Through Screens

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P ia Ednie-Brown's essay *Falling into the Surface (toward a materiality of affect)* (1999), has nothing to do with screendance.

Falling was published in 1999 and its audience was—and remains—primarily architects, architectural students, and academics. In 2009, an architect friend in Melbourne suggested Pia's writing might interest me; at the time, I happened to be involved in developing a screendance project called *Anamnesis* . The following year these coincidental circumstances led to my suggesting Pia's essay to the Screendance Network as one of several historical essays that would act as provocations for this issue of the *International Journal of Screendance* .

When I first read *Falling* I remember being drawn to its poetics, in which we no longer fall *down* but rather are "opening out," and our subjectivity is twisted onto a surface that animates perception.[1] Some of the connections to the screendance aspects of my practice were obvious, in particular the post-production work on *Anamnesis* and the idea of falling onto the surface of the team's computer(s).

Such fallings involve repositioning a film's subjects from the rehearsed and the responsive, to their manifestations in dance in the edit. It is as if a new choreography has begun and that which is already made is remade. The feeling of falling (or opening out) onto the surface of the screen initiates collaboration between (recently) live presences, the mechanics of the edit, pixels, data and the creative team.

From the conditions of post-production to the methods by which screendances are presented, these encounters with flatness, with surfaces of shadows and light, are at the heart of the screendance community's work. Although screendance's materiality is independent of the surface for projection or display, its affective potential is realized through the meeting of skins with multiple disparate surfaces. These ephemeral surfaces are the building of the film—a site for enaction—and our post-produced choreographic processes are "insinuated in the building itself."[2]

Laurie Anderson's 1975 installation *At the Shrink's (a Fake Hologram)* playfully disrupts the flatness of the screen by constructing a roughly shaped sculpture to *receive* the image, and its contours allow the light of the projector to animate the clay.[3] At the same time, the impossibility of Anderson's tongue-in-cheek experiment in three-dimensionality—reflexively rendered in her voiced description of visiting a psychiatrist—reinforces the mechanical and material demands of video (and film) for flatness.

Ednie-Brown expresses her interest in surfaces very clearly:

Surface*, in common parlance, is generally understood as the exterior boundary of things, the outer skin of any object. In this sense, surfaces are actual, material, textural entities that are the most directly perceived and* felt *aspects of the world. They are that which we directly encounter. The surface is also taken to be something that conceals: 'it was not what it appeared to be on the surface.' It is when things surface that they*

become evident or apparent; they appear out of a previously concealed existence or latency. Surfacing *is an action of becoming explicit, of becoming experientially apparent in a movement from virtuality to actuality—of becoming expressed across the limits of perception. Surfacing is the process of becoming perceptible and actual.*[4]

I can imagine philosopher Alva Noë''s "enactive approach" to perception, in which the act of perceiving is akin to metaphors of touch (rather than sight), intersecting with Ednie-Brown's *surfacing*.[5] Noë suggests that perception is not something that happens to us, but is something we enact. It is a skilled process that occurs in the entire body in which our capacities for perception, action, and thought are inseparable.

As images become "integrated and dispersed" in the process of falling (onto surfaces), they are falling into meaning through action.[6] The actions are ours, and through them we are sensitized, enactive, and the moving image (still falling) is made and remade, built and torn down. It is a delicate dance of construction, an architecture of desire between the mechanism of film-video projection and my *touching* its various surfaces.

At Expo Zaragoza 2008, MIT architects and engineers from the SENSEable City Lab[7] built a Digital Water Pavilion[8] (with design by Carlo Ratti developing the interactive water wall concept created by the Smart Cities Group at MIT and directed by William J. Mitchell). Conceived as "a place where spaces are flexible, changing and responsive"[9] the building features walls made entirely of water that is controlled (by electromagnetic valves) as if it were pixels on a screen.[10] The Digital Water Pavilion is a building of flexible (falling) screens-walls that are adaptable and able to project and absorb light. The walls are non-surfaces, outliers in how we understand the utility of walls and screens. They are porous surfaces in which the delineation of inside and outside is uncertain, and my dancing body is falling through them, and now the water-pixels of this screen are falling with and on me.

Through collecting and building ideas during this brief writing process, I've begun to think about screens: their physical integrity, motility, and balance, the ways in which I am seduced by their presence and ubiquity, the shrinking scale of our dances with perceptual action as we hunch, lean and hover around their pixels and frames. As a choreographer-dancer involved in screendance, I am interested in imagining the limits of the screen's capacity to contribute to the meaning-making possibilities of the videographic. This brush with Ednie-Brown's writing has given me the opportunity to questions the assumptions I make about screens and their potential for experimentation. In willing architects to depart from the "impasse of nostalgia,"[11] Ednie-Brown also—and inadvertently—challenges screendance practitioners to "break out of self-perpetuating habits. Through modes of fallibility, experimentations can expand their processual dimensions and propel them into even more pronounced expressions."[12]

What might this contrived or even arbitrary connection between Ednie-Brown's writing—something she herself now describes as a "cat overdoing a set of acrobatic twists while falling"[13]—and contemporary screendance practices be like for other screendance artists to engage with and respond to? Might various (and alternate) readings of Pia Ednie-Brown's work be useful to these artists and, in turn, offer poetic and/or analytic ways of thinking for a wider audience in the dance, film, screendance and architectural communities?

Engaging with the work of others—even if seemingly unrelated to one's own inter-ests—is commonplace. Artists and academics mine words and ideas to generate, imagine,

stimulate and share, and perhaps also to add authority to our work. If it's not Deleuze, then it's Rancière, or (more probably these days) Bourriaud.

> Alongside the popular expansion of criticism, the academic study of the arts has become much more specialised and esoteric … Now academics are content to speak to each other in technical language, published in small-circulation journals.
>
> Rónán McDonald[14]

The politics of my decision to ask two practicing screendance artists to respond to Ednie-Brown's writing has to do with accessibility. I want these discussions to be heard outside of academia, and for the *International Journal of Screendance* to be meaningful to dancers, artists, choreographers, and filmmakers.

Dianne Reid (Australia, www.hipsync.com.au) and Lucy Cash (UK, www.lucycash.com) are experienced dance and screen practitioners. Their work has been seen around the world and they have both found ways to continue to work in difficult conditions and nourish their artistic lives. Although Lucy and Dianne have both worked in and around academia at various times, they are independent artists, and their work and interests reflect their independence. Their contributions to this second publication of the *International Journal of Screendance* are playful, evocative, delicate, imaginative, and practical. It has been my pleasure to work with them and with Pia Ednie-Brown on this small contribution to the journal. I invite you to fall with them.

References

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Noë, Alva. *Action in Perception*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004.

Notes

1. Ednie-Brown, "Falling into the Surface," 10.

2. Ibid., 8.

3. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnotCEuFSwM, for an extract from Anderson's *At the Shrink's (a Fake Hologram)* .

4. Ednie-Brown, "Falling into the Surface," 10.

5. No", *Action in Perception*, 2.

6. Ednie-Brown, "Falling into the Surface," 10.

7. See http://senseable.mit.edu.

8. The official website for the Digital Water Pavilion is: http://www.dwp.qaop.net.

9. milladigital, "The DWP project," http://www.dwp.qaop.net.

10. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kBkX-LOrTk, for footage of the Digital Water Pavilion.

11. Ednie-Brown, "Falling into the Surface," 11.

12. Ibid., 11.

13. Ednie-Brown's introduction *Falling Again*, 85.

14. McDonald, "A triumph of banality," http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/oct/02/comment.art.