

# Vertical. Nature. Base.

A collaborative project by Echo Echo's Steve Batts and artist Dan Shipsides. Based at a Donegal coastal climbing location and a city exhibition base, V.N.B. is a residential experimental climbing / art / dance project that investigates the contrasting and comparable notions of climbing as sport and climbing as creative engagement. Interested people can join the camp in September (details tba) for various activities and camping. This blog is an insight into V.N.B.'s creative development.

Saturday, 1 August 2009

## DANCE NOT DANCE - CLIMB NOT CLIMB – AUG 2009

8<sup>th</sup> Aug 2009

Hi Steve,

The starting ideas are interesting:

Interviewing you (and/or other climbers) about what relation to sport climbing has. About fear. About beauty. About challenge competition. About sensual pleasure. About pain. Taking the answers as a sort of "score" for dancing. Maybe a soundtrack.

Learning a climb and practicing it as a sort of dance. With an expressive or affective process. What are the shapes and tones of the torso and if they appeared while dancing not climbing what would they signify or describe in the state of the dancer.

To climb and to record a monologue of feelings and sensations as I go. To use this as a score for dancing.

To do two routes alongside each other as a duet. Like a countermelodic composition. Controlling the timing and the moment of and effort in each move. Perhaps with a music score?

To attempt to model or echo in the dancing body the forms of the rock on a particular route.

I'm less focused (obviously) about the aim of moving it from "research" to a dance project or outcome (that horrible word "product") - I like to see the research as partly the project itself - I suppose I'm shy of the project in the end become a "dance" piece - so a kind of dialogue between dance and climbing is really interesting as long as the final thing isn't reducible to dance or climbing. How we do this I don't know....but I guess the starting point is a dialogue of sharing ideas and actual experience - with some element of ongoing "gathering" of material. Also being wary

Update Aug 2011

VNB project flyer

Background info

[Background info](#)

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of it becoming reality tv style...

bujt i understand the need to have some horizon scanning of an endpoint.

The idea of bringing in other climbers - (e.g.interviews) appeals - as might a widening of dancers who may be involved.

One thing I feel needs to be open from the start is that I'm being involved as an artist - not a climbing instructor or the "climber". I don't represent climbing - I'm an artist who climbs and sees a great deal of creativity in it.

It also has legal ramifications in terms of me receiving payment ( I assume somehow...?!) as a climber not an artist. I have instructor qualifications - but if I'm being paid for this type of work (instructing) I'm under a very different dynamic legally and interms of the sharing / collaborative dynamic of the project.

This is not to say I wouldn't want to "teach" you to climb - I love climbing with novices and sharing the experience - and of course would pay no less attention to our safety!!! but the legal duty of care is different.

Having said that i agree with you the starting point is climbing together - not you being in my hands - but finding a level where we both have creative adventure.

The ideas of "fear" and related the notion of life being contained in a "move" perhaps are still our key points as they tie the physical, emotional and social (art, sport, history) quite well.

Practical: how is the funding process. Would I recieve a fee (in stages I imagine) and expenses? I guess this is a negotiation we need to have soon.

Dan Shipsides

10<sup>th</sup> Aug 2009

Hi Dan,

Basically I have to say I agree with all of your observations and reservations. The "Making Something" (who knows what) issue is bound to be there for Echo Echo as that is what we have the money for... but I have no particular outcome in mind. We definitely don't need to identify a "result" we are aiming for, but it might be useful to have a sense of the length of time of our project. This can also help us to focus it because the more I think about it the more possibilities and resonances appear. If we know our time frame it may help us to take limiting and focusing research and creative decisions at relevant moments.

I can understand the reservations about the outcome being a "dance piece" or a "climbing piece". Personally I don't have that



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worry. I reckon that if we do our research well we could find our way to lots of different outcomes, maybe well into the future. The most important thing is to start with a radically honest exchange about interests, desires, feelings, histories, and values. For me that isn't difficult. I have been doing some research, thinking, watching videos, reading... also exploring your website. ... I am full of questions, ideas and feelings.

I certainly want to meet as artists. The experience and skill differential in the climbing is a facet of this relationship. One which itself can prove interesting and worth investigating. How do I feel as an experienced, skilled person in one area being a novice in another? How do you engage with me as a serious artist in the horizontal plane when I am an innocent in the vertical?

My major interest is in the artistic engagement. I really like your work. I am interested to encounter and to learn in this field. To get inside your processes, rhythms, tastes. The object isn't climbing, at least not in a simple way. I see climbing more as a medium for touching on meaning (in its broadest sense), and of interest because it interests both of us.

How do you feel about dancing? What is your experience, your impression, your prejudice? I tend more and more to describe my work as "movement poetry". It removes the "jazz hands" and mirror-gazing self-regard from the common perception. I'm a bit strange as a dancer too because I actually dislike the vast majority of "art dance" that whole world seems to be one in which the emperor has no clothes .....

I don't want a "climbing instructor". I want to go climbing with you. I have a good feeling about this. It is the way I did the bits of climbing I have done. Just to go with someone who I thought was safe enough and who I enjoyed spending time with and whom I didn't have to prove anything to. In a way I offer myself as a person who can be observed in the process of learning. A novice. A strange novice because most people who begin climbing are young and more unselfconscious. Maybe there are insights to be had from this.

I listened to an interview with Lynn Hill who talked about three stages in her climbing. The innocent first phase, the self-conscious competitive phase, and the calm meditative phase. This connected with me as a dancer. I began dancing from sheer enthusiasm at 22 having found the things I loved about sport, music and theatre in one place. Then it became: what should I be like?, How should it look? What must I practice? Am I good enough? This phase began to drop away quite soon thanks to training to be a teacher of the Alexander Technique but it still had a strong pull until fairly recently. It has been a very small

influence since my early 40's. Maybe because age puts me outside of the mainstream competition anyway. My pleasure in dancing is now of an order that I couldn't even imagine when I began even though I absolutely loved it from the start.

I found lots of climbers who are dead because of climbing. And lots of climbers who are dead because of other things. And lots of climbers who are not dead. I remember the broken woman lying on the ground. She wasn't dead. . . the animal cries of pain echo through every cell of me ... probably to my grave.

I thought of the several times I came close to dying in the sea and at the top of a cliff, the bicycle accident.....

I looked at the Topophilia concept. I moved house and place a lot when I was a kid. People ask, "Where are you from" and I don't have a simple answer. In Ireland this question is often very aggressive under the surface. Like there is a fear of not "coming" from somewhere. I realised that places imprint on me when something important or unique happens there. The first kiss. The first near death experience. The first fight. A family row. Breaking a taboo. I have the feeling that places, the texture, the visual aspect, the smell, the specific time, are written in me, in every cell. In my dancing practice I do a lot of detailed attention work, self-observation, meditative practice.... In that I discover the details of how this script, this calligraphy is recorded in me. Like I understand, intuitively, organically, the sand of Portstewart beach, the light of the frocess road, ..... Somewhere is the physical memory of falling down a step, again and again, in the house we lived in when I was a year old.

Watching climbing videos on You Tube I watched a very clear distinction. Pushing and pulling. Walking and hanging. Locomotion and brachiation. The fine co-ordination of these two primary reflex actions almost defines the difference between the "good" climbers and "bad" ones. I don't mean good and bad in terms of level but in terms of pleasure. There are some nice sequences where the "normal" push from the lower limbs and pull from the upper are changed with a hooked heel levering or a braced heel of the hand to push against.

Scale interested me in watching these videos. The scale at which people "show off". The private world of some small bouldering problem or the first free ascent in one day of some huge multi-pitch wall.

I woke this morning feeling like I did a few years ago when I climbed everyday for a month indoors in Holland with my dancer friend Istvan from Hungary. Maybe he is someone who could be involved.


I also remember reading in some esoteric hippy health context that upper body strength activity is good for a broken heart..... why I remember that I don't know!

..... I had the dream that I would never fall off.... Is this a real possibility.... To climb always at a level where the learning and improvement happens organically. Like apes....

All the best

Steve

SteveP.S. Any hint of reality tv .....  
aaaaaaaaaaaaaghhhhhhhhhaaghghhgahgha!

Posted by Dan at 19:04 0 comments 

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