

Influences

Tracie Mitchell, artist/educator/producer/advocate, Australia

Keywords: influences, history, Merce Cunningham, David Hinton, Meredith Monk, Maya Deren

Dance, which is to natural movement what poetry is to conversational prose, should, like poetry, transcend pedestrian boundaries.

– Maya Deren¹

When I see dance on a screen—any screen, whether it be in a cinema, an art gallery, an outdoor public screen, or on a television, computer, or smart phone—I am drawn to how the body and the screen come together as movement composition, and how the design and aesthetic of the images are woven together to create content and meaning. Watching a dance on screen work extends my curiosity and fires my imagination of the body and technology and the potential for their interaction. High or low production values do not matter; more likely it is the individual elements of screen works that will capture my attention: the dancers, the idea, the technology, the music, or simply that I admire the art maker. I understand watching a dance screen work to be an interactive process—a type of conversation with the art maker—and I am drawn towards work in which I can sense the artist's questioning and searching.

It was documentaries about mid to late 20th century artists that changed the way I read dance on screen. It was as though a light came on in me—how can I explain this reaction without sounding too corny? It was like jumping into cold water, all my senses had been woken up, yelling at me, “make no assumptions, there is no set way to create or construct dance work, everything is up for grabs!” I gravitated to the work of artists who were exploring ways to incorporate the camera into their choreography—Alwyn Nikolais, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Meredith Monk, and Merce Cunningham—their approaches were innovative and experimental.

Trisha Brown used a film by Robert Whitman in her work *Homemade* (1966). She strapped a projector to her back and as she danced, so too did the film—the projector throwing images out into the space.

It was the investigation of motion that led Alwyn Nikolais to create *Kaleidoscope* (1953) and *Totem* (1960). His aim was to make every element in each work move. Experiments with light and reflection were significant in his work: he designed costumes using

reflective materials and explored projecting images onto surfaces including walls, costume, and the dancers' bodies.

Steve Paxton used externally sourced films to make *Beautiful Lecture* (1968). In it Paxton performs live and his dancing is juxtaposed between two extremes—on one side is a filmed performance of *Swan Lake* and on the other is a pornographic film.

In Meredith Monk's seminal work, *16 Millimeter Earrings* (1966), three films are synchronized with live performance. The films are set to come on at varying times and are screened on different surfaces in the performance space including the back wall, a small rostrum, and a dome-like head dress that Monk wears over her face for a section of the performance. Pre-recorded images project her face shifting in and out of grotesque type postures onto the dome.

Seeing how these artists worked with the camera in their dance making was inspiring—it was as if the camera had been used as a provocation that enabled them to push against what they understood dance making to be. Their works played with scale, timing, repetition, effort, recorded image, texture, place, space, and weight. I was invigorated by their rebellion against assumptions and what the camera was bringing to their work; they were unpacking and questioning everything they understood about dance making and testing notions of dance and choreography as forms. I started to understand the significance of process in making a work and I wanted to introduce the camera to my practice to see what it might reveal. But first I needed to figure out how to use a camera! I realised that both dance and the camera deal with movement; their potential together was demonstrated to me in *Locale* (1978) and *Roamin'* (1979) by Merce Cunningham, and *La La La Human Sex Duo No.1* by Édouard Lock (1987).

Cunningham was interested in how looking through the lens of a camera offered different ways to think about the use of space in dance: "The first thing that struck me was that the space I was looking at wasn't at all like the stage, you didn't have to think that way."² Collaborating with video artist Charles Atlas and the dancers, Cunningham explored the relationship between physical space, dancing, and the camera. *Locale* and *Roamin'* unite the movement capacities of body and camera. Their construction involves both the camera and the dance moving at the same time in the live space, as if the camera and performers are dancing with each other: colliding, sinking, sweeping, blocking, and then moving away. The focus shifts from close-ups of body parts such as a curved spine that frames a trio in the background, or the palm of a hand sweeping across the frame. Dancers enter and exist in and out of view, trios and solos are seen, and isolated body parts shift attention from gesture to an entirely different configuration of bodies in another area of the space. The space, the walls, the floor, and the ceiling all keep shifting, making the dancing bodies the focus of the

movement. It was the first time I saw work that could only exist through the relationship between the dancing body and the camera.

In 1987 Canadian choreographer Édouard Lock and film director Bernar Hébert reformatted part of a live work into a short seven-minute black and white film called *La La La Human Sex Duo No.1*.³ It was performed by Louise Lecavalier and Marc Béland, and where Cunningham was exploring screen space, Lock was interested in illusion. Lecavalier lifts Béland high above her head as her legs prance out a march, and then she brings him down to the ground. She throws her body at him, he catches her weight, and together they fall to the floor, rolling, and returning to standing. The performers repeat the movement motif as the ballroom begins to fill with water which compromises the dancing by the performers. Eventually, fully submerged, the motif becomes just a trace—an illusion of itself—and the performers swim away. When I realised that dance could be freed from gravity, that speed of movement could be varied by the turn of a dial on the camera, and that the physical quality of the environment could be distorted, I started to understand the potential of the relationship between dance and the camera.

From 1990 to the early 2000s there was a surge of activity in screendance. Up to then I had been working largely in isolation, but by chance I saw a photograph from DV8's *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1988). I eventually saw *Dead Dreams* when it was screened on Australian public television. It was a dance work that reflected current issues and was like nothing I had seen before. Magnified sounds of breathing, dragging, banging, and slapping, as well as pumping club music underpinned the world created—it was sexually charged and felt on the edge of a violent explosion. Director David Hinton and choreography Lloyd Newson had combined a film narrative with a theatrical aesthetic to explore notions of isolation, loneliness, desire, and trust. The dancing was *contemporary* but the five male performers seemed to slip in and out of actions and gestures that shaped individual characters. *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* was its own reality and as I watched I became kinesthetically engaged with the dance; that is to say, I understood and experienced the work and its world through movement.

In 2000 David Hinton's *Birds* was a controversial winner of the prestigious Dance Screen Award at the IMZ festival. It generated substantial debate as to whether it was in fact a dance film. Where were the dancers? What was the work about? Who was the choreographer?

Birds was different from everything else that was screening around the time. It had no dancers on tables, or street corners, or stuck to walls, or in run down warehouses, no dancers flying in the air or dancing under water. David Hinton had sourced black and white archival footage of birds and collaborated in the editing suite with choreographer Yolande Snaith. Initially, I felt that in *Birds* Hinton was primarily making

a comment about screendance editing processes. But the more I thought about it, the more I felt that movement dominated the work. It simply used footage of birds being birds: flying, looking around, and ruffling feathers, in solos, duets, or trios, and also as large flocks of birds flying in unison. This is not to say that the work is in any way simplistic—quite the opposite. The composition of the shots was meticulously considered and resulted in the work's subtle ebb and flow. *Birds* is not a loud work—its soundtrack is of tweeting birds and watching the work made me want to take time in and with it while feeling enriched and full of thought.

Birds was incredibly important to my practice, but also I believe that it was a pivotal moment for dance on screen—it was as though someone had opened a window in a smoke-filled room. Hinton's film encouraged artists to think in new ways about what dance on screen was, and what it could be.

Martina Kudlacek's documentary, *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (2001), presents Maya Deren as an artist whose life was filled with a passion to explore dance and film. Her writing, thinking, and making were interwoven, each supporting the other. Her seminal work "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film" is what Deren calls an "organization of ideas in an anagrammatic complex."⁴ In it she sets out her theories about film as an art form. Watching *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* prompted me to consider how craft and creativity are both formal and fluid processes. Deren was bold and she was an explorer. She was immersed in a life of creative venture and her art practice crossed over into making, thinking, writing, talking, and doing. It is important to me how she was invested in the exploration of film and the integration of dance, and how relentless she was in testing assumptions—especially her own.

At a time when I was questioning the possibilities and potential of integrating dance and the camera, I was nourished by the work of Hinton and Deren. I was nourished not only by their inventive work and thinking, but also their love of film, their complete conviction that dance was a perfect partner for the camera, and that, together, the two forms presented an opportunity for the creation of a new art form—a form unique unto itself. My observation and investigation of their practices encouraged me to step forward into the unknown.

Biography

Tracie Mitchell PhD, created and teaches the dance screen unit at Melbourne University. Her award winning artworks have toured globally and are held in major collections including the Tanz Museum in Cologne and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. She is recipient of the prestigious Australian Council for the Arts

Fellowship. In 1999 she founded the Dance Lumiere Festival and was Director of ReelDance Inc. (2008-2010). She wrote the chapter "Scriptwriting Dance: The First Point of Integration for a Dance Screen Work," *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2016).

Email: tthemitch@fastmail.fm

Notes

¹ Maya Deren, "Choreography for the Camera," 221.

² Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 106.

³ *Human Sex* was the full length work made for theatre and it was a significant work for Lock's dance company La La La Human Steps. It won a Bessie Award and travelled internationally for two years. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/23a52af0-b2c5-0131-e08d-3c075448cc4b>.

⁴ Deren, "An Anagram of Ideas on Art," 4.

References

16 Millimeter Earrings. Chor. Meredith Monk. 1966. *YouTube*.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUfPmc_8E6c

Beautiful Lecture. Chor. Steve Paxton. 1968. 16mm film.

Birds. Dir. David Hinton. Chor. Yolande Snaith. 2000. DVD.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPAPKuRpDfk>

Brown, Carolyn, Merce Cunningham, Laura Kuhn, Joseph V. Melillo, Thecla Schiphorst, and David Vaughan. "Four Key Discoveries: Merce Cunningham Dance Company at Fifty." *Theatre* 34.2 (2004): 104-111.

Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men. Dirs. David Hinton and Lloyd Newson. 1988. DVD.

Deren, Maya. "Choreography for the Camera." In Bruce McPherson (Ed.) *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren*. New York: Documentext, 2005. 220-224.

----. "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film." In Bruce McPherson (Ed.) *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren*. New York: Documentext, 2005. 34–109.

Homemade. Chor. Trisha Brown, Dir. Robert Whitman. 1966. *YouTube*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrrNrfucoB0>. Film of performance.

Human Sex. Chor. Édouard Lock. 1985.

In the Mirror of Maya Deren. Dir. Martina Kudlacek. 2001. DVD.

Kaleidoscope. Chor. Alwyn Nikolais. 1953. 16mm film.

La La La, Human Sex Duo No. 1. Dir. Bernar Hébert. Chor. Édouard Lock. 1987. *YouTube*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRt5Y439dvU>.

Locale. Dirs. Charles Atlas and Merce Cunningham. 1978. *YouTube*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBTPGMzysdo>

Roamin'. Dirs. Charles Atlas and Merce Cunningham. 1979.

Totem. Chor. Alwyn Nikolais. 1960. *YouTube*. https://archive.org/details/totem_201702