



Rosemary Butcher, "Flying Lines", Hampstead Heath, 1986 © Rosemary Butcher Archive

# ALL IS NOW

## A talk with Rosemary Butcher

Interview: Sigrid Gareis

*Often referred to as an 'icon of new dance', British choreographer Rosemary Butcher encountered the post-modern Judson Church movement during a stay in New York in the 1970s, as well as works by Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham. Back in England she found that the US dance avant-garde and its aesthetics were not yet present there. She started to explore the new directions she had discovered, and in her early years as a choreographer she defined a new language and built up her work in isolation from other contemporary dance presented in the UK. Rosemary Butcher is still a border-crosser, an avant-gardist in her own right. Her works did not attract a commercial audience and received no substantial public funding, but she*

*persevered and maintains a prominent profile, switching between various fields of artistic production, such as film, gallery installations, pieces on stage or in outside spaces, graphic work, and also works in connection with academic research. She has also created a legacy through teaching younger artists. At Tanz im August, Rosemary Butcher is presenting her retrospective "Memory in the Present Tense", an exhibition and four performance-installations. Even though she started her artistic career in the mid-1970s, this is the first time her work is to be shown in Berlin. The curator and dance specialist Sigrid Gareis had the opportunity to talk to Rosemary Butcher during her preparatory visit.*

**Sigrid Gareis:** *You have been invited to Tanz im August to present four artistic works and an exhibition. According to what criteria or concept were these chosen from your extensive body of work? You have created more than fifty performances and productions.*

**Rosemary Butcher:** It was important to me to look back as well as to go forward. I wanted to show selected older pieces and to present new work, whatever the risk. It was important to allow the older works to rest against what was present. And so both "The Test Pieces" and the new installation piece "Secrets of the Open Sea" have grown over the last two or three years.

"After The Last Sky" was an important installation piece, the first of its kind in the UK in 1995, a landmark piece in terms of its approach to choreographic form, but it wasn't seen very much at the time. The exhibition presents a lot of my other work, which is shown in film and photographs. I chose to reconstruct "SCAN" and present it in a live version at Tanz im August because it was probably one of the pieces that had a stronger response at a particular time, and because I was able to work with some of the original dancers. For me "SCAN" was sort of the end of working with a certain language, which was much more technical. But it was also a highly collaborative piece with composer Cathy Lane and visual artist Vong Phaophanit, a Turner Prize nominee. He used light to make an installation, and his collaboration is presented as visual art, not as lighting design. And I think that crossover was very important. Also I worked on shifting the space so that the audience was very close to the performance, on four sides. Generally, "SCAN" seems to have left a mark.

**SG:** *Could you tell us more about your two new pieces?*

**RB:** "Secrets of the Open Sea" is a three-screen solo presentation. It goes back to earlier installation work, and I again worked with film. The film-maker with his handheld camera searches and follows the movement material within an

industrial space and through the juxtaposition of the three screens. "The Test Pieces" is a live performance for five dancers. It retains a sense of improvisation, which was very much present in the earlier works of the seventies and eighties. "The Test Pieces" works with memory and site – the site being whatever was left behind after the demolition of a building. The performance is an exploration of how the site can be recorded and inscribed through a movement language resting in an empty space. Both works represent a new direction for me, yet they have a connection to ideas in the earlier pieces "The Site" (1983) and "Body as Site" (1993).

**SG:** *You're going to show different aspects of your work in the retrospective, but your collaborations seem especially important to me. You're constantly expanding the boundaries of dance as an artistic discipline, particularly by working with artists from different fields: with the composer Michael Nyman or the architect Zaha Hadid. Could you tell us how you work with your colleagues, and what the interdisciplinary, collaborative aspect means to you?*

**RB:** I was influenced by the collaboration between John Cage and Merce Cunningham, and what they took from Marcel Duchamp. That interest I had prior to my discovery of Judson. Judson of course had an overwhelming influence on me, but I felt it was more about a concept of change rather than a particular style or aesthetic. Back in London my first works were demonstrably influenced by Judson, but even then I referred to visual art, for example by the British painter Ben Nicholson. But I think actual collaborations were initiated by conversations I had with other artists when I was a resident at the Riverside Studios in London in the late 1970s. The venue was run by the brilliant artistic director David Gothard, who assembled around him a group of artists such as the architects Will Alsop and John Lyall, the writer Hanif Kureishi, the visual artists Heinz-Dieter Pietsch, Bruce McLean and Jon Groom and the composer Michael Nyman, plus many other international artists who performed and exhibited there.

So I found myself being introduced by David to these artists who were working in the building in one way or another, and it seemed interesting to work together. When I did start to collaborate, however, what was important for me was that I still held the vision for my work but that the artist I collaborated with worked from his or her own premise. It wasn't a question of a design element added to my work but of taking an idea or subject and together evolving a sense of our own process. I suppose in most ways I was still holding the piece together and was mainly responsible for maintaining the consistency of the concept. There was a generosity of exchange of information from one art form to the other where the ideas could also inform the artist in his own work. Working with visual artists helped to provide some sort of new context. But within the context of dance in the UK at that time it did confuse critics and some of the audience, who found it difficult to place my work.

**SG:** *You have pushed yourself to the limits in terms of artistic disciplines, and have often also relinquished the classical stage format. Your work "After The Last Sky", which will be shown in Berlin, was the first dance installation in the UK. Striking here is not only how you deal with space in general but specifically your pre-occupation with architecture. What is your approach to space, site, place and architecture?*

**RB:** I was attracted to non-conventional spaces early on through my New York experience. I witnessed performances there in galleries, museums, the lofts of SoHo, even the Staten Island ferry. And I also danced myself in Union Square in a work by Elaine Summers. I think that the ideas and the experience of working in and watching performances in the lofts of New York really stayed with me. I became interested in the idea of doing things space-specifically but not always site-specifically.

I have also been informed a lot by my relationship with architecture and buildings, in terms of the overall effect they had on my understanding of space. Some



architects have seen my work as spatial. One of the things that has been commented on is the juxtaposition and placement of things. The inspiration of other places was important too, like archaeological sites, runways, hangars and the desert – a lot of spaces that had a different focus but were influential in how the work was made or driven by ideas.

I worked with the architects Zaha Hadid and John Lyall on a large-scale project, “d1, d2, 3D”. Hadid was interested in ley lines and put her one-dimensional architecture on the floor as a taped design, over which I laid a grid of movement inspired by Le Corbusier. The work in its second stage, “d2”, was performed in the Baroque church of Spitalfields in London, where I was looking at two-dimensional space; I worked with John Lyall, with slides and light. Finally, in the Tramway Theatre in Glasgow, Lyall created a three-dimensional space with scaffolding. As in “d1” and “d2”, the movement was developed with reference to Corbusier’s Modulor. That work stands out as a piece made with a direct architectural base, but other works also have a sense of there being something built.

This is also discussed in “The Test Pieces”, which is influenced by the work of Peter Eisenman and the manifestations of working with plan and photography. The theory behind the work derives from the writings of the architect Bernard Tschumi, in particular his concept of a building based on a real-life event, as outlined in his book “The Manhattan Transcripts”. I have been interested in his drawings in the form of a grid that show the evolution of a process in which different stages were translated and transformed into the next drawing. Transferring my understanding of the way I use space with the performers is, I think, the important factor in my work. As I am always drawing as I choreograph, it is always about things happening against other things. If you look at the drawings afterwards, there are lines and circles and triangles, all overlaid.

**SG:** *Your interdisciplinary approach has often been related to your beginnings at the*

*Judson Church in the 1970s. I have the feeling that this explanation is too simplistic.*

**RB:** Yes, I only fully realised that recently. Although I was of course incredibly influenced by Judson, I actually always maintained a sense of my own aesthetics. Sometimes this was quite difficult, as when I was asked to reinvent Allan Kaprow’s “18 Happenings in 6 Parts”. (‘Reinvention’ was Kaprow’s term. He wanted his work to be reinvented after his death, not reproduced.) I had to work with Kaprow’s concepts. Although I learned a lot, I found it impossible to remove my own aesthetics. Even with all the research of his work I undertook, I was never able to fully engage with his aesthetic.

**SG:** *You said you learned a lot by doing this?*

**RB:** What I gained from that working process was that I could let go of some of the aesthetics I was controlling in my work – and that was good for me; it gave a different identity to what I was doing. Like Kaprow’s contemporary Jackson Pollock, the energy was in the doing of the thing, not in the finished work. So I became interested in the doing of the movement rather than what it manifests. This premise underwrites my later work, including the two new pieces I’m bringing to Berlin. In a sense there’s an incompleteness. Before Kaprow, my work needed to be totally resolved aesthetically in my mind. Now I’m more interested in the idea of things that just maintain their own identity as they are, and not necessarily building up to completion. I got that from the study and the investment I made with Allan Kaprow.

**SG:** *At the moment we have an enforced Judson revival. What’s your position having been part of the Judson movement in the seventies? How do you see what’s going on with Judson at the moment? Does it mean anything to you? Is it relevant to you?*

**RB:** Well, to be honest, it isn’t my Judson. I use the word ‘my’ carefully, following a conversation with the promoter and director of St. Mark’s Danspace Project in New York,

Judy Hussie-Taylor, who presented the festival Judson Now in 2012. She made the point to me that there were many Judsons, even among the original protagonists. So I’m not saying that it isn’t interesting or relevant but that it was important for me to have actually experienced it. While I was there, however, I wasn’t analysing, I was just experiencing.

**SG:** *You were in the middle of the movement, you said?*

**RB:** Yes, I think that the revisiting of Judson by some contemporary artists in New York and Europe has actually been helpful to me, in the sense that their analysis of the past and the way they actually put that out in their work isn’t dissimilar to what I’m doing. Because there has been a re-looking at what I had experienced first-hand, a development of a language that I was already doing, and a new context to place it in. It gave me the confidence to validate my own explorations. I think that it was inevitable that this should have happened. Ideas that when first presented seem way out in the cold will eventually be rediscovered and given a new position later. Yet it’s impossible to reproduce all the energy and inspiration of those three years, which for me were seminal.

**SG:** *But going back to your own history and your own development as a choreographer for over forty years now: at the moment you’re dealing with your own personal history, building up an archive, reconstructing your works. Your series in Berlin is called “Memory in the Present Tense”. Could you explain your historical approach in more detail?*

**RB:** I can look at archives in a number of ways: as a physical object of history and as a reference, or as my or an audience’s own philosophical reassessment of my work, or as revisiting my original concept as a starting point for new work. The Berlin retrospective addresses all three. The exhibition presents the archives as a history of objects. The performance of “SCAN” with an original cast allows a new audience to perceive a past work within a different time and to assess or reassess the piece.

The starting point of the new works were the concepts from the past reinvented. It must be understood that I don't have and never had revenue funding from the Arts Council in England, so many of my works were only seen once and frequently shown to tiny audiences. There is of course my website, and Middlesex University London, where I'm a senior research fellow, is currently raising money to have the archives put online to be made available for study. This immediately changes how my work is perceived: it appears in a different time and context, and is seen by a different audience from when it was originally presented. This will tend to present me as a historical figure, which is not really what I want at present, but it's inevitable.

I undertook two research trips to New York to re-establish my memories of the time and discover how the ideas I encountered have developed. Following those trips I thought that instead of making absolutely new work I would make a series of things in which I revisited concepts of my past and reworked them into the present, showing that a body of work allows an audience a way into the present from the past.

**SG:** *In this context it's interesting what you explained earlier, that if you rework a piece from the seventies or eighties, today's dancers can't work with you in the same way as the dancers did at the time. Of course this is what always happens with conceptual work.*

**RB:** Yes, that's true. Another way of going back into the archives was to return to my gallery works (1976–1983), but taking the movement language as source. Somehow I aim to produce a similar source language when I reconstruct a piece, but of course the result is different because the experience of the dancers is different. Their experience and therefore their movement is much more sophisticated. It will be a very different visible work.

**SG:** *You are planning to build up a personal artistic archive which in the end will be manifested as an art work in its own right. Your exhibition is a starting point, or will be a part of it?*

**RB:** I think the Berlin exhibition is a journey for me. It's also a journey of being able to revisit the past as well as a history of contemporary dance over the last forty years. The question of where the work stands or where it is placed contextually can be accessed through the exhibition; I feel that this is why it's so valuable. Yet there is no timeline in the exhibition, in that there is no reference to what was going on at the same time. It would have been interesting to make links to what else was being produced. So you could actually see the juxtaposition, the passage of time, through the work of other contemporary choreographers. But I don't think this exhibition is an artwork. I think it should be informative and give a sense of my life's work, and perhaps in a way provide some information as to why it has taken so long for my works to arrive in Berlin.

**SG:** *Another question, also about your legacy. You have taught a lot of very famous and interesting pupils – or a lot of students of yours are such interesting choreographers now, like Jonathan Burrows or Philipp Gehmacher. Talking to them, they totally appreciate what they learned from you. Can you tell us about your teaching methods and how teaching relates to your creative process?*

**RB:** I think teaching is the same as choreographing. I don't draw a line between teaching and creating. When I prepare for the teaching, I'm actually continuing a process that sometimes gets resolved in the teaching process, so in one sense I'm almost always rehearsing. I think it's because of this that I've been able to keep working. It is probably one of the things where I've been able to keep a sense of progression.

When teaching I try to work on a piece that is the teaching itself, breaking it into a format that can be established as a way of giving information to others. This means I'm not directly choreographing but I'm breaking down the essence of what I'm trying to do, which is to communicate something that the people from the teaching group then begin to manifest. Not just teaching information but it

coming from a genuine idea that is probably an inspiration to very creative people. Ultimately all the people who have been influenced by me have been incredibly creative in their own right. They have just been enabled to go one or two steps further at a particular point in their lives and to gain the confidence to create their own language.

**SG:** *Concerning the retrospective in Berlin, do you have a wish for its reception, or an expectation?*

**RB:** I'd want it to be taken seriously – but seriously within the context and language of the work. Also that it does have its own identity. I think that would be really something, regardless of the perception of where my work rests. That could be really significant. I hope so.

## Retrospektive Rosemary Butcher

Memory in the Present Tense

Ausstellung

### Moving in Time: Making Marks and Memories

Ausstellung | Eintritt frei

Akademie der Künste, Hanseatenweg  
→ 14.–30.8., tägl. außer Mo. 15:00–20:00

Eröffnung: 14.8., 15:00

### After The Last Sky

Videoinstallation | Eintritt frei

Akademie der Künste, Hanseatenweg  
→ 16.–30.8., tägl. außer Mo. 15:00–20:00,

■ 16.8. Susan Leigh Foster talks to  
Rosemary Butcher

### Secrets of the Open Sea & The Test Pieces

Akademie der Künste, Hanseatenweg

→ 14. + 15.8., 16:00 + 19:00

SCAN

HAU1

→ 2. + 3.9., 19:00 + 21:00