

## *Translations* – A Dance for the Nonvisual Senses

Carolina Bergonzoni and Naomi Brand



A plain, bright dance studio with one mirrored wall. A large group of about seventeen people sit casually in a circle. Some people are using manual or motorized chairs, some have canes; others sit on the floor or in seats; there are three service dogs lying on the floor. Photo: Cathy Browne.

*Translations* is a collaboration between Vancouver’s All Bodies Dance Project and VocalEye with support from the Canada Council for the Arts – New Chapter Initiative. The project, researched in numerous phases throughout 2017 and 2018, explores how live description can be applied to the abstract movement of contemporary dance. *Translations* investigates the act of “audiencing” by asking questions about the senses we use to take in movement. How can dance be described through language, touch, or sound in a meaningful way? The project aims to create a dance performance event to be experienced by the nonvisual senses. *Translations* culminated in a series of performances for small audiences in December 2018.

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**Carolina Bergonzoni** is a dance artist and a PhD student in arts education at Simon Fraser University. She holds an MA in comparative media arts from Simon Fraser University and a BA and an MA in philosophy from the University of Bologna. Since 2011, she has been working toward building communities of movers and thinkers. Originally from Toronto, **Naomi Brand** spent ten years dancing in Calgary before relocating to Vancouver in 2013. She holds both a BA and an MFA from the University of Calgary and is a recipient of the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta Emerging Artist Award. Naomi is the co-founder of All Bodies Dance Project and is a contributing writer with *The Dance Current*.

During the creation of *Translations*, a diverse team of collaborators—including artists with and without disabilities who worked alongside artistic consultants from the blind community—explored different tools that might be used to shift dance away from the dominant visual sense toward other ways of sensing and perceiving. The project was driven by the question: What if sight wasn't the intended way to experience movement?



A plain dance studio with white walls, light grey floor, dance bars, and a wall of mirrors. A large and varied group of dancers sits in a semicircle (some using manual or motorized wheelchairs), and an audience is seated in chairs, watching. There is a conversation happening. Photo: Martin Borden.

Audiences were mixed groups of blind, partially sighted, and sighted people. Everyone was invited to experience the dance from a nonvisual perspective, not as a replication of the experience of blindness, but rather as an opportunity to focus on information about the moving body that was delivered through other senses. Some of these alternative sensory experiences included the sound of the dance, the feeling of the air moving, and the images drawn in one's imagination from the dancers' descriptions. In this way, the project asked audiences to consider their own perception and the ways they typically access art and the world around them. As disabled artists and scholars Lindsay Eales and Danielle Peers write: "Arts-Based Research offers us exciting opportunities to think through our moving bodies, and through the emotions that move us. It offers us opportunities to think, feel, and mobilize our knowledges differently" (2016, 56).

This collection of photos, descriptions, and videos document the creative process of *Translations*. In presenting our research in written/documentation format, we kept in mind Sarah Pink's notion of the hand as "an important focus on sensory ethnography research, particularly for understanding touch and tactile ways of knowing" (2015, 168). Sensory ethnographers have argued against the idea of vision as "a dominant and objectifying sense" (Ingold, quoted in Pink 2015, 10). During *Translations* we investigate the nonvisual aspects of live dance. With this contribution, we aim to prove that "the senses have come to the fore in the work of many contemporary academics" (Pink 2015, 24).



A plain, bright dance studio with one wall of windows that looks out over the city. A large group of people is arranged in a circle. Some people are using canes or motorized chairs, some are standing paired with another person, and there are three service dogs lying on the floor. One person in a mobility scooter is in the far corner of the room taking notes. Everyone seems focused on the centre of the circle. Photo: Cathy Browne.

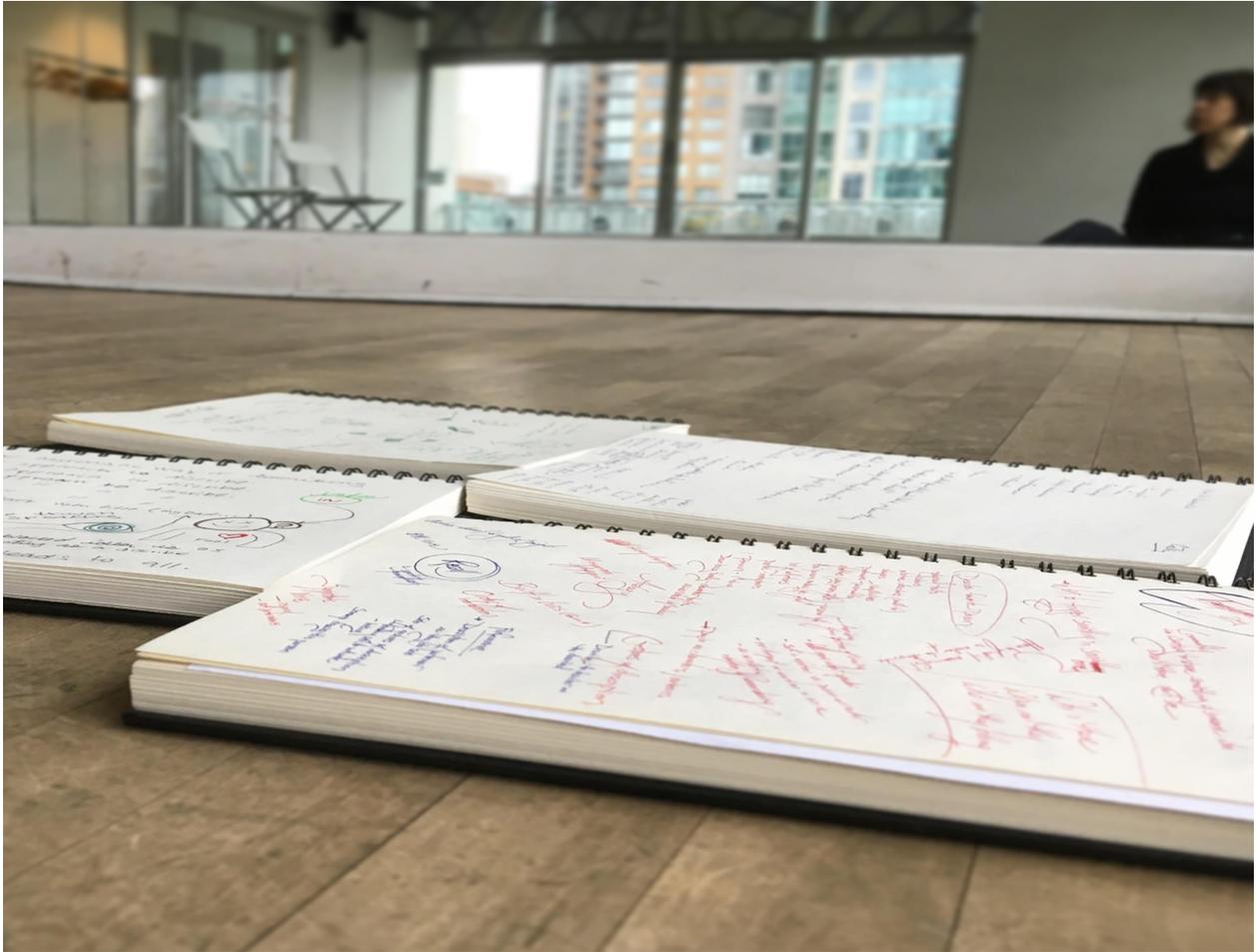
### **Tools and Content: Nonvisual “Audiencing”**

Live description, as VocalEye provides, is most typically used to describe the visual elements of a theatrical performance or event. The work of art being described is investigated, and language is carefully chosen to evoke images that are captivating for the listener and not simply a dry, forensic list of the actions. Most often, when it is applied to theatre, the description fits in between lines of dialogue and serves the work by complementing the narrative of the play. When working with the abstract language of contemporary dance, there is no narrative structure on which to hang a description.



A plain and bright dance studio with a view of the city in the background. Some people are sitting in chairs in a semi-circle. Seven dancers in colourful clothes face different directions, with one arm outstretched. Some of the dancers are using manual and motorized chairs, and some are standing. The dancers are inwardly focused. There's a sense of them working as a group, though they are not in unison. Photo: Cathy Browne.

Furthermore, in the case of *Translations* there is no existing dance ready to be described. The project began from the idea that the description and the dance itself would be created together, one serving the other. In this way, the line between what is the dance and what is the description is blurred beyond recognition. In this process, “the boundaries between perceiver and perceived” (Bredlau 2017, 81) were constantly redrawn: the perspective of the “translator” (our term for the sighted dancer in charge of describing the dance via touch) inevitably affected the audience member’s perception of it.



Four spiral-bound notebooks sit open and clustered together on a wooden dance floor. The open pages feature colourful writing and drawings. In the background is a wall of mirrors that reflects the city as well as the figure of one of the dancers. Photo: Naomi Brand.

We researched ways to translate movement into verbal descriptions using both metaphorical and objective language or as Steph Kirkland VocalEye’s Executive Director calls it “Bjork and Sherlock.” We experimented with whose voice and the perspective represented by the description, and we ask: What is communicated when the descriptive voice is embedded in the dancing body as opposed to coming from an outside observer?

We also explored description through physical touch by creating choreographed sequences of hand actions on audience members’ backs. Each “translator” performed a choreographed hand sequence in relation to a soloist’s movement. The soloist amplified the sonic experience of a dance phrase by emphasizing breath and using their voice with different qualities.



A plain dance studio with white walls, a light grey floor, and ballet bars in the background. Two light skinned people wearing black, casual clothes sit on the floor; one is positioned in front of the other, on their knees. The person in the background seems to be observing or perhaps instructing the other mover. The person in the foreground has one hand on lap and the other hand touching the floor, and is looking up. There is an empty manual wheelchair close by. Photo: Martin Borden.



A bright dance studio with light beaming in. There are six people: one uses a manual wheelchair, one uses a motorized chair, and the others are standing or kneeling. People are grouped in twos. A person has placed their hands on the back of someone sitting in a manual wheelchair. The left hand is placed palm-flat on the upper left of the back, and their right hand is slightly curled and forming a fist, with their forearm pushing softly into the seated person's mid-back. In the second group are a standing dancer and a dancer who is sitting on the floor. They are not touching each other; both look out the window. In the background is the third pairing. One person sits in a motorized wheelchair, eyes closed, half-facing the camera; the other person sits beside them and has placed their hands on the seated person's arm. There is motion of some kind, but we can't see what it is. Photo: Cathy Browne.

During this exploration of tactile description, we focused on Laban's Eight Efforts (wring, press, flick, dab, glide, float, punch, slash), and we studied how to translate these from the dancing body to translating hands. Additionally, we investigated the sound of the dance unaccompanied by music. Instead, we used costumes that made noise when travelling through space or when in contact with the floor: standing dancers used shoes to accentuate and amplify the sound of their steps, while wheelchair users purposefully moved in ways that created a distinct sound palette.



A plain and bright dance studio with a view of the city in the background. There is a tight cluster of dancers—some using manual or motorized wheelchairs, some standing—who are connected by the palms of their hands. The people in the cluster are bent over, leaning into one another. One person is sitting in a chair facing the dancers, eyes closed, taking in the experience. Photo: Cathy Browne.

The audience received information in layers; for example, a phrase of movement might be repeated but described through different modalities (verbal description, tactile description, sound and breath only) each time in order to create a “full” picture of the dance that has multiple sensorial entry points. Through these different tools, *Translations* aims to promote a kind of “sensory mobility” (a term we learned from one of our consultants, Carmen Papalia) in audience members and invite many different ways to enter into the dance.

## Videos by Martin Borden

*Translations* phase one: <https://youtu.be/v-j7TaRLhlw>

*Translations* phase two: <https://youtu.be/SuYbFrmUK1Q>

## Collaborators

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## Artistic Consultants

- Amy Amantea
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- Carmen Papalia
- Collin van Uchelin

## Image Descriptions by RAMP – Radical Access Mapping Project

### References

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- Ingold, Tim. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.
- Pink, Sarah. 2015. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 2nd ed. London: Sage.