

Liz Aggiss *The English Channel*
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"Have you calmed down yet Elizabeth?" It seems that at sixty, anarchic dancer Liz Aggiss shows no sign of "calming down". Her recent piece *The English Channel* (2013/14) is an energetic and wickedly playful exploration of what she describes as the "on-going female conundrum": "Do I please you? Or do I please myself?" Aggiss's piece has been eighteen months in the making and the strong feminist politics of the work has resonances with performance events such as "Calm Down Dear: A Festival of Feminism" at the Camden People's Theatre in 2013 (the title referring to David Cameron's patronising instruction to MP Angela Eagle in the House of Commons in 2011). Aggiss's long term collaboration with Billy Cowie as Divas Dance Theatre between 1980 and 2005 acquired them the labels of "maverick hybrids" and "smash and grab artists" (Brown, 2006) and the solo performance Aggiss has made since their uncoupling retains the energy and urgency of the Divas' work. In *The English Channel* Aggiss focusses on her own autobiography and the influences from dance, music, popular culture and film that have shaped and defined the body she proudly and defiantly presents to her audience. Choreographer Carol Brown states:

As feminist performance theorists have revealed, for a woman dancing, the stage is jammed with prior constructs – dances, choreographies, spectacles, performances, displays – that implicate her body as an idealised sign and object par excellence. As a woman dancing it is impossible to discount this past. I can no more install the primacy of my experience as a 'woman' without addressing the social and cultural embeddedness of gendered markings on my body than explore how these markings are implicated in the apparatus of representation. In other words, the apparatus of representation is a minefield for a woman's body (Brown, 2006: 10).

Liz Aggiss has been described as having a "'non-standard' body" and as Brown acknowledges: "the exclusive practices of dance refuse admission to the 'unbound' body. That is the body that exceeds our expectations of a dancerly body: a fleshy body, an aging body, a chaotic, undisciplined body, an abject body and a body of ambiguous sex" (Brown, 2006: 11). Starting late to dance at 28, even before her body was read and judged in terms of age (as it is now), her work was said to "sit queasily in dance" (Aggiss, 2006: 145) and was described as "solo, female, ugly" (Dodds, 2006: 128) due to the "grotesque" nature of the movement inspired by classic European *Ausdruckstanz* and early female pioneers such as Valeska Gert, Mary Wigman and Hilde Holger. Aggiss's seminal piece *Grotesque Dancer* (1986) brought her to the attention of the dance world and is a clear example of her desire to find her own style of anarchic dance within the contemporary dance culture. Mary Clarke's assertion in 1987 that Aggiss and the Divas were as "untrained as they are unattractive" became fodder for Aggiss's acerbic wit in *Survival Tactics* (2005-12) but aptly demonstrates a cultural desire for female dancers to be trained in a specific type of dance and to be conventionally "attractive", i.e. youthful, slim, taut. Aggiss is keenly aware of how her own body image does not fit into this: "dancers do not generally look like me, big shoulders, hatchety face, large breasts, squat, old" [2000: 30] (Dodds, 2006: 128). Dodds affirms Aggiss's subversion of the classical dancer's body claiming that: "the overt focus on Aggiss as an older dancer, complete with lined face and a generous layer of flesh, is a bold defiance against the lean and supple stereotype of the female dancer" (Dodds, 2006: 139). In *The English Channel*, Aggiss enters the performance space with her body covered in a draped sheet leaving only her legs and stilettos exposed. She moves her body in an angular and convulsive way as she delivers her text *staccato*: "Did you come with high expectations? Or is the bar too low? How low can I go?" Parodying Shakespeare's famous scene from *Hamlet* with the skull of Yorick, Aggiss holds a microphone to a prop skull that she has been performing with, knowingly acknowledging dramatic tradition and then usurping this with her playful and postdramatic approach. In *The Choreographer's Handbook* (2010) Jonathan Burrows claims that "the meaning that arises from the relationships between things can alter their individual meanings" (Burrows, 2010:113) and this is apparent as the action moves from vignette to vignette, live sequence to film to live again, not allowing audiences to get too comfortable with any image or style before undercutting it with a different and dissonant moment. Citing influences on her process of devising *The English Channel* as diverse as Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* and Kantor's *Dead Class*, the strange mixture of humour, the macabre and pathos creates an unsettling atmosphere in the performance space. Striking and stylised film work provides a backdrop for Aggiss's live body while her self-deprecating and witty persona warms the audience to her feminist plight.

The question "Do I please you?" at first seems to refer to Aggiss's body in the space – do we find her body pleasing to the eye? – but as the text continues she asks "Or do I please myself?" altering the meaning of the first sentence to infer "who do I please in this situation?" Aggiss is currently making feminist performance in the aftermath of the most notable feminist activity to take place around the world in over twenty years - the Slutwalk - which began in 2011 as a response to Canadian police officer Michael Sanguinetti's statement that to avoid being attacked "women should avoid dressing like sluts". This caused widespread dissent and hundreds of thousands of people in over 200 cities around the world marched in protest and to raise awareness of perceptions of rape. Existing marches such as Reclaim the Night had never achieved the same level of popularity and publicity and the Slutwalk was critiqued as encouraging a "pornification of protest" while simultaneously raising questions about the "reclamation" of the word "slut". The impact of this event highlighted some of the issues surrounding contemporary feminisms and demonstrates the complexity and confusion over what the feminist movement means for young people today and what common ground there is for a varied and diverse demographic to engage with. In *The English Channel*, one thing is evident; Aggiss's body is so visually striking in the performance space as it is a female body that we do not have access to. While watching Aggiss perform I became acutely aware that I had never seen a sixty year old woman dance on stage before in a professional context. Aggiss has been making work for thirty years, however the political impetus behind the way she uses her body has new resonances in what is seen as the "fourth wave" of feminist activity in this contradictory and complex post-Slutwalk phase. In a society that dismisses aging female presenters in their 50s while their male counterparts are still in the limelight into their 70s and 80s, the message about which bodies are palatable and desirable to see is very clear. Cultural restrictions on behaviour, attitude, and etiquette become debilitating for older women and their bodies become invisible in the media and in art. In *The English Channel*, Aggiss boldly takes these issues on as she offers a response to the question "Do I please you or do I please myself?" saying "Fuck it. I am sixty, and I am going to do what I damn well please." She begins to shake her body sexily and spasmodically before moving into a version of The Dead Kennedy's song "Too Drunk To Fuck" where she mocks the expectation of how an older female body should move and act. She delivers the text in a spoken word style:

I went to a party, I danced all night, I drank sixteen gins, and got into a fight, now I am jaded, and you are out of luck, cos I am sliding down the road too drunk to fuck (Aggiss, 2013).

The punk ideology and rebellious nature of Aggiss's performance is evident here as she challenges perceptions of what is permissible for her sixty year old female body to do. Wearing a sequined halterneck top, black sequined hotpants and stilettos with her long blonde hair reaching to her waist, Aggiss draws attention to the sexual nature of her body while the lyrics reference partying, drinking and fucking, all behaviours that are not connected to our perceptions of older bodies (as in Mammalian Diving Reflex's *All The Sex I Ever Had* exploring the sex lives of pensioners). Aggiss courts the impermissible and the punk ethos behind her work shines through the skilfully choreographed Dead Kennedy's cover. It comes as no surprise that in the early 1980s Aggiss supported The Stranglers on tour with her "punk pogo-ing" dancing troupe The Wild Wigglers.

Aggiss's playful sexual innuendo is also apparent at the "Intermission" when female ushers come through the audience with bags of traditional sweets asking "Would you like something sweet to suck? Something sweet and hard?" The seaside theme that has been set up at the outset of the performance continues throughout via the selection of swimming caps that Aggiss adorns. These caps have multiple significations; the removal of the female signifier of hair "channels" original *Ausdruckstanz* Dore Hoyer while also offering a reflection on Aggiss's own canon of work as they are visually reminiscent of her shaved head in *Grotesque Dancer*. The seaside summer holiday theme offers a nostalgic glimpse of a rare treat within Aggiss's childhood in Essex "where 'no you can't' was the answer to every question".

The programme notes (given as a prize at the end of the performance for those that come on stage and participate in “a good old Essex knees up”) claim that “in revisiting her childhood self, revising her *raison d’être*, researching the empty space and reflecting on mortality, *The English Channel* appeared onstage tonight.” The autobiographical moments of Aggiss’s life combine with reflections on her own performance archive to create a vivid mixture of nostalgia and contemporary issues around feminism. Growing up in an era “where women looked old before their time” and “where the liberty bodice and a hankie in the pants was normal attire”, Aggiss draws humorously on these experiences as she pulls items out of her pants (she later tells me that an aunt of hers used to keep many useful items in her underwear) while simultaneously undercutting and challenging the limiting version of “woman” that she grew up with. Liz Aggiss “is *The English Channel*” as she morphs from a psychic medium “channelling” versions of femininity through film and dance and then providing a conduit between her past and our present offering us glimpses into her personal history and repertoire. In her article “Reconstruction (or why you can never step into the same river twice)” Aggiss turns to the dictionary definition of the word “reconstruct” to reflect on her practice:

Reconstruct: to construct or build again, recreate a lost or damaged original form, deduce from fragmentary evidence” (Aggiss, 2006: 142)

Contemporary feminisms need to acknowledge the repetition that has occurred throughout various women’s movements in order for perceptions of feminism to move forward. There has been a refusal to recognize (either knowingly or unknowingly) the strategies and concerns of the generation before and this has proved debilitating for feminist debate at various stages. Aggiss’s desire to celebrate the past in terms of the legacy of European dance and her own personal history, has the potential to direct how we approach the present and - most importantly - the future. Only by turning to the “fragmentary evidence” of the “damaged original form” of feminism and celebrating artists like Aggiss who challenge perceptions of what female bodies are visible and vocal in our culture can the feminist movement be reconstructed and revitalised.

References

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Biography of Author

Dr Laura Bissell is a Lecturer in Contemporary Performance Practice at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Laura studied at the University of Glasgow and at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia and has presented her research on contemporary practices at conferences nationally and internationally. Laura’s research interests include: contemporary performance practices and methodologies; technology and performance; live art; feminist performance and performance and journeys. Laura also teaches on the MRes in Creative Practices at Glasgow School of Art and on the Transart Institute MFA programme in Berlin. Laura is Associate Editor of the *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* Journal, a member of the Creative Learning Board at the Arches and is on the board of A Moment’s Peace Theatre Company. Laura is currently working on a collaborative research project on performance and journeys as part of her involvement in the Making Routes network and has presented this research at the University of Lapland and at the TaPRA conference in London in 2014.