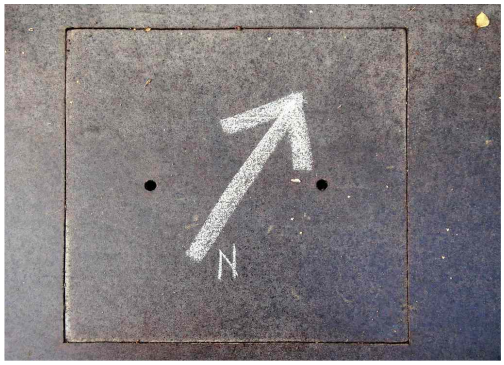
**MOVING NORTH:**
**ORIENTING DANCE AT LATITUDE 61**




By Gabrielle Barnett and Tinu Hettich

*How does north, as a geographic expression, relate to exploratory movement work? This question inspired "Moving North," a research project sponsored by the International Polar Year program at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, co-directed by Gabrielle Barnett (USA), Tinu Hettich (Switzerland) and Caroline Waters (Great Britain) in summer 2008.*

**Starting Points**

G.B: My first notes for Moving North imagine people at sites in the northern hemisphere orienting with compasses to face the north pole, walking along lines converging at the distant imagined center point. They include ideas for a score embodying the polar coordinate system; pathways radiating out from a center point. They refer to the pole as an abstraction, a place to which the compass points, a place where lines that we usually visualize as parallel meet.

T.H.: Early on we connect the external coordinate systems that organize the geographic landscape with internal coordinate systems we use to navigate through our moving space. Maps generally represent the world with latitudinal and longitudinal lines, the first being parallel circles around the globe, the second running as lines from north to south pole. Therefore, we can describe every point on earth according to where it falls in relation to these intersecting lines.

G.B.: North pole is simultaneously an imaginary fixed point projected from a system of lines wrapping the earth, and a constantly moving, physically identifiable spot generated by the earth's magnetic core and rotational axis. As a dancer, I can relate to both. I sometimes use external mapping systems, such as scores, choreographies, and stage directions, to locate my dancing. More often, though, practicing contact improvisation, I attune to physical sensations, like gravity and compression, to orient myself in kinesthetically confusing situations where no external spatial map guides me. Observing this difference, I became curious about using improvisational dance to explore different approaches to orientation and how they affect our sense of where we are on a larger scale—in relation to north or within a landscape. I thought to compare movement shaped by the Cartesian mapping system with movement inspired by other spatial constructs, including our bodies' internal sensing systems. I wanted to work this way both indoors in conventional dance spaces and outdoors, in urban and undeveloped natural settings.

T.H.*:* After placing the initial puzzle stones, Gabrielle, Caroline and I brainstorm and share notes, ideas and images by phone conferences and email exchange throughout spring and summer 2008. This exchange prepares common ground for movement research. Caroline begins teaching in Finland, while Gabrielle starts training dancers in Anchorage.

G.B: I propose working methods that I hope will highlight the experience of moving in conscious relationship to north. We will contrast improvisational structures based on the work of Barbara Dilley and Nancy Stark Smith, which restrict movement pathways to the parallel and perpendicular lines of the Cartesian grid, with movement explorations derived directly from contact improvisation. The grid-like structures will engage us with the established mapping system, while contact improvisation will provide a path into a "sensation-based" experience of where we are.

**Heading North**

*Gabrielle and Tinu plan material for south-central Alaska, while Caroline heads to Siberia, adding a new layer to the project: what is it to research north at the 61st parallel, rather than in London or Berne? Now north appears to us as place, or location, as well as direction, or orientation.*

T.H.: Where is north? Is north place or vector, pointing to a direction? During Moving North and my time in Alaska, many questions arise out of the first, so simple seeming, word-play "moving north". I move north, travel towards the north pole, Gabrielle and the intensive participants move in the north, in their home, Alaska. All of us move the thoughts and concepts about "north" around in our mind. Asking questions like, "where is north, where are you relative to it," I find that almost everybody thinks north is always "more north than me". Most people place themselves centrally. Based in Switzerland, if I think about north as a place, it is Finland, Greenland, Alaska. For people living in Anchorage it is "Fairbanks", "the arctic", "the north slope". North is relative; it doesn't exist in people's minds as one common place.

G.B: I return home for "Moving North" after enjoying a week of high-angle sun, bright blue sky, and ocean swimming "down south", near Vancouver Island, British Columbia. I chat with an anxious woman in the Vancouver airport, sensing she's not from the lower BC mainland; her attitude and body language tells me she's shaped by a harsher environment. She reveals that she "moved up north," to Smithers: a small town a bit southeast of the Cassiar Highway (on my mental map of the multi-day road-trip between the "lower 48" and south-central Alaska). For her, Smithers meant moving north; for me, it's the southern edge of a region that feels like home. I arrive in Alaska, questioning my sense of north.

**Orienting and accumulating**

*Gabrielle appears first in an accumulation score that will span the next ten days. Tinu arrives second. Together, they visit different outdoor locations in and around Anchorage to dance, deepen, and explore questions around "moving north". After that John Bainbridge (North Carolina) arrives to help document the dancing. Local dancers, Tamara Rothman Miller and Michelle Steffens, sign on for a week of intensive movement research, working both indoors and outdoors, mostly on the University of Alaska, Anchorage campus. Gabrielle's family returns home, and community members gather for a workshop; we integrate some of them into our performance score. Finally, an audience shows up to watch the show, following us as we move across campus*

G.B: Heading to the airport around 1:00AM to collect Tinu, I notice that summer has begun to wane; the last glimmer of light has faded in the northwest, with no sign of brightening to the northeast. Darkness still engulfs us when we pull into my driveway at 4:00 AM— warning that autumn waits around the next bend. We have a few days to settle in, select dance sites, and frame the questions and structures that will shape our research. But it's the peak of harvest season after a cold, marginal summer. The raspberries on the south-facing hill are late, but ripe and abundant, the strawberries in my shady garden abundant, but still green, my greens mostly bolted. Suspecting that the harvest will be meager this year, I feel pressure to gather what I can right now. Right now, wild raspberries, coho salmon and local farmed peas are plentiful—but they will be gone when the project ends. With Tinu's help, raspberries, peas, and fish get collected and preserved, as we accumulate food, questions, dance sites, and ideas for movement scores.

T.H.: What is North? What makes me feel “I'm north?” or “I'm in the north? Is it the lower sun on the horizon? The satellite dishes looking like they’re hanging loose, almost pointing to the horizon instead of up into the sky? The appearance of forests and mountain valleys at sea level which appear at 6000 ft in the European Alps? Is it the vast land, the long distances between settlements? The stronger seasonal changes influencing the rhythm of life?

G.B.: Selecting outdoor sites helps refine my sense of north. I’m drawn to dance in particular places, but often can’t identify why they feel like north. Meetings of water and land attract me—river banks, a lakeshore, the intertidal zone. So do glacial moraines—jumbles of rock in various stages of consolidation and re-vegetation. I sense how the active presence of glaciers still shapes and reshapes this landscape. We choose a surface of glacial silt and a recently vacated glacial outwash plain, as well as at the ocean’s edge. We pick sites near sea level, not high in the alpine zone, because their northern quality reads more clearly to us.

*After visiting many sites, asking, “what is north about this place?” and “what would dancing in this place reveal about moving north?” we sit on the riverbank to formulate and record our core questions. We select three as workshop studies:*

- *What internal and external information do I read to tell me where I am?*
- *How does being in this environment affect my movement choices?*
- *What dance structures or movement choices can I use to lead others to a heightened experience of a place?*

*Tinu wants to research*

- *How much and how is my movement influenced by the space around me?*
- *Am I trained to move in rectangular coordinate systems? Am I truly free to move in any angle in space or do I prefer certain angles?*
- *What are the parallels between moving in the microcosm of a dance studio versus moving in an open landscape? What additional influences contribute to my dance outside and how can I stay with the dance without having to black them out ? Are there (and if yes, what are) similarities between reading the landscape and reading my dance partner?*

*Gabrielle wonders*

- *How do my improvisational dancing skills overlap with my landscape navigation skills, both in terms of directional movement and my ability to be fully present where I am?*
- *How do I maintain a connection to both the landscape and to other people, when I work outdoors?*



*We will return to work in these natural sites, but first, we move to Anchorage, to work indoors in conventional dance studios and outdoors at the architecture/ landscaped nature junction. In Anchorage, we dive into the grid.*

**Gridwork**

*We teach a progressive series of scores introduced to us by Nancy Stark Smith, based on her own research and the work of Barbara Dilley, to allow us to approach improvising within a grid structure in stages. We start with Nancy's "Sweep": a straight line, unison walk back and forth across the space, to develop our tuning to group impulses and timing. Next, we introduce her "pick up/drop off"score: linear group travel with unison starts and ends, with options for independent dropping out into stillness. Barbara Dilley's "Corridors" adds the option of independently timed travel along parallel lines. Finally, Dilley's "Grid", opens up the possibilities of travel along perpendicular paths and 90 degree turns. We practice this progression in different settings: a four walled dance studio; a ¾ round stage; an outdoor courtyard with grid-line marked on both pavement and vertical building wall; a hill in the middle of a large landscaped lawn with criss-cross paths.*

T.H.: I enjoy introducing the compass as a possibility for orienting the grid structures —in addition to using architecture as a reference. Most indoor places give you some sort of rectangular orientation. The wood on the floor has a direction, the walls have a rectangular alignment, windows, curtains, even the lighting, are often arranged by 90 degrees. Outdoors is more chaotic. Mountains offer visuals of many different angles. The ground is mostly not flat, even over small distances. Places where human-built structures, like buildings, overlap with natural grown shapes, like trees, interest me; the Cartesian system meets freely aligned natural organization.
Using the compass to align a grid in an interior space changes movement choices. Suddenly, we find cross-lines between the grid's orientation and the floor, or the wall. Playing with different orientations inside buildings we learn to let go of using the walls for reference and consider other aspects of the structure and the other movers. When using the compass to orient the grid outside, it takes a while to get a clear orientation. Without visible, artificial lines to help us hold a direction, we must establish reference points in the environment. Realizing that we started to use our own footprints in the grass as points and lines of orientation is a fun surprise.

G.B: I enjoy the grid in the space outside the library—where the cement under my feet is marked off in squares, but a few architectural curves and slopes provide relief from a rectilinear environment. The grass hill is my favorite grid site because the incline encourages acceleration and deceleration– an extra layer of physics to accept or resist. A few workshop participants complain that they feel stuck in linear movements when restricted to the pathways of the grid. I ask whether moving in a linear path contradicts their sense of creative flow, or whether their creativity shuts down when their pathways are limited? Could they perform flowing, free-feeling movements in linear pathways? What does this say about our daily lives in Anchorage—a city laid out as a huge grid?

T.H.*:* One evening, talking about a friend, Gabrielle says "he lives off the grid," which triggers my linguistic and cultural curiosity: The grid translates in German to "Raster, Gitter, Koordinatennetz". If somebody lives "off the grid" (meaning living out in the woods with no electricity, for example) we would say "he or she lives not on the web" (nicht am Netz sein/hängen). So why does the German language refer to a public infrastructure as web, while in North America it's a rectangular expression? Many cities in Europe show, in fact, a web structure – streets radiating out from the center, while most cities in the States have a rectangular structure of parallel streets intersecting with avenues. (It actually takes us Europeans a while to navigate American cities –Americans must feel lost with all our non-mathematically organized random street names)

G.B: We've lost our connection to the significance of north, as direction and location, but we've discovered one way that mapping systems imprint thinking, language and movement; the Cartesian grid system has left its mark all over North America. In videos of our work, traffic passes in the background, blending seamlessly into our grid study. Introduced a long time ago, when the western parts of the continent were surveyed and mapped, the Cartesian grid still shapes the way North Americans move and perceive space.

T.H.: Thinking about the grid and the web, I notice that on world maps, moving from the equator towards the pole, the grid slowly turns into a polar coordinate system. Close to the equator, the coordinate lines align as a 90 degree rectangular grid. Approaching the poles, the north/south lines begin to converge. Maps of the polar regions are organized in concentric circles and lines radiating from a center-point: the polar coordinate system. From this system, we can get to a web: a series of inter-connected center points.

G.B.: In the context of the Cartesian system, on the scale and the maps that we usually use, the poles are distant points we can never reach-- because of the illusion that we travel north on parallel lines. So how do we make the transition to a system that allows us to locate the poles, and to locate ourselves in relation to the pole? We discover an answer by accident, pursuing another line of inquiry.

**Dispersing Score**

*The dispersing score arises from an initial frustration with certain aspects of the north: a sense of too much land and too few people. To develop our outdoor ensemble work here, we needed to cultivate qualities we observed to be important for survival in the north—qualities that typify northern communities—a combination of great self-reliance and interdependence. I recognize these traits in my daily life; Tinu and I both recognize them kinesthetically from contact improvisation. Tinu proposes the dispersing score; later, we realize we've made a dance structure that mimics the polar coordinate system.*

T.H.: I start by extending a contact improvisation duet exercise to a group study. We stand in a circle facing out, touching each other through the back and the shoulders, establishing a common weighted center in the middle. We play with increasing and decreasing the intensity of contact, separating by taking the weight over our individual centers and then in slow motion falling back to group support.
To learn the dispersing score, we hold hands while walking apart to the point where our hands form a wide circle, allowing us to rest in a counterbalance. Later we lean out to the surroundings maintaining connection to the group and common center without the help of hands. As the score develops, we walk a couple of steps out and back to center in a shared rhythm. Then, we play with the distance we walk. Different timings and speeds add more options. Finally, the score expands to include the option of turning and facing in. The dispersing score ends when a dancer breaks from the group, shifting into self-reliant, solo space.

G.B: When it's my turn to lead the dispersing score, I focus on tiny shifts that enable the transition from sharing weight and center in an inward-leaning group counterbalance to taking individual responsibility for weight in vertical alignment. I find another important transition when we lean away from group center, slightly off center without group support. Exploring these tiny shifts, out and back in again, I imagine myself as a cell in a single breathing organism. Later, everyone comments that something shifted in the group energy, the sensed group connection, from this practice. I'm curious how I sense the group reconvening, how I soften and adjust to absorb someone back in. Can I extend out an intention, or perhaps energy, to bring someone back? How far can I stretch my sensed connection to group; how is it that I can break or lose the bond even in close proximity to others? What have I learned by living so long in the north, what comes from my study of contact improvisation?

T.H.: Many situations I met in Alaska are reflected in this score. We gather as a group, supporting each other, depending on each other. Then I head out to the wilderness, knowing there is a place to return to. On my own, I rely on myself and keep my own balance. Reading the distance back, taking care of the arrival of the group, I accept whatever support I sense at the center. Depending on hearing and feeling through the backside of your body makes the dispersing score different from other structures I have experienced. With fewer opportunities to cheat, to adjust my movements to fit the other mover's choices, I must slow down. Removing vision removes the option of pretending to feel the group, which encourages movers to learn to read each other with non-visual information and move with the unknown.

G.B: To explore transitions between extremes of self-reliance and interdependence we create a score with a clear home base or collecting point, and unlimited possibility for moving away from that collecting point. Coincidentally, we created a score structured like the polar coordinate system—the score I imagined in my first notes.

**Reading landscapes, reading bodies**

*Moving North de-accumulates slowly, losing neither focus nor intensity. We enter a new phase, focusing on movement exploration with only two of us, digesting the findings from the Anchorage week. We move to the small town of Girdwood and the undeveloped dance sites we selected earlier, keeping a looser schedule, adjusting our rhythm to the weather and the flow of Gabrielle's family life. New questions arise, opening side streams of research, sometimes merging back again with the main stream, sometimes developing their own life and flowing on as a new independent branch.*

G.B: The dispersing score includes some principles we understand from contact improvisation-- weight sharing and group connection through sensation-- but it still generates straight line pathways. How do I rediscover the curved pathways and spherical space of CI after such focused work with straight lines? I find a way when refusing to abandon a straight line exploration when I meet Tinu in contact. A slight, but specific, weight share creates a curve. I don't intend to spiral, but transferring weight through the contact point I suddenly find myself spiraling around.

T.H.: The point of contact functions not only as the point of possible communication and support, but also offers a transition between linear movement and spherical movement. Almost like water turbines, the point of contact can transfer a linear trajectory into spinning movement with my partner, deploying a shared center and transforming the forward energy into rotational energy.

G.B: Examining why one outdoor site consistently invites spiral pathways and contact duets, I recognize a similar principle. At this site, two exterior walls form an interior corner. Entering this space I start to spiral; Even the grass is mown in a spiral pattern here. Navigating inside corners, my straight lines curve, and my pathway converges with that of my partner, easing the transition into physical contact.

T.H.: Moving out of the city, away from the grid, I become aware of how much visual, acoustical, tactile and inter-social information my body and mind reads, processes, and includes when dancing outside. Working in the northern environment, both similar to and different from the Swiss Alps, is joyful. Girdwood has a village feel, spread out in the forested valley. I enjoy finding my way on the curvy little unpaved streets. I realize how Berne, the Swiss capital, feels more like a big village than a city.

G.B.: Outdoors at the river, beach, and forest, we start asking "what invites dancing here?": "what kind of dancing do these places invite?" How do we orient ourselves when working out of sight of permanent human built structures? My interest shifts away from geometric pathways. I want to find a dance that tunes into both my experience of place and the sensation of my partner's body. To do this, I need to close down the frame of the landscape so I can really sense my partner's presence, without tuning out where I am. Or expand the frame of my dance to include the whole scene, without tuning out my partner.

T.H: Outdoor sites feel wider now. Architecture gets replaced by the alignment of natural objects. Distant objects have a stronger influence; while moving in Anchorage, I never was aware of the mountains, though they were visible almost everywhere. The reduced presence of man-made and familiar things guides me to greater awareness of what's present in the now. My placement in relation to the surroundings gains importance. What distance do I choose to create between me and the river bed? Can I jump and land safely on the coarse gravel? How much weight can I let flow into my counterbalance before Gabrielle's feet start to slip on the rock face?

G.B.: Dancing on unconventional surfaces heightens the trust and cooperation in the give and take of weight between partners; it also creates a sense of give and take between dancers and the dance environment. The buoyant spring of a branch under my feet changes to brittle tension when Tinu adds his weight, bringing my attention to our impact on the terrain in which we move. As we push the branch towards the limits of its tensile strength—moving delicately now-- I sense it could snap under our combined weight. At the riverbank, our footsteps bring water to the surface of silt, leaving a liquid trace of our presence.

I'm constantly reading edges, surfaces, tone, and resistance. This kind of sensing has become intuitive both in a contact duet, and when I move in the backcountry, following a river or mountain slope. Through MovingNorth, besides the familiar studio floor, my skin has felt concrete, asphalt, mud, grass, peat, glacial silt, gravel, rock, water. As well as reading sensation on my skin—sharp, cold, rough, smooth, irregular, slippery—I read the tone of a surface. Will I sink or slide? How does this surface meet me, how can it support me? Different surfaces, like different bodies, invite different possibilities, which become especially interesting when irregular, sloping, unstable, or expanding into the vertical plane. Dancing at the ocean's edge, evading the rapidly advancing tide, reminds me that the edges where my body meets my partner's surface are constantly in flux—I need to read those edges in the moment.

**Moving in the North**

T. H.: I notice that strategies for living in a northern environment reinforce principles I know from the practice of CI. People live off available resources, working with what's there, possibly taking support when and where it's available. Strong seasonal changes create different phases in daily life: getting outside, scattered, in summer, harvesting & collecting in fall, living closer together in winter. It's a vulnerable collaboration, a pulsing seasonality—you have to sense when the time is right, know when the support is there. I think about the importance of the timing of support, of living with the very moment that is.

G.B.: A few weeks after Tinu's departure**,** I return to sites where we danced together. They have changed. At Twentymile, the first autumn storms have eroded the soft silt, leaving coarse gravel underfoot. At Byron Glacier, our bouyant branch is anchored at both ends, washed downstream and flipped by the flooding creek. On the bigger scale, these places are unchanged, maps still accurate, but on the scale we explored them while dancing, the land has moved. I remember that north itself, the magnetic pole, is always moving—such that I have to reset the angle of declination on my compass to read maps accurately. What I experience as north is moving too. As the climate warms I recalibrate my internal seasonal calendar marking freeze up and spring thaw—the last day for berries, the week to plant seeds. I am part of the moving north, moving in the north.