

Activating *Agon* in Performance

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Doctor of Philosophy by Public Works

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Abstract

This PhD consists of six performance works by choreographer Athina Vahla created between 2004 and 2017. The accompanying commentary details how the central concept of *agon*, as struggle, conflict and contest from the original Greek meaning, is activated across these works through their content, form, spaces, and narratives. As a strand of enquiry, *agon*, it is argued came to be an intrinsic part of Vahla's choreographic signature.

The first chapter gives an account of how the concept of *agon* emerged and developed through a chronological narration of her choreographic practice. A preoccupation with 'realness' in performance is highlighted. A conceptual understanding of *agon* in the works is established in the second chapter. Heidegger's articulation of *thrownness*, Camus' essay *Sisyphus*, and Nietzsche's work on the Greek idea of contest help to articulate the creative impulses behind the activation of *agon* in the performances and illuminate the creative strategies in the choreographic practice. The third chapter shows how *agon* manifests in the works through discussing the strategies of 'real people', the visceral, and arenas. It describes how these three strategies developed over time, activating *agon* as a meaningful experience for both performers and spectators.

This commentary profiles how the performances staged conflict and struggle and how *agon* came to infiltrate the different areas of the works and expanded beyond the physical struggle in dance choreography. The performances offered audiences and performers access to the range and dimensions of *agon*, which especially in the later works, came to affirm and celebratelife. Vahla's process led to a particular kind of hybridity based on 'realness' through the inclusion of sports and athletes, and their agonistic practices. Making *agon* centralwhile continuing to work *from* conflict, the performances included different communities, expanding public engagement also to the territory of academic practice.

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I want to acknowledge the contribution of each, and every participant in all, of my past projects. They all deserve much credit for making those works come to life.

Thank you to my dear parents. Their spirit lives in me.

List of Works Submitted

De Profundis - Prolongations of Silence

Drill Hall, St' Andrew College, Makhanda, South Africa [31 March 2017]

Agon-In the Ring

Box Theatre, Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa [8 May 2014]

Polis

The Nun' Chapel, St Peter's Complex, Makhanda, South Africa [3 July 2012]

Splinter in the Flesh

Athens Concert Hall, Athens, Greece [25 November 2010]

In Praise of Folly

Contact Theatre, Manchester, UK [29 September 2005]

Wrestling an Angel

The Abattoir, 187-211 St John Street, London EC1, UK [3 December 2004]

Preface

Notes to the Reader

The PhD submission consists of two components: six performance works, as evidenced in a visual compilation of film footage documenting each of the performance works, and a written commentary discussing the various ways that *agon* features in the different areas of the works.

The audio-visual components documenting the choreographies is varied in nature. This reflects the different circumstances the works were made for. It is worth noting that while some of the works enjoyed a well-supported rehearsal and production period as commissioned productions, others took place under practical restraints.

To address possible gaps in the visual documentation of the works, I have selected and compiled additional material of shorter video extracts, performance pamphlets, and extracts of articles related to each separate work. These additional materials are included in the digital compilation of the works as an appendix, offering further references for the reader.

Although I have fully conceived and choreographed the submitted works, collaboration has been central to my practice. For these projects, I collaborated with practitioners who shared their expertise during the process and the performances, including performers, designers, composers, dramaturgs and writers, mentors, and producers. The nature of these collaborations contributed to rich and complex outcomes. In my description of each of the works in the appendix, I list the collaborators who made a significant contribution to the work.

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Introduction

Overview and *agon* definitions

In this PhD by Public Works, I am looking back at a cluster of six public performances I created over a fourteen-year span (2004-2017): *Wrestling an Angel* (2004), *In Praise of Folly* (2005), *Splinter in the Flesh* (2010), *Polis* (2012), *Agon - In the Ring* (2014) and *De Profundis – Prolongations of Silence* (2017). Revisiting these works I reflect on how the Greek concept of *agon* can be seen to form a core concept through my choreographies, becoming the key strand of enquiry and a visible signature¹ of my work.

The term *agon* denotes struggle, effort, conflict, and, also, ‘the event of the gathering or assembly for a contest’ (Tuncel, 2013). The word has been absorbed by the contemporary Greek language and is used in daily life to signify one’s strife and striving to overcome obstacles. Its use is also to denote a struggle for social and political freedom and commemorate significant liberation events in Greek history, such as the throwing off the yoke of the Ottoman occupation (1821) and the military dictatorship of the Greek Junta (1974).

It is widely used in sport and theatre for athletic or dramatic contests or competitive events; in political theory where *agonism* is a theory that embraces potentially positive results of political conflict; and in the Christian religion and the New Testament through the expression ‘*agon* in the soul’ (1 Timothy 6:12, n.d.).

Although there is no colloquial use of the word *agon* in the English language, it is a familiar root in everyday words such as *agony* and *antagonist*. These words could be thought to carry negative connotations, which might lead to a similar assumption about the meaning of *agon* itself. Yet *agon*, as I suggest, also conveys a positive and potentially cathartic meaning, particularly when it involves struggle and a

¹ ‘Signature’ refers to the recognisable and identifiable ‘brushstrokes’ plus, ‘ways of working’, in an artist’s work (Melrose, 2009).

courageous effort to overcome adversities, whether alone or with others.

In my commentary, I use several different words for *agon* as reflected in my works, namely conflict, struggle, effort, fight, strife, labour, contest, combat, opposition, tension and friction. These seek to describe and capture the different dimensions and nuances of *agon* in my works. It is the weaving of these multiple agonistic textures that came to produce *agon* as a distinct feature in my body of works.

Agon as signature

As an inherent and recurring signature of my choreographies, *agon* can be seen to manifest across different aspects of the works, namely their content, form, space and themes.

As content, *agon* is explicit in the movement material of my works and foregrounded through the physical actions of struggling, fighting, overcoming. Set against a problem, or conflicted interests, *agon* involves performers as protagonists and antagonists. *Agon* is implicit in the form of the works, with tension being created by the bringing together of diverse performance genres and practices to create a production. These practices are woven, layered, or stitched next to one another. As such my choreographies are characterised through their hybridity, with *agon* being activated in what can be considered the gaps between the forms. *Agon* is also manifest in the spatial design of the performances, wherein the stage or performance site can be conceived as an ‘arena’ and designed to evoke a sense of dissonance or conflict. Here, *agon* in its arena manifests as the tension within a site through a synthesis between different spaces, both physical and social, to create an event.

Lastly, *agon* appears as a common thread through the recurring themes of the works in which physical and mental strife are ways to overcome a challenging situation. In the work *In Praise of Folly*, the central conflict takes place between God and Lucifer over the creation of man. In *Splinter in the Flesh*, *agon* takes place in a gladiatorial cage as a metaphor for the struggle for survival. *Polis* functions as a social arena for performances and debates based on the contested past of a South

African town.

It is worth noting the gerund form of the word 'activating' in the title of my thesis, *Activating Agon in Performance*. It is there to indicate the iterative state of *agon* towards a goal in my work, as *agon* represents an ongoing strand of enquiry over fourteen years, and a central concern running through each of the submitted works. Certainly, the process towards this goal was the driver for the creation of the submitted works and on this basis, it informed my investigation of the concept of *agon*. This also relates to the embodied experience for the audience I was attempting to convey as a maker, through activating *agon* in performance.

Rationale for selected works

The six somewhat eclectic performances are all located at the intersection of dance theatre, live art, sport, and other embodied practices. Together they form an arc of investigation through which, on reflection, I can see I was deepening and enriching *agon* as key feature of my work. As such, each of the six works has developed or led into the next through continuous iterations on themes of *agon*, creatively prompted by *agon* as an ever-present, yet unfinished, central concept.

The arc begins with the works in which struggle is made manifest most prominently in the movement material. This sense of struggle in movement gradually infiltrates other performance aspects, such as the use and types of space and the performers employed, as the choreographic works become increasingly layered performative events.

Although struggle and conflict were prominent features in my earlier works (2004-2010), it was not until later that *agon* as a more complex system of tensions and contrasts fully emerged. As my commentary unfolds, I increasingly draw references from my later works (2012 onwards) as these works can be said to deal with the complexity and expansion of *agon* in my performances. However, it is clear that the earlier performances have been important in enabling *agon* to be manifested in my work. In them, I grappled with physical struggle in dance choreography and grounded *agon* in the movement expression. *Agon* was expressed with an immediacy based on

the performers' struggle caught in cycles of human failings and aspirations, and what happens in between being 'thrown' on stage: standing up, fighting, falling, again and again.

Each of these works forms the final iteration or a summation of past performances. My approach to choreography is to make and revisit works, meaning each of the 'final' choreographies are in themselves just one iteration that is the result of a process of testing and maturation. For example, *Splinter in the Flesh* (2010), is the final iteration that arose from two previous public performances with the same title in 2008 and 2009. *Polis* (2012) was the outcome of *Interdisciplinary Encounters* (2011-2013) that together form a cluster of performances testing collaboration and interdisciplinary practices.

In selecting these works I also came to understand some of the geographical and cultural shifts in my practice. I progressively came to see that there was a connection between emerging performance concepts of struggle and conflict, and the broader geographical, social, and cultural conditions in which the works took place. Deciding on this diverse group of works has been prompted by my realization that often *agon* lives and is activated in the gaps between practices, spaces, cultures, and collaborations.

Chapter outline

Following this introduction, Chapter 1 further traces *agon* through the evolution of my creative practice, providing a chronological introduction to the works. The chapter reveals the context, influences and intentions informing my creative processes. It seeks to provide the reader with a rounder understanding of the works and to make evident some of the effort, risk, and uncertainty of my creative journeys as a choreographer. Indeed, it could be said that as a maker I have also practised *agon* in and through this journey.

In the same chapter, I discuss the influential practitioners on my work and the range of practices I was drawn to in the earlier stages on my career, including Pina Bausch's *Tanztheater* with its visceral energy and expressive force, the fierce

athleticism of the *New Wave in European Dance*, and Samuel Beckett's minimalism and stark universes. Also, Robert Wilson's installation *HG* (1995), and Romeo Castellucci's image theatre inspired the visual framing of my performances. I became increasingly drawn to hybrid art forms such as sport and socially engaged projects, and, for my later works, I found inspiration in Jeremy Deller's elevation of real-life scenarios to artistic projects, as, for instance, in his exhibition *Joy in People* (2012). Lastly, I introduce some of the shifts that occurred in my works over their fourteen-year span and their relation to my preoccupation as a maker with 'the real' and 'realness', a concept I further explore in Chapter 3 in the crafting strategies of my works.

In Chapter 2, I discuss some of the specific concepts and theories surrounding *agon* that raise questions about the human condition. Some of these concepts emerged during the fourteen-year period of my practice through conversations and collaborations with dramaturgs, mentors, and academics, while others have become evident through writing this reflective commentary.

In terms of my creative process, I had, for example, specifically chosen to look at Thomas Wartenberg's beginners' guide, *Existentialism* (2013), because he works with film, theatre, and novels. And it was in 2014 when creating a work called *Existential*, that I read Gary Cox's book *How to Be an Existentialist* (2013). Sarah Bakewell's work *At the Existentialist Café* (2017) was particularly helpful, as it offered me an insight in the twentieth century existentialist philosophers' lives and interaction with each other as a context for their work, and the way this philosophical movement emerged.

Also, whilst I was busy creating performances featuring sports such as *Agon - In the Ring* on boxing, and with *agon* being a common feature of sport philosophy, I read some writings on existential philosophy applied to sport. In particular, the Routledge *Handbook of the Philosophy of Sports* (2013) offered me a way into looking at concepts of struggle in the physical performance, in or through sports.

Writing this commentary led me still further and, as such, I include some references to Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Albert Camus, as well as Søren Kierkegaard, whose works consider notions of struggle and existence. Whilst I will not go into depth about these philosophers, for that would detract from the more

appropriate focus on my choreographic work, my reflections have been informed by Nietzsche's extensive work on the Greek concept of *agon*, the concept of *thrownness* from Heidegger, and *Sisyphus* in Camus. It is through the extensive work of philosophy professor Christa Davis Acampora on Nietzsche's *agon*, that I became familiar with Nietzsche's ideas on conflict and struggle. It is through Heidegger's work that I realised that many of my works start with what he calls *thrownness*, and that from that initiation, *agon* arises as a response. For, as Heidegger notes, we are 'thrown' into the world and because of our *thrownness* 'there is a continual struggle between the drive to actualise our potentials and the ...restraints of our thrownness' (Watts, 2001; 34). I will explore and discuss this in Chapter 2.

Whilst not having formally studied philosophy, these sources have informed my thinking and making as a choreographer, and I write from this position. Indeed, through this writing it has become clear that what initially arose in the process of making, in what seemed to be separate or even random ways, had a pattern both in the thinking and in the making. It is this pattern, centred around the concept of *agon*, which now informs my consideration of the body of my works.

To illustrate an example that relates to this process, I first encountered *thrownness* as part of my upbringing with the music of the rock band the Doors, in their song, *Riders on the Storm* (The Doors, 1971). As Jim Morrison, their lead singer, intoned many decades ago, "Into this life we're thrown" (in Critchley, 2009). I later read that Morrison had attended lectures at Florida State University in Tallahassee (1963), in which Heidegger's philosophical thinking was discussed. Another example is the title *Splinter in the Flesh*, which I had found in Julia Kristeva's work *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991). Such is perhaps the way creative practices and insights emerge, connect, and materialise.

In Chapter 3, I present the three key creative strategies I have used to realise my work in collaboration with others, namely, the incorporation of what we might call 'real people', the evocation of the visceral and the development of arenas. Chapter 3 reveals my preoccupation with triggering an authentic experience of *agon* for the spectators – an intimate experience of what might be felt as 'genuine, truthful, immediate...' (Schulze, 2017) and, hopefully, be reflected upon after the performance.

The discussion of my first strategy, 'real people', reveals my preoccupation with 'the real' and 'realness' in the performers' presence and actions, and how this contributes to the activation of *agon*. I consider how the inclusion of non-professional

theatre performers in the works aimed to create a sense of familiarity, resulting in a less mediated experience for the spectators. I found myself digging into the creative process in rehearsals, to give an insight into how the quality of real operated in the performers' work both in rehearsals, and as made manifest on stage.

The second strategy relates to the aspect of the visceral in relation to the physical aspect of struggle, and with the layering and juxtaposition of certain images and visual motifs, including the clashing of incompatible elements within the same performance, all designed to make *agon* felt as an immediate and embodied experience shared with the spectators.

The arenas, as the third strategy, focuses on the physical places that were (re)designed as spatial frames for *agon*, such as the creation of a gladiatorial cage, or the use of an abattoir as a site for performance. Further, the concept of arenas is also related to my use of and interest in social spaces in which different practices and/or cultures meet and are contested.

In order to illuminate and better position these three creative strategies, I draw briefly on the work of performance theorists, touching on Tony Fischer's introduction of *agon* in performance in *Performing Antagonism*, Josephine Machon's writing on the visceral in performance, Doreen Massey's ideas on space and Foucault's concept of *Heterotopias* (1967), echoing the way I came to think, over time, about the spatial implications of my work. I also draw on the work of Daniel Schulze in order to frame the concerns of my practice and similarities with the concept of *authenticity effects* in contemporary performance, and the concept of 'the real' which I found later in my process in Carol Martin's *Theatre of the Real* (2013), and Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford's *Theatre of Real People* (2016).

Chapter 1. Choreochronicle of Practice

1.1. Background and Influences

The presence of *agon* in my work can be traced back to a turbulent childhood during the military Greek dictatorship. An early sense of struggle and conflict as a way of existing had found a movement expression in parallel to my training in dance and sport, both requiring continuous effort to overcome physical and mental limitations. It can be said that this early embodied experience of *agon* influenced my work as a maker.

Over a thirty-year practice in the field of performance and whilst located in Greece, UK, and South Africa, I have produced a steady body of performances including works commissioned by major companies and venues such as Candoco Dance Company, The Royal Festival Hall, South Bank (London) and the National Arts Festival (Makhanda, South Africa)². My first professional work was presented in 1989 and throughout the 1990s my performances featured what might be said to be existential themes such as the absurdity of life, the fear of death, the relationship between an individual and a group, as well as other notions surrounding selfhood, struggle and choice.

A feature of my earlier works was the performers' persistent fighting routines in duet encounters and the physically exhausting solos of characters portraying what we might see as existential angst. These works can be seen to reference and be influenced by Pina Bausch's *Tanztheater* and her embrace of movement repetition, such as in *Le Sacre du printemps* (1975) where 'the ritual destruction of the 'chosen one' is danced out to pure exhaustion' (Birringer, 2015: 3). My works during that time also echoed Lloyd Newson's work, described as 'the theatre of blood and bruises' (Arditti, 2011), part of the European and British New Wave in dance, including companies such as *Ballet C de la B*, *Ultima Vez*, and *DV8*. In dance - theatre, I was drawn to the performers fully possessing the moment of effort, struggle and the

² For a full list of choreographic performances, see appendix 2.

clashing of bodies, all aspects of the European choreographers' preoccupation with moving 'beyond the artificial to the real, to enable audiences to witness the palpable experience of the performers on stage as means of connecting with real life' (Fernandes, 2005: 142).

Whilst creating performances (1989-1999), I increasingly felt a restlessness with some of the inherent limitations and tropes of dance theatre and its devices such as narrating autobiographical elements on the microphone, dressing and undressing on stage, or building props on stage. I found myself in conflict with my practice. This made me look for the next step in the physical experience of the spectacle and what could be done in the medium of movement, its theatrical mode of representation and its spatial considerations. I embarked on a process of distilling movement vocabulary so as to capture what I perceived to be the core of my performances. Becoming increasingly aware of the recurring feature of *agon* in the works, I sought to deepen and interiorise its presence without reducing its physical impact. I also encountered the possibility of finding new ways in which *agon* became manifest in my performances.

In 2000 in a practice-based MA in Choreography, I investigated Samuel Beckett's work. Beckett's stark universes and use of time in which 'nothing happens [...]; nothing enters either, because time is circular' (İçöz, 1993: 287), his characters' agonizing existence and the way he used minimalism and repetition 'to reinforce the absurdity of their existence, their helplessness and dislocation' (İçöz, 1993: 288), further informed the staging of struggle in my works. I choreographed movement that embraced a sense of restraint and a lack of pathos, seeking to counterbalance the internal turmoil of the characters. For example, *Sonia Says* (fig.1) was created as a version of Beckett's short play *Not I*, in which 'the process of interiorising rather than mimicking the colonisation, [rendered] Rafferty's body painfully visible' (Werner, 2003: 46).

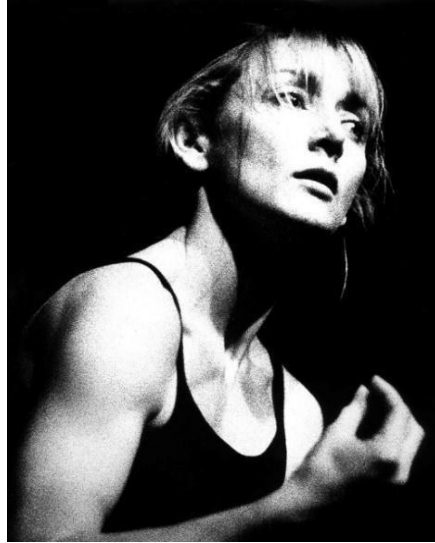


Fig. 1: Sonia Rafferty, touching a tear without blinking, in *Sonia Says*, 2002. Photo by F. Whisker

Inspired by Beckett's movement minimalism and action distillation, I reduced the movement vocabulary in my works to work on the dynamic qualities of gestures instead. I discovered that by focusing on the strands of time and space in movement, I could deepen a sense of character and create meaningful and engaging performances. Furthermore, by focusing on stillness and silence, I found I could make visible the gaps between actions, in which *agon* was rendered present and yet covert, internalised, and implosive. By doing this, I hoped to enhance and deepen the emotional experience of the spectator. Beckett's work had instilled in me an interest in the performing body *per se* as it worked through its physical potential and limitations, questioning presence and absence, dismemberment and dislocation. This fascination with the diversity of bodily expression led me to work with disability and create *In Praise of Folly* (2005), a dance theatre work premiered at the Queen's Elizabeth Hall by Candoco Dance Company, an integrated dance company and which included two wheelchair users and a deaf dancer. Inspired by Renaissance Italy, *In Praise of Folly* was a satire on man's creation and suffering and a metaphor for the present civilization. The story of the work was based on a dialogue between God and Lucifer about God's plan for man's creation (fig. 2). The performance visually depicted a dark painterly world, lit in the technique of *chiaroscuro*.



Fig. 2: Lucifer, in a painterly depiction. *In Praise of Folly*, 2005. Photo by F. Whisker

During the same period, I was exploring ways to visually frame the narratives of my performances and create painterly worlds in which *agon* took place. I became immersed in visual studies with regular visits to museums and galleries, experimenting with spatial elements and techniques in the design of my performances. My focus had shifted to the element of space. In a quest for alternative, creative uses of the performance space in my pieces, I first encountered Robert Wilson's site-specific installation work *H.G.* (1995) in the Clink Street Vaults, London. This work created in the late 1990s made a profound impression on me.

In *H.G.*, the spectator entered a subterranean labyrinthine world through the small door of a warmly lit dining room: the guests had just left, the table still undone. *H.G.* made me realise that space, as site can be 'choreographed' without the presence of performers and that a performance narrative can be created through designing physical space using light, objects and sound. This could be enough, in and of itself, to trigger a visceral experience for a spectator. Through *H.G.*, I considered the creation of a multidimensional performance space as an entry point for designing an immersive experience for spectators, who, rather than witnessing the event from a distance as in a traditional theatre setting, would physically enter into the performance world. In my case, this meant spectators also entering the space of *agon* and into

physical proximity with the performing bodies engaged in struggle.

I took on the challenge Wilson presented and a few years later my work evolved into large-scale site-specific projects in London (1999-2007). One of these works was *Wrestling an Angel* (2004), a work in two parts and for two different locations: The Old Operating Theatre Museum, and a disused abattoir. Designed as a promenade performance, the work took the audience on a journey through the complex landscape of the body and mind in the two settings of surgery and slaughter. It was the second part of this work, in which a war general wrestled with his consciousness in the disused abattoir that is submitted for this thesis (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: War general, barber and crow. *Wrestling an Angel*, 2005.

Wrestling an Angel featured a cast of over thirty performers that haunted the spaces of the site. I interwove image and sound, action and silence, pause and narration, long vistas and ‘keyhole’ visions to create a world the audience could experience in close proximity.

Both my site-specific and stage works drew inspiration from Romeo Castellucci’s work and especially his *Tragedia Endogonia* (2001) which included children and animals, all quietly performing mundane actions behind thin transparent partitions and as parts of unfamiliar hermetic universes. An example of a memorable scene in *Tragedia Endogonia* was that of a child suddenly entering the stage to

quietly lie on a pool of blood on the floor. This was followed by another quiet tableau in which a group of cleaners in protective full bodysuits entered the stage to disinfect the scene soon after. I had found the unhurried and emotionally detached images in this work strangely affective and unsettling. Scholar and theatre-maker Nicholas Ridout, effectively captures something of how this work affected me, writing that it is:

the tension between the real and the ‘pretend’ [...] that invades the spectators in a process of reflection about the emotional, visceral and intellectual implications of the images, stories and ideas contained (or secreted) in the performance. (Ridout in Grehan, 2006: 177).

Triggered by Castellucci’s use of actors and their actions taking place in unfamiliar settings, I began to include non-trained performers, ‘real people’ in my works to add an extra dimension in the narrative world represented on stage. The images in *Wrestling an Angel*, for example, were balanced on a fine line between reality and representation, featuring non-trained performers such as a doctor, and an elderly couple (fig. 4) quietly performing mundane activities alongside the professional dancers’ routines.

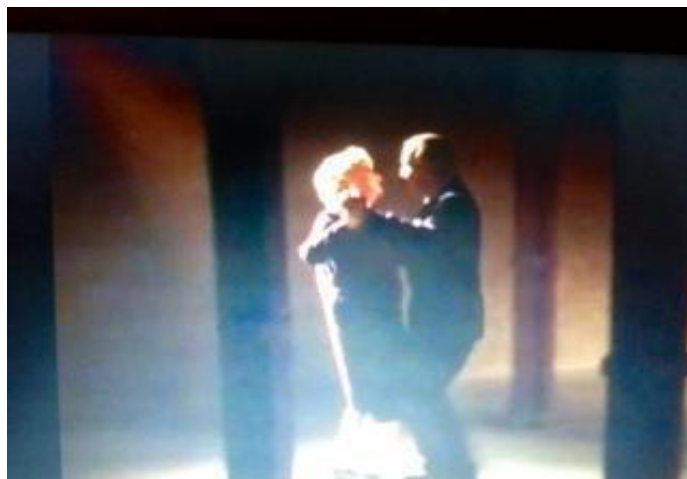


Fig.4: Elder couple waltzing. *Wrestling an Angel*, 2005.

I also sought to develop the movement form of *agon*. Hence, between 2006 and 2010 I threw myself into several activities that became projects, experiments,

physical training, and collaborations. I considered these as strategies to understand practices featuring conflict and struggle outside dance, such as performance art, physiology, and sports. Experimenting with new forms of physical performance, I was determined to learn from agonistic dimensions across different activities, so as to later apply my findings in performances. These activities included a collaboration with the Dance Science Department at Trinity Laban and a team of experts in Medicine, Biokinetics, Sport Psychology and Dramaturgy.

I was driven by an observation made by physiologist and dance science professor Matthew Wyon, stating that: ‘Dancers often perceive they are exercising maximally when they are not (monitored physiologically), while in contrast athletes know what maximal is all about and have often trained their bodies to override their natural protection systems to push their bodies’ (Wyon, 2009)³.

In response, I established choreographic experiments pushing the performer’s training to extremes and, working with the Trinity Laban team, we observed and monitored how a dance artist worked through exertion⁴ (fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Dance scientist. *In Preparation*, 2010. photo@ Squib.

³ The quote is from a past application to the Wellcome Trust in collaboration with Professor Wyon (2008) and relates to Wyon’s research in his work, *The cardiorespiratory demands of contemporary dance* (Wyon, 2009).

⁴ The research was presented at the IADMS (International Association of Dance, Medicine and Science) conference both in Birmingham, UK and Washington DC, in 2010 and 2011.

During that time, my interest in *agon* in certain sports and martial arts had also developed, finding articulation as an aspect of duels and combat activities such as swordsmanship, bullfighting, and boxing. In Spain, in the *Escuela of Tauromachia* in Madrid, I had studied the principles of bullfighting alongside young students and their old masters and had taken classes in Flamenco, tracing connections between the two. Elements of flamenco and bullfighting as well as swordsmanship, which I had been training in since 2002, were featured in *Splinter in the Flesh* (2008-2010). In *Splinter in the Flesh* the performers appeared on stage, entering a cage that created an arena, a visual metaphor for life into which we are thrown at birth, with no clear idea of either its rules or its function (fig. 6). The performance had developed from an earlier British Council commission in 2008, under the same title originally exploring themes of immigration and xenophobia. This work coincided with the time of the global economic crisis. In creating the work, I was looking to use my creative discoveries centred around *agon* as metaphors for expressing the struggle in these themes (fig. 6). As such, the work featured professional contemporary dancers, who, for purposes of the performance, trained in martial arts, as well as a flamenco dancer, a chef, and a soprano.



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Fig: 6. Dance ensemble, rotating with globe, *Splinter in the Flesh*, 2010. Photo by C. Alkiviadis

During this period, I also developed my interest in the sport of boxing. I viewed it as a kind of staged performance. In particular, I was drawn to its structured violence, and also recognised the conflict boxing had created in me. This conflict is eloquently expressed by Joyce Carol Oates in her work *On Boxing*:

Considered in the abstract the boxing ring is an altar of sorts, one of those legendary spaces where the laws of a nation are suspended: inside the ropes, during an officially regulated three-minute round, a man may be killed at his opponent's hands but he cannot be legally murdered. Boxing inhabits a sacredspace predating civilization... (Oates, 1985: 29)

I'd long aspired to create a real boxing match as an interdisciplinary performance event. In boxing I could finally assign a physical discipline and a prism through which I could filter my past explorations and create a hybrid performance form, one that could host *agon* across different areas of performance. The creative potential of this idea was ignited when I discovered the existence of a hybrid sport called Chess Boxing (in which six rounds of chess alternate with five rounds of boxing). This led me to Berlin to meet its founder, Ieppe Rubingh, and under his guidance I experienced it through training and as a spectacle.

Sensing a kind of a similarity in the intention between the immediacy of a boxing jab and Beckett's way of capturing the essence of a gesture through distillation, I decided to put dance choreography aside for a little while in order to study the functional gesture in boxing resembling 'a choreography in which each movement has its cost and no one knows the end' (Vahla, cited in King, 2010: 9), this without attempting an immediate movement manipulation in choreography. At the core of this process, I was looking for ways to understand boxing as another movement practice first, in order to later be able to create an authentic experience for the audience. By this I mean a physical 'gut' experience akin to the existential meaning of struggle and conflict in performance. In collaboration with Repton Boxing Club in London, I created my first experimental boxing performance *Fight Club* (2009) and focused on the labouring body of the athlete immersed in a single-minded goal: to win (fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Training session, Repton Club. *Fight Club*, 2009. Photo by Hellen Borrows.

Studying the boxer's job, I sought to deploy the application of corporeal intention to communicate directly without artifice or decoration. I realised that the synergy between physical performance and sport offered a great opportunity for a new theatrical arena to emerge, and specifically I envisaged a hybrid artform merging sport and theatre.

An invitation by the Africa Centre to the *Infecting the City Festival* in Cape Town in 2010, led me to post-apartheid South Africa and disrupted my planned projects in the UK. For two consecutive years, I created large-scale outdoor public events that involved an array of collaborations and combined different performance forms, all on socio-political themes. For example, in *Strand* (fig. 8), a series of performance interventions created an impact on the passers-by in Cape Town during the daytime, as '...unrehearsed, the crowd was mimicking the very element of human nature that the performance was criticising: cruel curiosity' (Hendricks, 2011).



Fig. 8: *Strand - Treasure Hunt*, 2011. Photo by N. Sanders.

Later, an invitation to lecture at the Drama Department of Rhodes University resulted in my residing in South Africa and engaging deeply with a new artistic, educational, and cultural landscape. For example, on behalf of the Drama Department, I developed collaborations with the Fine Art Department at Rhodes University, curating and co-creating a series of experimental works which were framed as fine/live art artefacts, (see example fig. 9). In addition, I looked at diverse embodied practices and explored possible ways in which academic knowledge can be performed, through curating a series of *Interdisciplinary Encounters* 2011-2013 (fig. 10 & fig.11), some of which were performed in the National Arts Festival.



Fig. 9: *Topos - Nude on cabinet with barbed wire*, 2011. Photo@ Ruth Simbao



Fig. 10 & 11: Post performance discussions between audience, artists and academic panel.
Interdisciplinary Encounters, 2011-2014. Photos @ Aman Bloom

My residency had stimulated an interest in social art and crystallised another shift in my creative research practice which further informed its relationship to *agon*. In South Africa, for instance, boxing and the race struggle come together in their own physical location, namely, the township; this led me to consider particularised implications of *agon* as struggle. It also set off a process of rediscovering *agon* in such a way that it shifted my works to what might be called a more socially engaged practice.

This new interest was further stimulated by performances and exhibitions that I happened to attend during my annual visits back in London. A main influence came from Jeremy Deller's exhibition *Joy in People*, at the Hayward Gallery (2012). I found an affinity with Deller's taking multiple roles in his work, described by Cumming as 'an enabler, intermediary and maker of connections, a producer, collaborator and activist' (Cumming, 2012), with his working with 'real people' and creating community projects through processions, historical re-enactments, demonstrations, exhibitions, and films. As part of Deller's exhibition, the film documentary *So Many Ways to Hurt You: The Life and Times of Adrian Street* (2010), was a work developed from Deller's response to a found photograph, in which the wrestler, in full make up and wearing his Champion belt, poses next to his coal miner father at the pithead of Bryn Mawr Colliery in Wales (Deller, 2003). The light that Deller cast on people's private and social lives, embracing simultaneously the mundane and the heroic, resonated with my works at that time. In these works, 'real

people' often became the main actors. For example, in *Topos*⁵ (2011), I had invited Rachel Breytenbach, sister of the South African poet laureate Breyten Breytenbach (fig. 13), to perform a live portrait to a recitation of one of her brother's poems.



Fig. 12: *Portrait of Woman with Bird - Topos*, 2011. Photo by M. Wilby.

Joy in People stimulated further thinking on how to develop the creative elements discovered in *Topos* into larger-scale collaborative projects as social platforms. It led to the production of the collaborative performance of *Polis* (2012), which also formed one of the *Interdisciplinary Encounters*. *Polis* was created for the bicentenary of Grahamstown, a frontier town founded during the colonial wars of South Africa (and now renamed Makhanda). It consisted of a series of four performance events, namely *Border*, *Arena*, *Spring* and *Market*, each interrogating the identity of the town from a different perspective. *Polis* also involved entertainment and audience participation (fig. 13). At a more fundamental level, *Polis* experimented with ways in which knowledge is both represented and generated by performance.

⁵ Part of *Interdisciplinary Encounters* and the *Fine Arts Lounge -The Audacity of Place*, *Topos* was created for the National Arts Festival (2011). It consisted of 10 short performances in 10 days. These were 'crash' collaborative encounters amongst a team of artists, members of the local community and academics.



Fig.13: Pole-dancer. *Polis -Arena*, 2012. Photo@ National Arts Festival

During the years of creating the *Interdisciplinary Events* in South Africa, I had worked to develop *agon* into a distinctly deliberate feature. By 2014, the year I created *Agon - In the Ring*, *agon* had become explicit in both the content and form of my works. *Agon – In the Ring* was an interdisciplinary work in which professional boxers and dancers performed together to create a new hybrid form of theatre. The work featured the training and preparations used in boxing, a boxing bout, as well as post-performance reflections, presentations, and comments surrounding a boxing match (fig. 14 & fig. 15). It took place during the turbulent years of the student protests in South African Universities and the decolonization of the curriculum.



Fig. 14 & 15: Boxer and woman with placard. *Agon - In the Ring*, 2014. Photos@ Mark Wilby

The student protests had a significant effect on the cultural and educational landscape of South Africa. The physical disruptions and turmoil staged on the forefront of daily life in the university campuses of South Africa made access to the university impossible and put a halt to artistic activities. I turned inwards and focused on *agon* embodied in a solo performance work, based on Frederic Rzewski's original music composition *De Profundis*, 'for a speaking pianist' released in 1994. The libretto of Rzewski's music composition is an adaptation of Oscar Wilde's letter, *De Profundis* (1897). For this project, I was initially invited by pianist Joanna Wicherek to collaborate with her as a musician and to create an ensemble dance work based on Rzewski's work, but in the end, it became a solo piano performance entitled *De Profundis - Prolongations of Silence* (2017). This work was a kind of a long rhyming poem portraying Wilde's agony during his physical and psychological imprisonment in Reading Gaol (jail), UK. The pianist's movement and physical presence was choreographed from her entering the stage to her last gesture of closing the piano lid at the end of her concert. As I had written in my program notes, 'this was a painstaking process, aimed at developing the existing score of music and written text into a more integral corporeal expression' (Vahla, 2017).

I consider the creation of this performance to have been an important moment in my work as a kind of 'return' to the body performing solo and, also building on and encapsulating some of the experiences I had gained in the previous years of my creative meanderings. Rzewski's classical piano composition is renowned for its physical complexity and emotional challenge which is 'not to be found in the mainstream classical pianist... The performance cannot be faked. One must somehow *experience* the piece' (McElroy, 2017: 19). With *De Profundis – Prolongations of Silence*, I had chosen to capture and choreograph nuances of conflict, struggle and agony in the body of a pianist performing in her own familiar practice, a piano concert (fig.16).



Fig. 16: Pianist. *De Profundis – Prolongations of Silence*, 2017.

If I were to encapsulate my work overall, I can see it as a path in which conflict and struggle were met and repetitively so. The works throughout have been inspired by people and the social conditions/structures surrounding them; they posed questions about the human condition, insinuating that the answers might be a wake-up call through disrupting familiar notions of performance. They saw people as strong and with choices, and at the same time, fragile as they struggle to transcend their circumstances and, maybe even often, surrendering to life's futility.

1.2. Shifts in the works

Reflecting on the trajectory of my practice, I can locate certain shifts that over time occurred across different areas of my works. These had implications on the type of performers, the form, and the narratives of the works.

In relation to these shifts, I have divided the works into two phases. The first phase (2004-2010) contains the earlier works *Wrestling an Angel*, *In Praise of Folly* and *Splinter in the Flesh*, created in the UK and in Greece, and the second phase (2012-2017) includes the later performances of *Polis*, *Agon - In the Ring*, and *De Profundis - Prolongations of Silence*, created in South Africa.

Looking at the grouping of these works, it seems to me that their evolving changes stemmed from a longstanding preoccupation with ‘realness’ in my practice, so as to create an authentic experience for the audience, or a first-hand, affective experience. The notions of ‘realness’ refers to my own understanding of real in performance as the genuine embodied expression of the performer’s personal experience that she or he shares with the audience. This, for me, implies action devoid of falsity or fakery, and manifested rather than illustrated.

This preoccupation led to the featuring of non-trained performers in my works. While in my earlier performances the relationship between *agon* and real was located in the ‘raw’ physicality of the professional dancers’ struggle on stage, it progressively expanded to include other professionals, invited to perform alongside the dancers. The shift in the second phase of the works meant that these other professionals, for example, athletes, musicians, and academics, took over the stage as the central performers, activating *agon* through their own practices. It can be observed that in this phase, my sense of ‘the real’ in *agon* had come to include the explicit summoning of the world outside the theatre through a variety of means that may include the use of ‘actual people to perform narratives of their own lives’ (Martin, 2013: 80). These performers, which I refer to as ‘real people’, are further discussed as part of my creative strategies in Chapter 3.

The staging of the ‘real people’ also becomes a ‘telling’ of another kind of shift in my practice. This shift relates to the form of the works that developed from dance theatre performances featuring professional dancers who spoke, sang, and used costumes and props on stage, to interdisciplinary events that included social engagement and audience participation.

As mentioned above, in the earlier choreographies conflict was specifically located in the medium of dance movement, grounding *agon* in the performers’ bodies. Progressively, *agon* expanded into a more complex system of tensions and contrasts in the form of the works, implicating the elements of space, choreographic structure, as well as production elements. Physical spaces shifted into sites as the works and their narratives acquired more layers, and with their audio-visual elements, new dimensions. As my choreographic practice evolved and the works expanded into other types of performance including live art, sports, and impromptu social events, *agon*

began to occupy the gaps between these different practices and, also, between theory and practice, the tertiary institution and the local communities. All these individual strands of the works contributed to the making of one piece of work, yet also remained autonomous, and intact, taking place alongside one another, or in juxtaposition with each other through competing tension and frictions. How they came together was designed to produce a kind of awkwardness for the audience, a sense of ‘defamiliarisation’, or what Victor Shklovsky called *ostranenie* in art: ‘the technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar”, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself ...’ (Shklovsky, 1917: 2).

More than an aesthetic purpose, this sense of difficulty in the form of my works was designed to prompt dialogues. As someone trained in dance, with initially a choreographic focus, this creative undertaking for generating performance materials and experimenting with new spaces meant that my years of investigations led to a certain kind of hybridity in performance.

The public events and discussions of *Polis*, as well as *Agon - In the Ring*, for example, became orchestrations of real, impromptu circumstances that staged a symbiosis between seemingly incompatible ideas, performance genres and even communities, all within the same performance. These events had specifically sought relationships to the real world and to ‘use theatre to access ‘the real thing’ ...’ (Martin 2013: 4), or, put differently, the performance becoming ‘part of the circulation of ideas about our personal, social and political lives’ (2013: 4).

With these later works created with local performers and for a community quite different to the audience of the large European auditoriums, the intention and mood behind the narratives of the works had also changed. The works had shifted from the existentially driven narratives influenced by Beckett and dance theatre, to facilitating expressions of the struggle and conflict of the South African communities.

Looking back at the works, I became aware that the earlier pieces lacked a redeeming quality, with the characters being caught up in violent situations which they could neither resolve nor leave behind. *Wrestling an Angel* ended with a confession in which the protagonist denounced himself, and in *In Praise of Folly*, three dancers were lowered to small pools of water, a symbol for tears.

In contrast, the later works were somehow more life-affirming than

melancholic, choosing to manifest an individual's struggle for agency and choice, their narratives rooted in everyday life. In *Polis*, for example, the participating performers, academic panellists and audience members engaged in dialogue, debating and discussing possibilities, and for a short while they shared a community, whilst *Agon - In the Ring* staged boxing as an example of survival and resilience. Even *De Profundis - Prolongations of Silence*, a work different in style and theme to the other two works, ended with Wilde's affirmation for life and a self-renewal.

Reflecting on these shifts in the works, it is clear that collaborations were an important aspect of my practice, in particular influencing the narrative changes in the later performances. The collaborative nature of these later works, as part of a smaller community including its members as participants, shifted my creative role from a director to an 'orchestrator', rendering the making of the works as a more socially engaged practice grounded in real life and as a collective experience. This somehow demonstrated *agon* not as an abstract or merely personal concept, but a fact experienced daily in the reality of a splintered community I was part of.

Chapter 2. Understanding and Framing *Agon*

This chapter introduces core concepts of *agon* connected to my practice during the time of making, or as arising through this retrospective writing process. I describe several concepts of *agon* and point to how these ideas relate to features in my works. The selection of ideas from existential philosophy seek to support an understanding and framing of *agon*. It is significant to note that my reading and discussion of these ideas arises from my reflection on my practice, rather than my practice being an effort to ‘demonstrate’ or test such concepts.

In this chapter, I focus on the tireless repetition of struggle in my works, the inclusion of cruel and violent aspects of human existence, and the presence of a community of people to both activate *agon* and sustain it. Through the performance of *agon*, I also discuss the intended audience experience. Lastly, I observe and highlight some of the contrasts in *agon* that further enhance the agonistic tensions in my performances.

2.1. The premise

Most of my works begin with the performer(s) being ‘thrown’ or ‘put’ on stage into an unknown, often unfriendly universe. The main characters find themselves somewhere, not feeling ‘at home’. They are placed in a situation in which they must struggle and push against their limits during the narrative of the work. Asking themselves questions, such as ‘where are we?’, ‘what are we supposed to do here?’, and ‘to what end?’, they throw themselves into action, trying to understand their circumstances and survive.

Agon is activated as a means towards overcoming the initial involuntary situation the characters find themselves in: they struggle, suffer, and fight back. While their struggle can be said to contain the potential towards freedom from their *thrown* situation, the winning over and against their circumstances is often rendered futile.

They face setbacks, they are pulled down and away from their goal, yet they keep going, stand up, and continue, again and again (fig. 17).



Fig. 17: *Splinter in the Flesh*, 2010. Photo by C. Alkiviadis.

Reflecting on what might be considered a pattern in my works, and in reference to existentialism, Heidegger's concept of *thrownness* (*Geworfenheit*), echoed something of the way I thought about the human condition. For Heidegger, we initially find ourselves placed into a world which he defined as the 'facticity of [its] being delivered over' (Heidegger, cited in Iwuagwu, 2017: 10), with the world being for example, our birthplace, families, our physical bodies. It is from this place that we begin our journey in life engaging in struggle and activating the potential to arrive at an understanding of ourselves. Furthermore, and for Heidegger, while we are projecting towards our future, we also continue to carry our *thrown* situation that remains in us, hence we navigate between falling away from our path and, yet again, pushing forward.

This kind of 'existential loop' can be said to relate from Samuel Beckett's universes and philosophy. The iterative nature of *thrownness* in Beckett's characters, who try to work it out and fail and keep going, also appears in the performance of *agon* in my work. The struggle remains when something fails:

Beckett's imperative to create, despite the impossibility of creation – that

stoical desire to find new ways of saying ‘nothing new’ and new methods of expressing ‘how it is’ – in essence to fail again but only better... (White, 2011: 283)

I saw *agon* in my works as an act of acknowledging, enhancing and activating the tension between the future possibility of overcoming and the past involuntary situation of ‘having-been-thrown into the world’ (Wheeler, 2011). The performers/characters’ decision to engage with effort can be said to hold the potential to free themselves from their *thrown* condition, and, perhaps to achieve this. In an article in the Guardian, Simon Critchley’s capturing of Heidegger’s *thrownness* made a deep impression in me, for ‘we can also throw off our thrown condition [...] in a movement where it [the human being] seizes hold of its possibilities, where it acts in a concrete situation’ (Critchley, 2009). I sensed a positive affirmation in this interpretation, that somehow, in my thinking, aligned Heidegger’s *thrownness* with the intention of *agon* in my works.

On reflection, I see my performances as orchestrations of narratives, spaces and movement compositions designed to activate *agon* across the different areas of the works and to render my performances as acts and expressions of a ‘throwing off thrownness’. An example of a *thrownness* and its ‘throwing off’ is found in the opening scene of *In Praise of Folly*, in which a blindfolded angel finds herself suspended from a metal structure (fig. 18). This scene was created as a poetic image for the fallen angel who, being expelled from heaven, is thrown into the world. The blindfold expresses her plunging into the unknown. Prior to the angel’s appearance, the audience hears God and Lucifer discussing the creation of the universe and with this the occurrence of human suffering. This first scene of the angel caught amidst a fall into a dark space was conceived with something from a Beckettian universe in mind. Creating an unsettling image of a dislocated, dismembered creature was to find an affinity with some of Beckett’s plays such as *Not I*, in which the character finds herself suspended in limbo in a stark universe.



Fig. 18: The fallen angel. *In Praise of Folly*, 2005. Photo@ Candoco Dance Company.

However, in contrast to Beckett's more nihilistic universes, I presented *agon* arising from a response to *thrownness*, seeking to take action to overcome it. By having the character of Lucifer lower the metal structure on the stage floor, I chose to 'ground' the angel as a metaphor for an earthbound existence. The performer jumps on stage and, with her feet firmly down, joins the mundane activity of a 'family'; she makes choices, fights and argues around the table, and pulls and pushes the body of the weaker family member lying on it. In acts that can be described as negotiations of power, this female character takes an active stance towards survival and creation itself: her *agon* is activated, and her initial state of *thrownness* becomes 'overthrown'. As a symbolic reminiscence of the initial involuntary state of her thrownness, the blindfold motif repeats once more, later in the work. This time the female performer represents another role in the cosmogonic myth: woman's creation from man. She puts on her blindfold, this time herself, and lightly tiptoes backwards on a straight line, on a dimly lit stage. Precariously balancing as if on a tightrope, the dancer resumes the poetic image of a vulnerable existence. She enacts a role that oscillates between *thrownness* and an action against it.

I had imagined *agon* as the path linking two states of being, the *thrown* and the self-actualised where the agonist is liberated from their burden. I had associated the notion of a self-actualisation to 'the idea of coming up to and owning what one is and

does' (Varga & Guignon, 2014), what Heidegger called *ownedness* (Heidegger, 1927) or, in my own thinking, what I consider fully emerging with and realising one's potential.

As an additional reflection, the activation of *agon* in my works was not only placed in the effort to overcome *thrownness*, but also, to do this while becoming aware of conflicting 'pulls' and ideas related to this goal. On the one hand, a commitment to struggle was driven by an idea and a projection that, at the polar opposite of *thrownness*, lies a higher dimension of self. On the other hand, a commitment to the task of *agon* allowed for the possibility that this ideal state of self might neither be achievable nor exist. It was this understanding of *agon*, namely, a paradoxical coexistence between activating *agon* as a means towards a goal and an awareness of the elusiveness of this goal, that can be seen to underpin my works.

2.2. Characteristics

Although the concept of *thrownness* forms the central premise of *agon* in my works and helps create a certain 'mood' that activates struggle, *agon* also has certain characteristics, perceived as more readily accessible in physical performance. The first one relates to the repetitive nature of *agon* as iteration, cyclical and keeping going, whilst the second addresses what can be called a dual quality in *agon*, namely, a just, noble competition for excellence to surpass one's opponent in contest as well as a cruel and unjust side in the conflict of breaking down the antagonist. The third characteristic refers to what can be identified as the social structure of *agon*, with *agon* activated in and mediated through one's own body yet taking place within a gathering of others.

2.2a. *Agon* repetition

In my works, *agon* can be seen to be taking place through repetitive acts of fighting and labouring. These acts are accompanied by internal monologues such as 'keep going, stay focused, stay on the task, don't give up, keep pushing, and more...'

that could almost be heard and sensed in the performers' physical struggles. These repetitive acts are linked for me with Camus's Sisyphus as the 'absurd hero' (Camus, 1975: 108), who accepting his *thrown* situation, engages with the struggle of pushing the rock up the hill, again and again. In Camus, it is the moment in which Sisyphus fully accepts the absurdity of life that he wilfully and explicitly picks up his rock and re-enters his *agon* to defeat his *thrownness*.

Similarly, entering into *agon* in my work, the performers' commitment to struggle was not once and for all, but once and again. Led into a cage through a big gate (fig. 19), the 'gladiators' in *Splinter in the Flesh* seized knives and swords to engage in combat.



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Fig. 19: Performers entering the stage. *Splinter in the Flesh*, 2010. Photo by C. Alkiviadis.

Staging the characters' repetition of their fight, their *agon*, I wanted to emphasise the possibility of the characters gradually arriving at a fuller understanding of themselves and their circumstances. As with Sisyphus, their commitment to *agon* lies in the repetition of *agon*, with each agonist as 'a striving, ever-forming

individual' (Tuncel after Nietzsche, 2013: 199). And with the performers/characters' struggle to transcend their limitations and effort to 'throw off thrownness', the work intended for the audience to also 'feel' and engage with the process of *agon*, to identify with the activity and, in effect, experience a similar moment of awareness and elevation.

At the end of *Splinter in the Flesh*, the characters come to realise their absurd situation. A female performer vocalises numbers, statistics, dates, population killed as a sudden moment, a glimpse of a 'muddled' awareness addressed to the spectator. She is the same performer, who in the beginning of the work, through an agonizing vocalization of incomprehensible sounds tries to understand and address the situation of being thrown into the arena. Her speaking numbers in the final scene could have been designed as the final performance cue to fade the lights. Instead, she takes hold of her shoe and, kneeling and joining the rest of the performers who are in a circle, begins to slap it against the floor. The forceful and repetitive slapping of shoes in the synchronised rhythm of a heartbeat is redolent of the sound of a gun, or even nails being hammered into the cross. The quality of this gesture as a closing image aimed to manifest an affirmation of living, also, a refusal to remain silent despite an awareness of a bleak situation; the performers individually and as a group were pulled back to the *agon*. As the lights fade out, the audience hears and sees the figure of the female authority's rhythmical footwork on stage, competing with the slapping sound of the shoes (fig. 20). This scene echoed the opening of the work, invoking the sense of variation within a cycle.

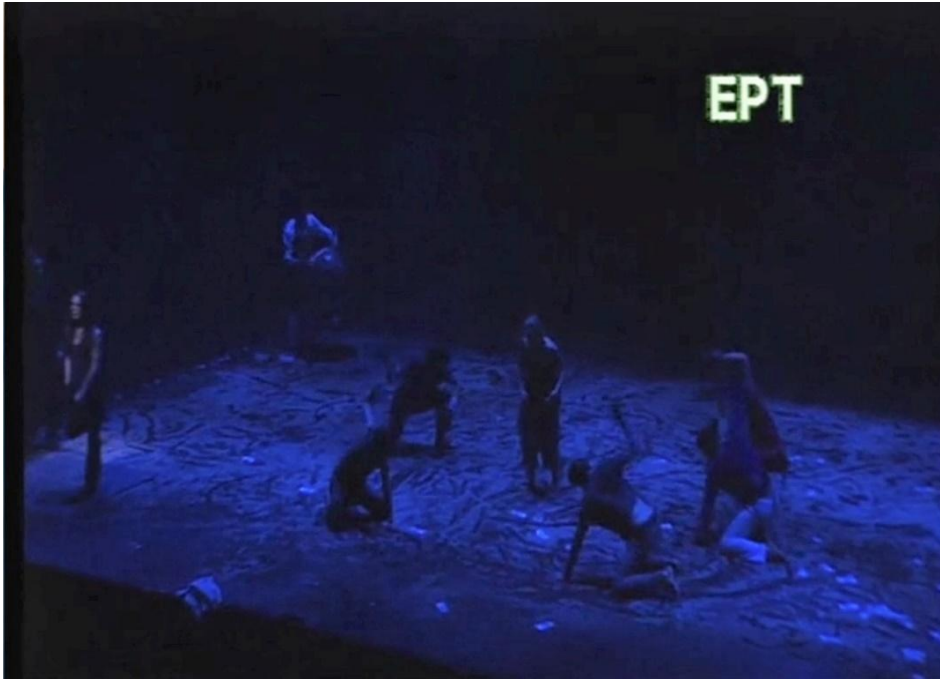


Fig. 20: Closing scene. *Splinter in the Flesh*, 2010. Photo by C. Alkiviadis.

The repetition of struggle in my works did not always resemble a precise loop or cycle, with the end and beginning being the same. Unlike the task of Sisyphus, it unfolded as an iterative development, during which different elements and nuances in the choreographic action were generated, tested, and developed as variations. Through a process combining both repetition and evolution, *agon* in my performances was in a constant state of becoming: forming and evolving, as a path to a goal.

In an earlier statement in chapter 1.2, I referred to an ‘arc’ that took my work from the futile to a redeeming aspect of life, which relates to this goal. I progressively came to the realization that the later works were about finding aspects of choice and agency in *agon* and practising those as creative acts manifested in small gestures or as whole parts in the works. It can be said that there are two kinds of repetition in Sisyphus’s task: one the repetition of pushing the rock in the beginning of his punishment, in order to, finally, get to the top of the hill, and then a second one, when after a number of repetitions, he can clearly see his situation and chooses to repeat his task from this awareness. I see a kind of self-release, even self-actualisation, in the

decision found in oneself to commit to *agon*: saying ‘yes’ to the challenge, and wilfully engaging with *agon* while being aware of its recurrence.

The notion of a release or a ‘breaking through’ the repetitive state of *agon* was manifested in three ways in my works. One was by inserting smaller symbolic enactments as acts of resolution. For example, in *Polis – Market* (2012) a schoolchild performed the quiet, meditative ritual of washing and repainting anew a school globe, a metaphor for creating a new borderless reality of the world as a clean slate, and in which he invited spectators to join sharing his sponge, brush and paint (fig. 21).



Fig 21: Schoolboy washing a globe. *Polis - Market*, 2012.

In a different approach to creating work and, as a second way, the sense of an act of reconciliation could be found in the post-performance discussions between audience, performers and panellists, as further described later in my commentary. The third way was in discovering ‘endings’ in moments amidst struggle and disrupting struggle itself. These were during pauses or quiet moments as small windows for self-reflection in the middle of *agon*. In *Wrestling an Angel*, the role of the elder couple waltzing amidst the young couples’ fights was, in terms of what I created on stage, the survival of two life veterans who, oblivious to the hostile environment of the abattoir,

lightly danced supporting each other in an act of care. As for *Agon - In the Ring*, in the pause between the rounds and the two boxers occupying the two opposite ends of the ring, the woman who carried the placard with the numbers of the boxing rounds replaced her placard with art canvases, created by a local artist. These were auctioned amongst the audience and this was ‘for real’, namely, to raise funds for the local boxing club. In this example, setting up the *agon* was to some cause.

To return to Sisyphus, it can be said that Sisyphus, in his repetitive eternal state, had discovered a ‘space’ of choice, each time he walked down the hill to find his rock. This is perhaps the moment in which Sisyphus, defeats his *thrownness*.

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me... That hour like a breathing space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of these moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock. (Camus, 1975: 108-109).

What was changing between my earlier and later works was, perhaps, that a sense of freeing oneself from the situations (and underpinning the goal) was not something for later, but in the present moment of the work, a recognizing and reconciling with the idea of *thrownness* and the past in the present, and even thinking of what could be next. The attainment of a goal through *agon* in my works was simply related to a notion of choice creatively (re) discovered and practised in the works, and, I would argue, also through the works. In my thinking of the repetition of *agon* in the Sisyphian sense, I came to envisage there might be different approaches to the task of Sisyphus that a group of people can invent and share.

Halfway through the arc of my works, I looked at sports as agonistic performance activities with a tight structural frame in that athletes have to follow the rules of the game, and they, also, have choices. As I became familiar with sports, a further aspect I became aware of was repetition in *agon*, was the fundamental desire to repeat *agon*. Athletes fully commit to the repetition of what could be referred to as a meaningless agonistic activity that they enter to win, yet, simultaneously, they contribute to maintaining *agon* as part of a structure that makes their athletic feat worthy of repetition.

Returning to the arc of my works, and akin to the athlete returning to *agon*, in each of the works I kept setting up the antagonists necessary to fight against. From creating God to understand an unfriendly universe in the earlier work *In Praise of Folly* to, ten years later, a real boxer entering the ring in *Agon - in the Ring*, my works might be considered re-organisations of the same desire, namely, to learn from the embodiment of *agon* as well as follow the task of examining life and explore different possibilities as an agonist.

Christa Davis Acampora discusses the importance of desire in *agon* in Nietzsche's work. Seeking to find something worth fighting for is what makes the agonist want to re-enter the contest (Acampora after Nietzsche, 2013). She takes a marathon runner as an example:

Those who compete often find that in the course of taking on such goals desire itself is perpetually tested and challenged such as the *maintenance of desire* itself becomes part of the struggle. Combating such desire fatigue can result in not only strengthening desire but also its redirection and reorientation. (Acampora, 2013: 200)

A 'redirection and reorientation' of this desire in my works appeared through the evolution of struggle via continuous repetition, extending to the mechanisms of training, the forging of collaborative relations with *synagonists*, and, also, with the desire for *agon* altering the goal itself. Coming upon this quote in the writing of my commentary, I realized and could put in words the more nuanced contrast in my creative thinking around repetition and what can be redeeming in *agon*: that, for instance, to desire running and no longer seeing it as means to an end resolution might not necessarily presume that it is for its own sake. Rather, to embrace the agonistic activity in its fullness, and remaining content with its repetition, can also include, indeed does not preclude, remaining alert to the possibility of ending the race and arriving at a goal.

2.2b. Cruelty in *agon*

In his work *Agon in Nietzsche*, Yunus Tuncel argues that for Nietzsche, *agon*

‘channels cruelty and destruction into culturally accepted arenas and enables humans to deal with loss and death’ (2013: 256-257). Nietzsche drew inspiration from the ancient Greeks who, understanding the need for boundaries for these destructive aspects, created sport stadiums and theatres as spaces for athletic contests and tragic plays, their role being to frame the dynamics of conflict contained and represented safely, instead of resulting in destructive acts, such as wars. Though smaller in scale than events taking place in sport stadiums and large amphitheatres, I view my works as kinds of arenas in which elements of brutality, suffering, and loss were safely choreographed and activated as agonistic expressions in their different iterations.

Two examples of cruel and violent scenes touching upon examples of the ‘inhumane aspects of humanity’ (Turner, 2006) in *In Praise of Folly* include a woman in a retractable dog leash (fig. 22) being thrown around on stage by the character of Lucifer, and a disabled dancer in the character of the young son being sacrificed by his family.



Fig. 22: *In Praise of Folly*, 2005. Photo@ Candoco Dance Company.

Alongside an acceptance of the fallibility of our human condition, the intention here was to trigger in the spectators a state of empathy, yet as the association of ‘trigger’ with trauma implies discomfort or bemusement, there is perhaps also to

question human behaviour in the witnessing of these acts. In his work about the dual nature of conflict, Nietzsche refers to the institution of *agon* in ancient Greece as an act which ‘spurs men to activity; not to the activity of fights of annihilation but to the activity of fights which are contests’ (Nietzsche in Acampora, 1996: 13). His distinction is made in reference to Hesiod’s text on the dual side of Eris, the Greek goddess of conflict: the bad Eris crashing and destroying the opponent, the good Eris surpassing the opponent in excellence. By representing conflicting qualities in my performances of *agon* and including dark and violent acts often tinged with humour, I wanted to highlight contrasts in the way the characters behaved on stage as part of the works’ narratives and their fight to rise above these darker aspects in conflict. The presence of these contrasting qualities in my works also aimed to amplify and intensify the movement struggle on stage, as well as the quality of resistance in *agon* as the action of fighting back and the value of obstacles in the process of overcoming.

2.2c. Community of others

It is important to note that in the questions posed by the characters when first *thrown* on stage in my works, and which I outlined at the start of this chapter, I have used the pronoun ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ for a reason. In my thinking about *agon* as a possible way to self-knowledge, I understood the path of achieving it as being part of a community of others. In effect, it can be considered that there is ‘I’ as a singularity and, also, ‘I’ as part of ‘We’, with both requiring a self-knowledge.

My sense of self-knowledge resonates with the platonic reading of Socrates’s ‘Know thyself’ from Charles Guignon’s work, *Being Authentic* (2004). According to this interpretation, self-knowledge is linked to ‘knowing [...] above all, your place in the scheme of things’ (Guignon, 2004: 12). This means an individual as being part of a wider whole, without losing sight of his/her function as an ‘instance of humankind’ (2004: 12).

Using *agon* in this way finds again an affinity with Heidegger's *thrownness* into the world, as the world comprised of others, and with *agon* necessarily related to and with them. In my performances, the agonists, in the specific performance worlds, worked alongside both their *synagonists* (a Greek term for people who share the competition, fighting on common ground), and against their antagonists. This brings forth an important distinction in Nietzsche's work on *agon*, as encapsulated in Acampora's book *Contesting Nietzsche* (2013). Acampora argues that 'not all struggles, are *agones*⁶... [leading to the notion that] *agon* requires an institution (i.e., how the contests are structured, as well as how participants act within them' (Acampora, 2013: 8). *Agon* thus implies membership and commitment involving, for example, contestants, judges, coaches, and spectators (fig. 23).



Fig 23: Boxer and his coach. *Agon - In the Ring*, 2014. Photo by Aman Bloom.

My decision to include and stage non-dance professionals in my works, which I discuss in the *agon* strategy of 'real people' in Chapter 3, stemmed from my interest

⁶ Plural for *agon* in Greek.

in enhancing the collective experience of *agon* as played out in public gatherings/assemblies in my works.

Also, rather than merely accepting the presence of a detached audience in my performances, I progressively orchestrated *agon* in relation to the audience as participants. For example, in *Polis - Border*, the audience engaged with the contested historical past of the South African town by absorbing and registering it through a symbolic ritual. With a long, narrow table extending across the length of the space and dividing it in half, audience members were ushered in to sit well back from the table. Halfway through the performance, the audience were invited to move their chairs to the table; this was conceived as a symbolic ritual of an intimate encounter between two spectators sitting directly opposite each other. As they sat, they were given a needle and a red thread to sew each other's name on the white tablecloth (fig. 24 & fig. 25). Thus, the long table was transformed from a symbol of division (border) to a symbol of union. Later, upon reflection, I realised that *agon* in my works was activated as a way of seeking connections as much as acknowledging differences.



Fig. 24 & 25: Border and table. *Polis – Border*, 2012

While writing this commentary, I became aware that the concept of *agon* presents a few contrasts and contradictions I noticed both in my research of *agon as a Greek concept* and as tendencies featuring in my own work. These tendencies included as follows: the aspect of repetition and continuity while also

working towards a final goal; presenting the desirable, noble qualities in contest while also including cruelty and violence; and the personal *agon* and the need for a society to support *agon*. In addition, *agon* in my works was enhanced through the tension in the symbiosis of such contradictions, and in the dynamics of the different pulls and dimensions. That an expression of a complex human existence lies in such contrasts and multiple simultaneous textures of struggle and conflict, is what, in my later works, I was seeking to address as a dance maker. Within this, the concept of *thrownness* and its overcoming, decidedly helped me understand my works as narrative structures beginning with a sense of helplessness, a ‘trapping’ that fired up *agon* and generated cycles of hope and disappointment, aspirations and failings. Activating *agon* in the gaps between these different and often contradictory dimensions, I was working to develop an understanding of our human condition through actively grappling with its mess and seeking to resolve a kind of *thrownness*, in effect by testing it repetitively through activating *agon* in the works. Next, Chapter 3 provides an analysis of the creative strategies I implemented in the craft of my works to activate *agon*.

Chapter 3. *Agon* as a Performance Signature

In this chapter I discuss three core features of my choreographic approach, namely, ‘real people’, the visceral and arenas, as developed in the fourteen-year span under consideration. ‘Real people’ relates to the role and type of performers participating in *agon* in my works. The visceral relates to the actions of struggle and conflict, as well as the more subtle and nuanced layering of material in the works, and arenas is about the spaces designed to host and be in dialogue with *agon*.

Each of these three aspects, can be seen as the container for a web of diverse agonistic textures, that together interconnect in what can be called a syntax for *agon*, put simply as the body (‘real people’) does something (struggles, labours, contests and fights or performs a ritual action) in some way (visceral), somewhere (in the arena). An example from *Wrestling an Angel*, mentioned previously, has an elderly couple (‘real people’) waltz quietly alongside a violent encounter between couples fighting (visceral through juxtaposition and displacement) in an abattoir (arena). Though it can be seen, that *agon* often arises as a tension emerging from such synergies, I will focus on each of these three strategies separately so as to describe their specific characteristics and to locate the agonistic textures that permeate each of them. However, it is also impossible for certain aspects of these strategies not to overlap.

The discussion apropos the aforementioned features, ‘real people’, visceral and arenas, takes as its starting point the performers’ bodies as carriers of meaning, followed by the body action as the physical movement/expression of *agon*, and leading to the aspect of the space where *agon* takes place. Put poetically, *agon* ripples out and unfolds, from centre to periphery, body to space and from self to the world.

3.1. ‘Real people’

Through all my works between 2004-2010, I had chosen professional dancers of an excellence that included a willingness to take challenges, unafraid to embrace the unknown, and test their practice. Later, my ongoing concern with the activation of

agon led me to further expand performer roles in my productions, creating works with both trained and non-professionally trained performers. Inspired by and finding affinities with Garde's and Mumford's work *Theatre of Real People*, and for the writing of my commentary, I have used the term 'real people' to describe these latter performers.

In this section, I will first discuss the notion of real as manifesting in the professional dancer, then further discuss my notion and inclusion of 'real people' in the works. It is important to acknowledge that my use of 'the real' as an attribute to a physical performer, also relates to the professionally trained dancers when labouring on stage to work something out beyond the well-rehearsed material of the work.

To push and forge this element of 'the real' in the presence of the professional dancer, I implemented two techniques. These techniques were used to achieve a sense of 'rawness' and realness at that present moment, accentuating the performers' struggle on stage. The first one was to increase the physical difficulty in the performers' movement, and the second one was to increase its physical complexity.

To increase the difficulty of the movement tasks was to challenge the performers' technical skills and physical stamina throughout the creative process and on stage, so that their *agon* is rendered palpable during the performance. It can be said that this process bore a similarity with the training of athletes who, in order to optimise their performance, increase the challenges in their training. It demanded the performers' immersion in the physical task, often involving an imaginary antagonist and 'being in the zone'; it also was a challenging process that could not be faked as their physical effort was pushed to the degree, that can be seen, as all-consuming. In terms of my approach, my performers' version of physical effort, namely, the continuous wrestling with the movement material both in the creative process and during the performances, was to make their *agon* be felt immediate, present and sustained, akin to Jan Fabre's:

to show the body *as such*: [...] bodies that breathe, sweat, gasp, and shout' [using] the principle of 'real time/real action', meaning that anything performed on stage simply is what it is rather than standing in for something else (Cassiers, De Laet, Le Roy and Van den Dries, 2015)

An example of this refers to my choreographic techniques of repetition for creating an encounter between partners in a movement duet. Bausch's technique of repetition, together with my witnessing the application of repetition in her performances live, inspired me and stayed with me for years. Her mottos, 'repetition is not repetition' and 'the same action makes you feel something completely different by the end' (Kisslgoft, 1985), particularly influenced the use of repetition in my work.

I would set up contact routines in duets and ask the dancers to perform them repeatedly and without stopping for a length of time. This was until the body grew exhausted and the tight form of a neatly choreographed pattern 'cracked', which meant the material and timing of the sequence would become disrupted and interrupted. The performers would need to trust and follow their own bodily impulses to continue developing their material and their narrative relationship. The movement path in the narrative encounter would change, *not* to catch or lift or approach the partner as in their original sequence but being open to improvisations or discoveries of a new route of possibilities in the movement relationship between what I called the protagonist and the antagonist. It is important to point out that the performance outcome could vary from a tightly rehearsed, measured duet to a structured improvisation based on a narrative situation. This depended on the dancers, the specific section in the choreography, and how they struggled in the creative process. What mattered was how the performers came to 'mature' into their material during the rehearsal process, and how an energy as essence of the encounter between the dancers in the duet would be 're-lived' with its *agon* remaining palpable on stage (fig. 26)



Fig 26: The jailer giving water to prisoners. *Splinter in the Flesh*, 2010.

To keep the performers' effort fresh and their *agon* raw, I also disrupted the rehearsal process, by consistently changing and adding new material at the last minute, thereby risking not arriving at the standard of a 'well-rehearsed' performance. The performers were in a process of constantly grappling with their intention and relationship to their movement material being neither finished nor fixed, yet in a potent and dynamic state of unfolding. Thus, their physical and mental effort on stage was revealed rather than concealed.

The same fixation with the performers' 'realness' within a set frame also led me to increase the complexity of the movement material. I introduced movement forms that were new to the dancers, such as martial arts, new forms of dance, and combat sports. These forms were taught to the dancers by experts from these other practices and the performers had to learn, absorb, and embody these new ways of moving in a short time, such that the effort to accomplish them remained visible.

As mentioned above, for the making of *Splinter in the Flesh*, for example, I invited a martial artist and a flamenco artist to teach their physical expertise to the performers. They also shared their insights related to the historical and social roots of their practices, so that the dancers might develop a fuller understanding of them, and their relationship to struggle and conflict. The flamenco artist taught the dancers footwork in which the build-up of a rhythmical phrase was to lead to a section of revolt against the jailer, in the narrative story of the work (fig. 27). As part of the increased complexity of the material, an additional challenge was that the sequence

took place without the appropriate, usual, music accompaniment. Instead, the synchronised rhythm of the footwork was choreographed to compete with a distorted Bach aria sung live by a soprano (video extract 03 in *Splinter in the Flesh*). The dancers had to work hard to keep to the rhythm of the flamenco ‘drill’ individually and as a group in contest with the aria. The soprano also had to work hard to sing a Bach aria that was both distorted and measured, all the while working with the dancers’ movement and narrative intention. Her role was to create an additional friction and sense of disquiet in the relationship between the performers and their jailer.



Fig. 27: Flamenco footwork scene. *Splinter in the Flesh*, 2010.

On a different level of technical difficulty, the martial artist taught the dancers to fight with weapons, with the added complexity of them having to perform in pitch black darkness in order to absorb this new-to-them form through their senses. In the opening of the work, knife drills between couples required the proximity in attacking with knives and, at the same time, the necessary precision of the action and its timing to avoid injury. The performers could not but be present in each split-second of the movement. In a sword sequence that followed the knives, the performers’ eyes were at the tip of the sword, focusing on the precision of cutting slicing and thrusting, calculating the distance between themselves and an imagined

opponent. Their intense focus and dripping sweat came from encountering a new challenge in performance outside of their own long-honed practice. It created a sustained tension, which was to make time linger.

The performers in *Splinter in the Flesh* had adopted these two practices as new ways of channelling struggle and conflict in their movement. To watch them being physically seized by something new that they were just managing to control on stage brought into my awareness another level of agonistic effort taking place during the performance, namely, expressing *agon* and being in a state of *agon* at the same time. This, in my view, created an edge that was sensed as much as observed.

Through these choreographic strategies, I also sought to instil a sense of authenticity in the reception of *agon* in my works. I invited non-trained performers to work alongside the professional dancers and actors, so that the spectators could get closer to *agon* through a sense of a more familiar, close-to-everyday life experience. I embraced the following definition from Mumford's and Garde's *Theatre of Real People*⁷ (2016) as it most accurately describes the diverse performers in my works:

contemporary people who have a verifiable physical existence and who usually have not received institutional training and have little or non-prior stage experience [...] Also, those people [...] who present aspects of their own selves - their perspectives [...] rather than those of fictional or devised characters. Occasionally, Theatre of Real People may include trained actors or performers, who represent aspects of their own selves (Garde and Mumford, 2016: 5)

In a similar way to the concept of the *Theatre of Real People*, my works included doctors, priests, psychologists, academics, chefs, musicians, and sportsmen, and, finally, the elderly and children who were invited to perform their professional or other activities on stage. However, while Garde and Mumford's *Theatre of Real People* has been examined 'in relation to dominant theatre conventions and traditions' (Garde and Mumford, 2016: 8), my approach to 'real people' is still partly located in the field of dance, including being integrated into a system involving principles of

⁷ '...theatre of the real' identifies a wide range of theatre practices and styles that recycle reality, whether that reality is personal, social, political, or historical' (Martin, 2013: 5)

time, rhythm, movement and its organisation, as important parts of the choreographic medium. By intervening in a certain performance context, these performers can be said to have created a synergy that enhanced the physical and psychological aspect of *agon* in the specific works. Apropos their specific functional actions and rituals, in many ways they were engaged in what Richard Schechner named *restored behaviours*, that is, ‘performances – of art, rituals, or ordinary life – performed actions that people train for and rehearse’ (Schechner, 2002: 29), and which in my works were reconstructed. Progressively, the role of ‘real people’ in my works became more central until in my later works they came to be the only performers (*Agon - In the Ring*, *Polis* and *De Profundis - Prolongations of Silence*). In these examples, ‘real people’ refers to other types of professional performers, such as a concert pianist and a boxer, who though experts in their field of practice, are not professionally trained as dancers or actors. Therefore, in my works they are, partly (pianist) or fully (boxer), performing outside the context of their practice. By ‘performing themselves’, these performers, brought forward knowledge from different practices that they shared with the spectators in a contemporary performance context. Their presence can be said to activate *agon* in at least two ways.

One way was directly through the intense struggle of professional athletes and other physical performers, whose expertise somehow identified with *agon*, in this way, rendering *agon* a first-hand experience for the audience. The boxers in *Agon - In the Ring*, the pole dancer, and the runner in *Polis*, are examples of these performers.

The second way to activate *agon* was by placing other practitioners performing their professional functional tasks in the same arena and often alongside the dancers’ physical struggle. This merging created an additional conflict in the form of the works. Examples of such juxtapositions and counterpoints can be found in a chef unobtrusively preparing his working table and tools for carving raw meat next to a group of dancers engaged in physical struggle in *Splinter in the Flesh*; an auctioneer calling bids in the centre of the boxing ring amidst the boxers’ rest break during a boxing bout in *Agon - In the Ring*; and a nurse measuring the blood pressure of an

elder performer amidst dancers' fighting duets in the abattoir of *Wrestling an Angel* (fig. 28 & 29).



Fig 28 & 29: Doctor, elder, and fighting duets. *Wrestling an Angel*, 2004.

One might say that the role of the familiar social body of a nurse, chef, or auctioneer in the middle of struggle was to heighten the experience of *agon* through the feeling of displacement that occurs when the unfamiliar arises from the familiar, triggering tension and disturbance. Taking ‘real people’ and their actions out of their socio-cultural contexts and transferring them to the stage was a technique I used to synthesise another layer of *agon*. This displacement was designed to extend conflict from the movement material to the constituent layers of the work.

The inclusion of ‘real people’ in my choreographic works reflects what Grade and Mumford name as *authenticity effects* described as:

modes of representation, and, on the other hand perceptual experiences [...] characterized by their capacity to generate, and sometimes also to destabilize, a sense of one or more of the following: the sincere and the genuine; referential truthfulness and veracity; and unmediated and intimate contact with people (Garde and Mumford, 2016: 9).

Coming upon this concept of *authenticity effects* as a theatre technique in performance made me aware of a paradox. In my effort to get to ‘the real’, I was asking ‘real people’ (figures 30, 31 & 32) to perform their profession within a

theatrical context which, by nature, is based on fiction and representation. By using real athletes, for example, to activate a contest, or a real priest to perform the last rite, I was attempting to draw the spectators into a web of sensation that might initiate a gut experience and/or a perceptual experience that could be considered powerful and affective, an experience I discuss more fully in the next section, the strategy of the visceral. But in terms of the use of real in my performances, I eventually realised that operating within a system of representation and signs could also be said to emphasise an 'imitation' of reality instead. That said, the creative intention behind choosing to perform *agon* in its realness was not to imitate but rather invite the everyday reality outside the theatre into the performance event. My later performance works became frames for examining life through people's first-hand, lived experiences and professional practices. These performances activated post-performance interactions between people who posed questions and shared knowledge.



Fig 30: Chef carving meat. *Splinter in the Flesh*, 2010.



Fig. 31: Doctor measuring the blood pressure of an elder. *Wrestling an Angel*, 2004

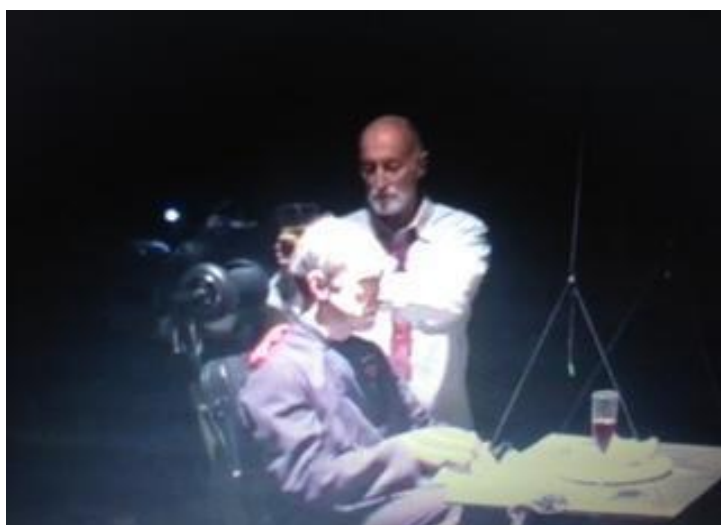


Fig. 32: Priest performing the last rite. *Wrestling an Angel*, 2004.

3.2. Visceral

Machon in her work (*Syn)aesthetics: Re-editing Visceral Performance* (2017), proposed that the visceral is: a very particular response where the innermost, often inexpressible, emotionally sentient feelings a human is capable of are actuated. The term also describes that which, simultaneously or in isolation to the emotions, affects an upheaval, or disturbance of the physiological body itself, so literally a response through the human viscera (Machon, 2017: 197).

From the position of a maker, working towards a performance experience while simultaneously trying to imagine it as an audience member, I understood Machon's bodily 'response through the human viscera' as a physical and sensorial intrusion, or an assault on the senses.

In this section, I will describe some of the techniques I applied in my works to activate a visceral experience for the audience and which include the following: pushing the performers' bodies to physical extremes and incorporating combat sports and their pre-performance training routines (an aspect mentioned in 'real people'); highlighting minuscule spillages of saliva and blood as small aftermaths following the main action: layering ritual images (which often use blades and weapons); and staging incompatible elements and practices together and as part of the performances. Reflecting on what might trigger 'innermost inexpressible feelings' in the audience and how this could manifest from the activation of *agon* in my works, I came up with certain ideas, such as the physical and/or emotional intensity of an action fully embodied by the performer, along with the synergy of performance elements coming together at one moment to trigger a body spasm, a vocal expression, a burst of laughter, or a heart palpitation.

The visceral could be experienced in the work directly in the corporeal expression of the full-body collision between performers, as well as through watching the labourious effort of individuals to surpass their own limits. The result was to be more instant, triggered by the intensity of, often, the proximal activity of the bodies in a state of fight. Another way that was less immediate or direct, which I consider equally powerful, was through the layering of images or other interventions and

collisions between events over time, seeking to create a response through what can be called an associative effect.

3.2a. Explicitly in movement

The crafting of a forceful and often violent intensity in the movement material as part of activating of *agon* was designed to generate the kind of ‘gut’ disturbance and an intuitive response from the audience, (as I mentioned in the strategy of ‘real people’), thus generating a visceral experience.

As mentioned in the previous section, pushing the performers’ bodies to physical extremes and exhaustion was a technique I repeatedly used in order to actuate an instinctive and acute physical sensation that precedes reflection: ‘whenever the *agon* expresses itself it is invariably accompanied by *agonia*’ (Fischer, 2017: 9) with *agonia* being the Greek word for agony. Being familiar with the common use of the word *agonia* in contemporary life as a Greek, I am also aware of its close relationship to the physical sensation of suffering. Physical strain and exhaustion were often expressed in the performers’ labouring acts and witnessed by the audience members. In retrospect, through these effortful and physically demanding acts, I sought to communicate something about struggle, and also its relationship to suffering. I was hoping that the performer’s physical state would generate a shared understanding, a *felt* experience, potent in its ability to generate kinaesthetic empathy in the audience members.

Examples which demonstrate an intense physicality in movement passages in the works include the runner’s labouring on a running machine throughout the performance of *Polis – Spring*, which I discuss below, and the intense physical training of both the boxer and the dancer with placard in *Agon - In the Ring*. The intensity of what can be called an *agon minutiae* in *De Profundis - Prolongations of Silence* was instilled in the muscle of an index finger, in which the pianist manically taps the same piano key, creating a piercing sound (fig. 33). I had asked the pianist to keep tapping on the note beyond its metric limit.



Fig. 33: Pianist. *De Profundis – Prolongations of Silence*. 2017.

In the performance, a press reviewer had sensed the painstaking work process behind such subtle moments of expression and linked that with the audience member's experience:

...Vahla directed Wicherek's every muscle in every moment. The result was unexpected [...] The person next to me was close to weeping [...] Wicherek's refined control of her medium provided the austerity of emotion that sent Wilde's arrow home. (Gillian Rennie, 2017: 20)

The actions described above expressed moments of endurance and perseverance, small personal wars that conveyed effort and *agonia*, designed to be felt, sensed, embodied. The visceral also relates to the moments of cruelty in *agon* in the works, already introduced in Chapter 2. Such moments were to display and test the characters' resistance and resilience to suffering. Increasing the physical challenge and having the characters' *agon* 'poured out' on stage was to create a certain atmosphere and the right temperature for the spectators to viscerally experience *agon*. For example, *Wrestling an Angel* and *Splinter in the Flesh* featured a leitmotif in which three performers had their partners' bodies bashed around the floor in a

synchronized, precise manner. In *Splinter in the Flesh*, this movement sequence was subverted into the organised system of a military-like drill which was repeated and observed from a distance by an apathetic ‘mother empress’. A similar motif had been performed on the dusted cold and concrete floor of the abattoir in *Wresting an Angel* five years earlier. Each sequence of actions ended with the performer on the floor crawling away to escape, then stopped by their partner and pulled back to the same place, after which, the sequence was repeated. Rather than an expression of a harmful intention, this ambiguous act was meant as the physical manifestation of an emotional numbness and state of loss, a confusion resulting in a deep disengagement with the lying body on the floor (fig. 34).



Fig.34: *Splinter in the Flesh*, 2010

With the repetitive impact of the downwards action being hard on the performer’s body, the partners two worked closely to technically control the movement and protect the body. During the performance, their acute concentration was combined with a precise use of energy in the short moments of contact, and, also, in the gap between control and a gut response.

This is an example that combines the visceral with the quality of ‘realness’ in the performers’ movement discussed in the previous section, a quality sought in my works and as a strategy for *agon*. Creating this act together with the dancers, we had

to imagine the spectators' reaction to the duet taking place, right at their feet on the concrete floor in the claustrophobic chamber of an abattoir. By removing the dynamic nuances of expression and staying with a kind of monochrome mechanical motions, we worked to turn movement into an 'unforgiving' sequence during which the repetitive thudding of the dancer's body against the floor would trigger a visceral response from the spectator. I was seeking to physically test, in my own way, what we as humans are made of and how far we can endure struggling alone and with others.

In order to push the act of physical conflict and struggle further, I looked into the functional movement in combat practices and used it as a creative strategy to safely enhance the sense of visceral in my works. I was hoping that by using the movement language of sports and martial arts, and framing this in a particular narrative, the spectator would feel the impact, the 'punch in the stomach', the assault to the senses. Being aware that these practices are concerned with a technical correctness and precision for the purpose of winning, I drew from them so as to access a sense of movement authenticity. In my view, an audience might experience this kind of movement differently to dance, perhaps because sports actions focus on function rather than an aesthetic purpose or the making of meaning in a narrative story.

An example of this can be traced back to the aspect of cruelty, as mentioned in Chapter 2, in for example, the scene of the female dancer thrown around by means of a retractable dog leash, in the work *In Praise of Folly*. On a technical level, I used the leash as a physical restriction to disturb the dancer's mode of moving, and through it access new possibilities in her movement struggle. This physical task, inspired by the sled resistance training in running and rugby, became somewhat absurd. It reflected the beginnings of my desire to experiment with placing the dancer's body in the context of *agon* in sport as another approach to triggering a visceral experience. I had realised that the visceral in sport seemed to result partly from the athletes' choices during the game, and as another kind of a self-actualisation that was dependent on the rules and structures of the game. The athletic striving could be witnessed and experienced 'as a way of making of oneself what one can' (Aggerholm, 2017: 151), for a little while at least. The narrative story of this scene of *In Praise of Folly* was in a way a first footing and an opening for exploring further physical possibilities in this act as a strategy which became featured in other performances.

Alongside my exploration of the visceral experience between two performers, I also dug deeper into the individual's duel with their shadow as an entry to the protagonist's *agon*. From this, in *Agon - In the Ring*, a new creative strategy emerged. It involved staging the pre-performance training routines of a real boxer, and a professional dancer as part of the final performance. These routines included the boxer wrapping his hands with protective bandages, practising drills against the boxing bag and shadow fighting (video extracts 03 and 04, *Agon - In the Ring*). What can be considered as the private *agon* taking place during training and behind the scenes, in the gym or in the rehearsal studio, was here made public. Focusing on the individual's effort to overcome oneself was in order for the spectator to firstly become familiar with the protagonist-character, so that a sense of familiarity could be established before the central event of *agon*, such as a boxing match, took place.

An example of this private experience of *agon* can be found at the end of the first section of *Agon - In the Ring* in which the boxer shadow-fights inside the dark imaginary ring with his coach and sport psychologist shouting instructions from the periphery of the stage. I consider this scene to be distinct for the following reasons. First, the performers are real professionals doing exactly what they would do in a boxing gym and a boxing ring. Second, for their ability to share physically and mentally a precise and sharp visualization of the imaginary antagonist, which is deeply embodied and created in the moment of the action. Lastly, for this 'displaced' scene taking place on a dark and bare theatre stage. Eventually, the boxer pushes his imaginary opponent against the rope and punches towards a knockout, as visualised in his mind. However, the boxer fighting alone in the empty theatre stage might be experienced as an act with an existential undertone, largely due to the boxer's displacement. Alone in the ring of his imagination, the boxer, as in a Beckett play, fights his ghosts (fig. 35).



Fig. 35: Shadow fight. *Agon -Boxing in the Ring*, 2014. Photo by A. Bloom.

Through the drills and rituals of the pre-performance training, I worked to create a visceral, first-hand experience for the spectators closely witnessing *agon* as a possible reminder that the personal *agon* one undergoes in private is also part of the human condition people share.

3.2b. Implicitly in the form

So far in this section the examples of the visceral aspect relate to the whole-body expression of struggle, effort, and resistance as a signature for *agon*. However, highlighting minuscule gestures in the works captures an essence of what was going on inside the performers' body, or what 'spills out': for example, the drop of blood following a jab; the saliva of spit after an encounter. These gestures manifested as impulses in the gaps between whole-body movement phrases and held potential for an instant pinch or a grab. They functioned as small incisions in the form of the works: some were choreographed, while others emerged accidentally, during the performance. When they appeared, they were attended to and visually framed, and even for a second or two, they came into life as distinct moments in which time seemed to slow down.



Fig. 36 & Fig. 37: Table scenes. *In praise of Folly*, 2005

In *In Praise of Folly*, the minutiae of a spit was performed by a disabled male performer, before being tied up on a table (fig.36 and fig. 37). The spit was the performer's response against his victimisation by a group of dancers (trailer 01, at 8.37 min, *In Praise of Folly*). Although subtle, this minute instance of reaction or revolt can be said to allude to Fabre's idea of the performer's body in his work as, "[...] an incredible paint box, a laboratory, a battlefield. Everything that comes from it is very important" for Jan Fabre: blood, semen, urine, tears, sweat, bones and muscles, everything' (Fabre in Piccoli, 2017). Sliced in a very short but precise moment of stillness, the gesture of the spit was designed to be imprinted in the memory of the spectator as a very brief and fleeting reaction and yet a poignant moment of asserting agency.

In *Agon - In the Ring*, the drop of blood spilled on stage, the small aftermath of the punch, created a reaction and confusion for those who had assumed that the boxing bout was a 'fake' representation on a theatre stage. A female performer in white gloves carrying paintings for an art auction, noticed the blood and gracefully wiped it away with her handkerchief, before disappearing into the crowd. In a post-performance discussion with the audience, the appearance of the tiny blood drop had pushed some of the spectators' boundaries in what was conventionally expected on a theatre stage, thereby enhancing their perception of *agon* as real in its sport context. It can be said that such minute performance moments were reminiscent of private, discrete impulses in which the visceral, as the result of momentum, often come to

light only briefly. Choreographed or not, voluntary or involuntary, they were to be noticed and highlighted, even when impromptu. Their role was to shift the focus from the large arena into the nuanced gesture of a character revealing the different gradations of *agon* in the movement.

I also looked to activate the visceral in quiet and uncanny images that, in my works, were often placed alongside the dancers' throbbing struggle to create a dynamic juxtaposition and an interplay between different dimensions of time and space in the senses. As I did this, I was seeking a balance between what Mackrell in relation to Ultima Vez, describes as, 'the body as an emotional battlefield, and performance as a kind of extreme sport' (Mackrell, 2007), and a more nuanced quality in performance. I was also looking to activate a kind of thinking in the audience that could ensue from the visceral experience.

I created images in which certain kinds of acts and rituals were visually captured and framed. For example, the sharpening of knives and quiet carving of meat in *Splinter in the Flesh*; Eve's careful peeling of an apple and hanging its skin on a hook as a reference to the snake in Eden in *In Praise of Folly*; and the shaving of a military figure on a dentist's chair in the cold abattoir in *Wrestling an Angel* were all quiet, mundane rituals using blades and often performed by 'real people'. Inspired by the disquiet images in Castellucci's work, they aimed to lure the spectator into a space of "tension between 'the real' and the pretend" (Ridout in Grehan, 2009: 39). Choreographed to occupy their own time and space on stage, the role of these scenes was to create an ominous feeling of what might follow next in the work, while the prolonged visual frames offered the spectators the time to delve into the space between the skin and the blade, a viewing space rooted in the visceral fear and danger of covert violence.

A profound change in my relationship to the visceral took place seven years later between *In Praise of Folly* (2005) and *Polis* (2012) when I came to reconsider what had been my own creative techniques that sought to make the spectator identify with the performer's struggle and to trigger an immersive experience. I desired to challenge my own creative methods, as well as the spectators' possibility for an

immersive experience, both by embracing a sense of an awkwardness in my works and by setting out to disrupt the previous form of my performances. This inclination resonated with Deller's influence and his claim of 'not making things, but making things happen' (Deller, 2015: 99). Looking to generate new audience experiences and dialogues in my performances, I placed diverse and often incompatible practices together. My choreographic designs of intercuts intrusions and disruptions, took place with little or no previous rehearsals. I wanted to see what happens.

Through audience discussions following each *Polis* event, I came to realize that, paradoxically, by working to disrupt an immersive experience, I was generating another kind of a visceral experience. This experience had partly emerged from the clash between practices incompatible with each other in performance. For example, in *Polis - Spring*, a male runner on a running machine was placed very close to the audience and in between two rows of seats, with all facing the large screen of a film triptych (video trailer 06, *Polis - Spring*). The film was an imagistic documentary, capturing aspects of the colonial past that had infiltrated the living fabric of the town. It was meant as a kind of altar piece, designed to be the central piece of the performance event. The sound of the running corridor and the runner's breathing, both amplified, made his presence more palpable during the event that also included the panel discussion that followed (fig. 38).



Fig. 38: Runner on treadmill. *Polis – Border*. 2012.

The physical exertion of the runner on the spot alongside the moving images of the documentary footage was to disrupt the attention of the spectators and to generate a strange conflict evoking unease in their perception. The spectators were neither able to be totally immersed in the film nor in physical sync with the amplified body of the runner. Being positioned between the two, and, hence, as discussed later, ‘observing themselves observing the performance’, they were in a position to become fully aware of all coexisting performance elements. I was creating a deliberate difficulty by placing them in a space of friction. A sense of conflict was also created in the gap between the uneasy visual narrative of the town in the film, and the runner, not running towards or away from somewhere, but on the spot as if locked in a continuous present. The disruption in the experience of the event was designed to generate an emotional distance in the spectator. I was hoping that this distance would prompt reflection, in the moment of performance. As some of the spectators commented later, a visceral response in their reception was triggered by the conflict between the runner and the film.

By positioning the spectator in a place of unease, thereby allowing for self-observation during some of the performances, I had worked to achieve an experience that prompted reflection and a re-evaluation of the place of the individual amidst collective *agon* as intrinsic to our lives in the human condition. I consider these moments of reflection and re-evaluation to arise as moments of self-awareness, and that, to come back to Heidegger’s idea of *thrownness*, such moments can also become instants of defeating our own *thrownness*.

In this section, I discussed the creative strategy of the visceral for the activation of *agon*, through physical struggle (explicitly) and through a certain layering of performance elements in the works (implicitly). For most of the works described in this section I deliberately used certain techniques to trigger a visceral experience for the spectator. In contrast, in *Polis*, creating a visceral experience had not been part of my original choreographic intention. However, my observation of how a visceral response from the spectators had emerged in *Polis*, further influenced my creative process in *Agon - In the Ring*. This work is discussed in more detail, at the end of the arenas section that follows.

3.3. Arenas

In this section, I discuss how arenas were designed to frame, contextualise, and in themselves, activate *agon*. Apart from being a physical place, an arena also formed a kind of existential space in which gradations of *agon* were played out in the narratives of my works. As with sports, one could say that the arena in my works formed a place ‘within which one can play situational responses and find out who one “is”’ (Howe in Aggerholm, 2017: 149). They are also places in which the performers, like athletes in their arenas, ‘must have obstacles which [they] strive to overcome just so that [they] can possess the activity as a whole, namely, playing the game [...] to make life worth living’ (Suits in Aggerholm, 2017: 151).

Looking back at my performances, I can see different types of arenas that evolved chronologically, each supporting and activating *agon* in a different manner. In this section I reflect on four types of arenas that are evident, namely the painterly, sited, social and sport arenas. The painterly arena entails the space of contest designed in a painterly manner on the stage of the theatre, as in *In Praise of Folly*; the sited arena embraces the multi-dimensional space of a site, as in the site-specific work *Wrestling an Angel*; the social arena consists of the merging of diverse arenas in one, as in the interdisciplinary encounters of *Polis*; while the sport arena concerns the framed and regulated sport ground, as in *Agon - In the Ring*. I also note that *Splinter in the Flesh*, which was created in a middle phase, explicitly staged an arena, for the set was designed to represent a cage filled with sand (fig. 39).



Fig. 39: Jailer welding the cage. *Splinter in the Flesh*, 2010. C. Alkiviadis.

3.3a. Painterly

The significance of the painterly arena in my earlier works was in the stage design used to both frame and help *agon* become alive, namely in a ‘painterly manner’. While I retrospectively named this space, a ‘painterly arena’, the concept of an arena in these earlier works was not yet conceived. This as an initial step in the development of an arena is, however, important as I was contending with visual ways to manifest additional tensions on stage, with their role being to enhance and, at certain moments, to help activate conflict.

In *In Praise of Folly*, a spatial sense of arena arises through what might be called a painterly composition. To enclose and contain acts of conflict using the black box frame of the stage as a scenography, I imagined the works being big painterly canvases and used the edges and depth of stage as its borders. For *In Praise of Folly*, I had dipped the canvas into darkness, the space was black. I called the space of conflict a ‘painterly arena’ for two reasons: the first because I drew from painting techniques to explore how an interplay between the elements of light, spatial planes, and objects, could enhance or generate dramatic tensions; and the second, because I used a series of visual tableaux to bring forward the actual conceptual arena, namely, the epic conflict in the narrative between God and Lucifer in a Manichean interpretation of a world, mapped into an Italian Renaissance Court in which familial politics were typically central.

In Praise of Folly aimed to be experienced from a distance and as a tableau in which a narrative came to life through the application of visual techniques drawn from Italian Renaissance art. The use of perspective, and the interplay between darkness and light on the human body and the surrounding objects contributed to framing the agonistic textures of the work and further bound them into a kind of a painterly ‘world’ (fig. 40).



Fig. 40: Eve and apple. *In Praise of Folly*, 2005.

Visually designed as a black canvas from which faces, objects and scenes slowly come to light, the work featured a pre-creational universe suspended in darkness that metaphorically represented a metaphysical arena where God and Lucifer argued and fought about the creation of man. The world or cosmology of *In Praise of Folly* was an imagined one. As such, the space was sealed or hermetically closed, unknown and unfamiliar to the spectator, or from another dimension.

Applying lighting techniques such as *chiaroscuro* (sculpting shadows of the dinner table at the beginning of the work) as well as the dramatic illumination of *tenebroso* (creating ‘black’ spaces of Lucifer’s face at the very beginning), was to illuminate acts of conflict. These were to take place in the spaces between the visible and invisible, the private and the public, and further creating a visual narrative of *agon* as part of the painterly arena (fig. 41).

It might be said that *agon* in this work was generated through an arena of darkness as a metaphor for the unknown world into which the agonists were initially thrown and they then had to make sense of it. From my perspective, the darkness of stage in *In Praise of Folly* finds affinity with Søren Kierkegaard’s sensorial account of the world as an unfamiliar place, a void in which we find ourselves surrounded by darkness, without having an idea of why we are here and what we are supposed to do.

I stick my finger in existence – it feels like nothing. Where am I? ... Who am

I? How did I come into the world? ... Why should I be involved in it?
...Where is the manager... Is there no manager? (Kierkegaard, 2009: 60)



Fig. 41: Lucifer holding a mirror. *In praise of Folly*. 2005

In *In Praise of Folly*, a godlike figure was found on a ladder upstage centre. Raising this figure introduced a vertical dimension of power with an authoritative presence, symbolically controlling and sustaining *agon* on stage. A similar figure was later featured in *Splinter in the Flesh*: a mother-empress seated on a high throne observed the action on stage from a distance. Introducing the vertical axis was designed to increase the spatial tension between the raised figure and the dancers' struggle on the floor of the stage (example, fig. 23 & fig. 42).



Fig. 42: Mother empress and dancers. *Splinter in the Flesh*, 2010. Photo by C. Alkiviadis.

By positioning the god figure upstage and diametrically opposite to the spectators' viewing space, I was aiming to create the depth of space and an additional tension between the raised figure and the spectators. Adding layers and activating tensions in the spaces between observers and the observed was designed to forge the audiences' sensation and their perception of the stage being enclosed with the spectacle contained as in an arena.

Another distinct feature of *In Praise of Folly* as a painterly arena was a large black table that formed an integral part of the blackness of the space. The table was the main prop and object during the performance around which the performers moved. The table was an additional stage and an arena, inhabited and fought over by means of a series of visual representations of 'earthly' places: a home, a family dinner table, an altar, a cross, a sacrificial slab, and a gravestone, all surrounded by darkness. The activation of conflict taking place around the object of the dark dinner table appeared twelve years later in *De Profundis - Prolongations of Silence* with the combination of Wilde's text and a Beckettian visual minimalism in the object of the dark grand piano, again dimly lit. This object similarly became a physical arena with *agon* emerging through the fights *from* it and *on* it (video extract 03, *De Profundis - Prolongations of Silence*).

Reflecting upon these choices, the two dark objects in *In Praise of Folly* and *De Profundis - Prolongations of Silence*, these black-box, proscenium theatre performances can be thought almost as bookends to each other, in which *agon* was visually located in a bleak existential universe where ‘*the rest is darkness*’⁸ (Beckett, 2006: 387).

Reflecting back, a preoccupation with featuring darkly lit or dimly lit stages gradually coming to life and colour as painterly arenas had been deeply ingrained in my existential relationship to *agon* as maker. Perhaps, this initial state of darkness visually depicted in earlier works, expressed a sensorial expression of *thrownness* as spatial disorientation. It was in this darkness that *agon* was activated, prompting the protagonist to take action to understand the world as a place and become part of, in a poetic sense, painting a world for oneself.

3.3b. Sited

From the proscenium stage of *In Praise of Folly*, the arena was expanded into the chambers of a disused abattoir in the site-specific work *Wrestling an Angel* (fig. 43).

Constructed as a promenade performance, the audience entered the building and travelled through a series of visual ‘zones’ and thresholds that incorporated the abattoir chambers across its two floors. Designed to be experienced as sites of contest, the painterly arenas (canvases) of previous works were further developed in this work, becoming physical spaces in which, the spectator could enter into fragmented and transient scenes of conflict, played out in this site of former slaughter and dismemberment.

⁸ Variations of the phrase ‘*Rest of stage dark*’ (Beckett 2006, p 433) repeat in his works *Rockaby* (1981), *Footfalls* (1976) and *Come and Go* (1966).

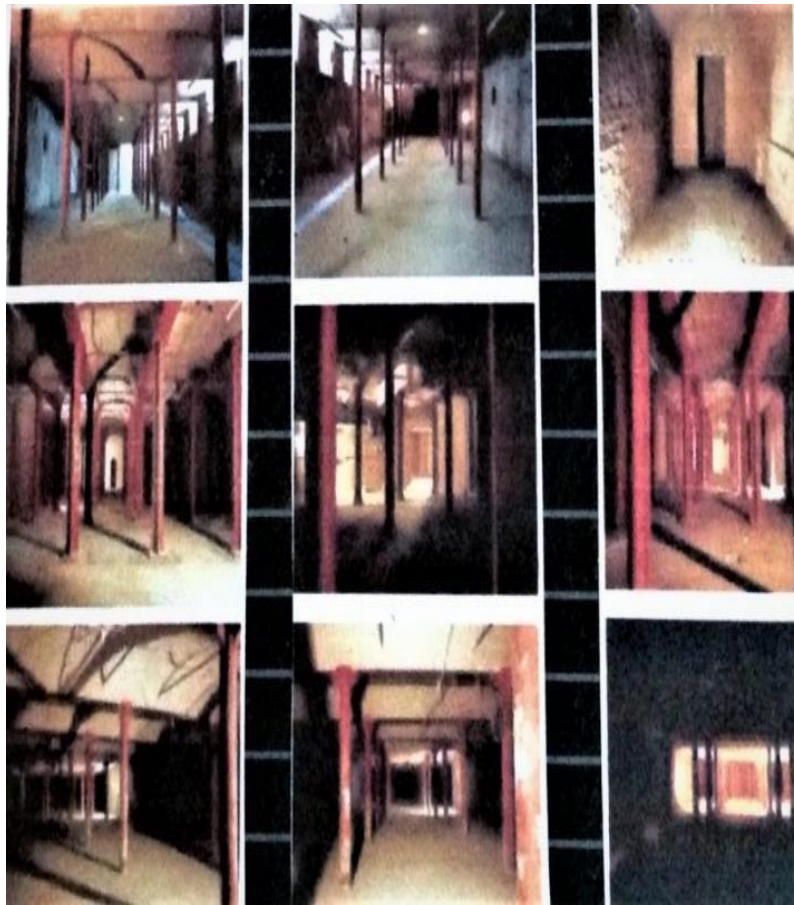


Fig.43: The abattoir chambers. From work journal. *Wrestling an Angel*, 2004.

If there was a way for this site arena to be experienced from a bird's eye view, the observer would be able to see that all the spaces of the abattoir were activated simultaneously on two floor levels and were designed for two different audiences. Inspired by the visual maps of old phrenological drawings, I was hoping that the work would activate *agon* both in its individual parts, but also in its whole through the tensions and rhythms created in the cracks between its different chambers, which could be seen to echo fragments of the mind (fig. 44).



Fig. 44: *The Phrenological Facilities* (1875), after O.S.Fowler. From work journal. *Wrestling an Angel*, 2004.

More specifically, in each of the smaller arenas, *agon* was enacted either through violent struggle performed as an ensemble, or through the disquiet of displaced images, such as domestic elements in eerie, unfamiliar settings. Examples of such images include a carpet made of house-dust (fig. 45 & 46) guarded by the watchful presence of a siren performed by a Butoh artist; a puppet theatre in the middle of an empty, vast water-flooded gallery in the basement of the site; the peaceful waltzing of an old couple amidst a group of soldiers wrestling each other.

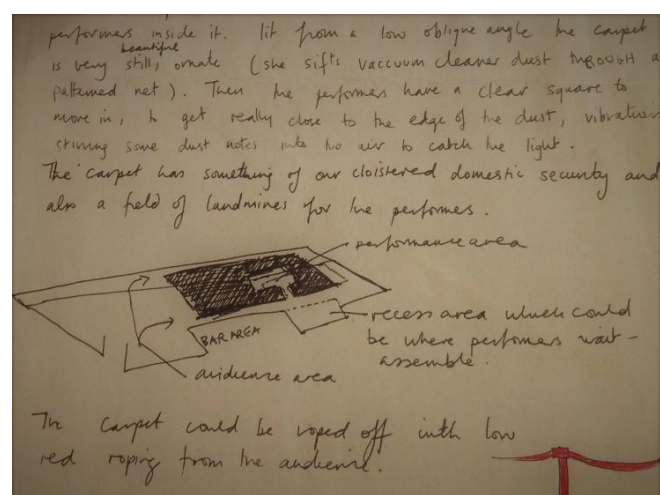
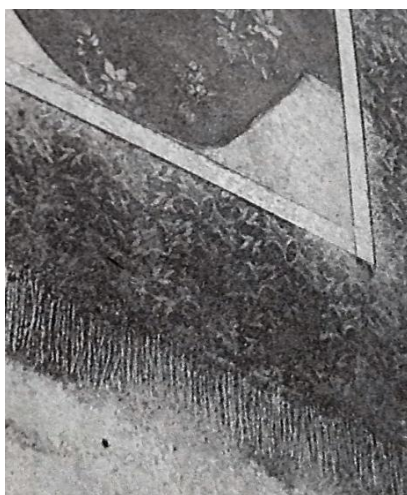


Fig. 45 & 46: (Left) Detail from *Dust carpet*, by L.Willow. (Right) Notes on *Dust carpet*. From work journal. *Wrestling an Angel*, 2004.

Apropos the arena and *agon* in *Wrestling an Angel*, retrospectively, I considered the concept of protagonists and antagonists to be manifested in the way the abattoir chambers as site of conflict were designed to be in contrast with each other visually and aurally, and as containers of movement material. For example, while the quiet puppet theatre took place in the bowels of the abattoir, a berserk military training of a troop of soldiers took place on the floor directly above it. A small room lit in red and inhabited by two performers in military clothes and engaged in a violent encounter was contrasted by another room next to it inhabited by a doctor quietly stitching together a piece of skin at a sewing machine. This image was intended to be a metaphor for the messy process of sealing a wound to allow healing in a surgical procedure. This procedure was symbolic too, reflective of the actions in the building. The contrasting images and situations, as well as their dynamic qualities, were visually designed to capture the process of trauma and the process of purging simultaneously, and alongside each other, as different phases of *agon*. More poetically, the procedure concerned ‘dis-ease’ and a similar difficulty in the body and in spatial perception that was activated in the way the spaces were stitched together in the spectacle.

In addition, in *Wrestling an Angel*, I created friction in the spatial division between spectacle and spectator. This involved the spectators’ positioning at a threshold, between the physical space of the spectator and the space of the performer. It allowed for their proximity to the performed action, but without participating. The audience was able to experience the performers’ intense and contested actions within breathing distance, while maintaining a ‘spectatorial’ distance, almost like occupying a fine border line between the arena of *agon* and the space of observing *agon* (fig. 47). The audience members were not invited to participate in the narrative world that therefore remained hermetically closed. This was in order to trigger tension and edginess in the spectators’ perception as they repeatedly faced the possibility that the performers’ actions might, though, suddenly invade the safe space of the viewer.



Fig. 47: Wrestling an Angel, 2004

A similar example can be found in the later work *Agon - In the Ring*. The boxing ring was framed with a single rope tied around four performers forming the four corners and surrounded by the spectators invited onto the stage. Once again, the single rope, as a delicate spatial division between the fighters and the spectators, was designed to create both intimacy and uneasiness, enhanced by the unpredictability of *agon* or what could be called a violent potential of the real and unrehearsed bout. It can be said that the tension of the rope dividing the space and stretching to safeguard performing bodies *in extremis* rendered the arena 'alive', and though not participatory, inclusive of its audience. Considering these arenas in their different appearances in my works, it has been my understanding that this kind of energy was generated by the gaps between the volatile performance spaces and their modalities of spectatorship. In creating an arena and a spectacle, this experience of watching, feeling but not touching was important in my making. I came to realise that an immersive experience can also live in these fine divisions or gaps. In this way, the site as a multi-faceted arena enhanced the spectator's experience of *agon* in my works.

3.3c. Social

Although the arena in my works refers predominately to the physical place of the performance on stage or in site, in my later works it also held socio-political dimensions. To be more specific, in *Polis* and *Agon - In the Ring*, the arena featured as a synthesis between different spaces, both physical and social, within one site. These increasingly expanded the notion of the performance space beyond its physical confines and as social gatherings. In these works, I shifted toward a participatory audience relationship, wherein the audience entered the arena. For example, in *Agon - Boxing in the Ring*, the audience took part in an inherently competitive auction. Half-way through the boxing match, the contest arena shifted without spectators or boxers physically changing spaces. While the two boxers quietly rested in the corners of the ring, the spectators, outside the ring, joined an art auction bidding for artworks. This unexpected shift and re-configuration of the arena as social space within the spectacle alludes to the multiple meanings of the term *arena* used to describe other spheres of social interaction and competition, one of them being, for example, the political arena.

In particular, the arena of *Polis* was designed with the ancient Greek city state in mind and the assembly of its citizens in the Greek *agora*⁹, as a central space of gathering and assembly¹⁰. In each of the four *Polis* events, *The Border*, *The Arena*, *The Spring* and *The Market*, the audience was gathered under the roof of a chapel as well as its surrounding yard, to participate in performance interactions and discussions. These four events featured an array of diverse arenas, designed to represent the city and its politics, the body of citizens, its cultural diversity, all within the same event.

Polis – Arena, for example, consisted of number of encounters taking place inside and around the consecrated chapel. These included a historical re-enactment of

⁹ ‘For Homer, ‘the agora was not only a constituent part of an urban environment but also signified a form of order and civilization. The emergence of the agora has been linked with the birth of the Greek polis (city-state)’ (Lindenlauf, 2014).

¹⁰ ‘In the epics of Homer besides funerary games and contests, *agon* also indicates the whole agora or the places in it used for competition, as well as the political and judicial assembly and those held for festivals’ (Dubбини, 158).

a South African war that took place in the chapel yard; two historical Museum exhibits guarded by local security staff in the chapel; a panel discussion about the past and present identity of the town that took place in the round; a pole dancer's gymnastics, echoing the activity of a local nightclub, occupying the middle of the chapel; and a short film about the town and its horrific history projected against the walls of the roof of the chapel. Some of these activities complemented each other, for example, visual depictions of social historical events activated discussions around them. Others were deliberately placed in a dissonant and awkward relationship with each other, for example, creating a new symbiosis between the panellists' political discussion and the pole dancer gymnastics around the metal pole. In *Polis*, the way spaces came together developed *agon* as a quality based on the difficulty and awkwardness of different social spaces meeting together (fig. 48 and fig. 49).



Fig. 48 & Fig. 49: Panellist and pole dancer. *Polis - Arena*, 2012. Photos@ National Arts Festival

Later, while looking to better understand the coming together of these social spaces, I encountered Foucault's concept of *heterotopia* and found an affinity with my work. *Heterotopia* (Greek for *heteros* meaning other and *topos* meaning place), refers to real spaces that live alongside our everyday reality like hospitals, theatres, cemeteries, brothels, prisons and ships. *Polis - Arena*, as discussed above, included the configurations of 'other' physical stages and their *agon* 'juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (Foucault, 1984: 6).

Contemplating these different spaces in my works and my tendency to cluster

these spaces together, a further realisation emerged. Bringing such spaces together, especially in the later works, was a deliberate strategy I was using to create frictions in the gaps in between the different spaces and their energies in order to reinforce, ground and expand *agon* as spatial tension and as conflict. In a paradoxical way, by staging and exploring the awkwardness of these diverse spaces meeting together, I was seeking their connections. Furthermore, it can be said that in my process of creating these, often contested, social arenas I was working both with conflict and *from* conflict.

Whilst writing about *social* arenas in my works and their relationships to each other in my commentary, I also came upon geographer Doreen Massey's propositions on notions of space. Reimagining Massey's understanding of space in the context of *agon* in my work, I took the liberty below of replacing her word 'space' with 'arena' and narrowed down the broader notion of 'interrelations' to pertain to conflict and competition more specifically. I wanted to see what emerges when space is viewed through the prism of conflict and competition.

...we recognize [an arena] as the product of interrelations [conflict, competition] ...we understand [an arena] as the sphere of the possibility of the existence in the sense of contemporaneous plurality...we recognise [an arena] as always under construction. (Massey, 2005:9)

Changing 'space' into 'arena' in the quotation above helps ground the aspect of space as a place of contest, the place that best describes my works. It also echoes the steps I had taken in my works to problematise the notion of space as a 'sphere of the possibility of existence', a meeting place of diverse voices and practices, thereby pushing *agon* further and finding new forms for it.

Once again, these test performances, as well as my creative explorations, resonates with Jeremy Deller's work whose 'sense of the polis hinges on the actual antagonism of different groups as much as on their potential solidarity' (Foster, 2015: 106). I had sought to reimagine social spaces by creating real life situations that disrupted audience expectations to manifest the diversity that comprises a bigger, constantly evolving social reality.

Although my performances in South Africa were intended as multi-cultural and multi-racial events, the majority of audience members were white. Although some South African productions attract multi-racial audiences, performances are still fairly segregated in terms of interest, so one finds predominantly black audiences for plays in vernacular languages, while more experimental performance artworks have mainly

white audiences. This sort of work is still considered to be largely “Eurocentric”. Since 1994 the number of black artists producing and showcasing work in the National Arts Festival (NAF) has increased and the festival productions and audiences certainly became more diverse, but there is a different sort of polarity creeping in. As a professor in Drama, Anton Krueger observed in his article, *Revolutionary Trends at the National Arts Festival 2017 (an overview)*,

In the last 10 years, it has felt as though the dream of a syncretic multiracial theatre which emerged in the 1990s has been replaced by an increase in the polarization between ‘black’ theatre and ‘white’ theatre...There is an uneasy, if understandable, paradox between wanting to be freed from binaries and yet also insisting on the importance of racial categorizations in order to reclaim a consciousness manipulated by centuries of white domination. (Krueger, 2018)

Through discussions with the creative team of *Polis* (2012) about audiences during the process of designing the four performance events for the National Arts Festival, we all came to decide that ‘busing’ audiences from the townships to the town - centre where the performances took place, was not an option. This was based on the idea that an audience chooses their performances.

What also contributed to the type of spectators who attended my performances and which I believe is beyond a racial distinction, was the performance genre of *Polis* and *Agon -In the Ring*. Both were interdisciplinary experimental hybrids, rather than plays following a story, or more traditional dance performances. As such, they attracted a certain kind of audience. Furthermore, created for small venues, they were designed for a limited audience number as site-specific works. It is possible that these factors also impacted on the demographics of the audience members.

My overall intention as an artist is to keep making work and pushing boundaries, by inviting performers from all walks of life, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds, such as the boxers in *Agon -In the Ring* (2014), to embody their stories and skills and communicate their struggles and aspirations to an audience. As mentioned in this commentary, I physicalized *agon* to activate dialogues that might lead to a deeper awareness and human connection. A deeper listening and understanding of the contested past in the history of South Africa is important. Perhaps it is also important to guard against the possibility of analysing the past to the extent that the complexity of history turns into a fear of creating art and expressing one’s voice. This could obstruct any possibility or hope for a better future which requires working with each other for healing to take place.

3.3d. Sport

It is, in my view, that after experimenting with the social arenas in *Polis*, I found a way to pull together all these *heterotopic* elements I had been exploring and experimenting with for years in one of the works that emerged from *Polis*, namely *Agon - In the Ring*. Reframing and containing *agon* in the boxing ring on the theatre stage in *Agon - In the Ring* was both a way of re-imagining the arena for *agon* and a way of relocating it in a rigorous structure and solid framework. The action of boxing was not featured in a narrative context; rather it was presented as boxing *per se*. Paradoxically, a sport itself with its rules and real athletes became the arena that itself held and hosted performance.

As part of the arena strategy here, I specifically include a discussion of *Agon - In the Ring* later in this section. This was the result of an accumulation of methods and techniques I experimented with earlier, with the explicit aim of challenging conceptual and spatial boundaries between dance-theatre and other embodied practices. I consider that a possible significant contribution of this particular work lies in its unusual synthesis and form, as an arena for *agon*. Through my clustering of unfamiliar performance elements in dialogue with each other in *Agon in the Ring*, I had set about to confuse some expectations of the spectacle as well as the spatial hierarchies in theatre. The work was *not* about actors boxing on stage, or actors boxing in a boxing ring as a site-specific work, or boxers boxing in their familiar boxing arena. It was about boxers boxing on stage, for boxing itself.

In *Agon - in the Ring*, the spectators watched closely as if observing something that they were granted permission to watch. My aim was to conceptually simulate the idea of an operating theatre in which the audience observes the detailed and measured process of preparation, metaphorically a kind of dissection of a concept into its constituent elements. In this way the theatre itself, as auditorium and stage, became a place of observation. Placing the stage in a context reminiscent of an operating theatre was to challenge the boundaries of the theatrical space that I expanded to contain the spectators as participants. The audience became part of the performance and was later

invited on stage to create the boxing ring, share the event in the round and therefore enact ‘the spectatorship’ of *agon*. The shift of spectacle within spectacle in my practice also meant a continuous reconfiguration and negotiation of the arena space, even if the host space was a theatre stage and auditorium. To illustrate this point, next will I explain how the spatial arena in this production was transformed halfway through the match.

The boxing ring became a place of an auction, as briefly mentioned above, for two artworks depicting wrestlers. The audience surrounding the ring was invited by an auctioneer, who entered the ring, to bid in between two bouts, while the boxers rested in the two corners. This action of bidding took place in real time, on stage, but outside the timeline and narrative of the spectacle. As the space of the auction was activated by the bidding spectators, they became protagonists and antagonists in an activity that shifted into the social sphere, with the theatre itself becoming a social arena. The auction aimed to raise funds for the local township boxing club. In this way, the boxing club itself came to be present in the performance through the boxing match and the auction.

At the end of the bout, the stage resumed its opening laboratory ‘place-ness’, with the Human Kinetics and Ergonomics scientists announcing the results of their physiological measurements to the public, and was followed by a soliloquy by the referee, who was also a boxer and an art theorist, on the death wish of the boxer. This was once again followed by the stage becoming part of the academic arena of the Drama department of the University. University lecturers were invited on stage in twos to theorise on boxing over two-minute presentations in the form of a boxing match bout.

As the intention behind my works shifted from wanting the audience to experience emotions that grab and move them to include more subtle kind of reception in which a degree of distance was necessary for the asking of certain questions about the meaning of existence, the element of space also shifted to express and manifest contested worldviews (fig. 50). In my later works, however, *agon* also became part of the everyday awkward and chaotic spaces in which we as humans might constantly try to piece fragmented realities together into a whole, somehow seeking to re-own ourselves.



Fig. 50: Preparing *Polis. Interdisciplinary Encounters*, 2012. Photo by A. Bloom.

Conclusion

In this reflective commentary, I have discussed how the Greek concept of *agon* permeated six choreographic works over a fourteen-year period and formed a key strand of enquiry and a visible signature of my work. The centrality of activating *agon* in my practice came through long development, including cultivating connections between emerging performance concepts of struggle and conflict, and the broader geographical, social, and cultural conditions in which the works took place.

While writing my commentary, I delved deeper into the meaning of *agon*. This commentary reflects both this retrospective thinking and my strategic attention to *agon* in my practice when creating the works. The writing process had its challenges. The two approaches belong to different time frames and intentions. However, reflecting upon my works in order to develop a conceptual understanding and framing of *agon* has provided the foundation from which *agon* in my choreographic craft came to be illuminated and alive.

I started this commentary with the story of my creative path, introducing the circumstances, drives and influences that gave birth to the submitted works. Revealing how *agon* became a compass that manifested across the different aspects of my submitted works, I noted its presence in the content, form, space, and narratives. In addition, I articulated how my practice developed and shifted over time, with my preoccupation with questions around life and its meaning growing stronger, including the underpinning themes and the creation of the works, as evidenced in how I drew on ideas from existential philosophy and the philosophy of sports.

I came to realise that *agon* in my works stems from an impulse to act against situations the characters/protagonists find themselves ‘thrown into’. This impulse particularly resonated with Heidegger’s concept of *thrownness*. Undergoing struggle over time to overcome limitations captures the essence of *agon* in my body of works. Working to overcome the situation the performers find themselves ‘thrown into’ activates *agon* as a mechanism of defeating their *thrownness*.

The core of crafting my performances is described through the creative strategies of ‘real people’, the visceral and arenas which demonstrate the activation of

agon across the different strands of my selected works, further revealing my choreographic intentions and signature. Drawing eclectically from the works of scholars and theorists such as Machon, Massey, Schulze, Garde and Mumford, Fischer, Acampora and Foucault, I carved a path through the creative strategies I used in my work for the activation of *agon*. These strategies were designed to create a syntax and a synergy for *agon* as a pathway to a meaningful, shared experience for performers and spectators alike. As such, I sought to activate *agon* in the belief that it held the potential to act as a portal through which spectators might access a kind of heightened awareness or visceral experience.

As a PhD by Public Works, it is the performance works themselves that form the contribution to knowledge, with this commentary accounting for how they contributed to the field of dance and performance practice. It can be said that dance theatre works often involve some form of conflict and struggle, expressed through embodied performance. As mentioned in my commentary, some of my artistic influences, such as Pina Bausch's *Tanztheater* and the European Dance Theatre in the eighties and nineties, featured conflict to express struggle in human relationships. A difference in my works is that I extracted and lifted conflict from the pool of human relationships and performance interactions on stage, and placed it centre stage, with my particular attention to the concept of *agon* evolving and maturing over time. The experience I gained working with conflict through my stage and sited performances provided me with ways working with communities in South Africa. This kind of performance work reached out to the local community and encompassed public engagement. As a result, I both honed *agon* into new contexts and embraced working from existing conflicts. My contribution extends to the academic community, as my approach in staging *agon* in these events provided a mechanism for academia to be part of the public engagement.

I have sought to push the spectators' and performers' awareness of the range of dimensions of *agon* by making it central, meaning that the works came to be about *agon* rather than *agon*, struggle, conflict and contest, being a creative device serving the narrative story of the work.

Agon - Boxing in the Ring is an example of a work that expanded beyond the dance medium to other areas and performance genres. Conceived as a hybrid featuring a sport activity performed by real athletes and including their pre-performance rituals as well as post-performances debates, this work in its scope can be considered as a particular contribution to the field of contemporary performance, both on an aesthetic and a social level. This work, and similarly *Polis*, contribute to theatrical modes implicating ‘the real’ and ‘realness’ in contemporary performance, adding to the practices such as those explored in the *Theatre of Real People* (Garde and Mumford, 2016) and as evident in immersive theatre forms.

By practising *agon* in my works I progressively went to the heart of *agon*: my works featured voices coming together to debate, to problematise and perhaps by doing this, to reconcile through conflict. The contribution of these works to knowledge also involves the aspect of hybridity in them whereby *agon* was activated and explored as a broader effort to grasp and to alleviate the tensions created between the academic, artistic, and social spaces I was part of.

The impact of my performances on diverse audiences around the globe arose from a consistent creative effort, an *agon* in the making, to keep addressing struggle as a shared, recognisable experience in a way that ‘human beings seek meaning in the struggle of existence...’ (Acampora, on Nietzsche, 2013: 3). In this regard, I staged *agon* as an effort to overcome limitations and attain a kind of self-actualisation/self-awareness.

Although it is not possible to have an insight into each spectator’s reception or experience of these performances, I can note that, overall, many of these works received positive reviews and built lasting collaborations with individuals and organisations. Perhaps the fact that I was able to be supported by different funding organisations, theatres, and educational institutions in different countries to keep producing works over thirty years can partly testify to the merit and impact of the body of works on audiences of diverse backgrounds that included people from all walks of life.

A reflection that had emerged from my tussling with the concept of *agon* in this commentary was that the embodied response and reception of audience members to my works also relates to some contrasts and contradictions that coexist in *agon*.

Besides striving for excellence and working hard to overcome one's own limitations, acts of cruelty and violence in conflict also featured in the works. Their presence was recognisable and felt as part of an *all-inclusive* human nature, by performers and audiences alike. Activating *agon* was a mechanism to rise above them. In addition, while the emphasis in a contest is on winning, overcoming, defeating, and surpassing, with *agon* becoming a means to a goal, in my works *agon* was activated as a way towards an awareness of living and a moment of self-actualisation beyond the confines of everyday life. By setting up agonists and their antagonists in an encounter, I used *agon* to encourage dialogues that sought connections. Paradoxically, performing contest and conflict in my works was designed to bind audiences.

Through making contrasts apparent, audience conceptions of what we are made of as humans and how we should live our lives was physically tested. And whether fighting and struggling releases us from challenges, or if, instead, making us plunge deeper into life's suffering can be debated, *agon* was staged as a meaningful act, which, especially in the later works, came to affirm and celebrate life.

I have used *agon* to reach a theatrical form that achieves an authentic expression through the content and context of a work becoming one. I activated *agon* by practising *agon*, not by thinking about it, but rather, *agon* in the creative practice and *agon* in performance mirroring one another. At times raw and messy, *agon* in my works remained alive by constantly shifting and adjusting to its surroundings and social contexts and acquiring new dimensions on the way. The works have moved and were moved by different people, audiences and collaborators, cultures, and places for some three decades. They embraced humanism and demonstrated resilience and survival, and maybe they rendered *agon* palpable and shared after all.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Credits and brief descriptions of works submitted.

A. De Profundis- Prolongations of Silence (2017)

Performance Credits

Pianist: Joanna Wicherek

Lighting Designer: Tersia Du Plessis

Costume: Ilka Lowe

Creative Collaborator (voice coaching, sound, light): Andrew Buckland

Chair for post-performance discussion: Dr. Anton Krueger

Usher performers: Carla Mostert, Mpumelelo

Supported by the Drama Department at Rhodes University South Africa and St Andrew's College

Description

Duration: 50 min

A piano recital at the St Andrew's Drill Hall by Joanna Wicherek, based on Wilde's words, set to the music composition of Frederic Rzewski (1994).

The Latin phrase *de profundis* means 'from the depths'. Oscar Wilde, wrote a long, protracted letter by this name from his prison cell in Reading, England. Found guilty of a homosexual relationship, he was sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labour. He was eventually permitted to write to his lover, Alfred Douglas, outlining his misery and sense of abject abandonment. This letter was later published, as *De Profundis* (1897).

Rzewski's adaptation of a long rhyming poem in ballad form, both explores the agonies of incarceration that actual prisoners feel when deprived of their freedom, and also, alludes to the psychological 'imprisonment' that people might experience when reduced to wretchedness by the circumstances of our own lives.

This performance adaptation of Rzewski's *De Profundis*, focused on developing the already existing scores of music and text into a more integral corporeal expression, in which the pianist's physical performance was developed and some autobiographical elements were added. Small parts of the original score were edited out and new additions were made within Rzewski's composition. In this sense, the composition was reimagined.

B. Agon – In the Ring (2014)

Performance Credits

Lighting Design and Technical Manager: Tersia Du Plessis Project Assistant: Hermien Potgieter

Theatre Administrator: Prarochna Rama
 Technical assistants: Vincent Rasana, Sekele Ralo, Thando Maurice Boxers: Mziwoxolo Ndwayana, Anele Beyi
 Coach: Thabang Hlalele
 Sports Psychologist: Greg Wilmot Referee: James Sey
 Ring Girl: Levern Botha Ringmaster: Graham Germond Auctioneer: Clint Moss
 Human Kinetics and Ergonomics MA students: Chloe Jager, Travis Steenekamp Physical Performers: Honours students, Drama Department Rhodes University Academics: Andrew Todd (HKE), Lindsay Kelland (Philosophy), Dr. Lisa Saville Young (Psychology), Dr. Joy Owen (Anthropology), Ann Christensen (Journalism), Professor Andrew Buckland (Drama) Craig Patterson (History) Tanya Poole & James Sey (Fine Arts)
 Auctioned artworks/ artist: Tanya Poole
 Video footage of Joza Boxing Gym: Mark Wilby Photographer: Aman Bloom

Funded by Lineages of Freedom, the South Africa Humanities Deans' Association (SAHUDA), and supported by Rhodes University.

Produced by ThinkFest! - National Arts Festival and supported by Rhodes University

Description

Duration: 60 min

An interdisciplinary work that brought sport and dance performance together into a hybrid form of theatre. The performance was part of the *AGON Conflict and Catharsis in Boxing and Performance* project, which included a mini colloquium, lectures, and workshops. The performance comprised of four parts: *Boxing Is...*, the staging of a boxing training session, including boxing rituals of preparation; *Dead ringer*, imagining a private moment in the life of the woman with the placard walking the boxing ring between each bout and announcing the next and including elements from the dancer's autobiography; *In the Ring*, the final boxing bout; *Aftermath*, a monologue by the referee about 'the death - wish in boxing' followed by two - minute presentations on boxing by academics who were invited inside the ring.

Funded by Lineages of Freedom, the South Africa Humanities Deans' Association (SAHUDA), and supported by Rhodes University.

C. Polis (2012)

Performance Credits

Debates ThinkFest: Anton Krueger, Film: Mark Wilby
 Dramaturge: Ford Evanson Sound designer: Corine Cooper
 Technical Manager: Jacques de Kock, Mark Wilby Production Manager: Nadine Joseph
 Stage Manager: Richard van Kerckoven Lighting Technician: Matshawndile Kesneni
 Ushers Performers: Tatsky Fatyi, Kanye Zulu, Erica Wertlen

The Border

Border Panellists: Professor Jeff Peires and Professor Julia Wells (history) Performers: Sophie Poole, Tristan Jacobs, Basil Mills, Robert Haxton, Ford Evanson, Erica Wertlen, Kanya Zulu

Images of Bones: Maureen de Jager Makhanda Canine Police Unit

The Arena

Arena Panellists: Richard Pithouse (politics), Professor Michael Whisson (Anthropology), Professor Pedro Tabensky (Philosophy), Ayanda Kota (Unemployment People's Movement), Professor Paul Alagidede (Economics), Jock McConnachie (Law) Historical Re-enactment: Basil Mills
 Performers: Erica Wertlen (pole dancer), Leonard Praeg (cellist), Basil Mills & Sigigla Ndumo (historical re-enactment)
 Blacksmith & Artilleryman: Steven Mills Sculpture: Warren Mills
 Museum Artefacts: Albany Museum (Fleur Way-Jones, Thabang Ntshobesi) Artefacts
 Security: Makhanda Military Police
 Film on Richard Pithouse: Michaela Hamilton & Debbie Potgieter

The Spring

Panelists: Professor Penny Bernard (anthropology), Mathia Chirombo (painter) Performers: Greg Wilmot (runner), Pasha Alden (blind oracle), Ivy Evanson, Kamva Ntapu, (children), Lotta Matambo, and Yemurai Matibe (singers)
 Artworks: Kesayne Reed

The Market

Panellists: Professor Gavin Keeton and Professor Geoff Antrobus (Economics) Priscilla Glover and the Graham College Boys' Choir, Kamva Ntapu (globe) Makhanda Informal Traders, Kanya Zulu, Errica Wertler, Greg Wilmot
 Cowhide visuals in the chapel: Leonnie and Rodney Yendall from Radway Green Farm

Produced by ThinkFest! - National Arts Festival and supported by Rhodes University (2012)

Description

Duration: 60 min per event

Polis was created for the bicentenary of Grahamstown (Makhanda), a small erstwhile frontier town founded during the colonial wars of South Africa. The work took place in a de-consecrated chapel and consisted of a series of four performance events, namely, *The Border*, *The Arena*, *The Spring*, and *The Market*, each interrogating the identity of the town from a different perspective. A fifth event entitled *The Cell* was canceled due to technical problems. *Polis* was a hybrid event that explored the fractured past of the particular town, as well as the forces shaping contemporary civic experience. On a different level, the *Polis* series experimented with ways in which knowledge is both represented and generated by performance.

The series used film, installation, choreography, music, fine art, and performance in conjunction with debates and panel discussions. It was a collaboration between –

singers, physical performers, musicians, fine artists as well as those working in digital media. It also involved politicians and lawyers, and academics working in a range of Departments at Rhodes University, as well as members of Makhanda's (Makhanda) community, including school children and teachers, therapists, informal and formal traders, members of the military, and the police services. Most of the performers in this event appeared as themselves, as participants in the ongoing drama of Makhanda.

D. Splinter in the Flesh (2010)

Performance Credits

Lighting Designer: Alekos Anastasiou
 Original Score & Sound Design: Stavros Gasparatos Dramaturge: Pete Brooks
 Set & Costume Designer: Zacharoula Ioannou
 Assistant Choreographers: Paul Blackman, Christina Gouzeli Weapons Trainer: Barry McGinlay
 Flamenco Footwork: La Joaquina Assistant Designer: Ioanna Nassiopoulou
 Performers: Kostas Antonatos, Paul Blackman, Azizaj Blenard, Christina Gouzeli, Stella Zannou, Jessica Henou, Giannis Karounis, La Joaquina
 Soprano: Vivianna Giannaki Photographer: Charis Alkiviadis

Commissioned by the Hellenic Dance Company Producer & Artistic Director: Pavlina Veremi

Description

Duration: 37 min

Finding themselves in a caged performance space, six performers were forced to face questions about how they should behave, why, and for whom. The work took as its starting point the idea that existence itself is an arena into which we are thrown at birth with no idea of either its rules or its function. Focusing on these key moral issues a densely layered symbolic performance landscape explored the dynamics between choices we make as conscious beings and that define us as individuals; whether to love or hate, to make art or to make war. A poetical exploration of what to do with the painful and beautiful gift of human consciousness, the splinter in the flesh.

E. In Praise of Folly (2005)

Performance Credits

Text and dramaturgy: Pete Brooks Lighting Designer: Mickey Mannion Set Designer: Gail Sneddon
 Sound Artist /Composer: Wajid Yaseen Costume Designer: Eleanor Park Vocalist: Maria Koripas
 Performers: Marc Brew, Bettina Carpi, Victoria Fox, Pedro Machado, Chisato Minamimura, Stine Nilsen & James O'Shea
 A Candoco Dance Company Commission Artistic Director: Celeste Daneker

Description

Duration: 30 min

In Praise of Folly was a satire inspired by the court of the Italian Renaissance, as a metaphor for the present civilization. The story in the work was based on a dialogue

between God and Lucifer about God's plan, a kind of Manichean approach to man's creation and suffering. The creation of man is ready to take place; a family argument follows, and Lucifer is expelled from heaven. The narrative spine is based on six short texts spoken live on stage by the performers. The ironic distance and emotional disbelief in the dialogue between the two God and Lucifer are juxtaposed with a forced neurosis physically manifested on stage. A dark painterly world on stage was lit in the technique of chiaroscuro. The role of the sound was to enhance the visual landscape; harmonies were distorted and drowned by sonic rounds resulting in an eerie soundscape of a lost paradise.

F. Wrestling an Angel

Part 2: *The Haunting of a Life* (2004)

Performance Credits

Lighting Designer & Production Manager: Michael Mannion Set Designer: Dick Bird
Sound Designer: Bruce Gilbert Costume Designer: Bellinda Ackerman Dramaturge: Brian Brady

Rehearsal Director: Susan Sentler Puppet Master: Gillie Robic

Performers: Sonia Rafferty, Emma Redding, Danal Guy, Louisa d' Ambrosio, Shane Irwin, Andreas Constantinou, Louis Gallo Mudara, Marie Gabrielle Rotie, Sayaka Tamagawa, Minami Tamagawa, Darryl Sheppard, Gerard Bell, Lily Paine, Sara Chin, Daphne de Baritault, Colin McLean, Gladys Hillman, Geoff McGarry, Elsie McGarry

Trinity Laban Third Year Students (2004): Nicholas Barratt, Alexandra Baybutt, Merete Dam, Francesco Faraone, Maurice George, Russel Harris, Christina Jensen, Gry Lomvo, Allan Mc Intyre, Rhona Nolasco, Katja Nyqvist, Saskia Oidtmann, John Slade, Tania Soubry, Line Storm, Ida Uvaas, Laura Weston, Maisie Whitehead, Anna Davvanzo

Photographer: Fred Whisker

Funded by the Arts Council of England Produced by Judi McCartney / Independence

Description

Duration: 60 min

Wrestling an Angel took the audience on a physical and emotional voyage through the complex landscape of the human body and mind in the settings of surgery and slaughter, namely an Old Operating Theatre and Museum and a disused abattoir in central London. Through a promenade performance and a cast of over thirty performers, dream-like images and fascinating characters haunted the spaces as the audiences explored these buildings. In small groups of twenty, the audience experienced the brutality of science on the body reflected in the movement of the dancers and enhanced by an eerie industrial landscape.

Appendix 2. Visual compilation of work components

A. De Profundis -Prolongations of Silence

Duration : 50min

Location: The Drill Hall Theatre, St Andrew's College, Makhanda South Africa (2017)

Viewing Notes

The recording is from the first evening of the performance. The sound could be clearer. At one point, there is a dog barking and a church bell ringing in the background.

The trailer gives a performance overview. For a closer viewing, I have included four short extracts as performance highlights. Their selection is based on the relationship between the following: Wilde's text and Rzewski's music composition; Wilde's letter and the pianist's autobiographical signature; Rzewski's original composition and the addition of new choreographic and musical elements; the pianist's role, primarily as a musician and, additionally, as a physical performer. It is advised that the viewer listens to the work through headphones.

Video recorded and edited by the Journalism and Media Studies Department at Rhodes University, South Africa.

Content

- 01-Trailer. Edited by the pianist as promo material. 7min
 - 02-Full work. 50 min
 - Short extracts
 - 03- at 08.40 - stepping on the piano (1.26')
 - 04- at 17.10 - middle section (4.36')
 - 05- at 32.00 - page-turner (5.19')
 - 06- at 46.40 - the end (3.51')
 - Supportive material
- Programme notes. Newspaper review

B. Agon – Boxing in the Ring

Duration: 60min

Location: Box Theatre, Rhodes Drama Department, Makhanda, South Africa.

The performance *Agon –In the Ring* was part of a larger umbrella of events entitled *Conflict and Catharsis in Boxing and Performance*. These events consisted of discussions, physical workshops, and lecture-demonstration on boxing and performance.

Viewing Notes

The video footage is from the first evening of the performance. It is unedited and ‘raw’. It was filmed for documentation. The trailer aims to bring together highlights of the event promo material. The short extracts are examples from the first part of the performance on boxing training and preparation routines. They belong to a work in progress, leading to *Agon –In the Ring*. There was little technical production preceding the event. This is the unrehearsed performance of the boxing bout, including the ringmaster, auctioneer, referee, drama students, and invited academics, each of them for the first time. The Honours drama students demonstrate a part of their boxing training with the coach; this had formed a part of their course curriculum. The work made allowances for informal performance interventions.

As sound in the footage is unrefined, either too quiet or too loud, it is best experienced in a medium to low volume.

Filmed by Mark Wilby, for documentation.

Content

- 01 - Trailer: Short impression of the full work (4’)
 - 02 - Full work: Footage unedited (50’)
 - Short Extracts
 - 03 – at 02.28’ - boxing hand- bandages (2.22’)
 - 04 – at 10.45 - boxing shadow fight (3.04’)
 - Supportive material
- Programme notes
Interview from Total Theatre Magazine UK (2009)

C. Polis

The Border, The Arena, The Spring, The Market

Duration: 60 min (each event)

Location: The Nun’s Chapel, St Peter’s Complex, Makhanda, South Africa

Viewing notes

A short introduction of *Polis* is narrated by Professor Krueger organizer of the *Polis* discussions. The filming of each event took place on the day of the performance for documentation. The raw recording was edited as separate trailers. *Polis* was part of the ThinkFest! program of the National Arts Festival in South Africa, a category allocated to talks. Designed as a hybrid, experimental event, *Polis* combined discussions with performances. Due to the unpredictable nature of the performances, the informal video recording and close camera position, the footage lacks wide shots that reveal the spatial design and structure of the events. Also, there is the issue of faint voices. A separate extract of *Polis – Spring*, repeated later as part

of *Interdisciplinary Encounters*, is included and is entitled *Synaesthesia*. The original features of the runner, the film, the song, and the audience configuration were transposed on stage. Its inclusion here is to assist with a clearer viewing of the spatial design and structure of the work.

A fifth performance entitled *Cell* was canceled due to technical reasons. *Polis* was filmed and edited by Mark Wilby

Content

- 00 - Introduction of *Polis* events (1.07')
- Trailers
 - 01 - Border (15.49')
 - 02 - Arenas (3.58')
 - 03 - Spring (15.17')
 - 04 - Market (8.54')
- Supportive trailer for *Polis - Spring*
 - 05 – Spring. *Synaesthesia* (4.12')
- Supportive material
- Programme
- Reviews & testimonials
- Overview
- CD sleeve - visual detail

D. Splinter in the Flesh

Duration: 37 min

Location: Athens Concert Hall, Athens, Greece (2010)

Viewing notes

The footage is from the preview of the performance, broadcasted by Greek television. Two short extracts from the work have been captured as examples of the inclusion of elements of other dance genres and types of performers, as discussed/highlighted in the written commentary. The footage of the chef carving meat is from an earlier version of the work. Its inclusion here is due to a technical reason, its purpose is to assist the viewer with a clear close-up image of the performer and his act.

Video recording: EPT (Public Broadcasting Corporation of Greece)

Content

- 01 - Full work. 37 min
- Short Extracts.
- 02 - at 18.15' - Chef- meat
- 03 - at 20.20' - Footwork
- Supportive material Programme notes

E. In Praise of Folly

Duration: 30 min.

Location: Contact Theatre Manchester & Queen Elizabeth Hall, London UK (2005 - 2006)

Viewing Notes

The recording of the full work is from the last technical rehearsal before the first performance at Contact Theatre, in Manchester UK. The footage is raw and unedited and with it having been filmed for archiving, the final rehearsal had as its purpose the making of technical notes for the performance. Sounds of children and voices in the background were unavoidable disruptions of the rehearsal. The table scene, as a short extract, is a close-up from another rehearsal. It relates to an example discussed in the written commentary and its selection is based on assisting the viewer through a closer frame.

Filmed by Candoco Dance Company.

Content

- 01 - Trailer. Edited by Candoco and including interviews (4.4')
- 02 - Full work. 30 min
- Short Extract
- 03 – at table scene (1.40)
 - Supportive material
- Company notes (Candoco)
- Reviews.

F. Wrestling an Angel

Duration: 60 min

Location: A disused abattoir in Clerkenwell, London UK (2004)

Viewing notes

The trailer captures parts of the performance in the abattoir, from beginning to end, and was filmed through a moving camera. The footage was made to offer the viewer a visual impression of the narrative world and design of this promenade performance.

There is little documentation left behind from this large-scale, site-specific work. The footage is from the second part of *Wrestling an Angel*, entitled *The Haunting of a Life*, as an autonomous event. This second part took place in an abattoir site in Clerkenwell London UK. The first part of the work entitled *The Dying Fall* took place in the Old Operating Theatre Museum in London Bridge. There is no visual material from this first part of the performance and the first part is not included in the submitted works.

Video documentation by Dionisis Tsaftaridis. Edited by Artsadmin

Appendix 3. Choreochronicle of Works (2000 -2020)

The productions stated below are a selection from an extensive list of works created in the last twenty years.

- *Letter from Oki* (2019 - 2020). Commissioned, by the Integrated Dance Company Kyo. Amacho Theatre in Oki Islands and Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre, Amacho and Tokyo, Japan
- *Watermob* (Aug 2019). Commissioned, by Rhodes University. Site-specific interventions and flashmob, to raise drought awareness. Makhanda, South Africa
- *Ekkyklema* (March 2019). Commissioned by the Integrated Company Kyo. Metropolitan Theatre, Tokyo, Japan
- *DNA* (September 2018). Commissioned by First Physical Company, Drama Department Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa
- *Muse*: (June 2018). Commissioned by Integrated Company Kyo, the Deaf Theatre Company Totto, No Iriguchi Company and received support from the Agency of Cultural Affairs in Japan and the Tottori Midsummer Festival. Tottori and Tokyo, Japan
- *Built-in obsolescence* (Apr- 2018). Commissioned by Roehampton University, London UK
- *Ethics* (Jan 2018). Commissioned by *Edge*, at The Place, London, UK
- *November* (Nov 2017). Commissioned by The Ministry of the Fine Arts, in Mexico City, Theatre of Mexico City University, Mexico City, Mexico
- *October* (Oct 2017). Commissioned by Theatre in Motion, Rhodes University Drama Department, Makhanda, South Africa
- *De Profundis - Prolongations of Silence* (2017). Independent project. Supported by Rhodes University. Drill Hall, St' Andrew College, Makhanda, South Africa
- *A soft target* (2016). Commissioned by *Verve*, at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance, Leeds, UK
- *Agon-In the Ring* (2014). Funded by The South Africa Humanities Deans' Association. Supported by Rhodes University. Box Theatre, Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa
- *Existential* (2014). A BA3 commission by Trinity Laban. The first stage of a three-fold project on the concepts of freedom and emotional branding. London, UK
- *Taller than Liberty* (2014). Commissioned by First Physical Company, Drama Department Rhodes University, and Zomba! Dance Festival. KwaZulu-Natal (KNT), South Africa

- *Alchemy* (2012). Commissioned for the 2012 Cultural Olympics and presented at the Purcell Room South Bank, in collaboration with visual artist Rachel Gadsden and the Unlimited Global Alchemy. London, UK
- *Polis* (2012). Curated and directed in collaboration with the team of a dramaturg, a writer, and a film maker. Funded by the National Arts Festival and Rhodes University. The Nun' Chapel, St Peter's Complex. Makhanda, South Africa
- *Wreckage* (2011). Choreographed for the National Arts Festival. Makhanda, South Africa
- *Topos* (2011). Conceptualised and curated as a series of site-specific performance events in collaboration with the community and selected departments of Rhodes University. Makhanda, South Africa
- *Interdisciplinary Encounters* (2011-2013). Conceptualised curated and directed as a series of monthly events entitled on behalf of the Drama Department at Rhodes University. Makhanda, South Africa
- *Strand* (2011). Commissioned by Infecting the City Festival as part of the festival theme, *Treasure Hunt*. Cape Town, South Africa
- *Meet Market* (2010). Commissioned by Infecting the City Festival as part of the festival theme, *Human Rite and Rituals*. Cape Town, South Africa
- *Knots* (2010). Commissioned by the Summer Dance Festival of Lemesos. Sited performance, Lemesos, Cyprus
- *Splinter in the Flesh* (2010). Commissioned by the Hellenic Dance Company Athens Concert Hall, Athens, Greece
- *In Preparation* (2009-2010). Performance-led research. International Association of Dance and Medicine conference (IADAMS), Birmingham, UK and, Washington DC, US
- *Fight Club* (2009). Commissioned for Homelands Festival. Research and Development fund to investigating boxing. Chisenhale Dance Space, London, UK
- *Splinter in the Flesh* (2008). Commissioned by the British Council, the Isadora Duncan Foundation, and later the Hellenic Dance Company. Performed at the Isadora Duncan Foundation and, the Foundation of the Hellenic World, Athens, Greece
- *Listening Post* (2008). Commissioned by the Science Museum. Performance response to the Museum's installations. Part of a six-month artistic residency at the London Science Museum, London, UK
- *Spaces Between* (2007). Commissioned by the South Bank for the re-opening of the Royal Festival Hall, South Bank, London UK
- *In Praise of Folly* (2005). Commissioned by Candoco Company. Contact Theatre, Manchester and Queen Elizabeth Hall, London UK
- *Wrestling an Angel* (2004). Funded by the Arts Council of England. The Abattoir, 187-211 St John Street, London EC1, UK

- *The Windows were Walled* (2003). Commissioned by the Greenwich Dance Agency, for the London Open House. Greenwich Borough Hall, London, UK
- *House of Kurtz* (2002). Independent project on Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*. Master Shipwright's House in Deptford, London as part of London Open House. Funded by the Arts Council of England. London, UK
- *F-Stop* (2002). Independent project. Based on Samuel Becketts's plays. Greenwich Borough Hall and The Battersea Arts Centre, London UK.

