

## **(re) thinking dance**

***reflections on touch, sharing and meeting during the pandemic,  
or a conversation that otherwise wouldn't have been.***

Written and choreographed by  
Maud Lannen and Roger Smith  
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# PROLOGUE

On 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2021, artist and researcher Maud Lannen presented her PhD project 'Per-forming the haptic maternal' to international interdisciplinary research laboratory PeARL (Performance and Research Lab). During Q&A, she was met with silence. This event opened-up questions about Zoom technology, English as the all-encompassing, blanket medium for communicating across borders, about the specific language of disciplines and about other possible barriers within and outside our control which might have hindered engagement and/or understanding that evening. The event also unexpectedly prompted Roger Smith, a historian of psychology and participant in PeARL, to write to Maud and Maud to respond. The reciprocated gesture turned into electronic correspondence which continues to this day – a conversation on Zoom, remoteness, absence and aesthetics. The conversation lets our minds wonder and wander on the digital page. It attempts questions and new ways of thinking about what it means to be present, to meet and to share in the context of PeARL, of dance and beyond, ultimately conversing on what touch is and can be in a way that would have been mostly *ungraspable* prior to Covid-19.

This is a conversation and interaction between a scholar (Roger is also amateur dancer and novelist) and an artist/choreographer-researcher. Both have written on touch, albeit their knowledge belongs to different traditions. The PeARL conference (June 2021) brought the opportunity for an art experiment: to (re)compose, extend, improvise and choreograph our email notes into reflexive sound work as dance and performance; to experiment with sharing and meeting differently. This special edition on 'Touch' for the *Russian Fashion Theory* journal, opens-up a new opportunity: to translate our video performance piece for the conference into performance or choreography writing; to experiment, once again, with sharing and meeting differently.

## PART I

### On Meeting

*Dear Maud,*

*How strange it is to be sending my first voicemail. We haven't even met.*

***No.***

## ***We haven't met.***

*We heard each other talk. I have seen your eager and inquiring head. We have read some quite complex pieces each other has written. We have shared something. But we haven't met. Or do you think we have met? Or do you think that other people will say that we have met because they're used to meeting on media and I am not?*



Fig. 1

*We've exchanged some quite complicated thinking, on skype or when you've talked and I've talked. But to me meeting means a physical presence. ***Why?*** Why should I think in such an old-fashioned way when people meet continuously and all the time on social media? Or at least, they say that they meet. My response is they don't meet. And yet with COVID, we haven't been able to meet physically. And instead, a great range of rich new ways of making contact as people say – of course it's metaphorical contact, not physical contact – have developed. ***Why should it continue to matter to me****

***that there should be physical presence?*** Well, what can I say about that just to summarise. And, this is very general, and being general, perhaps everybody can have some kind of reaction: do people share or not share what I say?

Firstly, meeting by physical presence is a habit or a custom. It's ***what / I / have / always / done*** in order to say that I meet with somebody. So that, physical presence meeting is part of my identity. If I adapt to having relations online, I change my identity. And I think that COVID clearly for many people has had an impact on identity. And that change of identity is bound up with the absence of physical presence and physical contact.



Fig. 2

The second very general thing that I want to say, is that the model or pattern of having a relationship with somebody, ***comes / from / being / a child with a mother.*** I mean that, in the most elementary way being the foetus inside the mother. And being born through the activity of the mother, and the first moments being with the mother. This relationship is a physical relationship of contact of closeness of physical presence. And, in my understanding, it sets a pattern or a model of all kinds of relationships. And this early pattern that is given to all of us, though it may not be in the future is present virtually to everybody. This physical pattern is not just physical it is also a matter of trust. The relationship involves the development of what becomes a moral world of trust. And so, for me, meeting physically is the way I have usually established trust with people. But now, we have to establish trust – and Maud,

we ***have*** established trust – without the physical presence. But it involves a change with the way I used to do things. And the third very general point that I want to make about physical presence is that, in my imagination, physical presence is unmediated. We are directly in contact. Whereas relations through a media are precisely that: they are mediated. And who or what does the mediation, then draws in politics in the relationship, politics in the broad sense. And some people welcome the mediation. They see it as opening-up politics. Other people see it as oppressive. And clearly, it can be both. But there is something to be said about the difference between mediated and unmediated relationships which opens-up the social dimensions of the way we choreograph.

*I think this is enough for the time being. What do you think? Have we met? Have other people on PeARL met with us? Are we meeting with people now?*

*In a second message, I will respond to what you say, but I'll also want to say something about sharing.*

*But Maud for now, that's it.*

*Take care*

*Bye*

*Roger*

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*Dear Roger,*

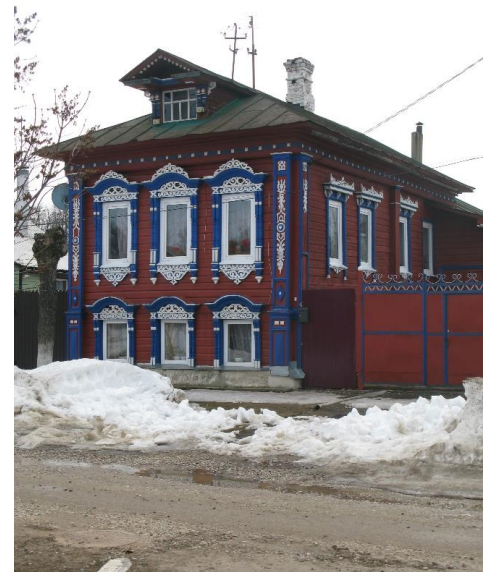


Fig. 3

*What a thrill it is to receive your first voice note and what an unexpected gift our exchange continues to be.*

*You're asking me and our audience 'have we met?'*

*I want to ask rather:*

## *how might we have met and be already meeting?*

*We might conceive that this event necessitates all participants to 'meet', by which I mean, agree the conditions of 'meeting', at its most basic: agree the date, start and duration. All bears physical implications really impossible to dissociate from the virtual event. Likewise, our collaboration in this project has demanded of us to meet: to come together, agree on some things and not everything – to meet across and despite our differences, across disciplines, languages, time zones, geographies, across generations, cultures, heritage; literally, across spaces and temporalities.*

*But meeting first and foremost to gather together, a way to invite contact and sharing, a premise to work it out together, improvise within a set choreographic structure. **Imperfect?** Yes, for sure. But its orientation, I would say is curious, both strange and inquisitive. It is also attentive.*



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

*There are many ways to narrate the mother/baby relationship: all could be said to be stories, fictions we tell ourselves are true. Here, you and I, in a way, are also involved in narration and storytelling. We occupy a frame for creative movement, creative thinking, construction, and transmission. Language features, quoting Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2005)<sup>i</sup>, as an embodiment of life and culture. Language, he writes, is mediating in my very being.*

*As you suggest, in meeting, touch is invariably invoked making visible questions of trust – apprehension about being touched, where we invite touch from, who is touching and how. Questions around consent, agency and autonomy in touch which remain potent both in the digital and physical world. We might ask, what is gained by physical touch and presence? What is gained from **our hands and***

***skin touching** in a handshake? Is skin to skin and physical presence intrinsically objective?*



*Meeting also alludes to our capacity to establish and cultivate human connection in response to changing context or circumstances. And the frustrations deriving from absence, fraught Zoom technology and from the mandatory use of the English*

*language are interesting – they interest me. They generate gaps, they complicate transmission. We might understand those gaps as acts of disillusionment: they render visible our differences and give us the choice to protect them. They remind us of the deep labour and struggle that must be undertaken to remain in contact, to continue to share. I am going to leave it there and look forward to your response.*

*Bye for now,*

*Maud*



Fig. 6

## PART II

### On Sharing

*Dear Maud,*

*Yes, yes, I like being attentive. And I warmly thank you for being attentive to my message. Once again, I feel surprised. I feel like somebody who comes round a corner in an unknown landscape. You cannot tell what's round the corner. But something*

***opens-up*** that

***opens-up*** oneself as

*well as ***opens-up*** the view. You take the term 'meeting' which I wanted to deny to us, say that we had not had it, and you turn it into the word 'sharing'. And this touches on something that is more important. Something that explains why I wrote to you in the first place. And why I think we responded to each other. What comes out of PeARL, out of our laboratory for me, is a new kind of sharing. It opens-up possibilities. Opens-up openings. It takes me round new corners. And of course, it is precisely media which I started of from being negative about which makes this possible, including the media Zoom that we've used for PeARL. But there are media and media. And the media has no success in sharing unless there are two or more attentive parties.*

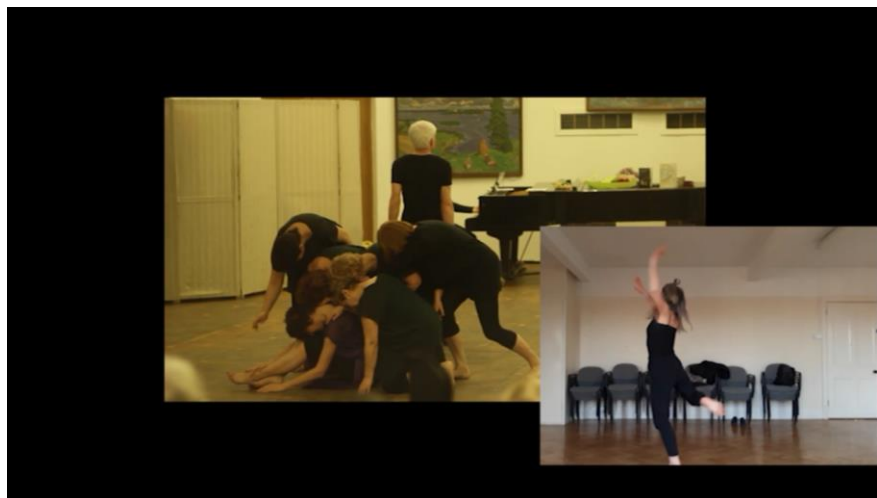


Fig. 7

Two or more sides who use the media. Not in a one-way direction but treated as something that is in its nature shared. And for this to be possible, the various people involved, you and me, Maud, have to acknowledge each other's agency, have to – and I think you introduce the word agency and I think this is extremely important – for there to be sharing, there must be reciprocity. There must be power in both directions. There must be space in which each person feels that their capacities, their limits, their special identity, their special character, is listened to. And you in your own talk recognise this by talking about narrative, that narrative is – and **our medium is words** – narrative is the medium through which we share agency. And hence, the voicemail is an attempt to express this, to find in performance this sharing of agency. And here I think I should end because we have so little time. And time is of course along with narrative one of the things which gives or denies us agency.

Thank you for listening Maud,

It's lovely to speak,

Bye

Roger

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Dear Roger,

For me sharing like touch is a human need, an impulse – it **leaps** outside of you and **leaps** you outside of yourself, your bodily boundaries, its familiar dwelling and situation. Your voice notes articulate ideas around meeting and sharing, but they also communicate your presence, your physicality and movements.

Anodyne sounds tell us that your body is already in contact with objects familiar to us all (a creaking table and chair, a mobile phone that buzzes, a keyboard brushed inadvertently by the hand). Words and sounds articulate relationships, relationships with language and everyday objects, as well as with each other. Those relationships leap out of their setting. Maybe we all leap out simultaneously? Might we re-think this movement, this **leaping** as dance?

Another question arises, is sharing only evident through reciprocity? You seem to suggest so. I am reminded of a conversation I once had with a lecturer in psychology: he talked of a correspondence he had cultivated over the years with somebody he called a friend. But the friend never wrote back. Nonetheless, he was convinced of their connection and sharing. At the time, I was completely bemused. However, this expectation of reciprocity also makes me reflect on the almost inexistent interaction I've had with my brother since I moved to the UK 25 years ago; how much I have yearned for familiar signs of connection and wanted for touch and closeness, and how over time, I came to conceive our relationship differently – in a way that doesn't demand but gives it space to

take **different forms, less familiar, less intelligible**, but no less 'present'. We might think of the pandemic as calling for similar movements and shifts in our perception.

I agree with you, listening is part of sharing and it certainly involves attention. However, might listening be practised when no one is speaking? What is the temporality of listening? What type of listening takes place beyond the moment of interaction? As you receive this voice note and I yours, I am most aware of our different temporalities, yet we are no less present and part of the world and its making. The email may arrive instantly, but **you** will most likely have **got up from your seat and left** your desk even if I open it immediately. I can listen to your words at a time that suits me, and several times until thoughts form. Time will pass and while I compose this, you will not be waiting still, though our rhythm of exchange, much like in physical interaction, may have already grown familiar and partially be sensed.... I am drawn to these paradoxes. So could a time that demands reciprocity be a time that in fact denies agency, denies very unique (you use the term 'special') modes of apprehension and engagement, different capacities and preferences?



Fig. 8

This choreography as you remark is certainly bounded by time which restricts it, and in restricting offers new possibilities. Time is an essential partner and timing has generated between us moments of synchronicity and asynchronicity. Going back to the event that made you want to write to me last March, I want to suggest that asynchronicity might be the unexpected corners that one finds themselves walking around, as you poetically put, and that potentially,

subject willing, opens-up oneself as well as opens-up the view! This is **the agency that is ours** as we make and unmake narratives about who we are and would like to be, and how we would like to be with and for one another.

You have shared with me once on emails, 'in the tension itself may be where the creative response lies.' Thanking you for your extraordinary thoughtfulness and generosity and looking forward to more exchange.

Take care dear Roger,

Maud

Dear reader,

Roger and I warmly invite you to be co-author and dancer in this choreography. Why not improvise with us? As you read and interact with the piece, you may wish to think of and experiment with tone, speed, flow, intonation, emphasis, silence and pauses; as well as different degrees of each.

What comes over the horizon?

Best wishes

Maud and Roger

### List of figures

Fig. 1 Roger in Shuya, Russia (photo)

Fig. 2 Shuya, Russia (photo taken on Roger's trip)

Fig. 3 Shuya, Russia (as above)

Fig. 4 Nottingham, UK (photo taken by Maud at home or in her locality)

Fig. 5 Nottingham, UK (as above)

Fig. 6 Nottingham, UK (as above)

Fig. 7 Video documentations of *Gershwin*, a musical movement performance featuring Roger (Moscow, Russia), and of Maud's studio practice (Nottingham, UK)

Fig. 8 Video documentations of *Matiushin*, a musical movement performance featuring Roger (Moscow, Russia), and of Maud's studio practice (Nottingham, UK)

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<sup>i</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o [1986] (2005) *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London, UK: James Currey; Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers.