

Critical Path Report

Thierry De Mey

Dance for Screen Laboratory

Joint project

Critical Path and ReelDance

September 26th – October 6th 2006

The Drill, Rushcutters Bay

Report written by Tracie Mitchell
October 2006

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The Project

Internationally celebrated dance filmmaker Thierry De Mey was invited to lead a nine day dance for screen laboratory instigated by Critical Path and Erin Brannigan for ReelDance.

Thierry De Mey is an award winning Belgium composer, percussionist and filmmaker who has an extensive history creating work for film, live performance and installations. He has worked with leading choreographers including; Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Wim Vandekeybus and William Forsyth. For more than 20 years De Mey has been involved with all facets connected to evolving dance for screen including inception, creation, negotiation and producing. He is also a staff member at the prestigious Brussels Dance School, P.A.R.T.S - Performing Arts and Research and Training Studies. He brought to the Critical Path Lab extensive knowledge and skill base.

Nine N.S.W artists took part; each coming to dance screen practice from varying backgrounds and included Dancers, Choreographers, Installation Artists, Editors, Television and Film Directors.

Selected participants were Sean O'Brien, Sam James, Narelle Benjamin, Nalina Wait, George Khut, Rowan Marchingo, Lisa Ffrench, Madeleine Hetheron and Kay Armstrong.

Each of these artists to date had been involved with dance for screen work that has received recognition from their peers and the wider dance screen networks.

Initially participants were invited to present a one page written document outlining a new idea in an embryonic state for a dance film, installation or other screen/choreographic project. The Lab was an opportunity for them to flesh out the idea, offering access to time, space, equipment, support staff and informed guidance without the pressure of a final product.

It was acknowledged, by the organisers, that each participant *may* be working with other collaborators and that the Critical Path project would financially cover the inclusion to one of the collaborators.

For example Nalina worked with a dancer, Madeleine with a choreographer and Rowan was working with his own cinematographer.

Additional staff were brought into the project for the participants to work with if they desired. This included two cinematographers, an editor and 3 support technicians.

Background

The Thierry De Mey Lab was Critical Path's first involvement in the establishment of a dance and screen laboratory. Brannigan, however, has been involved in the creation and implementation of two dance for screen workshop models that explored the potential of dance and screen elements in art making.

The Thierry De Mey project was an ambitious, well organised, highly relevant and timely event that;

- Acknowledged the growing skill base of artists working with dance and screen languages in this country, specifically N.S.W.

- Created a work environment that understood the complexities of bringing together the elements needed to create dance work for screen. This includes space of varying sizes, equipment and expert staffing.
- Secured the interest and expertise of one of the leading international dance filmmakers Thierry De Mey. De Mey's knowledge base and passion of dance for screen contributed to a focused and committed environment, absorbed in the research and building of skill base specific to dance screen practice.
- Acknowledged the importance of being able to offer the artists a substantial length of investigative time, in order to excavate the seeds of their ideas.
- Identified the need for support of artists of high calibre to have access to time, space and equipment in order to build research based practice.

Dance for Screen is a Team Sport

First and foremost was the recognition, by the event organisers, of the multiplicity of elements that contribute towards creating dance for screen works. The elements include thinking, dreaming, writing, talking, dancing, watching, filming, lighting, listening, editing and collaborating.

The level of organization and thought that had gone into the structuring of this project established a working environment in which the artists had the freedom to explore the potential of their ideas in their own individual ways.

For example

Lisa Ffrench focused on evolving the creation of a written script based on her initial idea. This involved working in consultation with a script editor.

Madeleine worked with a choreographer and his movement material. Her inquiry was driven by an interest in looking at editing and construction techniques.

Sean aimed to explore the potential of improvisation and screen. He established a creative and reflexive environment that included a live musician, a dancer and two camera people.

Sam, armed with a series of stills and footage he had taken of performers, identified the editing as his point of creation and used the technology like a tool for crafting poetry.

Each artist seemed to identify a sense of worth and value of the project. Whilst they were committed to utilizing this opportunity for their own practice, of significance was the cross fertilization that happened amongst the artists. The environment was one of generosity and curiosity. The sharing of skills, information and support. My observation is that all came away from the experience with much more they imaged as result of the time spent in each other's company.

Housekeeping and More

The Critical Path workspace, *The Drill*, was key to offering the artists a variety of spaces with which to address their individual needs including privacy when needed or the community of others when desired.

The kitchen became the heart of the project throughout the two weeks. It was the way we entered the building, made café, set up stuff, sourced information, got away from each other, came to find each other.

The large dance space was used predominately as the main shooting site and in the case of George's installation driven inquiry, he was able to erect four large screens and investigate the role of scale in his work.

Smaller spaces throughout the two storey building became allocated to editing suites, reading, writing, thinking and dancing.

Artists also used the surrounding grounds to shoot footage. Others such as Rowan, Madeleine and Kay shot sections of their works in other parts of the city.

A green room was set up, with chairs and a viewing monitor, for more formal meetings of the group as well as visitors. Also a box for participants to place copies of past works for others to have access to.

A schedule for the two weeks had been placed on a notice board in the kitchen. This schedule seemed to shift daily and became the main reference point for negotiating shifting of project components such as space, equipment or staff.

Group Meetings

Throughout the Lab period group meetings were organised of both formal and an informal tones. These were opportunities for the people to talk to their work, their ideas or to the work environment that had been set up.

Day One - Introduction day. The morning was lead by Erin and was a platform for each artist to introduce themselves to the group and speak to their aims for The Lab. Day One also concluded with Thierry speaking to the group. He suggested that The Lab was an opportunity for each participant to *dream your film in your head* and to use the freedom of this time in a way that art makers very rarely have the chance to do.

At the Friday meeting at the end of week one, Thierry came back to this point, reflecting that technical things should not be paralysing, this was a time for experimentation without the pressure of product or an outside timeline.

Whilst the formal organised meetings were a place for all to address issues, it was mostly housekeeping and technical elements that they were used for. However these meetings also offered opportunity for all to gather as a group, literally sit in a circle and look out onto each other. On a subliminal level to be reminded that, whilst a large component of what they did happened in isolation, the art makers were also part of a bigger picture, a collective group whose point of connection was through a mutual interest in dance and screen based work.

The informal meetings such as the water taxi event, lunches and dinners I think were probably the places where people spoke from their hearts regarding experiences they were having along the way.

Visitors

The artists had a place to come to work, to be reflective, in action and thoughtful to their ideas. What I think was also of significance to this nurturing environment was that it was framed contextually by a sense of the substantial dance screen activity going on worldwide. This was achieved through bringing a number of visitors into the Lab. These visitors offered context, variety and inevitably food for thought.

Thierry De Mey

It is noteworthy that Brannigan was able to secure the interest and commitment of an artist who is in such demand. This is a reflection of the high esteem his art making, knowledge and skill base is regarded on an international level. It was clear from the outset that not only was he highly skilled and articulate but also incredibly passionate about the possibilities of fusing dance and screen. His energy and focus became infectious throughout the workshop.

Day two of The Lab was allocated to a spotlight on Thierry De Mey. He framed this day long presentation by way of identifying his twenty year practice as an organic, hands on evolution of knowledge and skill base. Throughout the day he spoke to and presented us examples of his work, identifying their significance to his artistic questioning and understanding along the way. With such little written information regarding the structuring and theoretical insight into the creation of dance for screen work, this presentation was highly thought provoking and inspiring.

On the final Thursday, Thierry also gave each participant a copy of a working document that he created with Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker as part of the course work he teaches at P.A.R.T.S in Brussels.

Formal, individual meetings were also set up between Thierry and each of the participants. This was an opportunity for each group member to discuss their projects one on one. The projects and approaches were so varied, but Thierry was able to successfully address the very individual inquiries offering suggestions and stimulation to each participant.

Throughout the nine days his involvement also became very hands on, moving around the group, provoking questions, offering suggestions, and giving inspiration. He became part of a number of shoots including the second camera on Sean's shoot and third camera on Madeleine's. He also guided Nalina through her shoot, giving insight to the language and protocol of a director working on set. In particular the uniqueness of working with a dancer for screen.

De Mey, meeting with each artist individually, as well as moving fluidly throughout the group, supported individual projects and their unique growth throughout the nine days. These two consultation strategies also successfully addressed the volume of projects, the varying stages they were at, and the variety of expertise of each artists.

Jennifer McLachlan

Currently director of the Dance Board at the Australia Council for the Arts. McLachlan is a long standing advocate and initiator of dance for camera projects. Noteworthy is her time spent contributing to substantial inroads for the British dance screen culture in particular her time with the British Council and the UK new media initiative *Capture*. Her one hour presentation gave an overview of the British dance screen culture since the 1980's with a particular focus on models of presentation created by British television.

The group members I spoke to after the event commented that they didn't see themselves wanting to make work for television. Thierry referred to her as one of the heroes in television, an individual who had been fighting for the forms' existence inside a model that predominately had no interest in art.

All of the work that Jen presented was by UK artists who had long term commitments to making dance and screen based work but also had been the recipients of substantial support infrastructures that exists in the UK. Including Dance for the Camera, The Four by Four series, The Place artists in residence scheme and Capture.

This presentation highlighted the importance of process and how long-term investment in artist and their practice leads to work of excellence.

Panel Presentations

On the final day of The Lab each artist gave a formal presentation of their projects' evolution to date. A selection of guests with backgrounds in producing, curating or programming art projects involving dance, movement or the body, had been invited to join the group.

Guests included

SBS and ABC television, a programmer, a film producer, a gallery curator and government funding representative from the Australia Council for the Arts.

Observations

- Each of the artists had an opportunity to speak to their process and outcomes at the closing of the project.
- The artists experienced the opportunity to present and receive feedback from presenters and funding bodies.
- Producers and funding bodies listened to the ideas in the artist's language as opposed to formal application models. For example

Both George and Sam gave a spoken introduction followed by a screening of large scale projected imagery as part of their investigation into installation style works.

Narelle spoke and *dance/spoke* her ideas, presenting images of paintings and a short video of edited movement studies of her work.

- For artists to be heard in their place of work (as opposed to the producers place of work)
- To network with presenters and funding bodies. An opportunity for presenters to meet artists they didn't know and for artists to have a sense of presentation opportunities that exist. At the conclusion of the presentation some of the artists were approached by producers and programmers with a view to maybe taking their works to another stage.

- There was no pressure on the programmers or funding bodies to say yes or no to a project. But rather they were invited to offer individual, informed feedback to the projects, in context to their areas of expertise.

Although this final day presentation was part of the Lab project's brief, some of the group members felt the pressure of having to present a finished product. I make this observation as being different from the nervousness one may feel when publicly presenting an idea for the first time – that place where an idea moves out of your body and head into a public arena. Although a great deal of effort, by the organisers, had gone into developing a safe environment for the artists it was interesting that some still felt the pressure of product driven making in relationship to speaking in a room filled with people that potentially could present their work. Maybe this was more a comment on the imbalance and amount of pressure artists feel; to be delivering product as opposed to *cooking* an idea. Maybe what this project has revealed is a need to identify and address issues of balance for artists in terms of cooking an idea, formulating process, presentation and funding options.

Outcomes

It is clear that each artist entered this project with a sense of potential to build an idea. All involved, enthusiastically took on board the opportunity offered. Physical evidence of the investment in this concentrated period of time was the substantial growth of each of the projects, as was demonstrated in the final presentation.

All of these artists are mid career and make work of a high calibre. It was exciting to observe them individually as they found their own momentum over the two weeks and moved away from their ideas being driven by the technology. Instead the technology became a tool for them to dig deeper and hunt out the context of their work; what it is they are wanting to say/explore with their art making. I think this kind of journey into art making only happens as result of having time and opportunity to focus.

My observation is that the partnership between Critical Path and ReelDance was incredibly successful. The succinct levels of communication, the planning and organization that went into the making and running of this project was highly evident and resulted in the creation of a highly productive and focused work environment.

Brannigan did a really amazing job utilizing her networks and knowledge of the form. As well as negotiating and securing the contribution of Thierry De Mey and the other guests. She also brought together a group of artists who are at a place in their career where they have the capacity to leverage off this opportunity.

Project Co-ordinator Sally MacDonald was the face of Critical Path and was incredibly generous and efficient. She ran the project from the ground up, organizing and liasing staff, equipment, space and more. This project had so many elements connected to it that it was a potential nightmare waiting to happen. It is recognition to her level of organisational and administrative skills that greatly added to smooth day to day running of events and the overall high quality of this project.

Round Up

There is no questioning of the ability of the artists involved in this project. This project was an investment in them making the next step in their work by giving them access to space and information.

The Thierry De Mey Lab was successful and thought provoking on a number of levels. Most importantly, it offered physical and psychological space for artists to apply a rigor to their investigation and research.

The Lab also offered context; it addressed the need for artists of a high calibre to have access to information of current world practice and knowledge regarding the substantial points of reference and support infrastructures that exist. On one level a reminder for

artists that they are not in isolation and that their art practice is part of a bigger picture and a substantial community.

This project has raised for me the question about leadership and role models for art makers. Most recently mentoring and leadership models in the arts in Australia have a focus towards *emerging artists*. The Thierry De Mey Lab has brought up issues regarding the support of mid career dance artists and potentially what mentoring and leadership models could be put in place. I am suggesting that for artists at this stage of their career they don't want their hand held. Instead they search for respect, inspiration, provocation and rigor of inquiry. This I believe De Mey delivered.

On a final note, the evolution of substantial networks and contacts of substance take lengthy periods of time to accumulate. This process is often in fairy steps. It is my suggestion that participants keep open the lines of communication, keep each other in the loop re what they are up to if they are in town. All this becomes part of a more extended picture and the investment in a community of art makers as they evolve throughout the next decade and more.