

[In the Making]

Maxine Heppner

“We are complex creatures”

by Motria Sabat

Maxine Heppner is interested in complexity. As dancer, choreographer, teacher, arts activist and director of her company Across Oceans, Heppner allows each of her roles to inform one another in a fluid way. She embraces working from multiple reference points, finding in it a versatility and mobility that propels her creative thinking and her active physical investigations.

Currently, Heppner is juggling three projects, which she initiated and continues to oversee. First there's *Soup of the Day*, a monthly workshop session where dancers use improvisation to probe and question their individual working methods, the “ingredients” of their craft. Begun in 1996, *Soup of the Day* is a kind of sounding board for artists, an environment for discussion through dance. Each month a new facilitator guides the open studio sessions, bringing his or her own particular flavour to that day's recipe.

Then there's the *Cycles Series*. Developed in 1998, the *Cycles Series* is a training method and choreographic tool that integrates dance discipline with multiple-focus awareness techniques, such as visualization, breath control and vocalization. *Cycles* trains both the inner and outer senses to interact at a maximum level of complexity by bringing attention to many facets of our awareness at the same time.

And finally, the *AtHOME* festival, which began as a pilot project in 2001. After more than twelve years of travelling between Canada and Asia to dance, choreograph and teach, Heppner decided to bring her cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary experience back home to Toronto, in the form of a forum exploring the art of collaboration. “I think we're always

interacting with something or someone. Art is interactive as well. When I use the word collaboration it is in reference to a conscious situation where the people are mutually supportive of each other and the work, and where the art forms are also mutually supportive, which includes contrast and difference.”

When Heppner's students began asking her how it's done – how two or more people work together, she was further motivated: “Maybe there was a need to provide a situation where people could ask those questions and come up with some solutions.”

During this year's festival, Heppner will be working on a piece of choreography with three dancers, together with composer Mark Duggan of the Evergreen Club (a Toronto-based gamelan ensemble). Although the work is still very much in the beginning stages, Heppner makes it clear that the movement will be created in close collaboration with the music, which is set in nine parts of differing lengths and variable qualities. For Heppner, working alongside the composer from conception to completion is part of maintaining the integrity of a collaborative project. “Most often I've worked with people who created music with me during the process. [It's] not that I have the [dance] and then the person comes in and composes to it; and seldom do I have a piece of music first and then compose a [dance] to it.”

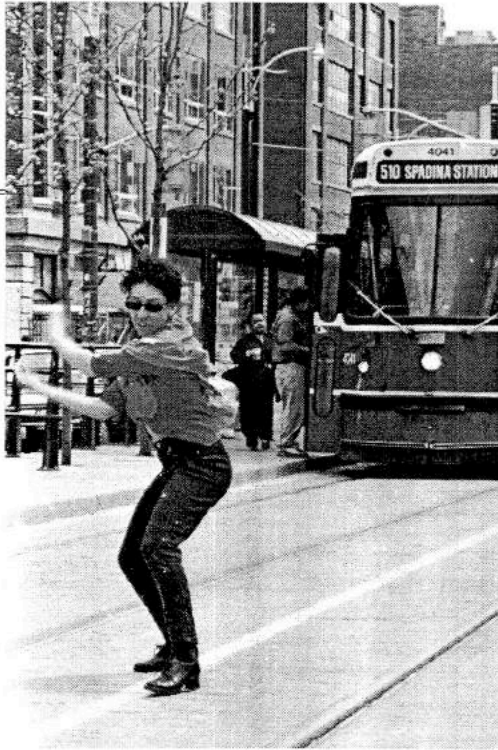
“For instance with this piece, right from >>



Maxine Heppner teaching at the AtHOME Festival 2001
Photo by Peter Stipcevic

Drawing: Sketches from Heppner's Cycles Series





“We work on many layers [of attention] at the same inside us, there’s what we feel with our skin, there’s then there’s the stuff between different people, and

the start I asked [Mark] if he would be able to make adjustments and shifts so the piece would be a dance-music piece, not a music piece and a dance piece that happened to be working at the same time.”

As for the choreography, it will be influenced by Heppner’s Cycles work. Asked to elaborate further on the philosophy behind Cycles, she explains that the technique is based on the premise that energy is infinite, and travels

in cyclical patterns of circles, spirals and interlocking figure eights. “*The Gold Wall* and *Merdeka* projects were major turning points when I had to explain these ideas of constant movement and flow of energy, seen and unseen, to the interpreters I was working with.” Heppner continues, “We worked with the idea that the dancing body resonates with internal tones long after a movement’s initial impulse is complete, much like a musical instrument when being played. For example, in music, a sharp attack and then a long sustained tone results in series of overtones, undertones and half tones that are audible long after the initial note has faded. In movement, a thrust of an arm will produce internal spools of energy that travel within and through the body long after the initial gesture is over.”

In order to create a very specific vocabulary from the energy pathways, Heppner worked out two different patterns that form the basis of Cycles work – eights and plates. Eights are patterns of figure eights that are visualized in the three dimensions of the dancer’s body. The centre of each pattern rests in a specific body part, and as it moves, the pattern’s central axis point shifts to another part of the body, becoming another pattern. Sometimes, the eight patterns intersect with one another in a kind of orbit or common sphere of activity. Energy begins to condense and build-up around these common spheres or small points called plates. The result is a build-up of active

tension that, when released, propels the dancer into space. “I have found that plating makes it possible to have a gestural vocabulary that is direct [the eights tend to generate a circular vocabulary], and to do travelling movement into far and open space.”

Heppner has been integrating her Cycles work into her dancing, choreography and teaching since 1998. “The question started to come over time in teaching technique where often we try and simplify things. [The general idea is] if you practice one thing and then another thing and then put them together, you’ll be able to do it.” But rather than simplifying our attention to just one thing or another, Heppner is interested in how we can hold our attention to many things simultaneously.

Heppner believes that her time spent in Southeast Asia has affected her sensibility for working from multiple focus points. She describes the foreignness of navigating in a different culture and of learning a new language as possible factors. She sees her Cycles work as a kind of coping mechanism, a way of putting an order to a sometimes fragmented existence.

Finding a balance between her many projects and collaborative activities remains a constant challenge. Preparations for the AtHOME festival have forced Heppner to watch that administrative demands don’t overtake her artistic work. It all comes down to choosing a point of focus: “At the most basic level, one is constantly negotiating several things at the same time to keep from falling flat on the ground – our strength, our flexibility, our weight, our mobility, our energy, our will, and all that in relation to gravity and the external terrain. At every moment all of this, and more, is operational. When we are functioning it’s because we can prioritize the constantly shifting demands of our attention.”

Maxine Heppner : « Nous sommes des êtres complexes »

La complexité d’une situation et les demandes changeantes qu’on nous fait de notre attention sont deux sujets qui intéressent Maxine Heppner. Ses chorégraphies se voient influencées par sa série *Cycles*, un travail à mul-



Maxine Heppner in a still from the video *Freestyle* by Jenn Goodwin
Photo courtesy of David Irons