







# DIRT

Dance In Regional disaster zones

Workroom









Lisa Robert's photographs form the spine of this book, winged by my brief personal writings that attempt to word the wordlessness of a choreographic consciousness in the dimming light of Australia's native species.  
A reflective essay by Phoebe Robinson at the end of the book, adds flesh to this ephemerality.

Rosalind Crisp  
Orbost, Victoria  
March 2025

to begin is to turn on attention



**DIRtywork Sydney Opera House 2019 Performance Text 1.**

In 1797 my great, great, great grandfather arrived in Australia. He was Irish, transported for anti-government activities.

The same year, the first 6 merino sheep arrived in Australia, 4 ewes and 2 rams.

By 1880 there were 106 million sheep in Australia.

This ovine invasion was facilitated by shooting the people who lived here and poisoning the dingoes.

In 1818 a French scientist invented strychnine.

By 1850 most colonial farmers used this poison regularly. As well as killing people and dingoes, they inadvertently killed countless native birds and small mammals.

In the 1960's and '70s I grew up on a sheep farm in Northeastern Victoria. My parents, my three siblings, myself and our numerous dogs and cats ate sheep nearly every day.

In 2013 I returned to Australia after 10 years in Paris. The majestic, alpine forests I grew up in, were all gone.

In 1999 the Australian government made an Act (EPBC) to protect threatened species. But since then, ~~7.5~~<sup>12</sup> million hectares of threatened species habitat has been cleared.

Australia is now a world deforestation hotspot.

Today, ~~23~~<sup>25</sup> Australian bird species are extinct and ~~1800~~<sup>2000</sup> Australian species are on the brink of extinction. ~~97~~<sup>99.5%</sup>% of native grasslands have been destroyed.

Welcome, to this ruined land....

My question is *how* to dance in the midst of this ongoing destruction?







Brookville

logged burnt by govt.  
failed to regenerate  
1904 - 2024

Kuark

burnt 2020  
surrounds logged by govt  
1950's - 2024

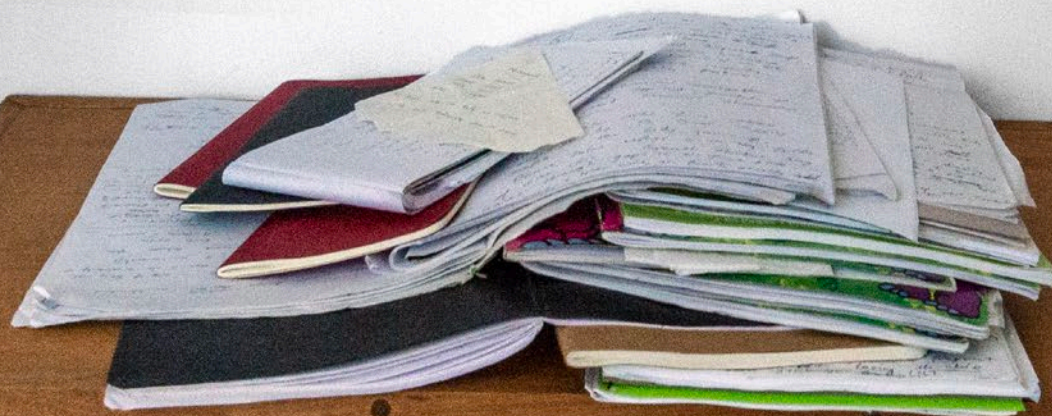
Can we hold the whole in our attention  
all of the time?

Ewings Marsh

repeatedly burnt by govt.  
2007 →

Cape Conran

burnt out by govt.  
2020







Pt. Ricardo bulldozed 2020



every movement leaves a mark  
every dance uses water



Conran Rd. 'diblo coupe' logged 2020





Pt. Ricardo bulldozed 2020



soften the flesh  
slacken the mouth  
slow down to catch  
the tiny things already there

Cape Conran back burnt by fire fighters Jan 2020





the future starts in miniature

from small movements of feeling

expose the practice

of noticing what's already there

soft disorder (for example)

there is no-where else

no thing else

no errant movements

all movements are of the same genre







303 Australian species depend on hollow trees to breed

It takes 120-200 years for hollows to form.

Planned burns destroy hollow trees  
The hollow tree acts like a chimney  
Even days after a 'cool burn' trees fall

1000-2000 birds die in every  
100 hectares burnt  
(Bush Heritage)

Planned burns have no impact on  
lessening wildfire in extreme weather  
conditions  
(UNPA.org.au)

Burning triggers a pulse of highly flammable regrowth  
for the next 20-30 years  
(Lindenmayer, Zylstra, Taylor studies 1990-2025)

Humans have destroyed 70% of all other fauna on earth  
(WWF)

"Cleaning up" dead wood & leaf litter kills the fungi  
that trees need to survive

Victorians spent \$6.6 billion on their pets in 2023  
(census)

There are more pet dogs in Victoria than wombats

Humans have destroyed  $\frac{2}{3}$  of all other  
fauna on earth  
(WWF)







how many kinds of mess are there?  
how many kinds of mess are there?  
how many kinds of mess are there?  
how many kinds of mess are there?

kinds dance  
of mess  
are there? something

there? the  
2nd season  
Sjoberg  
Felix  
more like  
'Shock'

go!

how



how does this dance work?

try not trying to achieve anything

not looking for usefulness

breathe into the back gums

breath fattens feeling

listen through the whole skin

sink the teeth of attention into flesh

a scratch is already a movement

go there first with imagination

no force

cheer up

where are we now?

sleepwalking into hell

(I can dance myself back, but a forest takes 1000 years)















Disorder is a lumpy thing  
dance



From the veranda of the hut I can see the freshly  
scraped hillside of our neighbour. We are separated  
by a steep gully and a waterfall. The water  
was once permanent but since the 1990s it is ephemeral.  
Bedrocks glisten in the heat. I look above  
the scraped hill to the skyline of the Angora range.  
It too has been scraped, by government agents.

When my father and my brother built this hut in the 1970s,  
they faced it towards the waterfall and the then woodland  
hills and wild alpine range.

Where to look, now?

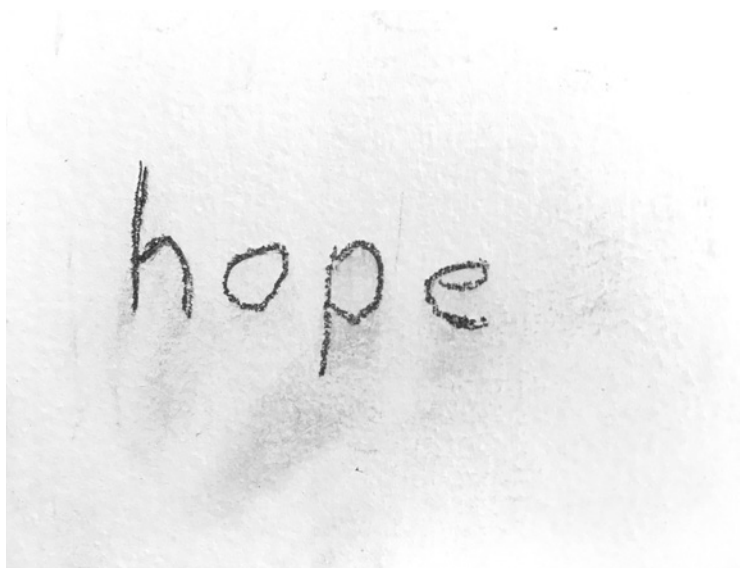
Could we turn the hut around? Or should we abandon it  
and build another one somewhere more peaceful,  
for example in the back valley or out on the western spur?

How to pull my eyes away and refocus on the living,  
on this side of the gully?

There is no more 'out there'

not even any 'over there'

Only 'in here'



an orchestra conductor hears what's coming next

can we sense with the body what's coming next?

all we have is consciousness

attention to the pull of flesh

licking the air

anytime

anywhere

this is dancing



I'm always looking for the wild ride but some days you just have to plant potatoes

ideas are useless

they lift us out of the body

(If you have an idea, find out how to stuff it back inside your body)

meaning is in the muscle

start with the muscle





when I'm inside the dance it is immeasurably vast

when I'm outside the dance i can measure it



Is the role of the choreographer to be alive to what's

already there before it is obliterated by our actions?



artists are always looking for new Form  
but then another Form always forms  
how to stay in the no-Form forming form?

the more lumpy-gunky it is,  
the more I can hold it away from Art  
(which is where Art comes from)

Keep going

Keep on

There is no end

This is IT



The dance only ends when we stop paying attention to what's changing.

DIRt Workroom is an open-studio project that engages Rosalind Crisp's ongoing responsiveness to the destruction of East Gippsland's flora and fauna through land clearing and government planned burns that are destroying habitat, impacting endangered species, increasing carbon emissions, and doing little to mitigate bushfire risk, and may in fact be increasing fire risk to the community (Lindenmayer, Zylstra, Taylor, 2025). DIRt's concern is the direct and enduring harm to the local environment caused by habitat removal and planned burning.

*Some days there are 20-30 burns pinging on my phone. They can be anywhere between 5 and 30,000 hectares each. The air is thick with smoke. Regional people suffer every autumn and spring. Burning the forest has now become institutionalised. Even so called 'cool burns' destroy the precious hollow trees that parrots, owls, kookaburras, possums, gliders etc. all depend on. It's a national disaster happening out of sight of most Australians. (Crisp, 2025)*

As a recent development of Rosalind's ongoing practice of DIRt (Dance In Regional disaster zones), the DIRt Workroom is a series of immersive, small-scale viewings of live dance performance, amongst an archival assemblage of photographs by collaborator Lisa Roberts, raw video footage by Andrew Morrish, newspaper clippings and published articles along with Rosalind's new writing on the DIRt project. The Workroom is variously described by Rosalind as *a dance stripped back, a book in process, a conversation, a consolidation and rearrangement of the DIRt archives, and a creative process exposed.*

*It is a disassembling and a reassembling of everything I've been doing around the environment work of dancing in regional disaster zones [since 2017]. I was going to lay it out as a book in process, and then I realised that it's not a book in a room; the room IS the*

*book. Photos and articles are arranged and rearranged on different surfaces. I write on the walls in pencil, erase it and rewrite it. It takes time to find the right place... (Crisp, 2025)*

DIRt Workroom is not just a performance event or gallery installation; it is a book-in-process and a conditional space that allows Rosalind's dancing and writing to continue while also responding to the felt-sense of being with an audience. The format is extremely open, anything can happen, and there is no pre-determined structure or duration to each viewing. Paradoxically, this openness requires Rosalind to maintain a precise focus in each dance. At the time of writing, three dance 'fields' have emerged in the Workroom, which she has named, *grief, spell and chaos*. To describe these, and what is meant by 'a dance' in this context, it is necessary to first explain the particular nature of Rosalind's practice, which relies on both a constant and ever-changing attentive focus to the present. This method has been honed over decades of Rosalind's dancing, but especially since 2005, when her practice exploded into a new phase that was simply named 'd a n s e'.

French dance scholar Isabelle Ginot, who worked with Rosalind in Paris for many years, has described 'd a n s e' as being drawn from a *huge open repertoire of 'attention scores'* (Ginot, 2014). 'Attention scores' can provisionally be described as open instructions that support a dancer's agency, sensitivity, and imagination for generating movement, as opposed to producing a set vocabulary of repeatable steps.

d a n s e was a 10-year period of Rosalind's work in which she taught herself to distil and bring into language the processes that were occurring in her dancing, without trapping those processes into a closed choreographic system.



*For a long time I improvised alone in the studio in order to produce materials for future pieces. d a n s e began when I was no longer interested in movement as such, but in the way I was producing it. Then I felt that this new process had its own autonomy. I came up with the first scores for d a n s e [...] by naming what I was doing, and even now these are still foundations for the work (Crisp, cited in Ginot, 2014)*

One 'attention score' from the early years of d a n s e, which continues to influence Rosalind's practice - called 'tool number 1A' - is about *leading or initiating movement from one-surface-at-a-time*. This approach involves not only moving one-surface-at-a-time but also giving full attention to each surface and, as Rosalind says, *taking time to feel the sensations arising from that fleshy site, and inviting imagination to fill that site before initiating movement with or from that surface into space*. Importantly, the term 'surface' is used in a deliberately neutral way, allowing her imagination to transcend the limitations of strict anatomical definitions, and to move beyond the simple, jointed, articulations of the most obvious limbs. A 'surface' is also not limited to external areas, such as the back of a hand or the crest of a hip; it includes internal surfaces, like the back of her gums or *a slice of brain*.

*...a lump of liver emerges out of the mouth, a slice of brain caves in, then travels through and out the hip. (Crisp, 2025)*

Rosalind practices holding her attention to a singular 'surface' even as she transforms or slips it across to another sensation in another 'surface', setting off a chain reaction that she describes as, *noticing and responding to the sensation, which then produces another sensation somewhere else in the body*. During the transition from one 'surface' to the next, there is a wide range of potential variability in the duration, texture, energy, stillness, or volatility of each 'surface' event.

Rosalind has described this to me as a *thinning* but also sometimes a *thickening* / *slowing* / *delaying* / *emptying* or *dilating* of her *tone of attention* in the transition from one 'surface' to the next. I recognise this as a potent strategy, not only for dance improvisation but also for recognising change in *what is already there*.

*What is already there, emergent? Not yet named. Once one has turned off the movement-making habit, epicormic blisters appear everywhere in the body. Catching just one of them as it emerges, means giving value to each not-yet-thing and staying awake to what is becoming. Having no opinion... No movements being given any more value than any other movements. Everything IS something. (Crisp, 2009)*

Since 2005, Rosalind's practice has evolved through two distinct phases: the first is d a n s e, which chronologically precedes DIRt. The latter emerged around 2017 in response to the damaging effects of state logging and burning, and drew with it the principles and practices of d a n s e into dialogue with Rosalind's physical/emotional response to this ongoing devastation of the environment that she grew up in.

*DIRt is d a n s e, only now it is imbued with the reality around me. Which forest, that I love, is Forest Fire Management Victoria burning down today? DIRt is not just meeting my choreographic practice, it's also meeting the present moment in my own living body, and where I am now. (Crisp, 2025)*

Rosalind says her experience of roaming the bush since childhood has informed her practice of both d a n s e and DIRt. These early experiences of *full-body listening*—being constantly alert for snakes and animals or recognising and caring for particular plants—developed her sensitivity to *what is already there*.

*Underneath both d a n s e and DIRt is my experience of this place that I come from. There is something about being in the bush; the full atmosphere of it, the attentiveness, and the 'joining with-ness'; these are things I already know from growing up in the bush. (Crisp, 2025)*

The DIRt dances, named *grief*, *spell* and *chaos* are each specific 'fields', within the larger 'field' of DIRt. For example, *spell* is not a singular 'dance', but a particular sub-field and group of sensorial-images that produce an atmosphere that Rosalind recognises as belonging to the category of the *spell* dance:

*It often starts by being quiet with my feet on the floor. Then it produces a quietness in the atmosphere, and a kind of elasticity all around me. Something about my perception changes: there is a light holding—not just of my whole body in my attention, but a holding of everyone who is there. It's as if the whole atmosphere is in suspension. (Crisp, 2025)*

Sometimes 'images' emerge from a 'sensation'. Other times, the image is first and produces a sensation; or no image at all, only sensation. Rosalind describes the imagery that comes to her in the *grief* dances as:

*...a sense of papery thinness, exposure, fragility, and transparency. It feels airy and light, as if I could be blown away. It has to do with the sensation of disappearing and death, or vanishing, as nature is. It is devoid of harshness; there's no straining, no adjustments, no rough ruptures, and no momentum. It is silent and quiet. (Crisp, 2025)*

Sometimes it's *less back into the tissue and more out into the air*. While these 'images' and 'sensations' are not fixed, some recur enough times to be recognised and named, and there is always an acute awareness by Rosalind of the precise quality of each moment, even as it passes on to the next 'surface' that is drawing her attention.

*With 'chaos', there's more tone to it—madness and disorder. Sometimes, I call it the 'architect's headache', where I imagine-sense that all the planes and angles around me are out of whack. It's intense, dense and wild. It's usually louder than the 'grief' and 'spell' dances, and it's more image-led than sensation-led. (Crisp, 2025)*

Importantly, Rosalind never sets out in advance to do *spell*, nor *grief* or *chaos*; they *emerge in that day's practice*. The dance occurs before it is named and the language that follows, she says *risers like steam from my body dancing*, in a process of recognising the emergent and unfixed patterns within the open 'field' of DIRt, in which Rosalind is always hyper-aware and full-body-listening to *what is already there*.

This essay is an attempt to capture what appears for now in the emergent 'field' of DIRt-buoyed-by-d a n s e, though it cannot be limited to this single description.

- Phoebe Robinson, 2025

#### References

- Crisp, R. (2009) *d a n s e* [self-published catalogue] Omeo Dance Inc.  
Crisp, R. (2025) [personal correspondence with Phoebe Robinson]  
Ginot, I. (2014). Rosalind Crisp: Dance of the Possible (S. Muecke, Trans.). In E. Brannigan & V. Baxter (Eds.), *Bodies of Thought: Twelve Australian Choreographers*. Kent Town, South Australia Wakefield Press.  
Lindenmayer, D., Zylstra, P., & Taylor, C. (2025, January 19). Can we really fight fire with fire? Why pre-burning is no magic bullet. *The Age*.



DIRt (Dance In Regional disaster zones) timeline

2025

*DIRt Workroom*, R. Crisp & L. Roberts, performance-installation, Orbost Studio for Dance Research

2024

*DIRt (Dance In Regional disaster zones)* R. Crisp performance, La Nuit des Idées, National Gallery of Victoria  
*The real time it takes...* R. Crisp solo show, Orbost Exhibition Centre, Orbost

2023

*The real time it takes...* R. Crisp solo show, Dancehouse Melbourne; *Liveworks*, Performance Space Carriage Works Sydney  
*Dancing over ashes*, R. Crisp interview by Gracia Haby, Fjord Review

2022

*DIRt* R. Crisp symposium, Fragile Earth, Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale  
*DIRt* R. Crisp performance, Solastalgia, Climarte Gallery Melbourne  
*white flesh on alpine ash*, R. Crisp & A. Morrish, video, Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale

2021

*DIRtywork* R. Crisp solo show, Latrobe Regional Gallery, Morwell  
*Cape Conran burnout*, R. Crisp & A. Morrish, video, East Gippsland Art Gallery, Bairnsdale  
*Artery*, L. Roberts & R. Crisp, video, Concerned Artists Resisting Extinction, Orbost Exhibition Centre, Orbost  
*Bowing Mt Delusion*, V. McEwan & R. Crisp, video, Concerned Artists Resisting Extinction, Orbost Exhibition Centre, Orbost;  
Light Moves festival Limerick, Ireland

*Are planned burns keeping us safe?* P. Zylstra, L. Roberts & R. Crisp, forum, Orbost Exhibition Centre, Orbost  
*Stony Creek Collective* R. Crisp & L. Roberts in Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices no. 13, UK

2020

*DIRt*, R. Crisp & L. Roberts, photo exhibition, East Gippsland Art Gallery, Bairnsdale  
*DIRt*, R. Crisp interview by MaCulture, France  
Artist-in-residence, R. Crisp, Orbost Exhibition Centre, Orbost Fellowship, R. Crisp, Regional Arts Victoria

2019

*DIRtywork* R. Crisp solo show, Sydney Opera House  
*DIRtywork* R. Crisp solo show, Dance Massive festival, Dancehouse, Melbourne  
*DIRtywork* R. Crisp solo show, Bath Spa University, Bath Spa, UK.  
Artist-in-residence, R. Crisp, Warnambool Art Gallery/Chunky Move  
Artist-in-residence, R. Crisp, Dance Limerick, Ireland

2018

*DIRt* R. Crisp, V. McEwan & A. Morrish, performance, Artlands festival Bendigo  
*DIRt* R. Crisp, V. McEwan, A. Morrish & P. Fraser, performance, Critical Path, Sydney  
*DIRt* R. Crisp, V. McEwan & A. Morrish, performance, East Gippsland Art Gallery, Bairnsdale  
*DIRt* R. Crisp, V. McEwan & A. Morrish, performance, Mt Delusion

2017

*DIRt* R. Crisp, V. McEwan, A. Morrish & P. Fraser, performance, Marlo Bushland  
*DIRt* R. Crisp, performance, Mt Delusion  
*DIRt* R. Crisp, performance, Critical Path, Sydney  
*DIRt* R. Crisp, A. Morrish, L. Griffin, V. McEwan, P. Fraser, H. Herbertson, performances, Orbost Mechanics Institute, Orbost

28 December 2024  
to  
10 March 2025

# DIRT Workroom

(Dance In Regional disaster zones)  
on Gunai-Kurnai, Bidjil and Manero-Ngarigo land

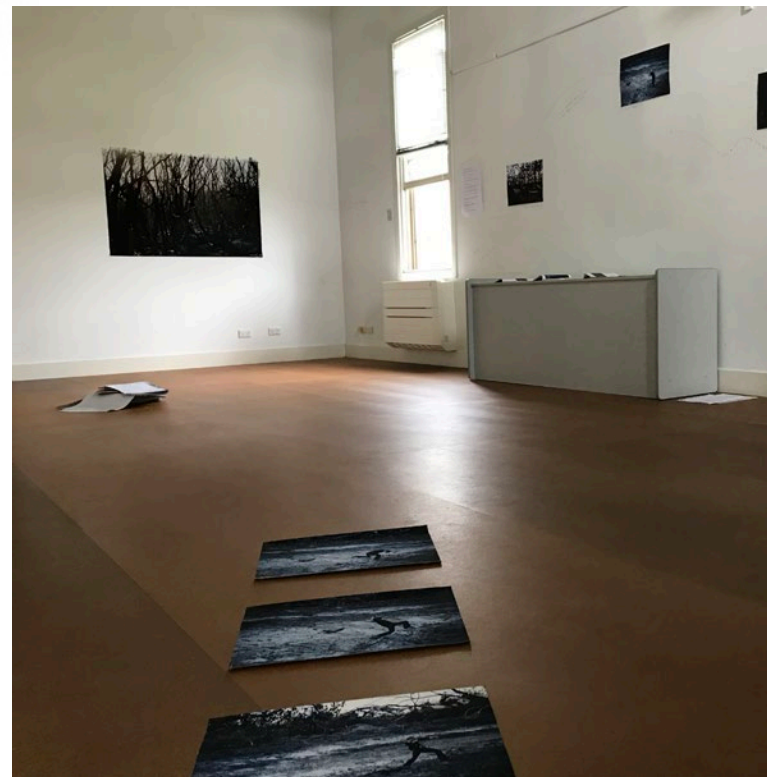
dance Rosalind Crisp  
photos Lisa Roberts 2020 - 2024  
texts Rosalind Crisp 2017 - 2025

editorial text of Snowy River Mail 15 May 1913

contributing artists - Vic McEwan  
- Phoebe Robinson  
- Andrew Morrish  
- Lizzie Thomson  
- Peter Fraser

supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria

[www.omeodance.com/dirt](http://www.omeodance.com/dirt)



Texts Rosalind Crisp, edited by Phoebe Robinson and  
Rosalind Crisp, essay Phoebe Robinson, photography and graphic  
design Lisa Roberts, additional photography Rosalind Crisp,  
photo page 13, Mt. Delusion logging coupe no. 7735010025  
in snow by Andrew Morrish.

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