, the object. A partner listens and keeps notes on what is said.

#### **Excerpt from Ellen exploring the black cloth**

The cloth is a rectangle of medium weight fabric, long enough to cover the body and soft to the touch.

(She starts with the cloth folded)

'Like a high quality pillow

Warm (she holds it close to her and kneels down)

Not actually [literally] warm

Each part [of the body] that touches it relaxes

(she curls over it and sighs – pushes nose into it)

a soft fold....'

'.....It's like a plant, or a dead animal

Like the shadow of something – like the past itself

(She places it on the floor, bunches it up and kneels down beside it)

It's like a nightmare

the past itself disguised

Like a baby, or animal

(she opens it out) it's nothing!

(she spreads it out on the floor)

Like a cloth for a picnic, but it's wrong being black

It makes a hole – makes [this rectangle of] floor disappear

(she picks up one corner and runs her finger along the edge)

Like eyelashes.....'

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### **The Microphone Stand – the role of an object within the piece**

The mic. stand was one of our first chosen props. Although on the one hand it is a familiar, utilitarian object, when freed from its usual function and identity, it can take on many other connotations.

Playing around with the stand early on in our work already suggested to us the monster theme. We noticed how it could unpredictably change its feel from being a versatile and relatively benign gadget, to taking on a cold, forbidding quality. Its upright stance, its claw-like foot, its arm or neck, and slightly-more-than-human height when extended, do give it certain monster-like characteristics. Its hinging and swivelling joints turn it into an unpredictable device, often with a mind of its own, a humorous potential that we have tried to exploit.



**Ellen on working with the microphone stand in rehearsal:**

I am approaching the microphone stand in the work space. My self appointed task is to relate to it in an embodied way – to explore it through the sensations it evokes in my moving body. I come up close to it, but I feel it is almost impossible to engage with – really alien, ahh! outrageously not like me. It is stiff and still and thin and spiky and I am soft and round and mobile. At first it is almost as if it is deliberately being mean to me – it rejects me and I feel a kind of repulsion to it. We are in conflict – me and that microphone stand. It is part of the task that I explore it with touch, but I don't want to touch it. It seems both demanding and hostile towards me. I decide to give myself some space from it by moving away and coming back. As I keep working with my own softness I approach it little by little. I work next to it. I stay with myself and allow the thing to be there, being simply what it is. I just really can't understand it, I find it so horrific! But as I continue to be with it, (because that is the exercise) something joyful begins to happen. I am connecting with it without touching it and without letting go of my own softness. We meet and I am somehow challenged and changed without myself becoming equally stiff and thin. I feel: ahh! this thing really challenges who I am. I have to laugh, it is like a huge joyful event. In our differences we meet and play and this *does* something. Deeply in my body I am appropriated, without ever not being me.



## **An emergent form – building and shaping the piece.**

‘Oh Monster!’ grew in phases over an extended period in which we re-visited the material again and again. Each time we had reached some sort of conclusion, we subsequently felt there was more to be found. But recently the piece seems to have emerged into something like a definitive form. The section that follows is to do with that final phase as the parts began to fall into place, but were not quite there – things needed to be done to make the piece really ‘work’ as a whole and in detail. Below are some of the things we aspired to at that stage.

**Making the details count:**<sup>16</sup> We try to make the most of each small gesture – not to let details slip by that could be capitalised upon and made distinctive. For example in the parcel opening episode at the beginning, we worked hard not only to spin out the suspense of not knowing what was inside, but also to refine how we responded to each other at a time when we appeared on the surface to be working independently (in fact in different dimensions of reality!). One could describe this process in general terms as a move towards greater particularity of the piece and all its parts.

Note to ourselves:

The piece includes potentially good images but we need to really *use* them – remember to slow down. Eg. if using a prop, let the audience see your relation to it. At the moment we tend to abandon each image much too quickly. Generally we are giving it all away too fast.

**Things needing to evolve (in the course of the action):** Despite a compositional decision to assemble the work as a collage of events (as distinct from the traditional linear sequence with beginning, middle and end), it still needed to hang together and have a shape, each part having its own necessary rhythm and pace and making sense aesthetically in relation to the whole. Also we seemed to be looking for ways in which the piece could retain, as it were, an ongoing memory of itself, a sense of flow, so that one part would not seem simply be abandoned in moving on to the next. Repetition is one obvious device for helping with this, but the issue is clearly more subtle than that might suggest.

**Weighing the parts against each other:** This was partly a matter of juxtaposition – getting elements to work in conjunction with each other, or in a sequence, in such a way as to be mutually supportive. It was also a matter of weight – how much importance or emphasis to give each element. The issue here was to give each part enough space to reveal itself, yet to go for the simplest version of it to achieve that end.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> What is it, for example, that we so admire in children’s drawings in that golden period say between four and seven? Is it not the distinctiveness, the particularity and character in the detail?

<sup>17</sup> This is the principle of ‘Ockham’s Razor’ which states that: ‘entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily’, or in other words the simplest version that achieves its task is the best.

**Visibility:** This is a basic issue in making anything and particularly in performing. Whatever you may think you are doing, does it come across? This has both compositional and performative aspects. In performance it seems often to hinge on how present and embodied the performer manages to be. In either case, having others watch the piece at certain stages was invaluable for this purpose.

**Offering an imaginative space for the audience** (to invest their own experience, feelings and imagination in response to what is offered): This could be regarded as the ultimate purpose of creating a performance at all and certainly all our choices hinged upon it. The first step was to enable the audience to feel present, acknowledged. The second was to keep the work as physical as possible – not to get too caught up in our own interpretations of what might be happening. Thirdly we wanted to ‘let the piece breathe’, through giving time and space to events – to allow a breadth of reference and weight, physically and emotionally. Beyond all this, we aspired to a condition where the audience would not so much focus on us as performers, but rather, would see more of the world through us.

Note to ourselves on performing:

All moves can be simple – we don’t need to act. The audience adds the sense of a drama themselves.

**Finding life and energy:** In all our decisions we looked to energise the work – to make it feel alive – and this applied as much to the gaps and spaces as to our actions in the piece. On a purely spatial level, certain ways of relating elements in the space would seem to activate the whole of it. In performance, maintaining attention to all that was there, not letting elements stay present beyond when they felt active was part of this. One way of keeping the work alive was that the parts should not be too rigidly held together, the performance too tightly controlled. It needed to be coherent, but held, as it were, in a loose grasp. At times we looked for ways to deliberately put things ‘on edge’, allowing a sense that the piece could run out of control, fall apart. The moment when each part seemed to have arrived was when it took on a life of its own.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In an extreme version of this the painter Myron Stout is said to have worked painstakingly for many years on his apparently simple paintings (say just one simple form on a plain background), stopping only when he felt the work came to life.

## Conclusion

This text set out to examine a working process in the making of a performance piece. Although focussing on a particular work, it has raised issues that would be relevant to other similar devising processes. Of course the conclusion arrived at in the making of any piece is in an important sense the piece itself. But in practice this can never actually be conclusive, since it has yet to allow in the unknown factor of an audience's experience and response. In another sense too, our work on 'Oh Monster!' has been ongoing for some time and may still open into another phase of development – it began as research and this work continues.

'Oh Monster!' has been a study in interaction, a search for a sense for connectedness to surroundings and how this could influence the nature of a piece. The study involves a collaboration across boundaries between art forms, specifically visual art and dance. In this text we have developed the idea of 'lenses' (of dance, of visual art) in order to throw light on the possibilities of cross-arts collaboration. Since 'Oh Monster!' is a work in dance/movement, the issue of embodiment has been a key one. The piece is also an enquiry into 'image'. How these two things – image and body – interact in a devising process has taken up much of our efforts as described in the text. In addition we have worked on the use of objects in performance and in this text have tried to isolate a particular interactive approach to that. All the above has also been an exploration of a theme (monsters), which we have claimed as a relevant one for the present time. We have tried, in practice, to examine some of its implications.

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## **A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE PIECE FROM START TO FINISH**

### **1. A woman enters and speaks**

Darkness, a door slams, a dog barks – running footsteps on stairs. As a beam of light comes on, a woman runs in and dives to the floor, speaking urgently into an intercom (mic.) apparently to an unseen colleague or partner. After this she disappears from view, under a black cloth.

### **2. A man enters and opens a parcel, while the woman remains under a cloth**

A man dressed in 1940s style hat and raincoat enters and approaches a small desk on which sits a parcel. The man opens the parcel by degrees, while intermittently re-arranging the furniture. Each time he touches the parcel, the woman struggles and rises up under the cloth. A life-sized carving of a sheep's head emerges from the parcel.

### **3. The woman's emergence; a projected image of rooks in trees; a faulty light.**

The man is seated, his back to the audience. The woman is only visible as a mound under the black cloth, which now edges towards him. The man springs up with a lighted torch, which he directs at this mound. Simultaneously, a large moving image of rooks in winter trees is projected onto the back wall behind the action. As the woman emerges from under the cloth and moves away, the man stands within the projected image as a watching figure, picked out by a spotlight, which flickers and fluctuates, as if from a faulty connection.

### **4. Entry with a flag, then a solo dance**

The woman enters from behind the audience carrying a large flag. In a series of sweeping moves she spreads the flag on the floor and places the black cloth over it. All goes silent as she embarks on a solo dance in front of the image of rooks. Her movements are slow and floating, echoing the fall of the black cloth. The man, accompanied by the sheep's head, watches from one corner.

### **5. A force unleashed**

The woman lifts up the flag and looks through it, as through a window. In a series of strong wavelike movements, the woman sweeps forwards and back, holding flag and cloth in front of her. The man and the furniture are seemingly swept aside by the force of these movements. Eventually he appears to be thrown down and lies still where he falls. In a crescendo of noise (caused by the twirling flag and increasing noise of the rooks calling), the woman spins wildly.

### **6. A clowning solo**

Having 'subdued' the flag and left the space, the woman immediately re-enters carrying a microphone stand, using it to poke the black cloth, which has been left in a heap on the floor. In a movement sequence, she then plays with the stand as if it were alive, alternately and unpredictably becoming her friend and foe.

### **7. Duet including the mic. stand**

The woman prods the prostrate man with the mic. stand, goading him into action. He springs to life, snatching the stand from her grasp. An improvised movement duet follows, in which both attempt to trick the other into letting go of, or taking the mic. stand. The duet ends with the man hiding behind the black cloth and the woman bowing to the mic. stand.

### **8. The woman speaks while threatened**

With the man hidden behind it, the black cloth appears to glide around on its own in the space behind the woman, who once again speaks over an intercom to an unseen colleague, this time with a mounting air of panic. As she ends she is staring directly at the sheep's head, held by the man who crouches beside her.

### **9. The man speaks**

The man attempts to introduce himself to the audience, but his account soon dissolves into vague references to danger. The woman hidden behind him punctuates his speech with sudden vocal sounds and repeated words.

### **10. The woman sings**

The woman sings a tragic song in a low voice and rhythmically swings a light on the end of a cable in an otherwise darkened space.

### **11. A chase in the dark**

In darkness only penetrated by momentary flashes of torchlight which create looming shadows, there follows a duet in which both protagonists are seemingly in pursuit of an unseen other, or others. The sequence is punctuated by terse calls and the sound of running or walking footsteps crossing and re-crossing the space. The sequence ends with the woman dancing a solo, still in darkness lit only by a torch held in her hand.

### **12. The woman engages with the flag**

Lit up in the surrounding darkness the woman moves forwards with the flag, giving rise to a series of images transforming one into another: the flag as tent, as window, as banner and as cocoon. At one point a dramatic 'sky' effect appears behind her due to reflections from the flag.

### **13. The slaying of the mic. stand**

With a sudden cry, the woman assaults the mic. stand using the flag as a lance – a kind of Don Quixote moment. As the stand falls in a tangle of cloth she runs on and out of the space, accompanied by a sustained and eerie roaring sound.

### **14. Aftermath and ending**

The man enters, pulling behind him a very long white cloth – a sad Spanish song can be heard in the background. The man uses the cloth to completely cover the objects strewn on the floor. Finally he retrieves the telephone and picks up the receiver. The woman re-appears from behind the audience and speaks for a final time as if to a hidden colleague. She disclaims all responsibility for her actions.

