

## Raft

*Devised by Ben Jeans Houghton and Nicole Vivien Watson.*

*Performed by Ben Jeans Houghton (sound) and Nicole Vivien Watson (movement).*



Low light surrounds a dark circle on the floor, a stage prepared for a performance. A deep voice sings out from the speakers. A dancer enters, and is illuminated from above as her foot touches the stage. The circle, we now see, is covered in an intricate design: a diagram made up of white lines that mark out intersecting circles, squares and triangles. Around these shapes are numbers, letters, words and symbols. Surrounding the black circle, we can now make out a multi-coloured rim, each coloured section printed with an astrological sign.

The dancer begins to move. She stays within the circle, starting upright, moving down to the ground, responding to the sound of the singing which loops and swoops, up and down. In turn, the singer responds to the dancer: following a sweeping movement with a hissing outbreath, or rumbling down in pitch as she works the floor with her body, finding the edges of the stage with her limbs.

*The circle is a stage. The stage is a raft.*

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The lines, numbers, words and symbols that cover the raft have their own internal logic. The design of the diagram is based on a sigil devised by Ben Jeans Houghton. This sigil formed a starting point upon which the other elements were mapped out - a selection of symbols from different magical systems organised through universal ideas: the stages of life (child, adult, elder, death), the seasons (spring, summer, autumn, winter) and the compass points (north, south, east, west). The most apparent system is Jeans Houghton's reordered version of the astrological symbols of birth signs, elements and planets.

Astrology, in Jeans Houghton's system and in the performance, is not a predictive or deterministic system, rather it supports creative action and improvisation. In *Raft*, astrology can be understood as a kind of magical infrastructure, a technology of thought and action that makes possible Nicole Vivien Watson's movement and Jeans Houghton's singing.

Viven and Watson and Jeans Houghton spent a long time developing the piece together, developing the idea through a series of workshops and performances over a number of years, and more recently, working together and apart to make the dance and music work together. But within the performance, certain moments are held open for improvisation. Each time the piece is performed, the movements that Vivien Watson makes can change, and the sounds that Jeans Houghton makes can be different. The *direction of travel* is always the same, the performance of *Raft* is a journey that begins and ends at the same place.

Vivien Watson begins in the east/Spring and completes a 360 degree motion throughout the duration of the piece, and Jeans Houghton begins and ends the piece with a low rumbling sound as Vivien Watson enters and exits the platform.

The raft of the title can be understood as a real raft, an ad hoc sailing vessel used by migrants to travel across the sea. Vivien Watson described rafts as,

‘Transporting people’s hopes and desires and requiring a lot of trust and hope that the raft stays afloat and carries them to their final destination’.

The raft can also be understood as a platform upon which a journey of life is played out, from birth to death (to possible rebirth). This journey is more metaphorical, Jeans Houghton described the raft as a platform upon which,

‘A kind of travel can take place, but more personal and reflective’.

The raft can also be understood as a stage where a performance happens. A space illuminated and filled with movement and sound for a particular duration.

It can be understood as all of these things at once.

Vivien Watson’s movements are choreographed and Jeans Houghton’s music is planned, but each of them also responds to the other in the moment of performance. No one performer leads, but both are led. They improvise with *and through* one another.

Improvisation has a seemingly contradictory nature. Improvisation is spontaneous. It is new each time, and is a way of the performer creating in the moment. But improvisation has to be prepared for. To develop an improvised performance is to slowly construct a space within which the performers can improvise. Improvisation, like astrology or other kinds of magic, is a highly structured system of action that produces results specific to the given moment. Because of what Jeans Houghton called ‘the primacy’ of improvisation in the work, when it is performed the audience are seeing the birth and death of a unique version of the piece in which the destination is known, but the journey is new each time.

The mud formed a finger, pointed

*Devised by Matthew de Kersaint Giraudeau, Ben Jeans Houghton and Nicole Vivien Watson.*

*Performed by Matthew de Kersaint Giraudeau (sound) and Nicole Vivien Watson (movement).*



Vivien Watson begins *The mud...* curled up in a bucket, covered in slime, glowing under UV light. The rest of the performance consists of her rising out of the bucket to a standing position, finally reaching full height, with her arm held up in the air, dripping viscous gunge back into the bucket before the room is plunged into darkness and the performance ends.

Throughout the performance, I manipulate feedback created by two microphones placed in the space. Feedback is the sound produced when a

microphone picks up its own output coming from a speaker, creating a positive gain loop which exponentially amplifies the volume of the sound. The sound is a ringing, whistling, rising tide of harmonic noise, and the frequencies are dependent on the shape of the room.

As Vivien Watson rises up from the bucket, the feedback is recorded and looped back on itself, getting louder and louder, with variations in the tone produced by processing the sound through computer effects. Once Vivien Watson reaches the apex of her movement, with her hand stretched out into the air, I give a signal to the lighting technician, and we cut the sound and lights simultaneously to finish the performance.

*The mud...* was developed through research into the practice of 'messyplay', a fetish in which people are covered in slime. The slime that coats Vivien Watson as she moves is a non-toxic substance purchased from a specialist retailer and designed to cover human bodies. Messyplay is an interesting fetish because although it clearly involves heteronormative ideas of sexual desire between men and women, the culmination of the messyplay act is the moment when slime completely covers a body and renders it inhuman and inaccessible to the viewer. Messyplay amounts to a form of desire in which the human body disappears from

view - closer to Freud's idea of the death-drive in which desire is focused on the sublimation of subjectivity, rather than on conjoining with another person.

*The mud...* also came from an interest in creation myths - as Jeans Houghton put it,

'A body formed from material, a body that arrives before the mind, matter that precedes the person.'

This moment of pre-personhood offers up questions to be answered through performance. How would a body without a mind appear to us, and how would it move? Can matter have a sense of itself, and of the world around it?

Vivien Watson's movements are slow, but the word slow implies a human slowness: the slowness of age or frailty, the slowness of relaxation or laziness, or

the slowness of taking one's time. Vivien Watson's movements are slow in a different way, an inhuman way. The movements she makes are laboured and hard, tight and stretched, painful and powerful. The movements have a slowness that impedes the audience's ability to understand the movements, or to place them within a lexicon of movements they have seen before.

Vivien Watson's movements in *The mud...* are influenced by Butoh, a dance form developed in Japan by Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata in the 1950s and 60s. Vivien Watson studied in Japan with Yoshito Ohno, a Butoh practitioner and Kazuo Ohno's son. Butoh was a response to the postwar political landscape in Japan, confronting audiences with hyper-slow, grotesque movements that refused traditional notions of beauty and 'the refinement and understatement [of] Japanese aesthetics'<sup>1</sup>.

The movements Vivien Watson makes in *The mud...* are ugly, or they would be ugly if a recognisably human body was making them. But because of the slime covering her body, and the contorted, distorted way she rises up out of the bucket, Vivien Watson becomes something else, something inhuman. She becomes an object for which claims of beauty or ugliness cannot be made. As Vivien Watson says,

*'My goal in the performance is to not exist. I don't want to be. I don't want to exist as a female, as a male, to feel as though I'm evoking any desire in anybody. I don't want to be anything. I don't want to feel, I just want to be nothing.'*

*The mud...* refuses a lot of things: ideas of beauty and the central place of the female body in dance are negated by the slime and by the way Vivien Watson moves, and ideas of music and its relationship to dance through rhythm are negated by the arrhythmic noise that accompanies the performance.

*The mud...* also refuses the traditional mode of a dance performance in which movements are developed towards some kind of formal resolution. This is a kind

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<sup>1</sup> Sanders, Vicki (Autumn 1988). "Dancing and the Dark Soul of Japan: An Aesthetic Analysis of "Butō"". *Asian Theatre Journal*. 5 (2): 149. JSTOR 25161489.

of performance duration that reflects and flatters human-centric timescales. *The mud...* refuses any attempt to read it from start to finish, and it refuses traditional ideas of performance as narrative. I see *The mud...* not so much as a dance, but as a single image that develops over time and can never be fixed.

From the moment that the audience enters into the space and tries to work out who or what is in the bucket, until the moment when Vivien Watson stands at full height, liquid but solid, present but absent, human but not, there is no way to place what we are seeing alongside things we have seen before, and when the noise stops, and lights are cut, that image remains stuck, flickering and glowing in our mind's eye.