



Photo: Laura Bartczak

Dear Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund
31st July 2013

**Performing my work at the Brooklyn International Performance Art Festival
(New York), 29th June – 8th July 2013**

Enclosed is the report of my work in New York in July 2013.

I am very grateful for your support to make this trip possible. This week in New York has been an amazing experience, offering a wealth of experience and reflections both for my artistic work and my research (PhD). Furthermore, it has opened up future possibilities for international touring as well as a career path once I will finish my PhD in October 2014. This is much more than I have expected and I am very grateful for this.

Thank you very much!

Attached you can find my report with some images take at the performance and during the rehearsals. I have also attached a copy of the overall festival and the programme notes for my performance on the 7th July 2013.

I can highly recommend to all artists to work abroad, gain new experiences from other cultures and working contexts. It broadens the artistic view and challenges opinions about the own work and creative approach. The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund offers a great opportunity every artist should try to take advantage of to explore and develop her/his artistic work.

Yours sincerely,

Kathinka Walter

www.kathinkawalter.com

REPORT OF MY WORK IN NEW YORK (JULY 2013)

I had an amazing time in New York and I have come back feeling inspired, full of new ideas and many contacts as well as invites to other festivals for next year (New York, Mexico, Berlin). My week in New York consisted of rehearsals with the five dancers by Lindsey Drury, discussions with other artists and curators of the festival, performances of other artists (e.g. La Pocha Nostra, Dovrat Meron) and the performance of my work at the end of the week (7th July 2013). I am very grateful for this opportunity and the experiences I have had, helping me to broaden my artistic/research horizon offering a wealth of experience and reflections. I will describe the different aspects of my experience in New York and how it benefitted my artistic development and research practice. The different sections will cover my rehearsals, discussions throughout the week, my performance and a conclusion to summarise my findings.

1. Rehearsals

I had four rehearsal days (10am-4pm) with the 5 dancers selected for my work and each day offered new and very different avenues for the work to go. Working with dancers from a different cultural context proved to be more enriching and exciting than expected. The work has been pushed in new directions, raised new questions/challenges, fully enriching my research/practice. I have kept a 'Talking Diary' throughout the week and I spoke into the camera at the end of each evening to document my findings. Going through the recording shows how each day had a different quality to it and how inspired and fulfilled I was feeling at the end of each day (see: <http://www.kathinkawalter.com/category/practice-led-research/>).

Key findings were based around ideas of working with trust and the awareness of the cultural context of my work. As trust is such a key factor of my work I was worried that working with new dancers for only four days would not bring out the richness and openness as well as the vulnerability within each performer. However, this week surprised me with new and unexpected findings. There was a liberating feeling to working with a group of new dancers. Boundaries could be pushed more easily and I was able to let go of preconceived ideas. It made me realise that knowing each other too well can also be restrictive and it can be harder to take risks and challenge each other due to the overall effect it can have on the long-term working relationship. Nevertheless, I do realise that an important element for the success of this work was that the dancers knew each other very well and this long-term build trust was crucial for the openness and risk-taking throughout the rehearsal and performance time.



Another key finding was the awareness of the cultural context of my work in Leeds and the effect it has on the creative process. Even though my company in Leeds consists of mostly non-English dancers, all dancers (including myself) have lived in England for a very long time and this week made me realise how much we have inhabited the English manners. Compared to my company in England the American dancers were much bolder in their approaches and less concerned about being 'rude' or 'tactless'. They found more opportunities to challenge my role as the 'visible choreographer' took on the lead and played much more with the shift of control between choreographer and dancer.

2. Discussions

Apart from the rehearsals I attended roundtables, discussing different aspects and challenges of the festival with other artists. Key points of discussions were the need to define the term 'Performance Art' and how we can keep openness within its terminology to not exclude other work. This was very important to me as my work sits in between dance and live art/performance art. I was nervous that my work would not be accepted and that the audience would classify it as too 'dancy'. But, throughout the discussions, I realised that there were many elements within my work, which were important aspects of performance art, such as the different forms of documentation and the focus on process rather than product. The response to my concern from Esther Neff, the festival director, after my performance will stay in my mind – she said: "If you wouldn't have called your work 'dance' I wouldn't have seen it as such. I found more similarities to other work within performance art and enjoyed recognising shared interests" (Esther Neff, 2013).

It is interesting how the responses I received from the performance art scene were much more inclusive, pointing out shared interests and similarities. My experience with the dance scene in the UK, however, is much more about highlighting my work as 'other'. This suggests that maybe the performance art scene is more suitable for my work but also questions why there is this lack of openness within the dance scene (at least in the UK).

3. My performance

My performance was presented at the Grace Exhibition Space, which is a venue devoted exclusively to Performance Art. Grace Exhibition Space opened in 2006 and is placed in a Brooklyn loft with all events being presented on the floor, not on a stage, dissolving the boundary between artist and viewer (www.grace-exhibition-space.com, 2006).

For me, this space was probably the one most suited to my work compared with all venues I have performed at so far. It was spacious and quite plain with its grey walls and grey painted wooden floor. It did not have any conventional theatre references and, with a bar in one corner, it allowed a very different overall experience for the audience and performers. It offered the audience to not only sit down and watch the work but also change their focus, talk to friends, have a drink and then return to the work. Whereas I have tried in previous performances to invite the audience to return to the work to see the work progressing, here the audience witnessed the overall arch of the work without having to watch it for the whole duration of 3 hours.

I divided the space so that the bar was in one corner and the main performance space in the other corner. I was surprised that the audience stayed for the whole duration of the performance

and that many people sat with us for most of the time. But I also enjoyed performing in this more relaxed atmosphere – the chatter in the background, the audience drifting in and out of focus. It had a relaxed feel to it and I enjoyed not being the centre of everyone’s attention. I found myself being much braver in my decision making, more playful and more open to the audience, talking to them about my artistic/research ideas and letting them be involved in the interactions with the dancers. It felt liberating and joyful – less terrifying.

As I mentioned earlier, the audience was not only different due to the lay out of the space but also acted very differently from how I am used to audiences within dance (or is it the UK?). At the beginning I explained the set up of the work and invited the audience to look at the dancers’ journals, the footage on the flip cameras and my notebook. Whereas in previous performances the audience were quite hesitant and needed extra encouragement by the usher, here they fully went for it! They read the journals, watches the footage - some people even used the cameras to film the work - they fully engaged with my notebook, sat down at my desk, played with my radio and the juke box. At one point it was getting a bit much for me and I had to tell them to leave me more space, had to regain my space again. At the beginning I was slightly terrified but it was done in such a lovely manner - like children wanting to explore - that it actually offered more interaction with the audience. At one point I referred back to an audience member wanting to play with the radio and gave him the task to find a tune for the dancers. It felt like we were all sharing the work, at points the deviation between audience and performers became blurry.



Photo: Hrag Vartanian, Hyperallergic, 2013

4. Conclusion

Overall, and as I hope this report has shown, this trip to New York has been very rich and fulfilling in its experiences and inspiration it offered. I now need more time to reflect on it but both, for my artistic work as well as my research (PhD) it has been highly beneficial and I am very grateful that I was able to experience it.

For my PhD, these experiences will feed well into my writing of my thesis and I have made discoveries and findings I would have not found just by reading or writing about it, which again has proven that, for my research, the practice-led approach is the most suited one.

For myself as an artist, I feel that this trip has benefitted me in many ways and has opened up many new possibilities. The model of me going to a place, working with professional dancers for a week and then performing the work, has shown to be very efficient and working within different cultural contexts offers great opportunities and avenues for the work to be explored. This will also allow me to travel more internationally with my work. Furthermore, I have realised that the performance art scene is possibly the better place to present my work in and it was exciting to see how it can be perceived so differently by other art scenes. This gives me great confidence in continuing with my work and it presents a great career pathway of staying in Leeds and continuing with my lectureship at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance and also branching out to different places and work in residency for different periods of time. So far I have been invited to a festival in Mexico (Easter 2014), Berlin (May 2014) and New York (July 2014) and I am excited about what these visits will offer!

Again a big thank you for supporting this project. I am very grateful for this.



Photo: Hrag Vartanian, Hyperallergic, 2013

References:

Grace Exhibition Space. 2006. *Home*. [online]. [27.07.2013]. Available from: www.grace-exhibition-space.com

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