

Dancing the unfamiliar

Independent artist **Doran George** engages in blissfully 'crap' movement dialogues with families at Los Angeles County Museum of Art

In May 2009 I was asked to run dance/movement workshops at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) as part of an artist-led programme for families. These were to be held in conjunction with an exhibition of the work of the Austrian visual artist Franz West. The programme is an ongoing part of the education department's mission to have families view LACMA as accessible, enriching, welcoming and a regular part of their lives. The workshops happen every Sunday alongside bilingual museum tours, and include transportation for groups from under-served areas. Many participants are first time visitors to a museum.

The emphasis of LACMA's education department is to focus on the audience without dumbing-down the art. All of this raises challenges for community dance practice, and has made the education department wary about including it. As an invited artist I was thankful for the opportunity to highlight the value of movement workshops, while also using it to undermine some of my own assumptions about what community dance could be. I did this by employing the avant-garde approach of 'dialogic practice.'

Delving into dialogue

Dialogic practice is a term coined by art historian Grant Kester in the book *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. It refers to visual art practice that has re-focused the site of aesthetic innovation from image, object or performance presented for an audience to interaction and communication focused within specific communities. It has a genealogical relationship



with the 'relational art' that is at the forefront of contemporary visual art. This movement is defined by Nicolas Bourriaud in his book *Relational Aesthetics*, as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space." Participation in an artistic practice, rather than observation of the results of an artistic practice, is, loosely speaking, the defining feature of dialogic work.

Whilst this is a term and a practice located within visual art and its theorisation, contact improvisation (CI) is an example of a development in dance that might be thought of as heavily informed by the approaches that underpin dialogic practice. Although the development of CI marked the synthesis of a radically new form of dance, Cynthia Novack in her book *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture (New Directions in Anthropological Writing)* pointed out that it also entailed innovation in the way such elements as performance, dancer and community were configured. Democratisation in the dancing itself, an emphasis on participation and the breakdown between professionals (dancers/choreographers) and non-professionals (audiences) were all critical features of avant-garde practice using dialogic principles.

It might be useful here to take a moment to delve into this a bit further, and to explain how CI undermined the rarefied nature of artistic practice upheld by modernism. The development of CI was underpinned by the principle that anyone can be and is a contact dancer from the



Above: Photo courtesy of Doran George.

moment they begin, and any dance can be interesting for the participating dancers regardless of their levels of improvisatory experience. In this way the interface, or dialogue, between the dancers was emphasised as the locus of value in a cultural experience rather than the external form or some 'finished product.' The need to 'teach form' was not erased, but it was certainly subdued by the desire to create a space for dialogue between the bodies.

Brilliant encounters

In a dialogue one is looking for a new way of thinking. Both parties come to talk and listen, and to build something together that each contributes to but neither knew before. Moving itself can be thought of as way of thinking. It follows, then, that a dance dialogue is the search for a new way of thinking the body. This perspective was critical in the work I did at LACMA. My concern was not simply to teach people a way of moving that I knew and they didn't, but to build a bodily dialog that we could all be engaged in and thereby find new ways of moving. The work was a conversation, if you will, between the workshop participants and myself.

This dialogic approach was important because the work had to exceed any prior conception I had of running a dance workshop, mainly due to the way that the museum's Family Sundays are structured. I was working in a covered area, like a large gazebo or tent without walls, on a grassy area outside the museum. Participants could and did walk away whenever they wanted. Two other artists were running

workshops in participatory sculpture construction and jewelry-like object-making in the same vicinity. Because families would arrive in dribs and drabs, and in both small and large groups, a traditional dance class-based structure simply wasn't an option. Often I worked with only one or two people at a time for as long as it took for their attention span, or my energy, to run out. This was anywhere between ten minutes and an hour.

One boy, about eight years of age, started flinging his arms and legs around wildly after reading the sign that hung on the frame of the open-sided tent. DORAN GEORGE: WE LIKE TO MOVE IT is what the sign said. So I copied him. What else would I do? 'Wow, that looks great,' I say. 'Am I doing it right?' 'Yeah,' he says. 'Now try this.' He followed the flinging with an abruptly truncated turn that left the body desperately trying to steady itself so that it didn't fall over. His seemingly inexhaustible ability to generate fresh and interesting movement, and me copying him, went on for twenty minutes or so and gradually developed into us stringing together his dance moves into what he called patterns. A girl of about the same age joined us, and so the process continued.

I had numerous similar duets, trios and quartets with people of all ages. One of my most memorable encounters was with a girl that can't have been much more than one year old. She was resistant to her parents adorably enthusiastic and hands-on encouragement of her to 'dance.'

This included them shaking her and manipulating her arms and legs in various directions to the beat of live

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Above: *We Like to Move It!* workshop with Doran George at LACMA. Photo: Alicia Vogl Saenz.

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percussion provided by Tony Ramirez for the duration of the workshops. The little girl only cracked a smile of willingness to participate, however, once she’d fallen over and I copied her. Falling over was the one thing that she did, movement-wise, quite competently and without any help. For a good, long ten or fifteen minutes we engaged in a falling-over and getting-up duet, followed by increasing amounts of giggles on both our parts as the falling over became increasingly deliberate on hers. Meanwhile an initial disappointment and confusion on the part of the parents slowly gave way to delight. It’s as if they realised that yes, this might actually be a dance.

West’s work served as a model for this kind of openness. In case you don’t know it, it’s full of seemingly arbitrary juxtapositions of found objects and images in sculptures and collages, along with badly fashioned objects that appear unfinished and are made with cheap materials. Altogether it’s extremely playful and messy, and encourages interaction. An old suitcase balances precariously with a papier-mâché, egg-like shape that has bright, glossy paint splashed on its side, and much of the masticated newspaper is still in full view. In West’s collages scraps of magazine images - including a meal from the 70’s, or a man wearing swimming trunks with his head cut off - intersect with simple and primary rainbow-coloured strokes. The paint looks like the water-based variety I remember using in the village playschool where my mum worked. I found in West’s practice an invitation to play in ways that are awkward, ungainly, embarrassing and all the more sharp for being so. Thus, during the workshops when children gave seemingly illogical responses to my questions, West had modeled for me a cultural world where I could validate them with an enthusiastic and unequivocal ‘Yes!’

‘We could faint,’ offered a nine year-old girl when I asked a group of about fifteen children I was working with to identify body parts that could pull us across the space and in all other directions. ‘That’s brilliant!’ was all I could think of to shriek back at her. ‘Let’s all faint when we can’t even imagine we’re going to,’ I continued, nearly breathless with excitement. ‘Let’s surprise ourselves by fainting, and then get pulled up off the floor after fainting by a different body part than the one we using before we fainted.’ Similarly, when a six year-old boy suggested running across the space like a growling dinosaur in response to the same question, how could I refuse?

The visual artist Roger Ackling recently said that he loves art that’s ‘a bit crap.’ I take Roger’s comment about crap art to be an identification of critical cultural space. Crap art breaks out of refined aesthetic practice, cool concept and virtuoso craft. By doing so, it raises an aesthetic discourse about that which is ‘other’ versus art as we tend to get stuck in thinking about it. So it follows that crap art is also sharp, rigorous and a vital part of the avant-garde. We need it. This absolutely applies to West’s work, and it makes me realise how much I love dance that’s ‘a bit crap.’ As ‘dance movements’ what we were doing in the workshops was all delightfully ‘a bit crap,’ and whenever possible the whole family were pulled along for the ride.

So how does dancing in ways that are ‘a bit crap’ support a family’s access to the museum? Importantly, it offers a place to play for everyone. Here the adults can make movement that is familiar because it’s seen through the eyes of their children, and yet simultaneously unfamiliar because it’s awkward, inane, embarrassing, ridiculous. So in contrast to the preconceptions many people have about art museums being stuffy places steeped in propriety, which can unfortunately keep them away, these workshops introduce the museum as a place to laugh, try new things out, get sweaty and experience the pleasure of looking silly. It introduces the avant-garde aesthetic practice of engaging with the unfamiliar as something that can be embodied and pleasurable as well as conceptual and challenging.

contact dg_something@yahoo.co.uk