

Navigating the Urban Jungle

Amy Wiseman talks to Martin del Amo about his new work *It's a Jungle Out There*.

Martin del Amo is one of Sydney's leading independent choreographers and artists. Having worked across a range of art forms including dance, contemporary performance, storytelling and new music, del Amo is widely recognised both in Australia, and internationally for his captivating solo shows.

Del Amo's 2007 solo work *Never Been This Far Away From Home*, tackled themes relating to the connection of body and place; an individual and its environment. This is an on-going interest which del Amo has explored again in his most recent solo work titled *It's a Jungle Out There*. His investigation is this time magnified; rather than focusing on uncharted territories - the unknown vs. home, he has condensed his area of exploration to the modern city. Sprawling and elusive, yet specific and formal, del Amo began his research with an idea of the modern city as an "ever-changing organism" - something very much alive and breathing as an entity. He was interested in how this relates to the body as an organism. Another image which sparked his research was from US author Tom Wolfe, who referred to the city as a "billion-footed beast" - wild, disjointed and unpredictable.

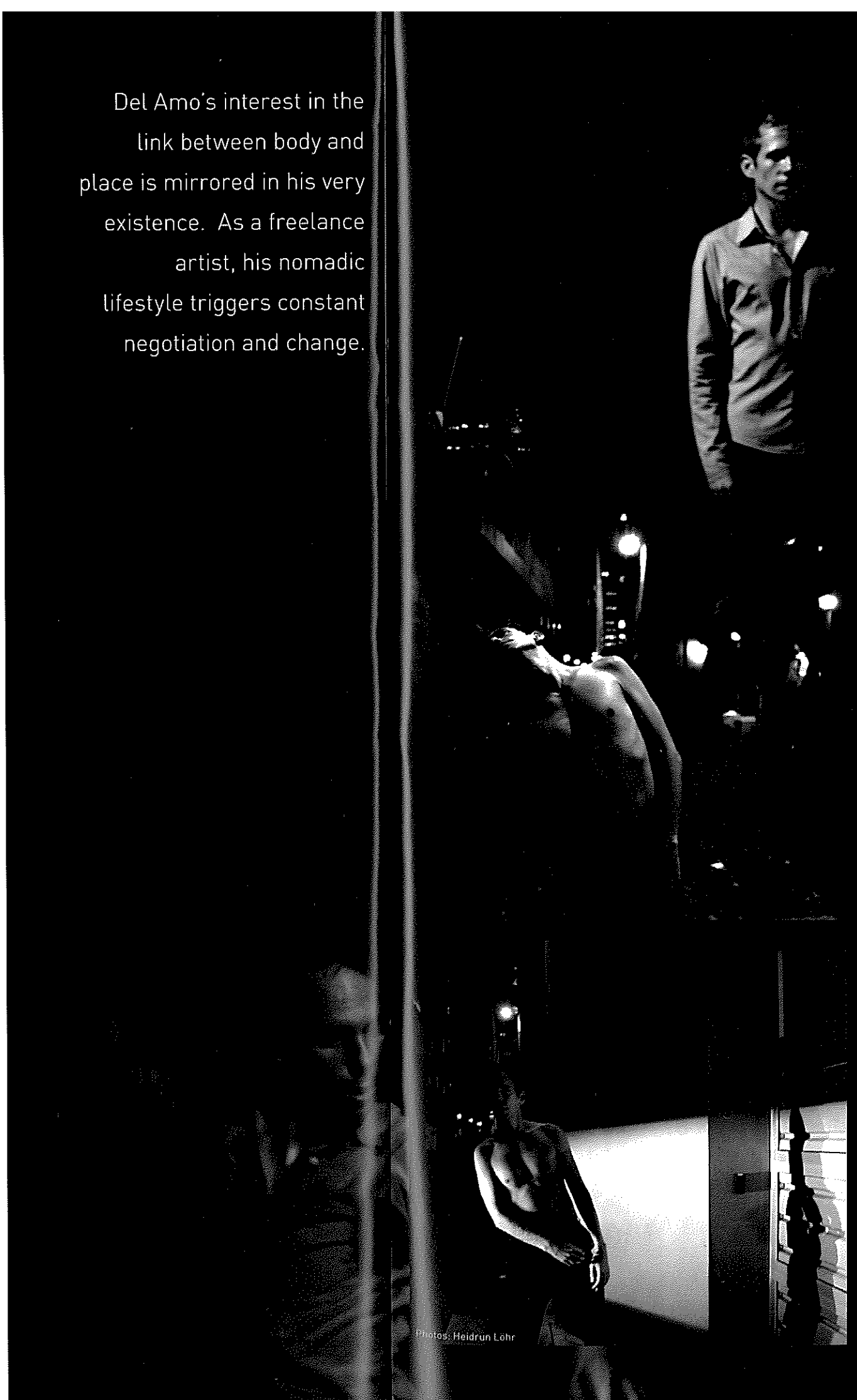
Del Amo's interest in the link between body and place is mirrored in his very existence. As a freelance artist, his nomadic lifestyle triggers constant negotiation and change. Del Amo's life is more-so specifically relevant to his latest work, having lived at least the past two decades moving between large cities. "My personal situation [is one] of having relocated from Berlin to Sydney but also being on tour a lot and being in other cities - you start to question what your relationship to home is," says Del Amo. "What is the unknown - when does the unknown become your home and vice versa? An interest of mine was to question what this creature is, that determines the lives of so many people."

According to del Amo, more than half of the world population now live in cities; a statistic from a current survey. "Before that, it wasn't the case - just recently city-livers have taken over. It's an experience - and the city experience is different for everyone - yet 2.3 billion people have that experience one way or another," he observes.

In order to get an honest sense of this city-dwelling experience, del Amo realised he had to "get amongst it", saying, "This work was not made of a personal impulse, so I needed to look at a slightly different methodology that I would employ. I felt that if I work around notions of the city I have to actually go IN because it is at the core of the investigation - the relationship between the city and the body. I came up with thinking of all these excursions - always about changing one factor - that would change how we usually experience the city, which is mainly through walking. Often these were designed especially to desensitise the body to the urban experience."

One of these excursions involved walking backwards through the city of Sydney, though del Amo insists he always had a minder to take care of him. He is also resolute that it was never about the experiment being a performative intervention, it was more about the experience of changing something as

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small as direction and how your whole experience changes as a result. Other times, he took the same route while skipping, or crawling on all fours for an hour. He even did a couple of blindfolded tests.

Another trial del Amo conducted, to get an extremely compressed sense of the city, was to spend no less than 24 hours in the CBD. "I went to many different places, gaining very different experiences that you usually wouldn't get within 24 hours," explains del Amo. "It became more apparent to me as I went on that it was more about the body coping. It was quite an exhausting thing!" Del Amo gave himself many different impressions; inner suburbia, the "block" - often deemed a slum or dangerous spot, a swish inner city bar for a cocktail, the botanic gardens and many more. To experience many facets of the city that make up the city was the overall aim, though of course in this case the encounter was completely constructed. However there was still a degree of spontaneity within the excursion. "I didn't want to be on a schedule - so it was almost like a structured improvisation," he says. "I was able to change plan but also have quite a clear idea about what I wanted to achieve in those 24 hours, a bit of a through-line."

Del Amo has worked closely with sound artist Gail Priest since 2004, but *It's a Jungle Out There* was the first of their collaborations where Priest had a role in the work's development. Del Amo logged all of his excursions either through the written medium, photos, or sound recordings, and then both would return to the studio to distil these experiences into material. Often applauded on his seamless transitions of text into physical movement, the task of integrating the two in this work was far more arduous for del Amo than previous works. "The research I did which was mainly physical research, had a physical impact that was really so strong and because of this, much more physical material arose," he recalls. "For a long time I didn't have any text - I didn't know what I wanted to do on the text level. It was only later that it made its way in, but [in this work] the ratio between text and movement - there's more movement than text." He continues with a smile, "I thought, 'Oh I'm an aging dancer, I won't do that much movement, I'll tell more stories!' But it was the negotiation of my body with the city - that's when I realised that it needed to be a very strong physical component to the work. Film and novels have managed to talk about the city's appearance really eloquently and in amazing ways so I thought what needs to happen for a dancer/choreographer to put that onstage would not be very productive to try and do something that another medium can do as well, or better. It's got to be the physicality that makes that difference."

Del Amo believes that part of the urban experience is to encounter both the exhilaration of choice, of joy, humour, chaos and fun that comes with dense city-living, as well as the unease of imposing routines, rigidity, franticness and hyper-alertness that we endure on an ongoing basis. These are two aspects we constantly grapple with, yet often they work in harmony - they coexist. And del Amo has succeeded in representing this "ever-changing organism" with the perfect measure of each.