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**SEEING BEYOND
SIGHT/WATCHING
THINGS
YOU CANNOT SEE**

A PHOTOGRAPHER AND CHOREOGRAPHER TALK ABOUT TRANSLATION

AN INTERVIEW WITH TONY DEIFELL BY ANTONIA CRAIGE

For my senior project as a dance major at Wesleyan University, I made a fifteen-minute piece, *Dance with Eyes Closed*, for twelve dancers who wore blindfolds during the dance-making process. I had four initial goals: (1) to facilitate a safe, satisfying, and stimulating experience for my dancers; (2) to examine aesthetic assumptions about what makes a “good” dance; (3) to study the idea of a “visual aesthetic”; and (4) to create a performance that demands a different way of seeing for the audience.

“Watching things you cannot see” became a guiding phrase that encapsulated my ideas about viewing dance created without sight. I wanted the audience to “see beyond” the movements before their eyes and search for deeper layers of meaning by empathizing with the dancers’ eyes-closed experience. As dancers, how does the way we use our senses affect the way the audience experiences the dance? If an audience is open to this sensory reordering, they may experience different sorts of dancing as “good.”

The performance consisted of structured improvisation and some set movements taken from our experiential process. It began with a ritualized closing of the eyes and ended by opening the eyes. I wanted the blindness to be understood as a choice—a way of accessing different sensations, perceptions, and movements—not as a handicap or gimmick.

One section illustrates the difference between learning through language and “scanning” (a light brushing of hands over another dancer to get an idea of the movement) and learning just through language. Two dancers perform a phrase while describing their actions. A second pair models learning through scanning and listening, while a third pair tries to replicate the experience just by interpreting the language. Visually, the groups appear quite different. Who is doing it “right”? Who is doing it “wrong”? Who is doing it better? Who’s to say?

In the end, we sought a balance between a presentation of the “blind aesthetic” that results from dancers moving with their eyes closed, and experiments toward more performativity and spatial clarity to help the audience “see.” My experience making these decisions and communicating my desires to the dancers was one of the most interesting parts of the research. While writing my project essay, a new phrase began to strike a chord with me: I began to think of myself and the dancers as *translators of experience*. Our objective—to translate nonvisual experiences into an intelligible visual language that an audience could enjoy. We wanted the audience to “come to us” by watching empathically, but found that we could “go toward them” by keeping their visual experience in mind as well.

Halfway through the process, I discovered Tony Deifell’s book,

[opposite] “Frances took lots of close-ups of her eyes. Many looked cool—blown out, out of focus—and she had beautiful eyes, so we asked her why she did it. Turns out that because she was partially sighted, she liked the sensation of the flash going off next to her eye.” —Tony Deifel



Dancers on the Bubble Wrap in Craigie's *Dance with Eyes Closed* at Wesleyan University, April 2009.



Dancers [left to right]: Spencer Garrod, Sam Sherman, and Noa Wotton in Toni Craigie's *Dance with Eyes Closed* at Bessie Schönberg Dance Studio, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, April 2009.

I had a few practical dilemmas to solve: In a small space with many dancers performing in the round, how could I avoid an overly cluttered dance? How would the dancers know where the edge of the dancing space was? One idea solved both problems. I bought 200 feet of Bubble Wrap. We taped it in a big oval—dancers stayed inside, audience outside. I organized the dance as a series of overlapping small-group interactions. A dancer not involved in the center space crawled slowly around on the Bubble Wrap, staying out of the way while providing auditory clues—pop, pop, pop—to the dancers in the main space about their proximity to the edge of the dancing space.

—AC

video stills © Aaron Freedman

(cont'd)

Seeing Beyond Sight, a collection of photographs taken by visually impaired students in his photography class at the Governor Morehead School for the Blind in Raleigh, North Carolina. After describing his teaching methods and philosophy in the introduction, Deifell presents the photos in five groups—distortion, refraction, reflection, transparency, and illuminance—based on how we “see” (or know) in the broadest sense. “Watching things you cannot “see,” “seeing beyond sight”—the conceptual similarities blew me away. I wrote Tony an excited email requesting an interview. I wanted to understand how he thought of his role and to compare our processes. The interview gave me new language to understand my role, my dancers’ role, and how projects like these can be vehicles for learning by expanding the way people see.

—Antonia Craigie

MAY 10, 2009: PHONE INTERVIEW

Antonia Craigie: *How did the phrase “seeing beyond sight” come to you?*

Tony Deifell: The initial teaching project at the Morehead School for the Blind was called Sound Shadows and focused on a mixed audio/visual metaphor aimed at the participants of the program. When explaining composition, we would try to draw on things they knew from their own experiences of the world, particularly around audio. We talked about composition in terms of the quality of light in an image and tried to make this concept understandable by drawing a parallel with sound. If you have music in stereo, where would you put the speaker? Straight at you? One on either side? You want to separate them so that you can hear the contrast in what is going on. You can draw the parallel to light. If you have light coming straight on, it is going to be fairly flat, just like audio can be flat. But if you have it coming from the side, like from a window, it will throw shadows and add depth in the same way that stereo adds depth to sound.

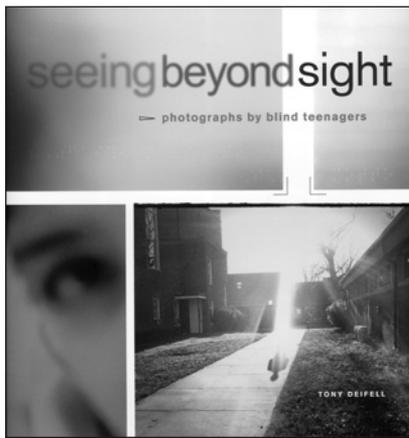
I deliberately chose the book to be for a sighted audience. It was a translation for them. You have to choose your audience and make a story that fits for them. People ask: “Why don’t you make the book in

Braille?” If the readers were visually impaired, it wouldn’t be that simple—the content would have to change as well. So the book title was about translating the idea of “sound shadows” to a concept more relevant to a sighted audience—“seeing beyond sight.”

AC: *Is there such a thing as a good photograph?*

TD: For a while I described the pictures my students took very objectively to them. There are lots of debates in the blind community about captioning for pictures and films. Some people say it should be very straightforward; others want it to be more colored. Even though neutral doesn’t exist, they go for that as much as possible. Then I realized, “There are some pictures that I like more than others,” which is different from, “This is good, and this is not good.” There are photos that dare you to look at them again—something on a visceral level. I would react emotionally, and my excitement became part of the value of the picture—the reason you show a picture to any person. I ended up deciding not to try to be objective.

AC: *What was the power dynamic in the class?*



Front cover of Tony Deifell's book, *Seeing Beyond Sight*.

For the first rehearsal, I invited the dancers to my house to cook dinner. Blindfolded, the dancers had to identify ingredients and prepare a meal. They figured out strategies for measuring, identifying ingredients, and putting pans into a hot oven.

Once the food was in the oven, each person found a partner and, using touch and verbal description, made a phrase together with cooking gestures, such as cutting, sprinkling cinnamon, and stirring. Then I asked them to “turn up the volume” of the movement, changing it from small gestures to more full-bodied movement. Afterwards, they took off their blindfolds, and we had our first performance.

—AC

TD: As a photographer, I have thought for a long time about the power I have with a camera to represent people's lives, so much so that it became paralyzing for me—another privileged white guy taking pictures of people who aren't as privileged and calling it art. And in journalism, there is the issue of choosing how you represent people to the public. For a while I stopped taking pictures. Later I came back to it. I realized that everyone is a translator, and everybody will have the privilege of power in some form or fashion. The representation—or translation—is a crucial bridge. It can be a translation and connection between people who would have remained separate.

AC: *Both of our projects are about getting people together to understand the differences in the way we perceive. We have found an extreme way—a person who can't see creates a product that is meant to be seen by others. That practice opens up a basic recognition that we all perceive the world in different ways, and this can lead people to empathize better with anyone.*

TD: We need extremes. It is really hard to pay attention—it is constant work. It is exactly those extremes that make you pay attention. You don't realize how small you are until you are on top of a mountain. Otherwise, it is not obvious.

AC: *How did you choose the photos?*

TD: There were thousands of images, which I pared down. Then we did a community editing process, inviting people from Durham and also from eclectic groups in Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. There was a room full of big tables around the edges of the space. I put the pictures on tables. Groups of

about ten people from different disciplines came to help with the selection process—priests, working artists, disabilities workers—all kinds of people. The instruction was to pull out an image that struck you for some reason, even if you couldn't name it, and put it on the center table. Then we had conversations about the ones that people chose. I got a sense of what moved people. Often it was different from the intention of the photographer. For me as an artist, so much of the value of my photographs is serendipitous: it wasn't in my intention at the time of taking the photograph. That is totally fine for me, and I think it is also fine for the students' images to be used that way.

AC: *It is interesting to hear you talk about this selection process, because I couldn't have imagined it from reading the book, which focuses on the photographers' experiences and feelings. But you were concerned with representing their experience and also depicting photos that were compelling to a sighted audience.*

TD: The book could have been a much more traditional documentary. The chapters, as I organized them, are in an arc that is highly subjective and relevant to my experience as a teacher and creator of the book. Since there is not too much text or explanation, it leaves enough breathing room for the students' experience. The translation is a relationship, not a product. Am I a facilitator, author, editor, or curator? What were the students' roles? I tried to be more ambiguous about those labels.

We couldn't do a student group-editing session, since by that time they were all scattered. I was drawing on memories of the students' interests; it was very impressionistic. A lot of students came back for the opening



Melody Heath's self-portrait, from Tony Deifell's *Seeing Beyond Sight*.

in North Carolina. They totally dug it. It reassured me.

AC: *Sometimes when I would suggest an exercise to my dancers, I found the results visually boring. As the choreographer, I wanted to give them suggestions. I was never quite sure how to negotiate that—I had my own aesthetic, but they were not having a visual experience. How could I honor their experience but also make it translatable and watchable?*

TD: It is not only that you are setting frames for your dancers' experience. You have these snapshots of what happens—even if it is unintentional or comes from a different cause. "Ooo, interesting. I couldn't have anticipated telling you to do that, but what you just did, let's figure out where that came from and re-create it, because for the audience that is going to be really surprising." It is this relationship—you have an interpretive role in isolating something from their experience.

AC: *I can relate to that. Seeing that the way a dancer was moving wasn't quite coming out in a way that people could understand, I'd say, "Let's work with that motivation a little bit more and try to find a way for the product to be intelligible."*

TD: Or they might do something that had nothing to do with your assignment. You have to figure out why they did it, and it might give you some fodder for a different kind of assignment.

AC: *Can you give an example of that?*

TD: Frances took lots of close-ups of her eyes. Many looked cool—blown out, out of focus—and she had beautiful eyes, so we asked her why she did it. Turns out that because she was partially sighted, she liked the sensation of the flash going off next to her eye. We encouraged that, though it wasn't the original assignment. However, say someone was interested in the warmth of the flash. She took photos holding the camera against her arm, and the pictures looked like someone took a picture in their pocket by accident. That kind of experience creates something that is not visually interesting and is not something you would put in the book. Both came out of a similar sensation intention originally—so it doesn't work in every case. On stage, if a dancer moves from sensation in a way that isn't meaningful for the audience, you as curator would edit it out. Maybe the movement is so subtle that it seems like they are just

standing there to an audience. For the dancer, the movement is intense and powerful, but the audience needs to see it for it to translate.

AC: *What if people didn't know the photographers were blind?*

TD: Some of the photos are good on their own, but for others, the context is what makes them visually interesting. For dance, it might help if the audience knew—through text or otherwise—the motivation for the movement. It might make it interesting, but not all the time. Even if you knew the kids were blind, the photo has to have many layers of value— aesthetics, context, storytelling, and contrast.

For example, one photo from the book is of a doctor outside his office smoking a pipe. The caption was, "A doctor or a sick person, or maybe both." The person was both a doctor and a sick person—because of the smoking. That irony was way beyond her intentions. The additional layer of meaning of the caption carried it to the final book. When you have a finite amount of time or space, which so much of art is about, it is about what is chosen to go in that finite time and space.

When I started the project, I was aware of the extremes and philosophical consequences of this work, but when it comes down to it, it is about people having basic contact with each other. John just wanted to take pictures of his girlfriend! At the end of the day, it is about being able to communicate in as full a way as possible.



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