

"Looking Back"

A Conversation with Katrina McPherson

Katrina was, along with Claudia Kappenberg and Douglas Rosenberg, a founder of The International Journal of Screendance. The first discussions about the journal took place in a remodeled pigsty behind the house that Katrina and Simon Fildes share with their children in the countryside of Scotland. She was the organizer, with Fildes and Karl J. Lewin, of the Opensource {videodance} Symposium in Findhorn, Scotland where many important conversations about screendance took place in 2006 and 2007. Those conversations are still resonating globally. This interview took place at the the 2nd Opensource {videodance} Symposium, Findhorn, Scotland, 2007.

Douglas Rosenberg: Would you begin with some observations about screendance in general?

Katrina McPherson: I feel like screen dance is currently in quite an exciting state at the moment. I feel—although I've practiced for almost twenty years—I feel the beginnings of a new engagement with the genre, and I think that's coming out of some things that have been happening in the last eighteen months or so. I certainly feel that there's been a connection between an international group of people who want to start discussing the issues around screendance, and as we've often said, "raise the bar" in terms of critical discourse and dialogue. And sometimes I've worried that that's a very abstract notion, but what I'm beginning to see is that it's happening. It's actually happening because the conversations that we are having as we meet in different places and at different times over this period are actually evolving. We're not always going back to the same point, and also the conversations we're having are beginning to, I think, get to the nub of things, which is leaving behind issues of funding and very sort of basic technical questions that I felt that people dwelt on for a very long time, at least in my experience. And getting to actually talk about content and the context that we are making work in and processes and all sorts of things, which I actually find is rejuvenating my interest in the genre. Which has often happened: in my practice I've felt that I've come and gone, I've waned, and I've felt less interested, and then something will happen that will draw me back in, to a fascination, to a particular area of work.

D: What about observations about the UK in general—sort of large, broad things about screendance in the UK?

K: The current situation in the UK is changing. There was a period of time with maybe about ten, even twelve years where there was a lot of production, and that was

primarily generated through the broadcasters, initially Channel Four and then the BBC in conjunction with the Arts Council of Great Britain and then of England. And that generated a lot of work which has been quite influential, probably even worldwide it's been influential, in terms of the development of the genre. But that situation is finished now. For the last two or three years, there has been very few commissions from television. But what's replacing it are commissions that are—that really come more from an independent arts funding that *claims* to be aimed more at galleries and alternative spaces, but which I think usually seems to feed into the international screendance festival circuit. But the paradox is that fifteen, twenty years ago, when this new UK wave of screendance was happening, there was absolutely no education in the field, or formal education in the field. Whereas now in the last five, six years there's been a proliferation or an explosion with education in screendance and now almost every undergraduate program in the UK that offers dance will have some sort of screendance or dance in television or dance film or whatever module, and there are also post-graduate opportunities for study. So I think there's an interesting thing there because in a sense, there is more opportunity to learn but there is maybe less opportunity to make, or at least make within a formal structure.

D: Do you have a quick definition of Open Source Video Dance? What is it? How did it come to be?

K: Open Source Video Dance came about as an idea from three of us together: Karl Jay Lewin who's a choreographer based in the northeast of Scotland; Simon Fildes who's a screendance artist, and my partner; and myself. And two years ago, we sat down and we kind of asked ourselves what we felt we needed as artists at this point in time. And we all felt that what we needed was discussion, discourse ... we said we wanted to get together, a group of people who were interested in the same area, not necessarily like-minded but who wanted to discuss issues. We didn't want to look at lots of work, we didn't want to make any work, we just wanted to talk about it. And that was, in a way, the sort of germ of the idea and it grew from there. Karl had recently experienced open space technology in another event. And he introduced us to these ideas and it brought to mind my experience and Simon's experience as well of being at festivals and conferences where the opportunity for debate and discussion was very, very small and narrow; and that often our best conversations, or the most interesting, stimulating conversations, happened in the lunch queue or coffee break queue and then it would be curtailed by the next series of programmed events. So, we thought, we wanted to create an event, a symposium that tipped that on its head, that put the coffee break at the heart, and that's what we did. And in the first Open Source, there was very sort of a fresh, excited, almost quite emotional feeling about it, where I think the people who were drawn to come to it, came there with this feeling that were bursting to communicate with each other about ideas and thoughts and anxieties and so on. We always thought it would be a one-off. But I think that, in a sense, that the impact of that first event was really large, and it was like one of these, you know, big pebble

dropping in the water, and the ripple out; there was just a sense of "we really need or we should do this again and see what happens." And so here we are eighteen months later in the second event, and we've made some alterations, we've got a few more programmed speakers which we felt was maybe an interesting way to give certain people a platform, a set platform, to represent ideas or constructs that they've been working on. But still allowing most of the time for free discussion or self-organized discussion.

D: What about history?

K: History! Whose history?

D: Histories ... Histories of you, your working history, what got you to this point? And tell me something about your community. How'd you get here?

K: I was initially drawn to screendance, or video dance as I probably usually would have referred to it, just when I graduated from the Laban Center in London in the late 80s, 1980s, and it was a time when there was the beginnings of what I see was a new wave of dance for television in the UK. It coincided ... my sort of awareness of the possibilities of making dance on screen came about when there was a series on channel 4 called "Dance Lines," where the idea was where you brought a director, television director together with a choreographer, and they were given time to experiment and then make work specifically for the television. So, this series was going on, but for me, the key to that was this edition of the journal *Dance Theater Journal*, that was devoted to dance on television, and I read this and suddenly realized that that was something I was really interested in. I think the interest for me lay in—you know, I had been through a ... had just completed a degree in dance and I was very interested in dance history and in particular the sort of postmodern era. But I was also very interested in making choreography or performance works. But what I was frustrated by was the experience of going to see dance in London and sitting in an audience with another thirty people, all whom were dancers, and all of whom belonged to the same sort of group of people. And I sort of thought, "well maybe the idea if you make dance for television, then you bring dance or you can communicate through dance to a much, much larger audience." So that was my initial impetus and that set me off on this journey of exploration and there was no formal screendance education in that time. So I ended up doing a postgraduate in what was called "electronic imaging" at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art of Dundee, in Scotland, where I'm from. And that course then, as now, is situated in an art college, but also had a reputation for being engaged in video art. Some of the tutors that were there at the time were actually key figures in the UK video art scene. And a lot of the practice and ideas that were being explored and had been explored on that course really fed into video art. So, I came along with my knowledge and experience of postmodern dance practice and came, you know, right up close to video art practice and found a lot of

similarities and a lot of ideas that I could work between the two. So, that really, those two influences, postmodern dance and video art practice, have been really what set me on my way.

In terms of production—production possibilities, I guess you could say—or techniques, I also drew on the fact that quite soon after graduating from Dundee, I ended up directing arts programs for television. So I became very aware of the television processes in that experience. And I think again that added to those two sort of more conceptual ideas—this kind of vein of wide experience that became of making television. So, my impulse had been to make dance for television; ironically, only one piece of screendance that I've ever directed has been commissioned and shown on television, British television, and that was *Pace*, which I made in 1995 as part of the BBC Arts Council of England "Dance for Camera" series. It's a five minute piece that I made in collaboration with choreographer Marisa Zanotti. And I think that was the only piece I made for television, but it's also, in some ways, the most experimental piece that I've ever made. It was the first time that I had the opportunity to work with digital non-linear editing system, which enabled me to take ideas of looping and editing techniques to an extreme that I had never been able to do in this sort of analog world I'd lived in, or worked in before. But also through a collaboration with Simon Fildes, who was an editor but was also a musician and had gone through postgraduate at Dundee as well—he was a video artist in his own right—and that first collaboration with him ... we've continued to collaborate for the last fifteen years, or more in fact—that has kind of determined the way that my work has gone.

And so ... I very quickly realized that actually what I wanted to make was an art form in its own self; it wasn't simply about putting dance on television—although obviously these things share similar techniques and approaches, or can do. So although that was my impulse for dance on television, actually in my own practice, I've always been much more aligned or drawing from the visual arts and also from contemporary dance practice. And strange enough, I think, in the two decades I've been making work and engaged with the area, we now seem to be kind of really there. Television has receded as a place for making work or a place for finding money to make work. And that's lead to people looking at alternative spaces and alternative means of production. And I suppose to me, I guess that can bring some problems because we can't really be just engaging with that world simply because that's where we can get our work seen and funded. It means that we also have to engage with a particular way of thinking about work and maybe that is partly why now at this time there seems to be this grand swell of—I was going to say interest, but there's more than that, sort of desperation that we should have more critical dialogue, which I would think would be more aligned with the kind of fine art, visual art practice than television, which traditionally, and you know, as far as I'm aware, doesn't have a particular kind of critical discourse aligned with it—or most people's experience with television is not bound up with critical discourse.

D: Where might this go? Where might you like to see [screendance] go?

K: I've written this book, *Making Video Dance*, which is a step-by-step guide to creating dance for the screen. It was written very much aimed at dancers and choreographers who want to make work for the screen, and it's primarily aimed at people who want to make single screen work. Although I would suggest a lot of the techniques in it are relevant for making multiple screen or installation or whatever. But, as I say, mainly aimed at dancers and choreographers who may want to make single screen works. And in a way ... until you know what's in that book, and it doesn't have to be through that book, but until you know the basic, you know, really what's in that book, then you can't really engage with the art form. And I know that sounds a bit pompous, and of course there will be any people that come through and have never, don't know anything about anything technical or processes or any considerations of intention or form or content or whatever, that will still make pieces of work that blow us apart, you know, that are so amazing. But, in general, when I look around and I see work, the people are making the same mistakes again and again and again and again and again. And it's not, it's absolutely—I'm not saying there's only one way to make a piece of work. But what I am saying is that there has to be a sort of integrity and a clarity of intention in work. And that's what I often think is lacking. And so I feel like, maybe I felt like writing this book might help to contribute, just to kind of raise the level. And I certainly don't mean just to raise the level technically, because I think that has happened, you know, people are shooting on very high formats with really high production values, but the work is still not succeeding necessarily. And I think, that to me has to do a lot with something much more basic which is a clarity of intention and an awareness of the context that the work is being made and seen in. So that would be my other thing: this is a thing that I think we're sort of seeing more now, is a sort of a call to people to be more aware of things that have already happened. And again, it's not about looking back and saying this is the way to do it and this is how it should be, but it's just having that kind of knowledge base that is very specific to this genre. You know, it's all very well knowing about the history of cinema, and that is important, and maybe the history of, you know, visual art and that's also important, but now screendance has a history as well that references things—that's what I feel is important, that we somehow manage to acknowledge but also have access to and learn from.

D: So can you talk the maturation of the field as you see it? What are the most salient points or the most vital parts of the field now twenty years down the line for you...

K: Well, I don't know. I guess I can only really speak from my point of view. I don't know whether this is something to do with, you know, once you've made work for two decades and you kind of want to slow down to a certain extent. I mean in some ways you are more productive because actually in a sense things can be a bit more at your finger tips or things could happen quicker than, you know, your sort of early days where maybe absolutely everything you do you've got to do every single thing

yourself and it can take ages and years to make something. But to me there is sort of a sense of slightly wanting to slow down and be more reflective about what's going on, you know; the energy changes maybe from being desperate to just get out there and make stuff, and make a mark and grab every opportunity, to being a little more kind of on the back foot and a bit selective about what you get involved in and ... but also, maybe realizing that it's not just about making stuff and that at some point we have to talk about stuff and look at stuff and engage with the ideas behind it. Which I think, I mean I've always done in my own practice. I've always thought about what I'm doing and why I'm doing it and I've had a rationale behind it. But it's about trying to share a discourse about that. So it's less interesting now to just talk about "well how did that get made?" and, you know, the production process and so on. But I guess also again it's a personal thing for me because when I wrote my book, which is effectively a workbook, which takes you from the initial idea to the finished product. For me, the writing of that just came out of my own experience over fifteen years of making things and also seeing other people and how they work, and talking to other practitioners and sort of drawing these threads together. But in a sense once that was complete and that last "T" was crossed and "I" was dotted, I could kind of leave that behind in a way. I'm now personally interested more in looking at a critical framework for discussing work and not so much talking about how to do it and the practicalities of things. So, I don't know how that reflects the field, whether it does. I think it probably doesn't. There's always the next generation coming up who are more concerned—you know the students I have, the postgraduate students that I have, are really interested in looking at the next bit of technology and what can offer them. In the way that I was very excited when Avid and non-linear digital editing came along and it completely changed the way that I approached making work. So I guess that also happens in kind of generations, doesn't it?

D: One thing I love about you is that you're an activist for the field. And that you give a lot of service to the field, which I also think is amazing. Open Source Video Dance is a perfect example of that.

K: For me there's a history to being kind of an activist, as you might call it, in the field, and it comes from coming of age, or coming into the field at a time when it was really quite minority. And certainly where I was living in and working for a lot of the time, which is Scotland, I was pretty much the lone voice in the field. And so I had to do a lot of persuading of promoters and arts funders and so on, and that there is actually a genre or an area of work called screendance or video dance that was separate and equally valid to dance or film but was not the same, was something in its own right. So I think that was sort of inherent in that, there was that, there's always sort of this feeling of we've got to kind of fight our corner. Through working with Simon Fildes, together we've got this feeling that nobody owes us a living, so we have to be active as well and creating opportunities for ourselves and for other people. If we sit back and wait for everyone, things to be organized for us, it's just not going to happen. And

again, I do think that kind of slightly comes from living remotely, from not living at the epicenter of artistic and production activity. You're kind of out on a limb. So you don't want to be out on a limb, you want to be at the center. So you have to, in a sense, bring the center to where you are. And that's the way we want to live and work. You know, we want to surround ourselves with the people that we're interested in; it doesn't matter where they live. So that in a sense was the starting point for Open Source Video Dance, which we now have had two symposia and that was really the germ of the idea when Simon and I sat together with Karl Jay Lewin and said, "What do we want to do? How do we want to progress our own practice?" And we decided that what we wanted to do was bring a group of people together who were interested in talking about what we were interested in talking about. And to create a conducive environment for that and to try and kind of get away from the very, very formal time structure, its environment, that an ordinary conference has and just open it up, so that actually the important issues come to the surface that could be debated. And I think it proved to be very successful over ... it kind of evolved; the first event was slightly different from the second event and we got a little bit more structure in the second event, but I think that served a good purpose. You know, I think we were also kind of ready for that. Whereas on the first open source everyone just wanted a space to go "blah!" [laughs] "This is what I'm worried about and this is what..." I think that people find it very emotional, you know, just be given that space to talk without there being any particular agenda. At the end of it, we didn't have to come out with some decision being made or some proposal being worked up which is often the end, is the required result of a situation like that.

D: I quickly have one more thing to ask you. What can you say about your Dogma Dance Manifesto?

K: Right, well, yeah...

D: Maybe you can give a date ...

K: Yeah, I've got to think about Dogma Dance, well 2000, I think. Yeah, probably 2000. Yeah, Dogma Dance came out of two ... I was working quite closely with two other people, not actually creating work but teaching, with Lisa Bixler and Deveril Garraghan and we had a lot of conversations about the kinds of screendance work that we were seeing, and particularly about the issue of the total lack of *dance* in dance films. And we began to kind of think of ... is there a need for some sort of manifesto or kind of strong agenda where we really kind of say, "This is what we think is needed to make a dance film" or in a sense handing the challenge to the rest of the sector and saying, "this is what we think needs to be in the work, and how are you going to respond to this?" It was of course inspired by the Dogma films initiated by Lars Van Trier and all those Danes, but behind it also was this idea of Yvonne Rainer's manifesto from the 60s, and we kind of felt that screendance hadn't, up until that point, had anything like

that. There was kind of a wishy-washiness about what it could be, you know, this one thing can be called screendance and that could be screendance and we wanted to get a bit of rigor behind it. So we launched this manifesto, this Dogma Dance Manifesto, that I think had a list of about ten points that had to be fulfilled in order to create a Dogma Dance, Video Dance. And if you did that you would get a certificate. There was a surprising amount of interest. We had a few open meetings in London and it was, I mean, thirty or forty people at the first one. The idea was also that we would screen work that and could debate, you know, whether it was Dogma Dance film or not and, I mean, it kind of bubbled under really, eventually. But the interesting thing for me is that I suppose the work that I've made, the single-screen work, has always been Dogma Dance work... it's very... it's trying to bring things back to the essence, so it's, you know, we said "No to dissolves" and "No to slow motion" and "No to music just being put on the top without any kind of relationship to what's actually happening in the performance," and I was trying to get back to the sense of performance being at the heart of screendance, as opposed to kind of purely being about production values and design and so on. So yeah, that was Dogma Dance. Might be revived.