Dancing with Epistemic Borders: Knowledge and unknowns in mixed-methods Practice-as-Research (PaR) collaborations between dance and social science


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This paper explores an encounter with the 'unknowns' of knowledge production and analysis experienced by a dance practitioner-scholar (McGrath) and two social science researchers (Durrer and Campbell) during an ongoing collaborative project that charts the effect of territorial borders on dance artists' livelihoods and practice in Northern Ireland. Expanding investigation of borders beyond the territorial to also encompass the methodological, the Co-Motion: Dance and borders project experiments with how improvised dance responses to research questions place an affective and embodied experience of borders in dialogue with methods of sociological enquiry, allowing an articulation of what it is like '[t]o feel borders, to carry boundaries in your body before they become visible, before they find an imitable and exterior form' (Noeth 2017: 122). Co-Motion addresses the theme of borders and the unknown across two interrelated tracks: first, the project’s research of dancers’ often shifting and precarious experience of physical borders in a post-conflict society and, second, the emergent conceptual and languaging borders experienced by the researchers when communicating across our different modes of disciplinary research. Both elements involve intricate choreographies of negotiation and this article highlights some of the difficulties, questions and opportunities that have emerged to date.

Co-Motion responds to a critical juncture for dance artists’ livelihoods and professional practice. The emphasis that Brexit has placed on border protection and cross-border cooperation connects with questions about the operation and experience of borders in European and global dance communities. As Brandstetter and Hartung (2017: 7) suggest, the so-called European 'border crisis' that began in 2013 and continues today heralded a 'major conceptual shift' in thinking about borders, which moved from 'notions of “flow” and “liquid modernity” as guiding paradigms to a (re)forming and re-formulation of borders that would soon crystallize as both topic and harsh material reality'. This shift in perception and experience has certainly occurred with the Irish border (Durrer et al. 2019), an international border and a 'border region' (McCall 2011: 202) between Northern Ireland (part of the United Kingdom) and the Republic of Ireland. During Brexit withdrawal talks, the Irish border once again became a critical site of negotiation and debate, and changes to the geo-political and socio-economic landscapes on the island of Ireland due to Brexit will inevitably be echoed in cultural landscapes more widely in the UK and Europe. At a March 2019 meeting of the directors of the arts councils of England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Ireland the lack of clarity about the future of free movement of artists across this border was acknowledged as being of ‘real concern’ (McBride quoted in RTÉ 2019). Subsequently, the onset of the global pandemic in 2020, and the differing lockdown restrictions in operation across the two jurisdictions on the island, has only served to heighten these concerns.

In the following, we discuss our first experiment with the implementation of a mixed-method enquiry into dance artists’ experiences of this border. Research concerning the Irish border in the context of artistic practices, including arts policy documents that impact directly on dance artists' livelihoods, has not yet attempted inclusion of the embodied knowledge of artists themselves. This experiment was the first step in preparation for the choreography of a screendance installation.
to communicate our initial findings, creating an artwork incorporating embodied and written responses that would serve as a catalyst for further discussion with both artists and cross-border policy developers. The experiment was conducted during Ireland’s first all-island dance conference in October 2019 in Belfast, Co-Motion: Dance and borders. This event was an unprecedented meeting of dance artists from both sides of the Irish border, providing a unique opportunity to gather both paper survey responses and filmed dance improvisation responses to questions about lived experience of borders from conference participants. The findings from these two modes shed light on the affective and material impacts of the Irish border on dance communities. However, when we arrived at the point of attempting joint articulation of our findings from the two surveys (danced and paper), we realized the borders between our disciplinary positions created interpretative conundrums. This article explores the accumulation of ‘unknowns’ that resulted, and how these unknowns shifted our research questions and the trajectory of the project’s future development.

Dance and the Irish Border: Mapping the Choreopolitical Terrain

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement signalled the end of the Troubles and marked a new ‘post-conflict’ period for the island of Ireland. The three-decade long period of armed conflict is typically understood as one focused on sectarian divisions between Unionists, who wish for Northern Ireland to remain in the UK, and Republicans, who seek a borderless, united Ireland. Our focus is on the Agreement’s transformation of Ireland to a post-conflict society and the Irish border from a ‘hard’ one policed by armed checkpoints to the current almost invisible division in the Irish landscape, marked only by the change of road speed signs from the European Union (EU) norm of kilometres adopted by Ireland in 2005, to the miles maintained in the UK and Northern Ireland. The border’s impact on people’s daily lives has a history of inspiring choreographic investigations by dance artists from both sides of its divide. Speaking of how choreographic processes can ‘acknowledge the multiplicities of engagement of shifting sites’, Northern Irish choreographer Mary Brady suggests that ‘[t]he staking out of territories perceived as being impervious to change invite conflict. Polar points attract. Borderlands become zones of intensified activity’ (2004: 9). Choreographic ‘activity’ in response to the Irish border intensified during the talks leading up to the Agreement, with works such as Mary Nunan’s Territorial Claims (1992) and John Scott’s Macalla (1995) highlighting the impact on corporealities created by bureaucratic land divisions.

Post-Good Friday Agreement, political tensions concerning the border have remained, and following the start of Brexit negotiations in 2016, another wave of choreographic responses to the border emerged, including a cross-border collaboration between Dublin-based Liz Roche Company and Belfast-based Maiden Voyage Dance interrogating poet Seamus Heaney’s articulation of Northern Irish artists’ experience of the ‘strain of being in two places at once, of needing to accommodate two opposing conditions of truth simultaneously’ (1985: 161). Considering how the border impacts his work, Northern Irish-based choreographer Dylan Quinn notes (2019: 43) that the border ‘has an impact in a variety of ways which are not always apparent. The narrative of the border appears like a trilogy running throughout my life: it was there, it was not there, and now, it is considering a return.’ Following Brexit, and in the wake of the global pandemic, Co-Motion attempts to grasp these ‘not always apparent’ and intangible ways that the Irish border affects and impacts dance artists’ livelihoods. In response to the existential difficulties currently experienced by dance artists on the island of Ireland and globally, its contribution to choreographic investigations of the Irish border’s ‘shifting sites’ places the focus on dance artists themselves.

Knowledge Hierarchies and Uncharted Zones: Mapping the Methodological Terrain

Recent dance scholarship focused on, or
including, the topic of migration and borders has centred on the analysis of dance works (Brandstetter and Hartung 2017; Brandstetter, Egert and Hartung 2019), or community dance projects (Migrant Bodies–Moving Borders 2018). Co-Motion aims to contribute by capturing and communicating the lived experience of dance artists themselves, rather than through an analysis of their works. Considering performing artists in Lebanon and Palestine working with the concept of borders, Noeth (2017: 119) argues that ‘current [global] border dynamics not only affect our artistic and intellectual work by enabling or restricting freedom of movement, but they inherently challenge the way we conceive of structures and systems, of centres and peripheries’. Co-Motion takes this challenge to heart in its methodological approach, aiming to lend visibility to dancers’ embodied knowledge and daily lived experience of borders through a mixed methodology of improvised dance responses to survey questions within a demarcated and confined ‘bordered’ space, combined with paper survey responses constrained largely by response categories, which aim to restrict responses and discourage improvisation. In both disciplinary approaches, borders that are integrated, or questioned in improvisation or survey design, echo or probe the territorial and conceptual borders experienced by dance artists. Additionally, the traditionally more ‘peripheral’ corporeal knowledge generated by dance was placed on equal footing with what is typically viewed in an increasingly scientifically oriented knowledge economy as the more ‘centred’ knowledge of sociological enquiry (see Campbell 2019). In attempting to reconcile methodological divergence, the project engaged with what Brannigan et al. describe as an “experimental humanities” approach, that eschews judgement in favour of experiments, and hierarchies of knowledge in favour of ecologies of expression and transformation’ (2018: 85).

In its tackling of hierarchies of knowledge in Western academia that privilege scientific knowledge over other embodied forms, Co-Motion is located within a growing field of scholarship that considers how dance practice can be made integral to interdisciplinary, mixed-methods research processes (Archibald and Gerber 2018). Co-Motion’s challenging of these hierarchies has particular relevance in the context of dance on the island of Ireland given the marginalized positioning of dance within the island’s artistic landscapes and arts policy development, and more generally within Irish and Northern Irish cultures and societies (McGrath and Meehan 2018; Cronin 2018; Arts Council of Northern Ireland 2014).4 The knowledge produced by dance practice (and other forms of embodied arts practice, arts-based research methods and Practice-as-Research (PaR) scholarship) also has a history of battling for recognition within academia (Foster 1995; Barrett and Bolt 2010). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, an outlier positioning of the knowledge produced by dance in projects combining dance and social science research prevails in mixed-methods literature (Bagley and Cancienne 2001; Durham-DeCesaro and Sharp 2014). Yet, as is also often noted in mixed-methods studies, this position lends dance the ability to contribute new perspectives and to trouble existing assumptions about knowledge production and analysis in transdisciplinary projects.

The concept of ‘border thinking’ is useful in questioning how dance functions in this context, particularly when the postcolonial and post-conflict contexts of dance on the island of Ireland are considered, in which an Irish decolonized corporeality could historically only be imagined through the dematerialized word, or Northern Irish subjectivity has to contend with the ‘strain’ of accommodating opposing truths (McGrath 2013; Heaney 1985). In their interrogation of the territorial and imperial aspects of the ‘modern foundation of knowledge’ from a decolonial perspective, Mignolo and Tlostanova, building on Gloria Anzaldua’s articulation of identity hybridity as experienced in border regions in her seminal work, Borderlands/La Frontera: the new Mestiza (1987), propose the concept of ‘critical border thinking’ as a challenge to the ‘epistemic frontiers’ that place knowledge classified as ‘other’ outside of discourse. Instead, border thinking allows for experiences from subaltern positions to be articulated from within, rather than being explained from without: ‘border thinking is the epistemology of the exteriority;
that is, of the outside created from the inside’ (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006: 206). This allows a 'shift' to a 'geo- and body-politics of knowledge' that 'denies the epistemic privilege... of an observer that makes the rest of the world an object of observation' (ibid.). For the Co-Motion project, border thinking provides a critical framework that positions dancers' embodied experience of borders as a site of knowledge production and an initiator of discussion, rather than as explained from an outside perspective. This framework allows an epistemic shift that re-orientates the study from producing data and knowledge about a cultural form from an outsider-observer position, to incorporating knowledge from within the embodied perspective and experience of the artform itself.

In the following section, we explain the different methods used to generate knowledge of dance artists' experience of borders. Our initial attempts at analysing findings from our different disciplinary methods highlight the distinct ways we approached both the collection of material/data and the languaging of analysis. These distinctions discovered within the project, as articulated from within each researcher's disciplinary perspective, are explained below.

BORDERS OF OBEDIENCE, INTERPRETATION AND 'VALIDITY': RESEARCHERS' METHODS AND INITIAL FINDINGS

1. Danced surveys: The dance researcher's perspective

Methodologically, movement improvisation was employed as a 'method of enquiry' that allowed embodied exploration of a concept as a 'way of relating to one's experience—a willingness to explore the realm of possibility, not in order to find the correct solution but simply to find out' (Cooper Albright 2019: 25). It also allowed dance artists the freedom to respond within their own particular movement style or training. For the collection of improvised responses, black gaffer tape marked three sides of a roughly 1.5 m x 1.5 m square on a dance studio floor, with a studio wall representing the fourth side of the square and the framing backdrop for a recording video camera. Laminated signs printed with single words also used in the paper survey text (for example, 'territory', 'migration', 'cross-border' and 'Brexit'), were placed on the floor between the camera and the 'bordered' square for dancers to use as improvisation prompts. A further, handwritten sign on A4 paper was placed on the floor across the side of the square closest to the camera reading: 'Keep inside your border'. Participants were free to interpret this rule as they saw fit.

The space for improvisation was designed to provide both concrete, material borders (that is, the square marked on the floor, the wall behind the square, the rule written on the paper) and an index to more immaterial concepts related to borders and migration (that is, the printed words) for the dancers to interact with if they chose. Four dance artists from different sides of the Irish border agreed to participate, and except for one participant who chose not to enter the bordered space at all—writing her own sign to hold up to the camera that read 'Dance knows no borders', before exiting—the remaining participants danced improvised responses to a selection of chosen words. Preliminary analysis revealed an unexpected finding, especially in the context of dance artists' expertise in engaging creatively with spatial boundaries and limits (Lepecki and Rosenthal 2011: 142): all of the dancers who entered the bordered space obeyed, without fail, the 'rule' of the paper sign saying to 'keep inside your border'; the border limits taped to the floor were always adhered to and never transgressed. The following descriptions are my interpretative responses to excerpts from two of sixteen short improvisations gathered from the four participants:

Dancer 1: 'Territory'

The dancer takes the border definitions of the square on the floor into her own body. There is a sharp, angular quality to her movement, performed sometimes with a fast tempo and sometimes with careful deliberation. Fingers, wrists, elbows and knees create straight lines and 90-degree angles. She watches her limbs as they form these lines and trajectories in space. Bending forward at the waist with one hand supporting the baby in her womb, she traces further borders with her index finger on the floor—a small circle around her feet. She has created her own border within a border. She steps out of one circle, only to immediately trace
another. Although she seems never to acknowledge it with her gaze, her movements never transgress the perimeter border marked on the floor.

Dancer 2: 'Border'

Standing on the stage right side of the bordered space, feet together parallel and facing the camera, the dancer looks down at what appears to be an imaginary line she has created separating the right and left half of the square. She steps over it carefully to stand in an identical pose on the other side. She repeats this move at an increasing tempo until she is leaping over the imaginary internal border. She finishes on a leap with the border between her legs. Without lifting her feet, she tries to close the gap between her feet by pulling them towards each other. It is a struggle.

The translation of movement into text in these descriptions, and the knowledge hierarchies and erasures inherent in this action, must be noted, along with the shaping of the knowledge they communicate through my subjective and affective interpretation. As Jones and Stephenson remind us, the performing body and interpretive texts that communicate their 'meaning' are intertwined in meaning-making processes: '[i]nterpretation is... a kind of performance of the object, while the performance of the body as an artistic practice is a mode of textual inscription' (1999: 8). From the perspective of the choreographic development of this material, I became very aware of my own 'performance' of the danced surveys gathered through my descriptive interpretation of them and through the design of their encompassing structure, especially when aligned with the (seemingly) more scientifically objective paper survey design. Yet, this interpretative performance can also be viewed as offering an example of Ingold's concept of 'languaging', which combats a 'notion of the word... in which all traces of... performance, of expression and affect, have been stripped away' (2014: 82).

Languaging calls for the 'domain of the tacit' (for example, bodily practice) to be acknowledged as being present in the 'realm of the explicit' generated by words, and for these words to be 'of response, not of representation, of anticipation, not of prediction' (83). Ingold's entreaty presumes a direct alignment of author and experience, which is not the case for this project. With this in mind, I undertook a process of re-producing and 'inhabiting' the recorded movements in my own body in advance of writing descriptions. Connecting Jones and Stephenson's insight that 'meaning is a process of engagement' (1999: 8) with Ingold's call for text as tacit 'response' in this way, attempted a bridging of the border of unknowns between researcher and participant through embodied engagement—and resultant physical and affective partaking—in participants' movements. However, erasures and differences remain inevitable in this process, generating further questions of 'validity'.

In terms of the movement content generated by responses, I felt that the border dances provided a wealth of material for inclusion in the next stage of the project, yet Campbell and Durrer felt that four respondents constituted a small sample and that more responses would be needed for wider validity. Additionally, I felt that the material generated in the dance improvisations could be transferred directly into the choreography of the screendance installation, yet Campbell and Durrer wondered if we should go back to the dance artists to gather further data about their experience of the dance survey before proceeding. In viewing the danced responses from the perspective of the social scientists as a 'sample set', I became more aware of its representational limitations when viewed through the categorizing lens of identity markers: all of the participants were white, able-bodied, Irish or Northern Irish females. I also became less certain as to how quantitative data generated from the paper surveys could be jointly articulated with the embodied and affective responses generated by the dance improvisations. Analysing the dance improvisations in dialogue with the social scientists revealed important 'unknowns' and insights. A fundamental question emerged: how might border thinking and the process of 'languaging' encourage epistemic pluralism and help prevent the dance responses becoming merely a novel vessel or decorative illustration for more 'traditional' survey data?

2. Paper surveys: The social scientists’ perspective

In addition to the dance survey, a self-administered paper survey was made available to all Co-Motion conference attendees seeking to
capture how dance artists* who attended the conference experience migration across borders—whether they cross borders as a result of their practice, why this might be and what issues these crossings might raise. During analysis, we initially assessed the achieved twenty-five responses as presenting only indicative findings. Additionally, it was clear that a number of responses ‘broke the rules’ of the guidance for completion. As a result, our early reflections highlighted issues relating to design and response limiting the utility of the data gathered. Two examples, discussed below, highlight the challenges and complexity the survey data alone presented in finding meaning regarding dance artists’ experiences of the border. Subsequent experience of analysing this data in conversation with McGrath, however, raised insights regarding the role and potential of disruption in paper survey design.

We sought to capture the variety of work in which dance artists engage as baseline information for understanding what types of dance artists might be moving across the Irish border. Questions first considered all areas of work in dance in which respondents ‘regularly’ engage (for example, performer, choreographer, teacher and administrator), and second sought to filter these to a ‘main’ category. While the majority of survey participants ‘obeyed’ the guidance given, ticking multiple boxes for Question One, reflecting the multiple jobbing nature of cultural work (Brook et al. 2020), and subsequently, narrowing down to one ‘main professional’ role when prompted, others selected multiple ‘main roles’ and two respondents selected a ‘main role’ that did not correspond with the ‘regular’ roles selected in Question One. Similarly, some respondents challenged the ‘borders’ of the survey itself by introducing marginalia. When we sought to understand whether or not respondents had ever migrated for work, and, if so, across which origins and destinations, one respondent circled the word ‘migrate’ in this question, adding ‘I don’t migrate. I travel’, followed by a lack of response to follow-up questions on this issue.

While most respondents, as with the dance improvisations, remained ‘within the borders’ set for them, these transgressions gave us pause for thought. It might be possible to assume that survey respondents may not have read questions or instructions closely, or that meaning was unclear. Yet such assumptions place the power and authority of the issues about which the researcher is exploring in the hands of the researcher, as opposed to the individuals who are sharing those experiences by way of the survey method (McClelland 2016). In fact, as Schaeffer and Presser explain, ‘[a]s respondents... read a survey question, they construct a “pragmatic meaning” that incorporates their interpretation of the gist of the question, why it is being asked, and what constitutes an acceptable answer’ (2003: 67). The refusal to respond in ‘expected’ ways or writing back to the researchers in the margins of the survey challenges the authority inherent in survey design (Warms et al. 2005). Interpretations of research questions, and their appropriateness, will differ across individuals. Survey participants may ‘expand or restrict the meaning of concepts because the wording of a question evokes prototypes or exemplars that then dominate the definition of the concept’ (Schaeffer and Presser 2003: 67). These meanings may not only be affected by the design of survey questions but are also living interpretations. Such interpretations may change over time for a respondent in ways related to identity, career status, gender and age, for instance (Saris and Irmtraud 2014). Survey responses are also influenced by social—and in our case professional and art world—conventions and contexts (Becker 2008 [1982]).

While a paper survey method was employed for largely practical reasons, to ensure data could be gathered in person during the conference, it also illuminated something crucial about how respondents circumvented, challenged and defied the intention of its design. The in-person, paper survey method allowed the borders of the survey to be more porous (Muddiman et al. 2019). Contrary to an online survey, for instance, paper surveys allow respondents to extend the boundaries of potential answers, engaging in ‘dialogue’ with researchers, thus extending the range of possible answers beyond expectations. Further, in a sector where individuals perceive themselves to be constantly filling out forms for funding applications and evaluations of work (McGrath 2021) there may be in-built resistance...
to questionnaires. Perhaps, the refusal of one respondent to entertain the word ‘migrate’ indicates an affective positioning towards surveys of dance activity initiated by those external to the practice. Yet, equally this refusal could be due to the close and politically contested socio-cultural ties existing on the island, recalling dance artist Dylan Quinn’s (2019: 43) narrative of the invisibility and the recent re-visibility of the Irish border within the context of Brexit, referenced earlier.

Towards a Generative and Collaborative ‘Unknowing’ in Mixed-Methods Practice

As Cooper Albright suggests (2019: 27), ‘[t]o understand embodiment as a way of knowing... one has to be prepared to navigate the murky waters of ambiguity and the shifting winds of multiple discourses’. Practice-as-Research scholars engaging with performance practices are familiar with working amidst the murky waters of methodological ‘unknowns’. It is often necessary for methodologies to be malleable throughout the duration of a project’s process, allowing for an ‘active dynamism’ in which methods can be ‘usefully deployed beyond the known’ (Freeman 2010: 129). Additionally, when collaborating with others it can be the case, as performance artist Amanda Coogan explains of her own process, that work is ‘constructed initially on a very faint scaffold of unknowns’, which then takes on an increasingly more solid structure and form once collaboration is underway (Coogan and Putnam 2016). Such ‘messy’ approaches are also not foreign to the social sciences (Sanscartier 2020: 48). Still, in Co-Motion, the project began with (seeming) methodological solidity during the phase of survey design and implementation. Indeed, from a dance perspective, the framing of participants’ improvised responses to the topic of borders as a ‘dance survey’, and the clear (and literal) boundaries set for how participants were to engage with the improvisation task and the performance space, arguably lent the methodology an aura of scientific surety. The links between the dance and paper surveys, comprising of key words used in both, offered a solid connection—at least from McGrath’s perspective—that would create a foundation for combined or joint analysis. From the social science perspective, Campbell and Durrer were unfamiliar with how the dance improvisations would be analysed, particularly as arts-based research is often viewed in mixed-methods literature as ‘aesthetic and immeasurable, reliant on dynamic, emergent, and iterative dialogues between arts-based, text-based, intersubjective, and metaphorical data for analysis and synthesis’ (Archibald and Gerber 2018: 961).

Yet, the subjectivity that is critically examined in social scientific research and emerged in our own initial analysis of the survey data came to light as a rich possibility for learning when combined with the dance improvisation analysis. Only in their combination did Campbell and Durrer begin to see other possibilities of meaning for the paper survey data, rather than a sense of failure. Yet, the meaning gained was a greater awareness of what more remained unknown. Further, the ‘disruption’ that we found in how dance artists responded to the paper survey clashed with a kind of obedience that was reflected by those who responded in the danced improvisation. Both methods, paper and dance survey, provide different means of languaging the experience of borders for dance artists, made evident only when their resulting data is brought together in all their confusion.

Confrontation with problems of combined analysis prompted necessary reflection on methodological and survey design presumptions. Stepping back from our ‘scaffold of unknowns’ allowed each of us to view our methods from the other’s perspective. Due to the challenge analysing combined ‘results’ presented, we employed a border thinking approach to instead examine the knowledge hierarchies at work in the project. We have begun to shift our thinking from questioning ‘validity’ to engaging in greater reflexivity as to the hierarchies held in and by specific research methods. This brings to mind Gadamer’s expansion in Truth and Method of a Hegelian dialectical understanding of knowledge and ‘experience’ (that is, one that proposes a progressive building of knowledge through new experiences) (1992). For Gadamer, experiences, particularly ‘negative’ experiences...
The experience of interpretive crisis in the Co-Motion project generated new knowledge about what we do not know, sharpening the borders of our ‘unknowns’. From both a methodological and hermeneutic perspective, the epistemic shifts experienced by the researchers enabled an ‘unlearning and ungrounding of knowledge’ that allowed ‘unforeseen bodies, movements and relations’ (Cvejić 2015: 226) to appear. As we progress Co-Motion further, we hope that the insights emerging from our ‘unknowns’ will help inform our languaging of both dance artists’ experiences of borders, and of interdisciplinary, collaborative processes in mixed-methods research.

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Okada Toshiki & Japanese Theatre

Edited by Peter Eckersall, Barbara Geilhorn, Andreas Regelsberger and Cody Poulton

Playwright, novelist and theatre director Okada Toshiki is one of the most important voices of the current generation of Japanese contemporary theatre makers. A theatrical visionary, he uses a unique style and distinctive language to show undercurrents in everyday moments and the strangeness of being alive in our time. His plays address issues such as social inequity, life in Japan after the 3/11 Earthquake, and posthuman society.

The book explores Okada’s work and its importance to the development of contemporary performance in Japan and around the world. Gathered here for the first time in English is a comprehensive selection of essays, interviews and translations of three of Okada’s plays by leading scholars and translators. Okada’s writing on theatre is also included, accompanied by an extensive array of images from his performances.