

# PERFORMING RURALITY: LUCY SUGGATE, JULIE CLEVES AND ROBBIE SYNGE, AND ESTHER HUSS

BY KATY DAMMERS

● When I tell people that I have been researching performance artists working in rural space across the UK they often think of a dancer leaping through rolling green hills; a duet of pastoral bliss. While it can certainly be beautiful, I have found that performance in rural space is rarely so simple and sweet. Instead, artists have described their work in rural space as complex – the rural is a retreat and place to experiment with new ways of living *and* a struggle with isolation and limited resources; a place of natural splendour and inspiration *and* a context struggling with unemployment and the scars of mining and factory production; a tight-knit community that values neighbourliness *and* an increasingly divided, gentrifying countryside that is pushing out locals.

Over the last year I have considered the relationship between contemporary performance and rural areas in the United Kingdom, questioning why artists situate practices there and how their work is impacted by the rural context. My research analyses rural performance at a critical juncture amidst the climate crisis, demographic shifts to rural areas in the wake of the Covid pandemic, calls to reconsider national identity amidst the rise of Black Lives Matter and Brexit, and broad reassessment of the role and funding of performance practices across the UK amidst growing austerity.

Artists Lucy Suggate, Julie Cleves and Robbie Syngé, and Esther Huss each situate their work in dialogue with rural areas where natural beauty and strong community interweave with political neglect, economic stratification, and hardship. Reflecting

the complications and contradictions of rural space, they embrace the rural as a collaborator in a complicated duet.

Lucy Suggate's choreographic practice, in the small town of Wadsworth in West Yorkshire, studies and develops community, positioning performance, as she described it to me, as 'cohabiting through doing.' Moving to the rural area in 2020, Suggate described the Covid crisis as a catalyst for a broader reassessment of her commitments to family and relationships, and she hoped her change in context would also be an opportunity to experiment with more sustainable, slower ways of making work. Suggate actively contends with both the isolation of the removed Pennine mountains and the freedom she has from bureaucratic structures.



Performance of *Tender Stones* by Charlie Ford and Lucy Suggate at Wainsgate Chapel, 2023. Photo by Jack Wallington.

Reorienting her practice to her local community, Suggate has found a central mooring in Wainsgate Chapel, a former Baptist church turned into an arts programme founded by Charlie Morrissey and Rob Hopper. Suggate rehearses at Wainsgate and also facilitates regular Open Movement sessions there that invite participants to move independently in a shared space. Attending a session earlier this year, I encountered a diverse mix of people – former dancers, folks interested in exercise, and an older woman who felt good surrounded by others moving and grooving in the early morning. As I stretched and wiggled around I found a warmth in the commitment to shared practice that maintained individual independence.

Suggate's commitment to working alongside and with others is developing in her ongoing project *Trade Movement*. Suggate embeds herself in

relationships with her local neighbours (for example, the local post office warden) and learns the choreography of their profession, seeking to understand the embodied knowledge acquired through labour and to, in her words, 'build frameworks for joint activity to unfold in, searching for genuine, authentic artistic sustainability.' The project is informed by the history of the town, whose hilltop viewpoint reveals the legacy of the Industrial Revolution in nearby disused wool and asbestos mills and the challenges of gentrification, leading to a housing shortage. *Trade Movement* will reveal the choreography of Wadsworth and how everyday actions together craft community.

Julie Cleves and Robbie Synge's artistic collaboration and friendship considers questions of access in rural areas through creative movement, shared conversation, and object design. Having met in an audition for Candoco Dance Company, Cleves and Synge went on to experiment in studio practice and outdoor improvisation in London, over time building a close physical and emotional relationship. Together, they experimented with ways they might support movement possibilities for Cleves both within her wheelchair and beyond it – bringing her increased mobility, physical sensation, and empowerment. They created a series of wooden blocks that could, with weight shifts and deft partnering, support Cleves' transition from sitting in her wheelchair to being on the floor. Cleves stressed, 'I want something I can move with... I want to move on my own rather than being part of a piece of equipment. When I'm on blocks I know that I've got power in that moment.'<sup>1</sup> This embodied solution, rather than a mechanical hoist, allowed Cleves to determine and participate in her transition to the ground for the first time in over a decade, bringing her access to nature in new ways.

In their short film *Forest Floor*, Cleves and Synge explore where and how they are able to share time and space within the rural Abernethy Forest in the Cairngorms National Park. Synge, who grew up in

<sup>1</sup> Ian Abbott, 'Ian Abbott previews RISE 2019 at Findhorn.' *Writing about dance*. April 16, 2019.

the Scottish Highlands, described the Scottish forests as his 'home.' It was his desire to further cultivate that sense of belonging in himself, and his growing family, that motivated his move back there, albeit accompanied by a worry that he might 'drop off the face of art's earth' when leaving London. Contrary to that anxiety, the forests have been a significant creative inspiration and refuge for Synge, and a place to continue collaborating with Cleves. *Forest Floor* combines the sounds of chirping birds and the lush green vegetation of understory with Cleves and Synge's tender, and at times funny, navigation of the uneven trail. They use the wooden blocks they developed together in a variety of ways: sliding them underneath Cleves' wheelchair as tracks, stacking them beside her wheelchair as a means of slowly aiding/assisting/helping transition to the ground, by removing one block at a time, and placing them across the soil to create a smooth surface for dance. The seemingly simple action of traversing a forest trail and sitting on the ground is revealed to be a complex contact improvisation between their two bodies and the rough, muddy surface of the earth.

Cleves and Synge's most recent work *To Earth* (2022) shared their practice with audiences through video, dance, and moderated conversation. Shown at venues including Nottingham Contemporary and BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, audiences were invited to participate in shared conversation that explored the relationship between accessibility, land ownership, conservation, and the right to roam. Ultimately Synge described *To Earth* as a 'cèilidh,' citing the Scottish word for a social gathering, with singing and dancing to stress the convivial, participatory aspect of their performances.



Performance of *To Earth* by Julie Cleves and Robbie Synge at Nottdance, 2022. Photo by David Wilson Clarke.

Dance artist Esther Huss described her interdisciplinary performance practice to me as a playful exploration in relationship with local collaborators and narratives. She moved to North Blyth, a hamlet near the small village of Cambois in South-East Northumberland, in 2019, lured by affordable housing and what she described as the ‘oddness’ of its geography that interweaves the industrial legacy of mining and the harsh, if not sublime, coast of the North Sea. Huss says she feels there is a real ‘need for me,’ with her creative output, open workshops, and local organising appreciated in a way that affirms her purpose; unlike in London where the arts felt competitive, under-resourced, and under-valued.

Working with her partner, the playwright Alex Oates, Huss founded The Tute, a community arts organisation housed in the Cambois Miners Welfare building. Crafted in 1929, the colourful building had been in disuse for years before they took over the lease to host dance and writing workshops, a weekly playgroup for local young children, and rehearse their own creative projects. They also support other local artists and companies, including a local boxing group, to use the space, delighting in the growing art offerings in the area. Historically, the space had been an important social centre for the community, united in support of the local miners. After the mine closed in 1968 Cambois lost its central employer and an important aspect of its identity. About 40% of residents today remain unemployed, and as recent efforts to bring new jobs to the area through the creation of a Britishvolt lithium-iron battery factory



Performance of *Stairwall – The Things We Find* with Esther Huss and Claudia Sacher at Percy A. Hudson's Timber Merchants, 2022. Photo by Luke Waddington.

faltered, the community remains impoverished and underemployed.

Amidst this context, Huss' dance projects provide opportunities for community members to engage with performance. Her recent piece *Stairwall – The Things We Climb*, with musician Jeremy Bradfield and visual artist Claudia Sacher, incorporated a large revolving wall, drawing, dance, and props in a live presentation, in addition to workshops with local primary school students and residents and an exhibition of performance elements. A non-linear narrative work, the piece moves between abstracted vignettes, their unexpected combinations inspiring curiosity and surprise in audiences. Presenting work within a community with little exposure to contemporary art, Huss encountered some initial resistance to what, for some, appeared strange or otherworldly. Stressing that anyone can appreciate and understand art, Huss deftly articulated her practice to others, invited participants into the process, and ultimately found significant support for her work. Showing *Stairwall* across North England in 2022, Huss noted that participants in the performance were deeply moved, with one man – a worker in the North Shields timber factory where the work toured – describing his experience as one of the proudest days of his life. Huss will continue to build on this experience with Cambois Creates to craft a large-scale performance in collaboration with the Cambois community.

Each of these artists collaborate with rural space – questioning how performance works as a cultural practice, what norms it enforces, and how it establishes new understandings of rurality itself. Together they are indeed performing rurality: crafting dances and sharing them with communities, co-constituting new, complex understandings of rural space and its potential. I have been struck by each of these artists describing these experiences as *gatherings*, rather than shows or presentations. Their work builds intimacy, fosters reenchantment with the natural world, and develops relationships through sensorial experience, participation, and collaboration.