CONTACT QUARTERLY

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PAT DEBENHAM is a professor of Modern Dance and Music Theater at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. He is a Certified Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analyst and for fifteen years was codirector of Contemporary DanceWorks—a semiprofessional modern dance company in Utah. His work as a choreographer often rides the edge between humor and pathos. He and his dancing wife, Kathie, conduct community workshops entitled Move and Be Moved. Most recently, they joyously presented a concert entitled Debenham Dance, which included their three 20-something dancing daughters, their grandchildren, and their three son-in-laws, who range from accountants to computer geeks.

BARBARA DILLEY danced with Merce Cunningham, studied new thoughts with John Cage, and entered new dimensions with the Grand Union. She continues to investigate bodymind through meditation and improvisation and teaches at the Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado.

After performing with Kei Takei's Moving Earth and Susan Marshall & Co., DAVID DORFMAN founded David Dorfman Dance in 1985. Noted for its exuberant style, the company has a history of collaboration with contemporary composers and visual artists, and its performances often feature live music. Community-based projects play an important role in the life of the company and have been presented widely. David Dorfman Dance has been honored with numerous New York Dance and Performance "Bessie" Awards and has performed extensively throughout North and South America and Europe. Dorfman holds a BS degree in business administration from Washington University and an MFA degree in dance from Connecticut College, where he joined the faculty as Associate Professor in Dance in the fall of 2004.

NANCY GALEOTA-WOZNY is a Feldenkrais® practitioner and freelance dance writer. Her work has appeared in the *Houston Chronicle, Dance Magazine, ArtsHouston, Total Body, Houston Woman, Somatics,* and other publications. She is a 2004 recipient of the Gary Parks Memorial Scholarship Award for Emerging Dance Critics and finalist for the Sommerville Prize in Somatic Writing. She also edits *Dancehunter,* Houston's only dance blog, at http://dancehunter.blogspot.com.

JENNIFER MONSON has been pursuing an original approach to experimental dance forms in New York City since 1983 when she graduated from Sarah Lawrence College. She has created a wide body of solo and group work and has long-term

collaborations with many artists including Zeena Parks, DD Dorvillier, Yvonne Meier, and David Zambrano. For several years, Monson curated two dance/music improvisation series in New York City (Hothouse at PS122 and Dive-In at Danspace Project). She has a strong commitment to improvisation as a performance form and performs and teaches releasing, improvisation, and composition on many continents. Monson has received numerous awards and grants, including grants from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, and a New York Dance and Performance "Bessie" Award. BIRD BRAIN, her ongoing navigational dance project, began in 2000.

YIAM REDD: Redd Alert was formed in 2002 as a forum to house and launch teaching and performance of a multimedia, multidimensional nature; to stimulate, inspire, provoke, and evoke audiences to their own creative self. Their style is rooted in improvisation as a tool for creation, as an end in itself. The work is facilitated through voice, freestyle movement, contact improvisation, music, percussion and rhythm, spoken word and text, visual art and film, esoteric study, and body work. In recent years, Yiam has been co-creating works in Australia, Canada, Germany, America, and the U.K.

GIONATAN EMILIANO SURRENTI lives in Orvieto, Italy, with dancer Laura Porter Blackburn and their daughter, Maya. He has studied, performed, and taught contact improvisation in Europe and in the U.S. He currently teaches CI in various dance contexts, and uses CI principles in his educational work with adolescents and in his career-counseling work with adults.

LISA WELLS dreamed of dance as she fell asleep as a child but fell away for too many years. She is now a Unitarian Universalist campus minister, a yoga and meditation instructor, a writer, a spiritual director, and a born-again dancer. Her permanent home is in Corvallis, Oregon, and from time to time she and her family live in Nicosia, Cyprus.

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FRONT COVER:

Jennifer Monson performing *Keeper* at SFADI (Seattle Festival of Alternative Dance and Improvisation), August 2003.

Photo © Tim Summers

BACK COVER:

Maren Witte in *Height Collectors*, an outdoor performance piece using scaffolding, trees, and acrobatic tissue, by Wire Monkey Dance Company directors Jen Polins and Saliq Francis Savage in collaboration with 14 dancers and aerial artists. Created at the Summer Dance Festival at Gut Stolzenhagen in Stolzenhagen, Germany, July 2004, curated/organized by Stephanie Maher. www.gut-stolzenhagen.de.

Photo © Wire Monkey Dance, Jen Polins and Saliq Francis Savage

OPPOSITE

[Left to right] Mark Koenig [under], Nuria Bowart, and Ray Chung at a contact improvisation jam in Boulder, Colorado, March 1997.

Photo © Theodora Litsios

Interview with Jennifer Monson on BIRD BRAIN DANCE— A Navigational Dance Project

> by Nancy Galeota-Wozny >

During my choreographing years, my biggest fear was running out of ideas. Now, as a Houston dance writer, my fear is that other people will. Once every five years, the available dance around me seems to reach a low point. At that place, I look a little harder for someone to jolt me out of my "nothing left to dance about" funk. Jennifer Monson is that someone.

Monson came on my radar in September 2003. I was looking over the DiverseWorks (a Houston alternative performance space) season in search of a story to pitch to my editor at *ArtsHouston* magazine. (Monson was on the DiverseWorks 2003/2004 performing roster.) In October, Monson came to Houston for a planning session for her spring events. While she wasin town, she called me, not about a story but about getting a Feldenkrais lesson. Throughout her lesson, she told me about her project of following migrating birds (and one year, whales) in a project she called *BIRD BRAIN*.

I have always been mildly interested in birds; for two years I lived

> FOLLOWING JENNIFER FOLLOW THE BIRDS >

Ospreys 2002 Ducks and Geese 2004 Northern Wheatears 2006

adjacent to wetlands where I was able to view egrets daily. These days, I'm more interested in people who watch birds. You could call me a "birdwatcher watcher." Ten years ago I went to Sanibel and Captiva, two hot Florida sites for bird watching. I spent more time watching these patient, sensibly dressed people sit quietly behind their unobtrusive long-range viewing machines than birds. If anyone knows how to be invisible, it's a birdwatcher.

BIRD BRAIN is a project of sparkling originality in shape, scope, and content. Monson's not just watching birds, she's following them, along their migration routes known as "flyways." I visited the BIRD BRAIN website, read the dancers' journal entries, watched video clips; in other words, I followed her follow the birds.

Investigate navigation, pick a migrating species, pinpoint their journey, create original dances and learning events at several sites along the flyway, coordinate with local scientists and park rangers, travel across the country camping in remote and urban areas—hardly the typical itinerary of postmodern dancers. Monson has already logged in several years of following birds. Her interest in birds began with the Pigeon Project in 2000. Monson worked with a neighborhood pigeon keeper in Brooklyn investigating patterns of flight and rest. Birds have been on her brain ever since.

The first official BIRD BRAIN tour was in 2001, with Monson following gray whales from Baja, California, to

Vancouver Island, British Columbia. This was the least plannedout tour. Monson recalled doing spontaneous dances for the rangers on the occasion of a whale sighting. In the fall of 2002, she followed ospreys along the eastern flyway from Wells, Maine, through Cuba to Venezuela. In the spring of 2003, the Ducks and Geese Tour covered the Gulf of Mexico to northern Minnesota through the Midwest along the Mississippi flyway. In 2006, she will begin the Northern Wheatears International Tour, which travels from the Arctic through Northern Europe, the Iberian Peninsula, and West Africa.

A BIRD BRAIN tour has typically involved traveling with a group of three to four dancers and one technician, performing anywhere from 25 to 40 performances at parks and museums along the path. The tours included workshops for dancers and school kids, panel discussions, film showings, long car rides, and all the trials of a road trip. The sites followed the actual routes of each species. Sometimes they arrived after the birds had left; other times they were right on target. Complicated logistics required careful planning. Funding was supplied by the New York Foundation for the Arts, participating organizations, corporate funding, and private sources.

The website www.birdbraindance.com served as a link to the events. Dancers kept an online journal. Photos and video clips kept Monson's followers informed. You could even learn about each species. An enormous amount of research went into the planning and execution of each tour.

[opposite page] Jennifer Monson performing at SFADI (Seattle Festival of Alternative Dance and Improvisation), 2003.





Jennifer Monson Dance/BIRD BRAIN performance at Arden Hills, Minneapolis, MN, April 30, 2004. Jennifer Monson, Juliette Mapp, Morgan Thorson, Osmany Tellez.

research went into the planning and execution of each tour.

I saw Jennifer again in the spring of 2004 during her stop in Houston on the Ducks and Geese Tour. The first *BIRD BRAIN* performance in Houston occurred on the large sundial that sits in front of the Houston Museum of Natural Science. Donna Meadows—the education coordinator and also a dancer—did the introduction. Meadows spoke briefly about the project and asked us to watch the dance as if we were observing something in the wild. She urged us to walk around the dance, to view it from many points, and to be in motion as well. Most of the audience assumed usual audience behavior and found a place to sit. One group of girls took turns getting up to join the dance. I learned from the website that birds do this too. Local birds join migrating flocks in their resting places.

The dance took place under the hot, Houston sun with just the outdoor sounds as the musical score. Dressed in rugged outdoor dance togs, the dancers—as well as the dance—exuded a sturdy quality. Concrete, wind, sun, noise, and unruly teens didn't disturb them a bit. Birdlike movements came and went. A short unison phrase punctuated the end. I knew there were ideas of navigation embedded into Monson's improvisational style. Watching, I couldn't pin them down, but I could sense their presence. The audience seemed a bit uninvolved; perhaps that was partly the point. Animals in the wild continue their actions regardless of our attention. Monson's dance approached that quality.

The next day, Monson and her dancers performed at the Houston Arboretum and Nature Center. The audience gathered in a large meeting room. I expected Monson to be there but, instead, Katrina Graham, the Center's Naturalist in charge of the project, greeted us. She proceeded to talk about dance, birds, the environment, and how to watch BIRD BRAIN—as if a phenomenon in the wild. I found it terrifically exciting to hear a park naturalist talk about how to watch dance. Then Doug Huang, another naturalist, led us on a ten-minute hike to the performance space.

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I was expecting this walk to be in silence, a time for me to gather my senses, clear my mental palette, and bring myself into a state of calm receptivity. Unfortunately, the 8-year-old girl walking directly in front of me had other plans. She chanted, "bird brain bird brain," all the way there, with an occasional "I love birds" and other chatter. Migration is not so predicable. Unexpected events crop up along migration routes all the time. For a moment, I thought of myself as a bird stuck on the noisy end of the flock. As we arrived in the performance area, my annoyance transformed to joy in watching my chatty trailmate spread her wings and wail, "I'm going to see the BIRD BRAIN dance."

Suddenly I found myself looking at an empty field.

There wasn't a dancer in sight. Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I was expecting some uncomfortable wooden bleachers facing a blank meadow soon to be filled with dancers. The naturalist suggested that we walk around and look for the dance.

The trail chatter came to a halt as dance watchers surveyed the bushes in search of a dance. Finally I spotted Juliette Mapp, one of the dancers. Hidden in the brush, perched on a log, she stood poised for motion but not moving. There was a hush in the crowd as if we had just spotted our first rare species. As Mapp began to move, slowly—as if stalking her prey—another dancer was spotted below a wooden platform moving in quick, light movements. At this point in the dance, I realized it was impossible to assume the "plop your bottom somewhere and watch" attitude. We had to move around in order to watch the dancers and sometimes had to squat down or look over and under bridges. In the beginning, the audience was in fact doing most of the moving.

Gradually, the dancers moved closer together and assembled on a wooden deck. I was surprised at how close the audience moved in to the dancing space. I wondered if bird watchers get this close to their finds with this level of comfort. How we went from dance searchers, to dance finders, to participants in the dance evolved seamlessly.

Moments of "coming together" emerged as a sense of unison played intermittently in the dance. When the dance ended, Monson invited us to stay for a short workshop on navigation. We practiced finding north, finding each other with our eyes closed, finding each other at different speeds, and moving as a flock. Most of us found north, faced our home, and moved as a flock without problem. Navigating with our eyes closed created mass chaos and lots of laugher. Wondering why followed our laughter.

I walked back to the main lodge with Huang. The Gulf of Mexico is the great meeting place for several bird species, he explained. I was slightly embarrassed to be learning this just now after living in Texas for fifteen years. I asked Huang about birds flying over oceans. Most don't, they follow coastlines, which is why the Gulf is such an important site in bird migration. The ten-minute walk, the searching for the dance, the finding of the dance, the workshop, the return trip with Huang, gave the event a completeness of experience unique in traditional dance viewing.

On the following Monday, I met with Monson again to tape this interview. After a dismal job of parking my car, it occurred to me that driving cuts us off from our navigational senses. I realized how much of Monson's work had penetrated my thoughts about traveling through space and about organizing my behavior for traveling. Over the next few months, I

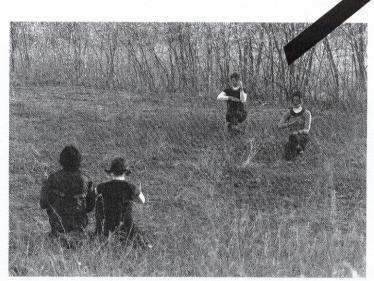
became increasing aware of my own embedded systems for navigating through my everyday world. I started paying attention to how I know where I am at any moment. My parking improved, too.

That summer, I visited my hometown of Buffalo, New York. A nearby lake guarantees frequent meetings with ducks trying to cross the street. One morning, the flock organized their crossing with great care. The ducks grouped, ungrouped, and fussed about in various configurations of flocking and unflocking, in search of some perfect order for crossing the road. It occurred to me that I could be watching a dance.

Much about Monson's work asked me to examine my own habits of dance watching. I thought about the awe those park rangers in California must have experienced in watching Monson's spontaneous whale-sighting dances. Monson's work points to the idea that "something in the wild" is a matter of perspective and—at some level—everything is "in the wild."

In January 2005, I was in New York for the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP) conference, where Monson showcased an excerpt of the indoor version she calls *Flight of Mind*. Although the performance represented just a snippet of what's to come, I could see the distillation process of a long outdoor adventure moving indoors. The full evening-length work will be performed in the fall of 2005 at Dance Theater Workshop (DTW) in New York City.

After the performance, my sister asked me if Monson injects the "bird stuff" in all of her dances. Monson's dances reveal that the "bird stuff" is already there.



Jennifer Monson Dance/BIRD BRAIN performance, Arden Hills, Minneapolis, MN, April 2004. [Left to right] Osmany Tellez, Morgan Thorson, Jennifer Monson, Juliette Mapp.

photo © Cameron Wittig, courtesy of the Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis, MN, 2004

CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER MONSON



I ask people to close their eyes again and face home. "Home" can be a very fluid concept. It definitely is for birds and it becomes so for me while I am migrating. I find that home more and more becomes a moving state. Dance feels the most like home to me.

> Conceiving BIRD BRAIN >

Nancy Galeota-Wozny: Can you talk about the conception of BIRD BRAIN? Was it a moment or a slow fire?

Jennifer Monson: In retrospect, it seems like a very clear evolution of my own experience in the world as a dancer with a powerful connection to the natural world. It makes sense to me that my dancing would move outside, start to traverse global communities, and renegotiate my relationship with the concepts of nature, environment, and consciousness.

The concept for *BIRD BRAIN* came to me when I was living in Williamsburg, a neighborhood in north Brooklyn with relatively low building structures, which is good for pigeon keeping. Many of the local building superintendents keep pigeon coops on rooftops. They fly the pigeons in the early mornings, evenings, and weekends. It's a sport that they feel passionate about. A successful pigeon keeper is able to keep flocks that bring other birds back to the coop.

It's all about providing good homes, food, and mates for your birds. I watched the flocks circling up above the city. The birds' white bellies catching the evening light has always struck me as one of the most beautiful sights in New York. It connects me to the sky. It also made me extremely curious about pigeons' ability to navigate and find their home.

In my research, I've discovered that there are several possible answers. One research experiment concluded that it is connected with olfactory recognition; other studies prove that the metal deposits in pigeons' brains allow them to follow electromagnetic fields. Birds also have keen senses of sight, hearing, and flock recognition; this makes me think about their energetic orientation.

NGW: You were a bit of an urban bird enthusiast. It's funny how we assume that city life is free from wildlife. It seems like the urban environment connects you with your surroundings.

JM: Yes. I also spend a lot of time walking my dog on an abandoned industrial site along the East River in Brooklyn.

For me, it is the only natural area in the neighborhood that is easily accessible. Over the ten or so years that I've been going there, the buildings have been torn down; the river has worn away at the pier. Ailanthus trees, phragmites (reeds), and other wetlands grasses have taken hold. I can find song sparrows, mockingbirds, peregrine falcons; and in the fall and spring, I see all kinds of migrating water fowl, such as buffleheads, ruddy ducks, mergansers, black ducks, and of course brants and Canada geese.

I realized that this weird bit of abandoned industrial landscape was serving these birds as vital habitat on their migrational journeys. This again triggered my curiosity about their phenomenal navigational abilities, their need for habitat, and how they connect multiple ecosystems throughout their migration. Watching them connected me to where they are coming from and where they are going to, from the Arctic to Latin America. It made me rethink my own ideas about nature. Previously, I'd thought of nature as something undisturbed by human action, but this site is a completely natural dynamic system that provides sustenance for a global community of birds during migration, which was heavily impacted by human development. The resilience and persistence of natural systems to reclaim this site fascinate and inspire me.

NGW: Where does "the wild" fit into urban life?

JM: Dancing has always been a place I experience myself as wild, uncontainable, and uncontrollable. Nature has similar attributes. Nature has a capacity to constantly be mysterious and challenge our perceptions and conceptions, which is something it shares with artistic practice.

Birds rely on urban areas that are right on the migrational flyways. They need a place to stop, rest, and get a drink of water. Abandoned industrial areas are becoming that place. There is a dynamic shift of the environment that's happening right under our noses. The city feels as wild to me, in similar ways, as natural environments. It is also a vastly complex and mysterious system that allows for a certain experience of the unknowable.

> Dancing as Navigation >

NGW: You mentioned that dancing calls upon navigational skills. How so?

JM: Improvisation investigates the challenge of opening up to the potential choices of a moment and then selecting a response or solving a problem. Each improviser chooses a method of orienting her- or himself and navigating in the moment. I was inspired by the inherent navigational skills of birds and did research about their sensorial and perceptual abilities. I'm rather jealous that they can sense magnetic fields and polarized light, can navigate from celestial bodies, and can hear infra-sounds.

I wanted to see if I could develop my own skills. I put myself deeper in touch with my own genetic navigational capacity. How would that feed my creative practice and reframe my experience of the world? As dancer and improviser, I am accessing and selecting multiple modes of creating, responding, and perceiving while in the moment of dancing. Sometimes it's an image from my imagination, but other times it's my spatial, visual, aural, or energetic awareness. Sometimes it's instinct, or a self-conscious emotional or psychological response to the moment. Sometimes it's memory or spirit. I'm definitely very turned on to my scientific approach to the world and integrating that information and practice into my creative work.

NGW: Let's bring the birds into the conversation. Obviously, they are skilled navigators. I am wondering if the soul of navigation was already deeply imprinted from your years as an improviser. Bringing migratory species into the fold is a huge expansion from the studio. Can you describe the idea of expansion?

JM: Birds navigate through several systems when they migrate; they don't rely on just one system. If it's cloudy and they can't see the stars, they rely on their electromagnetic fields. They have mechanisms that help them adjust to various wind patterns. There is one bird that heads out into the Atlantic, in the opposite direction of its goal in South America. It knows it will run into the trade winds, which will basically blow it to where it wants to spend the winter, at a much lower energetic cost. I really appreciate that faith in systems beyond their control.

Having multiple systems in place at once during improvisation is how I'm working. If one system isn't active or available, I'm able to access my other systems. Resting





Jennifer Monson Dance/BIRD BRAIN performance at the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Minneapolis, MN, May 1, 2004. Osmany Tellez, Jennifer Monson, Morgan Thorson, Juliette Mapp.

photos © Cameron Wittig, courtesy of the Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis, MN, 2004

one system while others come into play layers a more complex and deeper response and investigation of the dancer's life.

NGW: What do you mean an improvisational system? Can you give me an example?

JM: I consider improvisational systems as modes of orientation. Sometimes the movement is initiated from an internal image, sometimes from a sensory response, sometimes from an energetic experience or memory or sense of spirit; sometimes it's a compositional or rhythmic system, or initiated in musicality or texture. All of these can become components of each other, but I am interested in isolating and analyzing what it's like to have one system be primary and see how the other systems intervene or support. I'm extremely interested in the concept of transition and the fluid dynamics of working in several systems at once while allowing the clarity of the form or the energy to rise/arise.

> The "Science" Part >

NGW: You double-majored in dance and biology. Did you have a longing to bring your dancing into a scientific arena?

JM: I'm fascinated with biology. I love working with the scientists on this project and getting as much information about the natural history of the birds as possible. Animal Navigation is still a big mystery; people don't really know that much about how birds navigate. Through the recent use of radio and satellite telemetry, scientists are able to get a much more accurate picture of where animals actually go during their migrations, and they discovered some pretty extraordinary things.

NGW: What kind of extraordinary things?

JM: There is a population of snow geese that they found in the midst of a huge ice field. At first they thought that it was some error in the transmission because they couldn't imagine that birds could survive in those conditions. Somehow the geese were able to group together in ice caves and keep each other warm through shared body heat. There is another interesting story about a researcher who tracked Swainson's hawks from their summer habitat in Northern California. He couldn't believe it when he finally got some signals way down in Argentina. This story is actually quite tragic. It turns out that several thousand hawks were killed by pesticides. But this information is being used to change agricultural practices there to prevent future events like this.

NGW: How do you plan your routes?

JM: Much information goes into planning the route. I start out by studying the particular species' migration patterns. Then I start looking for state and national parks, wildlife refuges, and other environmental organizations that I think might be good partners. I also look for local arts organizations. Each of the tours has had a different balance of artistic and environmental partners. I consider how long it's going to take for us to go a particular distance. It's very important to me that we are physically traveling through the same territory as the animals. We are experiencing the same weather, tidal and lunar cycles, and space and distance. This level of detail in the environment, both human and natural, has helped me engage in my creative process in terms of how I think about my own perceptual skill as a dancer.

NGW: It sounds like a scientific methodology factors into your work.

JM: Yes. The scientific, environmental, and academic research that I do in preparation for each migration connects with my dance research. Collecting data, looking back at it, and theorizing how different kinds of improvisational practice will influence the structure of the work suggest new avenues of investigation and experimentation. We have gradually developed a writing practice among the dancers, with the help of different consultants, that has really helped to articulate and share our experiences while dancing during the migration. All this feeds back into my ideas of structure and experimentation.

> Performing BIRD BRAIN >

NGW: BIRD BRAIN takes place outdoors. You perform at parks, arboretums, science museums, and everywhere but the black box. What are some of the risks and adventures of this choice?

JM: Dancing outdoors is an incredible experience. It has taken me three tours to even begin to get a sense of what it means to perform outside under constantly shifting circumstances. During the first two tours, I was overwhelmed by the stimuli to my senses. The energy created through the act of performing dissipates almost instantly into the landscape. There is a constant reconnoitering and recalibrating between the self, the landscape, and the other dancers. It's exciting to deal with the elements—the wind, the rain, the heat, the uneven terrain, and the new audiences. Everything demands that you respond to it at the same time that you create the performance from your internal state.

NGW: Can you talk about placing dance in a natural setting?



Jennifer Monson Dance/BIRD BRAIN performance at the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Minneapolis, MN, May 1, 2004. [Left to right] Juliette Mapp, Jennifer Monson, Osmany Tellez, Morgan Thorson.

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JM: This is a big question for me. As I said before, the first challenge is responding to and sensing the environment and then creating the moment of performance. At first, I was primarily overwhelmed by the forces around me. As the work developed, I began to perceive more clarity and a sense of definition of how I wanted to see the bodies dancing in the landscape. I saw how I could be more proactive and have more agency in my dancing, choreography, and scores. I tried to not be at the mercy of the environment, but to let the dancing be a vehicle that will provoke a heightened experience of the landscape for the audience.

The audience sees the dancers responding to elements in their environment—the wind, the sound, the energy, their imagination—which in turn makes them more aware of their own experience of the environment. There is a juxtaposition of the space and time that a dancing body uses against the vastness of the landscape. Sometimes the body comes into synch with that landscape; at other times, it gets telescoped into something chunky in relation to the detail of the environment. The contradiction of being both a part of nature and apart from nature is inherent in our performances.

There are times when I feel subsumed by the elements; others, when I contradict that idea and am the human being experiencing the irritation of dancing over asphalt and being bitten by mosquitoes. I'm always trying to negotiate those boundaries. Sometimes the psychological, emotional, and practical considerations are blurred in the environment. I feel contradictions between natural and unnatural elements and our particularly human conundrum of consciousness that positions us in between the two.

NGW: Dancing outdoors is not contained in any formal way. What are the challenges?

JM: Sure, it's difficult sometimes. Often I perform as a solo improviser in a contained space. I generate the energy of the performance with the audience; that energy is contained by the room. There is a stronger resonance, which makes it easier to compose the musicality and energetic pathways. When you're outside, energy dissipates into the world. Interestingly enough, that experience has brought me to a deeper place as a dancer; it has changed my relationship to ego and space.

In the past, I felt uncomfortable in the natural environment, almost like an intruder; but now, I am more able to experience myself as a member of the environment I'm performing in. I want to become part of the ambience but, at the same time, I am aware of the artificiality of doing that within the frame of a performance event that inevitably has a beginning and end for the audience. I like to think of the project in its entirety—for example, we began the performance in Corpus Christi, Texas, and finished it in Duluth,

Minnesota. There is that kind of art-life continuity to the project's concept.

NGW: I've been reading the journals you and the dancers post on the website. It's not always a total joyride. There are days when you feel your inspiration is low or that things didn't click as well as you had hoped. There is humility in these entries. Part of it is the risk of working outdoors with unpredictable elements. I imagine the birds have difficult days as well. What's it like to be on the road for so long?

JM: When I started this project, I had come to the end of my rope in terms of living in an urban setting. I was desperate to establish a connection with nature that would feed me spiritually. I have gone through so much philosophically in my relationship to nature through this project that it has actually brought me back to a keen appreciation of the urban environment as a natural environment. I have moved away from a romantic and nostalgic relationship to nature and reinvigorated my own spiritual interrelatedness to the world.

One of the most surprising and difficult issues that came up on the tours was the social dynamics among the team. I learned a lot about my own skills as a director and communicator. I was taking an awful lot for granted about the other people who were with me on the tour; I could have been much clearer about my expectations of each individual's involvement.

Each day is full of so many demands. We have to camp, cook, warm up, teach, perform, participate in panel discussions, deal with the audience, shop, cook, and camp again. It is a huge amount of work, and it is straddling two worlds —the world of living outdoors that really takes its own time, and the world of the project's schedule of interviews, performances, workshops.

I had the idealistic idea that I could go and follow the migrations, be in tune with nature, and get into the seasonal rhythms such as the tides and the moon. In reality, we were spending large amounts of time driving in the car from camp site to performance site, as well as the long drives between each city, shopping for food, and figuring out where we could get a hot shower.

NGW: So you all are dancing together, camping together, and driving long distances together. That's a lot of togetherness.

JM: Group dynamics are something to consider. I've taken people who have never done any camping before out of their regular NYC lives for ten weeks. They suddenly find themselves working, camping, traveling, and dealing with living on the move. Each migration has very different group



dynamics—its own alchemy, its own balance of intimacy in the daily experience and in the dancing. In some ways, I really regret not staying with the same dancers for all three migrations. I don't know if that would have been possible, but I wish now that I shared the cumulative experience of the three migrations with other dancers. I regret that my body is the only one that has danced those 8,000–9,000 miles.

One of the richest and the most difficult challenges of this project has been learning how to be a leader. In flocks of ducks and geese, the leader is constantly changing. Because it's my project, I don't have the adaptability of having other people come into the forefront to take that responsibility. However, I'm really interested in endurance. I was a longdistance runner as a kid and I think pushing my endurance level was something I wanted from the project, not only physically but on all levels-intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I have to say that the level of exhaustion I'm experiencing now on all fronts is intense. It's much less about the physical exhaustion as it is about dealing with people-getting it up for press interviews and making sure everyone is comfortable. I'm one of those people who needs a lot of time alone; interacting with people can be very exhausting for me.

> Houston Performances >

NGW: The two dances I saw in Houston were very different. The dance at the science museum contained some unison sections, while the arboretum dance seemed more spontaneous. Can you talk about how your "score" changes from site to site?

JM: You saw two very different dances. We created some set movement choreography—set movement material—that you saw at the sundial performance, whereas the arboretum performance was completely improvised.

The basic score for each performance takes a general form that includes an introduction to the space or environment that we are performing in. We navigate through the space by opening our senses and identifying the terrain we will dance in. This practice ensures that both performers and audience will begin to focus on the space. Usually it's a simple practice of navigation based on my understanding of "direct reckoning." We look at an object from some distance in the space, and we move as directly as possible to the object.



Jennifer Monson Dance/BIRD BRAIN company members at Padre Island National Seashore, Corpus Christi, TX, March 2004, on the Ducks and Geese Migration Tour. [Left to right] Eun Jung Gonzalez and Willa Carroll, [background] Barbara Bryan.

With a clear goal in mind, we begin to open our senses to the experience of moving from the point of origin to our destination. Usually we start with straight lines and gradually move in curved lines as we speed up. I've been very influenced by the thermal dynamics of bird flight and the way birds take advantage of the spiraling movements of heat thermals. Our sense of the space radically changes as we shift from straight lines to curving patterns. The way we connect to each other in space changes and feels more like flocking as we bank off of each other's momentum.

After the initial introduction to the space, we have several different scores that, depending on the site, come together in different ways. Some of these scores are meditative flocking, energetic unison, and arriving and departing at the same time. Interlaced within the improvisatory scores are short sections of choreography. As the tour progressed, I became more and more interested in the transitions from, to, and within choreography and improvisation.

NGW: You work with a score that is devised from information gathered from migrating species. Can you lead me through a score?

JM: Once we are in the curving/spiraling relationship, we begin to relate more specifically to our spatial configuration, and that creates a "score" of arriving and departing into and out

of the formation. Migrating animals are constantly arriving and departing. How do they know where to land when they need food and rest? What does it mean to arrive in a new location while in the process of migrating? Where is it safe to rest? What is familiar and not? How do you know when to head on? Ducks can tell when the lakes north of them have thawed and will provide food; how do they get this

information? Smell? Other birds or insects? Temperature? They often arrive at the perfect time for feeding.

Within the dance, we develop our own strategies for arriving and departing as a way of relating and connecting. We're trying to sense each other and settle into a location. I've been working with the idea of location as something created by our dancing but not necessarily beholden to any kind of geographical or physical space. This "location" is something that we can then enter into together as dancers and arrive and depart from. Sometimes the amount of stimulus I am getting from the performance location overwhelms me. The ability to settle into my own "movement location" helps to frame the structure of the dance. I am interested in simultaneously framing the experience of the dancer and the audience's experience in the environment.

The concept of a "movement location" has an environmental connotation that feels rich to me. Another score we use is different forms of unison. We use energetic unison, weight unison, emotional unison, delayed unison, and real unison. This was a huge topic of discussion for us; it brought up a lot of questions about the difference between mimicking, leading, following, and connecting.

NGW: At times the dancers look still in the environment. They resembled egrets perching in a field. Can you speak about the stillness?



Jennifer Monson Dance/BIRD BRAIN flocking dance rehearsal with students from Battle Creek Elementary School, Minneapolis, MN, May 2004.



JM: Perching is actually part of the score we use. We visited habitats to observe birds. I think we were specifically inspired by watching waterfowl, especially pelicans, at Corpus Christi on South Padre Island. Even if we are using behaviors or movement patterns that are inspired by birds, we are never trying to imitate birds. It's inevitable that that kind of imagery gets instilled in our bodies. I've spent a lot of time watching birds, but I am just as influenced by weather, sun, smell, light, and the interaction between man-made and natural environments. I have to say that dancing outside has made me slow down and become more observant. The stillness helps orient the audience back to the environment and their own experience.

One of the things I learned in my research has to do with a study scientists did in which they attached heart monitors to pelicans in order to measure stress levels. It turns out that when the birds are flying in formation along the surf, the heart rate of the birds behind the leader drops. The theory is that the birds are taking advantage of the windbreak and drag; therefore, they don't have to work as hard physically. The responsibility of leading is shared among several birds. Not having to lead all the time reduces stress. There is an advantage in flying together.

When I drop into unison with the other performers, my sense of responsibility composing within the performance softens, and I'm able to be very present as I follow the other dancers in their movements. I become more available to the experience of moving with the group. I love that feeling when I'm allowing it to happen, not making it happen.

> Post-Performance Activities >

NGW: Can you talk about the post-performance activities you do with the audience?

JM: First, I ask people to close their eyes, breathe, and face north. It helps when people close their eyes; people open up to a different experience of the environment. I want them to trust their own relationship to "north." I ask them how they find north. For some people, it's purely intuitive; they can feel where north is. For others, it's based on a landmark. Everyone has his or her own relationship to direction and space. These exercises help make people aware of their own proclivities.

Once we confirm where north is and discuss our various methods of orienting ourselves, I ask people to close their eyes again and face home. "Home" can be a very fluid concept. It definitely is for birds, and it becomes so for me while I am migrating. I find that home more and more becomes a moving state. Dancing feels the most like home to me.

NGW: How do humans stack up alongside birds? Do humans have a flocking instinct?

JM: Humans actually have really good spatial awareness. We are able to identify where objects are in terms of direction and distance by hearing them. We also can retain a visual memory of space through our eyes and the repetition of experience. One of the partnering exercises we do with the

audience involves standing ten to twelve feet away from their partner and then, with eyes closed, walking to their partner until they feel they're in front of their partner without touching, and then reaching their hand out to touch them on the shoulder.

Once people have honed their spatial awareness, I ask them to get together in one big flock and sense their place in the flock. Then I ask them to close their eyes and touch the person in front of them with their right hand, and touch the person behind them with their left hand. People get a real sense of their body in relation to other bodies.

We play with simple flocking and turning in unison with eyes closed in order to see if there's a sense of energetic unison with everyone turning. There is an advantage to being located in the center of the flock. You are safe from predators. If birds are on the outside, they want to get to the inside if danger is coming. Generally the way birds change formation is by an outside bird turning towards the center. Relationships in the flock are constantly changing. I found that there is a huge range of skill when we did this with different groups of people on the tour. Younger people and families were good at flocking. The more people knew each other, the better they were at flocking.

> Life on the Tours >

NGW: There is much about migration that is hard to fathom. The sheer distances are mind-boggling. Your project, now in its third year, has some of that enormity to it. You are traveling throughout the world, setting up performances, workshops, and panel discussions with scientists and members of the natural sciences. As a human, and not a bird, how are you equipped for such a journey?

JM: I did a fair amount of traveling with my family when I was young. I lived in Ireland, Yugoslavia, and Norway and visited my sister for six weeks when she was doing research in Tanzania. Adaptability is a quality I have tried to cultivate. Maybe the experience of adapting to different cultures led me to improvisation. You have to be able to understand a situation and communicate without language. It relies on a lot of intuition. These were the strong points of the first tour—intuition, adaptability, and a desire to communicate.

The Gray Whale Migration felt so magical to me; I'm rather nostalgic about it. I went with three women who'd worked on the Pigeon Project. We had this creative kernel of working together for a year and a half. None of them had ever been camping before. We started in Baja, California, with a two-day drive down Highway One to the salt flats in Guerrero Negro. It's a very desolate environment. There's nothing green, there's no freshwater. There are only shallow

bays, sand, and salt.

When we got there, the dancers were really freaked out by the environment. The dancers were thinking, "We're going to stay here for five days?" It turned out to be the most magical five days for us. Almost every day we took small boats out to see the mother whales and their babies. The local people were extremely friendly and excited by our presence. By the end, we didn't want to leave. Everyone figured out the ground rules of camping, cooking, and sleeping. There was this alchemy amongst the four of us. We shared a willingness to go through this experience. It was rough, but also there was a warmth and generosity about it.

This tour was not scheduled in the way that other tours were scheduled. The later tours were focused on weekend activities at larger venues for bigger audiences. During that first tour, we often performed on a weekday afternoon in a national park for two or three park rangers. The beginning and end of the tour were strongly affected by the fact that we were very reliant on the kindness of our hosts and were basically staying in people's homes. At the end of the tour, on Vancouver Island near Tofino, we stayed with a family on Wickinninish Island in a house they had made from driftwood. Their son had designed and built boats specifically for the conditions of that area. He took us out to see the last whales of our journey as they headed north to Alaska. Talk about being in tune with your surroundings. The whole family communed with each living organism they encountered—the crows, the seagulls, the different marine mammals. It was a gift to spend some time with them. They were fierce environmental activists within the Native American community.

NGW: The Osprey Tour was more formally organized. How was this tour different?

JM: In the Osprey Migration Tour, I tried to plan a five-day stint at each location to work with schools and other environmental organizations. I started with the National Estuarine Research Reserve System that has centers all down the eastern seaboard and with partners that were tracking ospreys with satellite transmitters through a program at the Raptor Center in St. Paul, Minnesota. So we started with environmental organizations.

The Ducks and Geese Migration started with major arts organizations and then reached out to environmental organizations in their area. My whole relationship to how to build these collaborations has been expanded with the support of the larger institutions. With the help of the Walker Art Center, we were able to develop an educational resource guide that was used by schoolchildren along the route who then participated as dancing flocks in our performances when we came through.



Jennifer Monson performing Keeper at SFADI (Seattle Festival of Alternative Dance and Improvisation), 2003. From her program notes: "Monson has developed an array of movement characters, culled from years of solo practice that delve into the singularity of self etching an energetic signature of movement. The solo will consider the interruption of oneself to reveal the unexpected—conjuring what is invisible and inexplicable through dance."

NGW: How is the Ducks and Geese Tour going so far?

JM: The one thing that is really exciting to me in this tour is working in urban areas. We have some very interesting sites on this tour, including the Twin Cities Ammunitions Plant, which is now run by the National Guard. So you could say we are working with the U.S. Army. We also worked in the Calumet area south of Chicago, where we partnered with the City of Chicago's Department of the Environment. Performances happened in the midst of the ghost landscape of the old steel mills and landfill and rich marsh areas. We also performed in restored prairies in Iowa and several other areas that are celebrating nature as a vital part of the urban landscape. This experience has left me extremely hopeful about the possibility of designing sustainable ways of developing the future of our cities and suburbs.

NGW: What's next for you?

JM: I will be performing a theatrical version, *Flight of Mind*, on September 21–24, 2005, at Dance Theater Workshop (DTW) in New York City. I'm hoping to re-create some material from the Pigeon Project and perform it on DTW's outdoor terrace and other rooftops. I want the audience to migrate through the building and see it as its own ecosystem. We will be

"playing" the building for the sound design and are bringing 1,000 five-gallon buckets of phragmites into the theater.

We are also finally finishing the Gray Whale Migration and in April the original *BIRD BRAIN* gray whale team will do a week of performances and workshops at Whale Fest in Kodiak, Alaska.

I'm also setting up iLAND—Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Art, Nature, and Dance. I want to create a resource for artists, scientists, urban designers, and environmentalists to experiment on research and creative process. I'm working on buying a building in Brooklyn that will be converted into a sustainable building with two dance studios, residency quarters, a green roof, and a classroom/laboratory. I am working with a fantastic collective of green architects. I'm very interested in reinvigorating the kinetic experience of the urban environment. The city is nature. We have to start seeing and feeling it that way if it's going to really be livable.

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