

Dancing Museums Residency at Gemäldegalerie der Universität für Bildende
Künste Wien: reflections and documentations 6th – 12th May 2016
by Minou Tsambika Polleros

Transcriptions of the holy colour

The Dancing Museums project brings together 5 dance artists to explore and develop their own unique artistic response in relation to five unique museum spaces across Europe. At their second residency in Vienna from 6th – 12th of May 2016 I had the privilege to accompany them throughout their one week residency.

As I understand the enquiry of the Dancing Museum project is manifold. One of its questions is to develop creative strategies that enhance and expand the possibilities in how we perceive art and our dialogue with it more consciously in museum setting. It also wants to research new forms of participation and perception, scrutinizing the channels in which we create knowledge and meaning.

My task in Vienna was to document and study the unfolding relationship of dance artists works in relation to spatial architecture, its artworks and I was particularly asked to harness visitors reflections on the dance. This text is hence a compilation of my own experiences and thoughts together with reflections and interpretations that I have gathered through dialogue with visitors, dancers and gallery wardens.

While all five choreographers were developing their works throughout the week, on the 12th May visitors were able to encounter the presentation of all individual works in different parts of the gallery.

Multiple perceptions

A gallery is a space of many multiple perceptions. Each visitor encounters the artworks with their own unique subjective perception. It is in a way a very intimate often silent meeting in which thoughts and sensations remain hidden to an outside eye. A gallery is also a space that suggests a strong behaviour code and movement pattern, which makes my engagement often a highly choreographed unconscious routine of walking, stopping, sitting and contemplating.

Setting the enquiry to examine the realities and potentialities of such a space, the dancer has the possibility to visibly relate to what is around him or her and can interrupt my unconscious movement pattern in both mind and body. If as visitor I am available to participate in such an enquiry, it is at this point where I can enter a space of possibility and research myself.

When experiencing art we have the chance to become internally active. We can come into a dialogue with ourselves and with what we are experiencing. This allows us to weave new pathways in our mind and in our knowing. As Diane Shooman quoted so poignantly in her lecture ... , art can literally move us'¹ (Shooman 2016).

¹ Shooman, Diane Phd, (2016) *Art and the Perceptive Body* (lecture), Universität der Bildenden Kunst, Wien

Harnessing some responses and reflections of dance artists, wardens and visitors, the question arose how are dance artists able to create pathways into new perceptual experiences, within a space that everyone already knows how to inhabit? How can they warm up and prepare the ground for a laboratory of perception and experimentation? How can the dance open new ways of knowing without having to explain concept and intention? How can the spectators grow their own thoughts and enter a more conscious place of internal activity? And last but not least how is it possible to document responses and reflections? How can we collect evidence of such internal, often invisible processes?

Developing new eyes

A gallery space predominantly engages the eyes as the main sense to convey meaning, disengaging many of my other senses, which also take part in how I form meaning. In her lecture Diane Shooman spoke about the difference between focussed and peripheral vision. She suggests that if we loosen the grip on our focussed vision that is usually activated in a gallery space where we study intricate artworks, we might be able to cultivate a more peripheral vision in which the context of the artwork takes part in the experience. This way we enter a space of greater ambiguity and begin to include ourselves in the perception. As Dianne Shooman put it: 'in peripheral vision we are watching nothing but we perceive everything. In focussed vision we are the mover, in peripheral vision we are the ones who are moved' (Shooman 2016).

Having observed many visitors encounter the unfolding works of the five choreographers, I realized that working in a gallery that is in itself already so rich in artistic landscape, all dance artists seemed to become questioning forces within these spaces. Through their presence and their forms, I saw them scratching on the imagination of those who encountered their dance. It is in this way that Dancing Museums can be a gateway into new perceptions, wider perspectives and new relations.

Becoming internally active

Taking part in a dance is not always comfortable. Especially when the performance space is not as defined as in the theatre, where all seats are 'safe' seats. When the performance space merges with the 'pedestrian' space, spectators find themselves unexpectedly and perhaps involuntarily confronted with something unusual. It is this interruption of habituated control that poses a possibility to activate spectators into their own self-positioning towards the shifting dance.

Throughout the residency, I observed many people turning away from the dance, avoiding or ignoring what was happening. Being confronted with the unexpected requires a readiness and capability to respond to the shifting circumstances within well known settings. I pose the question whether this capacity of being able to creatively respond to the endless dynamics of a constant shifting world is unique to the capabilities of a dancer? What if, like a muscle it can be trained and cultivated also in the one who is perhaps not physically moving but who is nevertheless internally moved through witnessing the dance?

Throughout many conversations with gallery visitors, I found that despite the readiness to open to an unexpected encounter, some felt unable to rest in their own subjective experience without prior contextualisation. As if trusting in the personal proficiency without knowing more

about the intention of the dance, caused an internal conflict about whose knowledge is the right one? The question arises whether it is necessary to create a more factual framework in which explanation frames the anticipated experience, or whether both need to integrate one another in order to warm up the pathway that allows a wide spectrum of visitors to voluntarily enter the dance?

The language of the moving body

The language of the moving body communicates to a different mind in us. It speaks a language to which very few of us seem adept to. This language cannot only be grasped with our well practiced analytical mind that likes to run in habituated patterns decoding and fragmenting meaning into their conditioned categories. A dance requires and gives rise to a different more bodily, more visceral, more tacid and potentially more phenomenological way of looking and perceiving that involves the whole of ourselves. It dares the perceiver to enter new territory that cannot be foreseen, expected or categorized. It is therefore a space that tempts the perceiver to open to a new experience that is not entirely in their control. Perceivers are asked to open to a repatterning of their usual way of seeing and knowing. A new more haptic epistemology that remains in the realm of ambiguity and first person perception.

Dance uses the language of symbol. It is a physical storytelling and it requires a physical receiver in order to transcend into a felt experience. The gallery in which the focussed gaze is turned into a more peripheral and phenomenological vision through the dance, becomes a space of possibility. A daring space that cracks open the unknown potentials for a deepened collective laboratory that invites participation and engagement on multiple layers.

I realize that I am able to relate differently to a fellow body than to a two dimensional artwork. The moving relating body speaks from its own aliveness to my aliveness, from its own flesh to mine. The physical empathy that can unfold between a dancer and a spectator is a deeply subjective felt way of knowing and must remain in the sphere of subjective experiencing. It can therefore never be fully known or grasped. Its poetics are at home in the mystical not in the literal. The performance space becomes in this way a real laboratory in which outer movement is experienced and connected to a vivid landscape of inner movement in which contemplation, reflection, thought, feeling and imagination coincide into a rich invisible inner territory.

In the end it seems challenging to make visible what has happened on the inside of people who have encountered the five dance artists and their works. My way of documenting was mainly conducted through engaging in dialogues with multiple people who encountered or accompanied the dances throughout the residency week. The multiplicity of responses, thoughts and feelings was astonishing. You find most of them anonymously transcribed underneath.

Because we are speaking about the experience of a dance, I feel the harnessing of this subjective experience can only be partially brought forward, as the experience remains subjectively unique to each individual person. Concluding this process, I dare to think that trusting in this first person perception as no less valid than empirical knowledge, will introduce an inclusion of the perceiver into the dynamic unfolding of events. Which offers a much deeper and more felt understanding of the artwork before, and of my own agency in it.

QUOTES:

Anonymous transcriptions of conversations with members of the public, dancers and gallery wardens. 6th – 12th May 2016.

Person a:

It is something new. It brings something new into the space; different to what is here normally. It is difficult to put it into words how I find it. It seems easy to look at images, it is not so easy to look at a body. It is a new territory for me. Some visitors don't know how to engage with the dance.

person i:

I was captured by her movement interpretation and by the text. After her movement offering I had the impulse to study the portrait again in detail and through her dance, other aspects and layers of the painting became alive. The dance helped me to feel the painting in more depth & complexity. I was able to develop a different focus, one that differs from the more static and distanced onlooker stance of perception.

Person h:

If I would be a painting, I would find it very valuable to be related to in a different way.

Person l:

The paintings have in themselves a very subtle movement, people in the painting are always one second away from a step or a smile or an eye blink.

Person c:

The space was enlivened. There was a certain three dimensionality introduced and evoked by the dancer, by the centred and focussed movement. Watching the dance changed my way of looking. It altered my gaze, my vision. Being asked to be danced to: 'May I dance for you' incorporated me into the sphere that existed between dancer, painting and space. I was included and taken into the unfolding dialogue with the painting. Being confronted with an intimate offer – ,May I dance for you' felt momentarily challenging.

person l:

I see people and space. I see the relation between space and people explored. I see visual spaces, representations and interpretations and the movement in and out of these spaces of interrelation. I experience that there are things that I don't know. What is normal? What is ordinary here? I am used to experience dance from a distance. In this three dimensional space I experience multiple things: feelings, proximity and distance in interplay. There is a tension in this empty space. The dance breaks the movement habits we all follow when in a museum space. The dance shifts the space. I walk into a space that I know – with a new and unknown eye.

Person c:

Witnessing the dance enlivened the museum space as well as my own imagination & creative thought. I was stimulated into thinking of creative possibilities myself: what else can happen with the space? Something is activated, my own imagination.

Connor Schumacher, dancer

What we do, together, during performance is not magic, but the power of people coming together to change the way they look and think about ideas.

Person g:

The different performances were unified through the travelling sound. The offering of her felt very intimate and erotic. She created a strong relatedness to the portraits of Maria. I did not analyse the performance, I decided to experience and let it happen. Without the dance in this space I wouldn't be here.

Connor Schumacher, dancer

It is important that you know that I bring my life, just as it is, into this space.

person f:

Being confronted with an intimate offer ,May I dance for you' felt momentarily challenging. It is important to distribute the necessary keys for understanding which essentially frame the artworks. Otherwise my own subjective perception and knowing remains rudimentary and confuses rather than make sense. Without any briefing, without setting the frame for this dance, I found my senses and my interpretation overwhelmed. I want to know what the dancer has thought when developing the dance.

Person h:

What stays for me from dancing museums is the physical memory that I will have when I enter this space the next time. I will see lots of movement in the different spaces because I will carry the movement from today in my memory. I know that without the movement I will experience these rooms as very empty.

person b:

The space is more filled with the dance in comparison when there is no dance. It is a great change for the visitors to be able to encounter something unexpected in the space. The dancers are trying to create an empathy. They try to feel what the portraits feel.

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