

In Response: Dialogues with RealTime

25 Feb to 25 April 2019

UNSW Library

Branch Nebula

Martin del Amo

Vicki Van Hout

In Response: Dialogues with RealTime and the RealTime Archive Launch

UNSW Library Exhibition Space
Main Library Level 5
Kensington Campus

25 Feb to 25 April 2019

Lecture-performance nights:

28 February, 6.30-8pm Martin del Amo

20 March, 6.30-8pm Branch Nebula

10 April, 6.30-8pm Vicki van Hout

Archive Launch: 6pm, 17 April, 2019

This exhibition is best experienced with a personal device for streaming audio files and headphones.

Preface

UNSW Library is pleased to have partnered with RealTime to facilitate the digitisation of the RealTime archive, thereby ensuring continued access to this important record of experimental performing arts in Australia. The closure of the magazine marks a major shift in Australia's arts reviewing landscape with significant ramifications for the dance and performance community and the academics who work within it. The In Response: Dialogues With RealTime exhibition brings to life the importance and impact of this publication by revealing the enduring dynamic of the relationship between the publication and the artists it reviewed. The Library is thrilled to support the participating artists in a project that allows them to explore new modes of practice.

Through the Library's Exhibitions Program, we are finding new ways to support learning, teaching and research at the University. By mounting this exhibition, the Library shows how we can make possible new research to build knowledge around collections such as the RealTime archive. Our Exhibitions Program creates a space for discourse where the Library is able to support and showcase these kinds of research outputs that previously didn't have an outlet within our collections.

Martin Borchert
University Librarian, UNSW Library

Curatorial Introduction

In Response: Dialogues with RealTime is an exhibition marking the closure of RealTime art magazine and the launch of its archive. RealTime was Australia's critical guide to national and international contemporary arts 1994-2018 and has played a crucial role in documenting and providing critical commentary on work in dance, performance, sound, music, film, digital media and visual art that carved out new terrain in those fields. Academics at UNSW have been working with the editors of RealTime Keith Gallasch and Virginia Baxter, the UNSW Library, and the National Library of Australia since 2017 to secure the RealTime archive in both its physical and digital form. The collaboration between UNSW and RealTime is celebrated through this exhibition that contributes to innovations at the interface between performance, the archive and the gallery.

The exhibition features the oeuvres of Martin del Amo, Branch Nebula (Lee Wilson and Mirabelle Wouters) and Vicki Van Hout, Sydney-based artists working across performance, choreography, site-specific work, video art, visual arts and writing. Coverage of the artists' work in RealTime is presented in the exhibition space through printed and spoken word alongside artefacts from relevant performances, documentation (photographic and audiovisual), and related texts (programs, other media coverage). Throughout the life of the exhibition there will be three public presentations, one each month, where the artists guide us through their gallery room and provide insights into their practice and their relationship with the critical commentary surrounding their work. The exhibition closes with the launch of the RealTime archive and a brief recount of the three presentations.

Driving the approach to In Response: Dialogues with RealTime were several curatorial prompts: What remains of a performance once it's performed? Is 'archive' the right word for organising what remains? Can the ephemera surrounding a performance produce new knowledges? Can we map a career in a room? How do you exhibit the sound, energy and pace of a performance in a gallery context? Can we choreograph an exhibition space? How can we include the artists' audiences and critics? Can their responses be part of a new kind of dialogue? What forms could these responses take?

Each of the artists has offered visual and aural components to be explored side-by-side. Photos of performances can be supplemented by streaming reviews of their work read by the reviewers. Interviews with the artists have been recorded specifically for the exhibition and provide insights into their place within the Australian dance and performance ecologies, the development of the work since their first public performances in Sydney, training and influences, and the impact of critical responses to their work (Part 1, available to stream in the space on individual devices). Part 2 of these interviews, available in the audio-visual resources via touch screens in the space, go more deeply into details of particular works, movement vocabularies, composition and processes, design principles and collaborations. Excerpts from key works and a set of review recordings are also available

on the iPads. The vitrines display hard copies of RealTime reviews and other printed material.

Please join us on 17th April, along with the RealTime editors, to begin a new stage in the magazine's life as a rich resource for discovering and bringing to light the exciting work of Australia's most forward-thinking artists.

Co-Curator, Erin Brannigan

In Response: Dialogues with RealTime is co-curated by Dr. Erin Brannigan (Senior Lecturer SAM) and the artists in consultation with Jackson Mann, (Curator, Special Collections and Exhibitions, UNSW Library), RealTime founders and editors, Virginia Baxter and Keith Gallasch, and fellow RealTime Guardians, Dr. Caroline Wake, Gail Priest and Katerina Sakkas. The curators thank the RealTime team for their practical support of the project.

The RealTime Archive is a collaboration between Open City Inc., National Library of Australia, the School of the Arts and Media, UNSW, and UNSW Library.

The artists involved took part in pilot archival projects at Critical Path, Australia's centre for choreographic research and dance development, as part of Dancing Sydney: Mapping Movements: Performing Histories. This research project is lead by Dr. Erin Brannigan, Dr. Amanda Card (University of Sydney), and Dr. Julie-Anne Long (Macquarie University), and is supported by Critical Path and the NSW State Library.

Open City, the publisher of RealTime, has been supported by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding body, and by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy (VACS), an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments.



Australian Government
Visual Arts and Craft Strategy



Artist Biographies

MARTIN DEL AMO, originally from Germany, is a Sydney-based choreographer and dancer. He started out as a solo artist, acclaimed for his full-length solos fusing idiosyncratic movement and intimate storytelling. In recent years, Martin has also built a strong reputation as a creator of group works and solos for others. His most recent production, *Champions* (2017 Sydney Festival, FORM Dance Projects), was awarded the 2018 Australian Dance Award for Outstanding Achievement in Independent Dance. Other works include *Songs Not To Dance To* (Parramatta Riverside, 2015), *Slow Dances For Fast Times* (Carriageworks, 2013) and *Mountains Never Meet* (Parramatta Riverside, 2011). Martin's Helpmann Award-winning *Anatomy of an Afternoon*, a solo for Paul White, which premiered at the Sydney Opera House in the 2012 Sydney Festival, was presented with great success at Southbank Centre London in 2014. Martin regularly teaches for a wide range of arts organisations and companies, and has worked extensively as mentor, consultant, dramaturg and dance writer. His work has toured nationally in Australia and internationally to the UK, Japan and Brazil. Martin is a 2015 Sidney Myer Creative Fellow.

VICKI VAN HOUT is a Wiradjuri woman born on the south coast of NSW. An independent choreographer, performance-maker and teacher, she has worked across a range of performance mediums nationally and internationally. Her work practice emanates from the belief that all cultural information is fluid in its relevance and that we both exchange in and adhere to patterns of cultural behaviour and their tacit meanings. In particular, Vicki's work aims to explore the commonality between traditional and urban cultural experience, and how indigenous cultural information can be drawn upon to make sense of both. A graduate of the National Aboriginal Islander Dance College (NAISDA), Vicki has learnt and performed dances from Yirrkala, Turkey and Christmas Creek, Mornington and Bathurst Islands, as well as Murray, Moa and Saibai Islands in the Torres Strait. Vicki also studied at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance in New York and has danced with companies including Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre, Tess de Quincey Co., and Bangarra Dance Theatre, and with Belgian choreographer Hans Van den Broeck. Vicki has danced for culturally significant events, including the 30th Anniversary of the 1967 Aboriginal Referendum and the first Indigenous opening of Parliament in the lead up to the 2008 National Apology. In addition to her ongoing work in Australia, Vicki has secured several international choreographic residencies, which have included engagements in Austria and Singapore through the World Dance Alliance. She regularly choreographs for a range of diverse educational and arts organisations and collaborates with other performance artists. Vicki was awarded the 2014 NSW Dance Fellowship for established and mid-career artists - the first Indigenous winner of the Fellowship.

BRANCH NEBULA

Lee Wilson and Mirabelle Wouters co-founded Branch Nebula in 1998, and co-created all the company's works to date. Their outlook as artists is fed by a ravenous appreciation of lowbrow culture, such as mixed martial arts, wrestling, speedway, zine fairs, BMX and skate competitions, peep shows and shopping at the local mall. These are the aspects of cultural life they experience and share with their audience because it's what they know. Lee and Mirabelle's shared aesthetic draws its dynamism from their passionate engagement with street culture - and its intelligence - from a discriminating awareness of movements in the contemporary arts. They believe that refined art-making is everywhere, if you know how to look, and they champion the exquisite skills of the skater as they do the fluid movement of the contemporary dancer. They build Branch Nebula's work with both.

Branch Nebula is one of Australia's most adventurous performance companies working at the nexus between theatre, dance, sport and street-styles. They work with non-conventional performers to collaboratively devise work that defies categorisation. Branch Nebula's new work High Performance Packing Tape premiered at Performance Space's Liveworks Festival of Experimental Art in October 2018 at Carriageworks. In 2016 the Helpmann Award winning Snake Sessions premiered in Nowra in regional NSW, and toured to Artlands Regional Arts Australia Conference and Festival in Dubbo. In 2017 Snake Sessions' six city regional tour of skateparks was presented by Mandurah Performing Arts Centre; by Performance Art Development Agency in Adelaide, Whyalla and Mt Gambier; by Country Arts SA at Lighthouse Theatre in Warrnambool, and by the Bleach Festival, Gold Coast. This year it was presented at APAM 2018 and toured to NSW regional centres Wagga Wagga and Griffith.

In 2016 Branch Nebula curated Swarm for Campbelltown Art Centre's live art program, and developed a large-scale event Foodfight: The Battle for Food Security with artist Diego Bonetto for the Museum of Contemporary Art and Liverpool City Council. In 2015 the company premiered Artwork, commissioned by Carriageworks, working with unrehearsed non-performers who first meet the company an hour before going on stage.

Concrete And Bone Sessions was commissioned by Sydney Festival 2013, and toured to the Santiago A Mil festival in Chile in 2014. The Helpmann and Green Room Award winning Whelping Box premiered at Performance Space's SEXES festival at Carriageworks in 2012, toured to Arts House in Melbourne in 2013, and Brisbane 2014. In 2013 Branch Nebula created s.l.o.a.p. (space left over after planning) working with local professional street-style artists, an international co-production with the Kiasma Museum in Helsinki Finland for the Urb Festival, later adapted for Freespace presented by West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, Hong Kong, in 2014.

www.branchnebula.com

Art & review: an enduring loop

by Keith Gallasch & Virginia Baxter

REGENERATION

It's thrilling that the artists in this exhibition are responding to our attention to their creations, years and even decades after their making and our reviewing. This is strange, rare and welcome: ephemerality suspended and hitherto unspoken dialogues given new voice and longevity. The loop formed between reviewer and work (implicitly the artist) is being regenerated, experiences recalled in vivid detail and estimations reconsidered: the loop keeps turning.

BODIES & LANGUAGES

In RealTime we have tracked the careers of Martin del Amo, Vicki Van Hout and Branch Nebula. We have learned the language of each – images, movement, sometimes words. We know their bodies of work, if never utterly, for, being risk-takers, they always surprise with new works, as they did at first meeting when we entered their worlds and were changed, compelled to re-think possibilities of form and embodied thought.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

In our RealTime review-writing workshops both here and overseas we propose that encountering an artwork should be like meeting a stranger – a possibly intriguing, charismatic, complicated, unpredictable, difficult person – requiring patience and generosity to understand, let alone empathise with. Each work, after all, is an artist's avatar. The encounter requires openness and self-awareness, knowing one's own desires, limitations, aversions and prejudices, especially when dealing with the unusual works we were attracted to and which were burgeoning in the 1990s, if then being granted little serious critical attention.

LOOPING

Borrowing from phenomenology, we see this encounter as a loop formed between audience and artwork, not only in the moment but in subsequent recollection, discussion with friends and, of course, in reading reviews and other writings. The more subtle or powerful the encounter, the more enduring the loop, with other opinions and responses fueling it. The more deeply imbued in body and psyche, the longer the work is remembered, but it is also simultaneously subject to change as aesthetic, intellectual and political values evolve.

TEMPORAL DISPARITIES

As actors, writer-performers and producers for the two decades before we initiated RealTime, we knew what it was like to create a work over, say, a year or two, perform it for a few hours nightly for several weeks and to have



Vicki Van Hout

Briwyant (2011)

Performer: Mel Tyquin

Photo: Jeff Busby



Martin del Amo

Champions (2017)

Performers: Sara Black, Kristina Chan, Cloé Fournier, Carlee Mellow, Sophia Ndaba, Rhiannon Newton,

Katina Olsen, Marnie Palomares, Melanie Palomares, Kathryn Puie, Miranda Wheen

Photo: Heidrun Löhr

it reviewed in considerably less time; the very real time of the work reduced to 300-500 words in a newspaper, sometimes insightfully, sometimes not. These disproportionate time-scales seemed profoundly unfair. As reviewers and editors we wished to compensate for this inequity with more generous deadlines, longer reviews, where possible, and an honest disavowal of critical 'objectivity' in favour of considered and informed subjectivity.

OPENNESS & REAL TIME

RealTime has been published by Open City, a company we formed to produce collaborative performances and other works in 1987. The name reflected our desire to be open to new art experiences, to collaboration, and to generating a sense of community. In 1994 we launched RealTime, the title indicative of a focus on live performance in music, sound, dance, opera, theatre, contemporary performance and performance art at a moment when cross-artform practices were beginning to flourish and new temporalities were being generated by new media art, often at the intersection of the real and the virtual. These works required increased attentiveness from reviewers dealing with multiple artforms and having to find the language with which to express unprecedented experiences.

PRESENT TENSE, FIDELITY & JUDGMENT

We often encouraged our writers to compose in present tense in order to evoke a sense of immediacy. And, forestalling a rush to judgment, we also asked for vivid, concise evocations of what the reviewer saw, heard and otherwise sensed – attentive to a work's surface, comprising as it does much of the evidence with which the reviewer plays prosecutor, defense, judge and juror, whether a final judgment is made explicit or is implied. We hoped that each review would draw the reader into that same experiential loop, providing a palpable sense of works often unlikely to be seen by many readers across Australia and beyond. Above all, we sought fidelity to the work, a descriptive evocation, regardless of final judgment.

THE ART AFFECT

Reviewing demands heightened sensory awareness. There is nothing passive in being fully open to a performance. Engaged, we seem to forget our bodies and conscious selves, but contrary to this apparent emptiness we loop with the work, interiorising bodies and voices and design, a dancer's sway, an instrument's reverberance, the deep pull of gravity and release from it in circus, and in dance and music too. Visceral art hits the gut, sensual art brushes against the skin without touching. We shiver with fear, we sweat, hold our breath. Ideas delight, thrill, inspire, frighten or offend with palpable force. New media works test, disorient and expand our perceptual abilities. Relational art places our bodies inside the art, sometimes as co-creators, radically reducing the space between work and audience in the art-making loop.

Time is felt: the near-indescribable tension between moment and momentum in much art. Elsewhere we treasure the moment, welcoming imagistic works that refuse narrative compulsion, or, in recent dance and performance, seek transcendence and authenticity in ecstatic states and the 'now.' A vast number of works from at least the 1990s to the present have focused on the complexities of body, mind-body and perception in all their physiological, social and political dimensions, requiring of reviewers unprecedented attention to the work, self-awareness, and the demands on knowledge brought on by proliferating cross-artform and hybrid practices.

REVIEWING THE SELF

One of our occasional workshop exercises involves participants self-reviewing (how they see themselves, how they engage socially). As the learner-reviewer grows cognisant of the workings of the loop, registering each intellectual, perceptual, visceral response, they learn there will be moments when the exchange between reviewer and work falters or the loop locks or breaks. Often the first impulse is to blame the work. A better response is to first query one's attentiveness or courage to risk the vertigo of new experience, to put oneself in the way of risk-taking artists, to become a risk-taker, share in the ways a body can say, think, be.

REVIEWING IN REAL TIME

Unless the response is hurried, formulaic and premediated, the real time of writing a review is intense, the work experienced is re-lived and newly imagined; one's preconceptions have to be denied, ignorance acknowledged, vocabulary tested and expanded, the means to address work, artist and reader grappled with – review as statement, essay, prose-poem, combinations of these. As the loop turns, as images settle and the work's shape becomes clearer, the reviewer can be surprised at their re-estimation of the initial response, partly rational, partly as if the review is writing itself, partly like dream work – making sense of why elements of the work provoked feelings of discomfort, unlikely pleasure, or of a haunting.

REVIEWER AS SHARER

Artists are profound sharers. Whether seen as conduits, gatekeepers or judges, reviewers too are sharers. Ecologically, they might be seen as parasites (sometimes advantageously for art, as per Darwinian mutualism) or pollinators (attracted to art they spread its affects, at best making 'honey' of their writing) or, alternatively they are inhibitors and predators. In the era of YouTube and video documentation, reviewers are potentially supplantable, but the screen cannot tell what it was like to 'actually be there' and, when art and reviewer are as one, becoming part of an enduring loop.

RESPONSIBILITY & HUMILITY

The reviewer's compulsion to share their responses publicly is driven by considerable self-belief, varying degrees of expertise, and a passion to understand, belong to and have free access to an artistic milieu and its works. It might be driven by a felt need to support a particular form, a group of innovators, or specific communities. Whatever the motivation, the responsibility is enormous, not least now as reviewing is reduced to likes and blunt opinion-making while seeking new forms and platforms. Given the enormous temporal disparities between the making of a work and the execution of a response, the review must above all be humble before art, address it with fidelity and openness, alert to the workings – aesthetic, intellectual, intuitive, instinctive, perceptual and corporeal – of the loops that bind us enduringly to art and which represent the ways art transforms us, perhaps temporarily, possibly permanently.

THE ARTISTS: AGENTS OF CHANGE

The works of Martin del Amo, Vicki Van Hout and Branch Nebula (Lee Wilson, Mirabelle Wouters) have become a part of our lives. They have changed us in the ways we experience and understand the expressive potentials of dance and contemporary performance. Each of these artists has a very special sense of space and design. Collectively, they bring unexpected subject matter to performance – the everyday, sport, play, work, cultural heritage, and idiosyncratic personal and political concerns. They are also intensely collaborative, working at various times with suburban and regional communities, sometimes with those seemingly unlikely to associate with art. The experiential loops they generate go well beyond individual works. It has been our honour and pleasure to engage with their creations and bring our readers to recognise their enduring importance.

We are deeply grateful to Erin Brannigan for initiating and co-curating In Response: Dialogues with RealTime with the artists, to UNSW Library for supporting and presenting the exhibition, and to the project's other partners. We thank UNSW Library and the National Library of Australia for partnering to place RealTime print editions 1994-2015 online on the TROVE site. We also greatly appreciate the Australia Council for the Arts' decades of support for a bold publishing project, Guardians of RealTime members Erin Brannigan, Gail Priest, Caroline Wake and Katerina Sakkas for their passion to preserve the RealTime legacy, and Open City's Board, Tony MacGregor, John Davis, Julie Robb, Urszula Dawkins and Phillipa McGuinness, for their collective wisdom and unstinting encouragement.

Branch Nebula: Seeking flow

By John Baylis

There are many lines you can follow in Branch Nebula's work over the past 20 years. There's the way they work the body - the special things it can do, the training regimes it can submit to, its cracks and flaws. There are the spaces this body can inhabit and be seen in - stages, plazas, parks, and fictional plazas and parks on stages. And there is the audience: what it wants from these bodies and spaces. Running through all the work is a passion for the vulnerable and the marginal.

RealTime has tracked the company's work since 2001 when *Sentimental Reason* was presented at Belvoir St, then a year later at Performance Space. An ode to animal desire, two performers (co-artistic directors Mirabelle Wouters and Lee Wilson) became faux shamen, possessed by the spirit of horse sex. There was cantering and head tossing and lip flapping, culminating in harness-assisted congress - though mare covered stallion. As Keri Glastonbury wrote in her review in RealTime 52, 'neither the male or female (horse or human?) subsumed or captured by the other.' (p.24) The work took risks with tone, being silly, visceral and disturbing all at once. It demanded attention, and at a time when physical theatre (a term the company hates) was putting on its lipstick and heading very determinedly towards burlesque, it pointed in a different direction.

In 2004 the company co-produced *Plaza Real* with Urban Theatre Projects at Performance Space. The diverse cast inhabited a staged non-space strewn with plastic bags, evoking the windswept empty plazas that separate shopping malls from car parks. The work begins with a long list of things we can desire, from having someone express their love for us every five minutes, to world peace, to humiliating our enemies, to seeing a film in the company of a movie star. The bathos of this introduces the audience to the trajectories of the various performers whose actions, interactions, and words tell of their dreams and frustrations caught in a swirling willy-willy of checked yearnings and bounded choices.

Plaza Real showed most of the elements that would come to distinguish the company's work: an embrace of multiple performance genres and styles, culturally and physically diverse performers, stark design, a restless prowling of the space, a concern with the marginal, and an aesthetic that could be both brutally direct and lyrically allusive. RealTime recognised that something new had emerged in Sydney's performance culture with Keith Gallasch noting in RealTime 64 that *Plaza Real* was 'a work that, like its plastic bags, threatens to fly away at any moment, airy and mysterious, while at other times doggedly literal, hard-nosed and plainly satirical. Somewhere in between, strong performers, great design and potent images yield a performance language of great power and promise.' (p.44)

The company's next major work would take it to the Sydney Opera House in 2006. *Paradise City* was set in an



Branch Nebula
Sentimental Reason (2002)

Performers: Lee Wilson,
Mirabelle Wouters

Photo: Heidrun Löhner



Branch Nebula, Mickie Quick and Phil Downing

High Performance Packing Tape promotional photo (2018)

Performer: Lee Wilson

Photo: Tristan Still

open space with skate ramps on two sides, while plush crimson velvet curtains upstage provided an incongruous cabaret stage. Scattered around the space were roadwork barriers that suggested the constraints imposed on urban space, but which were contemptuously tipped, stacked and thrown as the show went on. This is not the world of Plaza Real - these players own this space, this pocket paradise. Skater, BMX rider, acrobat, dancer and b-boy all circle it relentlessly, moving in and out of each others' worlds. They mirror each other as the skater smacks out the moves of the b-boy; they mock each other as the dancer pulls the hoodie off the b-boy; they thwart each other as the dancer steals the BMX bike; and they come together in swirling movements that transect every inch of the space. The interactions are at times joyous, at times tender, at times furiously competitive. Beyond this promiscuous exchange of performance DNA a cabaret singer croons and gasps in snatches, agonising while the others are flying around her, occasionally coming forward but always retreating back to her velvet safe zone. An odd tension is set up culminating in the acrobat stripping the singer of most of her evening wear to leave her curled and foetus-like as the others skim the space. What can this mean? The body trumps the voice? Not sure, and such binaries are unusual in Branch Nebula's work. Whatever, it portends that paradise is not for all. Gallasch's review in RealTime 77 described the work fittingly as 'a moody, romantic portrayal of a small, intense cosmos ... The 'paradise' of the title is at first glance ironic but, despite their occasional falls from grace, this street in this city is mostly heaven for its denizens and for those who espy them. More and more audiences should be invited into this strange paradise.' (p.44)

If Paradise City takes place in leisure time, Sweat is about that other third of life that we spend working. It focused on the service industries, the poorly paid jobs that relieve the rest of us of life's tedious chores. It was presented first at Carriageworks in 2010. The audience enters an empty space and is immediately counselled by the performer/supervisor in the nicest way that their entry was not good enough and they needed to try again. They do, and receive the requisite positive feedback foreshadowing several scenes that extol menial work done well as the path to self-improvement. The performers then go to work themselves, setting up the complex sound system and a dinner party setting from scratch. The spectators are mostly left to enjoy the display of underclass bodies (all desirable, all 'ethnic'), though they are occasionally reminded that they benefit from this system. The work culminates in a dinner party that tips into the carnivalesque where the exploited rise up and more or less chuck food at their oppressors. A very minor victory, but the workers do get to show who they are when in their own private paradises.

Sweat sees a more overt politics at work in Branch Nebula's work. While previous work had valorised the desires and pleasures of the marginal, Sweat asserts that marginalisation is not itself marginal but is the very foundation of our economic system, and they add a side note: most theatre goers do okay in this system. This was noted in Pauline Manley's review in RealTime 100: '...we stood accused - of leaving all the dirty tasks of a wealthy society to people with dark skin and foreign accents.' (p.25)

Whelping Box was presented at Carriageworks in 2012, a smaller scale work with just two performers. It recalls Sentimental Reason in its tone - part ritual, part farce - and in its animality, but very much with the feminine stripped away. This is a man's world with its cruel training regimes, its fights, its bonding, its elaborate fantasies of domination, and its crushing reality of inevitable submission. Top dog then underdog - the cycle of (male) life. The defining image of the piece is two harnessed men, restrained by ropes, charging relentlessly at each other, dobermanns on a wire craving a throat to rip. The violence and chaos of the rampant male energy is sublimated towards the end, barely, by elaborate mythopoeic fancy dress, the protagonists imagining themselves into an heroic realm where all this might be redeemed.

Concrete and Bone Sessions in 2013 was the result of a discontent with the traditional theatre space and an increasing interest in the skills that could be called 'street' (that is: not taught at tertiary arts training institutions). While Paradise City created the sketch of a skate park in the Opera House, Concrete and Bone Sessions takes place in an actual skate park in Sydney's inner west. It is the high point of Branch Nebula's work to date, a paean to the human capacity to flourish and make beauty in the harshest of environments. The performers bring skills from dance, BMX riding, parkour, breaking and skateboarding, and these were woven intricately within the graffitied concrete greyness of the skate park. Together, they create a work that moves from incipiently hostile encounters between the park's wheeled and footed denizens, to wonderful set pieces that switch effortlessly from spectacular high-flying bikes and flipping bodies to intimate duets. At one stage, two dancers cradle a skater and shepherd her gently across the space. At another, a b-boy spins and swirls in unison with the bikers and skaters around him. Each set piece is a lesson in passion, trust, tenderness and courage. Is it a stretch to see in the mutuality and synergy of the players a glimpse of a possible utopia where respect and cooperation are the bedrock of human exchange? Perhaps, but if Sweat and Plaza Real were visions of late capitalist hell, Concrete and Bone Sessions gestures towards another way of living. Certainly, Keith Gallasch picked up on this in RealTime 113: 'The power of Concrete and Bone Sessions comes from its lyricism, carefully paced, ever evolving, building towards escalating teamwork, spectacle and risk-taking but without turning into a series of stand-alone acts.' (p.13)

Having freed itself from theatre buildings, Branch Nebula produced other works that took public space as their starting point. Very aware that the skate park of Concrete and Bones Sessions had been fictionalised (and privatised) by the very act of siting a ticketed, Sydney Festival event there, the company created Snake Sessions, which could happen in any skate park and which infiltrated but did not take over the space. The company's performers were in essence in residence in the park for a period, inviting local park users to work with them if they wanted, but leaving them to their own devices if they didn't. Out of this, a work evolved that blurred the line between professional artist and community participant, a work that arose out of the day-to-day life of the park. To date it has happened in 11 skate parks around Australia.



Branch Nebula,
Matt Prest, Clare Britton
and Denis Beaubois
Whelping Box film set photo (2015)
Performer: Lee Wilson
Photo: Clare Britton

Another site-based work is s.l.o.a.p., which takes its title from the irony-free architectural acronym for 'space left over after planning,' defined as useless pieces of ground, like that found under a freeway or like an awkwardly shaped vacant block. Presented to date in Helsinki in 2013 and Hong Kong in 2014, the work is an evolving flexible project that works with local street style artists to reclaim such urban jetsam.

The company had not abandoned traditional theatres, but it came to engage with such spaces more critically. Artwork was presented at Carriageworks in 2015. Its premise was simple: ordinary people were sought via online recruitment sites to take part in a research project. They arrived at the theatre and were briefed on the nature of the project. Thirty minutes later they would walk onstage in front of an audience and perform a variety of actions communicated to them in various ways: headphones, notes, whispers etc. The work was about the encounter between these newly-minted performers and a theatre-literate paying audience. The performers pushed trolleys, danced and conversed by mobile phone with random audience members. Live-mixed video and sound added a theatrical overlay to actions which, in themselves, were performed without flourish.

Keith Gallasch in *RealTime* 129 placed the piece in a tradition of work made with unskilled performers, but noted: 'Artwork is the sparest and most basic of these, a kind of instant theatre - here are all the effects, just add people.' (p.10) And certainly, the work divided audiences. Some were uneasy at being placed in this unequal relationship with the performers, where there was an obvious mismatch between the two parties' rules of engagement. Some felt quite passionately responsible for the performers' welfare. Others again were simply bored by the flatness of the performances. Some even enjoyed it.

The work is clearly a companion piece to *Sweat*, which was about those obliged to work to instruction, performing menial tasks that are meaningless to them. Artwork created that very situation on stage in real time. The artists acknowledged their complicity in the process, the only point of difference being that the workers' hourly rate was better than they were used to: free market forces leavened by subsidy. The work also queried the nature of the contract between audience and artist. How much visual, aural, intellectual and emotional stimulation is the artist expected to provide? This theme was taken up again in the short work *Stop-Go* which was performed at Dancehouse in 2018 as part of the Keir Choreographic Awards program. As in *Artwork*, there were no professional performers on stage. In fact, there were no performers at all: the audience had to make the show themselves from instructions on their seats under the gaze of an omnipresent timer that cued each action. From small deeds performed by a few in their seats, the work progressed over its 20 minutes to massed actions throughout the space and no small amount of chaos. *Stop-Go* was part prank, part serious study of the kind of experience achievable with off-stage prompts alone.

The company's latest work, *High Performance Packing Tape*, was presented at Carriageworks in 2018. A solo performance, it has a performer creating for himself a series of dangerous and apparently pointless challenges:

a tower of cardboard boxes to build and climb, a high wire of packing tape to string out then walk. It recalls Whelping Box as a study of male flirtation with self-destruction, while the performer's dogged yet impassive commitment to his job brings to mind the workers from Sweat, or indeed the participants from Artwork. Unlike the latter though, the work ends on a note of transcendence - this worker encases himself in a chrysalis of tape, perhaps hoping for a butterfly outcome. RealTime's response: 'For a company committed to explorations of the nature of work and of play as art, High Performance Packing Tape represents a superb synthesis of these preoccupations and the apotheosis to date of Branch Nebula's creativity.' (n.p.)

Branch Nebula is a special voice in Australian performance culture. It has had its share of international success and been presented by major cultural institutions, yet the work has a quality that resists easy consumption. The company doesn't pick the obvious option or repeat previous successes. The work, not the market, dictates the staging, and the performers are more likely to come from the mall than from tertiary institutions. A deep dissatisfaction drives the work, an anger at the blocks and checks and harnesses that channel animal energy into neurosis. But there are also glimpses of a world that flows.

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Fierce and Fragile: Vicki Van Hout's provocative body of work

By Lizzie Thomson

Vicki Van Hout sits herself down on a chair. She has just dragged this chair across the floor of a theatre, along with a large desk with several electronic devices balanced precariously beside a glass filled with water. This slapstick almost resembles a Buster Keaton silent film. Almost, except that Van Hout is most assertively not silent. She has been talking to us throughout, delivering powerful words with a compelling rhythm that surges, halts, swells and presses its way into our seated bodies. These words excite us. They elicit strange noises of self-conscious delight from us. And yet they are also lit with a darkness that taps into a profound seriousness. It is a degree of seriousness that rattles our bones with difficult provocations and an unsettling frankness. Van Hout is challenging us with questions relating to Aboriginal identity, cultural innovation versus appropriation, racial discrimination, and the commodification of indigeneity. This is all expressed with intense feeling, humour, fierceness and fragility. Van Hout hasn't titled this performance work plenty serious TALK TALK (2018) for nothing.

In this extraordinary work, Van Hout identifies an important characteristic that runs throughout much of her work - an inherent state of ambivalence that brings her audiences into a state of questioning. Familiar assumptions, expectations, and well-trodden paths suddenly need to be cross-examined. States like complacency and ignorance (that often go together with the condition of white privilege) are challenged in the most inspiring ways. Here, ambivalence functions as a tool for activating audiences. Indeed, Van Hout's use of ambivalence can be understood as a unique form of activism. Unlike other forms of activism that typically galvanise supporters with persuasive, one-sided arguments, Van Hout sews seeds of doubt in her audiences. She confuses them with contradictory perspectives and thus invites them into a more active and self-reflexive way of being in the world.

As she sits herself down on a chair during plenty serious TALK TALK, Van Hout tells us about a certain persona named 'Ms Light Tan.' With a small leap of imagination we can guess that she is referring to herself, to the colour of her skin, and to all of the complexities that come with this colour. She tells us:

Ms Light Tan exudes an air of ambivalence, an ambivalence that has other people questioning well is she or isn't she?

Oh, she's always been direct, in direction of gaze and direct in opinion. It is this blunt forced directness which precipitates ambivalence, a kind of unspoken confusion in others.

This simultaneously is and is not her burden - her ability to inadvertently provoke others to question, just by her very existence really. (Van Hout 2018)



Vicki Van Hout
Briwyant (2011)

Vicki installing her sculpture

Photo: Courtesy of the artist

The idea that ambivalence can be produced by a 'blunt forced directness' might seem absurd, but Van Hout definitely has a knack for this. With her brilliantly straightforward address, she brings us face-to-face with the complexity of matters relating to Indigenous cultural practices as they persist within (and in spite of) the context of ongoing colonialism. Instead of instructing us on what to think or feel about these matters, Van Hout throws open the doors and invites us to each find our own multilayered relationships to them. This breadth and depth of Van Hout's work reminds us that there are no clear cut ways of understanding our complex histories and current realities of this place, or 'concept,' we call Australiaⁱ. Rather, there is an endless diversity of experiences, perspectives, voices and stories to be engaged with. And this engagement requires an expansive mind.

These complexities are reflected in much of the writing on Van Hout's work published in RealTime over the past decade. In Djon Mundine's article in RealTime 125, 'A memoir: knock 'em down,' he compares Van Hout to the powerful storms that flatten the tall grasses growing in Darwin. (p.20) Mundine's text is written in response to Van Hout's performance work Long Grass (2015)ⁱⁱ. He writes, 'In April comes the violent powerful "knock'em" storms that flatten the grass and clear the line of sight. Watching Long Grass I thought of Vicki Van Hout as an amazing ball of energy like these storms that come out of nowhere to energize, create and be gone again before you can blink.' (p.20)

In 'clearing the line of sight,' Van Hout makes us see what we might not otherwise see. She takes a risk engaging with subject matter rarely explored by others, as Mundine points out. And she explores this subject matter with respect, sensitivity and honesty, acknowledging both the destructive and productive aspects of life lived in 'Long Grass.' This is reflected in Keith Gallasch's review of her work in RealTime 125. He writes, 'True to the work's ambivalence about Long Grass culture - at once violent and communal - the tall grass catches the light, sparkling in a bleak world'. (p.19) Van Hout writes of this ambivalence in terms of the contradictions of Long Grass being 'comprised of people with one of the wealthiest cultural traditions, yet the poorest living conditions. Exacerbated by the ongoing government intervention, they are all but invisible in a city whose population is swollen with tourists.' (Van Hout 2015, n.p.) By making the lived realities of Long Grassers more visible, Van Hout extends ethical responsibilities to each of her audience members. We are invited to question ourselves, including our political responsibilities relating to policies that greatly affect the realities of a group of people with such rich cultural traditions.

Van Hout's ability to bring others into a state of questioning is perhaps only made possible through her own questioning of herself and her artistic practice. Van Hout is an artist whose incredible energy, passion and fierce commitment to innovation are entirely awe-inspiring. She is continually expanding her craft in new ways through a rigorous engagement with cultural traditions and wilful experimentation with these forms. In a discussion on the necessity for cultural experimentation in RealTime 111, Van Hout writes, 'I utilise this knowledge to explore how these ancient practices may still manifest themselves in the present urban environment. I believe in cultural

memory and that our culture is a living one, not boxed in by a preconceived notion of the 'traditional' being the only true authentic.' (p.5) This active resistance to being 'boxed in' by preconceived imaginings and dominant aesthetics affiliated with Indigenous dance is evident throughout Van Hout's work. A clear example is Van Hout's evolving dance vocabulary, which draws on many influences including her extensive training in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dances, Martha Graham technique and contemporary dance classes with Brian Carbee.ⁱⁱⁱ As Van Hout states in an interview with Martin Del Amo in *RealTime* 103, 'I have been taught [Aboriginal traditional] dances, it is my responsibility to pass them on. They are not the sum of me though.' (p.31) Like the ambivalence generated by the very existence of 'Ms Light Tan,' Van Hout's dance vocabulary expresses the complex blurring of cultural influences, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.^{iv}

In her hilarious work *Les Festivités Lubrifier* (2016), Van Hout makes light of the challenges of negotiating diverse cultural inputs in her work. Amid beer drinking, dozens of pairs of underpants laid out to dry, intermittent phrases spoken in French, and a theatre technician who is shouted at but never seen, there is a section in this work where Van Hout, Thomas E S Kelly and Caleena Sansbury attempt to dance to a piece of experimental music composed by an unnamed Finnish composer. He has composed this music for Van Hout, specifically for her to choreograph to it, but it's not going so well. Jodie McNeilly captures this scene's satirical wit in her review in *RealTime* 130; 'Van Hout's deprecating humour (and crankiness) toward self and others works overtime. Something about being 50, and the synapses not quite making the right connections. Who remembers the chore? Stand just slightly behind and to the side in front... But the music's too short. They've run out of tempo.' (p.16) In spite of this scene being ridiculously funny, the juxtaposition of these two differing cultural practices is invigorating.

Vicki Van Hout's insistence on experimentation is of tremendous artistic and political significance. Considering Australia's continued attempts to police, to oppress and to reduce the possibilities of cultural expression of First Nations peoples, Van Hout's work offers a counter-thrust toward expansiveness and diversity. Her use of ambivalence keeps us awake. Her ceaseless drive to expand her own practice in turn expands our own perceptions.

It is an impossible task to capture the significance of Van Hout's multifaceted practice within the confines of this small piece of writing. True to Mundine's analogy, Van Hout is indeed a storm. Her work produces bursts of electrifying energy that stir us up and bring about new and different perspectives. It thus feels appropriate to end with a provocation. It is a question asked by Van Hout during the performance of plenty serious TALK TALK:

'But listen, do we wait for the art to change and then we make the work or do we make the art change?' (Van Hout 2018)

ⁱ “The concept of Australia’ is a phrase from Megan Cope (2018).

ⁱⁱ ‘Long Grass’ is a term that refers to camps on the fringes of Darwin where First Nations people live for both cultural choices and reasons associated with homelessness. (Pollard, Smith & Ralph, 2017.)

ⁱⁱⁱ There is a fantastic scene in plenty serious TALK TALK where Van Hout explores these multiple influences and questions her right to draw on these various dances. The scene includes an extraordinary choreography danced by Van Hout with a soundscore of a recorded phone conversation with her colleague Henrietta Baird, that begins with Van Hout querying an earlier claim by Baird; “You should stick to Martha Graham.” Video documentation of the work can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQkOA_v06CI.

^{iv} In an interesting paper by scholar Martin Nakata he states, ‘there is no strict Indigenous and non-indigenous separation, but overlays, intersections, multiplicities and contested meanings.’ (Nakata 2012, p. 104.)

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Martin del Amo On the Pages of RealTime

By Amanda Card

Reading review after review from one source, across the career of one artist, is an odd experience. Time collapses as an audience's engagement with nearly twenty years of performance unfolds in just over an hour. In this retrospective act of reading, and this exhibition, we are witness to how both the artist, Martin del Amo, and reviewers for RealTime honed their craft. There is evidence of the acquisition of knowledge through exposure as these reviewers reveal a growing engagement with, and understanding of, the work. Commentators move from noncommittal mention, through the shock of misrecognition, to the excitement of expectation, and the satisfaction of comprehension. Then the artists' success brings wider audiences, bigger venues, and a lament for the lost intimacies of insider-ness.

One of the early mentions of del Amo's work in Realtime 20 was in reference to A Severe Insult to the Body, a solo presented by del Amo at the Performance Space Open Season in 1997.

Didn't Chris Ryan do this piece in black heels a few years ago? Does anybody really wear underpants from Target? 'My beautiful Laundrette' meets Butoh Workshop 101 on the set of 'Silence of the Lambs.' What excuse is there for this kind of contortion? (p.34)

Eight years later Mike Leggett's review in RealTime 70 of the same work as installation (del Amo's collaboration with film maker Samuel James for ReelDance Installations #2 in 2005) shows a developing ability to read the work: 'like a pietà in high heels and jocks he scans the horizon, steadily, stealthily, moving imperceptibly in the darkened rooms which his spot-lit body inhabits.' (p.37)

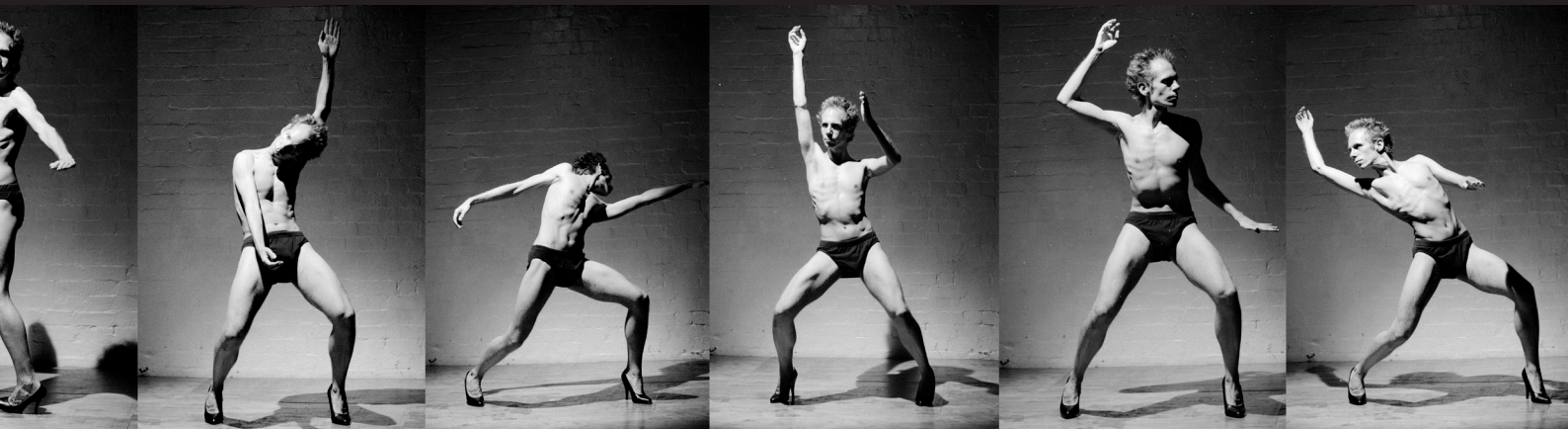
Through reviews in RealTime we also see snippets of the place that both del Amo and RealTime occupied in the local dance landscape from 1996 to 2017. There is commentary on art making and dance watching, but there is also a witnessing of community development, maintenance and even decline.

Approaching Omeo, the artist-run studio/rehearsal/performance space in Newtown, feels like walking to a downtown New York loft in the 1970s [...] there are artists inside working. They are not waiting for permission from the funding bodies to create work. They are developing a practice in a place - a culture of creative endeavour, a community with a shared aesthetic sensibility. (p.16)

The reviewer, Karen Pearlman in RealTime 69, was on her way to see Un-coordinated, curated by Rosie Dennis at Omeo Studio in 2005.¹ Del Amo and James reprised an early film collaboration - Postdamer (2000) - screened amongst seven other offerings by local artists. But the kicker in Pearlman's review is that she was also witness to the end of an era. The building that Omeo Studio occupied was to be sold, and by 2007 this place of community exchange had closed.

In RealTime reviews of del Amo across these years we see a growth in writing about dance in the magazine.





Martin del Amo

A Severe Insult to the Body (1997)

Performer: Martin del Amo

Photo: Heidrun Löhr (2003)

There are the rhythmic incantations of Virginia Baxter watching *The Little Black Dress Suite* (2013) in *RealTime* 117:

T-dress, V-dress, vintage bandeau, slimline, full-skirted, reverse wrap, Audrey style, whatever, I know that the trick with the LBD is simply to wear it well. Here Martin del Amo is the tailor and each of the dancers adds her/his own personality to the outfit to bring off the elegant display. (p.20)

Jan Cornell's review of *Never Been This Far Away From Home* (2007) in *RealTime* 78 shows how words, well spun, can give video documentation a run for its money.

A man in a white suit seems to hover in the space. As our eyes become accustomed to the dim light we see he is moving towards us across a white floor, his slight frame strangely trapped in the formality of his dress (aptly designed by Virginia Boyle). Carrying his polished brown shoes, he is barefoot, as if he has escaped - crept away from somewhere. Behind the white performance square, sitting at a table, sound artist Gail Priest 'plays' a laptop, feeding the buzzing soundscape into the air. (p.34)

There were the words of other skilled insiders as well: Gail Priest, Pauline Manley, Jodie McNeilly, Nikki Heywood; and then there is the work of Keith Gallasch, who reviewed del Amo over a period of thirteen years.

Of *Unsealed* (2004), Gallasch wrote in *RealTime* 61:

A man paces in his underwear. Is he lost? Looking for something? Mapping out space? The walking becomes almost hypnotic [...] the man stops, faces a mirror, wipes himself down, drinks water. These are quiet, slow moments. He looks at himself. Each time he stops here he adds an item of clothing before coming to address us, or, once, singing...before setting out on another, more intense walk [...]. By the time he sings, a searching, fine interpretation of a Friedrich Hollaender and Robert Liebmann cabaret song, he is fully dressed. The suit appears to contain him, bulking the strange reaching gestures - a half-hearted aspiration for transcendence? (p.47)

A year later del Amo presented *Under Attack* (2005). This was, for Gallasch, 'another utterly engrossing solo.' A signature style had begun to emerge as recorded in *RealTime* 66:

As in *Unsealed*, [del Amo] walks and walks, but less purposefully this time, goes to speak to us, then doesn't. [...] Between each episode his walking is breached by sudden involuntary movements, a kind of escalating possession, its force thrust up through the body into the arms and into the head racked side to side. He discards his clothing piece by piece. He is ever more the puppet, perpetually propelled, awash with sweat, legs dropping away from beneath him. (p.33)

As a critic embedded in the weave of the community of artists he reviewed, Gallasch's comments also illustrated the influence of that insider's perspective. *Unsealed* moved even closer than *Under Attack* to what Gallasch saw as the inspiration for both works: 'grief (the artist's for the death of a lover).' But with *Under Attack*, the grief 'is the kind that can pull your legs from beneath you.' (Idem)



Martin del Amo

It's a Jungle Out There (2009)

Performer: Martin del Amo

Photo: Heidrun Löhr

A few years later, Martin del Amo began to work with others. The solos continued, but he now also made them on, with, and for other people. Some followers of his work were sceptical: wasn't del Amo's movement just that ... his movement. All that 'escalating possession' and 'head racked side to side' was an idiosyncratic, unique, and therefore un-transferable 'style.' Erin Brannigan recorded the fact that this was not the case. Del Amo's 'weightless, labouring, exhausted, fragile, awkward, angular, chaotic, compelled and compelling' movement was actually the result of a rigorous practice:

What has been a revelation for many since del Amo began choreographing solo pieces for others, is the possibility that his corporeal signature has produced a movement style [...] The performance of Paul White at the Critical Path showing [of *Anatomy of an Afternoon* in 2011] revealed that del Amo's movement style is reproducible beyond his own corporeality, a fact that testifies to his choreographic and directorial skills. Reproducibility also puts his work into a wider circulation of bodies and contexts. (Brannigan 2012, p.28)

It was this work that saw the performance establishment come calling. *Anatomy of an Afternoon* was part of the 2012 Sydney Festival. Here Keith Gallasch voiced the lament of others in *RealTime* 107:

I saw *Anatomy of an Afternoon* at a disadvantage, from the back of the Opera House's Playhouse auditorium, deprived of the intimacy the work seemed to warrant ... White, as ever, moved superbly in a work that perhaps evolved too slowly to be consistently immersive and was curiously lacking a third dimension usually evident in the creations of choreographer (and *RealTime* correspondent) Martin del Amo. But I'd love to see it again, up close. (p.5)ⁱⁱ

Although not entirely convinced by *Anatomy*, Gallasch, as the engaged and committed critic he had become, was still prepared to take a second look.

Comparing reviews from other places also reveals the commitment *RealTime* had to the present, past and future of contemporary performance. By way of example, Michelle Potter wrote on her blog of del Amo's most recent work *Champions* (2017):

My regret is that the work really didn't give us much of a chance to see the exceptional abilities of people like Kristina Chan, Miranda Wheen, the Palomares sisters, in fact all eleven women. *Champions* was enjoyable but, despite its apparent intentions to make a social and political comment, to me it was a slight work. (Potter 2017, n.p.)

In his review of *Champions* Keith Gallasch, in *RealTime* 137, showed his smarts:

Martin del Amo and his collaborators at first push the art-sport analogy hard with a dance-football synthesis: there's a big AstroTurf field in Carriageworks' largest theatre, multiple video screens, media commentary, a mascot, heroic music and the dancers' names are printed on the back of their sporty tops. But, in a calculated point of difference, the dancers are not uniformed. It's a touch odd given that most dance productions still lean towards shared costuming and, of course, there's intense team work on display here. Nonetheless, once on the field, there's a strong sense of the dynamic played out between individuals. (n.p.)ⁱⁱⁱ

After the half-time Swan mascot (Julie-Anne Long) entertained the crowd, Gallasch wondered: '[p]erhaps the second half will deliver' the expected pay-off: the crescendo of unison exertion that we expect from current dance: the big finish - the high energy, group choreography where everyone dances together and the audience go home zinging with intra-corporeal, orgasmic release.

But, as if resisting a too obvious impulse, Del Amo takes us onto a field of dreams, slower, contemplative, beautiful, as if extracting and compacting an essence of elegant vigour. The music continues to pulse but with delightful Baroque invention, transcending any sense of mimicry or parody and, on the screens, notations of strategic moves become lyrical abstract artworks. I let my reviewer's pen drop from scribbling in the dark and reverie (no, not asleep) to the movement until an eruption of activity anticipates game's end with fabulous images of exhaustion, head-hung-low defeat, ecstatic jubilation. (Idem)

Vintage Gallasch. Vintage del Amo. Vintage RealTime.

ⁱ Omeo Studio in Newtown was a space originally created and financed by Rosalind Crisp. See: <http://www.omeodance.com/>.

ⁱⁱ For more analysis of Anatomy of an Afternoon at the Sydney Festival and at the Sydney Opera House see Chan (2012) & Shih Pearson (2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ The other women in this work were listed by Gallasch; all 'star players in the contemporary dance scene—Sara Black, Kristina Chan, Cloe Fournier, Carlee Mellow, Sophia Ndaba, Rhiannon Newton, Katrina Olsen, Marnie Palomares, Melanie Palomares, Kathryn Puie and Miranda When.' (RealTime 137, n.p.)

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