

Preface

Video Space: A Site For Choreography

by Douglas Rosenberg

Preface

Video space as a site for choreography is a malleable space for the exploration of dance as subject, object and metaphor, a meeting place for ideas about time, space and movement. The practice of articulating this site is one in which, through experimentation with camera angles, shot composition, location and post-production techniques, the very nature of choreography and the action of dance may be questioned, deconstructed and re-presented as an entirely new and viable construct. The result of this activity is what has come to be known as video dance, the practice of creating choreography for the camera, recorded in the medium of videotape. Video dance is a site-specific practice, that site being video itself. The term video serves as a kind of shorthand for a much broader system, a spatial construction which includes electronic recording devices, satellite transmission and reception and viewer decoding. As with any socially constructed site, it is beneficial to begin with an understanding of the language and history common to the form.

The contemporary practice of video dance has as its genesis, a short film by Thomas Edison made as early as 1894-95 called *Annabelle The Dancer*. The film, shot in one long take, features a young woman doing a Loie Fuller impression for the camera, her swirling, flowing dress in constant motion. The arc of dance for the camera continues through Hollywood musicals and the Busby Berkeley spectacles of the 1930's, primarily as a form of escapist, popular entertainment. There are some exceptions to this trajectory, most notably Maya Deren's seminal cine-dance from 1946, *A Study in Choreography For The Camera* made in collaboration with Talley Beatty, which is the precursor to contemporary video dance. While there was (and continues to be) considerable overlap, the transition from film (cine-dance) to video (video dance) in the late 1960's as the common method of fixing autonomous dance images, reflected a

rapidly changing culture and concretized McLuhan's theory of a global village through the application and appropriation of media practices. Choreographers, especially those born in the age of media, and aware of its power, have appropriated the language of media while continuing to create work for the theater.

Contemporary dance has been greatly influenced by the language of

video, television and the cinema. This is evident in contemporary choreographic practices which mimic the non-linear deconstructionist tendencies of media and the cinematic jump cut. This is remarkably clear in regard to video dance. There are myriad and distinct differences between dance made or re-made for television and the collaborative work of video artists and choreographers created with other ends in mind. As with any history, there are specific works created for the camera that have come to be regarded as "classics" of the form, such as Merce Cunningham's *Blue Studio*, and the aforementioned work by Deren. The importance of these works, can be found their use of the camera in creating an architecturally and or geographically specific site which contextualizes the choreographer's vision in a way not possible in the theater. There was a flurry of activity in video dance in the United States in the late 1970's through the late 1980's as funding sources including the National Endowment for the Arts, state agencies and PBS affiliates like WNET in New York and KQED in San Francisco began to recognize dance for the camera. However, that funding, (along with much of the funding for the arts in this country) has disappeared. Coincidentally, with the decrease in funding and the increase in cultural media literacy and the availability of consumer format video equipment, the number of artists creating dance for the camera has increased exponentially, giving voice to and empowering dance makers around the globe to participate in defining a site that is particular to dance for the camera. Though this article focuses largely on work being made in the United States, it is important to point out that the practice of video dance is an international one. Festivals, television broadcasts and screening opportunities in Europe and Canada far outnumber those in the U.S. [1]

While 'dance for the camera' refers to work made in both film and video, each artist chooses the medium of rendering for reasons that are quite personal. It is safe to say that prior to the middle 1960's most dance for the camera was rendered in film, (with the exception of dance rendered for television) as video was not yet available to the general public. However, in the mid 1960's, Sony introduced the first portable video equipment. By today's standards, it was cumbersome at best, however, compared to what was available at the time for the recording of real-time activity, it was a revolution. Video technology allowed immediate feedback, it was relatively easy to use and required no lab time to 'develop'. While initially, portable video equipment was seen as an ideal way to document dance, choreographers and video makers recognized the potential for creating dances specifically for the camera. Making dances for the camera quickly became not only a viable alternative to theater-dance, but a driving force in how choreographers re-conceived the art of dance for the theater, the impact of which is evident in the cinematic quality of the work of many contemporary dance-makers. This oscillation between camera and stage has been articulated by Meredith Monk in speaking about two early works, *Juice*, 1969 and *Needle Brain Lloyd*, (1970). Monk has stated that while conceiving these pieces, she

was interested in creating a "live movie", [2] and a work that addressed her fascination with cinematic time and space. This fascination of Monk and others with cinematic praxis is further articulated by Noel Carroll in his article *Dancing With The Camera*. Film theorist Carroll points out the "The other arts also vacillate between regarding cinema as a source of both subject matter and stylistic devices" [3] He goes on to say that "In the

first decades of the cinema especially, filmmakers naturally gravitated toward imitating the other arts". Carroll points out that from the beginning, dance and film had a "natural point of tangency... both it might be said, were concerned with movement". [3]

Over the years, as cinema and dance transversed modernism, they

have engaged in an almost unbroken courtship. Each gazing at the other with a sort of longing and ultimately appropriating both technique and style from the object of their affection.

Artists have been quick to recognize the potential of each new technology to come along since the Renaissance, mining it as a forum for artistic expression. Video dance is a product of the current technological revolution (though I prefer the term 'technological evolution'). However, all works of art, including video dance reflect something of the culture out of which they came; no artwork can be created in a vacuum and dance for the camera is no different. As technology has advanced over the past one hundred years, the works reflect those advances. Amy Greenfield's *Earth Trilogy* (1971) and Carolyn Brown's *Dune Dance* (1978) are works that are immediately recognizable as products of the 1970's, reflecting the attitudes and concerns of the era. We can read both works by the signifiers evident in the structural language, film stock, and movement quality, even the duration of the pieces, all of which gives us clues to its era of creation. Maya Deren's *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945)

with Talley Beatty finds the filmmaker breaking taboos, transgressing stereotypes and making a distinctly political statement by featuring an African-American not as a servant or a butler as Hollywood did at the time, but rather as a fully formed

human being, an elegant and talented dancer. Deren uses the dancer as the constant in a shifting landscape of place and time, the flow of movement unbroken as location changes from scene to scene, questioning our relationship to the logic of chronology. At moments in Deren's silent film, Beatty seems suspended in mid-air

for a humanly impossible length of time. At others, an unfolding of the dancer's arm begins in one location and seamlessly ends in another, the

choreography literally "moving" the viewer into another place. As we move through radical eras of our history, dance for the camera has mirrored the upheaval in the culture and in fact served as a site for the discussion of issues of gender, race, disability and

the very nature of dance itself, even while leaving us with a palimpsest of the concerns of the makers in their time. In Choreographer Victoria Marks' video dance work, *Outside In*, directed by Margaret Williams in 1995, the choreographer uses video as a site for exploring gender identity and issues of ability/disability. Created with dancers from CandoCo, Marks uses video as a site to playfully explore physical identity in a sort of voyage toward the discovery of a new understanding of dance. This work empowers and humanizes dancers of differing abilities, presenting them as sensuous and playful human beings.

The Specific Site

Dance is, by its very nature, an ephemeral art form. It is also one that is constantly defining and re-defining itself in relation to the culture and to contemporary life. As technology has advanced with increasing rapidity since the late 1960's, dance-makers have found new and often groundbreaking methods for using technology to achieve their choreographic visions. Grounded in this marriage of dance and technology is the creation of dances made specifically for the camera. While there are numerous terms used to describe this practice, I will rely on three which I feel are the most precise. The first, dance for the camera is an inclusive term that refers to any and all dance created specifically for the camera, either in the medium of film or video. The second, cine-dance is a term that refers to work made in the medium of film, and video dance which refers to work made for the camera using the contemporary medium and practices of video technology. All three terms refer to the art of creating a choreography for the camera, to be viewed as a fully formed, autonomous work of art, ultimately, either on a film screen or television. There are numerous approaches to the practice of creating dance for the camera and differences in the history of both, however there are also similarities that occur in both cine dance and video dance. Both place the choreography within the frame of the camera and offer the makers the opportunity to deconstruct the dance and to alter its form and linearity in post-production. As the quality and resolution of video has improved in recent years, the boundaries between film and video practice have begun to diminish. Still, each has its own specificity, history and formal qualities. video dance, by utilizing contemporary technology, places itself in the discourse of current media practice and therefore in the discourse of popular culture and contemporary

media theory as well.

A useful model when articulating these hybrid forms, is one in which the camera and method of recording 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 may contextualize a work of art or for that matter a sporting event, or any number of other organized spectacles. Site provides context. If a dance is created to be viewed only in the medium of film or video, it must be critiqued in terms of the architecture of that particular space. The site or architecture of dance for the camera differs 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 dance created for the camera is no longer simply a "dance". It is, rather, first and foremost, 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 or director, and again at a later point in the editing process. It is a work of art we are viewing within which dance is the focus, though the rigors of time, gravity, geography and the performers physical limitations are suspended in a void or virtual space.

When viewing a dance 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 specifically because the camera, while recording an event, may wander at will. That is to say, the camera has the potential to "see" a

dance from 360 degrees at any given point. 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 time-based media

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. 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. In other words, the presence of the camera is pre-supposed, a given, and as such the camera (or viewer) is invited into that safe-zone and 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, grand and poetic, while the dancer's breath and footfalls may become a focal point of the work.

Since its early days, video has come to serve two distinct and singular functions in regard to dance. The first and still most commonly used, is as a tool for documenting and archiving dance. The second is video as a site for the creation of unique and singular works of art, or video dance, in essence a sort of dance

theater for the camera. If one considers the theater with its proscenium arch as a site for the performance of dance, then one might also consider video, with its specific frame size (or aspect ratio, the relationship of width to height) as a sort of architectural space as well. Just as the theater has an architectural specificity, the

same can be said of video. However, the theater offers no permanent storage for dance. After a performance one is left with the lingering yet ephemeral image of the dance as it was in the theater. Within the technology of video, the site for storage of the dance becomes the electronically encoded space of the videotape, allowing the audience to view it repeatedly as it is. That is to say, the viewing of

the video dance is always in the present, regardless of the passage of time from its creation. The architecture of video, or video space is a construction of transdimensionality, in other words, the simultaneous perception of two time frames, (the viewing present and the past/present; the point of creation of the video dance) and the perception of three dimensional space in a two dimensional

medium. The act of viewing a dance created for the camera in the medium of video requires the viewer to participate in re-imagining the nature of dance itself.

Just as 'The Cinema' was the site both literally and figuratively, for the dances of Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire and Busby Berkeley, and had its own architectural viewing space, so too does video. Movies have historically been viewed in grand palaces, in the dark, surrounded by a number of other viewers. The larger than life experience of movie-going contributed greatly to a sense of spectacle. By contrast, video dance is generally viewed on a television or projected in some cases, but remains a relatively intimate

experience. In this regard, the concept of site has multiple meanings. Merce Cunningham, a pioneer in the field of video dance (who has worked extensively in film as well) explored this concept directly in his 1979 work *Locale*, directed by Charles Atlas. In fact, the title of the piece refers specifically to the fact that this is not a work for the theater and that the dance exists entirely within the purview of the camera. David Vaughan states that "In the previous pieces, Cunningham and Atlas had dealt principally with movement within the frame rather than movement of the frame-using that is to say, a mostly stationary camera with no fancy editing. Now they were ready to explore the possibilities of a moving camera..." [5] In *Locale*, the camera moves through the space of the dancers at breakneck speed, dancers randomly appearing and disappearing from the frame. The effect is quite the opposite of the entrances and exits one expects in the theater. It feels as if the camera is in a sense

'discovering' the movement already in progress. Vaughan goes on to say that Cunningham had an "instinctive understanding" that the language of video was quite different than that of the stage, "...realizing for instance, that time can be treated elliptically because the spectator absorbs information much faster than in

the theater, and that space appears to widen out from the small aperture of the screen, giving an illusion of greater depth than in fact exists". [6]

In the videotape *Blue Studio*, directed by Charles Atlas, (1976-77) we see Cunningham in the studio, on the road, the point of view constantly shifting, as Cunningham "dances" with dancers videotaped in black and white in another, earlier period of time. It is the collision of images and score, (by John Cage) existing in a contingent electronic space that gives the piece both its form and content. The importance of Cunningham's contribution to the development of

dance for the camera cannot be overstated. His recognition of the camera as a site for situating choreography and the inherent differences between camera space and theater space has insured Cunningham a prominent position in the history of the

medium. In *Beach Birds For Camera* (1992-93), a 28 minute film directed by Elliot Caplan, we experience the choreography first in studio, with the changing light of the day contributing to a spare, elegant mise en scene and later in another location without natural light, but set in proximity to a shimmering blue panel. The film moves from a cool almost ascetic black and white to color and as it does so, the viewer moves both metaphorically and literally to another site, one with a decidedly different emotional range. The presence of John Cage's score, *Four3*, at times audible at times barely so, is embedded in the picture, its source seeming to be the film itself.

Beach Birds as seen in theater, though striking, is quite different from the film version. In its theater version, the score is performed at a distance from the stage, the effect being a separation of music and movement, two distinctly different sources. Ironically, the dance itself, lacking in the "close-ups" utilized by Caplan in the film version, seems flat by comparison. There is no shift

in site or architectural specificity, we are always aware of the theatricality of both the dance itself as well as our relationship to it. The visceral experience created by Caplan in the film version hovers in the mind like a dream if one has viewed it prior to seeing the work in theater, and a longing for the presence of those images

is inevitable. This experience reinforces the power of cinematic dance images to replace or serve as a mnemonic marker for the "original" and in some cases to displace the theatrical performance of the same choreography.

While many choreographers initially create a work of choreography for the stage and later adapt it for the camera, Cunningham has reversed the process in works such as *Points In Space*, created for the camera and directed by Elliot Caplan in 1986. According to Caplan, [7] Cunningham is acutely aware of the contextual differences of camera and stage space and makes precise and numerous adjustments in the choreography for each. In the camera version of *Points in Space*, Cunningham's choreography often unfolds sequentially while entrances and exits are made to and

from the specific frame of the camera. In the stage version, the sequential sections of choreography are altered and layered, often overlapping, while entrances and exits are adjusted to stage space and a solo by Cunningham that appears in the camera version, is absent in the stage version. Though the trajectory of camera to

theater is unusual, in this particular instance the choreography has two distinct yet intricately related lives.

When we sit in a darkened theater and experience a choreographic work, more often than not our relationship to the work is less than three dimensional. Though we perceive it to be three dimensional, we make a number of assumptions based on our relationship to the work, which is fixed, as is our relationship to the stage, by our location in the audience and further by the architectural peculiarities of the theater. The choreographer has made certain decisions which present us with a particular view of the movement. We (the audience) experience or perceive the dance in respect to our fixed point of view. The camera has no permanently fixed point of view, rather the camera in motion has the ability to create a type of intimacy

with the dance that can only be imagined by the viewer in the theater. It is an intimacy that comes from both the camera's proximity to the dance and also from the camera operator's hyperactive participation in and fascination with the movement. This fascination with movement has a long tradition in the optical mediums. In fact, the photographic motion studies of Eadward Muybridge anticipated what we have come to call video dance by some one hundred years. Muybridge an English born

photographer working in Pennsylvania in the 1870's, invented a system of placing numerous cameras in a line and snapping photographs in rapid succession to capture movement in a way never before possible. What he created was a sort of cinematic unfolding of movement in both human and animal subjects in a way that

revolutionized our ability to comprehend movement itself. In 1888 Muybridge had a meeting with Thomas Edison to speak about his idea for a collaboration which would have featured Muybridge's motion studies and Edison's sound recording inventions. Unfortunately, the technology was not yet perfected and the

collaboration never occurred. However, as early as 1894, Thomas Edison had begun making silent dance films at his Black Maria Film Studio, the most well known being *Annabelle The Dancer* .

It is important here to make a distinction between the documentation of a dance, dance for television and dance created specifically for the camera. Dance documentation is generally done to preserve a choreography or a performance in its totality. Television dance is generally shot with multiple cameras placed in strategic locations including one wide or master shot. The resulting footage is subsequently edited together in post-production to give the viewer multiple viewpoints of the dance while still preserving the choreography. Generally, the traditional audience point of view is maintained, that is to say the relationship of the viewer to the stage. Dance for the camera is something entirely and occupies a wholly different space than dance for the theater; one could say that it is a hybrid form, contextualized by the medium and method of recording, that can only exist as film or video. It is not a substitute for, or in conflict with the live theatrical performance of a dance, but rather a wholly separate yet equally viable way of creating dance-works

In order to fully appreciate the work we refer to as dance for the camera, it requires one to suspend one's expectations of the nature of dance. In fact, dance for the camera has liberated dance from the theater and given it a new and different proscenium, that of the film screen or

television monitor. With this liberation comes a new lexicon of terms, with a new and different language necessary to speak of this work. While composition, form, dexterity and command of the medium are critical benchmarks, the language of dance for the camera and specifically video dance is grounded in the language of the media. The re-presentation of dance as a media object puts it firmly in the milieu of contemporary forms of representation. The site of video dance provides a forum for choreographers to participate in a discourse in the very medium of contemporary discourse, the media itself.

The task of articulating choreography within the site of video is a collaborative process. Unlike cinema, there is often no script as a tendency in contemporary choreography is toward the non-narrative or abstract. Consequently, fixing an ephemeral art form within the site of video requires not only intimate knowledge of the choreography but a high degree of trust. The camera can

be an intrusive presence as it not only records but influences the dance and the dancer as well. When creating dance for the camera, collaborators have a tendency to assume a relationship based in a sort of hierarchy that places the camera in service of the choreography

and is at odds with the very nature of collaboration. As video art was being invented in the 1960's, there was an effort on the part of those working with this protean form, to democratize the practice making it, at its best, an egalitarian one. The camera tends to exert a sort of authority that shapes a situation it intended to simply reveal or fix and reinforces the hierarchy that early media artists sought to destroy. By allowing the camera to completely dictate form, one compromises the choreography; by ignoring the presence of the camera, one may compromise the video dance. In both situations, the video dance is destined to feel lifeless or empty, occupying a site that is satisfying neither as documentation or video dance.

To supercede this dialectic requires a literal "recorporealization of the body" via screen techniques. 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. Video dance is in practice, a construction of a choreography that lives only within the site and architectural space of the camera. 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.

"Choreography" as such, becomes relevant only as source material for the visualization or recorporealization of the body in the four dimensional state. In order for the video or cine-dance to live, its original (the

"choreography") must be effaced or sacrificed in favor of a new creature.

This paradox has occupied the thinking of a number of theorists and critics including Walter Benjamin, who in his seminal essay, *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, written in 1936, said, "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be". [8] Benjamin explains this presence as the "aura" of a work of art, in a sense the spirit or texture of a work of art that is lacking in its mechanical representation. Video dance can never be the dance itself, only its other. However, to accept Benjamin's paradigm would be to deny the power of mechanically (or virtually) reproduced works such as Cunningham and Caplan's *Beach Birds For Camera*, the work of Victoria Marks or numerous others that have successfully challenged Benjamin's assertions and re-inscribed the choreographic aura within the site of video dance.

Douglas Rosenberg is a video artist who is writing a book about dance and the camera. His work with choreographers including Molissa Fenley, Eiko and Koma, Anna Halprin and Li Chiao-Ping has been screened internationally. He currently teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and recently organized the first International Dance For the Camera Symposium.

References:

1. There has been tremendous institutional support for video dance in England, specifically by the BBC in the form of commissions for broadcast. Additionally, festivals such as Moving Pictures in Canada, DanceScreen (organized by IMZ in Vienna), Mostra Festival in Spain and International Festival of Video Dance in Buenos Aires, Argentina have succeeded in broadening audience and creating screening opportunities. In the U.S. the Dance on Camera Festival in New York is the longest running such festival.
2. Monk made this comment while speaking about her work at the American Dance Festival in 1996 and had previously spoken about the concept of a "live movie" in a videotape interview for the American Dance Festival's Speaking of Dance series. Monk had made a film version of *16 Millimeter Earrings* with director Robert Withers in 1966 and had worked with film in her live theater pieces prior to creating *Needle Brain Lloyd* and *Juice*.
3. *Dancing For The Camera*, lecture presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Santiago de Compostella, Spain, November 30, 1995
4. *ibid*

5. David Vaughan, *Locale: The Collaboration of Merce Cunningham and Charles Atlas*, *Millenium Film Journal*, No 10/11, 1981-82

6. *ibid*

7. Conversation with Caplan, February 24, 1997, regarding his collaboration with Cunningham on the films *Points in Space* and *Beach Birds for Camera*,

8. *From Illuminations*, Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969