

SPIRIT COMPASS

One Year On: Conversations with Lucy Suggate

Conversation One

In August 2020, six months after the last presentation of Spirit Compass at Nottingham Contemporary, Lucy Suggate conducted a series of conversations with some of the people involved in the project. These conversations capture reflections and memories of the experience of the work from a variety of viewpoints, offering an archive of the work and an understanding of how Spirit Compass as a layered piece spills beyond the performative event.

In Conversation one, Lucy is joined by Lauren Wright, Programme Director of Siobhan Davies Dance and Katie Hickman, Performance Curator at BAL TIC Centre for Contemporary Art. Throughout the conversation they reflect upon experiences and the process of making Spirit Compass happen.

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Lucy Suggate: Duration always, you know, seems to come up in terms of in gallery work. Again it allows us to spill over- and I think also this idea of spillage or spilling over was important. So this notion of duration, what you do, how long you do it for - again this idea of labour, the kind of labour, the cultural labour, the movement labour that might take place and then how that's spectated. How that's viewed. Unfixing... unfixing the traditional and it might even only be on a microscopic level, you know? Yeah, somebody may have sat and watched the entire thing and for them it may, you know, the space may not have been that different to a theatre space in the end or into a traditional presentation space but just the incremental changes, the subtle changes.

The fact that your centre of gravity might have been low to the ground, the fact that you could... there is an option to leave even if you didn't feel comfortable to or weren't quite ready, you know, it's those options which breed a sense of autonomy even if you don't end up taking them. The fact that you can do them I think it's just as is important.

Lauren Wright: It's interesting because in some ways, you know, you articulate there how certain characteristics of the gallery invite the kind of questions that you want to ask and the kind of, you know, around autonomy or or choice and, you know, the multiple sides the kind of the- the sort of liberatory capacity of those things and also the the problematics of those, you know, the sort of falsehood of those but, you know, in in reality also this work is really challenging in, you know, both from a logistical perspective but i think also from a sort of philosophical perspective to the idea of the gallery. I mean, I mean challenging in a sort of critical positive... like it does work in that space. So Katie I'm really curious from your perspective to hear, you know, what did you see either in anticipation or reflection as, you know, what did spirit compass kind of open up, within the structure of BALTIC, you know, within the way it understands itself or what it understands itself to be for. What did you experience in that respect?

Katie Hickman: I think it was interesting when you're talking about the 'unfixing'. I think that's what a lot of what I'm trying to do with bringing my programme into baltic, is the unfixing of our known ways of operating and that obviously brings continual challenge, but it's also opportunity for learning and as an organisation I feel like we are very much in a state of learning.

And I was very aware of that - that there needs to be more space for a conversation across the organization to really understand what the work does. Or the work is intending to do and then, I suppose one of the- the- the biggest, things I think I learned from Spirit Compass was the impact on audiences and what that worked out in our building. Having worked there for a nber of years, I have never seen audiences transformed the way they were after going to Spirit Compass. And that's not, I mean there's been amazing work, it was just there was something. There was an intangible, there was a transcendental and there was that autonomy that was given to audiences that really, yeah.

It really occurred over that weekend and was was a very, hbling thing to witness as well in our building and I suppose that's that gives the fuel for for making sure that still exists and that work that challenges and challenges our audiences but as you say in a in a critically positive way, it was, I mean I think the main thing was... one of the main comments was always 'what did I just witness?' and I can't tell them because I wasn't in their body.

I wasn't, you know, I don't know what they were, you know, what they were witnessing or what they were, you know, feeling and what they were holding. What the labour was that they were putting into the work and so yeah, ... It's still something, as you say, I think that I've returned to a lot in these last few months of, lockdown because there's nothing more than I would want to than to sit in Spirit Compass right now for an afternoon.

Lauren Wright: Do you remember, I mean, you mentioned about comments like 'what did i just witness?', do you remember anything about what people were saying that might give a bit of a hint as to sort of what was what was what was the work unlocking? For- for individuals maybe with respect to their expectations of what they might encounter in a gallery? Or what they might encounter in respect of dance? Or something else entirely?

Katie Kickman: I- I don't know. I mean part of me thinks it was a permission to be conscious of their bodies.. in space more. Perhaps, yeah, the preconceptions are with, coming into BALTIC, you know, there is regular live programming but it doesn't have perhaps the duration or the permission to come and go the way that Lucy's work also provided and I think, yeah, I think permission to be in space and to give time to be with the work I think it really held people for a lot longer than they expected. There was lots of 'oh you know, I've got to go because I've got a parking ticket, you know.' 'I have to be out in an hour' and that really showed that they were just completely within the work but they didn't know how, necessarily. I think that I think that that is to do with the expectations that they'll come and see exhibitions and they'll read wall panels and they'll be told what or not be told what to think but they'll, they'll be able to find out quite easily, you know, they can talk to our front of house staff and they can have conversations that gives them more cases of work and, you know, they could do that with the front of house with Lucy's work as well but there was perhaps, uh, a much more, yeah emotional and kind of physical response to the work than they were used to.

Lauren Wright: You know, Lucy in your process you were so attentive to, you know, what- what did it mean to sort of care for the situation. So both caring for yourself in the process, caring for your collaborators, and then also caring for the way the audience might encounter the work. So maybe that's something to just examine in a bit more detail. What felt important in terms of you know, you- you mentioned before about the work making itself available and cracking something open that that comes with a vulnerability, and so I'm curious about how you thought about trying to cultivate that.

Lucy Suggate: Well the movement practice is this site of cultivation and it is through the doing of- of the movement that all of these - that many questions simultaneously arrive. So there's this idea of shift- of sifting, sifting through these ideas, these concerns, these thoughts, through movement. Perhaps, you know, because I've moved and thought and moved for so long, perhaps what's, so perhaps there's a little bit of this, solidification happening around the idea that in- through moving your body you can enter altered states of consciousness or different layers of consciousness and awareness feeling and an understanding. So what we do is we drop from our kind of yeah- we drop into these other states of being.

So, for example, if we take that on a sensory level we may be, you know, we use our light, you know, we use our five senses particularly our visual, you know, in the world that we live in, our visual, sense is very heightened. We're dependant on ocular a lot and especially in terms of engaging in culture. What happens if you make other ways of sensing available or important and even beyond the five senses that we're familiar with that we that we that we language or that we understand. So we're entering into a space of- of- of sensations and feelings that we don't actually have, language for. We can maybe talk about them in a poetic sense or use metaphors but we don't actually have labels for them and all of this comes from engaging in a daily practice of moving. (Tom Page's musical live score starts)

Lucy Suggate: So the practice allows all of these observations and all of these questions then you observe in the practice - even if it's a self-practice - how does this transfer onto interspaces and onto other bodies?

So again I think through a process of making and doing over a decade I'd perhaps made work that in a way were test sites for this idea or tested what happens when I'm move in this way in front of people in a public realm. What do people need? What do I observe from them? What do they observe from me? Because it's a site of transference. So again a little bit you know, why the sea was so important was this idea of- of tides or- or tidal activities this idea that there's something that's in constant exchange with its environment. I think that was that that was in key from- from the beginning.

Also, you know, a real key question - I remember writing this in the application - was, you know, you know, in the last 20 years we really have, you know, it's the 21st century and what does that mean?

It really has- has felt like a very particular shift and we know that from the 40s, the 50s onwards we've been having these massive cultural and technological shifts in our society and they are recent history, but there's something about these last two decades that really feels like we're entering into another space and that is one of, you know, more crisis more complexity, mass information and opinion and so therefore in this social fuelling space what, you know - I'm sort of asking myself 'how do you move?', 'how do you dance?', 'what do you choreograph in this age of crisis and complexity?' Also knowing that my moving body, in a way, fell out of the late 20th century, and if you look at it kind of in a historical context, you know, what is happening right now with people who are engaged in thinking around contemporary forms of contemporary dance and choreography.

So again and that- that, you know, and I suppose I'm also kind of a real- I hold a real belief that in this movement practice in this dance practice that, you know, again going back to choreography and dance creating these expanded fields of doing, being, thinking promotes a kind of turbocharged labour that is, that is entering sort of realms of, phenomena actually because you are- the human capacity in that state of movement expands, and moves in many different ways whether that's through knowledge generation, through memory, through actually what you're physically able to do. The duration, the energy, the power that you generate within your own body - on all levels not just a kind of virtuosic level, also on a kind of nuanced very sensitive level.

So there's this experience of being human somehow in the state of movement, feels, you know, or I'm talking about it from the position of doing it for so long feels really important and feels important to share in whatever way possible. You know even on a very basic just transferring energy in the same way that what you get from you know Katie you spoke about watching looking at the sea, watching the shore, yeah. Why are we captivated or again just looking up into nature, into the clouds and watching those nebulous forms change, shift, shape.

What does that say, yeah, what does that reflect back to us, what does that say about ourselves? So I suppose I'm curious about these sites or these situations that you place your body in and what you can learn what you can learn from them. I mean I just remember in the making of it, I was walking along the beach and noticing- so I had the sort of sea, in one... you know, the sea I could hear it, I could smell it, I could see it, but also at the same time I could see that I don't even know what they are...

Are they sand worms that just kind of push out these little micro - they look like micro turds in the sand and I could see them actually being formed and I was just like 'oh my god' there's this sense of, you know, and in that act there was this sense of abundance and energy all around us or that we're all sort of, yeah, we're all distributing our energy. Our movement across the surface of the planet, even if that's very microscopic even if it's done in a very subtle way or a very small way or even if it's imperceptible.

Lauren Wright: You made a lot of choices in the making of the work, both in terms of how you wanted to relate to your collaborators and also how you wanted the audience to relate to the work that could really be with that abundance. Also in an environment where of course, you know, the resources that we had were were limited to a certain extent and, you know, certain decisions had to be made on a practical basis but it seemed like it always came down to, you know, ultimately what- what's going to allow this transference to happen?

Lucy Suggate: Yeah, I- I think- think so. I mean I think it was an attempt I mean, you know, looking back on it, you know, you can always say, 'oh I didn't manage that very well' or, you know, again a lot- a phrase which keeps coming up every day is this idea of 'unintended consequences' so this notion of, you can set some- you know, again on this idea of I wanted to create something that could flex and change and respond to the needs of of the needs of all of those who are involved.

So whether that's institutional, budgetary, personal, ethical, - historical, all of these that in a way it was looking at this, as a site actually as a living site but also an archaeological site, a kind of swamp of compost, something that was living and moving and constantly changing and that you- you could have multiple entry points and multiple perspectives, so again, yeah I mean it's a terrible word but there was a- an invitation, an inclusivity rather than an exclusivity but what I also recognise even in that desire to create a site of multiplicity so that many people could exist in or many perspectives or many activities could exist in.

There are still hidden, yeah in a way even that often wasn't enough because you could still make assumptions that people were being taken care of or you could make assumptions that it was clear that this could happen but then that thing of like well it might be clear in terms of like, just because you've told me doesn't mean to say I understand. Do you mean? It sort of really- I think it really spoke to this idea of complexity and how because it- right now we live in a kind of beyond complex system where, you know, it's not just one concept of complexity, or what does, you know, what does complexity mean?

In reality it means many things vying in this, you know, vying for the same space at the same time, you know, we could say that's one- one element of complexity, one idea of complexity is contradiction- problems and contradictions trying to- trying to move in the same direction, you know, this idea of, yeah, there are many complex patterns that we have in our society what what feels right now is we're going into that kind of mega complexity where they're all- or what we're not doing is we're not resolving that complexity we're just adding on and we don't really know how to exist in it.

We don't really know how to function because we keep trying to reduce everything to a kind of binary straight 'yes' and 'no'. We keep trying to reduce everything to something that's efficient, you know, something has to be- needs to be efficient but complex at the same time or efficiently complex. So again this notion of feeling like you were kind of tying yourself in knots trying to resolve one thing and then that would imbalance that thing. A little bit like, you know, like when you're trying to, yeah, create bread or something and you overwork it or the the starter or the yeast is wrong, you know, like, it just sort of, like, you can have all these good intentions but then somehow it can they can overkill, you know? It can overkill things.

So it was really, yes, it was a very curious process because it felt like, well this in the ways what this kind of element of labour and work of being able to metabolise complexity, you know, metabolise difficulty is something that maybe we- we as humans need to spend a little bit of time focusing on but it is difficult and there's a lot of failure and misunderstanding involved in that.

Katie Hickman: I think there's a definite heightened awareness that I have of organisational practice and through our work, I think, with CONTINUOUS and the- the current situation that we are all living through - whatever that current situation is - the global pandemic and but we've been living through a lot of precarity for a long time. Is the heightened awareness which I know we've had conversations about Lauren, is the precarity of artists and security of organisations and how that brings such conflict that we have these institutions that are regularly funded but we don't have artists that are regularly funded but without those artists these institutions don't exist.

So, I mean, the hypocrisy is right within the cultural sector and so I feel very fortunate to work at an organisation that wants to make change and look at those hypocrisies and examine them and change them. I mean it's not it's not going to be an overnight process and nothing ever is.

There's a long change to go but I think there's- there's definitely the understand- I didn't have much more of awareness of the vulnerability of people coming into an organisation like BALTIC that is a large building a relatively small team actually for, you know, for the size but that, you know, there are practicalities within, you know, giving an artist a contract and saying 'sign that' when actually we as an organisation have the ability to check between ourselves... where's their checking, who do they have, you know? What's their support within that? And I think that's something I'm very aware of with independent artists at the moment is, it can't- that practice has to change.

We have to change the way we work with artists because, they're otherwise- the gulf just becomes bigger and the inequality becomes bigger and the, you know, as I say as an organisation we don't exist without artists so if, yeah, it- it- I suppose there's- there's a lot that I've been thinking about in terms of the cultural sector and how it doesn't have the same accountability and, I think, why we're seeing a lot of, critical conversations coming out of organisational practice and specifically at the moment but has been, you know, for a number of years is because we don't have transparency of how we operate, we don't have a regulatory body and even though we have Arts Council. They're a funding body, they're not our regulatory body - although we slightly are - so it's all these kind of- we've built this really- and are complicit in this really, problematic structure within the cultural sector. So I think there's a lot within what Lucy's talking about, in terms of, an awareness.

Building an awareness, I think, that that work does and that cultural labour does, yeah, in an organisation like BALTIC I think it- it brought to the fore a lot to me- for me about the changes that we need to make and it's not, you know - I'd like to think that we're a positive organisation to work with but I'm- but that's not enough. It's, you know, it's- yeah so the unfixing is definitely somewhere where I feel like we're still sitting, at the moment.

Lauren Wright: That's interesting. I think, yeah, I mean I suppose for me, you know, and in Siobhan Davis, I think one thing that has really come to the surface as I've- as I've really reflected on Spirit Compass is you know the amount in which, sort of, I mean Lucy was doing so much sort of holding of all of these different things in place and actually sometimes what we needed to do was just, like, make space for that holding to happen, rather than trying to hold it as well, you know? , because I think there's- yeah there is- there is this tendency, you know, as institutions we really are used to creating reality, you know, we we create the parameters within which these invitations, take place and we sort of don't question the fact that actually once you create those parameters certain things are permissible and certain things are not permissible and I think, you know, Spirit Compass was creating its own set of relations, that perhaps we didn't understand, until they had been formed and and I think, you know, just reflecting back...

I think both from Siobhan Davis' perspective and from BALTIC's, you know, in the future if we can really try and sort of let those relationships form and then respond as opposed to going like 'this is what we want', 'this is what we expect to see in this process' and then trying to make that happen. I think, you know, there's some- that's where the change is possible, I think within our organisations as a result of working with these these kinds of artists and this kind of work, because you know Lucy spoke in detail about, you know, the sort of the process of moving and how that changes perspective and then, you know, we just have to create space for that change to move through us - somehow.

Lucy Suggate: Why do institutions feel so fixed and sedentary as well? I have this whole thing around- I suppose because I'm such a believer in movement, actually, and you know the whole thing of Spirit Compass: Where There is Movement There is Change was this way of- of going, you know, come on. Change is constant and it needs to be constant, therefore it is potentially a movement practice and how do institutions which effectively are people - they are a group of people - how do they enter into a state of dance and what happens, because we know within the performance realm what happens. We have all of this evidence of what happens when people either engage in dance physically or engage in watching dance.

We know that there is this expansion. What happens if institutions or more formal structures also enter into this state of dance and I think there's something around this step from cultural production, or a kind of understanding or a critiquing of the cultural industry which we've we've all in a way been coerced into - co-opted into - willingly and unwillingly, aware and unaware, sort of - yeah and this shift into or maybe it's an and moment you know we have that, for a variety of reasons and we also have this, other thing as well.

So it's a kind of, again, creating a more expanded- expanded field but I also think building awareness of things and this is also something again that a lot of dance artists will talk about, is we have this- we do- you know through our practice we develop these... a way, you know, we have developed this ability to be aware of things to integrate thoughts and ideas into a physical material, to time travel, yeah. To push the boundaries of our own capacity, actually. We're doing that constantly, ... Yeah, I'm just curious about that- that expanded approach as opposed to that production always feels often about drilling down into a kind of, efficiency mode and I think that's part of the thing because I think cultural industry- cultural organisations or organisations have had to adapt the industrial organisation, actually. There hasn't been much discussion about how- how do- how do arts organisations structure themselves.

Lauren Wright: Yeah and our structures are pretty conservative.

Lucy Suggate: Yeah and developed in 1840-whatever, I don't think there's been much (Lauren: Yeah) I don't think there's been much change, . Yeah, so again and I often talk about the bureaucratic stranglehold which, you know, I'm yeah- and there's this funny, yeah, this tension that builds up between creatives and those in the institutions.

Lauren Wright: I wonder if there's anything else that we - the three of us - might, we can take a second to ponder, that might want to sort of pull out as landmarks from this.

Katie Hickman: I think one of the things was, I work within a public space so, you know, one of, the continual preoccupations as audiences for me and there's definitely, something that Spirit Compass did which gave permission and legitimised being in space and that's something that not a lot of work, I think, that comes into public spaces allows, to happen and I suppose there's something when you're talking about, you know, walking on the beach and seeing the sea and having just come from spending a lot of time looking at the sea, the yeah- the permission and- for audiences to be in space and to be held and to hold themselves in space in relation to to others and I think it's definitely something that, yeah, needs to be held a lot more within visual arts spaces.

Lauren Wright: One of the things that I was going to pull out which is around how we as institutions can be really open to and changed by these processes because I think, you know, I think what you said before Lucy about moving from production to process is really crucial in this time and it's actually really interesting how, you know, for example the Arts Council like their new, parameters for- for funding for project grants are really focused on process because- because outcome isn't really possible and I'm- I guess, you know, I- I heard John McGraw from Manchester International Festival, a couple of weeks ago, speak about how each time we engage in a- in the production of an artistic work from an institutional perspective we should prepare to be changed by it, that should be the purpose of that and I think this piece, Spirit Compass, offers so much in that respect and so I think, you know, if I could go back to the beginning it would really be about, like, what is the process that this, you know- really giving over to the process somehow, from our perspective as organisations, who were trying to facilitate it and really trying to attend to what that process requires and asks of us and then also, being very clear with the rest of the partners in the network and people who are entering into- into dialogue with the work about what was required of that, as well. So that that process can spread and share and I think, you know, in some ways I think the audience were able to do that quite successfully. I think, you know, that interface was really successful.

I think, you know, there's a lot that's coming out from the institutional perspective which is coming out in retrospect, and I think a lot more could have come out in the- in the doing but nevertheless i think it speaks to the richness of the work that it has the capacity for that change-making really which I think is - and for shaping a new landscape, actually, which I think is really, the privilege of it and the way that it remains active even if it's not actually being performed.

(End of interview)

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COLLABORATORS

Dance Artists: Annie Hanauer, Alexandrina Hemsley, Alexah Tomey-Alleyne, Claricia Parinussa, Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome, Isabella Oberländer, Jamila Johnson-Small, Stephanie McMann, and Rowdy SS.

Musician: Tom Page

Costume Designer: Lydia Hartshorn