Becomings and Belongings: Lucy Guerin’s The Ends of Things

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What is the first thing we remember when we finish watching a piece of choreography? Is it the agile technicality of the dancing bodies? Might it be the narrative that the choreography has constructed for us? What about the extraneous material such as the costumes, the lighting, the décor? Or could it be the assumed ineffability and transcendence of the dance? I believe that we remember an amalgamation of all of the above, yet cultural practices and codes inform, structure, and ultimately define such memories. As such, dance should not be dismissed as a prima facie aesthetic, but as an art form that develops, becomes, and by extension belongs (in)to polyvalent cultural constructions. Moreover, these constructions cyclically illuminate the culture, and the choreographic process, thereby multiplying the readings of the dance itself. I present these musings as a preamble to this paper and its reading of Australian choreographer Lucy Guerin’s piece The Ends of Things (Melbourne, Australia, October 2000). Through a mixture of performative description and writing, theoretical inquiry, and commentary on the choreography, I suggest how The Ends of Things might be an example of choreography that grapples with how subjects—fictional ones in the piece and Guerin’s own identity as a choreographer—engage with becoming and belonging. I will utilize postmodern philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s idea of becoming and Elspeth Probyn’s provocative conceptualization of belonging as ways to theoretically read the choreography, as well as to consider Guerin’s own identity as an Australian choreographer in the twenty-first century.

Lucy Guerin hails from Adelaide, Australia and she graduated from the Centre for Performing Arts in 1982. Thereafter, she danced for Russell Dumas (Dance Exchange) and Nanette Hassall (Danceworks). In 1989, she moved to New York for seven years where she danced with Tere O’Connor Dance, the Bebe Miller Company and Sara Rudner. When she returned to Australia, she began receiving commissions for work, toured in Europe, Asia and North America, and has received accolades and numerous prestigious awards such as the Sidney Myer Performing Arts Award, a Bessie, and a Prix d’Auteur. In 2002 she formed her company, Lucy Guerin Inc. and continues to produce work based mostly in Melbourne, Australia. Her company’s website offers a brief synopsis of The Ends of Things: ‘The Ends of Things’ is based around a central character whose life, as he understands it, is drawing to a close. His world is reduced to a small room from which he continues his mundane daily activities with painstaking, fastidious monotony, remembering in fragments, the life that is behind him. These scenes of regret and missed opportunities are represented by three dancers who eventually encroach upon his world, collapsing the boundaries between reason and chaos, and consigning him to the borderless expanse of the stage and beyond. (accessed 24 December 2009)

In an interview with Shaun McLeod, Guerin shares her choreographic intentions for The Ends of Things: referring to the main male dancer/character she states “he’s at a point where his isolation and cutting off from people is just starting to cause his world to disintegrate and he is losing connection with reality. [U]ltimately [the piece] relates to the end of control or reason.” (2000:37) In other instances when Guerin speaks about her work, she states that it focuses on the dualities inherent in human nature and the exposing of these dualities without positing simple resolutions. (Guerin 1997:46) One of her other pieces Living With Surfaces (Melbourne, February 2001) examines the adaptability of a person to her environment through the intricate bodily contortions and adjustments dancer Ros Warby makes on the
stage. She must become different shapes, angles, and sizes in order to adjust, fit, and ultimately belong to the green fluorescent surface that surrounds her. The tensions and negotiations that exist in the dualities and infinite divergences that occur out of these dualities open Guerin’s choreography to a place where it can explore spaces where things are not merely in opposition, but struggle to find accord with one another. She has admitted to struggles of her own, particularly with her role as a choreographer. In another interview, this time with Sally Gardner and Elizabeth Dempster, Guerin admits to her own existential isolation while making dances: “If I go into a studio and just start dancing around and making movement, I start getting very depressed and thinking ‘Why am I here?’ ‘What’s the meaning of life?’ and I end up lying on the floor sobbing. I just get an awful feeling of meaninglessness. I don’t quite know what that means.” (1997:50) How does knowing Guerin’s brutal honesty and vulnerability before watching The Ends of Things change or affect its witnessing? Does having access to her choreographic process fix the meaning of the dance? Will the piece be an extension of her thoughts, insecurities, and intentions or might the dance meander towards other ways of articulating the struggles of subjectivity?

In their monumental tome, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari posit becoming as a way to re-think subjectivity as something other than whole, complete or independent on outside forces. Instead, becoming enables a subject to encapsulate other people, places, or things, to engage with a fluid multiplicity of terms. Becoming is a process whereby the end result is a unique combination of the becoming subject and its becoming aim (MacCormack 2001:4). Becoming can involve anything from the most political and ideologically deconstructive, to the superficial or banal. As Deleuze and Guattari articulate, “becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, lead back to, ‘appearing’, ‘being’, ‘equaling’ or ‘producing’” (1987:239). Thus, rather than establishing something that is an equal combination of the two entities beforehand, becoming creates something new. A new alliance, or conceptualization of the self allows for infinite possibilities and specificities given the combinations of what existed before and what it will become. Using the possibilities set forth by their concept of becoming, I propose to read The Ends of Things not simply as a narrative about a man and his fractured relationship with reality and subsequent fall into despair, nor as the submissive acceptance of endings, but as a dance piece that posits the struggle subjects have with becoming. As she has suggested, Guerin struggles with finding meaning for her own dancing body in the studio. The dancer in her choreography struggles with maintaining a connection to his life. Thus becoming—becoming through desire, becoming a body/self, and for Guerin, becoming a choreographer—proliferates, shifts, flows, and collapses the fixity of subjects, selves, and dance.

Endings as Becomings

The piece begins with dancer Trevor Patrick lying inside a room constructed within the space of the stage. His pants are not fully off. They rest mid-calf, while his shirt drapes over his shoulders, not fully on. We witness the practice(s) of his everyday: waking up, brushing his teeth, going to the bathroom, listening to the radio, making/drinking coffee, opening/closing kitchen cabinets. While he prepares himself for his day, Ros Warby, a solitary female body, dances outside his room. As he becomes more awake or rather more conscious, two more bodies – a male and a female, those of Brett Daffy and Stephanie Lake – also begin to dance outside his room. Could they represent his heightening state of consciousness? Or do they represent the fragmented nature of his mind? Suddenly, his phone rings. A life insurance telemarketer asks difficult questions about existence and mortality, e.g., the ends of things. He stands and listens…dumbfounded, numb, pathetic. The bodies inhabiting the space beyond his four walls, dancers Ros Warby and Brett Daffy, begin a parody of a pas de deux,
a tango of murderous gestures. Gun to the head. Choking. Knife in the back. Punches and kicks. Sinister silent laughs. Once Daffy falls to the ground, a victim of these gestures demonstrated by Warby, Patrick moves to sit and sift through his butterfly collection. Stephanie Lake, the other female dancer in this quartet, now dances with Daffy, a dance with slow, languorous movements filled with effleuage. Sensuality seeps into the man perusing through this butterfly collection. Behind him, a projected image of a butterfly appears. Perhaps he has a visceral fascination with these insects? Perhaps they allow him to have fantasies of metamorphosis, of leaving the present predicament of his meaningless contemplation of life for a colorful romp through the air where his body might possess a flickering visibility? Perhaps he can relate to being inside a cocoon? Perhaps this butterfly symbolizes his sexual desire? If we choose to utilize desire as a product, “[i]nstead of opposing it to the real, instead of seeing it as a yearning, desire [becomes] an actualization, a series of practices, bringing things together or separating them, making machines, making reality,” (Grosz 165), then Patrick’s reality creates externally manifested tension and discomfort. He sits stiffly, his face solemn, his mouth tight, his stillness as movements or flows waiting to happen. His body, wrestles with the incorporation of Lake’s body as it flows into his own, with its encapsulated space and boundaries. While he sifts through his butterfly collection, Lake’s movements resemble those of the butterfly as it flutters. She waves her arms, flickers her hands, and she imitates the quivering of wings. As she dances he gradually shows discomfort. His clothes are uncomfortable. He yearns to escape but that too makes him uncomfortable. The mere act of being is uncomfortable for him as well. His body curves inwards, concave. Here, he is faced with a volatile moment where the possibility of becoming a desiring subject could emerge. Yet, he appears afraid of his own becoming, of his own transformation into a subject that desires (in this case, the woman). He returns to the supine position where he began this tableau. Pants return to their original place, shirt is half-removed. His body lies still, albeit still producing things. Images continue to project behind him. The other bodies surreptitiously creep into his space. In this section, the butterfly serves as an apt metaphor for his process of becoming a subject, what I will call man-becoming-pupa, yet Patrick’s metamorphosis works backwards in the piece. While a butterfly becomes itself through the linear progression of pupa to cocoon to ultimately, butterfly, Patrick’s man-becoming-pupa functions differently. His becoming troubles the linear progression of change and causality. Rather than work from the biological postulation that pupa moves to cocoon to butterfly, the man-becoming-pupa reverses teleological becoming and highlights its process as just that, a process that constantly proceeds, irrespective of how it does so. The Ends of Things works backwards in that the three stages of metamorphosis, from pupa to cocoon to butterfly are symbolically reversed through Patrick’s character transformation in the choreography. He begins in his cocoon (his home), desires butterfly-ness as the logical outcome of being inside a cocoon (here, I am reading the butterfly as a metaphor for his character’s desire for something other than his mundane existence), and eventually this desire produces a man-becoming-pupa: a reconceptualization of masculinity, of being in the world and making sense of it. He never achieves butterfly-ness, specifically the possibility to be in the world through a radically new subjectivity. The state of transcendence that being a butterfly represents is thwarted. However, the productivity of his desire to become butterfly enables him to become nonetheless. Although I am not suggesting that this be the only way to interpret or read this section of the dance, I do want to demonstrate how engaging with postmodern theories of subjectivity such as those of Deleuze and Guattari offer ways to illuminate the choreographic strategies and movements. As a result, the piece has different possibilities for meaning.

The dance continues.

A second “reality” begins. This time his cocoon is invaded. Warby, Daffy, and Lake enter
and disturb the practice of his everyday. That is, while he performs the movements and blockings from the first section again, they control his actions. He is not the agent of his body. They mobilize his body for him. A combination of “formal classic lines with loose-limbed, flung movement” (Guerin 1992:42) flows inside his cocoon. They literally are “under [his] skin” as the classic tune that plays during this section asserts. Linkages. Fragments. Flows inside and out. They work and dance together. Their insistence paired with his resistance. Again, he is uncomfortable. He is being ignored in his own space. He tries to have some (sexual) contact with Lake, but his advances are prevented by Daffy. His struggle with these intensities and flows represented by these dancing, space usurping bodies, concludes when he resumes his opening position. He lies down again, this time removing his shirts and pants. A third act.

His cocoon begins to deconstruct. Hands pull at the shell of the skin. Walls fall off to the side. He awakens to bright light and (silently) screams. The fragmentation that ensues combines movements from the first two tableaux. For example, Daffy’s solo is similar to Warby’s solo from the first “act.” Lake continues with her butterfly movements, passing them on to Daffy and Warby. They couple up and dance in one another’s negative space(s). The duets involve Patrick’s body insofar as he is caught in between the moving bodies. They writhe, bend, and contort around him, beneath him, or next to him while he stands there, looking uncomfortable without attempting to escape such a distressing position. He now wears just (underwear) shorts, exposing a slight frame, a pale, forlorn body, with his chest curved inwards. His weak, almost pathetic male body troubles common codes of masculinity which expect the man to be strong, heroic, and possibly invincible. Dismantling. Everything seems to fall apart. Patrick tries to occupy the other dancers’ negative spaces. His endeavor to reunite with these bodies fails. He returns to where his cocoon used to be, but Lake has taken over that space. They move around him, occupying and measuring his space. Is there room for him? Can his body still be part of the space? Can he still create assemblages, linkages, or flows with these other bodies if they have already facilitated his man-becoming-pupa? The internal flows of his mind, his inner desires, fears, and psychic dispositions enable the dance to be read as a product of his desire. When this desire can no longer produce, or at least, when his body’s flows, ebbs, and intensities settle, his body becomes a Deleuzian empty Body-without-Organs. Theorized as a body which all bodies aspire to, the Body-without-Organs becomes empty when it is “evacuated of its intensities and forces” (Grosz 170). Nothing can flow inside the empty BwO because it has filled up. In the case of The Ends of Things, Patrick’s body has filled with its becoming-pupa, thus the flows and intensities, which enabled the becoming-pupa, have stopped. This man-becoming-pupa may multiply and become something else because becoming is not a permanence but rather allows for other becomings. For now, this man-becoming-pupa has happened, and the “BwO has ceased to flow….. it empties itself too quickly, disarrays itself too much, so that it closes in on itself, unable to transmit its intensities differently” (Grosz 171). The dancers are frozen. They cease to move. His becoming-pupa, his metamorphosis into an empty Body-with-Organs, a body departing from its capability as a desiring machine, has stopped the intensities and flows. He begins to leave the stage, waving good-bye. Desire no longer produces. His consciousness has petrified. He waves good-bye to it, and by extension to us, the audience. His hesitant waves linger as his body moves further and further upstage, eventually disappearing into the darkness while Warby, Daffy, and Lake remain frozen, stuck in one pose, unable to flow without (t)his body.

Becomings as Belongings
How does this danced becoming relate to the concept of belonging? That is, if we desire to become something, what is the catalyst for that becoming? What do we want our becoming to
be relevant to? Where can becoming go? As Deleuze and Guattari position identity as a process of becoming, Elspeth Probyn suggests that identity is more appropriately called belonging, since this term encapsulates the material processes involved with identity construction (12). Desire productively functions within the concept of belonging as it enables ways for human subjects to make connections with one another and within the social. Probyn further argues for an insistence on the surface nature of belonging since it is at the surface where desire produces, where desiring bodies come into contact and create the social “reality” to which they may (not) wish to belong. Exploring this theme of belonging within the social in the context of The Ends of Things, I hope to use Probyn’s postulations as possible methods for reading the choreography, Trevor Patrick’s character attempts at both becoming and belonging, and Lucy Guerin’s role as a choreographer trying to both become and belong within the dance world as well. Additionally, by juxtaposing becoming and belonging within the piece, especially in the character performed by Trevor Patrick, I want to suggest that a body-becoming escapes being a body-belonging. In other words, in attempts to become (e.g., subjects, individuals, or masculine as in Patrick’s case), we disengage from belonging, and are perhaps forced to continually become in order to belong. If Probyn’s argument relies on the belongings of surfaces that begin with specificities such as race, class, gender, and sexuality and these specificities then proceed towards opportunities for individuation that then produce singularity, my reading of Guerin’s choreography counters these surface (social) belongings in favor of Patrick’s becoming-a-self. As he shifts from being a man—a culturally constructed concept of what masculinity should be—to a man-becoming-pupa—a man producing a new sense of selfhood from his desires—, his ability to belong to the choreographed environment, and by extension to the social that defines masculinity, is thwarted by his individuation. Of course, Probyn’s idea of surface belongings also calls for a radical transformation of the social as we currently understand it, yet The Ends of Things can only make meaning to an audience through these same social codes that Probyn recommends we reconsider. Thus, Patrick’s becoming and subsequent failure at belonging highlight how one’s becoming, i.e., one’s interpellation into the social, or belonging into the social, risks failure, isolation, and possibly death. Tragically, it was a friend’s death that led to the inspiration of this piece for Guerin, and I will touch upon this shortly. Patrick lies inside. Warby dances outside. Visibly, they belong to separate spaces. His world is tightly constrained and disciplined. Daffy appears on the other side of Patrick’s room. Both Daffy and Warby dance as a couple outside while Patrick continues with his mundane morning rituals. Oblivious to the dancers outside his self-contained space, Patrick appears as if his room is enough for him. He doesn’t venture forth, he stays inside, busy with his quotidian activities—coffee, morning ablutions, getting dressed, answering the phone. Three bodies dance outside his space. They do not try to get his attention, rather they reinforce the divisions between their world and his. When the phone rings he listens to the voice. It’s as though he hasn’t heard another human voice in a while. Never mind that the life insurance telemarketer is asking deeply existential questions. Never mind that Warby and Daffy make gestures that imitate person to person violence. As an almost non sequitur he moves from contemplating life (insurance) to examining petrified life in the form of his butterfly collection. His examination of the butterfly collection distances him from Lake who almost embodies the dead butterfly he longingly inspects. Meanwhile, the three bodies persist with their movements outside. When Daffy, Lake, and Warby enter his residence they take over not just the small space, but they take over Patrick’s ability to be in control of himself in the space. His daily activities are interrupted by these three bodies’ invasion and as I would like to suggest, their desire to belong in a social sense, to his domestic routines. My analysis here includes a critique of practices that involve a desire to belong so much that respect for (cultural, racial, gendered,
private) space is overlooked. Their desire to belong to one another in his space dismisses his presence. Instead, they usurp his space trying to belong inside a place that resonates with Patrick’s character’s specificities. Representing a party where the host is ignored and the party continues regardless, these three bodies dance, flail, indulge, and even expel their waste in his space. His face expresses a detached agitation. He does not force them to leave. He does not try to participate in the chicanery either. He seems despondent. Only when the boundaries that demarcate the divisions between outside/inside, such as when the three dancers remove the walls of his room, can the question of belonging be considered. With the divisive walls gone, the stage becomes the in-between space of possibility. Without any physical obstructions to visually separate his space from the other three dancers, the space acts as a juncture, a bridge between these bodies and their possibility of belonging to the space, the dance, and more specifically to one another. He stands almost naked, distanced from the three bodies that dance together. He approaches their bodies and tries to occupy their negative spaces. His endeavor to reunite with these bodies fails. Daffy, Warby, and Lake are interwoven in one another’s spaces, that is, their belonging is choreographed as social. Meanwhile, Patrick searches to find a way to belong. When Warby, Lake, and Daffy’s bodies stop moving, they’ve created yet another specificity that hinders Patrick’s attempt at belonging. They don’t move; they cease to respond physically to him. Is his attempt to belong fruitless? If he had just stayed still and remained immobile, would he then belong? What larger implications do his attempts at belonging have? Patrick’s attempts mirror our own attempts at trying to belong, and occasionally they might be fruitless, but these failures produce changes, different desires, and other connections. While Patrick, Warby, Daffy, and Lake dance on the surface of the stage, they are metaphorically on the surface of belonging, dancing what Probyn means when she writes, “[c]onducted on the surface, this [the processes of singularizing specificity, in other words, trying to belong] requires us to constantly place ourselves within relations of proximity of different forms of belonging. And at the edge of ourselves we mutate; we become other.” (34) Belonging implies complex positionalities that extend past mere mimicked or parodied actions. Thus, the social atmosphere that Warby, Lake, and Daffy create stands for a microcosm of the different situations where the desire to belong beyond specificity plays out. Is his initial refusal to belong as demonstrated by his choreographed unwillingness to party with them in his own home, a manifestation of his own individuation or does such an assertion have to involve a desire to belong so that it “becomes a force that proffers new modes of individuation and of being?” (Probyn 25). Once the walls come down literally on the stage, Patrick’s character is faced with the dilemma of belonging. His becoming other does not necessarily imply becoming like them, that is, the other dancers, but becoming a different conceptualization of the individual within the social. In one sense, Patrick’s character becomes a man-becoming-pupa, a drastically different conception of white middle class masculinity as is first represented in the beginning of the piece, while his fellow dancers represent the static social environment that possessed his pre-becoming body. In the end, he chooses to depart, not necessarily because he doesn’t belong, but because his becoming has shifted his ability to belong in the way he might have previously. The social as represented by the space of the stage and the petrified bodies must change, according to Probyn, if he is to belong, or, he will have to initiate another attempt at belonging through a different kind of becoming. In these complex negotiations between all those “wanting to become” and “wanting to belong” (Probyn 19), Guerin’s choreography has indirectly shown not just the Ends of Things as an end of control or reason, but the ends, or at least possible end of the social and its ability to include “becoming-others,” the ends of a socially constructed and constricting masculinity, and lastly, the ends of consciousness or life not only represented by Patrick’s farewell to the stage, audience, and dancers, but also influenced by the sudden death of Guerin’s friend, Jack McAdam. Is the only way to escape
from the confines of the social through death? Or, in a more optimistic tone, do our becomings symbolize little deaths of our old selves as we labor to produce and become new selves that can somehow belong?

Guerin’s choreography strategically corners her audience into confronting these perennial problems of postmodern identity, and the Ends of Things is definitely not the first piece of choreography to deal with the themes of death, identity, or the role of the social and its impact on individuals. For example, Bill T. Jones’ Still/Here (1994) alludes to his relationship with his collaborator/lover Arnie Zane and his death from AIDS although the publicity material states that the work came from Jones’ “Survival Workshops” where he interviewed people across the United States who were facing life-threatening illnesses. Other pieces by Jones’ specifically Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land and his D-Man in the Waters touch upon the theme of AIDS and death where the latter honors one of his company’s dancers, Damon Acquavello who succumbed to AIDS in 1990, while the former corners the audience into thinking about their views, acceptance, and tolerance towards AIDS, homosexuals, and religion. Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land, like the Ends of Things, also toys with themes of masculinity especially when Jones has one of his male dancers, dressed as woman, claim “Ain’t I a woman too?” after several actual women have danced to the proto-feminist declarations of African-American writer Sojourner Truth. The Ends of Things and Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land problematize the conceptualization of masculinity and demand – albeit through irony and humor—that their audiences ponder the threats to a socially constructed masculinity and the options available to resist, change, or accept its limitations. While Still/Here and D-Man in the Waters resound with a celebratory notion of life despite the atrocities of illness and death, Guerin’s Ends of Things does not blatantly honor life – her sense of irony gets in the way by how she characterizes her main character’s life as nothing short of mundane and pathetic; would you want his life? However, in its concluding moments, when Patrick’s body is the only one capable of moving and continuing off the stage while the other bodies stand there, listless, she offers a glimpse of how the Ends of Things is not an end, but again, possible beginnings (of life, personhood, even dance) in a different form. Might she be trying to remove the stigma associated with death by having Patrick’s harmless and shy good-bye wave to the audience mask the violence of Jack McAdam’s death? This question arises once The Ends of Things enters into a comparison with other dance pieces, demonstrating how dance can contribute to social discourse and thus informs, examines, as well as relates to both culture and itself.

Ends and Endings
The themes throughout my dances deal with dual nature and divergence. They explore questions of conflicting choices both emotionally and aesthetically often pursuing differing paths to an extreme. A dialogue is created that challenges audiences to find a way to accept the presence of disparity in the world and the tension that is thereby created. I want to end by suggesting that Guerin’s work lies in the interstices between becoming and belonging and thus mirrors her position as an Australian choreographer. Her choreography must become dance in order to belong into the greater (Australian/contemporary) dance world where it will continually become dance again through words in written reviews, viewings, audience memory, and other performances. These in-between spaces of becoming and belonging that her choreography questions thus generate new possibilities for the re-conceptualization of dance as a theoretical mode of inquiry. Not only do we remember the butterfly image, the forlorn body and wide-eyed stare of Trevor Patrick, and/or the classical lines of the movement, but we contemplate the way in which Lucy Guerin’s The Ends of Things illustrates how endings are not simple, permanent, or specific. They proliferate other
beginnings, becomings, belongings, and endings. Guerin’s penchant for the tensions arising in dualities, specifically those becomings and belongings that I have focussed on, allows her dance to inhabit this liminal realm, the space, as André Lepecki writes, “where the flow of choreography oscillates, the space the dance moves into, escaping from the linear time of everyday life to the pulsing time of memory” (Lepecki 75).

WORKS CITED


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