

BodyCartography in Conversation with HIJACK

[BodyCartography](#) co-directors Olive Bieringa and Otto Ramstad speak with [HIJACK](#) collaborators Kristin Van Loon and Arwen Wilder about the premiere of HIJACK's premiere of "[redundant, ready, reading, radish, Red Eye](#)" at Walker Art Center. The interview took place in Olive and Otto's home in November 2013.

Otto Ramstad: The overhead question was: do you at Hijack direct your performers? And if you do how? And if you don't, what else do you do that has an analog to directing? Or maybe you don't consider that at all: directing...

Kristin Van Loon: There's one thing I'm just thinking of now that we didn't talk about last night, which is times where we deliberately do not direct and actually very specifically don't look at people working and that's a specific choice to have everybody in the room is working at the same time, including us, and the difference between everybody but one, or everybody but two people working and zero people watching is huge.

Olive Bieringa: Huge in that you do it a lot and you rely on that as a strategy?

KV: There's a big difference between no one looking and anyone looking, like that privacy. And we've worked with big groups, including ourselves, nine in this piece and twelve in the winter feeling interested in how when we've done so much work just the two of us in the room and how much of that time nobody is watching and working, so expanding that

Arwen Wilder: Thinking about how this question... I was thinking about why this is a relevant question and how if you do work where you show somebody some moves and there's a clear right and a wrong, like a very specific shape that you're supposed to do, directing is different than when you're working in a task-oriented or mixed, sat-with improvisation kind of way that that becomes much more relevant and I think what you were saying, Kristin, about the difference between the two of us and then working with a group, I feel like we share such... we have a lot of unspoken rules about how you approach things like impossibility and you know if you're trying to do something and we know that its not possible to pay attention to as many things as we're asking people to and we know how much you like to be rigorous and frantically stick to the rules and how much we like to have a sense of humor and know that its impossible and let go of the direction and that one of the things that we have to try to communicate to our dancers is how to approach the instructions that they're being given. Mostly, I think what I was trying to say last night is that as long as the approach is clear, its our job to keep the directions, to keep the rules about what they're doing, such that they don't need continuous direction, that they're solving problems and figuring out how to be and how to do things within the scores that we're giving them.

KV: Yeah it's um watching for when the puzzle is solved so you have to adjust the puzzle, so maybe it will stay without direction for months

OR: How has it been successful to, that approach. Like is it about instilling a desire for them to have to want it themselves, or is it about sharing the way that you approach it, or is it just about letting that be a, letting that way of approaching the point to act via the instructions, but not explicitly, you know...

KV: It's just about finding the right people. Its funny I was just thinking that because you have to have inquisitive people, and boy have we hit the jackpot because we didn't pick people with similar backgrounds to us or each other but they've all amazing and it takes a sense of humor too...this is just such a great question because its come up pretty late in the process, like "oops we've said almost nothing to them about what to do." And actually we do, often we don't because we love what they're doing, and even telling them what we like without how it looks can ruin it.

OB: What percentage, if you had to come you with a percentage, would you say, of your aesthetic is based on failure in relationship to choreographing for other people?

AW: That's such a good question! Failure!

OB: I'm sorry I'm just dying to ask.

KV: We're really into being non-sequential and bouncing back and forth to things. We're really into corrections, lately, so it helps to have...

OB: To make it more difficult?

AW: It helps to have something be wrong, so that it can be corrected. And we like the wrong thing and the right thing present.

OR: Within self-correction, you mean like within what you're doing?

AW: One example that has inspired us is, just describe what it looks like without getting too detailed, a page with writing crossed out, some of it. So you can see read the words behind the cross-out parts, but you can also see what has been done wrong and still worth reading, so seeing that its wrong and seeing it through the scribble.

OB: But can you give me a percentage?

AW: A percentage of what?

OB: A feeling. What percentage within your work, and it could even be like the total, when you think about your work, or it could be just about you choreographing on others, if that easier. Like what percentage of their aesthetic, delight in it, is about failure?

AW: I can't give a percentage because it goes around and around for me in terms of what is failure because its success if they're failing in the right way, or it stops, so then is that still

failure? I don't know. I love the way one turns into the other and it feels a lot to me like so many dualities right now, like improvisation and set. I don't even know how to define the two edges.

KV: Maybe one way to answer that is 0%, in that dancing, I think it's clear for us and everyone, that the goal is perfection, always. So that's actually very important, the sense of humor about failing is to not be like, "It doesn't really matter if my arm is here or there," like that's never the feeling while executing it.

OR: Never mark it.

KV: Never mark it.

OR: Follow-up question is, do you think about dramaturgy? If you do, what do you think about it? If you don't, why do you not think about it? And is that important to you or not? Does it even come up?

KV: I need a definition and then you might have an answer right away.

OR: That's part of it. What does it mean to you?

AW: The way I define it is someone paying attention to the way that the images and the arc of the piece are personally and culturally relevant and sometimes people, I mean hear the word dramaturge a lot, a lot of people are hiring people to do that with them or for them...

OR: In Minneapolis?

AW: A little bit in Minneapolis. And elsewhere. And I think it sometimes, why I don't feel the need to hire someone on the outside is probably because there's two of us already, so we're often doing that for each other and also because we make a point of showing work as we're making, especially using protocols where there's a lot of description of what people are seeing and what it's making them think of, that we're getting a lot of that information as we're making it, so that we can, I think that someone taking care of that whether it's the choreographer or someone else is really important. I think that it's easy to get myopic in a way to get swept away by the sensation of movement or to get lost. We have definitely, I think, in group work over the years got lost in just the beauty of the group and lost track of the other stuff I was saying a dramaturge should do.

OR: Yeah I think we had never really worked any dramaturgical support. And I think, in terms of the definition, I think that the dramaturge we eventually worked with in our last show for a little amount of time, I think I would just say you have to just make your own definition, they all make their own definition, eventually.

KV: Who'd you work with?

M: This woman from Germany, **Stefanie Hahnzog**

OB: She's trained in theater.

OR: She's a theater dramaturge.

OB: A theater dramaturge, but they understand the body/mind training we use?

KV: And did she come to Minneapolis while you were making it?

OB: No we were in Germany, so she came to Hamburg and dramaturged while we were in process and we did a little exchange.

OR: She watched videos and then we talked on Skype. The interesting thing about us because we also...

OB: We just problem solved a couple of things we couldn't figure out.**OR:** Yeah. Also, you know, there's two of you, and there's two of us, and it was just like, well we don't need that because we talk about it, we talk about the piece, you know, all the time, so why do we need anyone else? But at the same time, it was interesting to have another person and if there's a disagreement a lot of times its one person that's agreeing with them and the other person isn't it could feel like a two-against-one kind of situation. But another way was just more people there talking about it, was very interesting.

OB: It was funny you asked the initial question because I was thinking today that you just call yourself Hijack, you don't say... you call yourself choreographers, or you call yourselves dance artists, what do you call yourselves?

KV: A choreographic collaboration...

OB: A choreographic collaboration. Ok. Because I was just thinking about it today. I was like, "Oh that's interesting," just the avoidance, you know, of labeling in some way. Or like you don't say "choreographers" or "co-choreographers." So it's interesting to ask the question.

KV: What do you call yourselves?

OR: Choreographers.

OB: We're choreographers, and I think that came from the place that we work so much with, initially so much with people improvising that we didn't feel like we were just choreographing on people. I mean, I don't necessarily feel that way anymore, but it really came from the fact that we were working with scores and sometimes maybe our own scores. And sometimes completely kind of, more of a conceptual frame and whoever was coming into it was bringing movement, the choreographic content in a way and we had just created the framework. And I think that is where it came from initially.

M: I don't know...

OB: We have a lot of directing, I mean, we do a lot of directing...

KV: What does it look or sound like?

OR: I don't know, Kristin, what is it?

KV: I'm trying to think...

OR: You're in like 3 pieces.

KV: Yeah, but I don't think of myself as feeling highly directed.

OR: Well, think about that duo you did with Karen on the table...

KV: Mmmhmm. But do you mean that it's tightly scored?

OR: I just mean that we would watch what you guys were doing, and then we would give you feedback. Maybe like, ok...

KV: I need more of this? Ahhh...

OR: I think we would say, probably stuff like, you know, "Make sure you change the rhythm of the way you're doing this, because if you don't, I have a hard time seeing what's happening," for instance.

KV: And I ignored you...yeah.

Laughter

OB: You must have because that's when the camera moved, so then we directed them more.

KV: I think it's quite likely that all that happened and I just don't remember it very well. I remember feeling very...

OR: That's good because you have to be in it. I mean it still has a score and I did give feedback, we did give feedback and say, "Don't do this as much, do this more," you know, "Do this." Or, some supportive things like "This was really vibrant within that" and "This really distracted me from what I want to see right now." But at the same time, you have to perform it and you have to survive that situation without it being set, so I can understand why that would be a bigger experience than just some little tips.

KV: I kind of suspect you did this in your process too, but it's a common way of directing for us, I think, and it's a lot like what we do in contact class every week which is just take turns watching. So someone else does your score. And even, there's some movement that there's five of us doing it, including Arwen and myself, and we're really trying to get very unified attack and energy and shape in our movement. And, I don't know, I think one of my favorite ways to do

that is just one person sit out, and you do a cycle of five, and watch. And, you know, it gives everybody power and sometimes just watching, like “Ahh Ha!”

OB: Could we talk a little bit about some of the beginning points or seeds of this new project?

KV: So many questions... (*singing*)

OR: That’s so like a...we’re in an interview with radio station questions.

KV: I love radio...um...I’m trying to think of what we made right before we started this because it’s so often our...

OR: At a gay bar...

KV: Was that the last one? *smithsoniansmith*? But what within that would it be...Was *Horoscope* after that?

AW: Before...

KV: Before. I usually travel with that list.

OR: A list of all the pieces?

KV: Of everything we’ve done

OB: Shouldn’t you just tape through them?

AW: I think some of why that wondering is even relevant is because usually the way we start a piece is by trying to do the opposite...

OB: A reaction to...

AW: Opposite of the thing we had just done...

KV: One thing about the beginning was a separation to start to...there was an articulation by each of us of an interest and if we call our MANCC Residency a seed time, we each had three hours a day to direct independently.

OB: And you never talked in the evenings about what you were going to do, you just kind of did it on your own?

KV: The planning, directing, leading in the rehearsal was independent...

OB: The whole big picture...

KV: We were designing the whole project.

OB: Was that the first time that you had done work that way?

KV: Hijack's half.

AW: Right, well it was the first time that we were thinking of making a single piece. We've made pieces for each other when one of us was directing and choreographing and the other one was dancing.

KV: We did that for years before we made something for ourselves together.

AW: Yeah, and after too. So we've done that a lot. And we've had rehearsals where we specifically take turns for set amounts of time. But to go for multiple weeks with, you know, the morning is mine and the afternoon is hers, making things but knowing that it was ultimately going to be one piece was new and presented a large problem upon leaving. We had two completely separate pieces. And we came back and we performed at a cabaret evening and Friday night we did Kristin's and Saturday night we did mine. We actually were really stumped for a long time about what to do with that material because it had developed so much further than things usually do before being connected.

OB: And how did you...what happened then next?

AW: We made something completely different together. And then little by little have put some of that stuff back in. But it was a huge quandary.

OB: Can I ask one more, it's a very quick question, I think. Does it feel like with choosing a title, or figuring out the starting point for the next piece then, is it always about putting on the awkward clothing? I mean is it always about choosing a place of discomfort, actually, because you brought up the word "comfort"? Is that the starting point?

AW: No. Not always. Sometimes...I can think of examples specifically of starting with an idea to create more comfort and more ease maybe in dance making or in our collaboration, in our conversation.

KV: I think polar extremes really exist in the piece right now. There is some movement that is stretches of dancing where A and B are next to each other and are very uncomfortable in sequence. It's very inconvenient to have your body in once place and lurch into the next. And if it does get convenient then we change the score, and other stuff that is selected specifically because there are favorite things. The word "favorite" is the deciding principle, so curious about how those things feel different. And how and then in terms of comfort, watching what happens to anything over time, especially those very inconvenient moves next to each other. Well, if you do it the same way for months it just smooth's out. Or if you do it with the same music playing, even if you think you're ignoring the music, you're not. You're starting to dance to the music. That's something I feel a lot.

OR: Being as that you're making this evening-length piece, does that change the way you're making it very much. Because I felt like, from my perspective, when I watched *smithsoniansmith*, and I only saw it at MOMA I didn't see it when you were on the other persons' set, I didn't see it at Opening. My feeling was: this is not evening-length. The feeling of it was...

KV: You wanted more...

OR: No. No, just the feeling of it was, I saw smaller pieces...
F3: It was episodic.

OR: ...together. And you were working with Scottie, and I don't know why that has to be anything. I remember thinking, it didn't have that feeling to me. Based on the feeling of what it is. And I didn't know. And I'm curious if that, you know the process of making that, I know it was obviously totally different, because it was just the two of you and Scottie, and I know you don't have a relationship with him in other pieces, but how's that change? What's the process like doing that? I know you just said that you just decided later on but it sounds like that was a force in the room for the whole 3 years, this commissioning *a* piece kind of feeling. So whether or not you just didn't decide it was like *in* the conversation and you know like *smithsoniansmith* versus this, you know, out of your cannon of works.

AW: Yeah. I felt the same way about *smithsoniansmith* and that was absolutely why the idea thinking about "novel" and slow development and things coming back around, unraveling, absolutely came from a reaction to that. And even a lot of the other longer pieces that we've made were like a bunch of little pieces strung together, and we believed that they informed each other but there was less of maybe that thing of we're saying is a full-evening, that kind of development.

AW: Well we did make a number of small pieces, short pieces, as we were making this, but the way that they've come together and overlapped and kind of kaleidoscope and splinter off each other and the way that some of the same vocabulary was used in different pieces, so it came to have a very different character, but then it's the same vocabulary, so then when you put those things together, it's less of a string of pearls and more of a whole. But also, I think it's significant just the amount of time that we've been working on it. Things can then percolate in a way that they do affect other parts of them even if it's in a less obvious way.

KV: I remember being very intentional from the very beginning to find pleasing examples of wholeness. Things that were almost a little too big to keep the whole, or too complex, to keep the whole alive and viewed and sensed. So just studying that. Sustained activities. Looking at the difference between routines and the different length cycles. So like I started having very informal weekly cycles, and monthly cycles and daily cycles. Reading, sticking with longer books, just reading novels more. I do like reading short things, especially with fiction, I love short fiction. So I was just, you know, expand the attention span. You can make something that's 60 minutes long, but it's just episodic, *just* episodic, if that's what *smithsoniansmith* is. Realizing that we like pretty dense things, we're pretty anti-filler. We have a strong aversion to wasting anyone's time. So how can we tolerate asking everyone to look at one thing that lasts that long and to feel

as rich and specific for that long both compositionally and as a dancer? And examples of breaks and rests and voids in the middle of things, helping break up the tendency to have our typical rhythm of sections. So if it's like: section and then a break and then a new section, there's different kinds of breaks inside the sections. So just identifying our patterns and habits with time.

AW: I think trying to figure out compositionally how the sound was going to work was a big part of figuring out a whole, compositionally because we like to work with found sound and often with pop sounds and those have complete arcs...

OB: And three minutes...

AW: Right, and they're three minutes long...

KV: A lot of our dances are...

AW: So what do you do with all those beginning, middle, ends, to not make it episodic, and that was a big puzzle.

OB: So the music for this piece is also found sound?

AW: It is.

OB: And you guys have mixed it up and played with it? And you're the mix master, Kristin?

OB: The cutter?

KV: I did definitely a lot of research from the get-go, continuous for the 3 years. And of all that, a small proportion is in it. I think in a great way a lot of what was coming out at the beginning, early on, is in there so that it's really matured in our consideration of it. And huge question of about whether found sound and found sound, where including a pop song from the radio is found sound, whether or not we should ever manipulate or edit anything. What is anything's whole? Can we find any sound sources that we like that are already 60 minutes long?

AW: We both listened to a lot of movie scores as a model for that. Like a whole sound with a significant duration.

KV: Someone else's story.

AW: Yeah.

OR: You just got to use Robert Ashley. He's got those huge pieces.

OB: Did you just go see that in New York? Is that why you were there?

KV: Yeah. Gosh his stuff is fantastic!

OR: Could I ask you another question? You're going to tour the piece?

AW: We're not opposed to touring the whole thing. We would love that as we fall more and more in love with this version of it, its more and more tragic to us that it doesn't have any other gigs lined up. We would love that. But we know that one of the things that has been appealing about us in the past is that there's two of us and we travel light. And that's the reality, and so, then making an interesting thing for us out of that reality is trying to figure out how to make that piece, but intentionally not addressing it so that we make the fullest most abundant...its going to be impossible, its going to be tragic and hard, and that's why I don't want to not make the abundant, full thing because I'm saving in my mind for how it will...

OB: Being strategic.

KV: No. No. Being accommodating. Being...

AW: We're spending it all, filling it up, and doing it for the Walker and then we'll...

OR: *(Singing)* It's a Walker show...

KV: *(Singing)* It's a Walker show...

AW: ...and then we'll figure out: What does that mean?

OB: Yeah, we're still in that learning, I think. Even though we've taken everybody to New York and to Chicago this year...

OR: And Germany...

OB: ...oh and to Germany, but that was before we did the premier. There's also no space that's like the McGuire Theater. You're in these shitty...I love you, venues that present us, but it's not the McGuire theater, so just the luxury and the height of its space and what the lighting designer, Heidi, was able to do in the Walker is really hard to replicate in other spaces. So just the fineness and attention of the tech crew also at the Walker, it's hard to manifest there if you're reliant on stuff.

KV: Getting ruined by the Walker...
(Laughter)

OB: It's gorgeous and so you're in love with the beauty of the space and being able to use the proportionality, until the timing of everything gets shifted and its like every time you remount the work, the stuff that was happening in the back corner you now can't see. You know, because the space at Abraham's, it's circular actually, or the corners just disappear, you can't even see them. So just also that luxury of that space is also a huge reality.

KV: I'm laughing because everything that Arwin said about abundance and full, big space, big time, big cast is very true and we both say it and mean it a lot. Simultaneously, especially at the

very beginning and throughout the whole time, we thought and talked a lot about avoiding the “doing the big show at the Walker” and being outside of...making something that wasn’t of us. So we thought a lot about just everydayness and we just kind of took a snapshot of our dance lives and said, “We’ve been teaching contact improv Wednesday morning, every Wednesday morning, for 12 years. It must be important to us.” So that must be a building block of the show. Not just contact improvisation, but what we *do*. And we had a very deliberate...we had to sample from what happened in that class in rehearsal, like specifically, every week. And the cast was influenced by people who were dedicated to that class. Just “practice” and “class-ness” in general.

OR: So you guys have still not, no video for this show.

Laughter

KV: You mean we don’t video our rehearsal and then look at it to feedback. We’re not like...

OB: But you’re both in the material, so...

KV: Right. It’s a problem. It’s a puzzle.

AW: And we did videotape during the residencies at the Walker.

OR: Did you watch them?

AW: Yup.

KV: Yeah, we made a point of...it felt unusual...we made a point of, you know, it takes so much time. So we sat and watched it...

AW: One of the big edits that we made was because of watching the video. It was really useful.

KV: I’m trying to think of which one

AW: The Mr. Hijack repeat cut came from watching the video. That surprised me. We take turns sitting out which is also time, takes a lot of time, especially as you have longer and longer sections. We haven’t yet, either of us, sat out of a whole, but even if you’re going to sit out of a 20 in section that’s significant. But we’re still fairly pigheaded about that.

OR: Because you’re opposites, then next show you’re going to have to choreograph everything from the video?

KV: We’ve had many opportunities to do that and we keep not doing that.

OR: I wouldn’t recommend it. I did that with *Super Nature*. I decided I would become a real choreographer and watch the video, all of it.

OB: ...this is of hours and hours of people’s improvisations...

OR: ...take sections of people's improvisations...

OB: ...like 3 months of improvising, right?

OR: Yeah. It was like...I think I watched...

OB: ...oh no it was 3 weeks...

OR: I watched a residency at Lily Springs, which was a residency that was all day long for 5 days, then I watched 3 weeks, then I watched a month's period, five days a week.

KV: How did that go?

OB: It took a long time.

OR: Grueling.

KV: How did you keep your...

OR: It took me a month.

KV: How did you keep your attention span fresh? Like did it wane, and then you have to take a break?

OR: Yeah I had to take breaks. I didn't watch it all day every day. But I got into the zone, and I had a goal, which is: I'm going to watch all the video.

OB: And I couldn't watch it because I had seen it all. I was outside of the whole process. I was like, I'm not going to watch anything you can just come back to me and tell me what you love because I already know what I love.

OR: I watched it and I took it into an editing program, final cut pro. So instead of taking any notes, I would just cut the pieces of video that I liked and I would label them in the computer. Then I had folders of different kinds of scores that we worked with, and I put them in those folders. And then I showed them all to Olive. I showed all the edits. If there was multiple things in one drag, and I only liked the one thing, then I would have the whole chunk and I would put markers in it. Because I could insert little markers and then I'd go back and I'd know what the different points within that thing were. Then I would show them all to Olive and we could kind of agree which of these sections. And then I brought it into the studio. And a lot of times I would give the video to dancers or groups of dancers and I was like, "Here's the points that I like in this, just like, put these points together," and pretty much, I didn't say to do it in sequence or not, but pretty much everyone did because it was much faster. And pretty much all of those worked out. And some of the times, I put the points together. Then at the end I realized, "Man, I did it! I'm like a real choreographer now. I chose the moves, and I put them together."

Laughter

Because I love Ralph Lemon and I was in Lyon once when he was doing...

KV: Did you do the drunken stoned phase though? Aw see, that's a real choreographer!

OR: I know, it's so boring to be a choreographer... Anyway I saw him like watching the videos and David was making little disks and giving it to him and he was doing it, and I was like, "Ok, I'm going to do that." Not just because Ralph Lemon, because I thought I want to make choreography, and we've done a lot of different things but most of our work is not very set. I thought I want to just use that method, and it took so long...

OB: It was grueling...

OR: I also thought another thing we could do is that we did both of these interviews and one of them is you interviewing us and we're interviewing you and they're sort of based on "Walker Shows." We could do another one where we just talk about collaboration.

OB: We just talk about Philip [Bither].

OR: We could just talk about the process and collaboration. Being in a two person collaborative team that has worked for fifteen years or more.

KV: Sex or no sex? Which is the better model?

Laughter

OR: Well if you have sex, if you're hetero, then just make more kids, so stop doing it after you got one.

AW: No, we're very civilized. Separate sex from procreation...keep them separate, very civilized...

OB: Awesome! Thank you!

AW: Yeah, thank you!

HIJACK is the Minneapolis-based choreographic collaboration of Kristin Van Loon & Arwen Wilder. Specializing in the inappropriate since 1993, they insert dance where it is least expected. HIJACK is best known for "short-shorts": pop song-length miniatures designed to deliver a sharp shock and collaborations with po-mo hero Scott Heron. The duo has taught and performed in New York (at DTW, PS122, HERE ArtCenter, Catch Series/Movement Research Festival, Chocolate Factory, La Mama, Dixon Place), Japan, Russia, Ottawa, Chicago, Colorado, New Orleans, Seattle, San Francisco, Fuse Box Festival, and Bates Dance Festival. Commissions include DTW/Tere O'Connor's "Nothing Festival", James Sewell Ballet, U of MN, Bedlam Theatre. HIJACK has taught a Wednesday morning Contact Improvisation class at Zenon Dance School continuously for 14 years. Van Loon & Wilder are currently at work re-imagining their Walker Art Center-commissioned nonet "redundant, ready, reading, radish, Red Eye" into a duet (?) for awkward spaces.

As codirectors of the BodyCartography Project Olive Bieringa (NZ) and Otto Ramstad (USA) investigate empathy and the physicality of space in urban, domestic, wild and social landscapes through dance, performance, video, installation work and movement education. Our works range from intimate solos for the street or stage, to large site based community dance works , short experimental films in the wilderness, to complex works for the stage. We have created numerous performance works, short films and installations across the USA, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, Europe, Russia and South America and were recently named Dance Company of the Year by the Twin Cities City Pages. Recent works include Super Nature, with composer Zeena Parkins, commissioned by the Walker Art Center, Performance Space 122 and PADL West. Symptom, with Minnesota twins Emmett and Otto Ramstad and Mammal, a commission for the Lyon Opera Ballet. Our trilogy Holiday House (2005-2007) was commissioned in part by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and was the winner of two Minnesota Sage Awards. Our site spectacle Lagoon was the winner of the Perlorous Trust Creativity Award at the New Zealand Fringe Festival in 2003. We are featured artists in the first book about site dance in the USA published by University of Florida Press entitled Site Dance, the Lure of Alternative Spaces.