



Men in the Wall (2003). Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie

## A SPACE FOR DANCE?

UK and US producer and practitioner, Portland Green, examines the current interest in dance work in galleries arising out of her presentation of the *Capture Installations Tour 2004/5*.

By the 1960s or 70s – depending on which side of the Atlantic you were on – dance had not only made its case that it could be sited outside the proscenium stage and that it could incorporate other artistic practices such as spoken word and film, but that it wanted to occupy the same performance and exhibition spaces as other art forms, producing a body of work that crossed genre and discipline definition. In the early part of a new century, through works that use moving image and installation<sup>1</sup>, it has again reclaimed spaces commonly earmarked for the visual arts, as a new space for dance. Exhibitions of these works have been very successful; over 18,000 visitors went to The New Art Gallery Walsall where the *Capture Installations Tour* was on view. However does this current placement of 'dance' works in the gallery contribute to a development in installation art and to other genres' developments and form 'a new point of convergence'<sup>2</sup>?

The *Capture Installations Tour 2004/5*, a portfolio of screen-based installations emanating from dance practice<sup>3</sup> revisited ideas about exhibition and reception that have their origins in New York City in the mid 1960s. Choreographers Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown and Meredith Monk were part of an arts culture that embraced interdisciplinary practice and exhibition. Works which used film and installation elements, but were driven by

choreographic concerns, were exhibited at institutions such as the Whitney Museum of American Art and The Guggenheim without question. As Helena Blaker states in her *Capture Installations Tour* catalogue essay – *A Dialogue between Disciplines* – 'Dance is a discipline which has had a dynamic and significant history in relationship to the visual arts'. But in reclaiming the space of the gallery for this type of work does it become by extension part of the debate about moving image practices and installation art, or does it create a new dialogue?

### MOVING IMAGE

Artists' work with moving image encompasses several disciplines and economic models and these have changed as the moving image has become more prevalent in arts practice. Since the 1990s, artist film and video in the UK has enjoyed a prime position within contemporary arts practice and presentation in Britain. In the US, where experimental film once existed as part of the film world, the economics of the cinema vs. gallery systems and the 'fashionable' interest of some museums means that it is increasingly now seen as part of the art world. However in the UK we should not ignore the body of work of film and video artists who are still working outside the model of the commercial gallery.



Many contemporary dance artists and film-makers working in screen-based installation first explored the medium of the lens through videodance<sup>4</sup>, a practice defined as dance that is originally conceived and choreographed for the lens and which explores the creative interface between dance and the screen<sup>5</sup>. Much of the videodance work created in Europe over the last two decades bears the footprint of one of its primary funders – broadcast television, sometimes in partnership with publicly-funded arts councils. Curator and writer Mark Nash posits a moving image practices' dialogue which asks: 'What's the difference between the artistry of films made for the cinema – even for the box office – and the art of films made for museums and galleries? Are the many artists working with film and video today really artists or just a different breed of filmmaker?'<sup>6</sup> Many videodance makers' response is 'neither'; we are not part of that dialogue but a genre in our own right!

So how do practices involving dance rooted in cinema or television deal with what the Whitney Museum's Chrissie Iles calls 'the folding of the dark space of the cinema into the white cube of the gallery'?<sup>7</sup> How do practitioners used to dance and cinema audiences giving them an investment of their time and an engaged experience, then deal with installation art spectators who give 'fleeting attention to a work we pass in the gallery'?<sup>8</sup> How have dance artists come to terms with the differences between the cinematic space and the gallery environment? And most importantly how do artists, particularly artists working in screen-based installation art, consider 'the specificity of the exhibition space and time'<sup>9</sup>, the space of installation – the architectural space, daylight, blackout, the space between the projector and the screen?

## INSTALLATION

While installation art, like multi-media dance, has a lineage dating back to the 1920s, it was in the late 1950s when it really emerged as an experiential genre with Allan Kaprow's *Environments and Happenings*, that we can begin to understand its inextricable link to the viewer's experience. Installation art however currently enjoys a status as 'the institutional approved artform par excellence',<sup>10</sup> and with recent super-sized installations

both sides of the Atlantic by Olafur Eliasson, Anish Kapoor, Mathew Barney and Martin Creed, it has also 'become the preferred way to create high-impact gestures within even larger exhibition spaces....Installation art increasingly solicits sponsorship, contributing to a widespread sense among artists and critics that it has reached its sell by date.'<sup>11</sup> Throughout this history however it has been dominated by the viewers' presence in a space and the viewers' experience, an experience mediated through the body.

Helena Blaker reminds us that 'a concern with the body has traditionally been associated with the dance discipline, where the articulation of the body in space, an investment in a vocabulary of movement and a technical skill has created a mature symbolic language. But visual art also has its own concerns, of course, with the body as an expressive medium.'<sup>12</sup> As of course does Live Art in the UK, which has forged a strong relationship with the gallery space with events such as *Live Culture* at Tate Modern.

Installation therefore seems an obvious choice of genre for dance artists. Angela Woodhouse creates dance works for the gallery that draw on specific art histories. 'My work is informed by the 1960s Happenings in the US and Live Art artists drawing attention to their own body as a performative source and site of their art. I have extended this into the form of dance, applying formal procedures but setting up questions about what it is to dance and perform and what it is to watch' she says.<sup>13</sup> Angela believes installation to be 'an open term...for some time I have been thinking of ways of bringing the space, if you like, into the event and the event into the space'. Carol Brown conversely situates her screen-based installation practice as a break with art history. She 'prefers to be in the blurred space, beyond boundaries, beyond hegemony of dominant practices', believing that the term installation 'is aligned with visual art practice.'<sup>14</sup>

Director, Stephen Munn's *Trading Spaces* at Quay Arts in January 2005 engaged in this dialogue about the history of installation art by programming Carol Brown and Abigail Norris' *Capture Installations* work *Electric Fur* in the adjoining theatre space to Angela Woodhouse and



Caroline Broadhead's *Court* in the gallery. *Electric Fur* is a two screen installation; one horizontal screen, the other vertical, installed in a deep black box space in which Carol Brown hopes 'audiences experience the work as a physical journey, creating their own mix between vertical and horizontal dimensions of screen space'. *Court*, a white box installation (at Quay) consisting of small 'rooms' created out of layered, fine white linen walls 'looks at the notion of disclosure, intimacy, and secrecy within a confined space. The piece centres on the witnessing of events that unfold between two people; the viewer is invited to enter and explore' says Woodhouse. The curatorial placement of these works comments on the history of installation art, graphically illustrating the range of experiences of space possible in a gallery. The works positioned in this way, question the audience/performer relationship, notions of the public or private space and the 'active spectator'. Woodhouse articulates this as one of her concerns:

*For me, Court straddles both the public and the private. In a structural way there are moments shared with other audience members and moments which one might regard as private dialogues with the performer. However it is not so clear cut as this since the directness of the performers' gestures to physically include the viewer offers a private and intimate moment witnessed in a public space. In the final analysis it is the prerogative of the viewer to play with an interaction publicly shared or to take for themselves the private experience. The audience are in the light; they are watching themselves being watched and therefore lose any previous expectation of anonymity. They are no longer the mass hidden in the dark but are individuals with unique points of view and urges, which they may choose to satisfy, for example touching, kissing, talking to the performers, or lying down with them. What is fascinating is the chances people will take with strangers and in front of witnesses – Court sets out to provoke this in people whether it remains a question 'shall I touch?' or whether they physically carry out their desires.<sup>15</sup>*

Conversely, many artists' screen-based installations emanating from dance practice, are offering the viewer an experience that Bishop describes as 'mimetic engulfment'.

*Rather than heightening awareness of our perceiving body and its physical boundaries, these dark installations suggest our dissolution; they seem to dislodge or annihilate our sense of self – albeit only temporarily – by plunging us into darkness, saturated colour, or refracting our image into an infinity of mirror reflections ...the possibility of locating ourselves in relation to the space is diminished. There is no placement in engulfing blackness: I have no sense of where I am because there is no perceptible space between external objects and myself. Yet until we do bump into someone or something we can go forward or backwards in the blackness without proof of having moved. Entering such rooms can make one aware of one's body, but as a loss: one does not sense one's boundaries which are dispersed in the darkness and one begins to coincide with the space.<sup>16</sup>*

Which, combined with the often-favoured loud, immersive soundscape, is an interesting development for dance artists whose practices are often concerned with a heightened awareness of the body in space. How does the desired active viewer perambulate through the installation space? To play devils advocate across two screen genres referenced in this text, how are you more of an activated viewer walking through a pitch black installation space than sitting on the edge of your arthouse cinema seat watching a suspense thriller?

## NEW SPACES, NEW DIALOGUES?

For me, the dialogue about space, installation art and the moving image was also extended by two other presentations. Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie's *Men in the Wall* in the ICA theatre created an experience of an extra spatial dimension, in which the characters danced through life-size 3D moving image projections within a 'snug' black box 'gallery' space. An experience that it is hard to have outside billion-pound movie theme parks,





and a first I believe for dance? And Rosemary Butcher's installation *Vanishing Point* at The Old Market Hall, Shrewsbury (a new space for the moving image and new media) that questions traditional views of moving image reception. Through a space that functions as both cinema and gallery; the exhibition supported writer Mark Nash's view that those 'writing on film and video in the gallery environment can too easily confuse "sitting in a cinema" with "passivity" or "mobility" with "freedom"'.<sup>17</sup> My curatorial experience in this genre has led me to believe this 'confusion' is shared by some contemporary artists also.

Through the use of technology, artists creating installation art can not only transmit moving image and sound to any 'space' but also create simulated space or environments; installation works that use these concepts are already pushing the boundaries of the space of installation art as a genre. There will surely be a point where artists exploring the body as a dynamic system through these technologies as performance, in theatrical spaces, will meet up with installation artists working with moving image, technology and dance or performance in the extended gallery space. Both share the same challenge – where to place the projection, and how does that relate to the experience mediated through the viewer's body?

Even without a performer present, the white box gallery installation space is a theatre space of a

kind. As such it has its own language and codes, which are different from those of the cinema and the dance house. However the screen itself adopts yet a different language and set of codes. The moving image screen acts as a window onto a larger space, one that can assume to extend beyond the frame of the screen, giving the illusion of the viewer being physically present somewhere else. It also has a tendency to dominate – it is promoted into view as the image continually rotates and scales and gives the best point of view. It can, although not always, bring us a cinematic way of seeing in concept and perception in connecting space and structuring time, it is one of representation – a representation that is of a different scale to everyday space. When placed within a physical, architectural 'theatre' space where the viewer and other 'characters' are located, how and when will the viewer know when to concentrate on the representation and when to concentrate on the physical space? When to switch between the eye-to-camera connection to the eye-to-'theatre' space connection?

So what effect will the current exhibitions of 'dance' installations in the gallery space have on the development of dance as an art form and the developments of other genres? While curators who exhibited works from the *Capture Installations Tour's* portfolio were happy to link works by their medium and discipline in 2004/5; if there is more critical review of screen-based dance installations from the perspective of the relationship between artist and audience, (a definition of installation art as a genre), who is to say how screen based dance installations works will be curated in the future? As Helena Blaker asks: 'How are they developing the language of their different histories?'<sup>18</sup> And how will dance artists or indeed any artists working in installation, either screen-based or performance-based, utilising cinematic images or visual and aural expressions of data, or all of the above, respond to the audience's changing relationship to social space?

Claire Bishop observes: 'When the experience of going into a museum increasingly rivals that of walking into restaurants, shops, or clubs, works of art may no longer need to take the form of immersive interactive experiences. Rather the best installation art is marked by a sense of antagonism



towards its environment, a friction with its context that resists organisational pressure and instead exerts its own terms of engagement.<sup>119</sup>

- 1 For the purposes of this text - an installation – a work that occupies a defined space where the elements and the space have equal importance; installation art – a genre of practice; an installation of art works – the installation is secondary to the works
- 2 Helena Blaker; *Capture Installations Tour* catalogue essay - A Dialogue between Disciplines. Full text available from [www.portlandgreen.com/captureinstallations](http://www.portlandgreen.com/captureinstallations).
- 3 A collective descriptor for a diverse range of installation and new media works toured by Portland Green in 2004/5: *Infected*, UK, 2001 by Gina Czarnecki & Iona Kewney, *WarStars*, UK, 2001 by Bruno Martelli and Ruth Gibson – *Igloo*, *Bodysight*, UK, 2001 by Sophia Lycouris & Konstantinos Papakostas, *Waterfall*, UK, 2002 by Richard Lord, *Electric Fur*, UK, 2002 by Carol Brown and Abigail Norris, *Men in the Wall*, UK, 2003 by Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie, *Vanishing Point*, UK 2003 by Rosemary Butcher and Martin Otter
- 4 Also referred to as dance for camera or screen and video art dance
- 5 Definition is Portland Green's adapted from Sheril Dodds' in *Moving in the Margins: dance on Television, Filmwaves*, Issue 21 p40
- 6 Mark Nash, *Wait Until Dark*, *Tate Magazine*, Issue 2, p56 and edited version of 'Art and Cinema: Some Critical Reflections' from *Documenta 11 – Platform 5: Exhibition* (catz Verlag, 2002)
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 Malcolm LeGrice, *Improvising time and Image, Filmwaves* Issue 14 p 5
- 9 Mark Godfrey, *Another Time, Another Space, Tate etc.* Issue 2 p58
- 10 But is it installation art?, Claire Bishop, *Tate Etc.*, Issue 3, p26
- 11 But is it installation art?, Claire Bishop, *Tate Etc.*, *ibid.*
- 12 Helena Blaker; *Capture Installations Tour* catalogue essay - A Dialogue between Disciplines
- 13 Conversation with Portland Green at the time of the Quay Arts exhibition – *Trading Places*
- 14 In an e-mail discussion with the writer for this piece
- 15 *op. cit.*
- 16 *op. cit.*
- 17 *op. cit.*
- 18 *op. cit.*
- 19 But is it installation art?, Claire Bishop, *Tate Etc.*, 2005 p35

This is an extract from a longer piece entitled *A Space for Dance?* Portland Green is a producer and practitioner working in moving image in both the US and the UK. *Capture* is an annual commissioning scheme developed and produced by Arts Council England since 2001 that aims to challenge the concept of dance and the screen. Approximately 45,000 people visited the nine venues that exhibited *The Capture Installations Tour 2004/5*, which showed works by Gina Czarnecki & Iona Kewney, Bruno Martelli and Ruth Gibson, Sophia Lycouris & Konstantinos Papakostas, Carol Brown and Abigail Norris, Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie, Rosemary Butcher and Martin Otter and Richard Lord.