

# **A Democratization of Screendance Curation: The Value of Curating as a Group Versus an Autonomous Curatorial Approach**

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## **Abstract**

This essay offers reflective insights into the creation and presentation of a student-led screendance festival, developed within the unique context of the world's only MA in Screendance. Written by alumni Jo Cork and Luisa Lazzaro, with an introduction by module leader Gitta Wigro, the piece explores the collaborative process that underpinned both the festival and the writing itself. Jo Cork is a screendance maker and unit leader for the MA Screendance at London Contemporary Dance School and Luisa Lazzaro is a screendance maker, intimacy coordinator and board member of The International Journal of Screendance. Gitta Wigro is an internationally renowned screendance programmer and has been speaker and jury member at numerous festivals. Initially focusing on programming and curating respectively, Cork and Lazzaro refined the structure of the essay through shared authorship and continuous dialogue with Wigro. The narrative became a collective one, echoing the festival's ethos of group-led creative production. Drawing on conversations with fellow cohort members, the authors reconstruct the festival's evolution, offering a layered reflection on practice-based learning, memory, and community within a postgraduate arts education context.

Perspectives on presenting a student-led screendance festival in the context of the only MA screendance course in the world, presented by two of the alumni of the course.

Reflections on the complexities encountered in defining and refining curatorial aims within different autonomous voices, and the active co-construction of a collaborative leadership approach.

## **Introduction: the festival and its context**

### **Frame Rush 2019 program**

Frame Rush 2019 took place in the Founder's Studio at The Place, London, on 13 and 14 March 2019. The program comprised five screenings: three international programs drawn from an international open call, and two curated programs, one focusing on urban dance on screen and one on historical dance films.<sup>1</sup> The festival opened with a talk by Dr. Claudia Kappenberg, and each screening was accompanied by a Q&A with participating filmmakers. In total, Frame Rush 2019 presented 37 films.

### **Context**

Frame Rush is an annual event, created by the students of the MA Screendance<sup>2</sup> as part of their coursework. This article discusses its first ever edition, presented in 2019.

The MA is run by London Contemporary Dance School (LCDS), a conservatoire for dance. LCDS is part of The Place in central London, which also houses a 300-seat theater with a year-round dance program, public classes and other events and activities. The MA Screendance, while not the *first* postgraduate course in dance film,<sup>3</sup> is currently the only one.



The course focuses on developing the students' filmmaking practice. As such, the purpose of this module (with the rather prosaic name "Presenting Screendance Work" or PSW) is not to create programmers or curators; it is on broadening the students' perspectives and critical reflection of the field(s) they will work in on graduation, as well as a space to develop skills and take creative risks in a supportive environment. Seeking out, viewing and selecting work by other artists invites students to reflect critically on their practices and preferences, and encounter some of the dynamics present in the sector.

Stepping into the role of festival organizer, the students encounter a number of emergent questions to confront and resolve for themselves: Why do events and festivals tend to operate in certain ways? How do we use the resources available to us? How does that reflect our values and intentions? What is my/our relationship to being a gatekeeper? What alternative methods do we want to explore, and what do they produce? What relationships does the event have with artists, its venue, audience and the field? How does the nature of festivals shape the field? And, of course, how does this inform my own practice as a screendance maker?

These questions and others are addressed in weekly seminars as well as in the students' own work and discussions.

Concurrently, the students work on two other modules, one on screendance making, and one delving into current debates and histories relating to screendance; these three areas interweave as the students apply material across these areas of creative practice.

### **The assignment / the givens**

The module has two assessments: (1) to contribute to the production of a dance film festival, and (2) to reflect on their contribution and the event after the festival is completed.<sup>4</sup> They are not assessed on the 'success' of the event as such: rather on the way that they approach the project and their subsequent self-assessment of their learning. This is to maintain a learning environment that is focused on exploration and experimentation.

There are certain givens that the students have to navigate as they devise their edition of Frame Rush: the event takes place in one of the spaces at The Place (or through its digital platform), a space recognised internationally as a *live* dance venue; the date is determined by the school; tickets are sold via The Place's box office, and it is advertised via its channels (as well as the festivals own channels, run by the students).

The assignment requires the students to formulate an open call and select one program of films from this open call. Subsequent editions have also been asked to present a selection of work from the previous MA Screendance cohort, though of course that did not apply to the first year. Otherwise the students are free to design the event content and schedule according to their interests.

### **Brief description of the process**

The [2018-19 cohort](#) consisted of 9 students: Corinna Abela, Emily Romain, Jo Cork, Luisa Lazzaro, Omari Carter, Vilma Tihilä, Eloise Mavronicholas, Kitty Voget, and Maria Kapala.

The group was asked to decide on the content of the festival collectively (unless they chose to cede or delegate decisions to particular members) - effectively creating a festival with nine artistic co-directors. Each also led on a specific area, such as artist liaison, technical production, finance, marketing, and stepped in across areas to support each other and explore other areas of

interest. They were supported by the module leader and a producer who offered guidance, knowledge and provocations. They receive between £1,800 - £2,000 to cover direct costs, and ca. £8,000 worth of in-kind technical, marketing and production support from LCDS/The Place.

The students met in September 2018, and began to define their common interests and aims for the festival. They devised a call for submissions which ran from 5 November 2018 to 7 January 2019 and received 833 eligible submissions.<sup>5</sup> The students watched the films, with each seen by at least three people, over the course of two months.

The joint programming process took place over several days in January, and yielded three international programs. Luisa Lazzaro and Omari Carter also curated a themed screening each.

### **Wider context**

The wider context to acknowledge includes Brexit, a significant and ongoing rupture, which created significant political strain in the UK on personal, regional and national levels. The covid-19 pandemic hadn't begun yet. While the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, triggered by the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, were still in the future, the student cohort brought experience and understanding of structural inequalities and lack of global majority and disability representation into its process from the beginning.

On a local and artform level, this year of Frame Rush also coincided with the inaugural edition of the London International Screen Dance Festival, created by choreographer Charles Linehan at Trinity Laban<sup>6</sup> in south London, in September 2019, six months after Frame Rush. To avoid unintentional overlap, the two events liaised during the selection process.

### **A Democratic Environment**

The context of the MA is important in that not only was it a peer environment, bringing together a group of people with different intentions and backgrounds (a product perhaps, of the recruitment remit for a Master of the Arts course with a small intake). The situation engendered, and even demanded, a working etiquette of openness, listening, mutual respect and equal power. This environment was welcomed and carried wholly by all on the course - again - likely due to the context of the MA and a group whose personal agendas sought opportunities to learn, broaden one's view, and adopt an exploratory approach in efforts to optimize educational gain from the course.

### **Collaborative Practice**

The openness and listening of the group, as we will discuss, reflects some of the thinking behind The Weave,"a methodology of interauthorship "<sup>7</sup> developed by interactive design collective, body>data>space in the 1980s and 90s. "The Weave enables the participants to envision the process and progression of a project... forming a plait that retains the visible identity of each contributor".<sup>8</sup> The ideas of body>data>space were present in the development of the whole festival, as well as within the programming and curating processes; each of the nine voices manifested not only in our contributions to selecting films, but also in small but meaningful details, like local business flyers in goody bags, the wording of signage, the content of pre-screening talks, the focus of Q&As, as well as the larger structural details like screening timings, the screen size for hiring and so much more. There was coordination and weaving in of all the different inputs, each intent tended to in some way. Perhaps imperfectly, in an ideal sense, to the

individual whose intent was being answered - but nonetheless, each individual retained a voice of decision making in what the festival as a whole became.

## **The Group Programming Process**

### **The Intentions of the Programming Team and The Wider Impact on the Artform**

As a preface to this section and in recognition of the experience from the perspective of the cohort, the essay moves from objective analysis to direct, first-person reflection necessary to better articulate the nuances of the project's development.

In order to make decisions, one needs a purpose, or at least parameters on which to base choices. In programming Frame Rush 2019, the team felt bound to two commitments. 1) The commitment to meet the needs and interests of the group as a whole. As a group of students on an MA program, each member of the team had the same right and expectation to learn and follow their curiosity. 2) The obligation - or artistic duty - to listen to new propositions and radical ideas from the team and the wider field, and to advocate for progressive work. The team's process had to serve both commitments - the internal (i.e. the programmer's) intentions, and the impact on the artform.

The first commitment manifests the voices working on the festival. The second - the artform focus or impact - is more broadly about progression within the arts to further the medium, or how it can be presented to audiences; the desire to delve ever more deeply into our practices and works in order to understand what it is we have done, why we may have done it that way, and what that opens doors to - or closes doors on. It's about remaining open to new ideas and reflective of older ones in pursuit of furthering the field.

A common team structure of festivals has a director, or lead creative. Others working on the event, though contributing deeply, are likely to have less decision making power in the overall identity of the festival. In those cases, the internal focus is likely to be seeded in the established values of the organizations, funders or independent artists who facilitate the realization of the event. It may be to do with work from marginalized artists, local artists, or young artists, for example; or to do with work tackling political issues, regional needs, ideas about the body, or any number of thematic markers. Of course it is likely to be several overlapping and interacting ideals that any team will navigate. For Frame Rush 2019, the internal intentions had yet to be formed, and would be formed in its particular context. Most of us didn't know each other, having met less than a week before planning got underway. We came together as students and peers; no hierarchy, each with our own goals, aspirations and interests, all of which were respected by our fellow students, even when their own differed.

In our initial conversations and research, we discussed the identity of the festival. As a group of largely liberal artists, the creation of safe space for audiences felt important, where people in all their diversities could safely enjoy the events and feel welcome and indeed integral in the community created. Drawing on Cara Hagan's vast data collection on submissions to the Movies by Movers festival and her findings,<sup>9</sup> we discussed ideas about representation of filmmakers, performers on screen and audiences, and established them as an important consideration.<sup>10</sup> The group also shared a deep care for accessibility and inclusivity alongside a concern for diversity of genre, and for presenting female voices. The implementation of said values was deliberately left to our will as part of the educational structure. Without a single decision-making voice, our internal agenda was necessarily broad and was, in function, democratic.

From the open call, the team created three international shorts programs for Frame Rush 2019. The selection focussed on goals and enquiries one might also see at other screendance festivals - goals on which nine disparate students yet to become familiar with one another could confidently align. These were: the raising of screendance's profile; the progression of the artform; and artists' bold use of the art form to express radical ideas or ask provocative questions. We all shared the desire to engage with the wider field, and create something that was impactful in the screendance community. We wanted to showcase screendance's potential for new audiences to fall in love with, and to manifest before us a coherent moment which embodied our collective understanding of the field we were studying. The team focussed on the proposition: What is screendance? What is not screendance?<sup>11</sup> This enquiry alongside all other aspects of our internal agenda became our impetus from which to build the festival.

### **The Team's Approach to Programming**

The difference between curating screenings and programming might be seen as the difference between seeking out works versus selecting works from a pool of submissions. In *Inscribing the Ephemeral Image*, Douglas Rosenberg unpacks the difference between programming and curation. He describes curation as 'not simply about choosing... "The curator assumes responsibility for the gestalt of the exhibition that itself further iterates a particular point of view by using works of art as texts, which by implication or inference create collective meanings."<sup>12</sup> The indication here might be that less compositional thinking might take place in a programming process - that 'simple choices' are made. Cara Hagan describes her experiences of developing the first Movies by Movers screendance festival in 2010 in her book, *Screendance From Film to Festival* (2022) and suggests on reflection of having screened a, "Handful of movies brought together by happenstance,"<sup>13</sup> that "Curation, programming, and producing are separate but inextricable activities that each require their own attention, while simultaneously maintaining awareness of all facets to create the scaffolding necessary to craft a successful event."<sup>14</sup> Hagan draws attention to the "felt experience of a festival, informed most saliently by the works included in any specific event"<sup>15</sup> and acknowledges that through these frameworks, "Many of the field's most recognized actors articulate for us their respective philosophies... and their intrinsic morals and values."<sup>16</sup> A curator will have a defined motivation in seeking works, but as we have discussed, so too does a programmer in selecting works - both processes may answer and work to an agenda, or set of agendas.

Rosenberg does not regard that a well-programmed showcase can also provoke discussion and excavation of genres, just as curated screenings might, however, putting a program together thoughtfully is much less about picking the nicest films that come in, and much more about listening to the submitting artists' voices and creating space, and a structure through which those meaningful voices can be heard. This does, as Rosenberg suggests, create a "kind of showcase",<sup>17</sup> however not one lacking in coherence. A programmed screening can draw out meanings and connections between its films, and create a dialogue between the individual works and the form as a whole. Films are chosen precisely because of their impact amidst or next to other films - the intertextuality and interdisciplinary that Rosenberg refers to in relation to curation may also be tended to within a programming process.

While it is to some extent true that programming "follows an entertainment model and therefore has an agenda that is colored by audience expectations" (p.129. 2012.), what is not accounted for is the programmers' prerogative and empowerment to subvert, question and reshape audience expectations through thoughtful programming, or as Hagan remarks in relation to selecting work

from 50 submissions for the third edition of Movies by Movers in 2012, through selection processes we can “shape the experience of the work intentionally.”<sup>18</sup> In this way, programming, just as curation, can rely “on a set of strategies that are intended to speak back to the form very directly, and in many cases... attempts to move the form in a particular direction.”<sup>19</sup> Rather than seeking out, programming is about listening in to the films before you, hearing the voices and agendas of submitting artists and responding to them, allowing the films themselves to inform and generate ideas of relation between them.

## **Implementing a Democratic Process in Programming**

### **Facilitation of Open Debate**

The team watched 833 films in total, each film viewed by a minimum of three people. After voting for favored films in a shared document, the team split into two groups, which met on consecutive days. Each individual came to their meeting with detailed notes for discussion. Vilma Tihilä facilitated both sessions and nurtured the same rigorous and open discussion about the films and programs in both meetings. Vilma brought the discussions from the first meeting into the second, distinguishing between expressing her own views and relaying discussions of the first group. After this accumulation of perspectives, Vilma and a representative from each meeting met and developed a final line up to take back to the group.

The in-depth programming discussions included the following considerations:

- Films that we all agreed on versus what sparked debate
- Different definitions of screendance within the team
- Representation of diverse bodies on and off screen
- Accommodating and challenging audiences’ expectations
- The established and potential new audiences we could draw in
- Aspects of care - the deftness and level of informedness of filmmakers in tackling highly sensitive or potentially triggering material
- The curated programs, and how the international screenings would relate to them - both chronologically in a single day of the festival, and broadly over the whole event
- The possibility of educating new audiences about the form
- The relevance of films in relation to current political and cultural events.

Using post-its and a large table, each group sifted through the recommended films, compiling them in somewhat fluid categories: clear favorites for inclusion, and those that some felt very strongly about but whose place in the festival was contingent on their context within a screening.

Early on, Omari Carter articulated the pull between ‘popular’ films and those that provoked discussion: “Are the [films] that are most voted for the ones that need to be given priority?... The ones that we’re arguing about ... will spark up an interesting discourse”.<sup>20</sup> Luisa Lazzaro pointed out that the voting process showed that even within the group itself there were “different views as to What is Screendance?”<sup>21</sup> Emily Romain and Vilma Tihilä discussed how to offer work that might not be conventionally understood as screendance (e.g. a film not featuring dancing bodies, or one creating choreography in the edit) to an audience; taking into account the festival location: The Place is a well-known dance venue.<sup>22</sup>



Conversations were not a linear process of proposition, analysis, judgment and conclusion, but rather rebounded around all corners of the room numerous times - with many up in the air at any one moment. Facilitated by Vilma, we interrogated each other's thinking from multiple perspectives - each of us genuinely open to being persuaded away from our initial views. This rigorous questioning was a vehicle for progressive discussion and meant that an individual's perspective was never delegitimized or dismissed by another's retort. Rather, we gave alternative views and excavated individual perspectives; a process through which voices were accounted for and accumulated into the end product. Gradually, each rebounding proposition settled into a conclusion that lay in relation to all other evolving decisions. The countless conversations, critical response and reflections about the films evolved and honed the festival identity. The conclusions and considerations, much more than the number of votes, became the deciding factor for choosing or rejecting films.

Relationships drawn between the films gave rise to intertextual observations: 'We have two animations there'; 'these three are all very other-worldly', 'Nothing else we have is doing something like that'. We acknowledged that the most 'popular' films weren't shoo-ins: creating meaning through selection and placement asked different questions of us and the films. We tested and debated hypothetical running orders, and gradually, each group arrived at two draft screenings: two vertical lines of post-it notes, surrounded by a cloud of other floating films.

While we had considered a screening focusing on work about queer culture or made by artists identifying as queer; having sifted through all of the submissions, the team decided not to theme the third screening. Corinna Abela, Luisa and Vilma met to re-consider the drafts and their surrounding clouds of possibilities. Drawing on all the considerations from the initial selection meetings, the three reconfigured the two draft screenings, re-shaping them into three well-balanced programs. Vilma's presence, mediating and acting as an advocate for both groups alongside a representative from each group, was crucial in maintaining the democratic structure. We shared a trust in the three's dedication to representing the entire group's views.

The joint programming process of decision-making took place intensively over 3-4 days, and while consuming, the immersion in the process allowed for visibility, accumulation, configuration and interweaving of the many perspectives of the entire team. Our approach allowed us to arrive at a consensus without narrowing the content to a single perspective, nor diluting it to bland, inoffensive consensus. We engaged in an intellectual rigor that allowed us, on an individual level, to concede: 'I don't like that film, but I can see what it is doing, why you feel it is doing that thing well and why we should include it in the festival'.

Democratic structures of conversation and a conscious practice of listening to one another's views gave validity to individual assertions, while also filtering out personalized responses in favor of rigorous, and intellectually meaningful statements for consideration. We were able to be thinking artists together, with care for both content and composition of the festival we were creating.

### **The international programs**

The team programmed three international screenings. Program 1 was shown on the first day following the historical screening, and on the second day Program 2 and 3 were presented after the *Urban Dance on Screen* program.

The three programs included diverse films and offered different emotional and visual journeys, but all responded to the screendance denominator that as a team we discussed in depth. The programs also predominantly shared progressive themes and were in line with curatorial concerns of representation such as female identity, experimental space, minority ethnic representation, LGBTQ+ representation, representation of disability and age diversity. It is important to note that the team's curatorial concerns in the context of this article refer to how the festival would be perceived and experienced as a whole, therefore relating to the international screenings together with the curated screenings.

#### Program 1

This screening consisted of nine visually striking films that explored in-between spaces and borders, and boundaries between self and other. An element that we wanted to actively support while selecting and programming was a substantial inclusion of female directors and choreographers

#### Program 2

A selection of films which spanned vast locations and intimate spaces, from outer space to the earth, and from the formal to the interpersonal. Minority ethnic representation, representation of disability, LGBTQ+ representation underlined our choices

#### Program 3

In this selection of international films, private moments sit next to social constructs and formal dance meets individual expression. This program prioritized and aimed to epitomize cross-cultural viewpoints, a choice that was further enhanced by the political climate experienced at the time and its unwelcome outcome about the UK exiting the European Union (Brexit) and its unsuccessful attempts to withdraw the agreement to leave.

### **Curatorial concerns**

The curatorial concerns consisted of an overall view of all five screenings of the festival. Once the international and curated programs had been defined, the team met to discuss ideas for a main narrative around the two-day festival, fusing the screenings, talks and their inter-relations.

#### **Ensuring the collection of the group's pre-existing concerns or desires about Frame Rush**

We were aware of the following wishes: a response to a specific political climate (representation of production from different European and non-European countries); a consideration of screendance as established notions of choreography on screen as well as an experimental space for the two; representation of minority ethnic and LGBTQ+ makers; representation of disability; feminist issues; age diversity on screen; historical context; gender concerns; urban dance focus. These comprised a substantial collection and at times it felt challenging to search for specificity within this realm of desired inclusive possibilities. We were inclined and preoccupied in finding a link among these considerations. When the curatorial team met the first time to discuss potential links the idea of time was suggested as a connecting thread. It seemed a bit cliché initially and simplistically connected to the historical screening. However, when the idea was communicated to the team, Omari responded with "the future is urban" - this invited a connection of active collaborative endeavor, triggering a way to visualize the different



screenings, which felt like curatorial work. The past embodied within the historical screening, the international programs representing the present and the urban screening epitomizing the future. Omari's response provided scope for further exchange of ideas. There followed a dialogue that focused on ethnicity and the lack of diversity within the institution. The realization that this was true impacted on the need to subvert or at least address this imbalance. Roya Rastegar speaks of emotional triggers in relation to watching films as a programmer or as a member of a selection committee. She describes how the condition of watching without an audience contributes to accessing the emotional where one finds what matters.<sup>23</sup> This personal mechanism described by Rastegar reverberated among us and the act of listening among our team members in the initial stages including the programming process provided us with curatorial opportunities.

Therefore, the discussions and dialogue among all members was significant in anchoring the motivations behind the two curated screenings as well as the programmed ones, and what emerged from these is that the more we discussed what screendance was or discussed the relevance of including specific issues the more this helped to visualize an arc of the festival with its multiple concerns under the overall principle of being inclusive curators.

### **Working closely with programming and interpreting programming with an understanding of potential connections**

Curating and programming processes were similar, and decisions in each informed each other, the processes intersected.

It was initially suggested that the historical screening be presented as an installation with iPads or tablets on which audience members could select several films from the past. The idea was interesting from the point of view of offering audiences the experience of moving fluidly within the areas of the festival, however as we were hiring a large projection screen it seemed pertinent to use it for the historical films as well. The historical screening opened the festival, which further validated the initiative to present the films on a big screen.

Most of the audience present at the *Once Upon A Light* had also booked for the International Screening 1, which took place the same evening. From a curatorial point of view the first immediate connection between the two screenings was the strands of what as a team we considered screendance, or the ways in which we valued the hybrid nature of screendance. Female filmmakers were another element of connection between the two screenings. Maya Deren's *At Land*, other than using innovative editing techniques, is also an act of advocacy for female filmmaking, which was present in our programming concerns and that was reflected in Program 1 through a number of films made by female directors and female choreographers.<sup>24</sup>

In *Once Upon a Light* the referencing of works that included presence of the body in and out of the screen connected to our concern about makers and crews, and their bodies being significant to a wider understanding of themes and politics within the programmed films.<sup>25</sup>

The international program 2 and 3 showcased films that included various curatorial concerns such as female identity, experimental space, minority ethnic representation, LGBTQ+ representation, representation of disability and age diversity. Omari's curation was a valuable addition to minority ethnic representation and LGBTQ+ concerns within the festival, and the films *Polishing*, *Fear* and *Dyanamite* that were in the *Urban Dance on Screen* curation came from the open call, which further indicates how the curatorial and programming concerns related and informed each other.

With reference to working with programming the curatorial team was preoccupied with searching for an overall connection among the curated screenings and the international programmed screenings. Once the three international programs had been decided, final decisions about these programs mainly revolved around establishing a balance of the diversity within each program.

In the final stages of the selection, it became evident that thanks to the diversity of the group in terms of age differences, identity, ethnicity, and artistic visions, interpreting programming by the group was naturally more representative of themes and concerns that as individuals alone programming, we would have not encompassed in their entirety.

## Curated Screenings

### Finding a common definition of screendance and motivations for curation

In the very early stages of the process the MA group found itself discussing at length what screen dance was to us. The more we tried to find a common definition the more we wanted to add and refine that definition. This highlighted the gaps present in setting or securing a definition that felt representative of different perspectives. In *Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* Douglas Rosenberg in his chapter *Curating the Practice/The Practice of Curating*, presents two ideologies of screendance curation. He posits two approaches: one that supports an experimental space between dance and screen, and another that supports more established ideas of choreography transferred to screen.<sup>26</sup> In consideration of these two strands, what resulted from the team's discussions was an identity of the group that included both ideologies. This allowed for the nine organizers to be open in programming and curating screenings that approached the relationship between dance and film in both notions described by Rosenberg.

Frame Rush 2019 included two curated screenings (beyond the requirement for the course), born out of individual initiatives presented and discussed among the group in the early stages of the course module.

*Urban Dance on Screen* showcased works that used innovative concepts, thought-provoking narratives and urbanity in a range of contexts. The films were drawn partly from the open call, and some were invited directly.

*Once Upon a Light*, presented a range of short films from the past that shared the idea of play between light and dark, and included an introduction by Dr Claudia Kappenberg, principal lecturer at the University of Brighton, artist and co-founder-editor of the International Journal of Screendance and lecturer at LCDS.

*Once Upon a Light* presented examples of origins and developments of the two notions Rosenberg defined. Though all four historical films were innovative in experimenting with dance and screen at the time of their making, *Le Lys* is representative of choreography directly transferred on screen, and *At Land* is representative of how editing could further transform movement sequences in ways that still influence choreography on screen today. The other films, *Black, White, Gray*, (1930) by László Moholy-Nagy and *Free Radicals* (1979) by Len Lye, exemplified the concept of a more experimental space between choreography and film. This provided a basis of how two different approaches to the form have a history and still held relevance to present day approaches.

In addition, *Once Upon a Light* intended to contextualize dance on screen as a multidisciplinary art form. The historical legacy of the study of dance and choreography places the body as the central focus, and screendance offers possibilities to re-contextualise the body.<sup>27</sup> The body can be present on screen or off screen, the dance can expand beyond the visible, and the choreography can interact with footage. These thoughts around the body, dance and choreography were the starting points for selecting the historical films.

*Urban Dance on Screen* presented a contemporary and diverse exhibit of films directing attention to the evolution of styles within a nuanced perspective of the artform.

Omari envisioned a screening of films that included urbanity in a range of contexts. His wish was to dismantle a generalized and fixed understanding of urban dance too often associated with a singular hip-hop dance form, black culture, or a specific city. *Urban Dance on Screen* consisted of seven films covering a variety of dance styles (contemporary, freestyle, ballet, hip hop, physical theater, gestural and puppet theater), filmed in cities in the U.S.A, Cameroon, UK, and Tibet. The films integrated choreography with urban themes within the film. Via his curation, Omari reminded us that urban dance is always evolving as cultures respond to the times in which they live.

## **Main challenges encountered**

As with most endeavors the curated screenings also had their challenges.

In the case of the historical curation, finding where some films were archived, obtaining the rights and negotiating prices to stay within the budget were the most prominent challenges. For the urban dance on screen curation, Omari found it challenging to negotiate with some artists because they distributed their works in different ways, ranging from self-distribution, commercial distribution companies, to licensing.

Another challenge shared by both curations was how to reach desired audiences. There was concern among the cohort that students (a demographic the team had identified as a desired target audience) would not be enticed and drawn to historical screendance. According to survey and box office data, a mixture of different age groups attended *Once Upon a Light* that included students from London Contemporary Dance School, but we did not fill all the seats on the day. With hindsight, it would have been helpful to consider advertising/marketing to dance history and dance culture tutors at the schools and universities in the area to reach more students.

For *Urban Dance on Screen*, the team was hoping to reach crossover audiences attending a live event on the main stage of The Place, Avant Garde Dance's *Show and Prove*, a competition of various dance styles including Hip Hop, Experimental, Afro Beats and House. *Urban Dance on Screen* was scheduled to allow audiences to attend the screening and then join the Avant Garde show and a discount was available when booking for both events. Unfortunately, dancers and competitors who had registered for the theater event were not as easily drawn to our screening space as we had hoped. This was possibly due to the building's layout not facilitating a physical meeting point between the two events. It raised a question about our marketing strategy and how we could have reached that sector of the audience that did attend the theater event but was unaware of the screening.

In a recent conversation with Omari he spoke of a gap he noticed on the day of the festival with reference to reached audiences. This further emphasized how at the time The Place did not necessarily offer professional training to people who were not already trained in

established/traditional classical and contemporary techniques and as a result people who generally book events and performances at The Place will be dancers from the mentioned professional sector. This realization intensified the value and purpose for his curation. Despite not having achieved the desired outcome in relation to broader audience attendance, the work inspired Omari to make a video essay<sup>28</sup> about the imbalance within the world of contemporary dance styles and make light on this issue within the academic world of dance education. So, in Omari's words "the curation took a different form to bridge the gap in academia" (Carter, personal communication with Lazzaro, 18 February 2021).

## **Curated screenings Q&A sessions**

During the *Urban Dance on Screen* Q&A session a member of the audience noted that he appreciated the political nature of the festival as a whole and asked how this was perceived by the organizers. Omari's response was that in his case it stemmed from realizing that urban is a lot more than just hip hop, a lot more than just relating to an *urbe*, and that it encompasses multiple stories.<sup>29</sup> Leaning into Omari's thought, the whole group concurred that programming and curating Frame Rush was so much more than our single stories, and that our single stories, if anything, were a reflection of a wider pool of stories. One could say that as nine programmers and curators we acted as an audience sample, an idea that Loist mentioned as being identified by Zielinsky in the 1980s when "[s]election committees typically represent a diverse range of community members and serve as sounding boards for a variety of tastes and identity issues."<sup>30</sup> With an awareness of community and the current political climate in the country we were inclined to promote representation of diverse voices and the intersection of boundaries.

*Urban Dance On Screen* sparked an animated post screening discussion around race. The director Cl  oph  e Moser who presented *Fauves* (2018) was asked a question about being a white French female director shooting in Cameroon, a colony of France. This sparked questions from the director herself challenging the accuracy of the facts stated in the question: 'Cameroon was no longer a French colony', and 'how do you define white?' The director carried on specifying her ethnicity to be Ladino, originating from Turkish nomads. Despite having been born and raised in France, Moser expressed her indignation with the French colonial past. The film celebrates and attempts to empower the film's female protagonist in an environment that would condemn her dancing in public. Moser also described her creative approach as collaborative. What became clearer from the exchange was the existing privilege of the director potentially 'passing as white' which confers privilege, having a French passport, and having no issue coming to the festival as a French national while her colleagues from Cameroon were not granted a visa for traveling into the UK.<sup>31</sup>

It also became clear from this exchange how recognizing the power and privilege imbalance between western crews and local casts in non-western countries as a result of past occidental colonization could further inform individual and collective curatorial responsibilities toward contributing to a fairer balance.

## **Learning from the Process**

### **Conclusions about the ongoing potential of Frame Rush**

The framework of Frame Rush as a festival proposes some interesting outcomes:

As the team changes every year, with each cohort given the autonomy to re-shape the festival according to their interests, Frame Rush is, in a way, protected from its own institutionalization. Every year, the contributing voices and their interaction with wider concerns of the artform shifts - with no cohort obliged to honor the choices of those in the years before them. This creates a vital artistic space which is poised to confront the wider concerns of the artform and impact upon it, with fresh and current perspective. In the very notion of their studentship, team members are permitted and encouraged to destabilize, question, and confront new propositions boldly, with perhaps fewer restrictions around satisfying funders, partner organizations or established audiences than other festivals.

The freedom of students to experiment and indeed both fail and succeed in their ideas creates a unique space in which experimental or unconventional methods of producing and programming can be explored - a luxury of inquisition rarely afforded to organizations or individuals who must attempt to guarantee some minimum outcome or face losing their funding. Each new cohort also changes the institution: informed by their ideas and ideals, they challenge the course, its staff and systems to engage with and support their vision for the event.

The democratic structure between the students acts as an annually renewed web in which the vitality of screendance in that moment can be voiced, questioned, articulated, translated and harnessed, to speak back to the form in a voice which is profoundly of the present, and freer from institutional obligations.

### **Conclusions about Frame Rush 2019 and how our working processes impacted the outcome**

Few cultural workers have the luxury of time to reflect. Some form of evaluation takes place in most settings, but it is pertinent to note how the educational structure of Frame Rush allowed the team the privilege to reflect deeply with one another and individually. Even as we have written this chapter, new reflections and conversations have emerged regularly as we recall the process.

Our submission criteria specified an open call that welcomed all genres of dance and film that adhered to the mutual interconnectivity of screen and dance, that supported artists who are changing narratives, that encouraged work driven by female, minority ethnic and LGBTQ+ artists, and that welcomed professional and student works that were meaningful, thought-provoking, experimental, and that cultivated dialogues across culture, contexts and locations. As a team we favored a collective voice that avoided separatist programming, categorizing films in one program or another based on theme, we intentionally grouped diverse films indicating our distinct inclusive politics. As suggested by Skadi Loist, “one strategy for avoiding separatist programming along gender/sexual identity or racial/ethnic backgrounds is the obvious move to mixed programs”.<sup>32</sup>

We sought to deliver a festival which, across its breadth, felt vital and relevant. We extended this care in both the programming and curation processes, all five screenings serving our intentions. The value of the programming as a thoughtful and rigorous process, along with the two curations and all the intermediary negotiations between each screening, afforded the rich gestalt of the entire event.

Our strategy was to present a mixture of films that focused on various themes and current issues including gender and ethnicity issues. From a curatorial point of view perhaps this strategy provided too few constraints, but Frame Rush in its first ever edition and in conjunction with the



MA being a new course with the largest cohort since its inception, demanded a wide spectrum of focus, which was further shaped by the stupefaction at the UK's exit from Europe. The breadth of our collective enquiry led us to create a festival that felt substantial in its content and meaning, and we were able to recognise this, gratefully, in the feedback received from audience members and invited sector professionals. We shared a sense of having successfully developed an event which answered both the intents of the group - and all the individuals in it - whilst also adding a meaningful contribution to the wider discourse across the field of screendance.

This was indeed, to many of us, a shock; having come together so abruptly, it was almost a marvel that at the end of the process, each of the team - all nine - felt satisfied and proud of what we had created - and more than this, felt satisfied that their individual practices, values, ideas, and artistic enquiries, had been embedded and present in the festival.

It would be true to say that the extent to which democratic mechanics were present in the day-to-day activity of developing Frame Rush 2019 were, in the moment, less obvious to us. The simple act of checking with the group before doing, generated a process of filtering through which allowed all to become included in every decision.

Curator Lisa Rosendhal talks about autonomous authorship versus a poly-vocal process in a presentation entitled 'Where is the body of the curator?'. Reflections on her experience of her then recent curation (the 2021 edition of the biennial *The Ghost Ship & The Sea Change*) eloquently theorized the validity of a poly-vocal process in curation:

I think it's a mistake to think of curatorial work along the lines of the conventions of individual authorship and ownership, it limits our understanding of the potential of the curatorial. Curatorial practice is relational and contingent at root. A curator is never autonomous in the sense of an autonomous artist producing an artwork alone in the studio. On the contrary a curator always produces with others in one form or another. This relationality seems to me to correspond to an understanding of the world as made up of relations and interdependencies, something that ideological construction of individual authorship with all its divisions of power, labor and agency underpinned by modernist ideas of autonomy and authenticity tends to make invisible. But my rejection of the idea of individual authorship and ownership does not mean that I reject the possibility of voice or agency. I'd rather think we should use the relational nature of curatorial practice to explore poly vocal ways of telling about the world, conceived from the point of view of an agency that includes us but does not belong to us.<sup>33</sup>

The term poly-vocal rings true both as conveying a group led-decision-making system as well as reflecting the experience that occurred during our making of Frame Rush. The Frame Rush 2019 team with its nine programmers and curators favored the relational nature of the endeavor and understood the value of shared curatorial authorship among different autonomous voices.

Reflecting on the process of developing Frame Rush 2019, it was clear among the group that we largely attributed the success of the festival in producing a substantial and impactful program of events to the interauthorship and collaborative practice we had so fully committed to. The process of legitimizing and hearing the views of others was what allowed us to arrive at a consensus which was not diluted to the inoffensive or selling out to the easy audience. We crafted a breadth of work and within its structure, we carved a space for dissenting opinions and choices, placing each piece thoughtfully to shape discourse and provoke a residual response to

the festival that bubbled for some time after - indeed, for the team at least - it still bubbles today, 3 years later.



## Endnotes

1. See appendix for full festival program
2. Please note that all descriptions in this article relate to the version of the course running from 2018-2021, validated by the University of Kent. A revised version of the course was validated in 2021 by the University of the Arts London.
3. The first MA courses with strong dance film focus were 2006-2009 Masters in Media Art at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee, a 12 month postgraduate course developed by Simon Fildes and Katrina McPherson, and taught by them and other faculty from the School of Media Arts, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee.  
The MA Contemporary Dance (Dance for the Screen pathway) at London Contemporary Dance School (David Hinton/Alex Reuben) ran from 2002-2007.  
Currently running is also the Graduate Certificate in Screendance at the University of Utah, USA founded by Ellen Bromberg 2010, developed further by Katrina McPherson.
4. This is the wording of the 2018/19 contribution assignment:  
Assignment 1: Contribute to the organization of a public festival (50% of final mark)
5. There was no submission fee, and the call also received 1,345 ineligible submissions.
6. Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance is a music and dance conservatoire based in south London. – thus a similar institution and venue to Frame Rush.
7. The Weave- a shinkansen and body>data>space interdisciplinary co-creation methodology, co-created 1992–1996, p.1
8. The Weave - a shinkansen and body>data>space interdisciplinary co-creation methodology, co-created 1992–1996, p.2
9. Hagan, Visual Politics in American Dance Film: Representation and Disparity.
10. The cohort set targets for themselves in relation to representation, and tracked the following statistics:  
Gender of makers: 60% Female makers; 40% Male makers  
Country of origin of films: Europe 50%; America 30%; Other 20%  
Representing ethnic and age diversity and minority groups on screen: 50%  
First time film-makers (student productions): 30%  
Filmmakers attending Festival (films represented at festival): 20%
11. Due to the hybrid nature of screen dance, the first task of the module was to define and describe what it entailed.
12. Rosenberg, Inscribing the Ephemeral Image. p.129
13. Hagan, Screendance from Film to Festival: Celebration and Curatorial Practice, p.87
14. Ibid
15. Ibid, p.85
16. Ibid
17. Rosenberg, Inscribing the Ephemeral Image. p.129
18. Hagan, Screendance from Film to Festival. p.90
19. Rosenberg, Inscribing the Ephemeral Image, p.129
20. Frame Rush Selection Meetings were recorded for reflection. Meeting dated 5 Feb 2019: 0:01:31
21. Ibid, Meeting dated 17 Jan 2019: 0:01:57.
22. Ibid, Meeting dated 17 Jan 2019: 0:04:31.

23. Rastegar, p.191
24. See Appendix for festival Program 1
25. The concept of selecting work with the presence of the body in and out of the artwork (visible and invisible) was very much influenced by Claudia Kappenberg's chapter 'The Politics of Discourse in Hybrid Art Forms' in Boulègue, F. and Hayes, M.C. (eds.). *Art in Motion. Current Research in Screendance/ Recherches actuelles en ciné-danse*.
26. Rosenberg, *Inscribing the Ephemeral Image*, p.126
27. Kappenberg, *The Politics of Discourse*, p.27
28. [https://uwprod-my.sharepoint.com/:f/g/personal/otcarter\\_wisc\\_edu/Em\\_xosdcKkNBjG46KXyrX7wBhKkTZ\\_sRpgYF22bGXRooQ?e=KE0p0P](https://uwprod-my.sharepoint.com/:f/g/personal/otcarter_wisc_edu/Em_xosdcKkNBjG46KXyrX7wBhKkTZ_sRpgYF22bGXRooQ?e=KE0p0P)
29. Urban Dance on Screen Q&A recording, minutes 1:59—2:40, 22:38-24:32. For access to the TED talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie mentioned by Omari, 'The danger of a single story'. [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?utm\\_campaign=tedsread&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=tedcomshare](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?utm_campaign=tedsread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare)
30. Loist, *A Complicated Queerness*, p.163
31. Urban Dance on Screen Q&A recording, minutes 25:01- 30:21
32. Loist, *A Complicated Queerness*, p.165
33. Rosendahl, Online lecture, minutes 10:30-12:12

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## Appendices

- Frame Rush Festival program
- Frame Rush 2019 film programs (list of films)
  - International screening 1
  - International screening 2
  - International screening 3
  - Once Upon a Light
  - Urban Dance on Screen
- Q&A participants list
- Submission and program demographics?