

36 Dance and disabled people

Project Volume

Susan Norwood, Artistic Director, describes how Project Volume linked learning disabled artists in dance, the visual arts and film



Above: Chris Pavia and Hayley Arundel, Intonation. Photo: Stu Allsopp

By working together, artists and dancers with learning disabilities could share responses and inspire each other through their different approaches to the same exhibition.

Right: Frances Weir.
Photo: Judie Waldmann



Intonation by Project Volume

Intonation promotes the artistic voice of artists and dancers with learning disabilities. This was a new body of work exploring an exchange between a visual artist and dancers at Modern Art Oxford in response to sculptor Thomas Houseago.

Project Volume

Project Volume is a dance organisation committed to providing opportunity, access and advocacy for people with learning disabilities to create and develop professional dance skills, thereby raising their potential, profile, voice and visibility within our society.

Project Volume trains dancers with learning disabilities to be conversant with contemporary dance culture so to effectively articulate their own artistic vision. It conceives the current hybrid nature of dance, to include film, performance and art to address the artistic development of the individual, as well as supporting different learning styles.

The idea

'Intonation' begins to look at how we can articulate the artistic voice of dancers and artists with learning disabilities, to be more visible within our culture. As dancers we can show our responses and ideas physically, taking the body as an 'active script'. As artists we can draw and etch out our thinking onto a page or a canvas. We can therefore think of art and of dance as forms of 'articulated vocabularies'. Intonation then explored the bringing together of the different 'vocabularies' of art and dance.

Through Intonation, a place of exchange was created between these different artistic vocabularies. This took place as a five-day performance residency, at Modern Art Oxford, working in visual and physical responses to the sculpture exhibition by Thomas Houseago, *What Went Down*.

The artist and the dancers were either emerging or working professionals with learning disabilities, to ensure a rigorous dialogue in which to inspire, challenge and learn from each other. The visual artist who took part was Danny Smith. The dancers were Frances Weir and Ruth Williams, associated with Anjali Dance Company and Chris Pavia from StopGAP Dance Company. A professional non-disabled dancer Hayley Arundel also took part for Ruth Williams to choreograph.

Encouraging dialogue

The inclusion of a non-disabled dancer in 'Intonation' was to ensure a free flowing dialogue between the mainstream and

disability arenas. Dancer Hayley Arundel extended her understanding of working with dance and learning disability through being directed by choreographer Ruth Williams. Whilst Ruth continued to develop her evolving choreographic practice, without assumptions on 'with whom, or how and where' she may work in her burgeoning career.

This dialogue between disability and mainstream arenas was further underpinned by working with Chris Pavia from integrated Dance Company StopGAP. Chris took encouragement from working with other up-and-coming choreographers with learning disabilities, whilst developing new choreographic tools to take back to his company and to use in his own practice.

Developing the vocabulary

The dancers and artist were introduced to the exhibition of Thomas Houseago and created a shared movement and visual vocabulary from their responses. The responses were firstly initiated from a collation of words from the dancers and artist responding to the exhibition. They then refined their choice of words to reflect their thoughts on the exhibition. From these words each dancer created choreographic material, which illustrated the contrasts of themes inherent within the exhibition.

By working together, artists and dancers with learning disabilities could share responses and inspire each other through their different approaches to the same exhibition. Both artist and dancers were asked to explore the texture, material, emotion, concept, structure and weight of Thomas Houseago's sculptural work.

Learning-disabled artist, Danny Smith, was pivotal within this creative process. His role was to constantly document his own responses to Thomas Houseago and to capture the physical explorations of the dancers as they worked.

As the dancers developed their individual choreography, Danny drew their responses. Danny's drawings then formed an almost, 'notational response' of the line and form of the dancer's movement. The dancers then responded directly to these notational drawings, selecting the weight of a line to define their movement, or a texture to illustrate a quality of movement.

This 'shared vocabulary' of physical response and visual art formed the structure from which the artist and dancers could nurture, explore and extend their respective ideas and practice.

Dancer Chris Pavia talked of "the structure of the sculpture and exploring how it was made", as informing his >



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Left: Thomas Houseago exhibition. Artist Danny Smith and dancer Chris Pavia, *Intonation*. Photo: Stu Allsopp

choreographic work.

Solos were created in direct response to a chosen sculpture, with sections of movement then interwoven into a group sequence or duet as each dancer selected a phrase from their choreography to teach each other.

The 'director's' role was simply to show the dancers and artist with learning disabilities the possibilities of reading these different physical and visual vocabularies, sharing and exchanging them to gain deeper insight into developing their own ideas.

"By having more time to look it gave me more courage to look", artist Danny Smith talking about his experience.

Composition

Unlike a stage an exhibition is not neutral and working within it demands a respect for all the elements of art, space and dancers to be of equal importance in the final performance.

Working within an art exhibition brings into play the tools of choreographic composition as dancers make complex decisions about where to place their work in relation to the space, sculpture and each other. The dancers experimented and developed an awareness of how their choreography corresponded to the sculpture.

The nature of this exhibition embodies silence, so rhythm and dynamics are taken from responding to the direct line, form and flow of the sculpture. The dancers went further taking the musicality and rhythm into their choreography from Danny Smith's, almost 'musical drawings' in their 'notation' of the dancers moving.

This layered approach allowed the intrinsic responses to the exhibition of the artist and the dancers with learning disabilities to be clearly pursued and revealed through a series of public performances in the gallery.

The performances

Four promenade performances took place at different times of the day and evening to allow for a rich diversity of audience. The promenade design of the dancers' choreography correlated to the exhibition layout and the role of the artist Danny Smith as artist, observer, notator and conductor.

It was vital to the work that Danny's role was not passive but instrumental within the dance. This was shown at the beginning, whereby Danny drew a sculpture whilst the dancers illustrated their reading of his drawing through the immediacy of their responses through dance. It concluded

with Frances dancing as though drawing the lines of Danny's drawings of the dancers onto her body.

The nature of a performance within a gallery offers two key aspects to developing a greater awareness of the work of artists with learning disabilities. Firstly, you get the accidental viewer, the viewer who has come to see the work of Thomas Houseago, who stops and watches. The second aspect is of being able as the 'audience' to make choices to move, to shift perspective, to see the work more closely or to stand back and observe at a distance. Since there is no stage, the barriers of performer and audience are permeable and can therefore offer a greater sense of intimacy.

An articulated view

A key aim of *Intonation* was to provide a unique and rare insight for the viewer, to engage in the responses to the exhibition of the artists and dancers involved. This was indeed a rare opportunity, as people with learning disabilities may be traditionally excluded from sharing their views on art within our culture, through the difficulties of speech or literacy.

Often we engage with our knowledge of culture through reading or listening, but what of those artists and dancers with learning disabilities for whom this 'method' may be problematic? It can mean two things: firstly, as a culture we are not enriched with the thoughts and intellectual contributions by artists with learning disabilities. Secondly, those artists without this 'conventional voice', with much to say, go unheard. This can support a crucial misunderstanding that if this artistic thinking is not clearly visible it therefore does not exist.

"When I work at my art I spread my feelings about how important it is to me. I am confident and clever at what I do and feel most confident when I am doing my art." Danny Smith, Artist.

However, if we return to the original vocabularies within art and dance, then it is here we may begin to find how best to learn about how artists and dancers with learning disabilities see art, perceive art and articulate their own ideas and vision.

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visit www.projectvolume.org

A film is now available on Project Volumes website, it is best experienced in full screen format, which captures the intricacies of the work. *Intonation* was funded by Arts Council England.