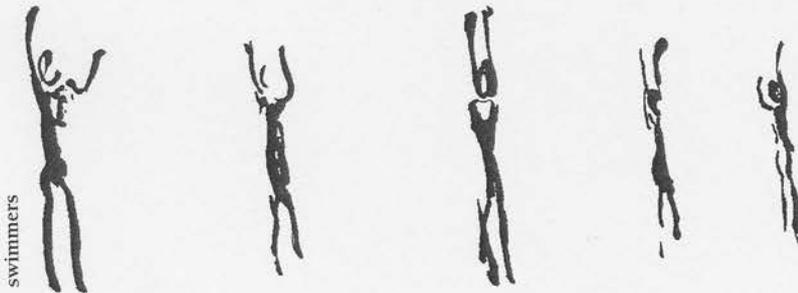




walking

People as moving sculptures, or How to combine different artistic disciplines

text and graphics by Peter Aerni



swimmers

It is a challenge for me to write about the things that I do as a visual artist, to find words instead of making drawings, collages, or sculptures. The artwork itself is what I am interested in presenting. But I am curious to trace its history, to figure out where many of the ideas and inspiration came from, and how my artistic practice influences my dancing.

My studio is a place to create frames with loose edges, allowing ideas to grow bigger, to manifest, to get real. There, I am surrounded by sculptures, drawings, photos, objects—it's my environment, my place to work, the place for my soul to be at home. Some of the objects help me define the boundaries of my work, while others serve as inspiration. With their presence, I also recognize topics that I don't need to investigate anymore.

I started to make ink drawings with a chinese brush pen in 1988, when I was a student at art college. I was drawing people moving. First I found them at the counter in a supermarket, then I went to street crossings in order to see lots of people walking in different ways. I ended up in a swim hall, where I could watch from above. I was approaching the human figure not as an anatomical shape or form, but as moving inspiration. I could see forms made visible by accumulated moments of time. The form of the human figure is not the shape of a culmination but represents energy being led from a preceding moment to the one after—never cut out of its context. Otherwise, this would only show an anatomical figure and not the condensed form of movement.

These drawings have kept me company ever since.



cashiers



CI duet figures

It was shortly after making these first movement drawings that I discovered dancers as a source of inspiration. I was also beginning to dance myself—mainly Contact Improvisation—as a tool to help me become more precise in reading movement and capturing transitory moments.

Usually when I watch a solo dancer or duet, the captured moments appear in my sketchbook one after the other, like a list of movements, a transcription of moments, an inventory of chosen impulses. I like the serial aspect of these sheets; the accumulation of signs allows a reading of movement.

I once made an animated film for which I needed to make twelve drawings for one second of film. First I made a video recording of the dance. Then I made drawings, frame by frame, in the right order. As a film, the result was pleasing; the dancer moved properly across the screen. But the drawings were odd because although they showed the form of a body in motion, they didn't show a concentration of the many moments that led up to it.

Sitting down and capturing these instants is almost a meditation practice: finding the breath to sit still, waiting for the right moment, and making a

paintbrush drawing, one after another. You never know how the session will go; you can only trust the moment. I try to be simple, to reduce the gesture of my hand to a single movement. My presence is in my body and not too much in the head. Clear, straight, honest.

One great challenge for me is to make life-size drawings. I have not yet succeeded. To make small drawings, the movements are small: fingers and wrist, the eyes are quiet. It takes a fraction of a second to put an impulse onto paper, to choose the moment and—with one gesture—to paint the picture. Life-size is too big and takes too long to draw—my body is too slow. The initial impulse gets distracted in the transcription as my whole body must move itself to respond.

Besides making drawings, I like to make sculpture. I have worked with glowing metal, I have cast plaster, I have worked with clay—but I love to work with stone. Stone can be heavy; it has different qualities to explore; its color changes as you polish the surface. The working procedure with stone is to take material off the original block instead of adding material (as you do when you work with clay or plaster).

Besides making drawings, I like to make sculpture. I have worked with glowing metal, I have cast plaster, I have worked with clay—but I love to work with stone. Stone can be heavy; it has different qualities to explore; its color changes as you polish the surface. The working procedure with stone is to take material off the original block instead of adding material (as you do when you work with clay or plaster). With stone, you begin working with your idea in mind, and the final form evolves as you get closer to it. Additionally, every stone has its little secrets and surprises inside; it is never as constant as you hope it will be.

Chiseling or working with heavy machinery demands physical skills, precise movements, and clear decisions. I decided to use only stones that I can carry and move. Thus, my physical strength influences the size of the sculpture. Meanwhile, I started to carve smaller and softer stones, more delicate ones. The fragility of these stones becomes recognizable when you hold them in your hand.

I carved my latest series of small sculptures in white alabaster and white marble: firm bodies with positive and negative limbs; not only the real limbs but also the other extensions—the mind and our senses. This allows strange volumes to emerge out of the stone, without needing to borrow forms from human anatomy or from the vegetable kingdom.

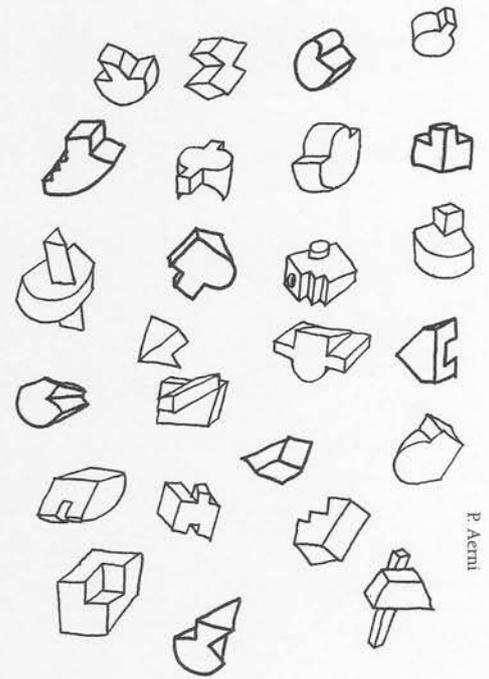
In order to change the scale, for another project I used a chain saw and big blocks of wood. Wood in general is easier to cut and lighter than stone. The chain saw is a strange tool because it is rather big, very noisy, and quite frightening. It also demands clear decisions about where to cut, how to proceed, and when to stop. And it forces you to sacrifice details, since you cannot make small things. I worked on abstract volumes with the idea of making toy wooden blocks, only bigger and rougher than the usual colorful handy cubes for children. I painted them white.

In addition, I made lots of sketches, straight ink lines. These sketches turned into drawings of sculptures that I no longer needed to carve. This was at the same time a relief and a sort of panic because I was losing the real 3-D object. The drawing is the idea of a sculpture; it pretends that such a volume exists.

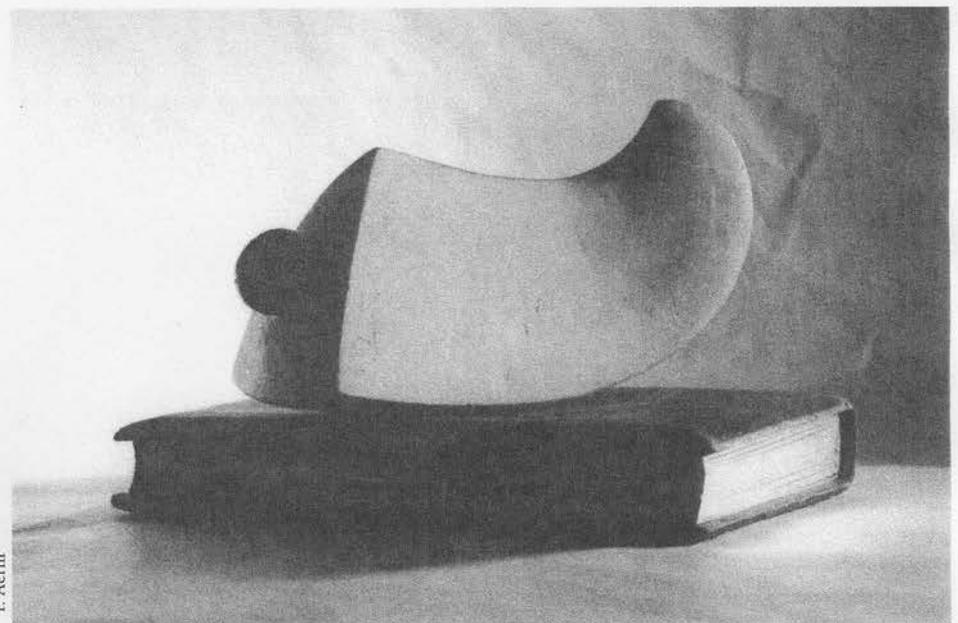
Meanwhile, I continued to make real sculptures. But from my experience, it became obvious to me, in relation to drawing, how the sculptural form of the cubes is specified by its clear outlines rather than by its volume. The volume of a sculpture is made visible by exposing the sculpture to different light, creating a gradation in its coloring and creating shadows.

In 1998 I started to use white walls as a support for big drawings that I made with black tape. These tape drawings became the background as I moved, scenery for improvisation, one source of inspiration.

Soon I made them on the floor to create different zones on stage. The lines, straight by definition of the tape, are in big contrast to the soft-edged body. The environment, and my sense



"Ink drawings of wooden sculptures that I don't need to carve anymore."
Arlequi, Spain, 2001.



Condensed Memory, stone sculpture on top of an old family album, 1992.

of it, is not the same with and without the shape on the floor. In performance, the drawing also serves as a starting point for me. It gives me the freedom to be there alone with the drawing on the floor, to be at home. It allows me to be simple—to stand, to breathe—I am always in contrast to the form on the floor. (The latest performance of this was at LIFDI, the Liverpool Improvisation Festival of Dance and Improvisation, in December 2001.)

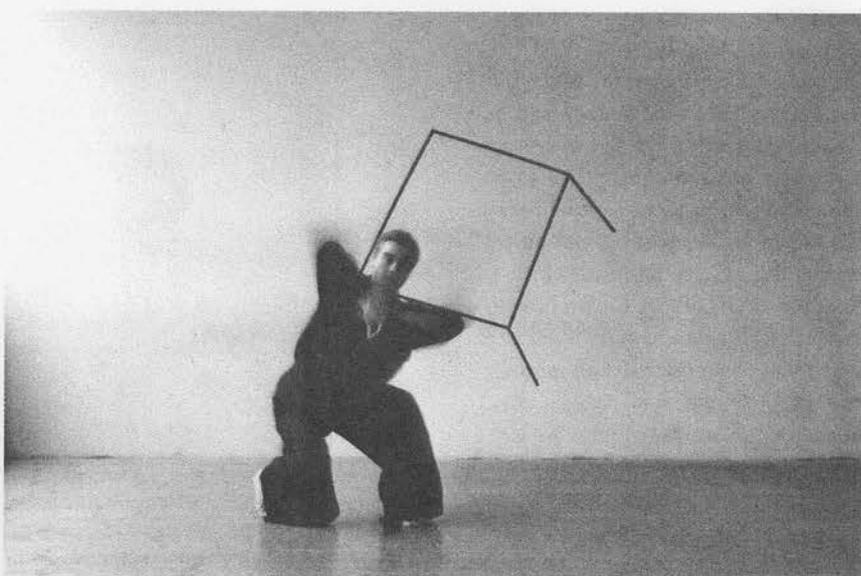
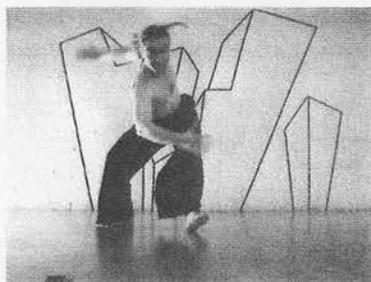
movement. I enjoy a similar muscle tension while working in both disciplines. I find a freedom in being very present in the moment and letting go of other thoughts. In both disciplines, I use similar ideas of precision, impulse, direction, and repetition. When I watch myself dancing on video, I often wonder how these ideas are combined with my physical strength and my very activated field of visual perception. Added to this are the specific dance movements taught to me by others. What is it in the end that creates my way of moving, my choice of being present in the dancing?

Contact Improvisation has become important to me alongside my visual work. After college I spent two years, 1992 to 1994, in Berlin, Germany, training intensively within the post-modern dance community there. Since then, I've continued to dance and teach Contact Improvisation in different contexts. Dance improvisation—and also the idea of improvising in general—has encouraged me to follow my impulses in my way of living and my work. It supports my attitude toward my way of working: following inspiration, using my training in various techniques, but still trusting the moment itself.

When I look at a sculpture, I often wonder about its creator. I am convinced that the personal physique and mind that it takes to create a sculpture is visible in the sculpture. I believe that a sculpture is inhabited by the process of creation. The sculpture is present when you show it to others; there is no more effort needed.

In a dance performance, in order to be visible, you create in every moment an immediate presence in your body. Your personal experience of the dancing helps you find the presence again and again, and trust in the moment.

What is it that creates my personal movement quality? Working on sculptures and dancing both involve complex



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[above and right]
Video stills, dance, and tape volumes.



Video composition: still pictures from the video "Dance for the Camera," a project where the public at the festival was asked to perform small choreographies or improvisations for the camera. Berner Tanztage, Bern, Switzerland, 1998.

Improvising gives me the freedom to move without a goal in mind. There is no physical result—no drawing, no sculpture—but there is the memory of it, the freedom of recognizing the body. However, the more I worked with dance and improvisation, the more I was interested in capturing moments of dance, memories, bits of new information in my body. At a certain time, I made collages after improvising in an attempt to give material substance to the experience of the dancing, retracing the physical memory to find images and forms, shapes and colors. When I look at these colorful pictures now, I can recall some body memories.

With the same motivation in mind, I started to use video as a tool to record movements. On the one hand, I use it to watch myself dancing, and on the other hand, it serves as a virtual audience for site-specific improvisations. I research, edit, and sometimes perform with the shot material.

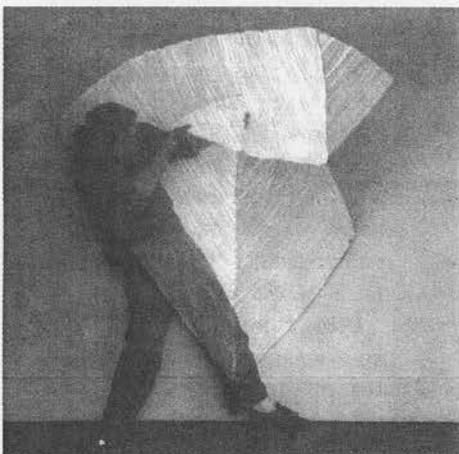
Using video projection on stage opened up another area for experimentation. In the use of video, I try to be simple. I want the viewer to see a real-time picture, not one manipulated or edited too much. For my latest performance, I videotaped a landscape with rocky islands and sea. In the video, I walk into the center of the frame, stand for three minutes watching the landscape, and then run out of the frame. For the live performance, the video was projected onto the back of the stage. As the performance started, I was standing in the center of the stage, casting a shadow of my body on the screen. Then, in the video projection, I came walking into the center of the landscape, arriving at the spot where my projected body fit perfectly into the shape of my shadow on the screen. Then I left the spot on stage, and my double, in the projection, remained there. I had the freedom to move, to duet with myself, to refer to the experiences I had in that landscape. After three minutes, my double ran off. And so did I.



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wood, 1998.



My desire to overlay my interests in dance and visual arts also produced two series of photographs. In order to show both disciplines, I superimposed on one negative a sculpture and a self-exposed photo of a moment of dance improvisation. I improvised with a particular sculpture in mind, trying to find appropriate movements. But because of the way I was working, there was still a big chance I'd miss the moment or overlap with the shape of the volume. I made a large number of photos and ended up with a few satisfying pictures.

With this procedure of superimposition, I can change the scale between me and the sculptures. This allows me the freedom to work with sculptures larger than those I can make, in fact to imagine working in whatever size I want.

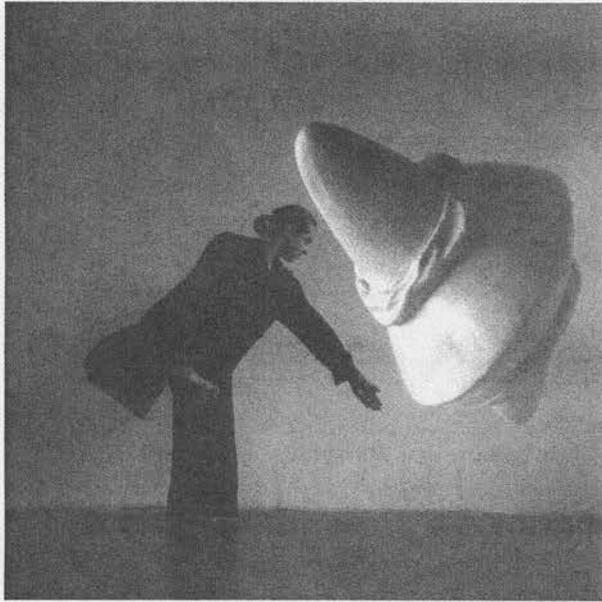
I printed the photographs of the hand-sized white stone sculptures on fabric, very big, superimposed with me almost life-size. This enlargement made the sculptures look very light and not made out of stone. At the same time, it is quite astonishing to see a man dancing with a big flying stone. In the final image, both subjects are in two dimensions. Both the mover and the sculpture seem to be real. I haven't yet figured out how to translate this onto a stage.

There is more research to be done.



I welcome your feedback or interest in collaboration. You can also contact me if you want to buy any of the big prints on fabric.

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all artwork by Peter Aerni

stone, 2000.