

# THE BODYCARTOGRAPHY PROJECT

## INVESTIGATING EXPERIENCE IN THE MIDST OF DEEP PLAY

BY OLIVE BIERINGA WITH SAMANTHA BEERS AND TRACY VOGEL



Otto Ramstad, BodyCartography Project, San Francisco Street Theater Festival, CA, 1999.

### **OLIVE BIERINGA: FOUNDER, CO-DIRECTOR**

#### **PROJECT HISTORY**

1997: The name BodyCartography is spoken. Was it a new word for choreography? A technique of internal anatomical mapping? In the fall of 1997, it became the title of a hands-on release-based class that I taught at Danceground Keriak in San Francisco. The class evolved into a collective of performers whose fundamental working mode/practice was inspired by the Tuning Score created by Lisa Nelson and worked with for many years by

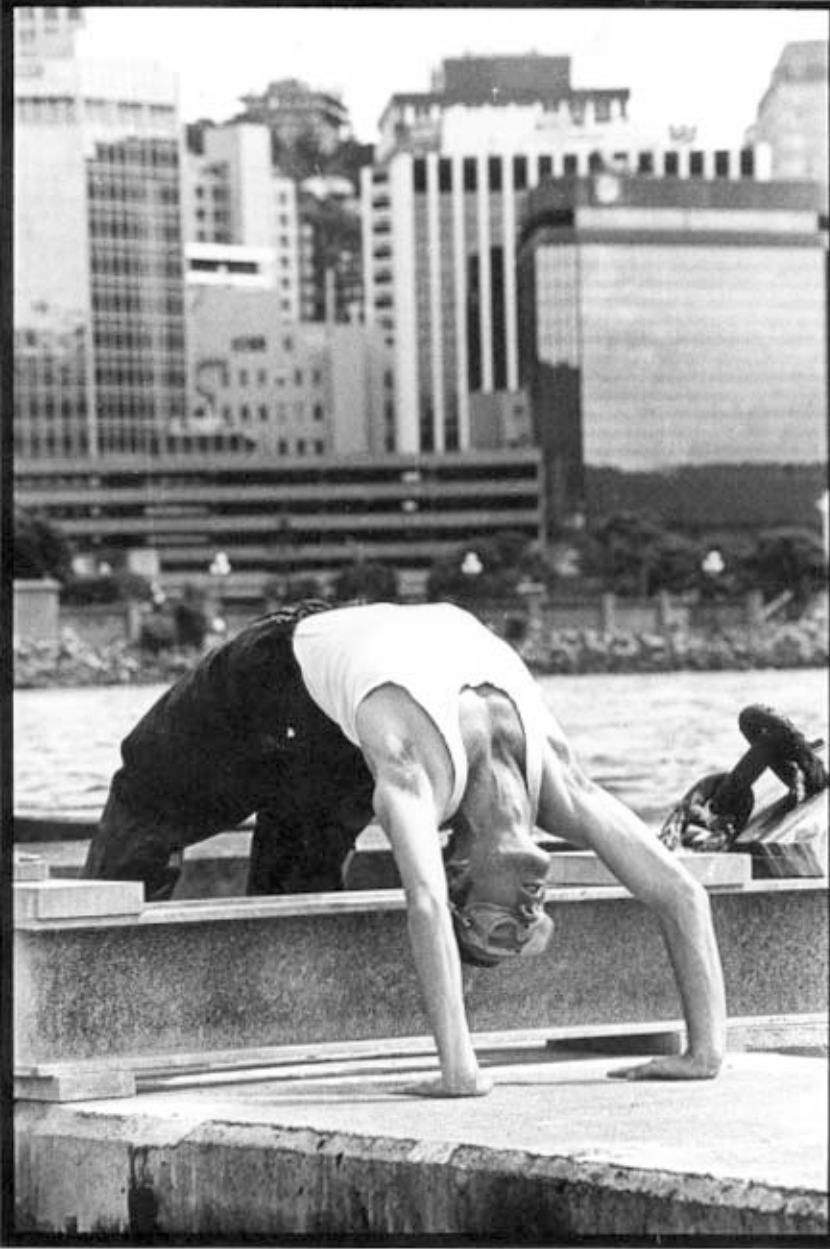
Image Lab. The BodyCartography group consisted of Tracy Vogel, Tanya Calamoneri, Krista Denio, Sarah Moore, Loren Olds, Vadan, and myself.

The word “BodyCartography” gave me a tool for communicating my experience of internal “body mapping.” It suggested a relationship between the microcosm of my bodily experience and the macrocosm of my environment, and that the two affect and change one another. Contact Improvisation provided the basis of our physical language. Our bodies and sensate navigational skills became the tools that we used to connect to each other and the environments we would work in.

1998: The first BodyCartography Project took place in Wellington, New Zealand, in February and March. The project was facilitated by myself, with the support of Karen Daly, and Sumara Fraser’s production and performance expertise.

The intention of this first project was to create an experiential map of the land, city, and sea that is Wellington, through site-specific research, performance, and documentation. Two important aspects of the project were to share the idea of “art as an everyday practice” and to provide ways to present dance work outside of the commodification of art. The project was devoted to the notion of art





Andy Irving, BodyCartography Project, Wellington, New Zealand, 1998.

making, not art selling. All our events were free. Community building through the project was essential to its success.

Over the month-long Wellington Fringe Festival, the BodyCartography Project produced twenty-three events, beginning with an opening benefit party and ending with a three-hour closing performance installation. We were witnessed by as many as 2,200 people. Television coverage occurred through NZ's TV1 Inside/Out series and local cable channels. The entire event was internally documented in video, photography, and writing. People were

invited to participate on whatever level they could as organizers, performers, photographers, drivers, tech crew, teachers, community resources, or sponsors. Performer's ages, physical abilities, dancing and performing experience varied greatly. Three performers had significant physical disabilities.

I returned to the San Francisco Bay Area and in September 1998 began a conversation with Thomas Sepe about facilitating a Bay Area version of the project. An endless fall of unsuccessful grant writing began. Where does this vision fit into the traditional world of

**"YOU REMIND ME OF THE COUNTY JAIL."**

**—ANONYMOUS PUBLIC WITNESS**

funding and patronage? (In Wellington I taught weekly Contact classes and received some local arts funding and community sponsorship to meet our costs.)

1999: Samantha Beers and Tracy Vogel joined us as facilitators and, with Thomas, the stability of four, the four directions, suggested more room to rest. However, the vision kept growing, stretching us all beyond our capacity. We began core group rehearsals, which quickly fed into our once-a-week open "labs" at CELL Space in SF. Performance events began in March (we lost Thomas to other commitments) and ran through to June, with a final performance installation at CELL.

## SEED

"Map" Webster's Dictionary presents us with the following definition: "...a representation, usually on a flat surface, of the whole or a part of an area." To me, a two-dimensional map is an abstract interpretation of, in this case, land. It is also a gateway to our memories and histories connected with place.

"Mapping" The Webster's definition: "the act of making a map." The body was once clearly a tool for measuring, and then three feet became a yard. Colonization's mapping of the land literally

associated memories to document our present moment, bringing us to a heightened state of awareness, presence, and curiosity about place.

How detailed, site-specific, delicate can my focus be reading the microcosm and macrocosm of landscape (the environment and my body)? What are the “social norms” of this street corner to me, to you, to the public? How does this information affect how I am in this place and how does it inspire me to move?

### SCORES/TOOLS

Our scores are our structures for coming together, our common agreement.

Score I: the Mapping Score

The group begins together (dressed in a unifying color) to journey from point a to point b. Our task is to improvise from the physical reality of where we are, who we are, and how the dynamics of our environment are affecting us. At least one-third of the group has an additional task to act as a bridge to the public by physically involving them (the audience is part of the landscape)

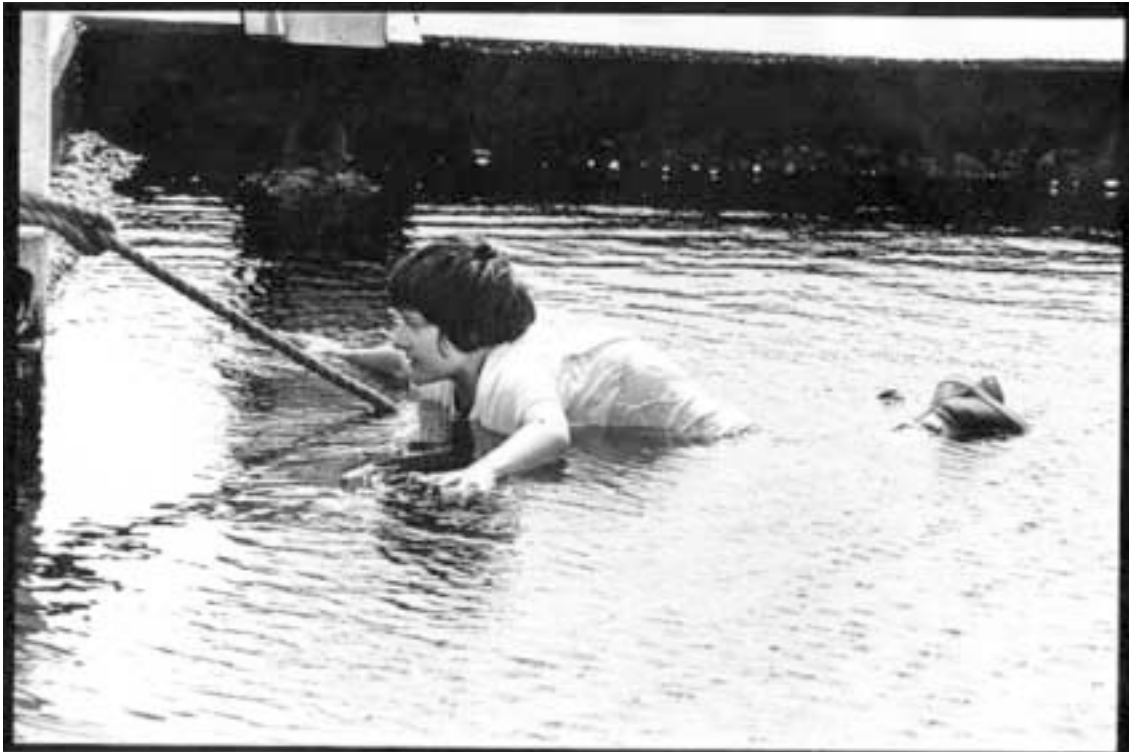
flattened our (both dominant and minority cultures’) experience of place—taking our multidimensional bodily experience out of the picture. What place do our bodies hold in the cities we have built up around us? How does the body currently function as a tool for measuring? Mapping with our bodies utilizes all of our senses and

or by sharing sensorial data via sound, word, text, touch, etc. There is one person who is strictly a guide or liaison, talking with people, giving out promotional material, and opening up discussion around what we are doing. However, if there is no public, this role is not needed. A toolbox is carried so that at any point any participant can leave to gather documentation in the wake of the performance or to utilize tools, as they are needed.

#### THE TOOLBOX:

An orange one from Home Depot.  
Contents: chalk, electrical tape (different colors), tape measures, pens, paper, extra rolls of film, videotape, rope, clothespins, binoculars, flares, lighter, blindfolds, caution tape, documentation forms, walkie-talkies, promo cards, band-aids, tiger balm, antiseptic cream, rubber gloves, alarm clock, pocketknife.  
Extra items: video camera, photo camera, orange street cones, flag.

photo: Guy Robinson



Bronwyn Haywood, BodyCartography Project, Wellington, New Zealand, 1998.



photo: Alex Zaphiras



BodyCartography Project, Sparrow Alley, San Francisco, CA, 1999.

### ORANGE

The color orange has become our most desired costume color for reasons of, and associations with, safety, visibility, utilitarian functionalism, spiritual practice, 2nd chakra energy, and besides, there's lots of it in thrift stores.

#### Score II: the Tuning Score

Lisa Nelson's Tuning Score has become a foundation from which we continually source material and build our own scores for particular events and environments. In Lisa's words: "This improvisational composition score sets up a dialogue amongst the dancers by making apparent how each one senses and makes sense of movement. The activity of the score is 'tuning.' With the tools of movement and verbal calls (e.g., 'end,' 'hold,' 'reverse,' 'replace,' etc.), each player continually tunes the image/composition to her/his own desire. Together, their opinions uncover the form as it arises and set the dance in motion."

In BodyCartography, the Tuning Score gives us a language and structure in which to build a sense of group and with which to introduce new people to the working dynamic and aesthetic

choice-making of that group. Over time we have developed our own interpretation to some of the existing calls and have developed new ones of our own, which is, according to Lisa, an intrinsic part of the score itself. The score also offers our audience a bridge into the sometimes-obtuse world of improvisational dance, demystifying how we, the dancers, are making the choices we do. It is an interactive score in which the public can be invited to make verbal calls and participate physically. We have utilized different versions in schools, theaters and in the street.

#### Score III: Solo Replay

Solo Replay is also a score devised by Lisa Nelson. This score is a great tool for opening up our vision to the possibilities of a particular site. Working outside with the score, we would pre-define our "performance/investigation space." A soloist chooses where within the predetermined area they want to work. Solos run for 30 seconds or one minute. "End" is called when the time is up. One or more participants then immediately and simultaneously enter the space and replay the solo they just witnessed.

### A SUNDAY AFTERNOON IN THE MISSION, MAY 18TH, 1999

Beginning at Walgreen's on 16th and Mission in San Francisco, dressed in orange, we decide to let the group facilitate itself, follow its desire...no set score. We leave chalk prints, poetry, and arrows behind us on the pavement for anyone who wants to follow.

We cross the street to dance with a rousing Jesus band. People are laughing and looking on at these crazy white folk hanging off telephone poles and rolling over each other and the filthy ground. Playing in the crosswalk at 16th and Valencia we hear, "Are you related to the blue people at Aquatic Park?" Yes, we are—a former version of ourselves on a windy, spring day. Now we wander into Sparrow Alley with a no-hands-to-the-ground score. Cartographers quickly escape the darkness, syringes, and shit to be back in the sunshine of Valencia's

newly painted traffic aisle. Bystanders join in the dance, screaming with delight. Car drivers stop to interact. A cyclist stops to pose for a photo. He, too, is dressed in orange. We create public participation on the scaffolding at 15th St. "This is the real shit!" an onlooker-become-participant exclaims. The metaphors inherent in Contact Improvisation are profound and simple. The bare bones of a white man saying "Trust me" to a black man as he offers his back as support for the man's descent from the scaffolding. Final stop, an orange group photo on 16th St. in front of a blue garage door. In writing this I remember witnessing a kid overdosing on this spot three years earlier. When we really allow ourselves to be present, the density of the imagery, history, and energy of each place we visit can be overwhelming.

Labs. Since the beginning of 1998, we've been meeting each week for "labs." This is a time for us to get together in the studio and deepen our process as a group. Different people facilitate each week. We explore new

scores, develop our understanding of old ones, and practice our contact skills.

The BodyCartography Project brings me great joy by changing my perceptual relationship to the cities I live and work in: Wellington, New Zealand, where I grew up and launched the project, and the Bay Area, where I have been living since '97. Power spots have developed for me where we have played/prayed/located ourselves. Making the time to absorb detail at each location only inspires more possibility and curiosity, adding to my hunger for imagistic gratification and physical interaction with the architecture, people and the land. I find myself walking around framing the textures of a street corner, the way the light falls on a building, the sound and characters on a subway platform, the saltiness of the harbor lapping against a concrete breakwater. I seek sites like I'm shooting a movie, search out surfaces and things to play on, places inhabited by people to witness or be witnessed by, people

to participate, to play off of, to heighten the charge of our investigations...to join us.

Most importantly, this work validates the experience of my body, what I feel and sense in the present moment, in the environments in which I live and play. It allows for critical, spiritual, and art-making dialogue around these issues with others, participant and public alike. Together we are creating art-making structures that invest in the relationship between our bodies, our communities, and the environment.

May the revolution of embodiment continue!

photo: Tracy Vogel



Olive Bieringa, BodyCartography Project, Emeryville Marina, CA, 1999.



**SAMANTHA BEERS:  
FORMER CO-DIRECTOR**

Mapping with the body is a participation. It is determination to live here. It is about showing up for one's own commitments: to social justice, to beauty, to spirit. It is about the riot of imagination, play.

The project asks big questions: What do we do as artists, as bodies, as dancers, as people in the world? Do we participate in the patterns that our very existence creates? Do we notice?

In mapping, we respond with a yes. We respond with touch. We go to the places we love. We go in familiarity, to shake up that familiarity, and to sink into it. We go to the places whose bareness or history or sheer normalcy compels us. We go in bright matching colors or in costume. We scavenge. We shop at the super bargain store where each piece of clothing is a dollar, or scrounge our orange and red and blue off the streets.

If there is any one, overarching theme for me in this project, it is the power of the act itself, and the joy and the difficulty of presence. The project exists for me (in body, mind and emotion) when I am involved in it. When I check out, get overwhelmed, get sick, get burned, it ceases to exist. What a life lesson!

**A DAY AT THE EDGE.  
KICKOFF EVENT,  
MARCH 28, 1999.**

We go to Aquatic Park where the city of San Francisco meets the Bay. We go to this place where bustle and concrete lead into vista and wind and soft crashing of waves. Here the Powell Street Cable Car Line ends and tourists mingle with street musicians, runners, old Italian guys lawn bowling, Hispanic and Asian families fishing, Cubans drumming. This crescent of sand and concrete pier has forever been one of my favorite spots in San Francisco. My memories of this place include a fourth-grade field trip to the Balclutha (a clipper ship docked here), a melting full-moon kiss at age seventeen, and numerous afternoon pilgrimages to dance with the water and sand before going to wait tables in a white shirt and tie.



photo: Alex Zaphiras

BodyCartography Project at the Burning Man festival in Black Rock Desert, Nevada, August 1999.

# UNTITLED (BURNING MAN)

BY RAFAEL COHEN

*Written during and after the "Burning Man" festival that took place in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada during August of 1999. Burning Man is an annual party, an art festival, and a week-long intentional community. [R.C.]*

I wake in a pile of sleeping people  
in sleeping bags  
and stumble into crisp morning air to do yoga on our astroturf front lawn in my orange jumpsuit. Horns, capes, beads, bindis, dreadlocks, cowboy hats and suits of armor march by hardly noticed.

New friends eat, dress, and savor the quiet sunlight. We slowly decide the structure of the morning's dance together and the neuroscientist bodypainters costume us in red. Waiting for my turn I talk of pheromones with a flame-colored woman, elegant like cocktail parties.

We roll, spiral and bless our way out into this nudist pyromaniac inventors convention 20,000 strong. We pass an anatomy lesson and a bartering session on our way through the crowds of geodesic domes, RVs and billowing, rainbow-colored parachute tents. Our cracked-earth ballet draws attention from a photographer on a motorized couch and several ten-foot bicycles cruising the alkaline lakebed.

As our dance ends, I gravitate towards the ice cream truck.

Parachutists punctuate the day. I find myself holding an eleven month old on a trampoline and cheering a massive parade of topless women on bicycles. I hope to enter the camera obscura before the sun sets. Following impulses and waiting in lines, I understand the futility of planning here and how much experience in so short a stay this environment allows for. And the utmost importance of generosity on all levels. By the time dark arrives I have ridden on a rotating twenty-foot seesaw with a man and a boa constrictor, watched mock battles in Mad Max's Thunderdome, and explored just a few of the dozens of twenty-four-hour-a-day raves. I've seen shooting stars, camels and a tree of bones. Ninety degrees has dropped to forty degrees and buildings are burning on every side of me. It feels like a medieval costume ball. I witness a blissful exchange of bodily fluids across a field of giant, fighting, flamethrowing robots under the towering, not-yet burning, man.

A man with blinking red nipples and I play a game, but the cards are whipped off the table and I can just barely see or hear him laughing about it through the sudden duststorm. I try to pick up the cards but I get distracted by a silver-blue woman riding a seven-foot vibrator and speaking in tongues. She dismounts and we discover similarities in our favorite artcars. Hers is a van with a VW insect (with antennae, eyes and wings) lounging atop and vending machines within. Mine is a golfcart with a neon flamethrowing spider atop, blasting techno. I stop to rest at a random fireside. People are passing around water, cookies and recreational drugs. No longer surprised, I recall the instructions I got for the festival:

*Bring toys, trinkets and treats to barter and share  
Drink so much water that you piss clear  
Leave nothing behind when you go  
Participants only, no spectators*

By now I draw my own conclusions:

*Judgement of others becomes obsolete.  
Judgement of self becomes obvious.  
Better judgement is stretched to its limits  
as 20,000 people take care of each other.*

*To contact the author: Rafael Cohen, 4005 Linden St. #7, Oakland, CA, 94608-3717; tel: (510) 594-7694; email: Rate127@aol.com.*





photo: Kris Bieringa

BodyCartography Project, Marin Headlands, Marin County, CA, 1999.

How will we score this, make it belong to the Cartographers, invite a deepening of perception? I am inspired by the light, blue and white, by the wind, by the meeting of textures and cultures. Many new scores emerge. My favorite is Sea Anemone.

The entire group makes an agreement to move as one animal for the duration of the score; one simple, aquatic, skin-sensing creature. Our arms become tentacles. Our flesh becomes one flesh. We hold to the group's center while moving through and together. We are collectively responsible for our cohesion and a spiraling sense of bound freedom. We locomote the entire length of the pier (some 500 yards), taking half an hour to cover a distance one can comfortably walk in five minutes. When we reach the end of the pier, we are breathlessly filled with wind. We run in streaming circles, breaking our silence with whoops and howls.

After our day of dancing at Aquatic Park, the place has changed for me. I have never seen it so down to the detail

of cracks and wave inlets and distances, nor have I shared it. Together we have witnessed the entire day pass and the light dim.

#### **TRACY VOGEL: CO-DIRECTOR**

Thirty-five people dressed in white. Some hold candles. On this cold San Francisco night in 1999, I can only imagine that the dim flame is giving some amount of warmth to chilled hands. The fog is rolling through the Western Edition where the BodyCartographers have gathered for our last "Slow Motion Walk" at the end of the project's first year in the Bay Area. Standing on the three-foot-wide concrete divider in the middle of Divisadero Street outside of 848 Community Space, I begin to take that first step into slow time and personal prayer that will last the next 50 minutes

or so. Cars light us up from both sides as they cascade past. Some honk, some yell, some try to engage us with questions, and some decide we are the newest religious cult to grace the San Francisco streets.

Second-story apartment lights come on, and spectators gather on corners outside of the local cafe and liquor stores. One woman, looking like she just emerged from the SOMAR [South of Market Street] Goth scene, pulls out her disposable camera to gather a memory of her moment here in San Francisco. A group of young boys begin joking with each other, laughing at us and the scene we are creating before them. We hear, "Hey man, what the fuck?" and "Check this out—go over there man, go over there and check them out." On this walk, unlike usual, no one joins us. Maybe the small street divider is too risky as cars drive by in range of bodily contact. Maybe the



cops that keep circling with their lights flashing make potential joiners fear arrest. I know it makes the hair on my arms rise as I review the rules of passive resistance and peaceful activism in my head. But we aren't here as activists and we are not resisting anything. We are a group of performers, dancers, office workers, singers, carpenters, walkers, nature lovers, organizers, friends, and strangers who have come together to bring a bit more imagistic beauty into the Western Edition.

I am often struck by the still images we are creating in the world. Perhaps this is only my perception upon viewing a photograph, drawing, video, or some other piece of visual documentation from our events. Imagistic beauty, it exists once and is remembered countless times.

Flash back to fall of '98. Same scenario. A group of 16 people in red doing a slow-motion walk through the Farmers Market in Oakland's Jack London Square. Exploring the abundance

of life and commerce at 8 a.m. Sunday morning. Immediately upon starting, I notice everything red in the environment. The paint on the ground directing traffic, the many individuals in red raingear or warm winter jackets, the flags that grace the skyline, the red peppers and flowers being sold at the booths. Through the next hour we are joined by many. A group of Latino boys poses one of their friends between us. Before he understands why they are telling him to stand still, we surround him. Losing his inhibitions he joins, walking slowly, a few steps, a few minutes, before embarrassment sinks in and he runs back to his friends. There is an upper-class, middle-aged couple, one in a complementary red, who berates us by the minute for wasting so much time—yet stays with us for over a half-hour making up scourging limericks. Then there is the stunning man from Ethiopia who, for the entire length of our walk, sets himself about six feet in front of us—slowly raises his hands and face

to the sky—and waits for us to surround him. Unlike us, who move slowly, he doesn't move at all, save his eyes closing as we overtake him. When we have completely passed him he walks around and in front of us to reassume his position and ecstatic dance again and again.

Of all the many scores we have done, this is my favorite. It has great impact and inspires much interaction through its pure simplicity. The score: 1 to 100+ participants of any age, size, and ability gather at a chosen destination in a chosen color at a chosen time. Give up talking. Visually explore the environment you are in. Feel your breath and base of support connected to the ground and begin to move forward as slowly as you can. Throughout the time of the score, feel yourself independent and as a part of the group, all sharing a different sense of time than that of the surrounding environment.

This score has been performed at Dia de Los Muertos in SF, Chinatown SF, Mission District SF, Western Edition SF, 12th St., Jack London Square in Oakland, and with Thich Nhat Hanh's slow-motion walk for world peace in Oakland.

photo: Kris Bieringa



Chris White and Kathy Ketman, BodyCartography Project, Marin Headlands, Marin County, CA, 1999.



As a trio, and now duet, of women directing the BodyCartography Project, we hold what feels like a wide vision. We dedicate ourselves to playing with anyone and everyone who is open to the contact. We come from “dance” backgrounds: modern, postmodern, technical, performance-based. We desire dance to be accessible to anyone, anytime, at anyplace. We take it to the streets to fully engage with our environment, to make living in a concrete city with a million people, living at home.

How do we work together? We are ever-evolving, exploring models and roles of leadership and facilitation that can meet our long-term goals and support the project’s short-lived experiences. Someone has to be a home to this vision. First Olive alone, then four,

and now two of us, but the circle of people is growing wider. As more participants step forward to organize and test their own visions, the container grows. Through a network of e-mail, voice mail, and word of mouth, events are organized and fulfilled. The KPFA protest, the War Protests, the Women in Prison public education event, our public transportation day, dancing in the Marin Headlands, performing at friends’ salons, events, birthdays, and more. You never know who will show up, but within twenty minutes of the appointed event time, you will have a group as small as five, as large as fifty, and usually somewhere in between.

The question always emerges—what if no one shows up? Will I do this myself? “Damn, this score is really only effective

with ten people. How am I going to do a counterbalancing human sculpture with just me?” Then you sidle up to a stranger, a lamppost, a tree, and go from there—another act of strangeness and beauty to accompany the urban landscape.

Dancing on the Market St. Muni stop, I’m reminded of the Happenings from the 1960s and ’70s. Nothing is new, and I dedicate this moment to all of those who made it possible for me to do this here, now, 1999 San Francisco.



photo: Alex Zaphiras



BodyCartography Project at the Burning Man festival in Black Rock Desert, Nevada, August 1999.

The BodyCartography Project is an ongoing performance research project based in the SF/Bay Area and performing wherever they travel. The touring structure is a facilitated community event which happens through collaborations with local artists in research, labs, site-specific events, and theater performances. Contact us at (415) 541-5644 or at our website at [www.Bodycartography.org](http://www.Bodycartography.org). You can also reach us c/o 848 Divisadero St., San Francisco, CA 94117; fax: (415) 922-2385; email: [olivebee@yahoo.com](mailto:olivebee@yahoo.com) and [Tvogel@dnai.com](mailto:Tvogel@dnai.com).

A huge thank-you to all the brave participants of this urban wilderness experience, especially Sumara Fraser, Karen Daly, Andy Irving, Zoe Miller, Johanna Sanders, Thomas Sepe, Otto Ramstad, Lorenzo Share, Creative New Zealand, 848 Community Space, and CELL Space. Inspirational thanks to Image Lab: Lisa Nelson, K.J. Holmes, Karen Nelson, and Scott Smith; and to Anna Halprin, Rachel Kaplan, Carolyn Stuart, Keith Hennessy, Med-o Whitson, and many, many more.