



DANCING MUSEUMS

THE DEMOCRACY OF BEINGS

Dancing Museums – “The Democracy of Beings,” is a European wide action-research project (2018- 2021) designed to foster and sustain long-term collaborations between dance organisations, museums, Universities and local communities. With a desire to develop inspiring and long-lasting arts and cultural programmes that people in those communities want to get involved in, this project builds on a successful 2-yr project, Dancing Museums – “Old Masters, New Traces,” taking place from 2015-2017.

Dance4 working with Nottingham City Museum Service & Galleries and Nottingham Contemporary are the UK Dancing Museums partners, inviting Nottingham based artist Eleanor Sikorski to collaborate with them.

The international practice-led research group, composed of artists, dance organisations, museums and Universities from 7 countries, looks at how the presence of dance can offer new ways of experiencing art and heritage and help audiences and visitors engage both intellectually and viscerally with artworks. The knowledge and experience generated throughout the project will empower the organisations and artists involved with the skills needed to implement meaningful audience development projects beyond the duration of the project. These practices will be shared and documented in all locations to build evidence and ensure consistency of data and anecdotal information.

Taking place in the UK, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Czech Republic, Dancing Museums will draw experience from a wide range of activities over the next 3 years including seminars, workshops and residencies in all 7 countries.

Project Partners:

La Briqueterie – Centre de Développement Chorégraphique du Val-de-Marne (FR), Conseil General du Val-de-Marne – MAC VAL Musée d’art contemporain (FR), Comune di Bassano del Grappa (IT), Arte Sella (IT), Fondazione Fitzcarraldo (IT), Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia (IT), Tanec Praha (CZ), Dance4 (UK), Stichting Dansateliers (NL), Mercat de les Flors (ES), Bundeskunsthalle (DE)

In collaboration with:

Prague City Gallery (CZ), Boijmans Van Beuningen Boijmans Museum (NL), Musei Civici di Bassano (IT), Nottingham City Museums and Galleries (UK), Nottingham Contemporary (UK) Paris III – La Sorbonne, Fondation Galeries Lafayette, Grand Paris (FR)

The UK practice-led research group consists of Dance4, artist Eleanor Sikorski, Nottingham City Museums & Galleries and Nottingham Contemporary.

Dancing Museums is co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union.



Dancing Museums – “Old Masters, New Traces” (2015–2017) sought to create new forms of public engagement. The emphasis was on audience impact. There was another outcome for me: working with dance artists changed the way I look at, think about and talk about art.

During the London residency at the National Gallery (led by Lucy Suggate, co-delivered with Siobhan Davies Dance), we set out to test accepted and codified behaviours in galleries.

The residency featured experiments inspired by the Gallery’s art handling team and the care with which they handle artworks.

Human Furniture invited visitors to experience paintings on a chaise longue of dance artist’s bodies or lifted high in the air in a human cradle. One visitor described spending longer looking at Turner’s work because she wasn’t supporting her own bodyweight. Another got the rare treat of staring Stubbs’s Whistlejacket straight in the electrifying eye.

Visitors talked about art while being pushed and pulled. Participants described an initial inability to push and talk simultaneously.

Slowly, it became possible to do both. Visitors recalled the gallery feeling empty and quiet (it was busy and noisy) and a heightened awareness of colour.

Public descriptions favoured ‘intense’ and ‘emotional’, over ‘informative’ and ‘educational’. This called to mind the philosopher and educationalist John Dewey:

“Images and ideas come to us not by set purpose but in flashes, and flashes are intense and illuminating, they set us on fire.”

It is hard to predetermine flashes when creating interaction between people and things. We each have our own frames of reference. Understanding how weightlessness or physical concentration facilitates a sensory experience of visual art transformed my thinking about art education.

Comparing dance artists to paintings is simplistic but there were – for me – arresting moments of equivalence. In 2016, Lucy Suggate’s work shared qualities with artists grappling with representing volume on a flat surface. Connor Schumacher’s work had the quality of a preparatory drawing – a glimpse into an artist’s creative process as they think and feel an arm or leg into their composition.

Why dance in museums? There is no definitive answer. Continuing to explore behaviours and experiences through the prism of topics debated at the launch of Dancing Museums – “The Democracy of Beings,” (sustainability, identity, collaboration, taking care of ephemeral heritage to name a few) provides a rich base on which to build the discoveries of the first project. I would encourage the partners to question why this is happening in this space, here and now. Moving and fixed heritage could share something essential (rather than literal) as this can add more meaning to both. The museum is not just a venue. The dance artist is not just an event.

Fast forward to 2019 and a presentation by Theo Clinkard and Leah Marojević at Dance4. I had been spending time struggling to write a drawing-based resource for Chatsworth, featuring Nicolas Poussin’s drawing of the Sabine Women. That evening, something shifted. In many ways, the works have nothing in common at all but shape, form and structure made a connection between the two in my visual memory. Suddenly the Poussin started to make more sense. Funny how the things you do not know about can throw the things you do into sharper focus.

MATT CHESNEY

I am an artist curator and the founding director of BACKLIT gallery and studios in Nottingham. I would like to give you an insight into my journey as a practitioner and director of an artist-led space in the city. My hope is that this will prompt curiosity and intrigue into Nottingham's history as a place that has housed experimental works and 'in-between' spaces.

Over the last 11 years I have been the Director of BACKLIT. BACKLIT was established in 2008 by myself and 25 Fine Art graduates from Nottingham Trent University's BA Fine Art course. During this time, we have supported local artists across diverse art forms by providing affordable studio space, commissions and developmental opportunities. Since BACKLIT's inception, it has also notably mixed practitioners at different points in their careers to encourage them to take risks and experiment.

In the beginning, BACKLIT - like many other graduate cohorts - were setting up spaces in empty factory buildings on the fringes of the city in order to test the boundaries of new works. Our original building was on Dakeyne Street, which hosted internationally acclaimed artists such as Mark Titchner, Jonathan Baldock and Rachel Maclean. Prior to our inhabiting it, it had been a successful artist-run space called MOOT and Stand Assembly studios. These collectives operated in the building for many years until they handed the space over to us and took over new premises at One Thoresby Street.

The factory on Dakeyne street is now the home of Dance4 who continue to champion pioneering choreographic work on an international scale, encouraging practitioners to work in areas that are ground breaking, distinctive and, at times, not conforming to a category or set of rules. BACKLIT has worked with Dance4 collaboratively to bring highly ambitious and important works to the city, including an exhibition by Robert Wilson featuring props and choreographic scores from the influential opera *Einstein on the Beach*, and more recently a new piece of work by Franko B called *Milk + Blood*.

In my opinion, this generous and collaborative spirit is what has set Nottingham apart from other cities in the UK. This burgeoning artistic community has been built on the rich foundations in which practitioners, researchers and programmers can thrive with an abundance of space, support and care. This unique positioning is in part due to the legacy of an organisation called The Midland Group that presented 'new art' in Nottingham and the East Midlands between 1943 and 1987. In the 1960s they provided 'a forum for progressive and experimental visual arts' and later in the 1980s had a particularly profound effect on the development of Performance and Live Art. Its 'Performance Platform', was the starting point for the National Review of Live Art.

Many years later The New Midland Group was set up by three independent artist studios; BACKLIT, One Thoresby Street and Primary. This artist-led consortium develops the ongoing legacy of The Midland Group by supporting local artists to be ambitious, collaborate and produce new works.

The territories in which Nottingham prospers are these "grey areas" which allow for multiple meanings and interpretations. Areas that have different types of contexts as they become archived and collected and whose significance is understood many years later.

These works present shades of grey that are the places to explore complexity, truth, and new ideas from a palette which is made of many different sources. It is here we lie in a space that as practitioners, researchers, participants and audiences we call home; a space to reflect, to feel comfortable, to be vulnerable and articulate the intangible. It is a place that belongs to all of us.

CÉDRIC FAUQ

I'd like to ask two questions, or two versions of the same question: what is the potential for dancing in a gallery full of things vs an emptied gallery? Several elements prompt that interrogation: I remember the exhibition "Danser sa vie" (Dance your life) at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (23 November 2011 - 2 April 2012); I also recall the great compendium *Chorégrapheur l'Exposition* (Choreographing Exhibitions), published in 2013 and edited by Mathieu Copeland; most importantly, I have this image in mind. It's by French writer and photographer Hervé Guibert (1955–1991), a close friend of Michel Foucault, who died from AIDS-related complications.

Amongst Guibert's body of work, this photograph is something of an intruder (and maybe it is). Titled *New York* (1981), it embodies the relationship I entertain with exhibition-making and its deeply performative aspect: that the little black girl is seemingly floating (either about to elevate herself or just landing) in between cased pseudo-Degas bronze, makes it look like she is just escaping a state of fossilisation. Not quite a still-life but rather a fleeting-life, she defies the gentle behaviour you are expected to adopt in such institutions. To dance in a gallery full of things is, then, always about infusing life in the deadliest of the institution: the museum-mausoleum.

At Nottingham Contemporary, where I work, we do not hold a collection – so things are also moving all the time. It also means we close down our galleries, for an average of 9 weeks a year, to be able to move things, about 17% of the year. Upon meeting Eleanor Sikorski (Dancing Museums UK Artist), the question of how dance could happen in the galleries in these in-between times, these empty times, arose. This very much is a real-estate question: I see it as opening the possibility for gallery spaces to be truly inhabited, thus turning temporary visitors into dwellers.

More dancing soon.

Cédric Fauq is Curator of exhibitions at Nottingham Contemporary.



Hervé Guibert, *New York* 1981, gelatin silver print Edition 1 of 25 signed Courtesy of the Hervé Guibert Estate, Paris, and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

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Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



**Nottingham
City Council**



Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Program
of the European Union

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Front and Reverse cover images; *Ways of Seeing, Ways of Being* by Lucy Suggate
Photographer: Matt Cawrey