

## Tim Etchells on performance: learning your lines

A collaborative drawing piece with Vlatka Horvat taught me to read the impromptu designs created by moving performers

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**Tim Etchells**

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From page to stage ... Tim Etchells and Vlatka Horvat perform *Over the Table*.

Vlatka Horvat and I take seats on opposite sides of a table in a gallery at [Aichi Arts Centre](#) in Nagoya, Japan, for part of our [Over the Table](#) project. Trapped between our hands is a pen, tracing lines on the paper we've placed on the table, marking the restless skids and scratches of our ungainly Ouija-board-meets-broken-seismograph collaboration. Disengagement would cause the pen to fall immediately, but for the next hour its motion – fluid, clumsy, jerky, strained or otherwise – will be produced by our playful but silent negotiation. Looking down on the paper when the performance is over it's all marks and trails, dots and lines – at once a drawing and a record of the choreography our hands have made, depicting their journey over the white expanse of the page.

There's a strange fascination to this process and it led me to consider the link between performance and drawing. Bobby Baker's [Drawing on a Mother's Experience](#) comes to mind – a performance that revisited [Jackson Pollock's action painting](#) from a feminist perspective, switching his dripping and splattering of paint on canvas for the act of throwing domestic materials including flour, jam and even Guinness onto a white double bedsheet. The resulting picture is beautiful, messy. It's also a theatrical mnemonic for the stories Baker has told in the performance: to look at it is to remember.

After Vlatka and I have finished our drawing performance we visit the upstairs gallery where Chinese artist [Cai Guo-Qiang](#) has a huge work on canvas depicting a sketchy underwater landscape and figures, stretched around the walls. A video in the gallery makes clear how the work was created, starting with a woman swimming underwater in a clear-wall pool while the artist draws lines around her silhouette, a fleeting trace of her movement drawn on a paper draped around the pool. This process makes an amazing performance, even if not explicitly staged. The final part of the video shows Cai and numerous assistants making elaborate preparations on the surface of the drawing as it lies on the floor of a large sports hall.

At first, as indistinct powdered material is scattered on the canvas in different places, the artist's work or intentions are unclear. Indeed, only as Cai and co set light to what seem to be fuses do I realise that the scattered material comprises small amounts of gunpowder. As the fuses burn down there are flashes and bangs, and smoke billows from spots all over the canvas. Assistants rush in with towels to damp the flames. A few spectators peer down from the seating to survey the canvas, now scorched from the small explosions, while Cai and his assistants walk the strange landscape of the picture, inspecting it for gunpowder that has not burned. In a few places the artist pauses then stoops to set fire to an unburned patch, causing more bangs, flashes and smoke.

Two weeks later, back in Britain for Forced Entertainment's [The Thrill of It All](#), I'm turning to an altogether more theatrical performance mode with actors, texts, microphones and dance rehearsals. It's only as we roll the white dance floor for the performances at London's Riverside Studios that I realise it too has become a drawing. What was a blank white surface at the opening of the show back in May has over the twenty or so performances to date already become a beautifully scratched, scuffed and marked expanse – a 14x10m map of the movements in the piece drawn by the boots and shoes of the performers, each marking the trace of some step, fall, skid or jump.