

Friday, 28 November 2008

Dear LUTSF,

Re: Report on Funded Activity to LUTSF

Please find enclosed my report on my travel to attend the ReelDance Festival in Sydney from the 9th to the 19th of May 2008. I want to thank you cordially for making this visit possible, and I apologise sincerely for the delay in submitting my report.

In May 2008, I was invited to attend ReelDance, a biennial festival of international screendance taking place in Sydney, which I would not have been able to take up without the support of the the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. The trip enhanced my knowledge in several areas of my work and gave me the opportunity to meet many inspiring practitioners. Being invited along with other international curators was a great privilege, and an affirmation of my work to date.

Over the course of my stay at ReelDance, I sat on a discussion panel, contributed to key meetings between international practitioners, observed and reported on a three-day workshop for artists working in screendance, met with Australian artists and brought knowledge of films and creative practice back to the UK and to other partners abroad. I had a very rich and rewarding experience at in Sydney, which continues to feed my thoughts. I hope that I was able to bring information and stimulation to my hosts and continue to share what I learned with my colleagues.

I want to thank the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund again for making this possible.

Yours sincerely

Gitta Wigro

REPORT

Visiting ReelDance 2008

In May 2008, I was invited to attend ReelDance, a biennial festival of international screendance taking place in Sydney. In covering the substantial travel cost to Sydney, the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund enabled me to take up the invitation, greatly enhancing my knowledge in several areas of my work and giving me the opportunity to meet many inspiring practitioners. Being invited along with other international curators was a great privilege, and an affirmation of my work to date.

Over the course of my stay at ReelDance, I sat on a discussion panel, contributed to key meetings between international practitioners, observed and reported on a three-day workshop for artists working in screendance, met with Australian artists and brought knowledge of films and creative practice back to the UK and to other partners abroad.

FESTIVAL PROGRAMME

The public screening programme was a central reason for attending, as my ability to programme screenings is dependent on building a personal 'library' of films to draw on. Witnessing festivals in different contexts also helps to continually keep me alive to different rationales and responses when curating. Erin Brannigan, the director of the festival, is respected within the field for her knowledge of historical and current work and critical facility, and I was grateful for the opportunity to experience the festival programme in its entirety. It was an exciting and varied programme, with an overarching theme ('Everyday dance'), but loosely interpreted to allow for a wide range of works. I was somewhat surprised to see that there was little work from Australasia other than from Australia and New Zealand. There are fewer works made in most of the other Australasian countries, but I had hoped that the relative proximity would result in some work from those countries appearing in the programme.

As a piece of 'homework' for myself I decided to write brief 'reviews' of the Australian works that engaged me most; I have enclosed a copy of these with this report. I have shared them with Erin.

In experiencing the festival and in a meeting with Erin, I also noted similarities and differences from practical points of view (e.g. marketing, audience development and audience profile) which informed my thinking about my current work, and also gave me an opportunity to reflect on my time working at the UK's Dance on Screen Festival. This was also fuelled by discussions with the other international guests. Conversation with the other curator guests ranged from comparing notes on the practicalities of presenting dance film, discussions around supporting artistic practice and talking about sector development.

ReelDance is very strong in building and growing successful creative and business partnerships, something which I often find challenging, and gained from seeing these 'in action' in a variety of models at the festival.

The festival programme included a panel discussion with the international guests for local artists. The aim was to disseminate knowledge about distributing your work (most dance film output is brought to its audience via festivals).

Eduardo Bonito of Dança em Foco spoke for the Latin American network (Red Sudamericana de Danza), Janine offered her view from an internationally recognised festival in Europe (Cinedance), and I gave my perspective of independent curation for different venues as well as speaking from my festival

background. The questions were interesting, ranging from practical questions to discussion of artistic policy. Topics we touched on were:

- Dance film developments and trends
- Presenting installation work: implications for the presenter in terms of access to audiences, press and funding
- Fostering emerging regional work alongside established international output
- Eduardo: if I don't show Brazilian films, who will
- Presenting dance film outside the dance 'ghetto' (i.e. dance venues and audiences)
- Production values
- The curators' work in pushing the boundaries (a discussion I was able to take up later in the year when invited to give a paper at *Screendance - State of the Art*)
- What the outside pressures on presenters are, and how we had dealt with those situations

WORKSHOP

ReelDance also included a three-day workshop for Australian dance and film artists with festival guest artists Katrina McPherson and Simon Fildes. Erin Brannigan spontaneously offered me the opportunity to observe the workshop. As I programme workshops for artists and occasionally teach as well, this was a unique opportunity. Katrina and Simon are experienced teachers (among many other things, Katrina has written the first and to date only practical guide to creating dance for the camera). Katrina particularly works with improvisation techniques applied to both the dance and the camera, and explores the effects of placing the camera physically in the performer's space. The discussions generated by exercises and viewing materials added to my understanding of dance and film as a form as well as inspiring my teaching. I have attached a separate report on the workshop.

VENUE AND SURROUNDINGS

The CarriageWorks was an exciting venue to be in. It is vast; it has many different exhibition and performance spaces, and several areas that are still being renovated and repurposed, which offered an interesting venue for the workshop participants' explorations. Concurrent with ReelDance, CarriageWorks hosted an exhibition of video art entitled Experimenta Playground, which complemented the ReelDance programme perfectly.

Sydney itself was an exciting city to visit, although all the artists I met told me I should be visiting Melbourne instead!

MEDIA AND DANCE MEETING

One particularly important meeting to participate in was the Media and Dance Network meeting, which resulted our drawing up a concrete plan of action to improve the networks' effectiveness. International guest Janine Dijkmeijer (The Netherlands) runs the website for MAD, Eduardo Bonito (Brazil) brought his knowledge of working networks to the table. Janine reminded us of the origins of the network at meetings at Monaco Dance Forum and Dance Screen Brighton – to create support for administrators working in the field beyond the existing artist networks and IMZ. There was an agreement that the network serves a purpose for festival and archive administrators and curators particularly regarding the identification of an international network for those of us still struggling for recognition in our own contexts and a sense of peer support. The network is already serving this purpose (eg. we are all able to cite membership in funding applications and on our website) but MAD needs to do/be more to remain relevant and vital. As none of the members has ever had the spare capacity to fundraise for MAD to become an independent organisation, it remains fragile; however, through partners allocating some of their existing money and including MAD activities in fundraising, some stability can be achieved without having to build an infrastructure capable of processing international funds. The immediate needs are to identify and connect with current and potential members. An action plan was drawn up to address this; I volunteered to take on the UK actions.

We discussed other relevant issues, including:

- Audience development strategies
- New media curation
- Workshop structures

The next MAD meeting has been flagged for Dança em Foco in Brazil in October 2009. (www.media-dance.com)

I also asked Erin for a one to one meeting, and I am grateful that in the middle of the festival she was able to take the time. We discussed programming's role in developing innovation and critical facility in single screen dance film.

She had also been looking for an international partner to deliver a co-commission of an installation piece for which she has a AUS\$ grant to be completed by 2010. She is looking for someone to help navigate co-commission, open to engaging in curatorial dialogue, and keen to export and exchange with Australia. I tried to give useful contacts in the UK to approach.

SCREENDANCE.ORG MEETING

A further meeting with the international guests discussed an initiative to build an archive of dance films and videos, accessible via the internet. This initiative – Screendance.org – was started by Scottish artists Simon Fildes and Katrina McPherson, who set up videodance.org.uk and the media-

and-dance e-list, both widely used resources within the screendance 'community' of artists, curators, teachers and students.

The project proposes to publish, generate and promote critical writing on screendance, and offer video capacity to effectively deliver an archive of screendance work, which could also include documentaries and performance recordings. I feel strongly that combining those two elements, discourse and archive, is a worthwhile way to proceed – discourse in dance is often hampered through the relative inaccessibility of material, especially at an international level, and building an archive with a strong commitment to rigorous discourse would strengthen its curatorial policy. Using the internet as a platform means that it is accessible independent of the researcher's physical location. Trough allowing dance practitioners across the globe to reference a shared history of work this archive could have a profound, lasting impact on dance.

ReelDance had called the meeting as they have access to funds to develop an online catalogue of Australian films, and hoped to be able to use those funds in a way that would support the Screendance.org endeavour, maximising the impact of the investment they can make beyond the national boundaries. Having run Videoworks, which was at the time the UK's main video library for dance, I feel strongly about the potential of this project, and was able to add my experience of running a video archive and knowledge gleaned from colleagues in the UK to the discussion.

We discussed who the primary users would be and their respective needs in terms of content and metadata. I learnt much from an IT/database specialist who had been invited to talk about feasible models of online video databases to deliver the technical side of this online catalogue.

We discussed the following points

- International funding
As discussed at the MAD meeting, there are problems associated with finding, accessing and managing money across several countries; we resolved for each partner to find the money for their 'section' of the database
- Metadata
As a research tool a catalogue is only useful if work is presented with sufficient and appropriate metadata, which has to be 'future proof'. It needs to be searchable (and time needs to be spent thinking about what future researchers might need), it has to be comprehensive, culturally specific (this might then need a glossary: e.g. 'modern' dance in the UK means something else in the UK than it does, for instance, in the US.)
YouTube is an interesting example for self-classification, but often results in unhelpful sub-division. A mixed approach of suggested and self-chosen 'search tags' might be appropriate.

- Screendance.org would function as the international portal through which the other databases can be accessed. ReelDance offered to make their template available to other festivals so that the 'national' databases would be compatible and more easily linked via an international site such as Screendance.org
- MAD would operate under the broader scope of Screendance

The meeting was very successful, with fruitful discussion, and buy-in into the idea from the international curators present. The hope is to develop this for 2010, which is when ReelDance is planning to have its dance screen portal ready.

When I was invited later in the year to attend the *Screendance – State of The Art* conference in North Carolina, I was able to feed information from that meeting into conversations, which have resulted in a number of US universities pledging their support for Screendance.org.

I was able to update Arts Council England's national office (officer working on digital strategy / dance) and regional London office (officer working on dance and moving image) on developments as well as contacts at The Place and Laban Trinity archives. I had hoped to meet with Shona McCullagh (Unitec School of Performing and Screen Arts, Auckland, NZ), but she was unable to attend. I hope to be in contact with her in the future.

NETWORKING

I was able to meet many Australian artists in person, discuss their work, and hear their view of the national and international scene. Observing the workshop also helped to get to know artists better early in the week, which in turn helped meet their friends and peers throughout the rest of the festival. Later in the year I was able to provide one of the Australian artists I met with information and support to fundraise for her visit to the UK (planned for 2009).

I was struck by the number of artists who held the work coming out of the UK in high regard, and envied its infrastructure for dance film; while in the UK there are some who will say that the UK's 'golden age' of high profile broadcast investment and distribution is over. Erin reflected back another observation – she noticed that the programming practice of UK curators often oriented itself strongly along the visual arts, and referred to the strong history of that form in the UK. Both of these comments were very useful to hear – a moment for me to step out of the trees and see the forest.

The Australian artists are very aware of the relative youth of the dance film sector in their country, but are feeling – and I think rightly so – that the work now holds its own in the international circuit, although many of them expressed feelings of isolation from European and US arts communities. One hopes that travel both ways helps overcome this sense of separation.



Overall, I had a very rich and rewarding experience at ReelDance in Sydney, which continues to feed my thoughts. I hope that I was able to bring information and stimulation to my hosts and share what I learned with my colleagues here.

I want to thank the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund again for making this possible.

Gitta Wigro
November 2008

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS: **

Festival brochure

Workshop report

Film reviews

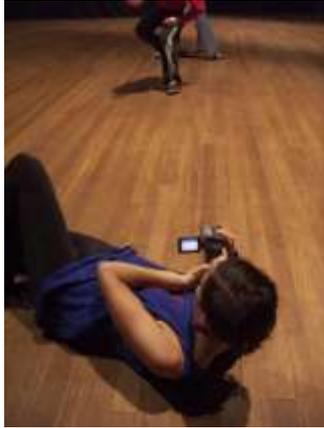
Selection of photos



Carriage Works Space



Dance Film Workshop



Dance Film Workshop



Dance Film Workshop

** Available in LUTSF Archive