

Jacky Lansley and Rose English at the ACME Gallery

Jackie Lansley and Rose English made some dance at the ACME Gallery on the 4th March (1978). The approach to this form of movement was new to me. In recent years dance has been redefining itself in practice, being described in publications such as *New Dance* and *Readings*. Developed in studios at Butler's Wharf and ACME, public performances are venturing towards audiences less informed, maybe even hostile, but ready to be exposed to the new developments.

The evening's performance made neither compromise with or false distinction between their approach to work and say, the dance that has emerged from the hinterland of Southern Africa or the stage of Covent Garden. A definite though unconventional narrative structure contained the dance improvisation, with detectable traces of the codes of classical ballet.

A slide projected to a large size on the end wall of the Gallery depicted a group of children, appearing to be members of a dance class all clustered around a piano; black drapes excluded the external and internal space of the room. The beams of light in the Gallery, (the children's projected faces), partially illuminated the two performers, sitting in canvas chairs on either side of the projector.

They began to exchange anecdotes about their experiences as children in ballet class; or as members of touring dance companies; and as dancers on the professional stage. One of the stories concerned a landlady who for weeks had been eagerly awaiting the arrival of two ballet dancers and was horrified when they arrived to find one with an arm in a sling supporting the other with a leg in plaster.

The anecdotes, related alternately, ended after ten minutes with the question one to the other, "Do you feel like dancing?"



The projector was switched off and removed, the room lights turned on and a medley of music by Bob Marley and others boomed into the space. For a further ten minutes they moved, sometimes together but more often apart, sometimes quietly then suddenly in great rushes up and down the room,

sometimes paying great regard to the music, or apparently ignoring it completely.



The sounds abruptly changed to a continuous twenty-minute recording having no perceptible rhythmic base, containing discrete sound bursts that seemed to be to do with water and animals. (Later we learn the recording was of beluga whales beneath the sea.)

Physical activity alternated between small-scale rhythmic movements and arrhythmic movement on a large scale. The dancers' attention was becoming more related one to the other, with less exuberant movement and more concentration of directed gesture, rhythm and 'body shape'.



The audience of fifty people, sitting against the skirting board around the space, witnessed the performers' refining process; and by their very proximity were party to it, dancer to dancer, dancer to audience, audience to audience.

Now the movements became slowed, sometimes halting entirely, both together for several seconds. Gestures similar to gymnastic exercises, yoga postures, or relaxation positions would be adopted, individually apart, in close proximity, each move made simultaneously. Classically graceful poses, some considerably strenuous and clearly derived from a classical training, interjected from a time and place of the past; within the framework for improvisation the

combination of dynamism and gesture carefully constructed the performance, time as present.

The intensity and concentration that had determinedly formulated towards this point, then quite rapidly receded, out the same way it had arrived. A mirror image construction becoming apparent as movements began to open up, began to reanimate in vigorous form with a rerun of the rushes up and down the floor space as before; the reggae music returned and the audience relaxed, it seeming for a moment several would join the dancers, instead restraining themselves to clapping in time.

The room was returned to darkness and a different slide appeared on the end wall, the image of a prima ballerina, thereby returning the audience to the submerged narrative. The image, bristling with costume, lit as if by a lightening flash, photographed from an angle to accentuate her individuality, separated from the *cour de ballet*, her assumed superiority attained only after years of training and promotion.

The performance concluded with an invitation to the audience to remove their shoes and show their appreciation of dance.



The oppositional position taken to dance as an institution could not have been more clearly stated. From the conditioning of children at an early age, grade classes and then into training, the capillaries of a dance expression, leading to ossification in the Companies. With their specialists, primas, cours, choreographers, conductors, directors, managers, management structures and grades, an industrial approach remarkably similar to the Cinema industry.

Likewise, an institution closely guarding the borders of a public art form, geared toward pleasing the audience, where expectations are conditioned by the dictates of meaning given, rather than meaning made.

The performance made at the Acme Gallery had much in common with recent work in other of the plastic arts whereby the emphasis has been turned toward the role of the individual viewer as part of the audience. Meaning made by the viewer begins with immediate physical factors, in helping collectively as an audience to define the space in which dance will take place. The appeal to the viewer thereafter is to be constantly alert and working with all the faculties, responding to changes in movement and sound by revising what has gone before and anticipating what may follow, reflexively responding to narrative, absorbing the spoken and musical sound as a part of the whole experience. The active mode of being audience as an implied critique of institutional forms is in parallel with the improvised music being made at the London Musicians Co-op, or the performance artwork seen at Butler's Wharf and Ayton Basement, or some of the film work that has emerged from the London Filmmakers Co-op in recent years.

The discourse generated by the films has contributed and helped identify to many of the filmmakers the function the work was fulfilling. Initially and together with other groups and individuals in other parts of the world, it was sufficient to distinguish between commercial films seeking an audience as an end in itself, and film seeking its own existence; as an art object, as the residue of its own making process, or as an artefact to be screened to friends or other interested parties as the initiator of conversation and debate. An often used description of experimental films was non-narrative, of the film's intent if not its actuality. In later years, more rigorous inspection of the films and their material functioning together with advanced theories developed from semiology led to a closer more consistent means of looking at film by responding through discussion and writing.

Improvisation, innovation, redefinition, the functional approach is a means of mobility, by which enthusiasm and the imagination is stimulated to further action. The dancer does not have the same problems as the filmmaker. They need no heavy or expensive equipment, or raw materials and processes from industry. They produce no artefacts so have no need of distribution mechanisms; there are fewer pre-conditions for the manifestation of the work. Like the artform itself, mobility is its elemental form, the co-ordination of that element raising issues for the artist.

The new dancers have created a space within the initial problems confronting practice. Their didactic working base can be enlarged through the use of workshops and open performance, whilst avoiding the rhetoric of dance organisation – beware of arts subsidy.

The performance on this night at Acme stimulated the act of viewing dance. It will replace the outworn social ritual of ballet and return dance to being a meaningful experience for both the viewer and the dancer.

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