

*Interview to Gill Hart, Head of Education at the National Gallery, by Marisa Hayes, chief editor of Repères, Cahier de danse<sup>i</sup>*

### **How do you integrate and approach dance in your work as head of education at the National Gallery?**

Dance is one of many different means by which we can create exciting and thought-provoking public engagement experiences for our visitors. At the National Gallery, our core expertise is in visual art education; teaching and communicating this is our top priority and therefore dominates our programmes. However, we also have a commitment to working with experts from other disciplines and art forms because we know more about our audiences and their needs than ever before – and our education programmes are committed to providing life-long and life-wide learning experiences that cater for a broad range of needs and interests.

There is a current trend for cross arts collaboration and we receive a lot of partnership proposals. In working out which ones have the most potential I consider the following things:

- Is there a genuine empathy between the partner organisations?
- Is the proposal audience focused? As a Head of Education principally concerned with public engagement, this is critical.
- If the proposal involves dance artists do they have a natural empathy with visual art?

Over the years we have integrated dance and performance into our programmes in a number of ways. We have programmed dance on stage in our auditorium on a theme linked to our 19<sup>th</sup> century French paintings; we have created promenade courtly dances through the early Renaissance Galleries; we have incorporated dance into our adult learning programme by inviting participants to a 'Talk and Dance' based on 18<sup>th</sup> century English portraiture and etiquette; we regularly programme dance and performance as part of our Family Festivals – cultural celebration days for Chinese New Year and Diwali. Such performances animate the Gallery spaces with movement and life to the great enjoyment of the public.

This creates a huge amount of variety but I have always wondered how obvious it is to a visitor or participant – is there a clear understanding why this performance enhances understanding or appreciation of *that* painting or part of the collection? How interconnected are these art forms? Are we just putting on a show that could be staged anywhere? It was a growing awareness of and concern for these questions that made the Dancing Museums project so appealing to me.

### **Did your training/background in art education include live performance as part of the museum context? If not, can you describe the process of integrating live performance into your work as an educator at the National Gallery (how it came about, your reaction and any evolution of your relationship to working with dance in the museum space)?**

I trained as an art historian before embarking on a career in gallery education. Part of this training included studying live performance as an art form in a Gallery environment.

Gallery Education has a long history of working with live performance in many ways; it has always been part of my practice to consider how best to include it in the museum context.

I think it is important, however, to acknowledge the distinction between programming live performance as part of a public education programme and *curating* live performance. In the former context, live performance somehow connects or co-exists with a material collection – therefore

functioning as a mediator and a work of art in its own right. In the latter the live performance *is* the artwork.

**What particular challenges and benefits does live dance in the museum bring to an educational context at the National Gallery? Sometimes, people forget that art education touches people of all ages, are there aspects of dance in the museum that have provided excellent educational opportunities for adults or specific publics?**

The challenges and benefits vary depending upon what the objective is. Dance in an educational context in a Gallery ordinarily means that there will be a performance for the public or a dance workshop for the public. *Dancing Museums* was neither of these things!

It was a considerable challenge to encourage visitors to engage with the dance artists, thinking less about how the dance artists were 'responding' or 'interpreting' the paintings and more about how being very aware of one's own body and physical response to the environment and the paintings can enhance one's own experience.

Dance and movement have the power to engage audiences of different ages in very powerful experiences within a Gallery setting. With *Dancing Museums* there were opportunities for audiences of different ages to actively participate or watch from a distance. I think it's important to accept that not everyone will want to physically join in. At the same time it is not only the very young who will act without inhibition!

At the *Dancing Museums* residency in London in November 2016 adult visitors who were given the opportunity to be physically supported through an experience reported how it enhanced their viewing, enriched the colour in some of the paintings they looked at or made their visit more memorable. This is fascinating and exciting information yet what actually took place looked very far removed from dance in any conventional sense. That also presented a challenge.

If incorporating live performance into the visitor experience results in engaging visitors in the art and the environment, creates memorable experiences and takes visitors by surprise, then I would say these are certainly major benefits.

**Are there aspects of your background in art education that you feel provide a new context for understanding or "framing" dance in the museum? And vice versa, are there aspects of dance in the museum that bring fresh perspectives to your work as an art educator and the possibilities for creating new experiences for the public?**

I hope that the dance artists involved in *Dancing Museums* do feel that there was a mutual exchange of ideas and expertise. From an art education perspective, we work hard to create appropriate interpretations of our paintings and we think a lot about the space between the painting and the person ; how we all see things differently ; what personal interpretation or meaning a person may develop. Taking this as a starting point has been really helpful in terms of ensuring that the dance artists at all times were aware that we were not trying to force a 'grand narrative' upon them – that there are many ways to interpret one painting.

Our practice is grounded in language and that presents various challenges. I noticed that some of the dance artists involved in the project seemed to be more inclined to use language or engage visitors in conversation as the project developed. I wonder if that was in some way influenced by the practice they encountered in the various museums and galleries within which residencies took place. It seemed as if the idea that all Gallery Educators talk and all Dance Artists *don't* talk was challenged!

I was keen to work more with dance artists to test whether it was possible to think about movement as a means of enhancing understanding. At the National Gallery we define our core educational expertise as ‘understanding the collection and understanding how people learn’.

Something we think about a lot is visual literacy and how our programmes support visual literacy in children from a very young age right through school. We also think carefully about the challenges in supporting levels of visual literacy in adults who may have been out of education for many years and for whom it can be a challenge to make sense of the visual information presented in a painting.

When we use the term ‘visual literacy’ we do not intend this to be understood only in terms of attainment or accreditation. Supporting visual literacy is also about enjoyment of the art and developing a personal understanding of it. Our usual way of supporting visual literacy is grounded in language – in the form of talks, tours, lectures, courses. Most of the time our participatory programmes are also grounded in language.

It has been really stimulating to work with dance artists who intuitively respond to the world through embodied knowledge – and have a more visceral response to a visual art environment. This has had a positive influence on me as a visual art education practitioner; to think more carefully about what I say and do when working with audiences.

It has also expanded my thinking on how to programme experiences for visitors. As I mentioned earlier, one of our key objectives is to create life-long and life-wide experiences for audiences and to cater for a broad range of learning needs. I think that working with dance artists and practitioners who think about body and mind and have visceral responses to visual art has broadened my thinking about how best to create that broader range of experiences. It has challenged my thinking about visual literacy. Now, I like to think about visual *and* visceral literacy.

**For you personally, are there any ideal contexts for presenting dance in the museum space? Is there a format or model you’ve observed during the Dancing Museums project that functions more successfully than others (for example, pre-announced lecture/performance vs. happenstance of meeting dance in the museum space, etc.)?**

I don’t think there is an ideal context exactly. It’s vital that everyone involved – museum staff, dance artists, dance organisation staff – have shared goals from the outset.

Some of the most powerful examples I have seen during Dancing Museums have been unique in character and specific to the location and the moment of the project. These have included:

- Choreographed guided tours of the Museo Civico in Bassano right at the start of the project. More than anything else in the project, these hi-jacked a tried and tested museum format and really challenged it.
- A far more performance-oriented moment occurred at the Louvre during the first Paris residency in spring 2016 in Connor Schumacher’s work in the reconstructed courtyard of the Palace of Sargon, department of Near Eastern antiquities. The juxtaposition of his physical form against ancient freeze fragments combined with the use of a specific soundtrack created a powerful visual, aural and visceral experience.
- Completely different in character from both examples above, the National Gallery residency included opportunities for visitors to have one-on-one experiences with dance artists. These experiences were not necessarily designed for the benefit of a spectator however the participant’s reaction to the environment and the paintings was enhanced by being guided into or through a more physical experience by experts in this – the dance artists!

These three contrasting ways to incorporate dance and movement into museum experiences are fascinating and each is worth further consideration.

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<sup>i</sup> A dedicated dance magazine produced by la Briqueterie – CDC du Val-de-Marne. Available on [www.alabriqueterie.com](http://www.alabriqueterie.com) and accessible online on [cairn.info](http://cairn.info)