



## Folding The Flesh Into Thought

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In this article I explore an interface between integrated dance theatre practice, creative philosophy and select medical and sociological discourses. I do so in order to reconsider the politics of thinking about intellectual disability. I employ the phrase “integrated dance theatre” to discuss dance theatre devised and performed by people who identify as being with and without intellectual disability. In contexts other than this article, the term “integrated dance theatre” is also used to discuss dance theatre performed by people who identify (more broadly) as being with and without disabilities. I take up and contextually translate modes of thought that are implicit in integrated dance theatre practice, in order to call for a concept of corporeality that encounters, and extends beyond, contemporary ways of imagining the intellectually disabled body. Deploying aspects of Deleuze’s work on Spinoza (1988, 1990b) and sensation (2003, 1990a) and his collaborative scholarship with Guattari (1987, 1994), I argue that integrated dance theatre performance texts possess a capacity to reframe the ways in which bodies with intellectual disability can be thought. By inviting audiences to question modes of thinking about intellectual disability, such dance theatre constitutes a praxis in which the intellectually disabled body is understood in terms other than those that presuppose a Cartesian mind–body dualism. I mobilize the work of Adelaide-based Restless Dance Company<sup>1</sup> as both a site of inquiry and a source of knowledge production. Building relationships between the affective surfaces of Restless Dance performance texts and Deleuze’s philosophy, I fold some specificities of embodied differences into thought. I look to create what Deleuze articulates as a Spinozist, joyful or useful union “which so disposes the body that it can be

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affected [and act] in a greater number of ways” (Deleuze 1988, 71).

Bodies with intellectual disability are characterized in vernacular discourses in terms of the sensory and the material. An unfortunate consequence of such characterization is that colloquial adjectives used to refer to a lack of competence or desirability iterate medical histories of territorializing intellectually disabled bodies. When employed to describe an erroneous behaviour, words such as “idiot,” “minda” and “retard” bind everyday verbal and kinaesthetic mistakes to histories of conceiving people with intellectual disabilities (Merton; Miller; Wolfensberger). Here, the outside of thought is brushed, although not fully encountered, via both the accidents that prompt such abuse and in

any changes in thought they generate. If the accident was framed in different terms, it might be a more productive moment. But rather, such moments become vectors for the re-articulation of medical and sociological assumptions surrounding intellectual disability. When these terms are used to classify a person, the unthought is pushed away. It is negated in favour of (what Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 117–62 term) a plane of reference, a constructed discursive field, upon which only specifically choreographed “truths” can be acknowledged.

The ways in which bodies with intellectual disabilities are understood in the medical and sociological discourses from which their name is derived mark a limit in thought that needs to be moved beyond. To employ terms used by Deleuze and Guattari, this limit is a junction point embodied in the brain, between scientific discursive systems and philosophy (1994, 216–17). Understandings of intellectually disabled people (and their bodies) should be components of concepts on a plane of immanence, not accidental crossroads between divergent modes of thought.

Most understandings of people with intellectual disability continue to be derived from such medicalized notions. As such, the body implied by the term “intellectual disability” remains untheorized. It is positioned on the edge of foldings of medical and sociological knowledges. The noun is a medical term, a construct of medical discourses, yet it is employed within sociological scholarship and everyday speech. It refers to a medical problem. It does not actively describe the capacities of a material body. People with intellectual disability are not imagined as incorporated, or material bodies that articulate a range of potentialities. Rather, their corporeality is assumed by default, as the difficult, fleshy packet that a deficient mind grew within. Forces produced by such bodies cannot be theorized while their corporeality remains overlooked within theoretical debate. Yet such forces are active agents in and of the world: integrated dance theatre texts offer a case in point. This polemic is illustrated by the ways in which spectators of integrated dance theatre can rethink ideas of difference and “normality.” Particular emotional connections experienced by spectators

constitute testimonies to the affective forces articulated on integrated dance theatre texts. Such a paradox: the difference between a lack imagined in thought and the affective lives of those understood as lacking is both an invitation and an imperative to re-imagine the corporeal capacity of the intellectually disabled body. The perverse doubling of an imagined lack with a living body begins with the ways in which medical discursive systems construct the intellectually disabled body as a limit in thought.

### a limit in thought

Definitions of intellectual disability can be adaptable and highly necessary political tools. However, all definitions of disability partake in the enterprise of defining communities and individuals in relation to their functional limits. Such a task is ethically problematic because it is an act of relating to another in which the “other” is simultaneously imagined and negated or limited. As I noted in the introduction, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) consider such referential modes of knowledge production to be discursive rather than conceptual. As a discursive system, medical knowledges such as definitions of disability are composed of what Deleuze and Guattari call “functives” (1994, 118). These are elements of physical functions that are actualized within a discursive system. As a method of construction or practice, discursive systems are pragmatic and political. Making this point, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that “[s]cience relinquishes the infinite, infinite speed, in order to gain a *reference able to actualise the virtual*” (1994, 118; original emphasis). In other words, while art and thought open up the actual to possibilities of the virtual, science (and medical science) crafts physical positions through accessing limited parts of the virtual. While broadly applicable definitions of disability as well as quite specific definitions modelled around personal limitations have pragmatic utility, they also constitute negative limits. They are theories built on abstracted parts of the actual. Such restrictions significantly shape the ways in which people with intellectual disability can be known.

While being a socially useful practical structure, discursive systems of medical knowledge are not concerned with developing culturally dynamic meanings. Rather, they are a means to an end; they are constituted by “[a]cts of reference...finite movements of thought by which science constitutes or modifies states of affairs and bodies” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 138). Acts of reference are singular, limited and defining. They can only be performances of a scientific epistemology. As abstract frameworks, medical systems do not create concepts. Nor do they produce bodies of thought that productively connect to other metaphysical systems. As such, the medically based idea of intellectual disability cannot hold valency within philosophy. Rather, it has sense only when supported by the beliefs that underpin functives in a discursive system, or what Deleuze and Guattari call prospects (137). Prospects are statements constructed because they can be physically proven. Prospects are proven *by* functives, aspects of the physical world slowed down to points at which they are observable. For example, the idea of a low I.Q. is a prospect. A perceived lack of abstract intelligence is thought to “prove” or demonstrate a low I.Q. This “lack” of intelligence, or I.Q., is a functive. As a contextually specific construction, the idea of intelligence and the ways in which it is tested are self-serving. They construct the idea of what they prove.

I am concerned with a specific kind of prospect, namely statements that are developed to identify, define and categorize intellectual disability. Medical definitions constitute signifiers that can be re-constructed, marginalized or written over by the affective logic of sense articulated on integrated dance theatre texts. Unlike forms of medical knowledge, the logic of sense developed in integrated dance theatre is not grounded in proposition-based facts. Rather, such logic is an articulation of an original aesthetic, devised from a collective process. Before I discuss how such logic is devised and expressed on sensory surfaces, I further unpack the institutionalized politics of intellectual disability that it disrupts. This provides a context in which the political affects of such sensory logic become plain.

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## prospects, functives and faces of intellectual disability

I take up Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of faciality to explore the institutionalized politics of intellectual disability (1987, 167–91). In particular, I deploy this concept to support my contention that, as propositions put forward by discursive systems, medical definitions of intellectual disability constitute signs and signifiers of a semiotic code. Like discourses of intellectual disability, faciality or the act of facialization is “a jump...from the organic strata to the strata of significance and subjectification” (181). Faciality is a system of attributing cultural meaning to material bodies, in which a “single substance of expression” is produced, as opposed to a heterogeneous range of matter, sensation and possible meanings (181).

Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization of faciality mobilizes a “white wall/black hole” dialectic: it is in relation to a white wall and a black hole that social visibility and group identity are produced (167–91). The white wall is a wall of signification upon which identifying features are inscribed. Black holes are loci of subjectivity. In order to become a subject, to be consolidated and socially coded, one limits one’s capabilities and desires. The subject is captured in a black hole.

An individual’s face is constructed in relation to the socially mediated faces of cultural groups. Relations between social and cultural groups are processes of (re)construction in which faces are remade, re-visioned and through which some collectives are defaced. In order to have a social identity, a configuration of bodies must have a face. The face both allows social visibility and limits the actions of those it holds in its black hole.

The face is expressed as social identity but also as capacity, possibility, action, thought and desire. The face is a social and political economy. Acculturated reading practices or visual codings are part of more comprehensive value systems that organize bodies and practices in hierarchies of power. External signifiers, such as actions or visible features, are given a comprehensive meaning that stretches beyond their physicality. For example, the human face as a vector of

significance is privileged over other parts of the body. Like the white wall/black hole of the face referred to by Deleuze and Guattari, medical knowledges, grounded in semiotic systems, are performances of a social libidinal economy (Bateson; Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 167–91). They are coded flows of socio-political desire.

Visual and genetically inherited signs are read as signifiers of a particular medical condition or disease. These signifiers are captured in the black hole of “intellectual disability” as a system of subjectification. Semiotic methods of medical identification fold into more comprehensive social value systems that institutionalize bodies. The classification of a body as intellectually disabled in medical terms can be read as such a specific socio-cultural positioning. From visual features which identify people as being intellectually disabled through to contextualized performances of “intellectual disability” within institutionalized systems established to support people with intellectual disability, medical discourses are connected to wide-ranging, performative and institutionalized economies. Categories for defining intellectual disability constitute the white wall upon which the face of intellectual disability is signified; that is, they articulate the signs and significance(s) captured in black holes of the intellectually disabled subject.

In order to develop a white wall/black hole dialectic, medical discourses construct inherently different bodies as being the same. This construction simultaneously produces the simulacrum of a “normal” human body. An imagining of an ideal, normal body, that justifies the materiality of the abnormal and, in this instance, intellectually disabled body. As Diprose suggests, and as is posited by the concepts of prospects and functives, genetic theory (and medical discourses) do not engage with anything other than themselves. In suggesting that “genetics, as theory, has no ethics,” Diprose is highlighting the symbiotic relationship between genetic theory and genes (as the products of genetic theory) (71). This point of argument can be applied more broadly to medical discourses of intellectual disability and their objects.

It is through biomedical knowledge that the ideal of a “whole” is constructed as normative

and desirable. Diprose articulates this point in her suggestion that:

To label something or someone defective or inferior relies on the assumption that the “proper” stands alone. Yet, some notion of the proper as sameness does silently underscore the evaluation of differences with real effects. (71)

The “whole” or the “proper” can never stand alone, Diprose contends. Indeed, nothing can be perceived as standing “alone” per se. “One” can only be known *in relation* to another. This relational equation of knowing is focused very specifically in biomedical theory and practice, within which a gene’s “function” is determined primarily in relation to its spacing in a nucleotide<sup>2</sup> chain (Diprose). Here, a gene’s function is read through exterior corporeal signifiers such as eye colour and shape, height, cognitive capacity, craniofacial features and so on.

Understanding the idea of the normal human body and its binary opposite, the abnormal body, as constructs of medical discourses allows for their contextualization and their deconstruction. The medical construction of intellectual disability and abnormality is contingent upon a simultaneous imagining of normality. Such constructions of normality are powerful abstractions. The process of classifying a body as intellectually disabled can thus be seen an act of “facialization” in which bodies are mapped in terms of dominant medical norms. Here, a semiotic code of genetic signs, visual corporeal and performative signifiers is read in order to paint a black hole of intellectually disabled subjectivity upon a white wall of medical knowledge.

The formation of intellectual disability, then, is a specific act of “cutting into the thickness [of bodies], of carving out surfaces, of orienting them” (Deleuze 1990a, 143). Here, beliefs and the surfaces of bodies are sutured in acts of knowledge production that deny many possibilities. Through embodied relations, sensory exchanges and the craft of dance theatre, it is possible to fracture and redesign mappings of intellectual disability in which bodies and beliefs are stitched together.

Integrated dance theatre is a context in which bodies with intellectual disability are engaged in creative, physical ways. In performance texts, the dances of intellectually disabled bodies express contexts through which they become known in experiential, relational terms. Such relations occur outside, or in excess of, the facializing, abstract medical knowledges of intellectual disability and the social belief systems that adopt such arborescent logic as a conceptual framework. Dance theatre devised and performed by people with intellectual disability, the aesthetic affects it produces, and the ways in which people who experience them take on these affects, can be considered as “distinction[s] or singular [ities]... belonging to a modal essence” (Deleuze 1990b, 197). The collective, creative process of devising and performing integrated dance theatre produces this new modal essence: an original “pure physical reality” crafted through embodied labour (1990b, 192, 193).

The economy of sensation held within an integrated dance theatre text is constructed around modes of knowing intellectually disabled bodies that are in excess of medical and social knowledge. By becoming incorporated in such an economy of sensation, in intersecting its aesthetic affects and taking them on board, the spectator’s kinaesthetic system engages with, and feels for, intellectually disabled bodies in ways that are prohibited in other contexts. The medical and sociological knowledges sutured together in “intellectual disability” as a facializing system are prised apart by kinaesthetic economies of relation that emerge in response to sensation.

## sourcing flesh

My movement between economies of the body and thought requires a distinction between corporeal and textual affect, as (after Deleuze) these are the terms I use to consider the composition of sensation. Corporeal or embodied affect is a change in corporeal capacity. In the Spinozist sense that Deleuze gives the term, this can be a positive or negative development, and can be quite simple (e.g., “now I can do the splits”), or more complex, such as the ways in which group psychology changes, the ways in which

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different atmospheres or spaces alter experiences of embodiment (1988, 1990b). One of the most useful definitions of the Deleuzo-Guattarian mobilization of corporeal affect comes from the work of Patton, who also frames Deleuze and Guattari’s employment of corporeal affect in terms of its Spinozist foundations, arguing:

Bodies undergo modification or change when they act upon other bodies or when they are acted upon by other bodies. These modifications which result from entering into relations with other bodies are what Spinoza calls “affects”. He distinguishes such affects or modifications from the “affects” or variations in degree of power to which they give rise in the body concerned. In these terms, a body may be defined by the affects of which it is capable. (2000, 78)

Through augmenting bodily capacities, leaving traces of positive affects in viewers’ bodies, dance theatre changes bodies of thought by changing people and communities. If corporeal affect is a change of bodily capacity, it is also a means of knowing bodies and relating to bodies that is performative. There are no expectations laid upon (vernacular) performances. They are not measured or judged. Indeed, an evaluative perspective is impossible because performances just *are*.

Textual affect is similar to corporeal affect in the respect that textual affect is a new difference, or singularity. However, a textual affect is a being of difference that inhabits literature, visual art or dance, rather than a corporeal extension. Textual affects have the capacity to instigate corporeal affects, to teach new milieus of difference, or imbue new fragments of experience upon the bodies that behold them. Textual affects exist only within works of art.

Textual or artistic affects are grounded in the milieus of sense that are established within a work of art, and it is because of this that affects can be considered as being “internal” to a work of art. They are composed of sensations: composites of creative labour and matter. Such sensations are specific to a particular work of art, or art text and as such I refer to them as textual or artistic affects. They create forces in and of experience



rather than representations. Deleuze suggests: "Every sensation, and every Figure, is already an 'accumulated', 'coagulated' sensation, as if in a limestone figure. Hence the irreducibly synthetic character of sensation" (2003, 134).

Deleuze and Guattari also advance this concept in their collaborative work. In *What is Philosophy?* they argue:

Art preserves, and it is the only thing in the world that is preserved. It preserves and is preserved in itself, although it actually lasts no longer than its support and materials – stone, canvas, chemical color, and so on. The young girl maintains the pose she has had for five thousand years, a gesture that no longer depends on whoever made it. (163)

A textual affect such as the pose of the young girl described above is, of course, going to be understood in a way that is specific to the viewer in question. The fact that a new sense is created, however, is irreducible. The sense can live on in bodies, actions and passions long after the experience of a work of art has faded. Textual affect is a singularity that can't be re-created in everyday life. Yet it can be remembered by the viewer in the course of their everyday life. Memory augments and thus changes affects, but the grounds of remembering affects are products of the art text as much as the viewer's character.

Within the work of *Restless Dance*, the production of textual affect is critically enmeshed with the production of corporeal affect. However, corporeal and textual affects remain distinct entities in the Company's work. For example: a textual affect within the *Restless* show *in the blood* is the sense of a "wish" (2002). I briefly recount the way in which this affect is constructed. I then explore the corporeal labour and associated affects needed to produce the textual affect of the "wish."

Framed as the host of a surreal and slightly dark birthday party, a dishevelled-looking man in a worn suit (that looks much older than he does) painstakingly lights 27 cup-cake candles. Slowly, he draws the small flame nestled in each cake to his chest. He closes his eyes as his shoulders rise and he makes a wish. Blowing out the candle, he returns the

cupcake to its original position in a row of cakes stretching across the front of the stage. He carefully kneels in front of the next cake. He strikes a match. (Hickey-Moody n.p.)

The sense of the "wish" created here exists in stark contrast to many lived experiences of the birthday wish. Here the wish is a specific, difficult enterprise, a mixture of effort and tired resolution shot through with fragile flickers of hope. This wish is a sense that does not live on in words; it exists only as a being of sensation. The character of the man who lights the candles exists only within the world created by *in the blood*. The "essence" or "is-ness" of this character's candle-lighting is contingent upon the spatial and temporal facets of the choreography surrounding him, the specificities of his and other dancers' bodies and the overarching themes of the performance piece: bloodlines, family celebrations, the performance of family and cultural histories.

In a different reality, but the same temporality, Mark Tanner lights a row of candles. His embodied memory of the way that the "candle lighting" happens is an extension of his personal style. Days of working with Ingrid Voorendt, Philip Channels and me cultivated a corporeal affect of "the wish" and instilled a method for lighting the candles in his blood, flesh and bones. The method is something like this:

Kneel in front of the cake. Pick up the matchbox. Strike match. Light candle, blow out match and place it on the left side of the cake (this shows you where you are up to. No burnt matches mean that *this is the cake you are supposed to light next*). Now pick up the cake with the lit candle, and hold the cupcake with both hands. Close your eyes and think of something precious . . . (Hickey-Moody n.p.)

And so the story goes on. Drawing together the mechanics of candle lighting with an imagined sense of "special wish making," the corporeal affect produced by the technical act of Mark lighting candles is also a textual affect of *in the blood*.

The translation from flesh to art occurs when, as the birthday party host, framed in the context of a full-scale dance theatre work, Mark creates

a cumulative affect of a somewhat forlorn and difficult “wish.” The feeling is similar to a desire you can never realize, something that is always slightly out of reach. Every now and then there is a sense that *maybe* he might get what he wishes for. But only every now and then.

The complexities of the relationship between corporeal affect and textual affect within a Restless work are always part of a dance’s power and intrigue. On one level there is no pretence; that is, the dancers are real people doing real things in their own particular style. Yet, on another level, this is not an everyday world. One only has to watch for fifteen minutes before feeling a bit different, not quite the same as you felt when you came in; the affect is seeping into your skin.

Deleuze and Guattari describe a textual affect as being an “Antarctica” in the middle of civilization, a sensory landscape that performs a unique, singular difference amidst an established culture of sameness:

The affect certainly does not undertake a return to origins, as if beneath civilization we would rediscover, in terms of resemblance, the persistence of a bestial or primitive humanity. It is within our civilization’s temperate surroundings that equatorial or glacial zones, which avoid the differentiation of genus, sex, orders, and kingdoms, currently function and prosper. It is a question only of us, here and now. But what is animal, vegetable, mineral, or human in us is now indistinct . . . (1994, 174)

Like an Antarctic freeze, affect arrests the development of cultural clichés and brings in new models of life that appear in the thaw or spring of this arrested development. Artistic affect dissolves ill-formed opinions (people’s automatic “differentiation of genus, sex, orders, and kingdoms” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 174)). Such affects also form new distinctions, sensations, internal atmospheres that can support those who behold them in dissolving inflexible ideas of “sameness” or “the way things are.” An affect changes an individual’s relationship with a socialized structure. Affect has the capacity to modify; it “is” a singular difference.

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The introduction of new emotional and aesthetic vocabularies constructed upon, and in relation to, people with intellectual disability transforms ways in which people with intellectual disability are thought.

## affecting thought

For Deleuze and Guattari, the practical events with which philosophy is concerned are events that occur within a very specific kind of thought. The terrain of philosophy is known as a “plane of immanence or consistency” (1994, 113). This name is derived from the idea that a metaphysical flat surface is made up of aspects of philosophy that are immanent to it, or have already been thought. As such, the plane can be considered as composed of the *consistency* of concepts, the interiority of extant thought. How, then, can sensations produced by integrated dance theatre be taken up to inform the ways in which bodies with intellectual disability are conceptualized? Through folding sensations born of the flesh, into concepts, the embodied labour of people with intellectual disability can be incorporated into models of thought deployed in relation to them. Bodies with intellectual disability need to be thought in terms of the affects they produce: the forlorn wish, the raucous laugh, the scream that articulates years of medical overcoding. A scream that incites terror in a room filled with bodies. In response to such an act, the intellectually disabled body might be thought as a vector of social disruption. Conversely, in omitting unbounded laughter, the intellectually disabled body becomes a hilarity-machine. A haecceity<sup>3</sup> of devious pleasure.

The production of new philosophy will always occur in a pre-existing context of thought. However, this context cannot be limited to philosophical terrains that have already been mapped. A certain degree of “stepping off the board,” or plane of immanence, must be undertaken if the unthought is to be encountered in a radical sense. As Deleuze suggests in *Negotiations*:

philosophy [is] a logic of multiplicities. Creating concepts is . . . [an act of] filling in what’s missing. Concepts are composites,



amalgams of lines, curves. If new concepts have to be brought in all the time, it's...because the plane of immanence has to be constructed area by area, constructed locally, going from one point to the next. (147)

Existent ideas of knowledge must be adapted in relation to newcomers in a dialogue. Conversations of theory must be bent in order to relate to such new arrivals. This negotiation allows us to envisage folding specificities of embodied differences into thought. Such an act of folding can produce a conceptual framework for thinking beyond the idea of intellectual disability. It will facilitate imagining the productive capacities of bodies with intellectual disability in metaphysical as well as lived contexts. This approach offers not only a means to give form in thought to the forces that such bodies produce; it is itself an ethical act. The practice of folding the flesh into thought acts upon bodies with intellectual disability in ways that increase their capacities. It does so by expanding social imaginaries to include relational possibilities for people with intellectual disability that are imagined outside medically based knowledges.

If such a practice can reconfigure imaginings of the intellectually disabled body, then this approach is, in part, the very definition of philosophy understood, with Deleuze and Guattari, as an affective "pedagogy of the concept" (1994, 12). Here, people with intellectual disability are not "less than." Rather, they are an Other that allows thought and art to access "the people to come...mass-people, world people, brain people, chaos people." They open up passages "from the finite to the infinite..." and, indeed, beckon a "moment of the infinite...[of] infinitely varied infinities" (180–81). Such people can push philosophers to the edge of thought and invite reconsideration of what might constitute thought itself.



## notes

1 Restless Dance is critically regarded as being Australia's leading youth dance company inspired

by cultures of disability. It remains one of a select number of companies operating in the field of integrated dance in Australia.

2 A nucleotide is a subunit of DNA or RNA consisting of a nitrogenous base, a phosphate molecule, and a sugar molecule. Thousands of nucleotides are linked to form one DNA or RNA molecule.

3 A haecceity is a multi-dimensional form of individuation or singularity. It is a specific "relation of movement and rest, speed and slowness... a combination of atoms, an emission of particles" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 276).

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