

# experimental documentation/choreographic translation

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## ABSTRACT

The point where a dance work begins and ends is fuzzy and ambiguous, especially when we consider performance as continuing past live interactions between performers and audiences into publicity material, documentation, film and context. Experimental documentation/choreographic translation performs aspects of the choreography corporeal translations, as a series of performance writings and images. A series of ten images is preceded by a critical discussion of the choreographic process underpinning corporeal translations and of movement-initiated writing as a rendering of dance process. Movement-initiated writing is posited as a method for writing about dance experimentally, in a form that emerges in relation to dance-based qualities such as felt affect, tone, rhythm, space and texture. Translation is discussed as the movement of ideas between artistic forms, cultures and/or languages. This article posits that the discipline of translation provides a rich resource in practice-led research for considering both methodological and ethical concerns in moving between creative and critical spaces.

holding  
everything in balance  
for a single  
perfect  
moment

undone and undoing  
laces untied

a collapse a  
transmission a  
conducting  
from femur  
through toes  
to her heart

the above poem was written in response to watching dancers val smith and christina houghton moving in response to an improvisation score as we ‘workshopped’ our piece *corporeal translations* for performance at the contemporary ethnography across the disciplines (cead) conference in november 2012. over the past few years i have developed a methodology for working between creative writing and choreographic experimentation which i term ‘movement-initiated writing’ (longley, 2008, 2011; longley & tate, 2012). this methodology conceptualises a kind of writing that is drawn from the felt sense of moving, sometimes using the entire page space—the space, texture, colour, formatting and text—to translate the felt affect of movement to a performance on the page. movement-initiated writing emerges through dance practice—when dancers, choreographers and their collaborators develop page-works as part of embodied studio work, allowing a somatic trace to fold inside drawing, image and text. movement-initiated writing positions writing through choreographic process as an artistic practice. as such, there is a sense that writing needs to *feel* right, that it involves risk-taking, that choreographic writers give themselves the license to break some rules of ‘good writing’ in order for the writing they do to reflect the logics of their dance practice—logics that are often quite (if not profoundly) different to those involved in sitting in a chair with a pencil in hand or tapping away at a laptop. as i write this i am aware that you as a reader are probably adjusting to the lack of capitalisation in this text. i’m wondering if i am undermining the trustworthiness of this article for you by favoring small letters at the beginning of sentences. but the thing is, when i began this article it was so much easier to write, to find a kind of ease and flow in the movement of language to the page, that i just kept writing without capitalization. and i am hoping this sense of flow might translate into your reading, or that you might enjoy a disruption to the standard formatting of sentences. i am hoping that there is some kind of movement in keeping the letters small, or perhaps a provocation to think that writing that emerges through dancing might express itself slightly differently, might introduce a sense of play or improvisation to processes of writing or reading (and here i am choosing not to have a full stop or an end bracket to encourage a sense of opening

a series of 10 artist pages follow on from this discussion of writing as a choreographic practice. these artist pages could be considered a form of documentation or a performance in themselves; they could be considered translations of choreographic process into new form. some pages could be

considered scores for further movement, others records of moments past, mapping a history, telling a story of something that has been.

the idea behind movement-initiated writing is to unsettle the notion that methods of documentation are about taming and containing creative practices in tidy, conventional forms. instead, i'm thinking about documentation as another means of performance practice, where intuition, play, risk, experimentation, feeling and frustration come into play as much as they do as in producing choreography. i have come to think that it is kind of strange to think of dances as ending when dancers finish their kinesthetic labour. what about when someone is writing about the dance they have seen, or drawing it, or developing a photo taken in rehearsal, or re-embodiment of the affect of it? to me dance work lives on in an endless number of forms, it becomes new things, its affects travel further than we imagine.

in an analysis of drawing as a form of process art, art theorist cornelia butler emphasises that "matter is *volatized* in drawing, not hypostasized" (butler, 1999, p. 32, author's emphasis). this distinction between the potential of drawing to hypostasize or volatize, to fix ideas or to allow them flight, is highly relevant when one attempts to translate ideas to the page. *the writing notebooks of hélène cixous* (cixous, 2004) provide an example of this—seeing the rhythms of shape and form that animate the first drafts of cixous' handwritten journals allows the reader an intimate insight into her writing process. in an interview with susan sellers, cixous describes the importance of handwriting to her creative process:

Handwriting is important. All this is handwritten, and I can't get around that, because I recognize different levels of ... rightness, for instance, of the work, or of refining, etc., ... according to the physical aspect of my own handwriting, and I need that. It makes for different voices, because all those notes speak in different voices, and I recognize them by sight from the look they have, from my own handwriting, because it's all different, all the time. (cixous, 2004, p.118)

in the artist-pages that follow this writing, the slopeyness and mutability of handwriting is very important—the way it conveys texture and time, the way it carries embodiment in it. such writing performs its in-process-ness, carrying the texture of listening to the site of the page. in her article "performing writing", critical theorist della pollock (2010) discusses the notion of performance writing and offers a tangential definition of it.

Performative, evocative writing confounds normative disjunctions between critical and creative (hard and soft, true and false, masculine and feminine), allying itself with logics of possibility rather than logics of validity and casuality. (pollock, 2010, p.120)

and that's how I see the work of experimental documentation—as a creative practice that emerges from working between creative spaces. in moving ideas between forms—such as languages, modes of creative work or ways of imagining—new possibilities arise. my sense of experimental documentation is that it is coextensive with studio practice, that methods of reflecting on studio work such as journaling, drawing, different practices of writing, film-making and so on bring ideas to life in a different register to that of choreographic practice, allowing us to think through our dancing in an extended number of ways.

movement-initiated writing exists in a movement between the abstract and the concrete, between a concept, idea or feeling and its materialisation. this mode of documentation involves feeling into a choreographic state and finding a means to translate it into another form. moving concepts from their vague, ambiguous, ideal state in the imagination to a materialised form that is articulate for others to perceive is at the heart of the work of an artist, and methods of documentation begin such processes. they allow us to map, note and follow abstract, affective, virtual or conceptual forms and connect these to material gestures, specific movement phrases, writings or drawings.

i consider this kind of documental process a work of translation—between creative forms rather than languages. translation theorist frederico italiano writes that, “translation is a cultural activity that produces new spaces ... translation, as a rewriting of geopoetic features, creates new imaginative geographies” (italiano, 2012, p.1). dance scholar freya vass-rhee (2010) employs the term translation to describe choreographic practices that move between the sonic and kinesthetic modalities. her discussion of translation as the movement of ideas between forms (linguistic, artistic, or otherwise), wherein innovative creative materials manifest via the movement between forms, clearly corresponds with italiano's discussion of translation as “a performative negotiation of cultural differences across constructions of worlds (and identities)” (italiano, 2012, p. 2). when you attend critically to the act of translation, you become aware of the movement of ideas between spaces. you attend to the ethical issues triggered when cultural imaginaries and their affects enter a space of travel and becoming other. this can provide a useful critical framework for studio-based practitioners wherein the

development of creative tasks, documentation of processes, and the integration of resultant materials to further rehearsals is key in developing new work.

in the *corporeal translations* project, developing a poetic register of writing in response to movement tasks evolved a core text that formed the dramaturgical structure of the piece. we<sup>i</sup> began with exploring the concept of translation as a kind of choreographic ethnography wherein we observed instances of translation, mistranslation and misunderstanding happening in the city around us. we made translation notes of all sorts of different urban experiences—turning the motion of travelling on a bus into a drawing, attempting to map the texture of different spaces or encounters through drawings and script-writing. these notes then became choreographic scores—starting points for improvisation and movement phrases, which were then translated into other forms—film, photography, writing, drawing. after a few months of developing movement scores, dramaturgical ideas and pieces of performance writing, a text evolved that brought together the main themes informing the structure of our work: desire to connect and the loss of not connecting; an image of travelling; being a foreigner in a fictional Japanese landscape; the corporeal sense of language as something visceral and muscular; the sense of language as a contagion, an affective, colonising force that controls us and that we can't always control.

I wanted to find you by inhabiting your tongue, it was the only way, so I moved into the pools of saliva that gather at the side of your mouth as you sleep, the viscous blankets of your DNA.

I found myself travelling all the time, we don't keep still while sleeping—we move so much faster. You dreamed a new scene in *Sleeping Beauty* called the Airport Scene, narrated with an Irish accent by a sound engineer named Cahill—I took off.

I landed in the arms of Mt Fuji, walking in winter at Lake Kamagichiko, hiking the stitches and folds of your kimono.

It was nearly enough, but I was cold there,

I needed to go further, to the geographies of your vowels, to the cartographies of your inflection. I listened so hard I couldn't hear anything else, the whole rest of everything ceased to breathe. You died from the virus of urban language, its everyday violence bloomed in your blood and neither

of us realised what was eating you up until it was too late. You simply disappeared—another, elsewhere, reterritorialised.

There was nowhere left to go, till finally grief restarted the lungs of the city, with not unviolent pushing and jostling, language lubricating bones and joints, language renewing flesh and sinew, languages not at all our own, but someone else's, from someplace else.

i then asked native speakers of italian, japanese and māori to translate this text as a sound recording. the sound recordings of the different languages were treated as musical compositions in our choreographic process—with intonation, tone and rhythm suggesting movement dynamics and scores. the *corporeal translations* project has involved many different kinds of translation—from the traditional sense of movement between languages to treating translation as a conceptual pivot for movement-initiated writing and development of choreographic or ethnographic ideas into alternate forms. the following pages could be considered a new performance of elements of the *corporeal translations* choreography: a range of materials (programme notes, drawings, poetic texts, choreographic scores) generated by a specific mode of rehearsing redraw our studio process to have it travel in new ways—in this case virtually, digitally, two dimensionally, with pencil muscles and scanner-made space.

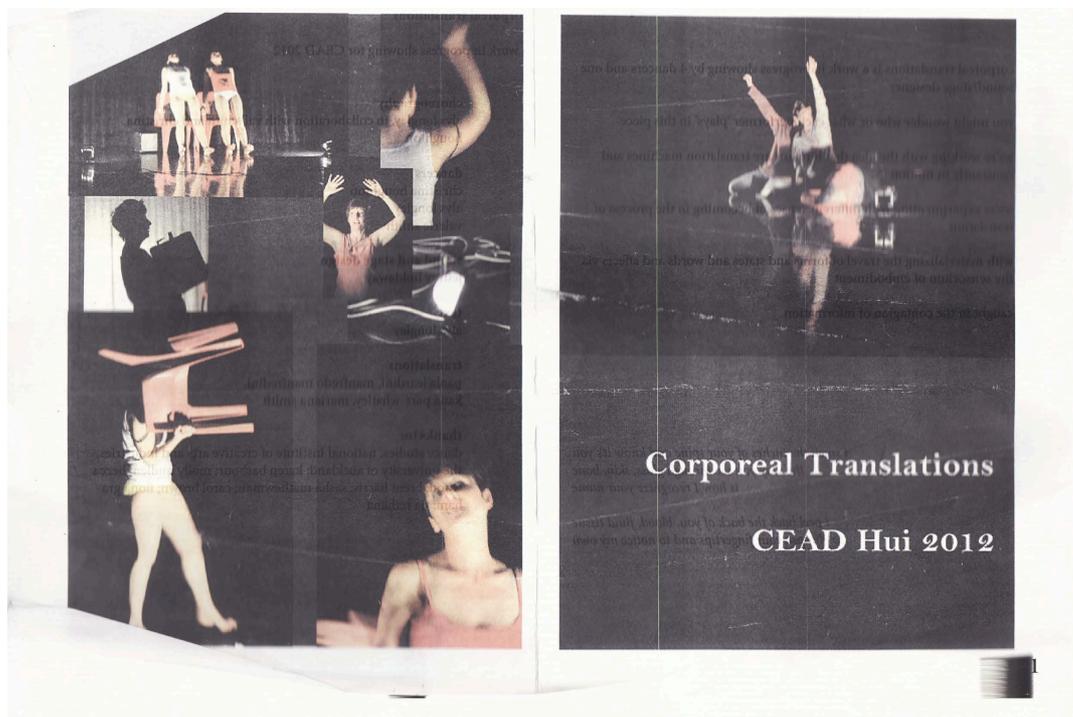


figure 1: *corporeal translation* programme by alys longley and jeffrey holdaway

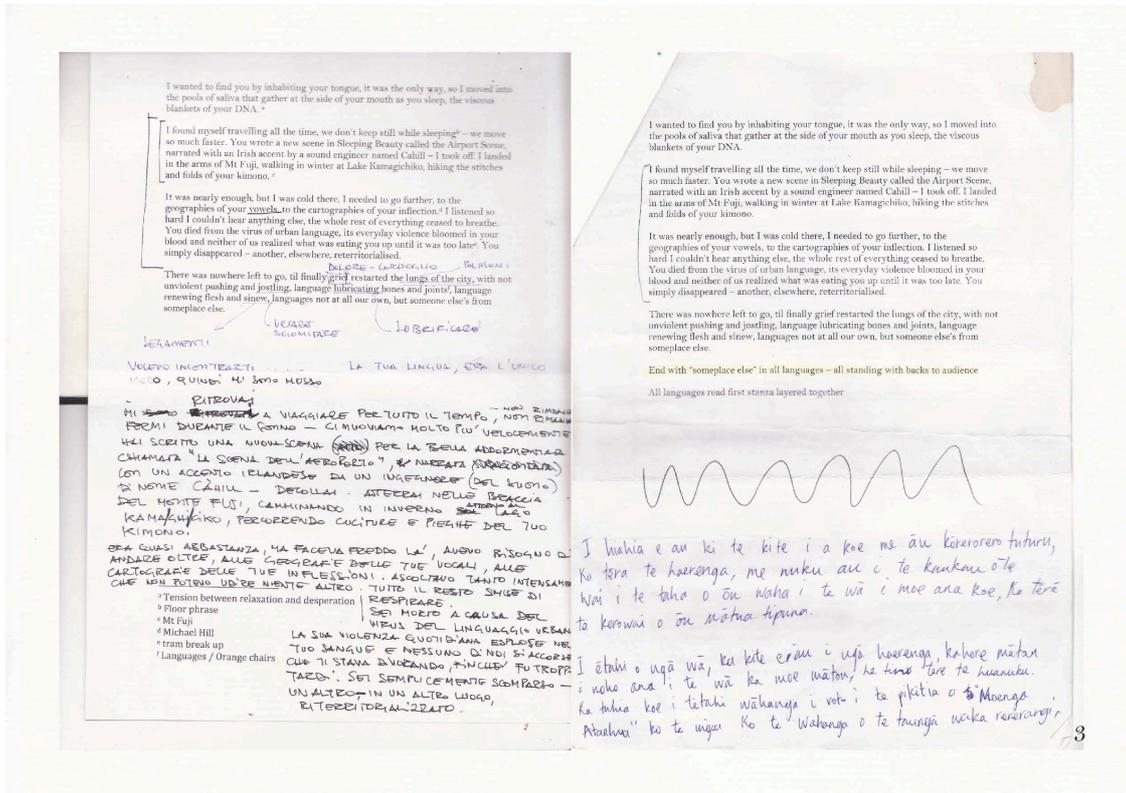


figure 2: translations of performance text by manfredo manfredini and mariama smith

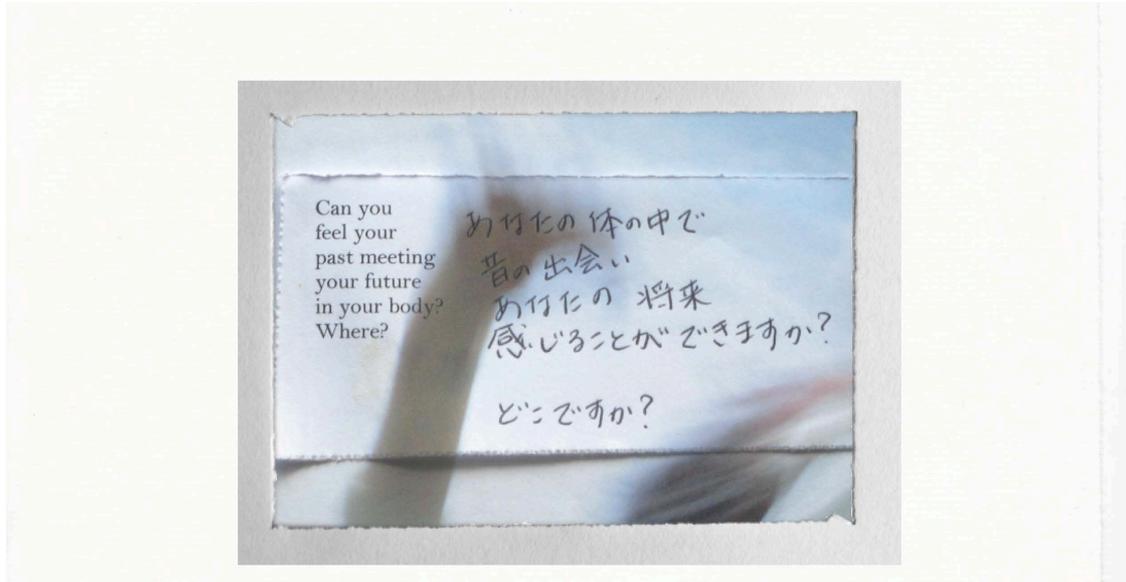


figure 3: choreographic score created in workshops with alys longley and sarah knox

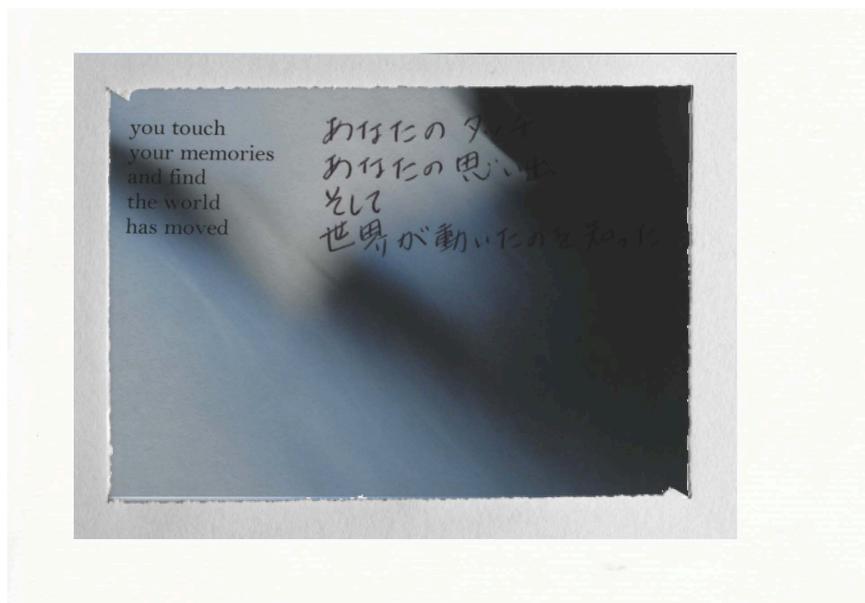


figure 4: choreographic score created in workshops with alys longley and sarah knox

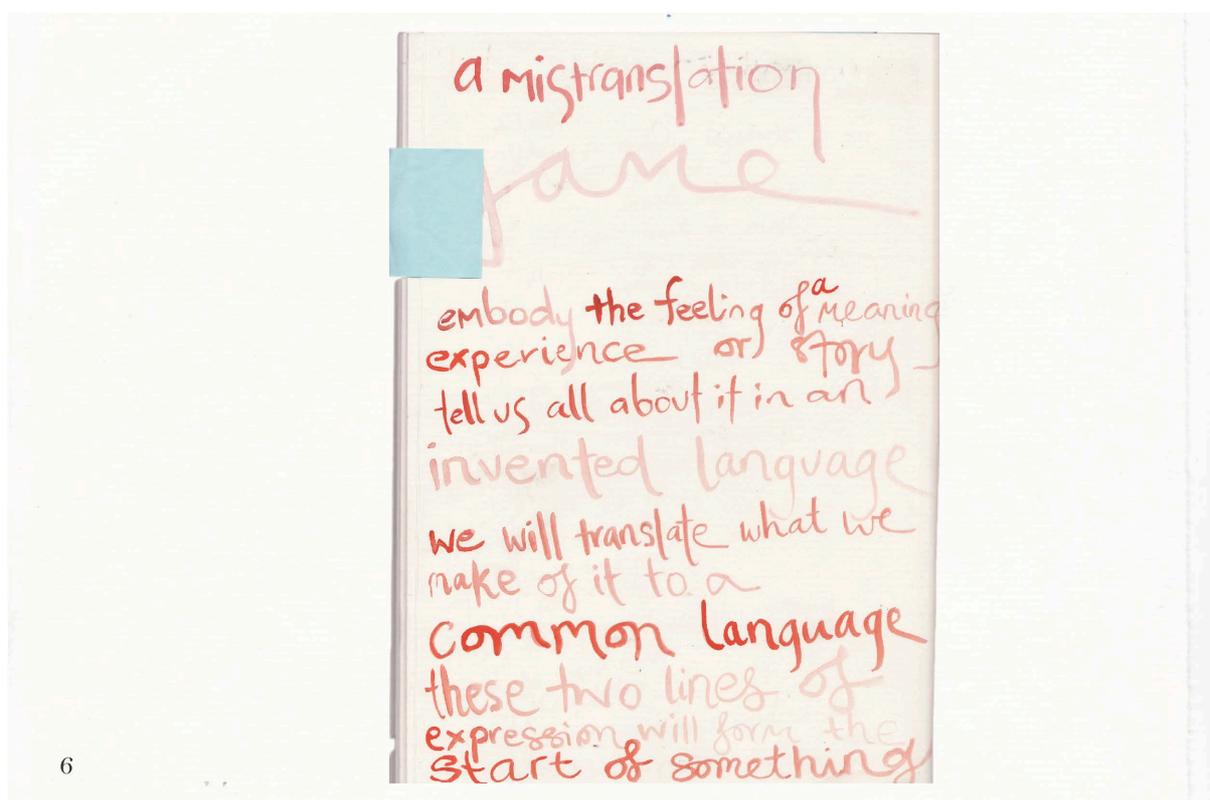


figure 5: choreographic provocation from alys longley's journal, photograph by alys longley



figure 6: a page from alys longley's journal with movement-initiated writing digitally imposed

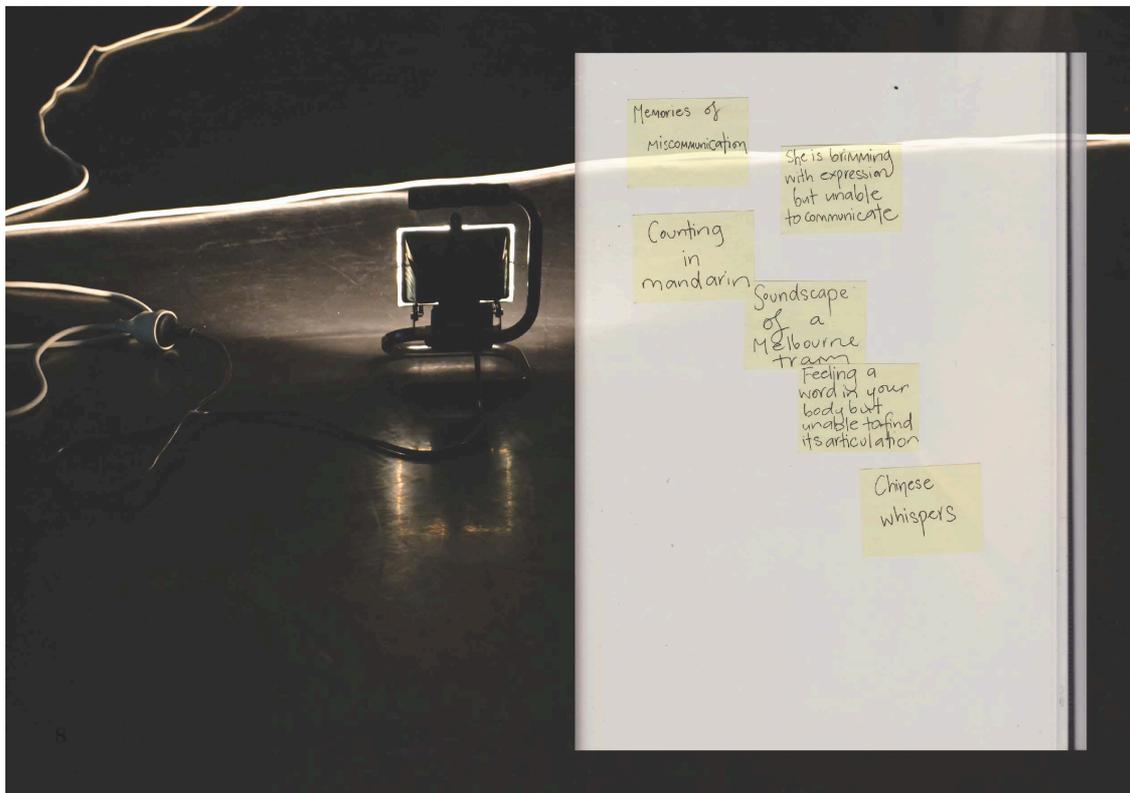


figure 7: a page from alys longley's journal layered on an image of performance scenography, photograph by jeffrey holdaway

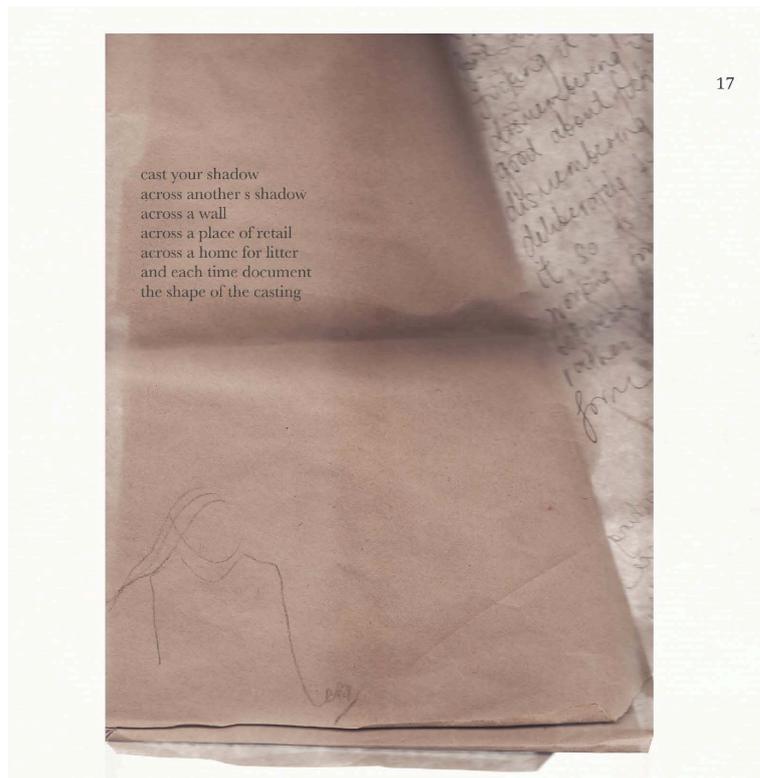
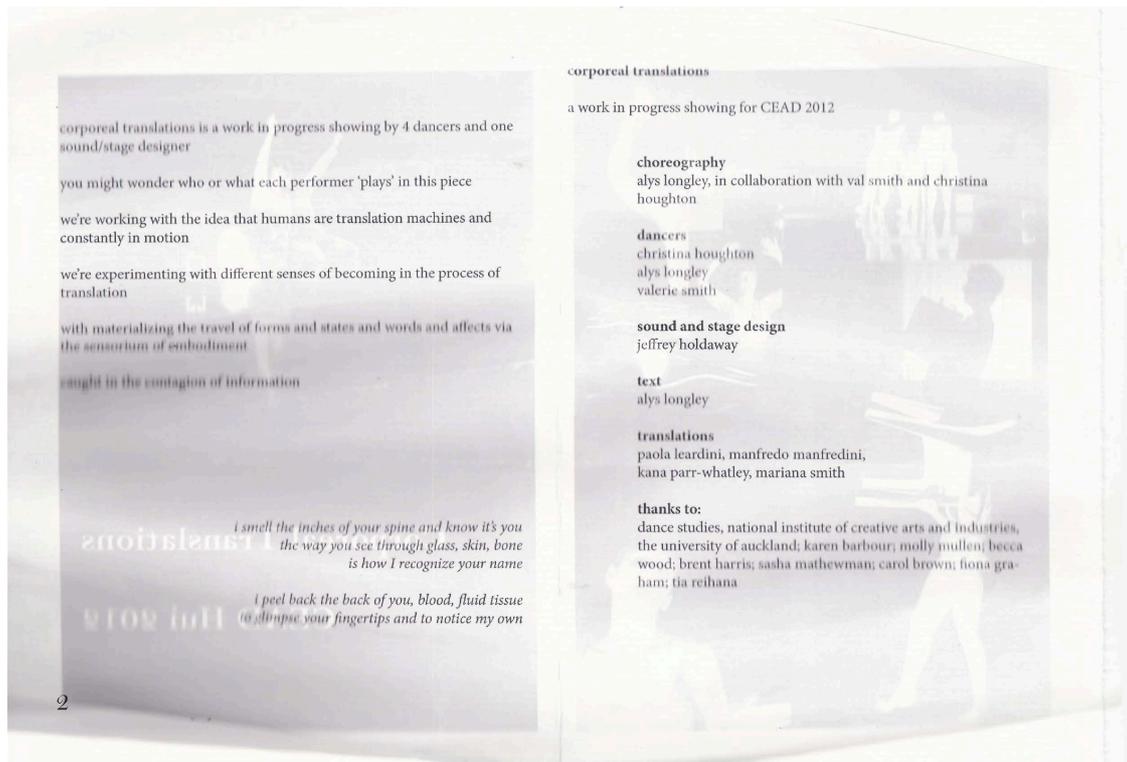


figure 8: a page from alys longley's journal with movement-initiated writing digitally imposed



figure 9: a page from alys longley's journal layered on a still from the short video work *radio strainer*



**figure 10: *corporeal translation* programme by alys longley and jeffrey holdaway, featuring dancers val smith, christina houghton and alys longley**

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<sup>i</sup> *Corporeal Translations* was made in collaboration with dancers Christina Houghton and Val Smith and designer Jeffrey Holdaway. A choreographic research process with Sarah Knox and Katherine Tate informed our studio processes. As the dancers in the project were employed as research assistants on the project, and interviewing was not part of our methodology, formal ethics approval was not required for the research.