

grounded: A Lens on COVID through Screendance

By Claudia Kappenberg and Fiontán Moran

Abstract

In this article, Claudia Kappenberg (University of Brighton, UK) and Fiontán Moran (Tate Modern, UK) reflect on the curation of a one-off online Screendance festival which they co-devised in summer 2020. Kappenberg had secured financial support from a Covid Recovery Fund set up by the University of Brighton with the aim of initiating regional recovery projects from any academic discipline or field of research. Due to a nationwide lockdown all art institutions along the East Sussex Coast had been closed, which caused an eerie absence in the region of creative critical discourses. Kappenberg invited Fiontán Moran, a visual arts curator with an interest in the body on screen but new to the canon of Screendance, to collaborate with her on the festival. The festival consisted of five programmes, each available online for 24hrs and it concluded with an online conversation. This article takes the form of a dialogue between the two curators. They reflect on the festival's title '*grounded*' and the use of Screendance as a lens with which to explore films from diverse groups of artists and epochs, and propose thinking about movement as a political act.

Introduction

Like much of the United Kingdom, arts communities in the Southeast of the UK were largely paralysed during the lockdown in spring 2020 through the temporary closure of venues in Brighton, Eastbourne, Bexhill, Hastings as well as numerous smaller arts, music and theatre venues along the coast. Many gallery staff were on furlough and online content tended to be provided by larger institutions elsewhere, apart from grassroots activities such as Hasting's Isolation Station broadcast on Facebook. Regional cultural platforms and their conversations were largely absent at a time of intense turmoil, which created a particularly eerie state of things reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan's suggestion that art could be an early warning system.¹ McLuhan borrowed the term from an actual distant early warning line or DEW line, a series of American radar stations that were built across the Arctic region and Alaska in 1957 during the Cold War, and which remained active until 1993. The closure of arts institutions all along the East Sussex Coast and the absence of their habitual signalling felt like an inverse phenomenon and uneasy foreboding. *grounded*² was devised in response to the regional silence as an online film festival that used Screendance as a lens with which to explore relevant films from diverse groups of artists and epochs. The curators, Claudia Kappenberg and Fiontán Moran reflected on the project initially for a special issue of MIRAJ, the London-based Moving

¹ McLuhan, Marshall (2013) *Understanding media: the extensions of man*, New York: Gingko Press, p12.

² Kappenberg, Claudia and Moran, Fiontán (2020) '*grounded*, A Season of Screendance', 28 July – 9 August, <http://coastalcurrents.org.uk/grounded/>. Accessed 28 July 2020.



Image Review & Art Journal³, which was compiled in response to the extraordinary circumstances of the Pandemic. The article is reprinted here with minor amendments.

Claudia Kappenberg: In May 2020, the University of Brighton set up a COVID-19 Research Urgency Fund, inviting proposals for projects designed to support the efforts of local and regional communities and local capacities, be they economic, environmental or else. I saw this as an opportunity to curate an online season of moving image works that would respond to the issues raised by the pandemic, bringing together films of predominantly regional artists and using the funds to pay the artists for the screening. As a crisis that affected our embodied selves, our mobility and relations in unprecedented ways, this was also an opportunity to test and expand the parameters of the field of Screendance. As an art form that bridges the gap between our embodied lives and digital technologies, Screendance appeared to be ideally placed to engage with individual and collective experience during lockdown.

Historically, Screendance has been disseminated above all through dedicated festivals and screened to dedicated audiences, more often than not to audiences interested in dance, expecting to see work about dance. While this audience is in itself a varied and global constituency, there is potentially a wider relevance for the practice given the current interest in the relation between physical and digital space, physical and digital bodies and physical and virtual experience. In order to explore this wider remit I was interested in co-curating the season with someone from a different field of curatorial practice, and I invited Fiontán Moran, curator at Tate Modern in London and on furlough at the time, to work with me. *Coastal Currents*, a cultural organization in Hastings which normally focuses its activities on an annual arts festival in the autumn, agreed to host the project on its website.

Reflecting on both the condition of confinement and the unavoidable immersion of oneself in one's locality, the season was entitled *grounded* and proposed a way of thinking about movement as a political act, using an expanded notion of Screendance both as a practice and as a lens with which to revisit other moving image work. The season considered the variety of ways artists use movement in video and film to explore the relationship of the body to society, of confinement to imagination, and health to politics.

Fiontán Moran: As many have remarked, the pandemic and resulting lockdown provided much-needed space and time to reflect on the role of art in times of crisis and drew attention to the limits and possibilities of showing work online. Claudia's invitation provided me with an opportunity to explore my longstanding interest in the relationship of dance to film and video, and to foreground the work of London-based artists whose work I have found useful in thinking through these concerns. I was interested in how the

³ Reynolds, Lucy and Mazière, Michael, *Moving Image Review & Art Journal*, Intellect LTD, Volume (9): Issue (2). < <https://www.intellectbooks.com/miraj-the-moving-image-review-art-journal> > https://doi.org/10.1386/miraj_00031_2

genre of Screendance might function at a time of stasis, and how essential movement is to both the body and to building a sense of community.

As most of my professional experience has involved the creation of temporary exhibitions within gallery environments, *grounded* was an opportunity to think more concretely about curated screenings of time-based media work and the possibilities and limitations of the online environment.

An important part of this investigation involved me thinking through Claudia's decision to title the programme *grounded* and what possibilities might emerge from that word, which led me to Grounded Theory. As a form of qualitative analysis most commonly used in the social sciences, Grounded Theory prioritizes a mode of research that does not begin with a set aim or thesis but is grounded in observation and analysis and allows thematics to organically emerge, which seemed to reflect the process Claudia and I followed. Working in collaboration, we selected artists by compiling and sharing lists of works and then finding affinities between works to form the screenings. However, it was also important that there be crossovers between screenings so as to resist any defined curatorial statement, which stood in contrast to what many curated projects aim to do. Rather than attempt to make sense of the current moment by constructing grand narratives with defined conclusions we sought to create a space where different affinities could be found between the artists' works.

CK: From this position Fiontán and I set out to devise five screening programmes, which would be streamed on the *Coastal Currents* website over two weeks. Each screening would be accessible online for 24 hours so as to retain the feeling of an event, whilst allowing for some flexibility and access across time zones. The main parameters for the selection of artists and projects were the pandemic, the sense that this crisis highlighted the vulnerabilities of individuals and communities, that it put into question much of our assumed ways of being, and also that the suspension of normality might just provide a chance for profound change. Related concerns became more significant in light of the mass protests in the wake of the death of George Floyd and the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement. Subsequently, a number of works that explored the representation of Black bodies in history and the media took on renewed relevance.

FM: *grounded* provided an opportunity to return to works that we have seen over the past few years, and in some cases further back, that seemed to reflect many of the experiences created by the lockdown. Developing the screenings at a time of ecological, biological, political and social crises, we hoped that the season could ask how a new social fabric can be developed at this time, how we traverse boundaries and dissolve conventions, how we nurture newness and mourn what we have lost, how we remember and how we forget, how we explore what it means to be human.

One of our concerns was the way in which boundaries or physical space is constructed, how bodies move within and traverse them, and the intimacies that are played out in public. These ideas formed the basis of our launch screening 'interior worlds/exterior lives'. In Harriet Middleton Baker's video *The War Room: An Opera!* (2018) corporate

aesthetics served as a way to think around the performance of power at a time when institutions and governments were being called to account.

In contrast, other works presented an expanded experience of subjectivity that used formal concerns of the split screen, abstraction and animation to disrupt traditional modes of seeing. Ursula Mayer permitted us to show her 16-mm film double projection *CINESEXUAL* (2014) as a split-screen video presentation for the first time that created a new relationship between the content of the work and the space of the digital screen. In Adham Faramawy's *Skin Flick* (2019) they play on the performances for camera that are associated with vlog confessionals, makeup tutorials, and advertising imagery, to present a personal and fantastical exploration of how our skins relate to ecology, pharmaceuticals and the screen. Jordan Baseman's *gendersick* (2019) uses abstract visuals to illustrate a monologue that explores what it means to be in-bodied, and the expectations that come with essentialized notions of gender identity.

This programme closed with Paul Maheke's beautiful silent video *Tropicalité, l'île et l'exote* (2014) where he adopts imagery of the artificial island of Vassivière, alongside brief moments of his dancing, to form an analogy between the body and land as sites of colonization but also resistance.

CK: The season's concern with the interplay between subjectivity and the wider social fabric was signalled also by the very first film of the programme, Ben Rivers' *The Coming Race* (2006), an ominous scrambling of people up a mountain side, shot in black and white 16mm film. The film is almost abstract in its visual and sonic elements, but visceral at the same time, with the pedestrian activity of scrambling functioning as a metaphor that echoes the current sense of crisis and uncertainty. The second programme 'socialised' further explored the notion of the individual in context and focused specifically on the conscious and unconscious movements that affect how we shape and form our place within society.

FM: It was important that our second screening, titled 'socialised', include references to modes of address that are associated with institutions. This was perfectly conveyed through Rosa-Johan Uddoh's *Performing Whiteness* (2019), where she takes on the role of a newsreader, accompanied by back-up singers, to impart poetic reflections on the state of UK politics and the culture sector with comedic effect. Performed in various parts of Tate Modern and produced by the collective East London Cable, the three videos uncannily reflected upon how information is communicated through carefully stage-managed institutions and organizations to convey an air of authority.

Forms of reportage or transmission served as the basis for a number of works, all of which foregrounded certain conventions of behaviour and movement that form meaning when enacted collectively. In Gray Wielebinski's *Honey Doesn't Go Bad On Its Own* (2018) they compiled countless clips depicting intimate and emotional moments between baseball players on-and-off the field that are contrasted with countless scenes of the tradition of throwing buckets of ice-cold water over team members. While Onyeka Igwe's *Sitting On A Man* (2018) and Evan Ifekoya's *She Was A Full Bodied Speaker*

(2016) each reanimated different types of archives in order to reflect upon and form new histories.

CK: At a Frieze roundtable discussion entitled *Dance during the Pandemic*, intimacy came up as a topic and Aruna D'Souza noted that culturally we barely differentiate between touch and intimacy.⁴ One might argue that this is changing rapidly with the recent requirements for physical social distancing on the one hand and increasing virtual interactions on the other. In the absence of physical touch, we rely more on the screen's capacity to provide multisensorial, embodied viewing experiences, a kind of haptic visuality⁵ that can engage with intimacy in many ways, and various strands in *grounded* explored this territory.

A number of works in the programme 'taking/care' placed the viewer into an intimate proximity to pain and loss. The programme started with Yvonne Rainer's *Hand Movie* (1966), one of the films in the season that signals a longer history of relevant cinematic approaches. *Hand Movie* was shot on 16mm by dancer William Davis while Rainer was in the hospital recovering from a big operation, showing the small, mundane movements of one of Rainer's hands against a grey background in a meditative, quietly defiant and intimate dance.

In Florence Peake's *The Keeners* (2015), viewers witness in close-up a group of mourning women in a public park who enact the Irish and Celtic tradition of keening – ritualized crying performed by professional mourners. The sound in this video is deliberately withheld, but the implied sound appears to resonate even more forcefully. *The Keeners* is followed by a persistent close-up on Phoebe Collings-James' shaking head and open mouth in *Mother Tongue, Mother Master* (2018), which is accompanied by an incessant ringing of bells that are strapped to her head. A slow and solitary dancing in Fenia Kotsopoulou's *This Dance Has No End* (2018)⁶ shows a hybrid male and female figure immersed in dark space and silence, accompanied only by sparse sounds that seem to emanate from the filming camera and which add to the sense of proximity, of something analogue and real.

FM: Developing out of works of mourning such as Florence Peake's *The Keeners* (2015), water became an important motif as a metaphor for renewal and transformation. In Zoë Marden's *little lo ting* (2017) she contrasts underwater footage with brief glimpses of the cityscape of Hong Kong and her own body to narrate the story of the ancient myth of the Lo Ting, a mer-creature of the indigenous inhabitants of Hong Kong, and who stands as a symbol of dissolving boundaries.

⁴ Aruna D'Souza (2020), 'Dance during the pandemic: A roundtable conversation', *Frieze*, 213, 4 September, <https://www.frieze.com/article/dance-during-pandemic-roundtable-conversation>. Accessed 16 December 2020.

⁵ Laura U. Marks (2000), *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham: Duke University Press.

⁶ Fenia Kotsopoulou (dir., chor.) (2018), '*This Dance Has No End*', Accessed 19 December 2020 < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOY6uyRZ0fw> >

While in *water bb* (2019) by HRH and Gray Wielebinski, a static camera with minimal editing showed a group of participants in outfits also designed by HRH performing a series of mysterious movements in a swimming pool. Showcasing the relationship between teacher and student, questions of trust and care, *water bb* sought to find a way to think about the therapeutic possibilities of movement in times of crisis.

Intimacy was also an important element of the other screenings. In Holly Blakey's *Some Greater Class* (2015), which was shown as part of the 'interior worlds/exterior lives' programme, she depicts dancers performing the kinds of routines common in popular music videos or in nightclubs but pushes them to a place that foregrounds the vulnerability and exhaustion of the body. As a choreographer and filmmaker who has made a number of music videos, Blakey's work reframed how we view conventions of dance at a time when it was gaining increased visibility in the art world.

More sensual forms of intimacy were foregrounded in *Fantasy Series EP01* (2018–19) by Florence Peake and Eve Stainton, which was shown as part of 'socialised'. Originally live-streamed by the East London Cable collective in a domestic interior, the video used green screen technology to transform the floor with a close-up of slug-like creatures. As they rolled around and placed their bodies in erotic poses, often in extreme close-up, Stainton and Peake formed an analogy between the space of the screen and the intimate space created between bodies, which was emphasized by the series of sexual fantasies that they whispered to each other in an ASMR style. At a time when the screen has become a locus of intimacy, *Fantasy Series* was a reminder of the need for sensory experience to form meaningful connections.

CK: The fourth programme began with *Play* (1970) by Sally Potter, also a film that is part of choreographic traditions in cinema. *Play* is a double screen film of six children – three sets of twins – playing on the street, filmed from above and through two adjacent cameras. The key device here is the doubling of elements, children and screens, with each screen offering slightly different versions of the same scene in a way that troubles and confuses the audience's vision, thereby challenging the notion that vision gives us access to truth. The two frames almost correspond, but not quite. Filmmaker Maya Deren wrote, in *Divine Horsemen*, that in Haitian Vodou the understanding of the relation between segments is different to ours, that it avoids competitive, dualist constructions. In Vodou, Deren noted, one and one add up to three, taking into account the 'and' as a further constitutive and meaningful element.⁷ This concept tallied with the films in the fourth programme and inspired the title '1+ 1 = 3 / narratives', which considered more closely the ways in which our bodies try to make sense of stories and experience.

Two films in this programme were made during lockdown: Andrew Köttings's *Because the Rest is Silence* (2020) and David Blandy's *How To Fly* (2020). Based in Hastings, Kötting turned to his own archive and films of local and coastal landscapes to devise a deeply subjective, and in Köttings' lexicon, hauntological account inflected by his lockdown experience. Based in Brighton, Blandy's *How to Fly*, by contrast, used the

⁷ Maya Deren (1983), *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, New York: McPherson & Company.

format of a YouTube tutorial and appropriated the tools of a games engine to fly a cormorant across digital landscapes in a meditation on life as essentially mobility, adaptability and presence. These latter approaches are also indicative of a sense of resilience that emerged from the films of this programme, including Oona Doherty *Concrete Song* (2017) and Becky Edmund's *Stand In* (2009). In the latter, a single man merely stands in the frame as a still figure but asserts the inevitability of the relation between us and the world. *Concrete Song* meanwhile played out in urban Belfast and portrayed a combination of energy, passion and determination that shouted out to artists everywhere in lockdown.

FM: Harold Offeh's *Smile* (2001) offered an important way to think about Screendance and storytelling through a video work that included no editing and only featured the artist's face in extreme close-up. The narrative was conveyed solely through Nat King Cole's rendition of the song *Smile*, during which Offeh attempts to keep his face muscles in the said position. While the original video lasts for over thirty minutes, in the 3min edit that we presented you can already see the difficulty Offeh has in holding the pose. It transforms a song that proposes smiling as a way to deal with upset as a deeply labour intensive experience that does not suggest any outcome of happiness but instead places the figure in an ambivalent position. As a former University of Brighton student, Offeh's work also formed a connection to the origins of the programme.

CK: Evan Ifekoya's film *Contoured Thoughts* (2019) seemed to encapsulate what many artists in this programme share, a need for language in a quest for meaning and possibility. A figure is submerged in water and surrounded by hills, drawing attention to both the materiality of body and site, as well as to the image, facilitating a process of quiet contemplation.

The season concluded with a fifth, meditative programme and the premiere of Graeme Miller's *Wild Car* (2020), which was shot on a camera-phone, that entity that has dictated so much of life over the past few months. Mounted on an improvised rail vehicle and steadily moving forward, the film follows the narrow-gauge tracks of Europe. Created in response to Brexit and edited in lockdown in rural East Sussex, the film travelled across distances and landscapes in a way that underscored the current confinement and mourned the Brexit yet to come.

Overall, the season mirrored difficult circumstances. The open curatorial premise allowed us however to respond to the moment, and to discover connections without concern for categorizations of artistic practices or differences in aesthetic modes. It allowed us to repurpose older films and to bring them into dialogue with contemporary projects and current concerns, building programmes which themselves repurpose movements and images of the everyday to investigate both communality and specificity of experience during the pandemic. What emerges is perhaps a heightened attention to the values we embody as people and as a society, such as care and attention, difference and solidarity.

FM: Reflecting on the programme as a whole, *grounded* seems to have proposed alternate ways through which to view Screendance, and to think through the importance of community. With a number of the works being co-authored, or produced by the same

collective, or featuring the contributions of their friends and colleagues, I was reminded of the way artists have self-organized over the last few months to create new platforms for sharing work and have formed closer bonds with their peers. The variety of artists and types of work in the programme also drew attention to the necessity of thinking about the ground we each inhabit and the way that movement, either choreographically or cinematically, can help to form new modes of connection and communication.

References

Deren, Maya (1983) *Divine Horsemen, The Living Gods of Haiti*, New York: McPherson & Company.

D'Souza, Aruna (2020) *Dance during the Pandemic, A Roundtable Conversation*, frieze, Issue 213, 04 Sep 20. <https://www.frieze.com/article/dance-during-pandemic-roundtable-conversation>. Accessed 16 Dec 2020.

Marks, Laura U. (2000) *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822381372>

McLuhan, Marshall (2013) *Understanding media: the extensions of man*, New York: Gingko Press.

Reynolds, Lucy and Mazière, Michael (2021) *Moving Image Review & Art Journal*: Intellect LTD.

Treasures of GSA Library (2013), 'Marshall McLuhan's DEW-Line Newsletter', 1968-1970, <https://gsalibrarytreasures.wordpress.com/2013/10/16/marshall-mcluhans-dew-line-newsletter/>. Accessed 15 Dec 2020.