

Dancing Means Doing

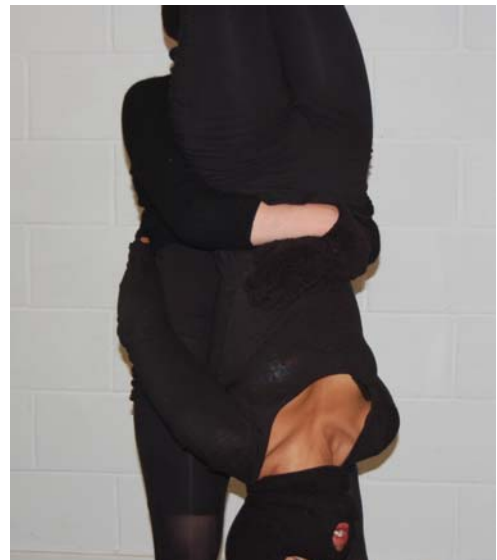
UCF's Winter Dance Gathering brings meaning and doing together in a lively festival of choreography

Merce Cunningham said, 'when I dance it means *this is what I am doing*', and this December saw over one hundred dance artists from all stages of their career offer themselves up in what they were doing at University College Falmouth's first annual Winter Dance Gathering, December 4, 5 and 6. Dancing in the dark, partnering with the walls, choreographing over the internet, critiquing female dressing room neuroses, tap-dancing to live music, wrestling with giant flags and creating mass improvisation events are just a few of the 'doings' that comprised a weekend celebrating diverse and energetic engagements with dance performance in 2009. Taking place at UCF's Dartington Campus in Devon the gathering featured work by students, staff and alumni of UCF and Dartington College of Arts within a weekend of performances, workshops, discussions and film screenings that were all free to the public.

The question 'Where are we at?' acted as umbrella to the packed program of events that responded to this question performatively, figuratively or literally. A distinctive aspect of the festival was the high volume of site-based works; during Friday evening's launch it was possible to encounter surprise dance performances in the toilets, showers, entrance, fire exits, prop closet, and café of the Aller Park studios.

Lingering in the hallway left one at risk of becoming witness to the mysterious performance by 'The Carpet People'; this ninja duo wore head-to-toe black, executed a sequence of lifts, rolls and entanglements, and sometimes threatened to envelop onlookers.

Further down the corridor 'The Meeting Space' with curries, mulled wine, homemade cakes, film screenings and live guitar music was also spontaneous host to several performances including a stripped down tap dancing duet. Accompanied by a five-piece band Bella Shirley-Miller and Maisha Kungu performed *Take Your Clothes off When You Dance*, an effusive rendition of Frank Zappa's 'What's the Ugliest Part of Your Body?' to thunderous applause.



The Carpet People take over the hallways

Meanwhile outdoors in the misty dark, Beatrice Jarvis presented her ethereal installation and performance *The Lost Narrative*. Smells of hot wax mingled with the night air to make this world, tucked beneath a concrete overhang, a welcoming enclave. Upon the ten square meters of space were words written in chalk. Picture frames, shoes, a chair—all painted white—shared space with red leaves, the performer's red hair, red photos and the reddish light from a row of candles. The audience witnessed sepia-toned images from a poet's life as Jarvis in a white crinoline dress rapped on a typewriter, danced in the leaves and grappled with an old suitcase of memories before disappearing into the night.





Beatrice Jarvis' *The Lost Narrative*

Back inside and entering 'The Visual Space', one felt a change of tone from the jubilant chaos of the hallways to a more reflective feeling created by a studio quietly awash with images. The room was a composition of frames, large and small scale projections and screens, in which the varying soundtracks and rhythms of the images were allowed to juxtapose each other, interweave and co-exist. Works by Katrina Brown, Truth Unit, and Sophie Utting offered extended and unusual perspectives on the presence of the body with other media of charcoal, a piano, and cloth. 'Play' by Truth Unit including Imogene Newland, gave an intimate view of movement and sound of dancer and piano, one merging into the other. Films by Katrina Brown offered a steady pulse of images, photos, sites that revealed a mother-son relationship and a repetitive drawing action, a caress of charcoal outlining a child's silhouette just before he falls from the frame and the action begins again. Two poetic dance films by Sophie Utting washed the walls with beautiful, grainy choreographed images of sea, landscape and moving body.



Video work by Katrina Brown in The Visual Space

Other films revealed experiences of community, society and/or culture. *Interrupted Vision* by Jane Castree was an upbeat play with occlusion; partial views and fragmented angles of the dancing body drew on themes from M.C. Escher's work. Through touch and sound, Itta Howie's *Surfacing Voices* showed the drawing in of a curious audience into the grass and earth. Rosanna Irvine's video short *From The Locker Room* was a fast-paced and surreal look at confinement of the body in social space, and the TWIG Project's '*Twig Dances in Nanling*' documented movement-based improvisation studies of plant species, performed by children in the Nanling National Forest Park of south China. Christine Borch's '*Old Eyes on New Dance*' was a touching look at how contemporary dance is perceived through the eyes of the elderly, as a dozen Danish interviewees settled in austere living room landscapes, gave their candid opinions on bare feet, passion and conceptual choreography.

Amidst the hubbub of live performance taking over the rest of the building, ongoing join-in improvisation jams in Aller Park's biggest studio, renamed 'The Action Space', challenged the public to jump in as part of the fun. Here, a performance jam was followed by a contact jam, and then glitter ball dancing into the night. Each transition between jams was marked by a wash, as twenty dancers performing a sequence of choreography by Kuldip Singh-Barmi, materialized from hallways to take over The Action Space for the duration of a song before dissolving into the borders again. Another memorable moment of dissolving borders was watching as more than sixty people, seated on the edge of the space and observing the jam, slowly filtered in to the center and joined in the contact improvisation score of softly taking someone to the floor.



The Action Space: *Cross-Field Improvisation Jam*

Saturday morning the studios were busy again early, with twenty dancers taking advantage of the release technique class taught by Sabrina Ribes Bonet. The workshop '*How to Swede a Dance*', given by Chris Engdahl, introduced participants to Engdahl's interactive site, an international forum for choreographic deconstruction and exchange. Participants take choreography from the site, adapt, reject or change it in some way before uploading the new version for future appropriations. Afternoon performances included works-in-progress as well as discussion points to frame the work just seen in terms of a larger field of performance research. In the discussion '*Angles on Collaboration*', Noel Perkins, Runa Kaiser Larsen and Simone Marie Mortenson chased interpretations of collaboration ranging from masked coercion to the collective contributions of an improvisation-based performance ensemble.

The performance programme of the day featured a number of collaborations. Sheri Burt, Joni Brown and Louise Moxhay's performance *Welcome to the Women's Showers*, an audience favourite, was a dry look at the obsessions and mind games that haunt ablutions in women's changing rooms. Ellen Kilsgaard and Chris Crickmay's *Oh Monster!* was an eccentric safari through a territory of basically familiar objects whose personas grew

menacing through Kilsgaard's riveting performance as a brave but bullet-sweating explorer of this world, and Crickmay, whose silent detective persona and torch coldly illuminated the heart-stopping evidence. Evoking my own childhood terror of the dark beneath my bed, *Oh Monster!* worked between sculpture and performance to reveal how our performative encounters with objects generate emotions towards them. Next Kate Ashman and Marina de Quay presented *Through the Keyholes*, a work-in-progress commissioned for the Winter Dance Gathering exploring the tales emerging from twenty antique keys found in an old tin box. The performers unlocked their stories, creating a maze of memories and characters; they ran into, through and over each other, getting locked in and out of place. A second commission went to Runa Kaiser Larsen and Simone Marie Mortenson from Denmark to develop *Women Without Men*, reviewed here by Alison Grace.

Women without men? Who are they and how do they live? Perhaps you are one of them, passing unnoticed in the crowd, hiding a life of highly disciplined exercise and control, no distractions allowed? Are you perhaps on a personal quest for your true self, fuelled by freshly pressed carrot and protein juice???

Whether you are one of these women or for example, a man (without a woman), do not feel put on the spot, you can enjoy two young women attempt the perilous exercise of answering the numerous questions posed by this unsettling phenomenon.

Two well trained dancers deliver a highly practiced routine to tackle this tricky subject to the stage floor, using their individual physical and mental skills. The combination of two contrasting styles of personas, one driven by sheer attack, control, and articulation of movement, the other more loose, uncoordinated but nevertheless striving to get to the end of the debate, divides the space into spheres of personal battles. The show, structured as a TV quiz, is well worth the theme it addresses: movements and gestures become contorted and distorted, rude and untamed. A highlight of this spectacle will be when both ladies meet in a demonstration of "how to be in control"... Here, the combination of gestures, counts, and exclamation "no, no, no!" fuses into a quirky choreography of the absurd.

If you have missed the opportunity to see the first showing of "Women without men" at University College Falmouth's Winter Dance Gathering, watch out for their next appearance. This is a work in progress, created and performed by Danish choreographers Runa Kaiser Larsen and Simone Marie Mortenson, which we will hope to find developed in the near future. This was a daring, clever and hilarious first show.

-Alison Grace

Sunday morning included the workshop, 'Body, Place and Object' with Kilsgaard and Crickmay, as well as performances from afternoon to evening. Audiences in groups of eight were led blindfolded into a black box studio to experience *Left in the Dark* by Susanne Thomas. Given a length of rope to hold onto, the blind were subject to a softly building orchestra of body effects. The press of a body at your ankle, someone's breath in your ear, swishes and scrapings along the floor, whispers peppering the room, the feel of a breeze as someone jumps past, and a terrific crashing of feet made a netherworld of darkness filled with dance and music from a contrabass on wheels. Hannah Silva's *Panopticon* brought the audience into the role of the all-seeing interrogator as 'subject 251175' revealed her thoughts, memories and pride in her British citizenship while striking chords with our inner victims of bureaucracy. *Degrees of Freedom #5&6* held in two different studios connected by live feed cameras seemed also to reveal processes of witnessing and transmission as Rosanna Irvine and Noel Perkins sat at a table, confronting one another in a conversation of touch, resistance and collapse while cameras and audience watched their every move.

The only ticketed event of the weekend was Marie Gabrielle Rotie's butoh solo *Black Mirror*, produced by the Arts at Dartington. With dramatic lighting, an expansive sound score and skillful use of props, Rotie conjured the intimate and playfully macabre world of one who plays with her image in the mirror. True to butoh's fearless exploration of the dark and comical corners of the psyche, *Black Mirror* brought the weight and solidity of a traditional dance form to ground the end of such an experimental programme. The final performance of the weekend was the work in progress showing of *TAME (Hystericon)* by Alison Grace and Sabrina Ribes Bonet. The piece brought butoh forms and release work together in a critical comment about women's madness.

With Merce Cunningham and now the Winter Dance Gathering past it seems fitting to reflect on how far our doings in dance can really mean *doing*. With the imminent relocation of UCF's choreography programme from Dartington's green hills to Falmouth's new performance facilities, there are many meanings in the question 'Where are we at?'. For this year's Winter Dance Gathering, the musings in the doing were everywhere: improvising with plants and children in China, interrogating the subject, talking dance with Danes, and demonstrating the impossibility of 'how to be in control'. Above all, the action-packed three days made very clear that the answer to 'Where are we at?', at least for UCF choreographers, is clearly moving, moving, moving.

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