

***circling, tumbling, dancing around: back pieces***

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**Biography**

Katrina Brown is a UK-based choreographer and artist with an interdisciplinary hybrid practice across movement, drawing, writing and still-and-moving image. Her work is presented in gallery-like situations and on artist pages, producing material and digital documents as extensions of live work and processual activities of moving, drawing, sensing, thinking. She is currently working in collaboration with writer-artist Emma Cocker on their project *Dorsal practice: Murky Back Thinking*. She is a Senior Lecturer Dance & Choreography at Falmouth University Cornwall UK. [www.katrinabrown.net](http://www.katrinabrown.net)

**This article was collaboratively reviewed with Dr Bob Whalley**

**Abstract**

This article consists of six text-image pieces that share practical research into modes of moving, perceiving and thinking through the back and extended notions of dorsality. Since 2019 through workshops, studio residencies, presentations and collaborative moving, conversational, drawing and writing practices, I have been developing physical exercises and choreographic devices for tuning into the back, bringing attention to and exploring the unseen surfaces and axial technologies of the back. These dorsal practices are evolving through movement and sensory research as well as opening a wider set of philosophical concepts and possibilities for orientating in and co-habiting a world amongst other bodies and things.

The pieces combine short written texts, footnotes and images. The texts have evolved from sensory observation in practical movement tasks and conversations, in the form of notes and recordings, often working in a dynamic process between embodied experience, memory and imagination. The footnotes are a playful device for allowing other peripheral ideas such as light, moth, vestibular labyrinth, tree, tracing paper, ghost, voice, front-crawling to enter and to generate gaps for the reader in which to linger, skip, skim, imagine, (re)connect. The still images, diagrams and drawings are another way of taking note, testing, proposing, articulating and reading.

**Key words**

dorsal, turn, choreographic, writing, orientation, peripheral, note-taking

*circling, tumbling, dancing around*  
back<sup>1</sup> pieces<sup>2 3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *a dorsal sensibility seeping through*

Dear reader, I give background context to these text-image pieces and choreographic research into dorsality, at the end. You may however wish to read that contextual back-note first and then re-turn to the beginning.

<sup>2</sup> *inviting many ways to read*

Or you may wish to skip and skim here and there through the texts, still images and footnotes.

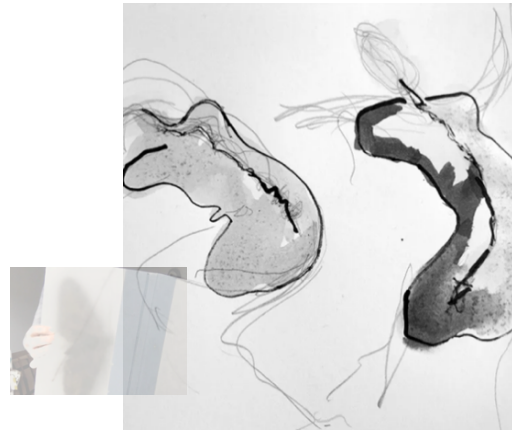
<sup>3</sup> *the remains of editing over and over*

These piece experiment with text, image and accompanying footnotes: allowing for non-linear connections between different kinds of information, a dispersal of focus and a letting in of unexpected things. Editing over and over as a choreographic process, less a distillation of ideas and more a stripping away so that traces or an absence of what is no longer there can still be felt or imagined.

## I back-bones

*dorsal tuning*<sup>1</sup> *twisting*<sup>2</sup> *tilting*<sup>3</sup> *turning*<sup>4</sup>

Tuning into the back opens a dorsal sensibility. I take my back for a walk, feeling back-ness in my moving, walking, crawling, swimming, dancing, resting and dreaming, noticing things that appear from behind, seeing other-wise, gesturing with limbs, micro-articulating joints, sensing gravitational tilts that upturn and turn me about. In dancing around, I feel like a kind of bio-mechanical-technological human-animal-sentient-thing, picking up vibrational frequencies through my porous skin as soft eyes scan. I am out of kilter, ambivalently moving amongst.



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<sup>1</sup> Tuning into the back refers to a sensory practice of bringing attention to the back and to the space behind the body to explore a dorsal orientation, in which relations between seeing, hearing, touching and gravitation become re-organized. Frontality favours a hierarchy in which the ocular and linguistic capacities of an upright social human-animal are dominant. With a dorsal sensibility, eyes soften as surfaces and receive light, rather than focussing, pointing, judging, naming. Peripheral vision and listening are activated and the cooperation between our twenty-four senses shifts, perhaps slowing, swaying, expanding, turning forward motion.

<sup>2</sup> I am approaching dorsality as an exploration of and conversation between the axial, skeletal and surface, skin technologies of a human-animal. The spine's cervical, thoracic, lumbar, sacral and coccyx vertebrae shaping a body's movement in micro-articulations and delicate curving, twisting, and turning, whilst breath expands dorsal surfaces that wrap around the body. We orientate ourselves and to others in the world with the downward pull of gravity operating together with surface and horizontal forces.

<sup>3</sup> Uprightness is dismantled in many ways. Collapse sudden, stumble awkward, spiral dancery, crumple soft, death inevitable. In lying low, a body is relieved of holding up, albeit tossing and turning to settle the weight of the day. In swimming, the spinal axis too tilts 90 degrees, is relieved of some gravity immersed in water. In front-crawling, a swimmer coordinates axis and breath as it twists from side to side to swing arm, pull water, move diagonal, take breath. In back-crawling, a swimmer is closer to floating as eyes gaze above at cloud, plane trail, bird, peeling pool ceiling. In lying low and swimming along, the horizontal plane is activated. Of Louise Bourgeois' piece *The Three Horizontals*, Christiane Meyer-Thoss speaks of verticality as affirmation, horizontality as a desire to sleep and retreat, and floating as 'states of ambivalence and doubt'. (2007: 286)

<sup>4</sup> David Wills proposes a bio-technological connection beyond a traditional understanding of technology as a human-mechanical relation, that in turning, we turn into 'something technological' (2008: 1) He writes that '[a]s soon as there is articulation, the human has rounded the technological bend, the technological turn has occurred', that '[e]ven if in turning one deviates from itself in the simplest or most minimal fashion, turns just a little to the left or to the right – it turns, for all intents and purposes *toward the back*.' (2008: 4-5) Turning toward what lies behind. Moving toward the back. Swaying right left, up, down, here, there, detouring, advancing askew.

## // towards backwards

*time<sup>1</sup> turns<sup>2</sup> us<sup>3</sup> about<sup>4</sup> and dusky<sup>5</sup> moods seep through semi-porous skin*

I have started to travel backwards on trains, deliberately sitting with my back to the direction of travel, to heighten a sense of departure, the slight feeling of nausea a sign of disorientation. Is leaving heavier on the heart than going towards? Does facing back-wards relieve me of desire and pause my tendency to jump ahead of the present situation? Locating where I am is complicated, in body, time, space, place. Nostalgia, release, fear and adventure intermingle and tug at me. As sensory systems attune to the forces of speed, direction, view, gravitation, I lean back into many uncertain possible futures. Hesitancy shivers. Dusk settles.



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<sup>1</sup> 'We take our vocabularies of time from space', writes cognitive scientist Rafael. E. Núñez (2006). Through a notion of embodied cognition in his study of Amerindian language of Aymara he explains that '[i]n Aymara, the basic word for front (nayra, "eye/front/sight") is also a basic expression meaning past, and the basic word for back (qhupa, "back/behind") is a basic expression for future meaning.' This observation operates perhaps as a choreographic prompt to test out and explore new habits in time-body-gesture.

<sup>2</sup> Renee Gladman explores entanglements of language, architecture, place and gesture in her book *Event Factory* (2012) about a fictional, yellow-skied, ailing land called *Ravickia*. Her protagonist and 'linguistic traveller' tells us the reader that, '[i]t brought us to the much-celebrated threshold, where you are supposed to hold your breath, with a hand against the back of your neck as you walked through.' In putting the body in the midst of (mis)understanding, readers also often lose their way in *Ravickia*.

<sup>3</sup> Moving through the back evokes images of angel wing, dorsal fin, heavy veil, ghostly presence, ancient knowledge, uncertainty, unknown, dark, murky. These images are sensational, imagination moves the body and what remains unseen becomes felt, listened to, noticed with heart, skin, breath, gravity, other. Navigating through the back a kind of tentative curious meandering through the dorsal materials of the body's predicament.

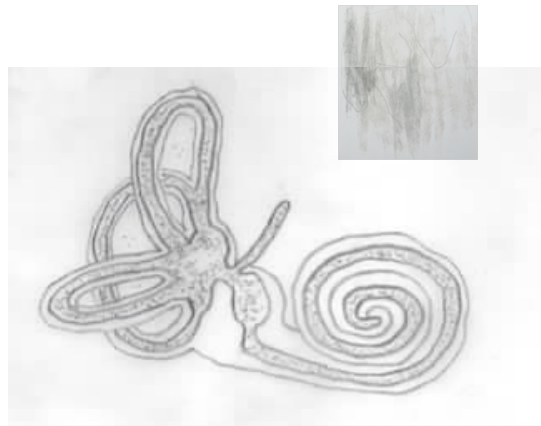
<sup>4</sup> Ric Allsopp opens his essay *Walking Backwards* with a Paul Valéry quote from 1957: 'We enter our future backwards.' (2014: 235) Allsopp proposes 'walking (and looking) backwards' as 'temporary zone' of performance, that '[a]s a 'form of mis-performance, walking backwards – an action "contra naturam" and often associated with with resistance, ridicule, reversal – disrupts and shifts our expectations and refocuses our modes and habits of attention.' (2014: 235)

<sup>5</sup> Shadowy movements at the edges of vision play tricks on the imagination as dusk tilts the world and shifts sensory relations. Twi tween light dark, an unseen thrill. Fear – of unseen and unknown – alerts us to a sense of back-behindness, pricks up ears, quickens heart and excites skin.

### /// listening-back

*facing away<sup>1</sup> tympanic membranes vibrate<sup>2</sup> and voices<sup>3</sup> curl<sup>4</sup>*

Turning away from each other, we sit back-to-back, leaning against the other. We take turns to speak and to listen, circumventing back-and-forth chit-chat, relieving us from the eye-to-eye performances of attention when facing one another. We are reflecting on our, this situation. I listen to her thinking-aloud and absorb meaning through my back, through her warmth, her and my weight, our breath, her words circulate although sometimes escape me. In not being able to immediately respond some of what she said evaporate, so that in my turn to speak, I try to grasp my thoughts and sensations as they occur, and in so doing, I also at times fall silent, leave gaps, lose track. I sometimes need to find another way to remember, to deviate to let things resurface. Sound, vibration, air, voice and breath intermingle, curve our conversation as a place to linger.



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<sup>1</sup> There is an obsolete meaning of conversation (*mid C14. Fr conversacion. L conversationum*) as something intimate, familiar, and a place to dwell and live among which is less about direct communication between people and shares something closer with a dorsal sensibility of being among and allows for an understanding of conversation as a soft, porous container holding a criss-cross dancing around.

<sup>2</sup> Listening is a way of locating oneself relative to other things around behind to the side in front above and below us. The vestibular labyrinthine system in the organ of the ear allows the human-animal body to sense gravity. When there is a problem with the equilibrioception function and this sense is disturbed, it is impossible for the human body to understand up from down or be able to move from here to there, causing vertigo and disorientation. The two senses of hearing and gravity operate, together, from within the ear, but with a different sensory nerve. In another kind of listening, everything vibrates and is felt and picked up through skin and nerves endings – we listen through folds, twists, turns, curves, cavities, membranes, hairs, fluids, waves, tremors, pulses.

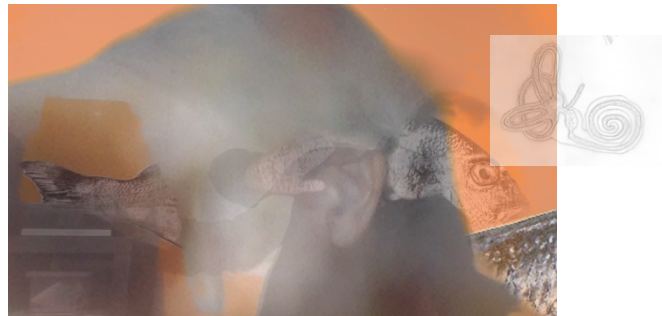
<sup>3</sup> A group constellation: 1. Sit in twos back-to-back, lean back on, sensing each other, breath, warmth, tension, texture, skin, through the back. One talks. One listens. Take turns. 2. Reconfigure the pairs to form a circle, a looking inwards talking-together circle and a looking outwards listening-together circle. Notice voices patterning the air as well as missed words evaporating. Presence and intimacy shaping in this conversation. Change around.

<sup>4</sup> Back-to-back conversations curl lines of communication. A voice projects its sound waves from the mouth and resounds in the space as tonal material, voicing as an extension of bodily presence. Voicing-listening-thinking is an entangled process and multiple voices intermingle and circulate in breath-air. What is conveyed in a voice? What sense is intimated between vowel, consonant, um, hmm, er, uh? It reminds me of the *Esaleyons*, living on the obscure edges of Renee Gladman's fictional land *Ravickia* (2012) and who speak in gaps and with breath. I imagine and quietly test out speaking airily with the lightest and softest variations of h/H/aitches.

## //// background absence

ground<sup>1</sup> delay<sup>2</sup> ghost<sup>3</sup> lost<sup>4</sup> magic<sup>5</sup> glimpse<sup>6</sup>

Working online during 2021 lockdowns across video-conferencing platforms, opened spaces for (dis)connecting body-time-place, glitching, delays and missing parts. The laptop screen displays and entangles where and how we are alone together and intimately remote, co-performing our presence in unstable groundless conversations. Experimenting with virtual backgrounds and front-materials of tracing paper, foil, turmeric dusted Sellotape and other objects, placed between body and camera, to obscure and rupture clear visibility created delicate elusive cruxes as places to linger with intent and hover between (in)visibility and tactile wonder. Perceptual locatedness becomes a magical confusion of front, back, material, digital, body, ground, screen, sound, echo, name, touch, real, imagined, here, there, us, they, you. (In) front and back (behind) mingle. Otherworldly shadows, holes, ruptures are glimpsed. Scaling surface loss.



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<sup>1</sup> A virtual background creates a visual field, a groundless-ness, a gravity free zone, a vertigo, a backdrop, a flatbed, a loss. In *In Freefall: A Thought Experiment in Vertical Perspective* (2011), Hito Steryl prompts ideas of contemporary visualities, perspectives and groundlessness. With satellite navigation, apps and new technologies locating us, we are perhaps losing our ability for way-finding through sensory data, analogue maps, in woods and cities, sensing direction with sun, moon, wind and other references, or finding ways in unplanned detours, wrong turns and all else perceptual, cultural and mythical of and between east, south, north, west, left, right, dark, light.

<sup>2</sup> 'The trees spoke their language. The light and dark took turns. What I knew was my absence. What I sensed, clear as unruined air, was the ghost of a chance, a different presence.' Ali Smith (2022: 80)

<sup>3</sup> In freefall with no air resistance, all animate and inanimate bodies – tree, rain, paper, moth, fish scale, laptop – drop and tumble alongside one another at the same rate of acceleration, the acceleration of gravity.

<sup>4</sup> Laurie Anderson's Norton Lecture 2021: *2 The Forest*, in which due to the pandemic, she delivers online, is speaking into the Zoom void not knowing who is listening, watching, there. She works as a magician, criss-crossing virtual backgrounds, musical interludes, stories, memories, technological and environmental information. There is also pink blossom, snow, letters, words, all falling, soundlessly. She says that "in the forest you can get lost". Slipping between virtual trees, she disappears. She tells us, "Back in two!" but doesn't return.

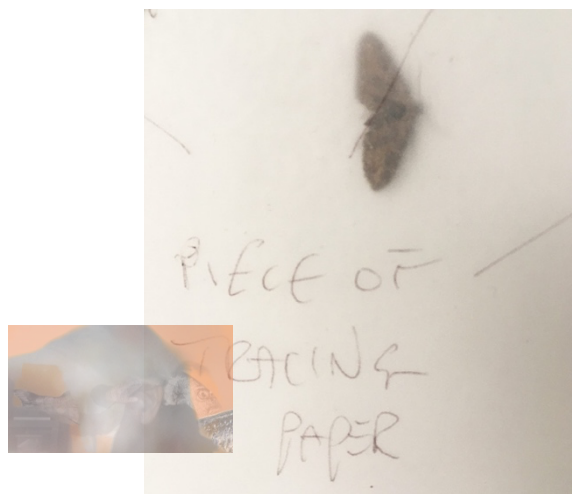
<sup>5</sup> 'You take a pinch of keyhole. And fold yourself up. You cut along the dotted line. And think inside out. You jump round three times. You jump into the mirror. And you're invisible.' Kate Bush (2018: 177).

<sup>6</sup> Emma Cocker writes that '[t]he glimpse is always a little otherworldly, for it marks the opening of one world or reality onto the possibility of others. Those receptive to the glimpse thus inhabit a zone between two worlds, between now and elsewhere, between the actual and the imagined.' (2016: 55)

## //// back lighting

### light<sup>1</sup> impression<sup>2</sup> quivering hairs<sup>3</sup> and papery flutters<sup>4</sup>

On a sheet of tracing paper, I wrote *PIECE OF TRACING PAPER* and taped it to the wall. Days later I film a small moth, which in finding itself fleetingly caught between wall and tracing paper, does a small back and forth rotating dance, to the right, to the left, while I watch from the other side of the translucent sheet. I print out a still image of the dancing moth on a fresh sheet of tracing paper and lean it on the laptop screen which is displaying the same image. I take an image of this paper-screen, showing one moth-image over the other moth-image – same moth? two moths? a familiar moth? – blown up to a larger-than-life scale. A trace-image of moths\* entangled in the material grain of the tracing paper and pixelated digital data. Lines. Light. Papery wings. A delicate brushing against. A circling.



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<sup>1</sup> Moths are attuned to faint - not bright – light. Through a process of transverse orientation, they are able fly in a straight line by keeping a distant celestial body like the moon at a fixed angle. Their evolutionary process is disturbed by artificial light, which in being too close, causes them to fly in spirals. Their dancing around laptop screens as bright light emitters are involuntary programmed scores, deviations from other activities. What is this relationship with surface, light, seeing, translucency that draws me in. Eyes receive light, let light in, scan surface.

<sup>2</sup> Sara Ahmed writes that '[w]e are turned towards things. Such things make an impression upon us. We perceive them as things insofar as we share residence with them. Perception hence involves orientation: what is perceived depends on where we are located, which gives us a certain take on things.' (2008: 27) We need to turn towards that which is unfamiliar for it to become familiar, a dorsal turn therefore a necessity for moving sentient bodies.

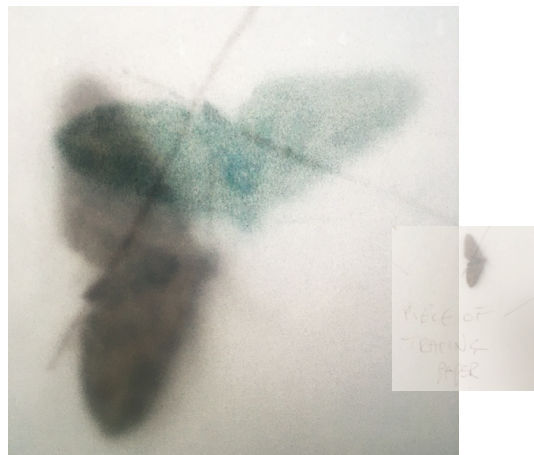
<sup>3</sup> I am thinking that Katherine Hayles's notion of 'unthought' resonates with notions of dorsality. She proposes 'unthought' as a non-conscious cognition, a 'kind of thinking without thinking', that which occurs before thinking and a 'potent force of conceptualising interactions between human and technical systems – and other life forms - transforming the way we see the world.' (2019: 1-2) Thinking through the back perhaps intimates at unthought – all a bit of a blur, still slightly out of reach, not quite graspable?

<sup>4</sup> I'd like to think the moth is a *Small Dusty Wave*, but I am not certain, and this moth has no need of my naming. In Ursula Le Guin's article in *The New Yorker*, *She Unnames Them* (1985), groups of animals, prompted by Eve, agree in councils of elderly females to return their names to the donor, to be free of human [Linnean] categorisation. 'The insects parted with their names in vast clouds and swarms of ephemeral buzzing and stinging and humming and flitting and crawling and tunnelling away.' Looking behind names to feel close, among, akin to other (human)-animals.

## ||||| back into dancing

re-<sup>1</sup> turning<sup>2</sup> over<sup>3</sup> and over<sup>4</sup> and over<sup>5</sup>

*tilt, rhythm, back* is a score for three dancers. Starting from a palm between shoulder blades, surface to surface contact, hand in the back, dancers lean in, resist, drop, pivot, touch barely, take breath. The trio of human-animal-dancers are a constellation, playing in the triangular force field, working with eyes open (softly scanning), eyes closed (ears and skin listening), micro-articulations, micro-frequencies, micro-tilts. A complex bio-technological dance emerges. An eco-choreographic situation in which wall, dust, echo, light and other things join in. This way. That way. Toward. Away. Unsettling.



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<sup>1</sup> An etymological trace of the prefix *re-* is 'back', as in return, retrace, reverse, remember, recall. Also *re-* as in back from, again, anew, once more, undoing, backward. This dorsal practice has also been opening other understandings of dorsality and of *re-*, that are not retrograde, not wholly resistant to forward motion, not oppositional to frontality but bringing forward dorsal qualities of accepting, allowing, swaying, letting in and a willingness to reconsider, redirect, reorientate.

<sup>2</sup> Skin sheds and rebuilds from the inner to the outer layers, and a warm open hand on our back reminds us of dorsal surfaces, of entangled forces of future-past directions, of sensory imagery, of back-behindness and the elusive blind space behind us. Jeroen Peeters asks, '[w]hat is the promise residing in this dark gravitational pull towards a private space, ultimately not even accessible to [our]selves?' (2015: 275) Perhaps differently accessible if we lean back into the promise and we notice what is appearing from behind.

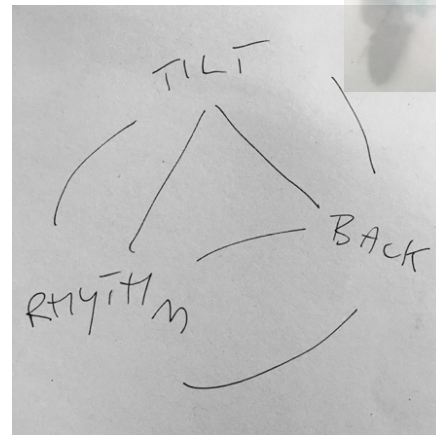
<sup>3</sup> Karen Barad states that "'reflection/returning" and "diffraction/re-turning" are not opposites but different optical intra-actions'. They write, 'I want to begin by returning - not returning as in reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again.' (2014: 168) Their proposition of turning things over and over captures my imagination, allows me to do just that, to re-turn, to be turning things over and over to blur boundaries, to value not-clear-cut, to pixelate, to disperse, to scatter, to keep moving things around.

<sup>4</sup> Working low on the ground and moving through the back in performance tugs at uprightness and frontality: Trisha Brown's solo *If you couldn't see me* (1994), Bruno Beltrão/Grupo de Rua de Niterói's *H2* (2005), William Pope. L's *Thompkins Square Crawl* (1991), Xavier Le Roy's *Low Pieces* (2011), La Ribot's *Laughing Hole* (2006), Ralph Lemon & Okwui Okpokwasili's duet *Performance 14* (2011) amongst other artists. Away facing, backward running, writhing, falling, crawling, staying low, sinking, toppling one another over, to challenge viewing.

<sup>5</sup> Without feet firmly on solid ground, or a map or a faint celestial light to way-find us, we are perhaps freer to tumble, spiral, crisscross, turn around slowly, spin, drop low and continually re-orientate ourselves to other things and unfamiliar body-time-places.



# back<sup>1 2</sup> – notes<sup>3 4 5</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> These text-image pieces have come out of research into notions of *dorsality* and the back in a hybrid arts practice, developing since 2019 through workshops, studio residencies, presentations and in collaborative moving, conversational, drawing and writing practices. Developing exercises and choreographic devices for tuning into the back, as a way of bringing attention to and exploring the unseen surfaces and axial technologies of the back. These dorsal practices are evolving through movement and sensory research as well as opening a wider set of philosophical concepts and possibilities for orientating in and co-habiting the world.

<sup>2</sup> The work proposes a dorsal sensibility that can complicate and unravel binary myths of front, back, forwards, backwards, future, past and offer useful tilts and modes of resonating with other animate and inanimate bodies, things, scales, constellations. The research began with a stronger stance of the dorsal as a destabilising and resistant force to convergent forward motion and vertical power structures dominating much of western contemporary working and living. Working through the body and with others, a more subtle and quieter understanding of the dorsal has emerged, less an oppositional alternative to forward drive, uprightness, frontality and visibility but a giving value to qualities of letting, listening, co-operating, bending, swaying, turning. And in this the hierarchies of sensory relations are reconfigured and softened.

<sup>3</sup> The writing has evolved from sensory observation in practical movement tasks and conversations, in the form of notes and recordings, often working in a dynamic process between embodied experience, memory and imagination. The footnotes are a useful and playful device for allowing other peripheral ideas such as light, moth, vestibular labyrinth, tree, tracing paper, ghost, voice, front-crawling to enter and to generate gaps for the reader in which to linger, skip, skim, imagine, (re)connect. Still images, diagrams and drawings are another way of taking note, testing, proposing, articulating and reading.

<sup>4</sup> References to other writers and artists have been lightly drawn in, touched upon, their ideas absorbed into the body practice and felt in the imagination. These can be followed up by you dear reader if you are interested. I am aware that I mention more than declare, suggest more than assert, skim surfaces rather than dig deep into and yet I am increasingly aware that this too is perhaps a dorsal quality – that there is value to uncertainty, hesitancy and seepage in thinking feeling writing – and living.

<sup>5</sup> Working with dance-artists Yixuan Kwek, Maria Evans and Zachary McCullough 2019-2020 in *tilt-rhythm-back: dances and drawings* at Dance4 Nottingham/Void Falmouth as well as informal and working conversations with artists Sarah Scaife, Frankie Williams, Rebecca Hilton, Emma Cocker, Rob Gawthrop, Sofie Parsons, Neil Chapman and Joanne 'Bob' Whalley has greatly influenced and shaped thinking. Further research around the dorsal is evolving in collaboration with writer-fine artist Emma Cocker in our project *Dorsal practices: Murky Back Thinking*, with artist Frankie Williams in our performance and video-making activities *Choreographies of scratchings, twitchings and lying low* and with writer-artist Neil Chapman in our dialogue *Re-turning Dorsal*.

At home in crisscross voicing-listening-thinking-conversing.

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All images and drawings by the author.