

Kelly Nipper: Composing Movements

Joanna Fiduccia explores a practice that
reconnects movement with myth



All images courtesy the artist



'Weather Center', 2009, video



The period known as the 'little ice age', roughly from the 15th to the 17th century, coincided with the most aggressive witch hunts in Western history—a synchronicity some scholars link to both the social stresses of poor harvests and the widely-accepted belief that sorceresses could control the weather. With the climate now careening calamitously in the other direction, a return to superstition seems not altogether unlikely—making 'Weather Center', the title of Los Angeles-based artist Kelly Nipper's rendition of modern dance pioneer Mary Wigman's 1914 'Witch Dance', less arbitrary than it might first appear.

Crouched on the floor, the dancer's movement lurches into angular postures, her bare feet thwacking and fingers conjuring as she executes

Wigman's dance. Like Wigman, Taisha Paggett wears a mask that accentuates the dance's savage, cultic quality. But in contrast to the original, in which Wigman was accompanied by oriental percussion, Nipper's only soundtrack is a woman's voice calmly and repeatedly counting to ten. Meanwhile, her camera weaves unsteadily around Paggett's movement as if wary of her, cutting abruptly between shots and yet, somehow, never becoming unsynchronised with the counts. It is as if in place of Wigman's sorcery, Nipper has substituted an almost magical alignment of measure, movement, and camerawork.

Curiously, then, Nipper deflects the dance's irrational, emotive energy—the same expressive core that often translates into theatricality when displaced into contemporary art—only to suggest a



'Sapphire', 2008, above: video, below: performance study photographs



subtler, but no less irrational force. Her desire to distance herself from theatricality could be one explanation why Nipper, who frequently works with dancers and movement, resists the label 'performance' to describe her videos and the live events. Another explanation could be the artist's background. Trained as a photographer, and longtime archivist of Allan Kaprow, as well as of the estates of David Tudor and Experiments in Art and Technology among others, Nipper has spoken about her work in terms of suspension and 'stop-time'. Accordingly, movement in Nipper's videos seems to have removed itself from the continuum. Often played on loop with only words or counts for its soundtrack, her choreography is as reproducible as a photograph and just as forlornly tethered to its brief duration, stretching the 'stop-time' of the photographic instant without losing the finitude that defines it.

Her early works, such as the photograph '60 minutes of hourglass sand', 2001–02, (an arabesque of hourglass sand captured mid-flight as it is blown from an industrial fan) and the four-channel video work 'Bending Water into a Heart Shape', 2003, express this directly. The latter juxtaposes one-minute-long panoramas of a centre for figure skating practice, and features shots of a mobile that dangles pendants made of ice and a dancer slowly rotating on relevé. The dancer, Phithsamay Linthahane, trained for months with internal martial arts instructor Joseph Zeisky so as to be able to pivot, tall as a minaret, from the centre of her body, only adjusting her feet when the torque of her torso absolutely required it. The artist refers to this projection—perhaps punningly—as 'a turning point' in her career.

Indeed, with its frozen revolutions, clocks without minutes, and bodies marking shapes, 'Bending Water...' anticipates the use Nipper has made ever since of dancers and the moving image to reflect on photography. Shortly after 'Bending Water...', Nipper began work on the multi-part opus-in-progress, 'Floyd on the Floor', named for the 1999 hurricane that devastated portions of America's Atlantic coast. Initiated in 2006, 'Floyd' is composed of several research-based performance studies: an 'object poem', sculptural set pieces, live events treated as sketches for later film and video works, and an eponymous live performance that took place

during Performa 07 in the Judson Church gymnasium in New York. The performance featured eight dancers who partnered, posed, moved across the floor in elliptical patterns, and manipulated parachutes. All wore sky blue costumes and cream-coloured balaclavas stained with black blots in the shape of numbers, turning them into an anonymous movement choir of musical counts or, perhaps, storm advisory figures.

Nipper subsequently expanded one of the Performa piece's movements, entitled 'Shifting Shapes', into a three-channel video projection, again featuring Paggett. Two of the three channels show a black box theatre furnished with set pieces that suggest a giant model of a large-format view camera. The third pictures a moving background (in actuality, several superimposed layers of scrolling shots of trees, primitively rendered in white chalk on a dark grey ground—a 'black forest' 'where "Floyd" exists or lives', says the artist). Between these layers, we see Paggett carry out movements corresponding to a voiceover, which dictates the coordinates of a movement phrase: 'left forward middle, left side low, back low...' These coordinates resolve into an invisible ring around the dancer—a ring known as the 'girdle scale'.

The Girdle scale, devised by Rudolf Laban, a visionary Austro-Hungarian choreographer and movement theoretician (as well teacher of Wigman), works with four variations (based on the periphery of the icosahedron), which are cyclical, with no beginning or end point. It is an apt image for Nipper's work as a whole, itself girdled by associations and intuitive clusters of concepts. The clockwise motion of the hurricane corresponds with the panoramic shots and the dancer's counts; the crystalline icosahedron with the ice pendants of 'Bending Water...' and the 'crystalised' photographed instant; the eye of the hurricane (the 'weather centre') with the lens of the camera and the frequent cameos made by apples (the 'apple of my eye', but furthermore the 'core' and heart shape, and their role in the Fall—'Floyd', after all, is on the floor).

Circles and girdles are recurring images in Nipper's videos. In the black-and-white video 'Sapphire', 2008, Laban movement analyst Sarah Leddy performs the girdle scale to the soundtrack



'Compass', 2010, movement score sketch

of a dialogue from Jean-Luc Godard's 1965 *Alphaville*, in which a man and woman discuss the nature of love. This time, it is the halting, hyperextended positions of Laban's sequence that chafe against Godard's overwrought poetry, ('O beloved of all, beloved of one alone, your mouth silently promised to be happy...'). These operatics are checked by the restraint and regularity of the scale;

as Nipper says, '[Leddy] is *doing* the scale—not performing it'. While the dialogue grows ever more diffuse, the scale, played on a loop, seems to imprint or 'develop' the invisible form of the icosahedron in space. 'Circle Circle', 2007, similarly hems in its suggestiveness. An 'environment' including the ice mobile from 'Bending Water...' and a sound component, it features a double projection of a woman in



ballet pink tights and a charcoal grey leotard against a dark grey ground. The contours of the thighs are as distinct and concupiscent as a John Wesley, as she hypnotically rotates her hips at varying speeds to the sound of melting ice.

Nipper no doubt inherited the vocabulary of 'environment' from Kaprow and his ilk, along with the term 'score' for the directions that record her works. Yet 'score' has a far more explicit nature for Nipper than for her mentor. Both 'Sapphire' and 'Circle Circle' include a transcription of the choreography into Labanotation, another one of the theoretician's contributions to the history of dance. One of the three systems currently used to record choreography in dance companies worldwide, Labanotation resembles a schematic whose markings describe both where and when the dancer's body moves, their characteristics corresponding to different movement qualities (for instance, a sign shaded black means the movement is done low to the ground, whereas a hatched sign means it is danced high or on relevé).

Evocative of a strip of tapestry, Labanotation recalls one of Nipper's influences, Anni Albers. In Nipper's sketchbook is an image of Albers' 1969 'Red

Meander', whose mazelike red design adds a second layer of choreographed line to the thread's back-and-forth movement, woven into the fabric's particular 'stop-time'. Given this property of weaving and Nipper's highly associative intelligence, it is little surprise that images of looms and weaving instruments are gradually appearing in her work.

The artist is currently producing a 16mm film, 'Compass', performed recently at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich, in which graphic symbols for the instruments appear on the dancer's unitard. The introduction of film into Nipper's primarily video-based work is the kind of anachronistic choice of medium one might have expected from Nipper years ago, given how much in her work not merely *turns* but *turns backward*—locating her not only among Laban and Wigman, but also among the Futurists and Oskar Schlemmer, whose 1922 'Triadisches Ballett', in which actors metamorphose into geometrical shapes, seems particularly kindred to Nipper's fascination in Laban's platonic forms. In her recent book on the orphic myth, *Flesh of My Flesh*, Kaja Silverman writes about the backward glance as a confrontation

with our finitude that will unite us with the world—much as the dancer executing Laban scales, by tracing the finite reach of her body, is said to produce a harmonic communion with the space around her. Nipper's 'stop-time', by withdrawing movement from the continuum and from the active space of 'performance', unites it with the operations of the photograph and with the Platonic geometries of space. Her backward glances and the finitude they acknowledge might account for some of the bewitching strangeness in Nipper's work, haunted by invisible geometries and faraway histories, and by a character—irrational, sinister, erotic, emotional—that lives in the centre of her motifs like the weather lives at the eye of the storm.

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All images above, 'Floyd on the floor', 2007, performance