

Article 3: Seeing Time

A paper given at the Future Arts Symposia 2001, curated by Stan's Cafe in Birmingham.

Summary

The Symposia brought together a range of artists, curators and academics speaking from backgrounds in architecture, dance, music, performance, television, theatre, visual and web art, they discussed the present and future of art under four broad headings: Art and the New. Art and Society, Art and Technology, Art and Time.

Claire Russ writes about 'Art and Time'

Claire Russ, Artistic Director of the Claire Russ Ensemble, based in the Midlands and London since 1990, creates contemporary dance theatre which tours nationally and in Europe. Choosing themes of the moment the work combines quality dance with abstracted images and theatrical delivery.

Seeing Time

"It is 4.45 pm. I'VE RETURNED to the first paragraph to rewrite. Relief. The landscape is still breathing and there is some flexibility between seconds. I spend about an hour on the first paragraph. Picking at details to find the description I want. For me everything I think about has an attached physical sensation, and a mind's eye image. I experience the passage of time on these levels too. Consequently when I close my eyes in search of descriptions I imagine tunnelling into an untouched landscape. On this occasion, the landscape recedes as I tunnel and there is no light. Time is irrelevant, there is only focus. I am stretching the surrounding matter to its limit and taking it with me into the tunnel, as if sucking it toward a black hole. I roll over and over in my efforts, and the tunnel twists and distorts until the entrance to the tunnel is a tiny pinpoint of focus. Time still means nothing. It is only now that I've stopped moving that I realise that time exists. I also realise how long the paragraph has taken to write, and moreover, that I have been absorbed in writing and thinking for almost six hours with very little to show. Time is kaleidoscopic sometimes. It slides around itself, making hours seem like minutes, and minutes seem like hours. Time is unruly, untrustworthy and contorts itself while you are not looking. I would like to be able to manipulate time, rein it in and make it do what I want. I resent time for threatening to run out. But time is a fraud; the seconds keep ticking, and though there are plenty of seconds out there, are there enough for me? Little Angus will be home soon and he'll be hungry.

This morning, after much pleading, cajoling and last minute nappy changes I finally had the house to myself. As the front door closed, sounds echoed up the tiled hallway. I shut my eyes taking in the sudden and exquisite silence. Through the red glow of my eyelids I saw a calm expanse of time ahead of me; a 3D landscape of blissful solitude. I was sensing the particular qualities held in that moment. Time was all around me, gentle, a yielding seamless expansive surface, slowly breathing, never perfectly still, relaxed for the moment but poised to respond to changes in my perception. For how long would time adopt this mantle of expanse and relaxation? My task for the day is to

write about Art and Time. What can I do and say on such a huge topic? And I only have today. I begin to visualise time, becoming more aware of the geometries adopted by time in my perception I finally begin writing at 11.00 am after tidying up to Bach.

At 1pm, after two hours writing, the landscape in my mind's eye, which had earlier appeared to me gentle with a light curvature, a yielding seamless expanse of surface, had changed. It had become and tensile and contracted. Taut membranes had sprung up, stretched here and there like big sails braced to catch the wind. The atmosphere was highly charged and time seemed at the mercy of an imperative to move quickly through the seconds. Having mused for almost two hours, the idea for this talk had found a shape but not a form. Time is suddenly racing and I feel excited and out of control. I don't know exactly where we are going with this paper, me and time, but the ideas seems to be gathering momentum, reinforcing themselves with each movement. When I close my eyes this momentum is a fast moving piece of graphic art melded with aerial ballet dancing loop after loop through a forward thrusting landscape.

Did you notice I didn't tell you anything about 11.00am - 1pm yet? Hopefully it will not be overly deconstructive to stop this narrative of sorts, and reflect on 'loops' or warps? We can do this through flashback. It's London 1992, American Post-Modern dance guru of the 1960s, Steve Paxton is giving a sort of 'Dance improvisation meets Einstein' (*my title*) workshop. We are thinking about time and have naturally discarded a linear notion, and would be more likely to pull our own teeth out than to dance following musical structure as Isadora Duncan did at the last turn of the century. We are applying new models of time to dance improvisations and loops are proving a very popular idea. We find they are a useful structuring tool for improvisation or choreography. Everyone returns to the same positions and points in space that they started from and then start again, but differently. It is as if they were coming back to the same moment in time. This repetition and recognition helps everyone to find structure. The security creates a freedom in which loops find their own existential path. Many of us have that strange feeling of having been here before. In the pub afterwards, with all the clarity which a few drinks bring to thinking, we realised that time-loops might explain that eerie phenomenon of 'deja-vu'.

I close my eyes, If I dive at the surface of the landscape, sweep around in an arc, not seeing where I am going, but if I keep turning left, I arrive back where I started, bursting through the geometries of the surfaces in explosive fashion. I've created a loop. I dive again and create another one, and a good few more at many angles. The landscape is alive with entrances and exits, like wormholes, bulges and burrows. In between each loop I am compelled to run like a child, running down a hill with her legs running away with her. I keep running until I launch myself into the next loop, and the next and the next. One idea flows quickly into another, and each one is forming a new loop. Each loop seems to reinforce the idea. The last one bursts through a section of 3D matrix spreading down to our lower left; a remnant of an earlier manifestation of the landscape when I was tidying up to Bach.

After much cajoling and pleading the house was finally empty of people. As the front door closed, the sound echoed briefly up the tiled hallway. I shut my eyes taking in

the sudden and exquisite silence. I went upstairs and tidied up to Bach.

I tidied up to Bach, before 11am when I sat down to write this. I decided not to tell you what happened when I was tidying up to Bach earlier because it seemed a bit mundane to talk about tidying up at the beginning of piece of writing And I wanted to start more dynamically and tell you about endless possibilities in all that tunnelling, looping and diving.

As I was tidying up to Bach I was trying to create mental order. An order akin to the faint green grid lines of a computer generated 3d matrix. I often tidy up in time to Bach, especially when I am thinking. Often I play with the musical phrasing, trying to arrive to pick up that shoe on the three of the bar. Sometimes I relax my choreographic efforts and let my movements fall incidentally around the music noticing and enjoying any accidentals'. There goes one - by chance I place the last book back into the bookcase on a perfect and final cadence in the Bach. I glance casually around to see if anyone noticed that brilliant accidental moment which may later seem so right that it would have to have been pre-designed by a genius.

When I close my eyes the surface of my gentle timescape is covered by a matrix - a grid that defines the time landscape into measurable units stretching and undulating to infinity. As the landscape breathes Bach and I are both present. Could you call tidying up to Bach, 'dancing' I wonder?

[FASTER] A final loop head bursts through the surface of this thought and explodes a section of the grid down to my lower left. The gaping wound splays out and I look down in horror. With an effort of reconstruction surpassed only by Schwarzenegger in *Terminator 2* it had reformed itself, leaving only a wormhole, I will run out of time if I don't start now.

You know the story from here - visualising mind's eye landscapes - thinking about time. But you don't yet know about the big freeze. Later today an ice age hit; my landscape breathed out and stayed that way. The flat surface of ice is too cold to touch. Maybe this paper is an artistic disaster and I would be best to give up now. Time seems momentarily facile. Perhaps to no end, my thinking has swallowed up large quantities of it. It is the 21 st Century, the trains train drivers are on strike and David Attenborough says the human race may be extinct in a hundred years. So why does it all matter so much.

Through necessity however, time and I fall into focus. 'Time is money', I hear the voice of my survivor mum. We are in a wider tunnel now. I am enjoying taking the space to run again. I turn a corner and abruptly stop. My energetic looping of earlier has created intersections. Angles, corners requiring deceleration and acceleration, which tires my muscles as my flow is repeatedly arrested. Once I start to connect a few strands of thought in the text however, a pleasing rhythm emerges. The intersections enable me to do this as I run through a proper labyrinth which compels me on to the metaphorical exit point.

I am running out of time. They will be back soon. The last hour of my eight hours of solitude has compressed into what seems like a few minutes. I start to think broad trends and write a few notes on the time-connected influences in this text. It takes time for influences to converge and be recognised. They wind around each other avoiding, until they align or intersect. Surely this could be done slowly over Tia Maria, but time is different in motherhood. In motherhood time, leisurely activities exist in compressed time. Thinking about something becomes an act of will, rather than a meander. The time is now. Seize the moment (of solitude). Angus is almost here to grab my leg, and tug at my jumper, so I'll squeeze in as many hours, days, years into the final minutes I have. In face, here he comes - two seconds to physical contact - I'll try for the century.

Time based influences on this text (that I am aware of):-

Cubists - in the sense that they fragmented an image giving each part of it a different narrative and time scale. An object is represented as it is experienced rather than as it appears. Object becomes subject - a relief.

Deconstructionists/post modernists - encouraging non-linearity and layering, borrowing and off-loading logic and a pre-occupation with the cognitive. - Quentin Tarrantino, and Krzysztof Kieslowski - directors of the 1990s created simple time-based deconstructed narratives in film, similar to the form of my piece of writing.

Existentialists - thinking whilst experiencing and vice versa. Using the first person in a piece of writing in an academic(ish) forum.

Feminists - the freedom to admit to motherhood as an influence on the artistic contribution of the female half of the western population.

Mathematicians About ten years ago I had a boyfriend who did symplectic geometry - thinking in four and five dimensions. Whilst he was working his head used to sweat under the heat created by his brain activity. He used to describe his number/shape world to me. I remember that the shape of donughts was very important - I make connections between this and with curved shapes in new architecture that are fashioned to create central atria in buildings. Future Systems Selfridges is an example.

Architects - new architecture reflects the fast changing landscapes of cities - temporary structures- e.g. Steve Hall's Storefront for Art and Architecture in NY built in 1994 in collaboration with Vito Acconci - created out of relatively cheap materials and designed to be redesigned within ten years.

The use of stretch and tethering - tent or sail like fixing and more amorphic compliant graceful lines in buildings. Dubai is sprinkled with such elegance, influenced I assume by sail ships coming into port over centuries.

The familiar looping gyrosphere like sculptures you find in the middle of roundabouts.

Here in Birmingham there is one in Castle Vale, and in London they are at Old Street and Wandsworth roundabouts. Looping - circular - global forms.

Computer Graphics - The graphic world of computers is part of our image world, and pervades my writing. The manipulation of matrices and equations to enable us to solve problems, draw, paint and discover the imagery offered by the computer. This technology pervades popular culture, science and science fiction. It gives speed and power to the designer and a sense of fluidity and motion, whilst behind it is pure mathematics.

Sigmund Freud - a man who has suffered very bad press however is worthy of the nobel peace prize in my opinion. His labelling of the Unconscious contributed (along with the work of Jung) to the unleashing of an image world expressed first by the surrealists.

ON Reflection

All of these influences also apply to my choreographic work. They are influences from the last century, and mostly from the last two decades. However much history is researched, it seems to me that it is our local time now which really gets into us, The imagery that I came up with (without pre-planning) in this piece of writing it is of an advanced technological, post-structuralist age. I like writing. It seems to indicate a bleeding of art forms, one into another, I predict that dance will increasingly bleed into new architecture, public spaces, and through television into homes. It ought not to continue to exist in relative isolation.