

## **EChO: The Wellcome exhibition and Atomos – traces, texts and tales of a journey through dance**

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It is rare for the thinking and making processes of a choreographer to be quite so much in the public eye as Wayne McGregor. As one of the UK's most respected and admired choreographers as well as a significant UK 'export', McGregor has been both a willing subject for observation and experimentation and has in turn contributed much to those experts who are interested in researching imagery, creativity and other aspects of human agency through the activities of choreographers and dancers. Their combined work is generating valuable knowledge and insights for the wider dance research community as well as for dance practitioners. The AHRC-funded EChO project (Enhancing Choreographic Objects) has extended this work by providing another concentrated period of observation and development, creating and then tracking a complex, multi-layered project that has focused on the enhancement of a previous 'choreographic object' the 'choreographic language agent' (CLA) that was developed to enable McGregor and his dancers to construct abstract images that according to dancer Alex Whitley 'augmented the imaginative process'<sup>1</sup> and created much more complicated geometries in the body that the imagination alone could not construct.

EChO has provided focused time for creative development and reflection by an interdisciplinary community of experts, weaving together the knowledge of artists, researchers, social scientists and cognitive scientists. Initially, EChO set out to do something 'with' the original CLA that would 'enhance' it rather than anything new for McGregor to use in the studio as part of his creative process. Following the original EChO project proposal, the aim was to make the CLA into something more akin to the "objects" that were the focus of the earlier AHRC-funded network 'Choreographic Objects: traces and artifacts of physical intelligence'<sup>2</sup>; as things to convey something about the knowledge making process in dance to public audiences. But in a series of interviews with the original project team<sup>3</sup> it became clear that McGregor was still interested in something he could use in the studio and that might provide another form for the 'entity' that he had expressed a desire for. Further discussions revealed that the original CLA had lacked agency and autonomy. Another kind of agent was needed, something that participated in the studio as another creative contributor, without the dancers having to leave the dance space to work at a screen with a computer programme. Moreover, it was decided that the agent should somehow have a more embodied presence in its dimensions and material form, and thereby encourage a responsive interaction in movement terms.

As James Leach, anthropologist and Principal Investigator for EChO observed, the CLA needed a body, and though not a representation of a body, a body that would relate to other bodies and therein elicit a response, a kinaesthetic response that would be material for choreography. What emerged was '*Becoming*' a 3D screen-based art work that was on human scale and was goal directed, programmed to have an autonomous presence. Creators of *Becoming*,

artists Marc Downie and Nick Rothwell, described how they wanted *Becoming* to 'earn its place' by embodying intention, effort, weight, gravity and friction<sup>4</sup>.

*'Digital artists want to build systems that surprise them. Choreographers are the same. They want to build systems and to work with them to see what emerges that can be crafted into something that elicits an emotional response. I think there's a kind of natural affinity there'. Nick Rothwell – 2001<sup>5</sup>*

The aim of EChO was also to develop tools to assist the viewer, so audiences would have information that could enhance their appreciation of McGregor's work in performance. In parallel with the making of Wayne McGregor and Random Dance's new work, *Atomos*, premiering at Sadler's Wells in October 2013, an exhibition was developed for opening the new space in the Wellcome Collection; *Thinking with the body: Mind and movement in the work of Wayne McGregor / Random Dance*. The exhibition was devised to provide audiences with insights to McGregor's choreographic career and current concerns, and bring together the expert contributions of those who have worked closely with McGregor and his dancers, including Scott deLahunta (Director, R-Random Dance), Phil Barnard, David Kirsh, Alan Blackwell, Nick Rothwell and Marc Downie.

Viewers were invited to 'find out more about choreographic practice and to contemplate how mind, body and movement interact in each of us'. The exhibition also included a public showing of *Becoming*, providing visitors with an opportunity to discover more about the thinking behind *Becoming*, the history of its production and its role in the making of the new work, *Atomos*. 3D glasses were available so visitors could replicate the experience the dancers would have when working with *Becoming* in the studio. Realising that McGregor was taking the idea of *Becoming* seriously for his process of making *Atomos*, Leach described how it was recognised that what could be shown at the Wellcome "would be a true insight into what happened in the studio in both senses – as a way of experiencing 'kinaesthetic response' in one's own body, and seeing a real part of the studio process. The (original) CLA was a good way of demonstrating something about the kind of operation the brain might undertake in solving movement problems, but there was something else it didn't give access/insight into – the body as a presence and elicitor of movement"<sup>6</sup>.

Visitors were encouraged to attend both the exhibition and the performance, offering the linked events as a mutually illuminating experience although tracking whether visitors did in fact attend both, and in what order, was not easy to do<sup>7</sup>.

The exhibition, carefully curated, was designed to take the visitor on a journey, revealing the rich content and many dimensions of McGregor and Random's work, presented through a multimedia series of displays. The visitor was able to listen to recordings of McGregor, his creative collaborators and the various scientists talking about their engagement in the work and how their interventions provide a filter to help dancers break a convention or habit. Images and films tracked the dancers in rehearsal and performance. The recently

published and beautifully designed educational toolkit by Magpie Studio, *Mind and Movement*, derived from 'Choreographic Thinking Tools' was also represented through a multisensory interactive installation using sound and visuals.

A single room, organised in cinema format, was dedicated to a film of the dancers in the studio rehearsing for *Atomos*. The darkened room and large screen allowed the visitor to attend to what is usually a private rehearsal process (although it is acknowledged that this is a carefully edited film in its own right, beautifully shot by artist and filmmaker David Bickerstaff, who was hired by Wellcome to work as part of the curation team, so not quite 'fly on the wall' as the viewer might be if witnessing the rehearsal in real time). The film provides an unusually honest and intimate connection with the dancers and their efforts in working through the sometimes impossibly complex movement tasks and challenges set by McGregor. Viewing the dancers work through demanding holds and lifts, frenetic gestural pathways and physical counterpoint is compelling, as is their close connections with each other<sup>8</sup>. The glimpse of anthropologist James Leach on film, quietly bearing witness, reminds us of our own viewing position and how our perceptions of dance are primarily produced through our visual sense, mediated in this case through the film screen. The film shows clearly the sweat, the physical effort, and the inevitable imperfections of the rehearsal process as the dance gradually takes shape. The dancers work through tasks, responding to *Becoming* who/which quietly and without effort joins the rehearsal. They experiment with movement phrases, discarding, refining and at times working collectively to devise a duet or group section, and always, it seems, pushing themselves towards their physical limits and trying to undo or challenge their own movement habits. Although there is much to admire in the dancers in their honed technique and extraordinary physicality the film allowed us to see that human frailty and vulnerability are just beneath the surface of any creative process.

The exhibition concludes with a 'take home' information artefact that recounts the six themes of the exhibition ('Tracing Collaboration', 'Choreographic Thinking', 'Physical Thinking', 'Becoming', 'Seeing Sound' and 'Dance Making'). It is designed for the visitor to construct a paper object following instructions as an exercise to 'tease hand and eye' and thereby in a small way connect with the cognitive processes involved in the creative activity of dance making.

What follows is a closer focus on one of the first exhibits within the exhibition as a whole, the *time-line*, which presents a dynamic, multi-level representation of McGregor's work since 2000. It draws together diverse information and communicates the many layers and intersections of his choreographic career. The density of information is at first quite daunting; there is a lot to absorb. But the textual mapping of an artist's career, brought alive through thoughtful design and selected imagery is highly effective. Spread across a long section of wall it invites the visitor to walk along the length of the time-line, making physical the journey that the time-line charts. The description at the start explains the various strands and how they interlink, and emphasises how one strand charts the development of an autonomous replicant towards the making of *Atomos*. We

are also told that 'McGregor's own words are at the heart of the time-line narrative'.

What is perhaps the first thing to notice is the labour involved in bringing together this time-line. Created by designer Kevin Mount working in collaboration with Scott deLahunta, the time-line is assembled to provide a rich resource that skilfully organises a body of work as a form of hypertext. Mount devised the time-line structure and organisation, selecting the images and devising the concept of the alignment of McGregor's various activities. deLahunta who has a close working relationship with Random Dance over many years and since 2008 as Director of R-Research, joined the process towards the end and developed the research thread through the time-line<sup>9</sup>. deLahunta has developed a prestigious programme of research over many years that has evolved in conjunction with McGregor's choreographic projects, informing, probing and reflecting on the dance making process. He has been pivotal in bringing together the community of researchers who have collaborated with McGregor in various ways, and who have commented on his work, have drawn on their observations to problematize theories of perception and formulate new theories based on discoveries about the dancer's making, rehearsing and performance practices. The time-line assimilates this diverse range of insights and becomes an archival record of McGregor's career to date.

*'I don't find the interventions problematic. I don't hold with the old fashioned idea that if you explain away creativity you are not going to be creative..... It's like having this cognitive toolkit that you can put with your choreographic toolkit to extend your possibilities' McGregor (2009)<sup>10</sup>*

The time-line is primarily a visual map; a feat of information organisation and design. Text and image are blended to be mutually supportive. Photographs, thumbnail images and sketches are aligned with, or are layered beneath, text boxes that describe the range of performance projects and other activities. There are also extracts from programmes and press reviews. The voices of many involved in McGregor's career are included as quotes and conversations. It thus describes the interrelationships between those who work with McGregor as part of a wider community of practice, revealing the impact of different disciplinary viewpoints on his choreographic projects. Combined together, the time-line provides a multi-vocal, multi-perspective artefact that demonstrates the dynamic structures that underpin the work; structures that comprise people, institutions, traditions, discourses and research frameworks.

Activities are organised above and below a central date line; some well chosen images, sketches from McGregor's own notebooks and textual designs bleed across to connect what might otherwise appear to be disparate events. Details of meetings, workshops and labs that stimulated a new project, research intervention or other study period are positioned beneath the line, then further below are dates of publications relating to the work as it developed. The dates of all McGregor's performance projects together with brief descriptions are detailed above the line. At any one point on the line it is therefore possible to identify the seeds of a new project, the connections between different activities,

which might be primarily (although rarely limited to) creative and/or geographical, research communities. The synchronic and diachronic organisation shows how McGregor has developed and sustained a unique signature practice within an aesthetic sphere in which several traditions (including ballet and contemporary dance) combine, and are frequently deconstructed and reconstructed. It also shows how an artist's career is developed through the support from, and interactions with, a wide number of other experts. We read about how his work is studied and its potential for generating a body of critical literature *about* the work because of the information provided in the time-line. At the individual item level it enriches our knowledge about each choreographic project.

Several aspects 'jump out' to me from the time-line. First is the rate at which McGregor has made work; over a period since 2002 he has choreographed 43 works for a range of dance companies. Another is the increasing attention given to McGregor's work from those working beyond dance who have collaborated with him and whose responses are included in the time-line, including leading artists, composers, scientists, architects and so on. The confluence of art and science and the convergence of different writing registers and languages offers a fascinating insight to how a narrative that is particular to McGregor but which resonates with much contemporary theatrical dance, is shaped and formed. Relating to the language that evolves through the time-line is McGregor's naming of his works. Titles are often playful inventions or conjunctions, frequently drawn from computing and science lexicons suggesting something experimental and elemental but rarely evoking anything lyrical or poetic. Titles such as *Symbiont(s)*, *Aeon*, *digito1*, *Carbon Life*, *Sulphur 16*, *Skindex*, *Renature*, *Limen*, *Qualia*, *AtaXia*, *Xenathra*, and *Undance* – amongst many, reflect his curiosity about scientific theories and structures, and then *Atomos*, though not in any way a conclusion to his career, seems to reach towards something primal in his reference to the atom as basic unit of matter.

*'I'm immersed in the language of artificial intelligence, its particular syntax and grammar, its algorithms and evolutionary dynamics, its discourse, and it is from here that the first phase of Entity for the stage will emerge'. Wayne McGregor, speaking about Entity, 2008<sup>11</sup>.*

The time-line also requires the visitor's time; time to study it in depth and time to think about what it tells us that we wouldn't know otherwise. Much like any archival project, the introduction explains that this is not a 'full picture' so it inevitably raises questions of authority. Constructing a narrative requires selection and editorial decisions by the designer/s who sift through the many documents so some things will be left out, whilst other aspects are made more visible, prioritised and emphasised.

Placed at the beginning of the exhibition the time-line stimulates questions that might provide a guide for the visitor through the rest of the exhibition. It is also valuable to return to the time-line again after seeing the rest of the exhibition. Armed with more knowledge of McGregor's working practices and the work of his collaborators, the time-line becomes another valuable site for demonstrating

how choreography is a 'thinking system'; a distributed way of making work both inside the studio with his own dancers (relying on their creative input) and in the diverse artistic collaborations he sets up in the context of any new creation. The time-line makes this explicit and is simultaneously another kind of thinking system, producing a model for how to map complexity and the dialogues across subject domains. Moreover, the time-line reveals a wealth of information that might be otherwise hard to uncover. We learn about McGregor's proclivities and preferences for particular working methods. We find new correspondences and connections between people and projects, key events and conversations that led to a new phase of work. Information about source materials sits alongside the influences and impact of particular institutional structures and the ways in which other knowledge infuses his work. Each work emerges as a site of disruption or productive contamination and helps to place his work within a broader artistic/intellectual/community. Viewed within the context of the exhibition, the time-line also participates in a sonic collision of different voices; snatches of recordings of McGregor's collaborators spilling in from the rest of the exhibition echo through the timeline. The same voices reach out from the text so there are moments of surprising interruptions or connections.

Positioned within the exhibition as a whole and created during the process of creating *Atomos* and its related '*Becoming*' the time-line also prompts thought about its impact on McGregor and whether seeing his own past presented in this way influences or changes his current practice. *Atomos* seems to invite a similar reference to distillation and whilst the work embodies McGregor's familiar style in its movement and structural complexity, and the incorporation of digital design (3D screens and costumes) I detected a softer, more reflective quality that arrived through the dance/sound relationship and that conjured up a world that is more humane and vulnerable than is present in McGregor's previous work – although I acknowledge that my time spent viewing the dance in rehearsal in the exhibition may have influenced this reading. It is as if the opportunity to document and share his creative journey has allowed McGregor to observe himself 'from the outside'. Seeing him-self at work means that others see him too in a way that has not been possible before. We also hear him at work in the exhibition, talking about his process, expressing his curiosities. He is a quick thinker and a quick talker, urgent in his desire to create. The general speed of his processing results in rapid, densely layered movement vocabulary. Dancers are asked to push beyond what is comfortable, beyond their habits, always striving for the 'just beyond'. Nothing stays still or in one place for long. The time-line captures what is a prolific career in constant motion. Perhaps it is bearing witness to his own work that has encouraged him to find a structure in the performance of *Atomos* that makes space for more time, to allow moments to settle and reverberate.

The time-line leads seamlessly onto the 'Process and Concept Tracking' (PACT) documentation that emerges from a series of conversations between McGregor and cognitive scientist Phil Barnard since 2010. The PACT corpus captures an extended process of mind mapping, providing access to a detailed analysis of a dancer's thinking and making process. McGregor is quoted in PACT as explaining how 'Concept tracking has allowed me to understand the mechanics of some of

my own process'. Whilst the text is even denser than that within the time-line the PACT is made more tangible partly through the organisation into columns of text that incorporate colours and lines to visually connect concepts across time, and partly by charting its development through the time-line itself.

Together, the time-line and PACT combine to offer an engaging view of a complex matrix of different knowledges and expert practices with many entry points that enable the visitor to delve into questions about how ideas are sourced in dance, and how an artist navigates through and draws upon the expertise of those who study his work. Whilst particular to McGregor and Random Dance the time-line and PACT provide a compelling insight to the intricate and multifaceted processes involved in dance making. As such it contributes to a growing fascination for accessing artists' procedures and a parallel increasing willingness by artists to share the many aspects of their making process. Viewed alongside *Becoming*, which simultaneously reveals yet more about a making process whilst providing a digital substitute for the corporeal dancer, these exhibits go a long way to help audiences appreciate the complexities of dance.

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<sup>1</sup> Whitley made this comment during the EChO Seminar at the Lilian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells, on October 3 2013, see: <http://www.sadlerswells.com/whats-on/2013/EChO-Seminar>.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Choreographic Objects; traces and artifacts of physical intelligence' project was funded through the AHRC Beyond Text programme, see: <http://projects.beyondtext.ac.uk/choreographicobjects/index.php>.

<sup>3</sup> This series of interviews were conducted by James Leach and constituted the core research evidence for what was to develop within EChO

<sup>4</sup> This comment was made during the EChO Seminar at the Lilian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells, on October 3 2013, see: <http://www.sadlerswells.com/whats-on/2013/EChO-Seminar>.

<sup>5</sup> Extract from the timeline exhibit.

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication 1/12/13. Leach also explained that 'the fact he [McGregor] took up the offer was unexpected, and that he wanted it for *Atomos* made it urgent, and somewhat risky. But it was attractive as an idea because of my hypothesis that there is something about the 'knowledge' made and worked with (as material, as I came to later call it) in his choreography that was not captured by the CLA'. It is also important to note that McGregor realised that one screen on human scale was not going to be effective on stage so the earlier thought that *Becoming* might appear on stage in the performance of *Atomos* was abandoned in favour of it finding its home within the rehearsal studio.

<sup>7</sup> A series of interviews with visitors was conducted by PhD candidate, Hetty Blades, which might offer some insight to visitor attendance.

<sup>8</sup> I found myself spending a long time in this room and noticed that others did the same, perhaps because of the seats that encouraged a longer attention, but for me it was the film itself that was so captivating.

<sup>9</sup> deLahunta described how Mount sifted through all of McGregor's notebooks from the last 15 years of work to select the content for the time-line. In the final three weeks of the process, deLahunta relocated to Dartington where he and Mount sat on the dance floor originally built for Kurt Jooss, and visited by Laban, in Warren House, for an intense collaborative process. It was then that he developed the research thread for the time-line (personal communication; 17 November 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Extract from the time-line exhibit.

<sup>11</sup> Extract from the time-line exhibit.