Curating the Practice/The Practice of Curating

Douglas Rosenberg

As the field of screendance becomes more popular and more festivals emerge around the world, how festivals are programmed becomes more and more important. Festivals are the conduits through which most people are able to view screendance, though it is often unclear how a festival builds its public programs. Is there a jury, an individual curator, perhaps a combination of both? What is the difference between a curated or juried screening and one that is "programmed" and what are the concerns of each? Are tickets sold and how does that fiscal piece play out in what is screened? And finally, does the festival provide a platform or forum for criticality as part of its programming?

The practice of curating comes from an art model in which an individual or team attempt to create meaning from a group of artworks, a product of the relationship of one object or image or film to another as seen through numerous cultural lenses and frames of reference. Curating dance film and video is a way of constructing narratives about the field of screendance that may be otherwise invisible or absent. As these are excavated, or brought into the light, the viewer sutures the images together and in doing so either accepts the curator's thesis or creates a new one for herself.

Curating is also a way to interrogate individual works of screendance, collective, individual or group practice, and to actively shape and comment upon the field in general. Yet, it seems that curating, in its truest sense, (with some exceptions of course) is largely absent from the screendance festival circuit and from screendance exhibition in general. Curating creates a foundation for criticality as it frames and groups individual works around issues of content or form or other myriad concerns. Thus, the possibility of a critical dialog is amplified through active curatorial practice. Curating and criticality are linked and synergistically contribute to an elevated discussion about meaning, purpose, form and content in the field of screendance.

Programming, which is more often the model that one finds in screendance festivals, is in a way a kind of showcase model, not unlike the way in which a dance concert is often arranged when there are multiple choreographers on the same bill. The underlying similarities between artists sharing the same program may be vague or not entirely apparent and often they appear together for reasons wholly outside of the content or style of their work, reasons that may be pragmatic or financial. Curating is the exact opposite of that model. Curating implies that a third party has an active role in choosing and arranging the work on a program in such a way as to create a meta-narrative between pieces, between choreographers and between the content present in the work the audience ultimately sees. The role of the curator is more than active, it is *pro-active* in that the curator's job is to seek out work that supports a thesis, a thesis that the curator seeks to introduce into the culture of the art form (dance for instance) in order to create a

2

conversation about the art form itself. In other words, the curated work is at the service of something greater than itself. In this model the work begins to function on a much deeper level than simply as entertainment. It begins to catalyze new ideas about the genre, it serves as a text for a larger discourse about the art form or about issues that are of concern to the curator, (political, cultural, or other) and it elevates the genre to one in which rigorous interrogation of the form of screendance, of dance itself of issues of representation and agency and beyond, vibrate across the entire practice and the community of practitioners. If one adds critical writing and reportage into this mix, the field begins to look like a serious creative social space in which important and meaningful dialogs may begin to take place that will ultimately elevate the field. And it begins to address issues of artistic citizenship, reinforcing a kind of synergistic community practice.

Both dance and media have become ubiquitous in the culture. Reality television has turned its attention toward dance in various forms, dance appears on the Academy Awards, in commercials, one can see dance in numerous incarnations on YouTube and other media sites and of course there are any number of movies that foreground dance to tell a story, often one about triumph over class or social status. These representations of dance on film and video have most certainly affected way that dance is represented in the genre of practice we call screendance. The trend toward spectacle and toward lavish production and virtuosic performance is clearly visible in the work one encounters on the international screendance festival circuit. The oscillation between what is often

historically referred to as high and low culture, or as the post-war critic Clement

Greenberg framed it, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (in his seminal essay of the same name

from 1939) is a constant in art history. However, in the current mediatized culture, where

the gap between life and art has been ameliorated and boundaries that once existed to

delineate one practice from another have been dissolved, the blending of high and low,

avant-garde and kitsch, experimental and mainstream, commercial and independent has

exerted an undeniable pressure on the arts to keep up and to compete with a visual culture

that is at times, overwhelmingly frantic. Greenberg used the term *kitsch* to identify a

kind of esthetically impoverished art-product which, in pretending to be high art attracted

those who wished to align themselves with high culture in order to signal class status.

This is an essay clearly written from a Marxist point of view, but informative regardless.

It is also enlightening to consider how a statement such as the following might inform

theories of curatorial practice.

Greenberg states:

"One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a

poem by T. S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a Saturday

Evening Post cover. All four are on the order of culture, and ostensibly, parts of the same

culture and products of the same society. Here, however, their connection seems to

end…-- what perspective of culture is large enough to enable us to situate them in an

enlightening relation to each other? Does the fact that a disparity such as this within the

frame of a single cultural tradition, which is and has been taken for granted -- does this

4

fact indicate that the disparity is a part of the natural order of things? Or is it something

entirely new, and particular to our age?"

(*Eddie Guest was a folksy newspaper poet at the Detroit Free Press beginning in the

late 1800's for some 60 yrs.)

He goes on to say,

"The answer involves more than an investigation in aesthetics. It appears to me that it is

necessary to examine more closely and with more originality than hitherto the

relationship between aesthetic experience as met by the specific -- not the generalized --

individual, and the social and historical contexts in which that experience takes place.

What is brought to light will answer, in addition to the question posed above, other and

perhaps more important questions."

　　　　　Clement Greenberg, The Avante-Garde and Kitsch, 1939, Partisan Review

Greenberg is asking the reader to focus more closely on the context from which the work

of art emanates, in order to make judgments on the esthetic value as well as the cultural

value of the work of art.

Both Greenberg and other theorists of the modern era, including Theodor Adorno framed

the avante-garde and kitsch as opposites. Adorno's argument against kitsch was that it

was merely a product of the "culture industry" and subject to the needs of a marketplace

which desired entertainment above all else. Adorno held that true art should be both

subjective and challenging. Greenberg felt that art should aspire to a much higher

calling. In *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, Greenberg noted,

"… the avant-garde itself, already sensing the danger [of "superficial phenomena"], is

becoming more and more timid every day that passes."

Greenberg felt that it was the duty of the avante-garde to battle against the diminishment

of art that the cultural acceptance of kitsch enabled. The avante-garde for Greenberg,

was a point of resistance.

Perhaps you have seen this footage of Matt Harding dancing for the camera around the

globe:

NEW YORK TIMES:

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/08/arts/television/08dancer.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

YOU TUBE: MATT HARDING

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlfKdbWwruY

Clearly, Matt Harding's YouTube videos would be an example of kitsch.

As post-modernism evolved in the 1980's the once clear-cut boundaries between

the avant-garde and kitsch became blurred as *irony* entered the vernacular. The embrace

of irony (as well as techniques of appropriation) led to a kind of work that embraced

popular culture and often invited mass consumption and mass media practices, thus

elevating kitsch to the discourse of high art. Simultaneously in the world of dance and media, the aspiration toward television and the wider audiences that television distribution offered, greatly enticed makers of screendance. The legacy of that enticement is a kind of work that mimics the spectacle of both television and Hollywood in its scale, production values and content.

The next clip is from a dance film by Gideon Obarzanek and Edwina Throsby for their film Dance Like Your Old Man:

YOU TUBE: http://www.cinedans.nl/2008/en/index.php

Looking at these works side by side, (with the the previous film by Matt Harding) one sees a particular similarity. In both there is a kind of nonchalant exuberance, shot in a similarly straightforward manner. The difference is of course context. *Dance Like Your Old Man* was just announced as the winner of the CINEDANS Award during the International Dancefilmfestival CINEDANS in Rialto in Amsterdam, while Matt Harding's clips make no claim to high art. One could certainly position them side by side within a dance film context to raise questions about context and intent as well as appropriation and post-modern pastiche. That is a hypothetical curatorial project that might inspire debate about the nature of the form.

There are multiple strands apparent in screendance production,

And, as is often the case, one can identify a pendulum swing away from the dominant paradigm of the moment toward another model. One reaction to the ubiquity of spectacle and virtuosity as well as the trends that currently dominate dominant festivals, takes form in work that is intimate, socially conscious, humble and thought provoking. This is work that at its core comes from a conceptual impulse and is antithetical to spectacle. This body of work often trades the veneer of polished surfaces for the more difficult gestalt of content *and* form. In doing so, it raises question important questions about the very form it inhabits.

The programmed festival model is one in which we usually find the most recent screendance creations being shown and rarely do we see a body of work by a single artist created over time. While the festival model currently dominates the exhibition of screendance, I would note here that this was not always the case, at least here in the states. Seminal exhibitions of screendance work took place on both coasts One of the earliest media collectives, Video Free America in San Francisco both produced and curated work from the late 60's through the eighties. The Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, California screened curated programs, as did independent curators on both coasts in makeshift venues, underground cinemas and later in dance spaces such as The Dance Theater Workshop in New York.

Hans Breder, Professor of Art, created the Intermedia Area in the School of Art and Art History at The University of Iowa in 1968, with which Elaine Summers was affiliated

and where she created some of her early dance film work. Summers was a member of the Judson Dance Theater in New York, the seminal group largely considered to be the founders of post-modern dance in the early 1960s. The group, which grew out of a dance composition class with Robert Dunn, included such luminaries as Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, and David Gordon. The Judson group questioned the very nature of dance and its practice, opening the door to a new set of possibilities, including dance on film and video, and dance in a mediated environment. Summers worked extensively with projected film and images in a dance environment, beginning as early as the first Judson concert in 1962. She also made freestanding dance films. She founded the Experimental Intermedia Foundation in New York as well as her own dance/intermedia company, the Elaine Summers Dance and Film Company, which toured experimental multi-media works from the 1970s forward. Summers's work in multi-media, from its earliest stages, made dance an element in a kind of *gesamkunstwerk* of imagery that became a model for generations of other artists whose work involved synthesizing dancing bodies into an electronic field of activity.

Her films, including *In the Absence and the Presence*, *Iowa Blizzard*, and *Two Girls Downtown Iowa, 1973*, deconstruct dance and re-present it as often formalist, abstract imagery that suggests, but does not demonstrate, dance. Summers's use of movement in those seminal films was often excruciatingly slow and asked the viewer to forego expectations of more traditional elements of "choreography" in favor of a gestalt of

cinematic motion. The resonance of her approach is evident in many subsequent dance films, and even more so in the very idea of intermedia or multi-media dance activity through the present. Yvonne Rainer is often cited as a seminal figure in screendance, which she clearly is. However, it is in her famous manifesto that she articulates a position regarding a theory of dance that is overlooked for its significance to the screendance debate. In Yvonne Rainer's *NO Manifesto* of 1965, the choreographer/filmmaker states:

> No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved.

Amy Greenfield reifies Yvonne Ranier's manifesto in films such as *Encounter* (1970), *For God While Sleeping* (1970), *Transport [1971], Dirt* (1971), and *Element* (1973). For Greenfield, technical dancing is irrelevant, rather, the mise-en-scène of bodies in real, physical – as well as traumatic and repetitive – motion lies at the core of her cinematic exploration. In *Transport,* for instance, we see a group of people, not performers or dancers, but individuals who can only be immediately identified as humans engaged in a very visceral set of tasks, undertaken with deeply-felt conviction. In other words, there is no artifice and little evidence of the camera's alteration of reality as we see the group carrying a member aloft over rugged terrain, until exhaustion sets in and then another

10

member is lifted above their heads and the process repeats. As in Ranier's manifesto, there is no cinematic magic in these early films, no glamour and certainly no transformation. It is what it is and nothing else. Neither the movers nor the film are virtuosic. The film is, rather, a moment in time, an intervention of camera and recording device into a mindful but seemingly meaningless version of what Allan Kaprow might call "child's play." This work breaks down expectations of both performance and the art of filmmaking. In Greenfield's early work, nothing and everything happens simultaneously. Her work is a connective thread from dance to what would later become known as performance art; it also connects to conceptual and minimal art. Greenfield's films are a flashpoint for hybridity within the context of an evolving esthetic of screendance in a time of great change in the art world in general. They are not dance, nor can one argue successfully that they are not *not* dance. They are exhortations to reconsider the nature of dance, community, and cinema. In 1983, Amy Greenfield and Elaine Summers curated and produced the important Filmdance Festival which took place over two weeks at the Public Theater in New York, with more than one hundred films and filmed sequences scheduled in twenty-one different programs. They also produced a slim black catalog, which contains essays by both filmmakers and choreographers and is a highly prized document among students and scholars of the genre.

Both Summers and Greenfield as well as James Byrne who curated the 1989 series at Dance Theater Workshop were artists first, though artists that were interdisciplinary and

memlab 6/25/07 2:42 PM
Deleted: The

memlab 6/25/07 2:42 PM
Deleted: are not

memlab 6/25/07 2:42 PM
Deleted: nor is the film itself

memlab 6/25/07 2:42 PM
Deleted: It is,

memlab 6/25/07 2:42 PM
Deleted: rather

memlab 6/25/07 2:42 PM
Deleted: ,

memlab 6/25/07 2:42 PM
Deleted:

memlab 6/25/07 2:42 PM
Deleted: It is

memlab 6/25/07 2:43 PM
Deleted: that

memlab 6/25/07 2:43 PM
Deleted: the boundaries of

memlab 6/25/07 2:43 PM
Deleted: as well as

memlab 6/25/07 2:44 PM
Deleted: what

memlab 6/25/07 2:44 PM
Deleted: will ultimately b

memlab 6/25/07 2:44 PM
Deleted: , as well as

memlab 6/25/07 2:45 PM
Deleted: what

memlab 6/25/07 2:46 PM
Deleted: is and what

memlab 6/25/07 2:46 PM
Deleted: is and what

memlab 6/25/07 2:46 PM
Deleted: is as well

memlab 6/25/07 2:46 PM
Deleted: 100

memlab 6/25/07 2:46 PM
Deleted: 21

often worked outside of the discipline of dance. Byrne's notes for "Eyes Wide Open" at DTW state,

"Featured in this program are dance films and videos that demonstrate bracingly innovative approached to constructing cinematic choreography from disparate and minimal movement sources. All of these works strive to create new forms and structures for the presentation of a screen reality dealing with the human figure and movement. None of the films deal with a traditional approach to filming dance… This fascinating selection of new works presents a range of possibilities that push and expand the edges of dance video."

This curator's statement puts his agenda out front of the work and creates a context for viewing. It makes evident that the selection of work both troubles and questions the nature of the form. It also operates an s a kind of challenge to both makers and curators to answer by way of further exhibitions.

In the catalog for Filmdance 1890's-1983 Amy Greenfield notes:

"This catalog sets out to discuss the nature of filmdance. Each writer in the catalog was free to choose his or her own subject. No writer knew the specific viewpoints of the others. Therefore, the articles present varying, sometimes opposing, definitions, theories, and discussions on the nature of Filmdance… The artists who responded to the invitation to write have made statements either on their own films or on

their theories of filmdance. In setting down their thoughts, they further help to articulate the varying and changing nature of filmdance."

James Byrne and Amy Greenfield each make their case for curatorial prerogative, but both point to the larger needs and desires of the field in general in their statements. The curator's statements articulate a methodology for how the work might circulate conceptually, as a whole made up of individual voices. Likewise, the festival model creates a context for viewing and also sets parameters for discourse. However, the festival model, often lacking a thesis and leaning more toward an entertainment model is less clear in regard to a desired outcome. So, the gap between those two approaches has led me to a series of rhetorical questions around which this conference is built:

- What responsibilities do programmers and directors of screendance festivals have in regard to defining the field?

- Can curating function as a kind of critical thinking?

- What part might curators play in creating intelligent and thoughtful programming that articulates a distinct point of view that sets one festival apart from another?

- What does it mean to curate a program of dances for the screen?

13

- What historical precedents are there to be found in fine art or experimental cinema models?

- How might curating function as historical documentation?

- Curating as writing: does an articulately curated program function as a text for understanding the form?

- How might curating shape a dialog about entertainment and the relationship of media to dance?

- What might curated programs allow for that programs chosen by other means might not?

- Can curating define a model for criticality?

- What kind of topics might be suggested as curated programs and what might those topical programs address?

- How might curating help to enunciate genres in the field?

With curating or any sort of selection process in which some are chosen, others not, comes the

question of elitism. In other words, who gets to choose and why? Curating is not however, simply about choosing. It is a pro-active practice which by its very nature contains in equal parts, academic/pedantic/scholarly and teaching components. There is in fact a high degree of responsibility that one undertakes as a curator, not only to the work, but also to the culture of the art form in general, its historical provenance, its way forward and its venous flow of inter-related tributaries often located outside of its own discipline.

I bring up the issue of elitism because of a recent on-line discussion which took place on the media and dance list serve. The festival model often exacerbates discussions about elitism in that it seems that often, the work that dominates screenings is highly virtuosic, highly produced and linked to established choreographers and or directors.

This is a discourse which I do have strong feelings about and address it quite often in classroom situations. The rhetorical question is this: why is it when one needs a doctor, lawyer or even housepainter, the common tendency is to look for the best at each job, i.e. the most "successful", "well-qualified" or otherwise. In these quotidian life-decisions, elitism is considered a positive for obvious reasons. Yet, somehow when the discussion turns to art, there is an almost automatic recoil away from ideas about elitism. The logic is inconsistent.
 Understandably, the project of post-modern art has been to diffuse the perception and practice of a particular kind of elitism in the art world in favor of a more egalitarian kind of practice. But that project was directed at changing the perception of whose voices mattered and whose work was represented in institutions such as museums, galleries, etc.
 Screendance, (in one strand) coming out of the video art practice of the 1970's. (an historical

antecedent often overlooked) has inherited the openness of media practice in general. That is to say that there is no prohibition or regulation regarding who gets to make work, no apprentice system, no training period. In fact one of the overwhelming successes of video art was to instantiate itself as an artform that was not tethered to the segregated past of Modern Art. That, coupled with the availability of low cost video production tools makes screendance a practice that is the most accessible of all art forms at the moment and thus the least "elitist". That analogy speaks to production, which is separate from curating, exhibition and critique of the form. Where perhaps the whiff of elitism comes into play is in those three, often-linked areas of the practice along with of course, funding. As artists, we are for the most part middle class, educated and privileged, (there are of course exceptions). The most anarchic of all movements, and the one that ironically is brought up when people begin to speak of "revolutionary art" are the Futurists. The Futurists were members of the Italian bourgeoisie, which is roughly equivalent to the upper middle class in the current era. The idea that the futurists were some kind of radical group of artists is certainly true, but they were also very much inside the circle of the art world, highly educated and privileged. Privilege should not preclude one from provoking the status quo. We at this conference are elite in our understanding of a particular area of research and practice that most of the world cares little about. I readily admit to and have a great deal of pride in, being among an elite group of practitioners who have dedicated a good part of their lives to elevating an art form, to making work that matters and to parsing and interrogating both the work and the milieu within which that work circulates in the same way a scientist focuses on their own particular area of research. If a woodsman spends 30 years learning how to best cut and mill lumber from a tree, does that not make him a part of an elite group, capable of mentoring, teaching

16

and critiquing other woodsmen? Elitism is the mechanism that comes about as a natural progression of practice, whether it be in yoga, art, gardening, child rearing or other avocation. Where perhaps the biggest friction comes about is in the festival system that screendance seems to have aligned itself with. In other words, the festival model is one in which judgment is passed at numerous levels by people who have been somehow charged with the authority to do so. Later in the process, the problem multiplies as awards are conferred upon the "best" films. In the current model those who choose films for inclusion and further who confer awards on films are rarely expected to engage in critical debate supporting their choices in the form of public discourse or written essays, nor do we in the community often know how or why these particular individuals are chosen to have that authority. So, yes, the system is filled with elitist behavior, but it is the lack of response to, protest of, advocacy against, or radical alternatives to the system by artists and others that is the real problem. This is where curatorial activism should come into play. There is room for anyone in the screendance community to create radical alternatives to the status quo. Every movement in 20th century art history was built on the ashes of another and was subsequently burned to the ground by the next group of angry, committed artists who, in time became obsolete as well. In this room are intelligent, talented and curious artists in the who I hope will challenge my status quo during this conference. However, we are all part of an elite group, the inside of the circle if you will, that is an inevitable result of naming that which one is and that which one practices. That circle is what enables us to engage in this discussion just as dance training allows one to speak in a privileged and unique language as well. The problem as I see it is only in the wholesale acceptance of the status quo.

17

Screendance, for all its revolutionary historical bloodlines, has become institutionalized

to the extent that it is largely impotent as an agent for critique and social change. What is

has become I believe, to a great extent, is an agent for the distribution of dance on film.

This is truly an ironic observation in light of how canonized Maya Deren has become

within the field. Deren has become the pivot point for a history of dance on film, an

artificial point of reference in the same way as the mythology of Nam Jun Paik as the

"father of video art" is a convenient narrative. This is precisely why the field needs the

kind of polyvocality in which artists from non-western or other self-defined (feminist,

queer, hybrid, other) cultures speak for themselves and why curatorial activism is so

important at this moment.

What Deren and others including Amy Greenfield achieved was a complete rupture with

Hollywood musicals and with documentation of virtuosic dancing as film art. The irony is

that the work of Maya Deren and Greenfield (or other work of their ilk) would not be

included in most screendance festivals these days except as a nostalgic looking backwards to

the "roots" of screendance.

Curating is a platform for strong statements and quite different than arranging or

programming. It relies on a set of strategies that are intended to speak back to the form very

directly and in many cases attempts to move the form in a particular direction. It is also

about using works of art to make a definitive statement that sometime lies outside the form,

such as disability, gender, etc. Programming seems to be a cross between the way film

festivals are often created and the way dance events are conceived. In both cases it follows

an entertainment model, a model which is often contingent on ticket sales and therefore has

an agenda that is perhaps colored by audience expectations. Programming may be done around a theme but is still a different undertaking than curation, with a different outcome to be sure. Curation as it is practiced in the gallery and museum world is, in the first iteration, free of certain encumbrances such as ticket sales, (galleries can be entered without admission fee as can most museums at least once a week). In subsequent iterations, the curator functions as an interface between public and artists as well as assuming the responsibility for the gestalt of the exhibition. The exhibition itself is often intended to further iterate a particular point of view using the art objects as a kind of text in order to do so. My bias is clearly toward an art model, though I think the art and screendance genres can be synthesized.

The term "screendance" is roughly the equivalent to the term "painting". In other words, it describes a practice by its formal characteristics in the broadest terms. The articulation of a practice beyond those terms requires a subset of language that begins to speak about the work in more particular terminology. That is, terminology that begins to allude to style, content, affiliations, histories, provenance and lineage as well as movements whether art historical, dance historical or otherwise. To have a show of "painting" without naming the frame of the specific works in the exhibition (new abstraction, color field, pop, etc.) would be rather rare in the art world at large. In that scenario, it is the job of the curator to choose the paintings for inclusion and to subsequently create a statement in the form of a catalog essay or some other text that lays out a rationale and a frame or lens for the show. In that essay, the curator would address why the group of paintings

was gathered and arranged in a particular way, what is the connective tissue between the works, what are the intertexts, (in other words, what do these works have to say to each other and to the form?) and perhaps speak about the form itself. What is the state of affairs in painting, does this work indicate a change in course for the practice, does it restate an existing course, etc? While curation per se is rare in the dance world, it has existed from time to time as artist led practice, the Judson Church group being the most memorable to me, and in the gravitational pull of downtown dance in New York for instance as well as the self-organizing nature of post-modern dance as it established itself as an alternative to Modern dance. Dance was also articulated through the modern era by writers/critics like John Martin and later Sally Banes and others. This model is one that screendance would do well to consider if only as a starting point. The need for critical writing as part of a broad view of curating is incredibly important.

The festival model and by extension, touring programs, tend to cover similar territory in regard to what gets screened. We often see a small group of films screened at festivals for a year or so until they are replaced by the next year's output. The similarity in style and approach that one can identify if looking at international festival selections is often striking. Again, in the painting analogy, these trends might be recognized as movements or styles and named, (abstract expressionist, realism, etc). We need to begin to name the trends in screendance in order to talk about them and encourage other visions as well. In another frame, to use a musical analogy, there might be a particular approach to making screendance that could be referred to as "classical". As makers, and curators, we have the ability to create the kinds of discourse through curating and exhibiting as well as

through writing that can illuminate these ideas to the field. By curating an alternative to the strand of work that seems too ubiquitous, and by creating an essay that frames it, one can illuminate another set of possibilities and move the field forward.

Screendance has yet to establish itself as a field of practice distinct and separate from other genres. Discussions of screendance often cite Hollywood musicals and other film/dance hybrids as part of the discourse. I would propose that these are precisely the questions that can be addressed by curation and certainly by writing. Screendance is more than a subset of dance and technology, more than a subset of Hollywood musicals or music video, differing in numerous ways. By vocalizing this difference it may be possible to elevate the form beyond its current state.

The current scenario in the screendance environment, in which festival models prevail and in which films are often referred to as "the best" of a given year or "the best" festival choices and subsequently tour the country creates a model that is self perpetuating. If these *are* the best films then as a viewer and maker, wouldn't it be logical that I would emulate the style of work that is being granted such status? If instead, touring programs were curated to make a number of statements that move beyond the films and engage broader dialogs about the culture at large, about media, about humanism, then perhaps we could move away from the current state of the practice toward one that is more evolved.

One more note about "elitism". The term "academic" has come to be almost pejorative it seems. It is often used to differentiate between those who make art and those who

21

theorize or teach. The difference is more often than not without merit. Practice and

theory have become fluid demarcations, (in my opinion they always were) which makes

the idea that only those with university affiliations can be "academics" moot. I would

offer the term intellectual in its place. Intellectual rigor is what allows us to debate

critical issue in our field and I would hope that subsequent to this conference, more of us

will take part in these conversations about the future and past of the genres we are

engaged in articulating.

The topic for this year's conference has, to my surprise been a somewhat contentious one in

the field. There are a number of opinions it seems, having to do with the very idea of

quantifying "quality" in regard to screendance itself and further how that might be assessed.

What makes a "good" work of screendance, as opposed to one that is somehow indulgent or

worse yet, boring. What makes a "good" program of dance films, how do festivals create

audiences, etc.? Screendance festivals in general suffer from the desire to serve many

masters, fiscal, artistic, audience and otherwise. However, the questions that will be raised

here, I hope are concerned first and foremost with the art of screendance, though I am not

naïve enough to understand that the commerce of screendance is not far behind.

Given the fact that many in the field of screendance come from a background of university

studies and that university studies include contemporary ideas about literary criticism,

deconstruction, media theory and critical thinking in general, it would be a safe assumption

to say that both the makers of and the consumers of screendance are at he very least, aware of

those methodologies. One might assume given these facts that the culture of screendance

would invite intellectual probing of the practice as well as rigorous and critical analysis

toward a broader understanding of the form. This is perhaps where the curator might come

into the picture. The curator is simultaneously an educator an arbiter, a connoisseur and a

theoretician.

Dancer and choreographer Sandy Strallen, organizer of the London International Dance Film

Festival, in an interview with Channel 4

(http://www.channel4.com/4talent/feature.jsp?id=6207)

online, states that,

"Part of the "problem" of recent dance on film is that it has often been a refuge for

mediocre choreography using clever angles and lighting to fool audiences into thinking

that we're seeing dancefilm… As with computers, "garbage in will mean garbage out".

Banal, silly, badly executed or poorly motivated choreographic design does not get

obscured or camouflaged by clever filming and facile editing - it becomes amplified by

it".

Strallen notes a number of "successful" works of dance on film as models, including *The

Red Shoes*, *West Side Story*, individuals such as Fred Astaire, Busby Berkeley and Gene

Kelly and on the contemporary dance side, Edwouard Lock and Mats Ek/Culberg Ballet.

Let's examine his frame of reference. First of all, it is overwhelmingly a Hollywood

musical model. This is a form in which dance is foregrounded and at the service of

narrative. In other words, the dance, through the unobstructed lens of the camera, is a

23

device through which we come to know the protagonists and antagonists, the backstories

and the relationships of the actors in an unfolding screen drama. Second frame are the

contemporary choreographers Strallen names as exemplary. Both Edouard Lock and

Mats Ek choreograph in a contemporary ballet vernacular. An example of Ek's dance

film work is Sophie Guillem in Wet Woman can be seen at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63oBG3TUaKU

Edouard Lock's Amelia can be seen at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRJd5UeEwI4

Both of these films fall into a category that is easily quantifiable: The dancing is clearly

virtuosic, the product of highly trained performers, and the filmmaking is also arguably

well crafted. In both instances, the technical aspects of artistic product are readily

identifiable and as such meet Strellen's criteria for success. He states,

"Banal, silly, badly executed or poorly motivated choreographic design does not get

obscured or camouflaged by clever filming and facile editing - it becomes amplified by

it."

In both examples I have noted, the choreography is anything but "badly executed" and

the filmmaking clearly does not obscure or camouflage the dancing. In fact, what we see

on screen is quite like a multi-camera television production one would see on Great

24

Performances or the BBC equivalent, or for that matter a 1940's Hollywood musical.

Wide shots and close-ups are interchanged to highlight detail, cuts are made on action,

the wide shot establishes the frame and dominates the film so as not to compromise

choreographic intent and continuity, and virtuosic performance dominates the screen

experience. Much like a sporting event, one may not feel an affinity for the athlete or

performer, but the "quality" of the performance is measurable by all mainstream

standards of success. It might be described as a kind of media populism. In this populist

template we often find work that verges on the spectacular, full of breathtaking visuals

that portend a kind of gravity to the screen image we are encountering. The spectacle is

an event most memorable for its surface quality, or its visual accomplishment. Found

both in high and low culture, its history in theater dates back to the 17th century. In film,

spectacle found footing as early as the Lumiere film of 1895 in which a train pulls into a

station as if directly at the audience, a view impossible in any other real-life situation.

The French theorist Guy Debord, writing in his volume, *The Society of the Spectacle*,

1967, states in his opening salvo,

" In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as

an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved

away into a representation."

Writing from a Marxist perspective, Debord seized on a thread of media production that

extends from theater to architecture and most certainly to film and television as well and

cuts across all historical performances of power. The spectacle of virtuosic dancing

25

encased in film is most certainly a thing of beauty. However, it is a distant beauty, or as

Debord would say, a *representation* of beauty.

In analyzing the stated preferences of Strellan, the London International Dance Film

Festival organizer, I have teased out a curatorial point of view that one would wish were

more publicly articulated. In other words, I would like Mr. Strellan to make a

commitment to his curatorial imperative in a way that I could intellectually respond to in

either my own curating or in written discourse. In other words, name his frame of

reference minus the dismissive comments that are clearly based on subjective standards.

The responsibility that attaches to curating, for me, involves a kind of risk-taking in

which the curator attempts to make a clear statement about where s/he stands at he

moment in which a particular program was conceived. If I was curating with Debord in

mind, I would most certainly think about the work I was considering in terms of his

theories. I would also attempt to frame them within a thesis of my own that perhaps

created tensions and problematized Debord's Marxist ideologies.

In a recent LA Weekly article, the curator of the Los Angeles Contemporary Art Museum

Paul Schimmel is profiled. Called, "Curatorial Ecstasy", it focuses on Schimmel's big,

often spectacular exhibitions including his much lauded, Helter Skelter: **L.A. Art in the**

1990s. Named after The Beatles' song (and a phrase also attached to mass murderer

Charles Manson) Helter Skelter included the work of 16 artists all of whom focused on

the seamy detritus of Americana. The exhibit made a bold statement for Southern

26

California vernacular attempting simultaneously to raise the profile of LA art and to speak across the country to the New York art scene. The show reverberated widely and according to the LA Weekly, (http://www.laweekly.com/news/features/curatorial-ecstasy/181/)

"The merits of "Helter Skelter," with its unabashed turn toward spectacle and packaging of diverse work under a heavy thematic overlay, were and still are much debated. Mention the show to anyone who was on the L.A. art scene then, and a decade and a half later, you'll still get an emphatic response. But among detractors and supporters alike, the bigness and boldness of the exhibition are well-remembered…" Schimmel states:

"We could never have a contemporary show that could beat the numbers of even a third-rate Monet show," insists Schimmel, who thinks consensus is overrated, whether among a curatorial staff (he believes the strength of MOCA's is its diversity of views) or between an institution and its patrons. "When you're working without the safety net of consensus, inevitably patrons question the speculative nature of curating, and so you hear a comment like, 'That's a curatorial-driven initiative,' often delivered with a disdainful tone," … "but that's how it should be. Some curatorial work should be speculative. Curators should be able to say that they believe in something, they think it's important, and they're going to show it without waiting for a consensus."

So, Why is curating important to our community?

I would propose a few reasons: The first is to create a sense of identity. Curators often describe and articulate elements of a practice that are less about saying what it is not than saying what it is. We often describe our work as "not like Hollywood musicals" or "different than music videos", or "not simply dance documentation". However, a point of differentiation does not constitute a genre. A close example would be performance art, a term widely used in the 1970's to name a kind of practice that shifted the site of objectification from materials found *in* the world to the material of the body itself. "Performance art" differentiated the site of art practice from the material site of painting or sculpture: it named both the practice, " art" and the genus, "performance". Note that the term has fallen out of favor and been replaced by the much less cumbersome, "performance" to describe both practice and genus. This is similar to the evolution of the term "rock and roll music" which differentiated the new sound from the old. First, the term was shorthanded to "rock music". Now, of course we simply need to say "rock" to be understood. Certainly, this evolution of language relies on a preexisting set of conditions and a certain amount of connoisseurship. But the cultural understanding of performance art as well as conceptual art, minimalism (and the list goes on), was articulated in practice by curators. It was often simultaneously described and critiqued by writers and artists themselves. However, it was curation that provided the visualization and the critical mass of objects arranged within a particular logic for both viewer and critics to ruminate, meditate and reflect upon. Similarly, in regard to screendance, it is curation that will begin to excavate genres, patterns and modalities within the practice.

So, to return to the issue of curating, a question to consider is this: "What does the curator want from you, the audience?" It is a complex question. Curating dance film and video is a way of constructing narratives about the field of screendance that may be otherwise invisible or absent. It is also a way to interrogate individual works of screendance, collective, individual or group practice, and to actively shape and comment upon the field in general. Curating creates a foundation for criticality as it frames and groups individual works around issues of content or form or other myriad concerns. Thus, the possibility of a critical dialog is amplified through active curatorial practice. Curating and criticality are linked and synergistically contribute to an elevated discussion about meaning, purpose, form and content. So, what the audience might offer is a kind of feedback loop in which the efforts of the curator or programmer are reflected, considered and responded to in a thoughtful and focused manner. The audience embodies the work and moves it out into the larger culture of dance and media, into their own practice and into their social situations through discourse and reiteration. In this model, there is a partnership implied, a relationship between makers, curators, festivals and audiences that if undertaken seriously by all might move the field forward in a way that elevates both the work and the critical discourse surrounding it.