Project Description

Artist Statement

Phase One: The Pigeon Project

Phase Two: Migratory Tours

Community Outreach
Integrating Students, Scientists, Local Performers
Addressing Migration/Navigation, Conservation

Artist Biography + Press Clippings

Jennifer Monson
artistic director

BIRD BRAIN
-a navigational dance project

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1999 Preparation and Research for BIRD BRAIN

The project's components - conservation/ecology, technology, education - and the collaborations with scientists and environmental groups will increase in scope and complexity as we gain more experience and knowledge as the project progresses.

Spring/Summer 1999
Research and develop conceptual framework of overall project:
- Research (library, web-based) urban (pigeon) and migratory species and migration routes; initiate relationships with Brooklyn/Manhattan pigeon keepers/pigeon clubs; identify project collaborators; initiate/develop contacts with potential tour sites along migratory routes; begin fundraising (ongoing); identify/confirm creative residencies here and abroad.

September 1999 Caracas, Venezuela
Initiate contacts with funding organizations, festival producers, local bird organizations, artists; identify Venezuelan dancers/musicians for North to South America tour, Fall 2001. (Invited by Neodanza under U.S.I.A. auspices.)

October 3-16, 1999 Bolivar Flats, High Island and Anahuac Audubon Bird Sanctuaries, Galveston, TX
Bird watching on migratory flyway - 2 week residency, DiverseWorks, Houston, TX; performance of The Glint and research for BIRD BRAIN project.

Oct. 18-Nov. 17, 1999 Djerassi Resident Artists Program, CA
Research migration, navigation, pigeons, artificial intelligence; develop creative processes, movement investigations/material to inform staged work and tours.

Nov. 20-25, 1999 San Francisco to Yucca Valley, CA
Trial tour and Pacific coast research culminating in solo performances held in parks and nature refuges. Photographic and video documentation by Gretchen Till (technical director)

December 13, 1999 New York, NY
"Performance Mix", Context Studios, incorporates results of Djerassi residency.

December 1999 Baja, Mexico
Observe arriving Gray Whales in Laguna San Ignacio; identify potential sites for Phase Two - Gray Whale Tour Spring 2001.

2000 PHASE ONE: The Pigeon Project + BIRD BRAIN development

ONGOING:
- Plan/establish relationships for Phase Two - Tour #1: Gray Whale Tour
- Research global positioning systems, satellite transmitters and other tracking systems etc. for tour (ongoing with collaborators); develop structure of educational component; begin educational program with Brooklyn, NY students at EBC and El Puente; develop website

Jan.-Sept. 2000 Develop The Pigeon Project
- Intensive rehearsal period for The Pigeon Project includes rooftop pigeon observations; obtain/work with own pigeon(s)

August 2000 Research Trip: Southeast Alaska
- Study of marine navigation, whale and bird observation, and movement exploration along the coastline.

August 2000 Assateaque National Seashore and Delaware Bay
- Five day trial-tour with three dancers includes investigative documentation techniques, digital imaging and website linking.

October 2000 Premiere: The Pigeon Project, PS 122, NYC

Nov.-Dec. 2000 Residency and performance, BODYWORKS Festival, Melbourne, Australia
- Build relationships with artists and local organizations; outdoor performance with workshop participants.
2001 PHASE TWO
Tour #1- Gray Whale tour
Baja, CA to Alaska, follow female Gray whales and their young calves.

General locales and projected dates:

March: San Ignacio, Mexico
April: Ensenada, Mexico
    San Diego
    San Pedro
    Los Angeles
    Monterey
    San Francisco
    San Jose

May:
Point Reyes National Seashore
Northern Coast of California
Newport, OR
Portland OR
Tillamook OR
Seattle, WA

June:
Vancouver, B.C.
Juneau, Anchorage, Alaska

List of BB Project Partners to be provided and will be posted on the BIRD BRAIN website upon confirmation.

2001-2003 continuation of Phase Two: International Touring

Spring 2001 Plan/research all upcoming tours
    Focus on educational and technical development

Spring 2002 Tour #2- Songbirds International Tour
    Venezuela and/Uruguay to Eastern Canada up the eastern flyway, stopping at major cities along the East Coast as well as small towns and wildlife sanctuaries;
    Latin American dancers and musicians incorporated into the tour

Spring 2003 Tour #3- Geese and Ducks International Tour
    Gulf of Mexico to Northern Canada up the Midwest along the Mississippi flyway

Fall/Winter 2003 Tour #4- Northern Wheatears International Tour
    Arctic through Northern Europe, Iberian Penninsula to West Africa

2004 COMPLETION and FINAL PROJECT

Spring 2004 Final culminating project/performances in NYC
    Potential sites include
    indoor: BAM Majestic Theater, New York, NY
    outdoor: Jamaica Bay wildlife refuge

This final project includes members of the entire project from all over the world.
Project Description

BIRD BRAIN is a five year navigational dance touring project that follows the migratory pathways of birds and gray whales on their migratory journeys across the north and south hemispheres. The project investigates the navigatory habits of these animals and their biophysical and metaphorical relationship to us as fellow travellers in the world.

Phase One
THE PIGEON PROJECT 2000

Fall 2000 Urban Rooftop Performances + Performance Space 122 New York City

The initial research and development phase (1999-2000) will result in a full-evening work based on the natural and cultural history of pigeons to be premiered at theater venue, Performance Space 122, NYC. Related rooftop performances in Brooklyn will take place in conjunction with the theatrical performances. Built for three dancers with live mixed sound scored by composer, James Lo, the work will investigate ideas of navigation and location. The work will be informed by the highly refined skills for navigation and orientation that dancers develop through rigorous sensorial and perceptual processes.

Phase Two
Four Migratory Tours 2001-2004

Spring 2001 GRAY WHALES Baja, Mexico to Alaska
Spring 2002 SONG BIRDS Uruguay, Venezuela to Canada
Spring 2003 GEESE AND DUCKS The Gulf of Mexico to Central Canada
Fall 2004 NORTHERN WHEATEARS Arctic, Europe to West Africa

The four discreet but related low-budget migration-based tours constantly shift from urban to wild to transitional landscapes. BIRD BRAIN aims to link the dance world with the less familiar natural terrain of wildlife refuges, conservation parks, city parks, and marinas, and reach non-dance audiences who frequent these habitats. BIRD BRAIN employs technological tools including web sites, global positioning systems and other satellite technologies to incorporate creative linkages between and among artists, scientific researchers, environmentalists, the classroom and the general public through programs in natural history museums, aquariums and research institutions.

BIRD BRAIN is being funded in part by Creative Capital Foundation, Jerome Foundation, Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, Rockefeller Foundation MAP grant and is a sponsored project by the New York Foundation for the Arts.
artist statement

BIRD BRAIN — a navigational dance project is a comprehensive project that employs many of my long held strategies as an artist. The project’s alchemical melding of art with the poetics of science will illuminate the linkages between the natural world’s fragile, delicate strength and the creative process. In so doing, this project integrates my ongoing investigations into the nature of forms, which constantly renegotiate the symbiotic, contradictory and confrontational relationships between art, environment, power and place.

"Bird migration is the one truly unifying natural phenomenon in the world, stitching the continents together in a way that even the great weather systems, which roar out from the poles but fizzle at the equator, fail to do." (Scott Weidensaul, Living on the Wind)

I am fascinated by migration and the links it makes between continents and ecosystems. The adaptability and flexibility of migrating and local birds that allows them to function together in symbiotic, supportive coexistence; the genetic programming that can provide a 5 week old adolescent bristle-thighed curlew with the wherewithal to fly 5,000 miles from the tundra of Alaska to the warm tropical islands of the South Pacific without stopping, unaccompanied by adult birds; and the myriad of song birds that migrate from Northern Canada across Northern Europe through the Mideast and down to the tip of Africa— all these journeys captivate me. These small birds make contact with more parts of the earth than most of us could ever dream of. I am fascinated equally by how this migratory web parallels information webs in a material, delicate, infinitely complex and changing way and this, in turn, frames how I approach the body as communication source.

Entomologist Hugh Dingle suggests, "migration is specialized behavior especially evolved for the displacement of the individual in space." This could just as easily be a definition of dancing. As dancer/improvisers, we tune and hone our skills of navigation in order to move through the moment of creation with acute sensitivity to our surroundings, cultivating our senses to be prepared for the unpredictable and unexpected.

How do we navigate? Touch, smell, hearing, sight. Birds use their peripheral vision as dancers do to sense unison and change in direction along with a variety of other navigation mechanisms. They orient themselves using the sun by day and the stars by night, also apparently sensing the earth’s magnetic field and other clues: the polarized light at sunrise and sunset; the low frequency sound waves generated by trade winds and ocean surf. What remnants of navigation have been sustained in our human genes? What has it evolved into? Is it part of our calculating mathematical linguistic sense, our intuitive sense of home, of finding comfort, of the need to move, be a nomad? Has language evolved from our need to navigate, establish place, communicate location? How does technology enhance the possibilities of the body and of other natural systems and where does it impede? Where are the boundaries? How does the body continue to orient itself and navigate distance and time in response to the constant and rapidly increasing impositions and transmutations of technology on our human systems?
Phase One
THE PIGEON PROJECT 2000

Pigeons—resilient urban survivors, both pest and pet, scourge and servant, ubiquitous around the world—serve this project’s quest given their keen, poignant historical relationships to human beings and their efforts in realms of navigation, orientation and communication.

Posing questions on increasingly fluid notions of place, distance, travel and time in response to the impositions and transformations of technology on our lives, Phase One, The Pigeon Project begins by looking at navigational strategies in the urban environment through the study of the natural and cultural history of pigeons.

Performances
September 22 & 23, 2000  Roof Top Performances, Brooklyn
October 5-15, 2000  Performance Space 122, NYC
Fall 2001  National Tour

Movement and Sound
The development of this work begins by observing trained pigeons on the roof tops of New York City. I am currently working with the pigeon keeper, Julio, across the street who has approximately 400 pigeons. From these ongoing observations and recordings, James Lo and I will identify and distill patterns of flight and rest, like, for example, the spiraling flight formations of the pigeons as they inscribe increasingly broad circles across the cityscape, patterns which will inform the work’s physical movement and sonic structure simultaneously.

We will broaden our investigation to include metaphors for orientation and travel: dynamic changes in perspective—distance, approach, retreat—created spatially by the dancers and aurally by the live mix of sound cues made up of pre-recorded computer-manipulated natural sounds. For this piece, we hear the turbulence of a few thousand wings flapping, tiny heart beats, wind, bird calls and the quiet meandering cooing of the birds at rest; each building a sonic landscape whose evoked associations, in turn, feeds and intermixes with the work’s choreographic structure. The result will stimulate the audiences’ own sense of orientation and navigation during the performance.

Set/Light Design
Lenore Doxsee (lighting designer) enhances the audiences experience of time and distance through shade and subtle changes in light created by a pulley device integrated into the lighting system. The set is a compilation of rotating badminton birdies and bundled feathers by Jonathan Berger. Our collaboration will integrate the spontaneity and immediacy of my improvisational work with a rigorous exploration of complex set structures that feedback and forth between the music, visual and light components and the dance.

TOURING
The Pigeon Project is available for touring Fall 2001 in conjunction with workshops and outreach activities that integrate BIRD BRAIN’s aims to creatively link science, art, conservation and education communities.

Technical Specifications, Detailed Budget and Residency Activities are available upon request.
Phase Two
Four Migratory Tours 2001-2004
Phase two consists of four low-budget tours, each following the migratory path of a different species

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Origin/Direction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2001</td>
<td>GRAY WHALES</td>
<td>Baja, Mexico to Alaska</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring 2002</td>
<td>SONG BIRDS</td>
<td>Uruguay, Venezuela to Canada</td>
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<td>Spring 2003</td>
<td>GEESE AND DUCKS</td>
<td>The Gulf of Mexico to Central Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall 2004</td>
<td>NORTHERN WHEATEARS</td>
<td>Arctic, Europe to West Africa</td>
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Spring 2001 (Tour One): GRAY WHALES and their calves from Baja/Mexico to Vancouver
various sites along the Coast including: (dates subject to change)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Late March</td>
<td>Laguna San Ignacio, Mexico</td>
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<td>Ensenada</td>
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<td>April</td>
<td>San Diego, CA</td>
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<td>San Pedro</td>
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<td>San Francisco</td>
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<td>Pt. Reyes Peninsula</td>
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<td>Point Arena</td>
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<td>May</td>
<td>Mendocino</td>
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<td>Redwood National Park</td>
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<td>Coos Bay, OR</td>
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<td>Newport</td>
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<td>Tillamook</td>
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<td>Olympic National Forest, WA</td>
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<td>Seattle</td>
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<td>June</td>
<td>Vancouver, Canada</td>
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TYPES OF PRESENTATIONS
45 - 50 free or very low cost performances will occur along the route
- formalized presentations in museums, wildlife conservation parks and aquariums with lectures and educational links combining BIRD BRAIN touring team and local organizations
- organized outdoor performances in state and national parks engaging dance, general public and youth audiences
- spontaneous outdoor performances in conjunction with whale sightings
- website serves as the integrative link between performances, animal tracking, educational outreach and discussion of conservation and migratory/navigational issues

TOUR SPECIFICS
DATES: late March through June, 2001
LENGTH: 8-10 weeks
PARTICIPANTS: four dancers from New York, one technician/documentarian/web-designer
local performers will be integrated into the project at various sites along the route
ARTISTS WILL TRAVEL BY MINIVAN (OR DONATED ELECTRIC VEHICLE); CAMP ALONG THE ROUTE IN LOCAL, STATE, CITY PARKS AND WILL INTERACT WITH LOCAL RESIDENTS.
THE PROJECT WILL PROVIDE LIABILITY INSURANCE COVERAGE FOR THE PERFORMERS.
ALL LOCAL AND FEDERAL CLEARANCES WILL BE OBSERVED FOR OUTDOOR PERFORMANCES.

Local support may include organizational support, in-kind services/goods, recommendations or referrals, marketing assistance, financial donation, outreach and community links or other valuable resources.

BIRD BRAIN Partners will assist with performance locations, audience cultivation, press contact, and links to local organizations concerned with issues of migration, navigation and the importance of sustaining migratory habitats.
STUDENTS, SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH, and other links

Interaction with LOCAL PERFORMERS
Jennifer Monson will lead movement workshops with local performers focusing on navigational processes. The workshop participants may be integrated in local BIRD BRAIN performance events. These performance structures will be influenced by each particular location and the gathered local participants.

Workshop description: The workshop will begin with a heightening of our own awarenesses of navigational strategies and senses. This will include exercises that cultivate our ability to localize sounds, sensitize our responses to light and our perception of shape, touch and direction, activate the desires of the eyes and our responses to environmental elements, temperature, wind, humidity. All these perceptions will then be channeled into our own personal navigation of the imagination and how that guides our creative processes and forms our dances/performances.

Interaction with SCIENTISTS
At the start of the tour, the artists convene with scientists and identify an animal with a satellite (or similar type of) transmitter. Tracking the progress of the animal throughout the tour will dictate elements of the live performances. For example, the animal might be traveling through bad weather or over the ocean, mountains or cities or taking a stop over for a while or blown off course — all these possibilities will directly affect the structure of the scores that we use the day of each performance.

Educational Component
Students studying migration in the classroom will also track the animals and the performers. These students will create strategies in response to the conditions of the migrating animals. The students will upload these strategies to the website that will then be retrieved and used by the travelling dancers to influence their performance structures. (Eventually we will develop a program that simulates the experience of the migratory species.)

Local On-site interaction
On the day of the actual performance, internet connections with scientists, satellite transmitter and classrooms are set up. This information is then used to structure the performance for the particular location and circumstances.

Possible performance scenarios:
Local participants are engaged through workshops/performances.
Organized panel discussions and lectures with scientists are suggested at appropriate sites.
Performance by BIRD BRAIN artists only; discussion to follow

Documentation and Web Access
The website will function as a central communication resource. Input will be gathered from the dancers, scientists tracking the migrating animals, and students who are following the project.

Each performance will be documented using video and will be uploaded weekly to the site and will include daily journals kept by dancers, participants and performers. A tracking system will be designed in collaboration with scientists, to actively follow the migration of the animals. Students will contribute via links with New York City based educational programs that have been developed by Jennifer Monson.

This comprehensive and progressive website actively informs and influences the entire project as it spans its five-year global journey.