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A little less conversation

Exploring how choreographed gallery experiences can impact upon depth of engagement

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Based on a conversation with Kate Coyne, Programme Director, Siobhan Davies Dance, and choreographer and dancer Lucy Suggate.

The following dialogue between Kate Coyne, Gill Hart and Lucy Suggate is based on the European Union funded project *Dancing Museums*, a two-year research project featuring five dance organisations, five choreographers and eight museums and galleries. The project comprises eight residencies, each lasting two weeks. Residencies include research time for the lead choreographer and a week of audience engagement.

The project was conceived to explore ways in which working together might result in more powerful interpretations or experiences of art – in the case of the National Gallery, paintings.

Choreographers create experiences using their bodies, communicating through a process of physical thought and movement. Visitor experiences in museums and galleries are often based on words; labels, audio guides or a dialogue facilitated by staff. A critical rationale for exploring what might be gained from working with choreographers was to test what James Elkins described in *Pictures and Tears*:

*'...the piles of information smother our capacity to really feel. By imperceptible steps, art history gently drains away a painting's sheer wordless visceral force, turning it into an occasion for intellectual debate.'*¹

Might it be possible to challenge codified and accepted behaviours when one looks at, learns about and experiences art in a gallery? We set out to test this hypothesis, not in order to do away with language but by complementing it through movement, to explore the 'wordless, visceral force' of a painting.

Why place dance within the context of a museum or gallery?

KC: Dancing in a museum brings visitors closer to performers – its proximity to the perceived stillness of paintings or objects interrupts codes of gallery behaviour. It creates situations in which dance can be recognised as a physical model of thought, allowing non-verbal communication of the complexity of human movement, both in the live body and within a painting or object.

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We, at Siobhan Davies Dance, have a lot of experience working in galleries. The opportunity to research (rather than build performances) and to look at dance through the lens of historical painting is a new one, chiming with the organisation's desire to continually investigate dance's place in culture. It has provided a platform to consider how dance and visual art education can work together, to an extent exploring what Karmen MacKendrick articulated in *Embodying Transgression*:

*'...literature forces us to confront what we cannot understand in language, the inexhaustibility, the impossible nonsensical excess, of "meaning", which turns out to be everywhere and absent; dance forces us to confront what our bodies alone can "understand", the inexhaustible joy and desire of spaces.'*²

There is a convention where people watching dance stay for the duration – even when that was not intended. When we presented the durational work *Table of Contents* in galleries, dwell time

significantly increased.³ In *Dancing Museums*, we are testing whether we can encourage a similar licence to linger in front of a painting, encouraging visitors to look for longer whilst both engaging with the choreography and the collection.

Gathering evidence of dwell time is one of a range of methodologies used to record and evaluate *Dancing Museums*. Differing scales and types of organisation has necessitated varying approaches, including commissioning objective writers to document residencies by observing and interviewing staff, visitors and dance artists through to a full ethnographic evaluation study at the Louvre.⁴ When the project concludes in March 2017, a rich body of evidence will exist across organisations whose objectives vary.

GH: At the National Gallery, a desired outcome of *Dancing Museums* is to test and learn from the proposition that we need not be dependent upon sophisticated verbal language to create meaningful, in-depth learning experiences that enhance visual literacy.

Performance is part of many museum and gallery programmes. This project is not about choreography as much as the artwork. It is about how obvious or explicit the relationship between performance and painting can be. Does that relationship 'speak' for itself and can it be readily understood? How can we resist the temptation to provide verbal interpretation to explain the performed interpretation?

The pursuit of other modes of communication in part connects with the historical fine art collection we have at the National Gallery and chimes with an idea put forward by Rika Burnham in *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*. The 'coded, puzzle-like character of allegory in the grand manner threatens to bring out the worst in our teaching... Information floods in to alleviate our anxiety over the possibility of failing to make the artwork comprehensible.'⁵ Working with choreographers felt like an appropriate way to test this. Whilst transmission model teaching (where knowledge or information is transmitted from teacher to student) is not our main staple, we are seeking to create situations where our participants can experience dialogues – not just with us, but directly with the paintings.

LS: Movement is my language of choice – as a choreographer when I encounter paintings, particularly historical ones, I am struck by the transformation of two-dimensional surfaces into three-dimensional worlds where illusion and reality coexist.

Performance spaces often insist on distance; fixed perspectives that somehow seem counter intuitive. If my work is about passing energy from one physical body to another why would I want you to be stuck still? In a gallery, paintings and the moving body are no longer separate – they are extensions of each other. Everything comes alive.

There are embedded expectations when watching a live performer; we enter cultural and communal spaces with a lot of coded behaviour. During the *Dancing Museums* residency at Arte Sella <http://www.artesella.it/en/chisiamo.html>, an outdoor exhibition of contemporary art in Italy, visitors stopped, looked and stayed – even if the work was not intended to be watched as a whole piece. There seemed to be a shift towards more conventional dynamics of performer as active, spectator as passive. In a large outdoors sculpture park I had been anticipating a wandering quality and natural desire to change perspective around a fixed object. *Dancing Museums* residencies highlight these issues: how do we, as dance artists, depart from more traditional paradigms of spectator/performer?

How does dance and movement add to the existing practice of educators and choreographers and lead to more in-depth engagement with our visitors?

*'As human beings we all live in two worlds. There is the world that exists whether or not you exist... This is the world of objects, events and other people; it is the world around you. There is another world that exists only because you exist: the private world of your own thoughts, feelings and perceptions, the world within you... We only know the world around us through the world within us, through the senses by which we perceive it and the ideas by which we make sense of it.'*⁶

GH: Museum and gallery partners approached *Dancing Museums* as an opportunity to address

ways in which embodied or procedural knowledge may not be well presented through verbal language alone. For the dance partners and choreographers it is an opportunity to consider the gallery environment as more than a mere backdrop for their performance.

All partners in the project have been motivated by the sentiment expressed (above) by Ken Robinson in considering the convergence of movement, words and pictures. Robinson continues, 'In western cultures we've become used to making firm distinctions between these two worlds, between thinking and feeling, objectivity and subjectivity, facts and values.'⁷

At the National Gallery our collaborations with choreographers have developed as part of a programme based upon experiences where there is a convergence between thinking and feeling. One catalyst for this enquiry was the exhibition *Vermeer and Music: The Art of Love and Leisure*, <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/vermeer-and-music>, which featured live music in the exhibition and on the events programme.

Music provided a powerful, alternative experience and also a conundrum: Vermeer's paintings are among the most resoundingly quiet. Slowly an idea grew to create the conditions for visitors to experience one artwork in total silence. *Looking without Talking* events took place in the Dutch Galleries where, with minimal conversation, visitors were asked to take a seat on their own in front of a spot lit painting and,

at the sound of a bell, sit in silence – alone, with a picture.⁸ By removing verbal interpretation, we concentrated instead on creating optimum conditions for visitors to stop, slow down, take notice and begin constructing individual responses.

Summative evaluation revealed that time alone and space to focus the mind and eye resulted in many participants developing a framework of meaning ordinarily teased out verbally, using questions. Some participants found the experience so powerful, they were moved to tears.⁹

This led to the development of experimental programming, complementing the more conventional approach one might expect from a guided tour or lecture. Diversifying our approach has created programmes where participants take control of how and what they absorb from a painting as they settle into an active looking experience. This is challenging behavioural conventions and our educational practice simultaneously – however, whilst much of what we do is based upon theories of multiple intelligence,¹⁰ the inclusion of feeling, making or performing is likely to be couched in verbal prompts.

Movement, like silence, has also developed as a means by which to do this; *Dancing Museums* thus far has provided striking examples. For the *Museo Civico, Bassano del Grappa* in August 2015, Lucy Suggate and Tatiana Julien choreographed a 15 minute long experiential tour designed, through minimal verbal instruction, to encourage participants



to engage with a specific theme in one gallery, a colour in another and a hand gesture in the next. The cumulative impact of this approach was one of spatial awareness and heightened awareness of materials and emotions; participants used their own bodies to react to the art around them.

At the Louvre residency in March 2016, Connor Schumacher performed the equivalent of a preparatory sketch in the setting of a reconstructed ancient courtyard. A soundtrack written and recorded by Connor played as he moved across the friezes and the courtyard; the carefully selected words and movements combined to create an audio

and visual rumination on frailty and conservation. The human body looked small and vulnerable against large stone artworks.

'From the moment these monuments were finished they began to die.'

'From the moment my body was built completely it began to die.'

'There are gaps in the history of these objects

Just like there are gaps in my teeth.'

'The object does not care that it is falling apart.'

My body does not care that it is falling apart.

Only I do.'

The works themselves are in a 'constant state of conservation' as the soundtrack asked us 'who will conserve the idea of me?' ¹¹

KC: Our research interest for *Dancing Museums* is whether dance can surprise visitors out of following conventions, leading to a longer, more deeply personal, engagement with paintings.

However, dance work exists only in the moment, and each moment is unique depending on who is there to experience it. Watching a live body in movement can increase dwell time but what is interesting about *Dancing Museums* thus far is how increased dwell time has been directed *back* to the artworks. This has been recorded at *Arte Sella*, where average dwell time during the residency was doubled, and visitors to the site were recorded as being in less of a rush to 'finish the tour', and at the *Louvre* where Connor Shumacher's piece led to longer and more concentrated dwell time during and *after* the performance.

The partner museums and galleries in *Dancing Museums* vary; settings can be large, small, have free-standing displays or works only on walls. Some have low footfall and others high. This variation in visitor flow presents a challenge, making it imperative for the choreographers to be adaptable, mindful of their environment and sensitive to the visitor experience.

LS: I aspire for my work to be encountered in a similar way to how you might approach an object, a piece of sculpture, a strange creature or another human being. I'm curious to know what information the visitor receives by just passing a moving body in a gallery space. For me, the most important thing is that I am able to transmit energy and ideas from my body into space to be experienced by 'willing' spectators.

My artistic response to paintings has been to focus on time, space and colour, manipulating my body within these frameworks. The physical marks I make enable the public to read the body as a live and painted manifestation. Their reflections back to me always include reference to an aspect of the museum artwork as well as what I am doing. Occasionally I talk to visitors as I work – which is not always what they expect and can take them by surprise. One participant at the residency at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, described my work as being both Baroque and Sci-fi: I can, then, integrate these references into my material. Unlike the paintings, I can take on feedback and constantly alter the work at source.

What are we learning?

LS: Traditionally the dancer is so often used to being the centre of attention – a little bit like an altarpiece. I wonder if we can ever fully abstract performer from performance. This makes it difficult for a performer to be read like a painting or piece of sculpture. We will always be human, always be alive. There have been moments where we have all reverted to previous experiences or modes of



operation: the dancers keep on performing and the public watch the moving body as if it were in a theatre. Can we ever successfully integrate differing codes of cultural behaviour? Primarily it is a process of acclimatisation for all involved. We are learning to share the space with the public, the paintings – and a lot of different movements.

In *Dancing Museums* we are exploring a more subtle, integrated approach. Sometimes it is difficult to know how to behave: the stillness of the paintings command so much attention that any movement can appear insensitive, inappropriate.

What skills, or embodied knowledge, can I pass on to enhance or encourage new learning, seeing and thinking? I often think about the artist; the physical act of painting, mixing colour, transferring their imagination into marks. Having spent time with the paintings, I begin to see paint as their material as the body is my material. That's something I want to explore during the National Gallery residency in November 2016.

GH: There have been moments, or vignettes, within each residency, where flashes of physical and conceptual intelligence work in synchronicity – as John Dewey put it, 'Images and ideas come to

us not by set purpose but in flashes, and flashes are intense and illuminating, they set us on fire'.¹² They appear at their strongest when designed around an economy of carefully selected language combined with a physical intelligence. Connor Schumacher's soundtrack and movement in symbiosis with the artworks at the Louvre and Lucy Suggate's disruption of a movement with a word during the Vienna residency are such moments.

The disciplinary exchange between choreographer and educator demonstrates that a carefully designed experience can lead to extraordinarily powerful visual encounters for everyone involved. Verbal language alone can lock us into superficial analysis, whether formal or narrative. To encourage visual and visceral literacy – for an individual's experience to go deeper – we need to be a little less verbose ourselves.

Notes

1. Elkins, J. (2004) *Pictures and Tears*. New York: Routledge, p.92
2. Mackendrick, K. (2004) 'Embodying Transgression' in A. Lepecki (ed.), *Of The Presence of The Body, Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, p.150
3. *Table of Contents* is a six-hour long collaborative work. Evaluation at the Arnolfini cited 75% of visitors agreed that the work had changed their expectation of what they see in a gallery, 65% of people stayed up to 1 hour, 20% stayed 1-2 hours and 15% stayed 2-4 hours.
4. The Louvre evaluation will be available on the Dancing Museums website. Date to be confirmed. <http://dancingmuseums.com/>
5. R. Burnham and E. Kai-Kee (2011) *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, p.122
6. K. Robinson and L. Aronica (2015) *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education*. Viking p.51
7. Ibid., p.51
8. This event format was in part inspired by an experiment described in the Boston Globe of the approach taken by Harvard Art History Professor Jennifer Roberts, who asks her students to stare at artworks for up to three hours. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/health-wellness/2013/05/26/cure-for-distracted-mind-stare-painting-for-three-hours/rzlKob6JEBY0RIsQI1DSqN/story.html>
9. Feedback from this experience ranged from 'sitting in silence, I find my eyes to be extremely busy...' to 'relaxing', 'cathartic' and 'mindful'. One man reluctantly sat on the last available seat in front of a battle scene; later he explained he would not ordinarily have looked twice at this painting – time alone in silence had enabled him to search for details, discover relationships between figures and a growing wonder about how the artist had achieved the flourish of a cape or dramatic pictorial effect.

10. The theory of multiple intelligences was proposed by Howard Gardner in his 1983 book *'Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences'*. Gardner proposed eight criteria to be considered as intelligences in place of one general ability. These criteria included visual-spatial, verbal-linguistic and bodily-kinesthetic. At a later date, he proposed several additional criteria. For full details see Gardner, H. (1983), *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books

11. Excerpts from Connor Schumacher's 'Everything Crumbles' performed in the Louvre on 18 March 2016

12. Dewey, J. (1934) *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books, p.287

Endnotes

Video footage of some of the residencies can be viewed at <http://www.dancingmuseums.com/artefacts.html>

Information about this project and the impact can be found at <http://www.dancingmuseums.com>. It is a work in progress and is very much the result of people working in different languages yet all trying to co-ordinate in English – which is interesting in itself given the aims. At this point there are various written accounts and surveys of different residencies, some of which are in need of translation. In due course these will all feature on the website.

Images

1 – 3. Connor Schumacher, *Everything Crumbles*, 2016, with fragments from the Palace of Sargon II, Louvre, department of near eastern antiquities, photos by Gill Hart.

4 – 6. Lucy Suggate performing in the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna. Lucy spoke with visitors whilst performing, challenging conventions of behaviour for both gallery goers and performance audiences, photos by Gill Hart.