

Process-Product; an international festival of improvised dance reveals much more than improvisation

Vincent Cacalano

Process-Product was a unique dance event, which took place in the Department of Contemporary Arts at MMU-Cheshire between 25 February and the 2 March 2013 at the Crewe Campus of Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). This was the first festival of its kind at MMU Cheshire, which focused on exposing an array of current contemporary work where the notion of improvisational strategies operated as a key component of the creative process. Over the week, this idea was explored through a variety of approaches including live performances, screen dance showings, workshops, academic presentations, informal discussions, and a tele-presence event.

The festival united professional dance artists with prestigious and varied backgrounds from Asia, Europe and North America. Many of them have worked with notable figures from the history of Contemporary Dance such as Erick Hawkins, Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark Smith, Anna Sokolow, Siobhan Davies, Anna Halprin and Mary Wigman. They included Maida Withers now in her 70s, Mary Prestige, one of the founders of the X6, Tanusree Shankar of the Ananda Shankar Centre for performing arts in Kolkata, and emerging artists like Wendell Cooper, who combines urban dance and contemporary approaches in his work, and is still in his 20s. They were asked to contribute to the festival because each has a very different approach to live performance and a range of practices, but despite their differences, they refer to notions of experimentation and the use of improvisation. Each artist was sent the paragraph below to prompt a response, which was seen in how they approached the presentation of their work.

Questions concerned with the notion of the 'set' and 'improvised' will be addressed during the week, contemplating whether either approach actually holds more value. Furthermore, can choreography ever really be 'set'? If performance is a 'live-now' space, even with the intention of setting things, can we ever really know what is going to happen? (e-mail message sent by Vincent Cacalano to all festival participants, 15 January 2013)

The festival, was intended to enrich the MMU dance student's education, through showing a variety of different approaches to making work, where methods are exposed, and are the primary ingredient for consumption. I wanted them to see, and hear about, performance work from the inside out, where the focus was not only about final production concerns.

The idea for the festival developed over time, and was a response to seeing work by emerging choreographers in a formal theatre context. Often, I noticed that the dances seem to have been created in an environment focused on producing quick outcomes, and many of these works appear to have been made and set quickly. Often it seems they had little time to develop the work with the performers before they had to vigorously clean the dances due to the pressures of meeting the standards and expectation of finished work to be presented formally.

I have noticed a certain approach to performance emerge, where the presence of the dancers has an almost militaristic athleticism, showing a closed-in and slightly worried presence, unaware of the space around them. However, the content and nature of work did not seem to require this pent up and sometimes clipped presence. It is complex for an ensemble to figure out what makes a dance breathe, find its pace and become finessed with subtle details. The time it takes to make set- and-finished dance work, and the production pressures dancers and makers face are interesting factors to consider when one thinks of confronting the contemporary history of product. How do choreographers today manage this? How does this pressure influence our mind set and approach to working with young dancers, especially considering that so very little work is presented where process is exposed in a really obvious and direct way?

The Process-Product Festival created a space where artists could show performance that was stripped down, rougher, looser, messier, not always giving an answer, open, process-palpable and maybe even risky in how it played with structure and audience expectation. It was a chance to present work that revealed the inner workings of an artist's sustainable- practice. Teachers, students and public members were invited to attend throughout the week and contribute to this complex, but ever-intriguing discourse.

This interest for displaying process within product goes beyond the act of improvisation, however improvisational strategies are at work. Examples of this can be seen in Trisha Brown's collection Early Works. One dance in particular Line Up (1976) shows choreographic and compositional methods usually used in the studio being presented as performance.. The work is compositionally intriguing: as one dancer instructs another to perform actions like 'reverse' a phrase of movement. The material being performed is set, but the instruction seems freer in time, less bound to only one particular moment. As dancers are so instructed, the entire dance falls together through a remarkable sense of craft, intelligence and rigour, put on display. This method is also used in a much later work MO (1995), but the instruction is not called in the moment of performance, it is used to explore the potential of the material through rehearsal. In MO the integrity and depth of the process is made transparent by the sheer level of craft and ability it takes to make the work, as dancers manipulate movement in dense space, physically dramatic, yet relaxed and awake in presence and manner.

Workshops were largely based in improvisation and its relationship to composition and choreography, offering approaches that were uniquely developed by each artist through methods of experimentation and educated guess, reflecting their interests in certain ways of moving, and for some a pursuit of developing new styles. Workshops included various somatic approaches and movement re-education principles such as Todd alignment, Rolfing, Pilates, Yoga and Bartenieff fundamentals that were integrated with dance technique, offering practical warm-ups for the body with very specific pointers to use and function.

The information was not offered as an eclectic collection of principles, but it was integrated within the dancing body where approaches that, at one time, might have been separate modes of investigation can produce an integrated result through experiment, ambition, and the use of improvised and experiential methods of study. Examples of this are the work of Wendell Cooper, where Hawkins technique has been integrated with urban dance and Yoga, and in the work of

Tanusree Shankar, where the fluidity of Indian dance is used creatively, and fused with western modern dance compositional approaches, to make new works. The role of improvisation and experimentation is central for these artists to embed physical knowledge in the body, and in the nervous system. As Wendell Cooper explains,

The most recent way I have been using improvisation to develop my style is by using the emergent properties that have come from playing in various styles. I can combine the tensional integrity required of certain Breakdance movements with the Hawkins work that ask you to be close to the center of the joint to create efficient yet powerful ways to move.

In yoga, you are encouraged to find multiple perspectives to look at things and develop a sense of healthy objectivity. I used that to consider that we are not dancing on a flat Earth, but a round Earth that is rotating and moving through space. I often use this sensation as a motivation in improvisation. In this way I use turn cosmological ideas into movement scores. Now that there are various styles in my body, I can allow my body consciousness to discover answers to movement questions in ways that I would not have intellectually created.

I hope to let this process reveal cultural, physical, and spiritual connections within my own psyche. Improvisation has always been a way for me to integrate information. It is through the spontaneous combination of source materials that I am able to discern a larger pattern.

(Cooper – Cacialano e-mail interview, 30 April 2013)

The festival also had several lecture demonstrations focused on artistic methods and approaches to making, ranging from screen dance to choreography, improvisation, education and performance. These sessions relied on language and visual example as the main means of communicating information, and focused on how artists experiment in their process, through educated guess and choice, to arrive to a product. The term educated guess in this context is useful as it refers to how artists with a certain amount of knowledge and experience enter into a process where much of the final outcome remains unknown, where artists set up situations purposefully to encounter unknown circumstances when exploring a new work rather than establishing a formula and following that when making work. When speaking about her film work and ideas within the context of the festival, Anna MacDonald explains,

I can either say very little and be very clear, or I can try and say a bit more and be less clear, and unfortunately for you I have chosen the latter, but, I feel, able to do that because I am in this context, you know this is about process-product, and what I did not want to do was close off everything and give you the answer, so forgive me

MacDonald addresses her willingness to risk, and how the festival has created a supportive context to do this. She addresses exposing where she is in her work at the moment. Rather than editing herself she wants to allow the viewer into the process, before conclusions and answers have been determined. When speaking about her work and the capturing of a moment on film, and being present in that moment she commented,

It was about trying to go with what was there, on that day, in that particular moment, an imminence, there's imminence, rather than something that is true of all days, something that was just true of that day, and that might not even be true of that day, but that was potentially true of that day

She explained further,

So, it is that sort of allowing in the interruption, the disruption, the thing that can't happen, the thing that is happening. Inviting immediacy in which I think is particularly interesting in film.

(text transcribed from a video of Anna MacDonalds lecture demonstration, Wednesday, 27 February 2013, Crewe, Cheshire, UK)

In this academically approached lecture demonstration, MacDonald discussed some of her ideas about film and dance composition in general, including her ideas about how she sets up situations with parameters to then be filmed over specific swaths of time, rather than setting up scripted scenes to be recorded shot by shot.

Maida Withers also presented a lecture demonstration of film, discussing a range of topics present in her work and career, such as dancing in sites in the nature of her birth place, Utah. She mentioned improvising on the edges of cliffs, and having the topography of the earth as her collaborator, using her proprioception as guide, feeling the rocks support her when dancing on high cliffs. The events of MacDonald and Withers reaffirmed how process and product, for many of the artists involved, cannot be separated easily, but occur almost as an avalanche of creativity, that actually never ends.

The lecture demonstrations and performance work gave festival goers an opportunity to see statements in action, showing work of entirely improvised dance-music, instant composition skills, loosely structured improvisations, complex structural work set loosely in time, and set work developed through improvising in rehearsal to create material. In a tele-presence event with Hunter College, students from MMU in Crewe and students from Hunter College in New York City danced short improvisations with each other in real time, via skype through the use of a large projection on-screen. All of the work was presented with minimal technical support, where artists took a hands-on approach to the presentation of their work. Cooper was seen in performance turning knobs and adjusting projectors to produce sound and light, while Mary Prestige, in her performance was seen searching for the objects she needed, during and as part of the piece; she literally misplaced them and needed to find them in the middle of her performance. Each performance included question and answer sessions to allow for the audience to gain an understanding of how the work was developed, what artistic questions were in play, and what the artistic intentions were. The audience managed this approach with ease, as there was a relaxed and open atmosphere throughout the festival.

One highlight from the range of performances shown was the Liverpool Improvisation Collectives (LIC) event, where they presented a quartet and two duets. The performers worked with objects,

spoke and moved. They balanced long sticks on their heads, danced contact improvisation while putting on clothes that were piled on the floor, and whispered in each others ears while laughing and watching toy trains move around the space. During the post performance discussion several important issues emerged from LIC about the seamless line between process and product that is the result of investing in process as the primary artistic driver.

Mary Prestige remarked,

but that's funny isn't it, you know, oh so that was improvised was it, that was improvised, you know actually, in a way, I do not know what the deal is sometimes, you know what I mean, people like to say it was improvised, or they do not want to mention the word, or people are obsessed with, is it fixed, isn't it fixed, everything's like, it is like life, isn't it?

Jo Blowers added,

For me it is about definitions that do not really exist I have conversations about so called set material, and whenever I ask someone the question, so when you occupy this set material, has it ever felt the same twice, and then one of the biggest criticisms of improvisation is, which in some instances has a degree of validity, isn't it just getting up and doing anything, and you realize, you realize, that equally, if you observe that it is not really interesting so, there is always an intention, but if the intention is really coherent or communicative or readable is a different thing. But I think the practice of improvisation demands that kind of clarity of intention, and that is similar to occupying set material where there is a degree of openness that means your present within it, and in performance it is does not really matter what the material is. (sic- improvised or set)

(text transcribed from video of post performance discussion on 26 February 2013, Crewe, Cheshire, UK)

What Blowers describes reminds us that even if the body is not improvising literally, but is dancing a set pattern, the now-moment is a moment that cannot be repeated. Awareness of that moment is a crucial and important aspect of performance, in order to potentially avoid a performance presence that is rigid, clipped and unaware of the whole space. There was a clear understanding that the moment of exposure, coming out of the studio to share a performance with an audience is setting something (up) within itself, decisions are made, something happens in a space in that one moment, and it is in the public domain. It can be remembered and can be imprinted in a spectator's mind.

This was also addressed in the teaching practices of LIC, who taught several workshops throughout the week.

Tanusree Shankar and Dancers presented a lecture demonstration with informal showings of several dances. Shankar spoke about her ideas about life and art and the need for positive energy, which inspires her to create. Explaining what we would see, and then showing the dances either live or on-screen, the work was danced on very complex rhythms such as a beat of fifteen counts. It was presented directly without any extra production elements aside from the most basic, revealing the depth of the physical research, which she has pursued through developing a technique that supports her choreographic goals. When discussing her movement material, Shankar was able to break down

the various aspects that comprise her technique and choreography. The work showed a very detailed and fluid movement vocabulary, performed with an open and aware presence within set material. This event in the festival highlighted how a performance can focus on the spontaneity of a live moment, even if a dance is set, by not dwelling on what is secure, but by taking the risk to focus on the real time reality of performance itself where not everything is controllable. It was evident through other works presented how each artist embraced this idea.

Gia Cacalano and Wendell Cooper presented two solos and a duet. Cacalano and Cooper danced loosely structured scores, which were very physical, throwing the body into the momentum path, and falling through space whilst articulating various body parts. They also taught several workshops revealing their physical knowledge and ability to integrate somatic approaches and traditional dance technique. This work showed a very different approach to what was seen previously: it was performed in a light manner with open and relaxed expressions, despite the dancers showing an intense physicality. And whilst the use of technology was present the work still had a rough and raw sensibility.

Cheshire artists and I presented a performance in collaboration with Tanusree Shankar Dancers. Showing a score involving five dancers trained in Ballet and Contemporary techniques, alongside three dancers trained in the Shankar style of Indian new dance. Using set movement material with many varied weight shifts, they responded to a choreographic task that asked them to navigate a very dense space, relying on an awareness of space and each other to avoid accidents. The dancer needed to alter and change the material to respond to the task. One could see the dancers' backgrounds in the movement materials emerging from the task, but also movement principles that overlap any one particular style, that any professional dancers should understand, such as how to shift weight quickly and efficiently through understanding how to control one's centre of gravity. The task demonstrated how improvisational strategies and being in the moment assists a dancer to solve choreographic problems, revealing a process directly within a product.

Lastly, an unstructured improvisation was performed, which was open to all the participants of the festival, with live music by jazz pianist and improviser Adam Fairhall. In this dance the performers were asked to approach the space focusing on the use and range of the eye and sight. Watching the playful and open performance presence of the dancers making clear choices and organizing the space with a sense of choreographic intention, I reflected once again on the emerging choreographer's platform events I mentioned earlier in this writing. I wonder if practicing an improvisation like this one, specifically focused on the use of eye, seeing and listening to one another, could be a useful tool to support the performance of set work, where the performers look closed and rigid, unaware of the space.

I would like to see more venues creating a festival context to expose the richness of artists' processes and ways of working in a supportive and informal manner; a situation that allows the way

an artist works to become the product for consumption. For some, it can be about showing a technique and how it was developed into choreography, for others a way of structuring material. It can be to expose another way of creating material, a way of performing, a way of editing or orchestrating a situation to be captured within a frame of time. For many artists that implies improvisation, in some way, but it does not have to. Though improvisational strategies were evident throughout the week, Process-Product as an idea was much broader than improvised performance. Improvisational strategies can be seen at the starting point of making a dance where an artist only has an idea, or at the performance moment itself, or any and all points in between.

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