

REVIEW ESSAY

***Dancing Bodies, Moving Images:* An Exhibition of Installed Works at Summer Dancing, Coventry, UK, June 2012**

Curators: Andrea Barzey and Polly Hudson

This review offers an overview of the screendance event *Dancing Bodies, Moving Images* (Coventry, 2012) and discusses the major themes that emerged during the curatorial process and from audience responses. It is written from the perspective of the curators, and includes material from interviews and panel discussion with some of the artists whose work was shown. The event was curated in response to an invitation by Decoda, an independent dance organization based in Coventry, UK, who were interested in a Dance Film event as part of the biennial international festival of dance, Summer Dancing.¹

We decided to send out an open call for submissions with a remit that aligns specifically with the philosophy of the festival, as well as with our own curatorial interests surrounding dance and the moving image, and somatic practice. We asked questions such as:

- How is the body integrated in dance on screen?
- What are the differences/similarities between choreography for live performance and choreography for camera?
- How can we retain embodiment and somatic sensibilities when creating the artefact that is dance and the moving image?

The ten pieces chosen were gathered from the open call and by invitation. The result was an exhibition of installed works, culminating in a discussion with a number of the artists whose work was being presented, and with ourselves, the curatorial team, joined by Katye Coe, director of Decoda.

There was a very clear vision from us, the curators, for how these works should be presented: installed in a gallery setting that would enable an encompassing kinaesthetic experience for an audience and also support the ethos of the works. Our aim was to create an immersive environment that would allow for a multi-sensory experience and encourage dialogue. The setup allowed the viewer to make choices about how long to witness work, from what angle or position in the room, and to be physically comfortable since we provided cushions, blankets, and a welcoming environment. This seemed to work well, with many audience members staying for long periods of time, sitting or lying down, or moving to see the works from different angles and viewpoints.

It became clear fairly early in the curatorial process that we had selected pieces that fell into two distinct strands, and that these demonstrated differing requirements for how



Dancing Bodies. Photograph by Christian Kipp.

the work was to be presented. Some of these differences were also borne out by particular artists' requests. For example, Margerita Zafrilla requested that her piece *The Collection* (2012) be shown as a small-screen installation as this was her original intention for the work. The final decision for the overall design of the exhibition was therefore to have some of the works projected onto a large screen with surround-sound, and to place a small screen with headphones in the same gallery, but in another part of the space. In the course of the exhibition this spatial arrangement facilitated a somewhat unintended dialogic relationship between the works as some viewers were witnessing the large-screen works with the headphone sound of the small screen.

The large screen featured works by Mattias Malmivaara (Finland), Tara Rutter (UK), Johan Planefeldt (Sweden), Wilkie Branson (UK), Rachel Sweeney (Ireland). The small screen showed works by Rahel Vonmoos (Switzerland/UK), Susan Sentler (USA/UK), Dolphin Dance Project (USA), Karen De Silva (UK), Margerita Zafrilla (Spain).²

A scheduled panel discussion took place once the exhibition had concluded, led by both curators and open to all film artists and Decoda participants, where a number of key issues were raised by artists, audiences and the curators. Curator Polly Hudson noted:

...something that came up for us in the curating of these works is that there are two overriding themes happening at the moment in dance film—one type of film is being made in nature, particularly drawn to water, snow, rocks, woodland, and we were wondering about why that is...the other takes place in interior spaces with "no site" that focuses on the body in a different way.³



Dancing Bodies. Photograph by Christian Kipp.

Artist Rachel Sweeney responded, with regards to her work *Driftlines, flooded memories* (2011):

... this piece is the very beginning of an experiment. I was trying to think of it as three stages: one is the receptive site that is an immersive environment and involved with itself, which raises the question of navigation, crossing terrain and the translation of body across site, and then there is the relational context which for me I am starting to question. The question is how does the camera force these kinds of communication processes out? Having deliberately not known where the camera is faced (and I am trying to not use the term "framed")... I suppose there is something about perspective, fluidity and immersion that relates to that somatic quality really clearly. You can then see if the camera uses that somatic quality or whether the camera cheats and changes it.

There is a delicacy about this kind of choice of setting for dance film, and in the images and works that emerge. It becomes an immersion of the body in landscape. Besides Rachel Sweeney, artist Tara Rutter also pursued an investigation of the site, and her movement practice includes an ongoing commitment to work within the landscape as demonstrated in *Meeting Cliff Tops* (2011).

There were other works concerned with landscape, but they slightly differ from those by Rutter and Sweeney, such as Mattias Malmivaara's *Release* (2012). A female dancer is moving in snow in the Finnish mountains in a way that allows the viewer to see the landscape as backdrop as well as the body within it, leading to a rich cinematography. It depicts the somatic body within site, presenting work with movement material that could however be translated from one site to another, a subtly alternative view from Rutter and Sweeney's work in which the site is integral to both movement and body.

Wilkie Branson's piece *Big Wide World* (2011) is different again. What is notable about this work is the impressive, sophisticated production quality; the use of steady, long follow shots; the highly honed framing; and the clarity that is brought to the work by the artist's understanding of his media. Branson also demonstrates an eye for colour, and an empathetic approach to landscape and to the moving body within it.

A piece that sparked some interesting discussions around sexuality and the portrayal of the female body in dance film was Johan Planefeldt's *In Touch* (2012). Filmed at the *In Touch Journey festival* in Goa, this work could be deemed controversial, as was noted by a number of audience members, with regards to the representation of gender on screen, as it depicts semi-naked women on beaches and in water alongside men, who are generally shown as more active and in some instances are fully clothed; drawing on sexual imagery akin to soft porn, the work is reminiscent of the exploitation of the female body on screen. Conversely, this depiction could be read as the sensuality of Somatics, and in an interview with Hudson in September 2012, both Planefeldt and the director of the *In Touch Journey festival*, Volker Eschmann, who commissioned the piece, responded to questions around these issues.

Polly Hudson: "The work has brought up strong feelings for some people in terms of its portrayal of gender. I'm interested to know what your thoughts are about that?"

Volker Eschmann: "I wanted, originally, a film about moving from the centre, but time constraint made that not possible. So I said to Johan, who's an experienced filmmaker, and is also newly involved in the work, just to capture what was going on at the festival."

Johan Planefeldt: "It's an interesting topic—I've been facing it a lot in my movies. I'm happy that these discussions come up. Re. the gender perspective—I of course have a male gaze, I wasn't consciously trying to remove it. On the other hand, most of the participants were women, in bikinis, in a state of bliss; when you work like this people become more photogenic—in a state of love and presentness. Beauty from the heart. And maybe people confuse that with the kind of beauty that is in H&M adverts for example, famous for being sexist, having scantily clad women in their winter publicity." [We break off to discuss this kind of advertising campaign and the images contained within it.] "There are questions about this already in the Contact Improvisation community; the most interesting part is that this film does not say at any point that it is CI."

Polly Hudson: "What would you call it?"

Johan Planefeldt: "A documentation of the *In Touch Journey*: trying to capture the essence of the festival. A cinematic ritual. This is a running theme, the main focus of my work."

Polly Hudson: "There is however a juxtaposition between the semi-clad people and the clothed men dancing."

Johan Planefeldt: "That's also one of the main criticisms—of the passive woman and the active man."

Polly Hudson: "What do you feel about that?"

Johan Planefeldt: "It's a bit of a shame, but that's what happened. I wasn't even planning on making this movie—I shot some stuff—I made something out of it—documenting some stuff. ... And in all my movies I work with peak experiences."

Volker Eschmann: "The idea is that the film has a similar effect to the ritual itself." [Eschmann refers to the ritualistic movement practises at the *In Touch* festival] "By being in a meditative state whilst watching this video—people said [on Vimeo] that it changed their day."

Despite its possible challenging readings, the curators felt that the piece had a place within this collection of works, because of the cinematic depiction of Contact Improv that has been a key underpinning practice in *Summer Dancing*. It was also included because of its representation of Somatics in motion that gives the viewer an opportunity for kinaesthetic empathy, as illuminated by Planefeldt and Eschmann's comments.

The works on the small screen in the gallery had slightly different foci and sensibilities as far as landscape and setting were concerned. Most were set in interior locations, with the exception of Karen De Silva's *Abigail Hurly's 7.47* (2010). Reflecting on locations for dance film, De Silva echoed the curators' earlier observations:

...I always work in site because I work with lived experience and lived imagination so the place has to be real for me...but I really see the increasing engagement of working with nature and I am wondering if it has something to do with the emergence of somatic practices...there seem to be various strands of working with the body in nature, where we see the body impacting on nature, the body being impacted on by nature, and the sensuality of the experience of the body in nature.

Susan Sentler, whose piece *Exposed* (2012) is located in a dance studio, said in relation to her own decisions:

...the site needed to be ambiguous and an open enough canvas so that the viewer could get a sense of interior, which could have been that of the protagonist

or from a past life, like a canvas... Film lends itself to time/images being sliced and cut together and they can exist together.

Rahel Vonmoos's piece *but—at least* (2010-2012) appears to combine both documentary and dance film, which sparked an interesting debate in the curatorial team during the selection process and was highlighted by the curator Andrea Barzey during the discussion:

What came up for Polly and I, with reference to teaching dance film to undergrads, is referring to dance and the moving image as a separate entity to documentary. Rahel's piece blew this theory out of the water...there is an overlap in the film that is really interesting.

In response to Barzey's comment, Vonmoos explained her process, pointing out that she began recording a video diary that she kept over three years whilst working on a piece that used projections, therefore gathering many video images or spaces:

That's all I had so I re-filmed things and re-projected it, using the projections to make textures and other sounds...using sounds from another space, another time.... I was really interested in the rehearsal videos. I really enjoy watching rehearsal videos, but don't enjoy watching performance videos of myself because it has this heightened "thing," a form. When there is a rehearsal there is just nothing. There's just me and I am putting on the camera... nothing becomes something, because that's all I have to make something... Blending in is very much about how my life is... I am trying to layer and then scrape away. You just see the body and I am interested in just this physicality of the body and in the emotional impact.

Vonmoos's work is a different type of film, which does not sit either within dance film or documentary and which could perhaps be classified as Somatic Documentary. Katy Coe, director of *Decoda*, suggested that when watching Vonmoos's film, she can easily identify with the piece as she understands "herself, alone in the studio, as a female, with objects." Some other members of the audience felt this was due to the rawness and vulnerability that Vonmoos exposes of herself and which is different to works which have high technical production values and polished choreographies, potentially creating a barrier between the work and its viewer.

Hudson noted that: "In a lot of other cinematic arenas, low production values would be unacceptable because the work is not 'high tech' enough, whereas such work can, conversely, provide a kinaesthetic and empathetic experience."

De Silva argued that Vonmoos's film is still highly technical given the projections, editing and lighting that were used to build up the layers. Vonmoos used these elements as a tool with which to choreograph the piece, as in "traditional dance film."

As ever, when engaging in a creative process, unexpected results emerged in the process of curating this exhibition. Sometimes a conceptual point of departure is just that: a place to begin. New ideas arose during the event, surprising both curators and audiences. The notion of Somatic Documentary was proposed, and perhaps this is a new development in dance filmmaking and offers something different to the field of screendance.

The individual works did, however, answer some of the questions posed by the curators, retaining somatic sensibilities on screen, underlining the importance of a deep

understanding of the body in motion when making such works, as well as the benefit of a commitment to investigation. As a collection of works, they posed new questions about the choices artists make about settings and working with site, which became the over-riding topic of the show, and the ensuing discussions.

Notes

1. The Artistic Director for Decoda is Katye Coe. Decoda is based in Coventry, UK, and is the organization that has grown from the *Summer Dancing* festivals whose collaborating host partner is Coventry University. See <http://www.decoda-uk.org/>.

2. Many of the works in *Dancing Bodies, Moving Images* can be viewed online via the Decoda website, at <http://www.decoda-uk.org/summer-dancing/dancing-bodies-moving-images>

3. This and the following responses were part of an open conversation between curators Andrea Barzey and Polly Hudson and artists featured in the screendance installation, *Summer Dancing*, 28th June 2012, UK.

Media

Abigail Hurly's 7.47 (2010). Dir. Karen De Silva. UK. 5:30 min., video, color/sound.

Big Wide World (2012). Dir. Wilkie Branson. UK. 3:57 min., 16mm film, color/sound.

but -at least (2010-2012). Dir. Rahel Vonmoos. UK. 10:08 min., video, color/sound.

The Collection (2012). Dir. Margerita Zafrilla. UK. 3:28 min., video, color/sound.

Driftlines, flooded memories (2011). Dir. Rachel Sweeney. Ireland. 4:07 min., 16mm film, color/sound.

Exposed (2012). Dir. Susan Sentler. UK. 9:01 min., video, color/sound.

In Touch (2012). Dir. Johan Planefeldt. Sweden. 11:48 min., 16mm film, color/sound.

Meeting Cliff Tops (2011). Dir. Tara Rutter. UK. 10:00 min., video, color/sound.

Release (2012). Dir. Mattias Malmivaara. Finland. 7:39 min., 16mm film, color/sound.