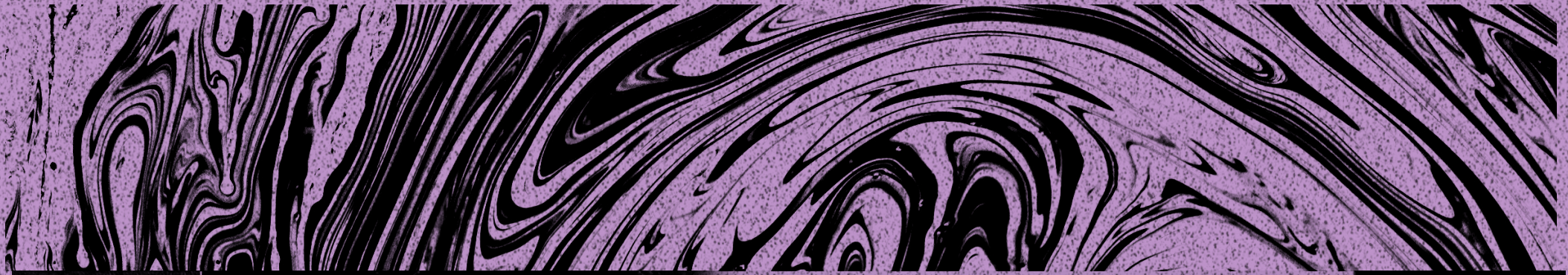


FIELD NOTES



You are you even if you think

by Arabella Frahn–Starkie

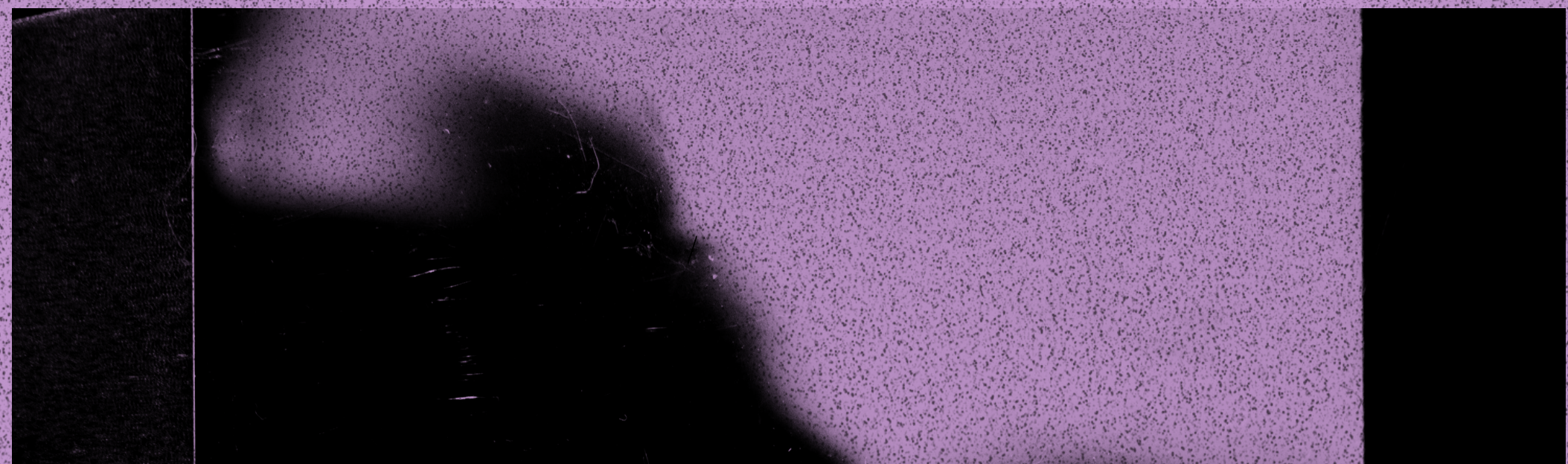
reflecting on

never are

by Emma Riches

Presented as part of Dancehouse

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Field Notes is a Dancehouse initiative that commissions writers, academics, and artists to produce in-depth reflections on works within the Dancehouse program. Moving beyond conventional reviews, these texts aim to extend the life of each performance and contribute to a broader conversation about contemporary dance and choreographic practice.

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Emma Riches, performer, and creator of *never are*, is walking backwards, softly dragging her feet along the ultra-reflective floor as the audience enters the performance space. The room is shrouded in haze, blushing light, and harmonious choral tones. Idle chatter settles in the room as Emma begins to move through a repeated phrase of movement. We are eased into her choreography which repeats at multiple angles and proximities. Emma dances with soft precision, a complex dressage which feels at once ritualistic and mechanical.

I grew up watching television ads campaigning to reduce, reuse, recycle. In the 90s an ad campaign was launched showing a montage of Australia's natural beauty cut with footage of litter, murky drainways, and innocent baby faces, paired with a catchy Australiana jingle urging the population to do the right thing by reducing, reusing, and recycling.



never are (2026), Emma Riches. Photo by Gregory Lorenzutti.

Thinking about this now, nearly thirty years on, I picture myself watching those same ads implanting their mantra into my mind via my television screen, wedged between a limited selection of shows that my friends and I followed faithfully each week. There was an innocence to that pre-internet media diet — constrained, scheduled, and shared.

I find myself wondering what influence our vastly increased media consumption has had on one of the great contradictions of our time; our hunger for stimulation continues to rise, while our attention spans, fatigued and impatient, are steadily worn down.



never are (2026), Emma Riches. Photo by Gregory Lorenzutti.



I'm talking about this because *never are* has caused me to reflect on minimalism. I've always been drawn to dance for its inherent minimalism. The creation of an experience by endlessly arranging and configuring our bodies. In the aftermath of the performance, the detritus of the work is held within our embodied memories.

Minimalism in dance originally emerged in the 60s and 70s, during the postmodernist movement through the work of artists such as Lucinda Childs and Yvonne Rainer, with an emphasis on structural clarity and largely responsive to the theatricality of modernist dance. I think minimalism in dance today emerges, not as a hark back to postmodernist ideals and aesthetics, but in response to a very different set of circumstances at play on our cultural stage. What I saw in Emma's choreography was a desire to engender focus and to do more with less. Innovating through resourcefulness, looking at what is already amongst us to create something anew.

In her first major choreographic work, *never are*, Emma weaves a restrained selection of movements and words together in a patient yet playfully unfolding choreography. We see gestures and phrases repeated, composted, and reordered. Articulating movement pathways in reverse, Emma subverts momentum, stealthily finding muscular power where it really shouldn't be. Her spine unfurls and spirals generously. She meets my eyes with hers, open and warm. Whilst the audience may relax into the kaleidoscope of texture, Emma is dealing in detail, articulating minute differences from one gesture to the next.

Her reflection follows beneath her, a daylight shadow warped and watery. The clean lines of her limbs appear below her as a metallic apparition, bent and mangled. Emma and her collaborators entangle the production elements in a soft symmetry. Light downcast from the lighting rig refracts back up to the ceiling, thickening the space with the feeling of water.



never are (2026), Emma Riches. Photo by Gregory Lorenzutti.

The costume, designed and fabricated by her mother, Sandra Riches, touched by the warm lighting, emits an iridescent sheen. Fitting like a glove, Emma is somehow both fully clothed and next to nude. Sam Read's lighting design takes cues from the glow of her costume, warm sunset hues of pink, lilac, blue, and yellow rise and fall throughout the piece, gently ushering in the mood. Rachel Lewindon's composition is rich and cavernous. Echoed chants pulse left and right, an attention to the spatialisation of the sound that is present throughout the piece. There is a melancholy to the reverberations of her soundscape which is belied by a compelling and steadfast delivery of text, as Emma introduces a repeated and scrambled phrase of words.

Are you *near* even if you are *falling*
Are you *smiling* even if you are *torn*
Are you *standing* even if you are *flat*
Are you *loud* even if you are *sedate*
Are you *running* even if you are *trapped*

Are you *stargazing* even if *the clouds* are *low*
Are you *forgetting* even if *you wrote it down*
Are you *forgotten* even if *you are known*
Are you *gone* even if *you can't let go*

You are you even if you think *there is*
something odd approaching in the distance.

You are you even if you think *it's impossible.*
You are you even if you think *there's*
still so much to do.

You are you even if you think.

ARE YOU EVEN IF YOU ARE

Her intonation constantly shifts my interpretation of the words and movements like a long antimetabole poem of mind and body. I play a game filling in the spaces between her words with my own. The furrow in my brow suggests to me that I have snapped into an intelligence that feels more north of my eyes, and just as I start to debate myself on the difference between sensemaking and feeling, she says:

YOU ARE YOU EVEN IF YOU THINK

This makes me smile.



In the context of today's visual saturation and attention-deficit, temporal experiences like *never are*, created with patience and resourcefulness at the core, feel like the antidote to a cluttered brain. Held by flourishing choreographic texture, pink hues, and choral reverberations, I am entranced. Through simplicity and restraint Emma reveals that there is plenty to see if you have the time to look.



never are (2026), Emma Riches. Photo by Gregory Lorenzutti.

Arabella Frahn-Starkie is a dance artist, researcher and emerging conservator. Over the past seven years her artistic practice has been preoccupied with the documentation and care of dance. Her time is mostly spent considering the preservation/continuation of embodied knowledge.

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