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Essay on Screen Dance

First presented February 2000

Dance For the Camera Symposium, Madison, Wisconsin, USA

There are two histories of dance for the camera to tell. One, autonomous and free floating without any theoretical or historical tethers, and the other an invisible history in which film dance and later video dance are a part of the investigations undertaken by artists from the birth of cinema through modernism and into the post modern era.

I am interested in beginning to articulate a wholistic history of a genre which lives more often than not, on the margins of dance, film, and video histories. As we have entered an era of post-dance, in which dance is displacing its own identity by eagerly merging with other existing forms and its own mediated image, this seems to be an opportune time to begin to articulate a new canon as well.

Dance for Camera is in the midst of a renaissance both in terms of the sheer number of practitioners and also in terms of its public acceptance and recognition. However, along with this success comes a number of potential hazards for the genre as well. One of those hazards is a sort of ghettoization that threatens to push dance for the camera further into the margins of both dance and the arenas of independent film and video as well.

As dance for the camera has become institutionalized in the university, in festivals and by some funding agencies, the genre is at risk of becoming ossified, its growth stymied by its own success. There are parallels for this in both dance and the visual arts as well. Historically, the moment of cultural recognition for an avant garde movement generally has also signaled its demise. Codification, historiography and canonization can squeeze the life out of a fragile, ephemeral art form.

Dance itself is a marginal artform and certainly dance film and video makers must be considered on the margins of the margin. It is in this most marginal of spaces that women including Amy Greenfield, Elaine Summers, Doris Chase and others presupposed Feminism and carved out a territory in cine dance as independent, experimental filmmakers, as outsiders enabling themselves to create works that are seminal in the history of Dance for the

Camera. The territory that these pioneering women claimed is dangerously close to being sacrificed in return for the carrot that is mainstream recognition and acceptance. The ghetto that I fear we are heading toward is one that privileges form over content, tools over practice, and is a modernist construct in a post modern era. What is lacking within this renaissance is a forum for critical evaluation of the landscape of dance for the camera that does not simply perpetuate advocacy over critical analysis but asks, "what is the social significance of this work and what is its contribution to the culture?" Advocacy is an important element in the cycle of creating work that leads to audience building, to be sure. But once the audience is watching and listening, the real issue becomes watching and listening to what? Without a forum for critical discourse, one which supports and welcomes critical analysis of the work, then we run the risk of becoming simply another of the decorative arts. I suggest that we not barter critical self-examination for a larger audience or mainstream acceptance. If we become conventional then the work of those who pushed the boundaries of dance and film will be simply a faint echo in the history of the genre. Dance for camera straddles a very thin line between extending the metaphors of dance art into a new hybrid form and fetishizing dance and the bodies which one frames within the purview of the camera. Without critique from both within the community as well as from outside sources, Dance for camera will remain a formless, shapeless adjunct to theater dance, prized more for its entertainment value than for its contribution to culture. To further revise the often quoted Pater's dictum, it is my observation that in the current climate, screen dance aspires to the condition of Hollywood whereas once, screen dance aspired to the condition of radical flux.

This condition mirrors the condition of dance in many ways, so it does not seem so extraordinary a claim, perhaps. However, as dance for camera succeeds in finding an audience, it is the work which inscribes itself as emblematic of the genre. And if the work in question aspires to the condition of Hollywood then the community offers itself up as just more filler to be squeezed between other so-called "arts programming" which we regularly find on television.

One of the situations from which this dilemma springs is the inability of language to simply and accurately describe a given phenomenon. Dance on Camera is a broad term that may address any and all work that includes dance and film or video. As an analogy, dance as a general term may include ballroom, jazz, ballet and modern as art as a general term may include impressionist, conceptual and pre-Raphaelite work. It is the arena

in which these works might be presented that contextualizes them and sets the tone for the discourse and critique that follows. Dance for the Camera as a site is ill equipped to support a discourse without further contextualization. In other words, we must first differentiate genres within the larger category as we have done in dance and the fine arts generally. For example, a documentary can not be critiqued in the same way a choreography for camera might. An experimental work requires an even different discourse. This of course is obvious. However, given the arena which festivals and showcases create, while ultimately providing audience accessibility, tend to diminish the possibility of articulate, insightful critique and analysis. They become by necessity, an advocacy situation and ultimately reinforce the ghettoization of the genre as entertainment. Dance for camera as entertainment is in danger of becoming, unfortunately a self perpetuating cycle. If we as makers, even subconsciously, are responding to the desires of available screening possibilities, then we perpetuate a kind of work in which video or film are in service of dance and in doing so fetishize dance and dancing bodies into a sort of spectacle which this culture is so keen on. In order to move forward in this genre, we must ask ourselves if we are responding to the culture's fixation on spectacle and seductive corporeality or if we are engaging the medium of representation on a level that extends the boundaries of the genre. The genre of video or cine dance has the potential to engage in social critique, and to address issues of the time in the same way that theater dance and the fine arts can and do. Further, in order to be taken seriously by the film, video, and visual art communities as well as theorists and critical thinkers, we must evolve as a group into one that self analyzes and self critiques. It is time for the genre to be addressed on its own terms, but first we need to articulate those terms using language that is better suited to the task.

Perhaps, given that we are here as part of the Dance for the Camera Symposium, it is the proper time to ask, "is our focus here on dance in another medium, or is our focus another medium?" If we privilege dance, then dance on camera is relegated to being merely another way to extend dance into the popular culture. If our focus is on articulating the site of activity within an entirely unique medium or genre, which I believe dance for the camera to be, then we need to begin to engage in the kind of critical and theoretical analysis that film, video and the visual arts have previously provided models for. To do so we must be willing to jettison or at the very least, suspend the medium specific language of dance.

I would like to offer some definitions that may help to clarify the points I am getting at. Dance for the Camera is an overarching framework

within which there seem to be a number of sub-categories. The term SCREEDANCE seems at this point a better term to describe dance created specifically for the screen rendered in either film, video or digital technologies.

Having said that, inherent in my definition of screendance is the concept of recorporealization. Here, 'recorporealization' is used to describe a literal re- construction of the dancing body via screen techniques; at times a construction of an impossible body, one not encumbered by gravity, temporal restraints or even death.

The screendance is a literal construction of a choreography that lives only as it is rendered in either film, video or digital technologies. Neither the dance or the method of rendering are in service to each other, but are partners or collaborators in the creation of a hybrid form. The dance created specifically for the camera is never truly fixed as a live performance might be. It is always in the process of becoming.

Screendance recovers the deceased body, in some cases reinvents it and recorporealizes it, objectifying it or re-materializing it (to invert Lippard's term), in the process.

In a screendance the body is raw material for a reconceptualization of corporeality, in which mechanical reproduction recorporealizes the body and one in which the filmed, edited body becomes the authentic body as it outlives its subject. And while this methodology privileges the director, it is in a subversive way a technique for authoring one's own autobiography and self-representation vis. a vis. the dancer's or choreographer's choice of movement vocabulary.

I'd like to talk a bit about narrative in regard to screendance. My observation is that there are screendance templates that have come to serve as a kind of shorthand. These templates hinge on a reliance on narrative.

The first template is dance in the service of narrative which is the common Hollywood construction and has been appropriated by dance film and videomakers. In this template, dance is used to move the "story" forward and to act as a hinge for the narrative structure. Dance is subservient to the narrative in this instance.

The second is narrative in service of the dance. This template presupposes that the viewer requires a narrative structure to cling to though only as far as it serves to create a site for choreography. The narrative in a sense serves to relieve the tension of the choreography.

The third is dance as narrative in which the dancing body is both subject and object of the film or video. No narrative is presumed or proposed, though given our desire for narrative structure, the viewer may self-create a sort of meta narrative.

Meta narrative is the superstructure in which the culture creates "stories" from disparate elements, either abstract or figurative. Culture longs for structure and in turn for narrative. The tendency toward narrative that has become evident in the last few years has all but colonized experimental or abstract work in the genre. The irony is that digital technologies promise non-linear editing capabilities and a kind of freedom that analog video supposedly could not offer, yet in reality digital video is more often than not put to the service of narrative form.

As screendance becomes institutionalized these templates begin to form the foundation for a kind of serialization wherein the highly stylized rendering of a dance in film or video informs other subsequent highly stylized renderings and so on. These serialized screendances form a corpus or index of prevalent tastes and also point to a model which tends to exclude experimentation with the form itself. Much like mainstream cinema serialized and codified its own sub categories, for instance, action films, boy meets girl, screwball comedies, etc, screendance seems to at this point in time, be intent on serializing itself as well.

Dance documentation, on the other hand fixes a choreography as it is rendered in a live performance and is subject to the vagaries of that performance. It is worth noting that the performance fixed is rarely the one that the choreographer feels is the definitive version. However, dance documentation or its relative, dance documentary is always in the service of dance. As it is so, choreography as it is generally defined, as is "dancing", are sacred and the integrity of each must be maintained in this model. This relationship predetermines the formal elements of either documentation or documentary to the extent that the dance will always be at the forefront of the work and that it will tacitly take precedence over any other considerations.

These definitions are the polar ends of the spectrum of what is referred to as dance for the camera and it is a safe generalization to say that most screendance falls between these poles. However these definitions point out the need for an entirely different type of analysis and critique for each and I believe make it obvious that one can not be substituted for the other without doing a disservice to both.

Screen dance, for the purpose of this argument is further differentiated from dance for television in that dance made specifically for television broadcast in the tradition of Dance in America for instance, is to a large degree predetermined as to both form and function. That is to say that the film or video rendering of the dance will generally be in service of a pre-existing piece of choreography rather than an exploration of the marriage of dance and its own mediated image much in the same manner as dance documentation. This is of course not necessarily the case in television markets outside of the U.S., for instance the BBC and Bravo/FACT produce dance for television that falls well outside of this paradigm.

Dance for television is generally a utilitarian practice, the utility being film or video in service of choreographic continuity for broadcast to a large audience. The method of transmission is functional and transparent and largely transposes the theatrical or proscenium experience of viewing dance to the broadcast arena as opposed to having inscribing a unique presence within the frame. Sculpture, for instance, is not made "for a gallery" as dance is "for television". The site specificity of dance made for television obviously precludes a number of possibilities.

Screen dance is itself a type of site specific practice. I would suggest a way of thinking about this hybrid form in which the camera may be thought of as the site, as we might refer to the theater as site in concert dance. This is where the work occurs and it is further the architecture against and through which the audience perceives the work. Site-specificity is how we contextualize a work of art or for that matter a sporting event, or any number of other organized spectacles. Site provides context. So, if a dance occurs only in the medium of film or video, it must be critiqued in terms of the architecture of that particular space. So, how does the site or architecture of dance for the camera differ from that of concert dance? In a number of ways, some of which are readily apparent, while others are not. First and foremost is the fact that dance for the camera is inherently a mediated experience. That is to say, what we are seeing when we view a film or video dance is no longer simply a dance. It is, rather a film or videotape, the subject of which is dance. The camera and method of recording have rendered the dancing as it occurred, however the representation of that dancing is filtered through the compositional and esthetic strategies of the camera operator, and again at a later point in the

editing process. It is in fact an object we are viewing within which dance is the focus, though the rigors of time, gravity, geography and the performers physical limitations are not at issue at least in the manner in which we may have become accustomed in regard to concert dance. This is where it is imperative that we begin to speak in the language of cinema. In a darkened theater we have but one fixed point of view, that of where we sit. The language of cinema allows us to participate in a work from multiple points of view. In this case, the term "point of view" may refer to not only a physical location, but a metaphorical one as well. Here, point of view may be a poetic, even abstract representation of place, or a visual reference to a purely emotional state of being. The language of cinema allows for a constantly shifting, ever fluid definition of place and time. What is consistent in the genre of work we are addressing here, is that dance is the catalyst for each investigation. Investigation is indeed exactly what the film or videomaker is engaged in. The very nature of the camera, with its capacity to zoom in and out and to focus tightly in a very small area, invites investigation of movement and its permutations on a very intimate level. The nature of creating dance for the camera at its most experimental is that the camera operator and the performer are forced to share a very intimate space, a space which in the theater is a safe-zone, protected by the fourth wall. Dances created for the camera are made with the tacit assumption of Brechtian theatricality. The fourth wall that Brecht referred to is in this example, the camera's lens, the artifice which separates the viewer from the dance. The camera (or viewer) is invited into that safe-zone and as such may participate in the dynamic of the performers space in a most intimate way. A gesture which on stage may seem small and insignificant may become, when viewed through the lens, poetic and grand, while the dancer's breath and footfalls may become a focal point of the work. These properties of screendance may be used for either their entertainment value or for their efficacy value.

In Richard Schechner's book, *Performance Theory*, the author describes a situation he calls, The "efficacy-entertainment braid". He speaks about a kind of performance that is designed to be efficacious, that is to effect transformation. For instance, in Papua, New Guinea, Schechner witnessed the performance of a ritual in which elaborate ceremonial dancing took place during which time animals were exchanged and debts were paid. As time went on, Schechner states, it became that the same people exchanged animals so that they might dance. Thus the performance changed from one of efficacy to one of entertainment. However he states, "no performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment. The matter is

complicated because one can look at specific performances from several vantages; changing perspectives changes classification".

This theory is applicable to screendance as well. The screendance that seeks to preserve the "integrity" of a piece of choreography may be efficacious in that it serves to archive the dance in its complete theatrical form and serves the choreographer as a specific communication tool. It may even be entertaining as we see in the example of Dance in America. However, it is not efficacious in regard to advancing our understanding of the form of screendance, ie there is no transformation. Schechner maintains that to effect transformation, is to be efficacious. Efficacy equals change and advances the art form. To do so, however may require one to sacrifice entertainment. In efficacy, one engages the ritual of object making, the ritualistic practice of creating, aestheticizing etc. To limit the cinematic vocabulary to only dance and its signifiers as one might in creating a screendance, is to engage in a sort of ritual. The practice of making screendance inserts one into a community of others engaged in similar process or ritual.

After all, isn't modernity and its entertainment's a debased form of ritual?

In the process of efficacious artmaking, one may create an entertainment or not though to follow Schechner's logic, efficacy and entertainment are always linked. To recognize the entertainment value of an efficacious work requires audience participation in the form of critical and analytical dialogue. In other words, a screendance that is effective in broadening the boundaries of dance and its mechanically produced other may not at first viewing seem like what we know to be screendance.

This idea was addressed by the artist and theorist Allan Kaprow in a 1983 essay called, *The Real Experiment*, but proposed much earlier in other writings of his. In *The Real Experiment*, Kaprow proposes a theory that holds that, "Western art actually has two avant-garde histories: one of artlike art and the other of lifelike art". He goes on to explain that we recognize artlike art specifically because it looks like what we know to be art and further that it is contextualized by its environment. Lifelike art is more difficult to recognize because it questions the very nature of what we know to be art and it may occur in venues that we do not associate with art.

So, to bring this back to screendance, perhaps the most efficacious screendance does not look like dance as we know it at all. I would propose that the most efficacious screendance might even counter the monolithic histories of dance, cinema and the visual arts and create a third party if you will, an independent party that infiltrates the histories of other existing artlike practices.



The theorists I have mentioned come from outside the dance world. They along with Lucy Lippard, Phillip Auslander, Clement Greenberg and others have kept an eye on contemporary art and offered critique and prescriptives along the way. This community is in need of the same sort of analytic guidance if it is to be considered a part of rather than apart from the larger sphere of dance, art and history.

It is my hope that this symposium will begin to address the issues I have raised regarding screen dance and perhaps raise the consciousness of the community of artists and scholars beyond these walls as well.