IN FOCUS 2023

DANCE (LENS)

Melanie Kloetzel joins Siobhan Murphy in a conversation about site, screen, materiality and the screendances curated in material moves. Melanie is a settler artist, scholar and educator located in Treaty 7 Territory on Turtle Island (Canada). Siobhan is a settler of Celtic descent currently living at Geboor (Macedon) on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people. She makes screendance and publishes writing in the field of dance studies.

Melanie Kloetzel:

Director of the dance theatre company kloetzel&co. and co-director of the art intervention collective TRAction (which produces the Climate Art Web), Melanie has developed events, workshops and encounters in theatre spaces, alternative venues, spaces of public assembly, and online environments across four continents. Melanie's films have garnered such awards as Best of Fest (Sans Souci Festival of Dance Cinema, USA), Best Documentary (Mabig Film Festival, Germany), a Boss Female Short (Freedom Festival International) and a Best Experimental Film Award (GO Independent International Film Festival, USA), as well as been selected for screening at such well-known festivals as DANSCAMDANSE Festival (Belgium), the American Dance Festival's International Screendance Festival (USA), and Danca em Foco Festival (Brazil). Kloetzel is Professor of Dance at the University of Calgary.

ANCEHOUSE DANCEHOUSE DANCEHOUS

Siobhan:
Let’s dive in by talking about why it might be important for screendance works to take account of the site in which they take place.

Melanie:
Naturally, there are screendances that are shot in theatre spaces or studios; in my experience, the point of shooting in these more conventional spaces is often for us to think less about the site because we already associate such sites with the dancing body. So, when you see films shot in a theatre or studio, it’s more like you’re watching documentation of something live, or perhaps a rehearsal process.

But when you take dance out of those spaces, right away we are presented with something that’s unconventional. When we walk down the street, we don’t expect to see somebody rolling down the sidewalk, right? So immediately that draws your eye; perhaps that’s why filmmakers like Maya Deren started exploring unconventional sites for the dancing body (at least in modernist theatre-oriented cultures) back in the 1940s. And pulling the gaze directly to that interaction between the body and place is something that has continued to appeal to dance filmmakers. As I’ve written about elsewhere, there is a level of narrativity that develops when the body begins interacting in spaces that are not the studio or theatre. As those of us immersed in Eurocentric dance disciplines like contemporary know, it can be quite challenging to establish narrative through an abstract form like dance. But once you’ve asked a dancing body to relate to a site that has other associations, the narrative can come through much more quickly. This is also heightened at the moment due to the impressive amount of narrative content humans consume via screen; in other words, humans tend to make immediate links between a two-dimensional screen space and narrative.

Siobhan:
It’s almost as though it generates a conflict of interpretation. The history of contemporary dance of course has many tangents but one of them is the conceit of “abstraction”, and as soon as someone places a dance in a specific location, they are disallowing or complicating that conceit. And as dance makers, we’re not necessarily trained in how to grapple with the narrative implications of place.

Melanie:
I definitely think there’s a danger when a screendance (or live performance) is sited in a location without considering what associations might exist with that environment - it can really undermine a dance film (not to mention become culturally insensitive or even offensive!). Katrina McPherson has written about how place is so vital in screendance, that it often ends up being known by its site, like ‘the one filmed in the jail’. But there are so many dance films coming out right now that really couldn’t care less about where they’re being filmed and site is just a backdrop. They’ve lost an opportunity to engage with that place and to let that place impact what happens. The extreme end of this would be greenscreens where you can put any kind of background behind the dancing.

Siobhan:
Sometimes the arbitrariness of that can be playful.

Melanie:
If arbitrariness becomes the theme, then, yes, it can have value. For instance, I did a film (Room) where the body was filmed in many different places doing some of the same activity - that film was about adaptation, or more specifically about how we’re failing to adapt in relation to the climate crisis. In that kind of context, arbitrary locations make sense.

Siobhan:
So you're saying that when site is not overtly engaged with, or when its arbitrariness is not intentional, then we're importing a viewing paradigm that doesn't suit the situation. We're using a proscenium mentality when it doesn't apply. It's a bit like how difficult it can be, when improvising, to get rid of the idea of a front and dance in a way that invites multi perspectival viewing.

Melanie:
I'm thinking a lot about this at the moment, especially in terms of the whole notion of modernism and the way it took bodies out of everyday places and stuck them in a theatrical frame. In my opinion, that change of venue has potentially done dance a massive disservice - quite a different scenario from certain indigenous cultures, for example, where that dancing body has an instrumental connection to place. These are questions that I'm wrestling with right now.

Siobhan:
This certainly comes up when curating screendance work in Australia. There's a strong historical tendency to view the open landscapes of Australia's interior as empty and neutral, as though the vast space and absence of visual 'distraction' makes for a blank canvas onto which the artist or filmmaker can project their vision. Of course the notion of emptiness is a deeply painful and injurious fallacy within Australia's colonial history, but sadly persistent in artistic representations.

Melanie:
In Canada there was a film that came out during the pandemic - it was a big deal, sponsored by the Globe and Mail (Canada's most prominent newspaper). Multiple dance companies across Canada all danced to Leonard Cohen's 'Anthem', a classic Canadian song. The film literally had ballerinas doing ballet vocabulary on the beach for, seemingly, no reason and with no interaction with the place. I couldn't believe what I was watching, actually. At the time I had been thinking a lot about waterways in Canada. A number of indigenous peoples - both in Canada and elsewhere - have very specific protocols for working with waterways, but it was as though all that history could be literally wiped away and we could just embrace ballerinas dancing on the beach with the same vocabulary and conventions as seen on stage. It was shocking!

Siobhan:
These are examples of when paying attention to site is perhaps most critically important. So how does one begin to pay attention? In your book with Carolyn Pavlik, "Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces" (2011, pp 6–7), you suggest that paying attention to a site involves tuning in and also tending to a place, implying stewardship or care. Attending to the history and/or cultural uses of a site and developing narrative threads in relation to that is one way a work could engage with site, and the films I've gathered in material moves do that to different degrees and in different ways. I am also very interested in finding a way into a site through material engagement, or what you have elsewhere called a "phenomenological dia-logue that occurs between dancer and place". I thought we could step through some of the means by which this dialogue might be made available to a viewer. Let's start with perhaps the most literal interpretation of this idea: How do dancers themselves engage with the physical substances or realities of the site?

Melanie:
The most obvious engagement of this type (and certainly from the perspective of the viewer) is probably the connection between a dancer's skin and a site's surface. When a dancer touches - particularly their bare skin - to other surfaces, we (and the dancer) can't help but focus on the differences (and sometimes similarities) between the material/texture of the skin and the material/texture of the site. This tactile engagement can be very evocative across the screen divide and almost always draws attention to notions of vulnerability - often how delicate or vulnerable our skin is. Through touch, we can sense an amazing range of things. You know, when Marc gently plops his hand into the water for that first image of "Uath Lochans", we can feel that plop right along with him. It feels both refreshing and familiar and we can sense that through the screen. But later in the film, we also can sense what it would be like to scratch that same skin across a splintery wood surface and we might be fearful for Marc's skin at that moment. These things speak to a kind of human vulnerability in a really specific way.

Siobhan:
It's interesting to think about vulnerability relative to works seen on stage. We've all seen intensely physical stage works where bodies get thrown around, but in that context we don't think so much about the brush of skin against tarkett, and we don't necessarily have that same kinaesthetic concern for the person. Do you think it's about proximity?

Melanie:
Absolutely. The close-up is so vital. I've written about this in terms of live site-specific work: when we bring an audience up close and they can be right next to us and see us interacting with place, they can have a very visceral reaction. When you're on a stage or when you're very distant from a performer, it's difficult to register that same level of vulnerability. But, we can communicate that visceral vulnerability (and other ideas) much easier by bringing a viewer in tight proximity to those moments in both live site work and film work. Viewers can see how we dialogue with or connect to place in a palpable way - whether it's how delicate our skin can be when interacting with a rough, hard, or overly hot or cold surface, or how deliciously soft, cool, or smooth a surface might be on our skin. I call these techniques of integration - with the extreme close-up being perhaps the most significant of these techniques. Such techniques can communicate quite clearly that phenomenological dialogue between dancer and place.

Siobhan:
Thinking about it as dialogue is interesting, because if it's a dialogue then it's a two-way communication which prompts consideration of how the place is speaking back. In the screendance "Quarantine", the opening scenes are full of the sensory, the tactile, the reciprocal: the building is almost falling apart on the dancer, Kyle Abraham. So yes, there's the vulnerability of his skin relative to boards that could splinter and hurt him but there's also the sense that if he pushes too hard, that door frame, that piece of history, is going to disintegrate. There have been so many screendances made in decrepit buildings with fraught histories - it's quite a saturated theme within the genre. One of the many reasons I chose this film was that Gabri Christa has allowed space for the building to speak back: there's something quite reciprocal in the vulnerability of the 'skin' of that building relative to Abraham's skin.

Melanie:
Yes, and such reciprocity gets heightened when a filmmaker has a keen awareness and makes specific choices in terms of the cinematography. For example, when they allow the camera to linger on the site, even after the body leaves the frame. In other words, if a filmmaker decides to stay focused on a particular spot, rather than follow the dancer (or just cut the shot), you can see the dust motes dance through the air, dirt trickling off a hand or water droplets being welcomed back to a body of water. Those things create that kind of reciprocal dialogue between the two materials, the site and the skin. If a filmmaker has that kind of sensitivity, it really benefits how that dialogue can be communicated to a viewer.

Siobhan:
In terms of the filmmaker's point of view, it's a switch in perspective, when they're not just seeing the dance, they're seeing the whole situation. This brings us to talk about how a reciprocal relationship with site can be rendered not only by the dancer's engagement with materials but by the camera person's choices. You've already touched on this by mentioning how the dancer might exit a frame, and if the camera stays with that frame, we get to see what remains, what ripples outward from the dance.

Melanie:
This is really clear in Olive Bieringa's work "Plant". She obviously has a long history of making site work. And in "Plant", as a camera person, she is allowing her knowledge of and engagement between her body and the site to come through the camera in a completely different way than you see in other films. Usually, it's the body that's on the other side of the camera that is the most important in dance films. But in "Plant" the camera person's body is just as important. For instance, in this one shot, she's doing this circling activity, with the camera panning 360° over and over again; the camera might come across a body in the frame, but it doesn't feel that important. It's almost as if the dancers' presence in that shot is incidental and that kind of interaction was fascinating to witness. Of course there are other moving shots and following shots in 'Plant', but often the body's on the edge of the frame - still almost secondary to the experience. Those techniques were fascinating to see in a film that's really quite old. In some ways, it's a film that's very difficult to watch. There's no music that's helping us, and it's 10 minutes long, and we're getting used to shorter and shorter dance films all the time. And Olive even severs the link between visuals and sound, matching sound and visuals from different shots. This feels quite disorienting for the viewer - almost like the bodies themselves had been displaced or severed from society in a way, becoming like strange remnants or leftovers that Olive (as camera person) would kind of catch falling or running through the frame. Of course, this sense of displacement is also highly impacted by the editing, but it feels like the camerawork is what drove that in a totally different direction. The dialogue that developed between the camera person and the place felt like it almost became the main activity.

Siobhan:
I completely agree and this is why I included it despite the low resolution. I love the way it prioritises the dance behind the lens as a sensory entryway to the site.

Melanie:
You could even hear the noises the camera person was making. Normally you would edit that out. But by leaving it in, you can't hide or deny the presence of the camera or the body of the camera person. By being very upfront about their presence, Olive was able to create a potent dialogue with the random events happening around her.

Siobhan:
Olive talks about the footage as being raw and that it took her a while to understand what it was. It was experimental, the shooting of it, and then ultimately it had a feeling of documentary war footage. The camera is not precious; some takes are imbued with a sense of risk, that the camera could get wet or fall. The wild, experimental approach is what makes the film stand out for me so much.

Melanie:
I like that you decided on putting something like that back to back with Shantel Liao's "Little Farewells", where the camera is doing nothing! It's actually just a stable single shot, which may seem off-putting, but is critical for the success of that film. Viewing it straight after "Plant" shows the differences in how place can be seen as a collaborator: the very disparate choices made for these films in terms of both camera work and editing support the commentary on place that each filmmaker wanted to make. With "Little Farewells", the single static shot gets uncomfortable, maybe even boring, but that's kind of the point, right? I mean, the camera is chained in place. That's exactly how we felt during the pandemic lockdowns. We couldn't move; at times, we couldn't even exit or leave a singular space. So the decision to chain the camera in place was a painful decision, but powerful. And, then add to that, whatever is in the shot at the very beginning is what's going to be in the shot the whole time. So both in terms of the camerawork, and editing of course, there is the idea that there's no room to move, a haunting reminder of the reality that we experienced during the pandemic.

Siobhan:
The camera is also seconded by the static TV screen which is on some kind of weird news loop so that between these two still frames you just have no options, really increasing the claustrophobia.

Melanie:
Both "Plant" and "Little Farewells" are highly successful in terms of techniques of integration, but they produce very different kinds of outputs. And when you see them back-to-back, it really demonstrates that there isn't just a single choice in terms of camera work or editing for place-based filming. This is also why curating for order is so impactful; it encourages viewers to think about the differently emplaced body - in other words, how different situations, places and experiences can be communicated quite clearly to a viewer through the use of different camera and editing techniques.

One thing I would say that's missing in this set of films - in terms of that dialogue with place - is the wide expanse shot, where the body looks miniscule against the vastness of a place. This is not a technique that is used as often in dance films, but one that can be really powerful. There is one moment in "Plant" when the men walk away from the camera and you see the whole site - that moment really stands out because you start to realize the tiny scale of the human body in that massive military site. But I sort of missed more moments like that.

Siobhan:
Let's have a little think about editing, how editing can help the phenomenological dialogue between dancer and place survive.

Melanie:
I think, in some ways, this is where it gets the trickiest. I would even say that this is the moment the dialogue tends to fail because people get so enamoured of what you can do in the editing booth that they start to lose sight of those important dialogic moments between the body and place. Things can get kind of overly produced or glossy, as Doug Rosenberg has discussed. I think that's really good commentary because I do think that over-producing or making everything look sleek and 'perfect' becomes quite tempting in the editing process - and I would argue we're seeing more and more people give into that temptation. I feel like we're really losing an opportunity when that happens. For example, dance filmmakers have gotten a bit obsessive about what a jump cut in conjunction with very short clips can do right now. Certainly, jump cuts have become the standard transition in screendances - and mostly for good reason because we're trying to make a movement feel continuous or, by jumping to a different movement, we can make the viewer feel quite disjointed. But when we pair them with short clips for a whole film - what is becoming almost the norm for screendance - we can start to undermine a film's potential.

I feel like this is what ended up hampering "Uath Lochans" a bit. I've watched a number of Katrina McPherson's films over the years and I really enjoy her sensitivity with regard to place - for example, she really understands the value of techniques of integration like the extreme close-up and wide expanse shots. But I was trying to put my finger on why her beautiful collaboration with Marc Brew and Simon Fildes felt a bit less powerful. I really appreciated, for instance, how the wheelchair enters so casually quite late in the film, almost as just another happenstance, like "oh, here it is and this is just my reality". It's not made into a big deal. But I do feel that the jump cuts are paired so often with short clips that we don't spend enough time with the body. It's like we're jumping - from Marc on the pier to Marc in the heather to Marc next to the water - without a real sense of what and how Marc's dialogue with each of those spots develops over time. I feel like we got a lot of short, repeated images of him interacting with the materials of the place in a small way, but not how his body was adjusting to and interacting with the structure and dynamics of that beautiful place over a given period. So, perhaps a bit of a lost opportunity for understanding the rich dialogue between Marc and the Scottish Highlands.

There were very different editing styles in the other films, however. I've watched and analyzed "Quarantine" before, for example, and I've often found myself baffled by some of Gabri's choices. For example, in the past, I couldn't figure out why the film starts with extreme close ups of Kyle; I've always wondered, why isn't it the building? Why doesn't it start with the building? I was really challenged by that choice. But after viewing it again, I've found myself really appreciating the reclaiming that was happening through Kyle's body in that place. I'll try to explain.

In some ways, one might expect a film that is set in a place with such direct connections to the horrors of the slave trade might focus on such horrors. So, for instance, when you see Kyle's naked torso in the beginning, it can bring you back to the black body and how for centuries the black body has both been looked at, inspected, and, really, assayed only for its use value by Eurocentric cultures deeply implicated in the slave trade. The billowy white fabric he's wearing reinforces that association - bringing us to a more 'traditional' past perhaps. But, as the film develops, it feels like Kyle starts to push back against these tropes. He starts to offer little smiles or pouts or smirks, along with hip hop or club or abstracted contemporary moves, almost like he is trying to talk back to the place, like "Yeah, I know that's my history, but I'm not going to be defined only by that." The music also starts to shift in time and place, touching on this ridiculous construction of a "new world" and "old world". So, you hear what might be considered more 'traditional' African music back-to-back with rapping or atmospheric guitar or even just the wind on site. So, through the film's brilliant editing that forefronts all these disparate associations, you can sense how Kyle is going across time and place and freeing up the space from any singular association. He's reclaiming the space through his black body as a person living centuries later. This sense of bringing himself to the place, acknowledging but reclaiming it in a different way was a really interesting choice. But that interpretation only came after I sat and watched the film again, right? With new understandings and different perspectives due to my own development process (particularly with regard to coloniality). So, this time around, I found myself really engaged with Gabri's choices - with that sense that Kyle's almost impish expressions were saying, "yes, you have to see the impacts of colonialism, but you also can't define this body only by that experience."

Siobhan:
It's really playing with the expectation that because it's a building with an immeasurably tragic past, the representation of it will stay appropriately tragic. Those sorts of expectations can be a prolongation of oppression, and the film really disrupts that.

Melanie:
Yes, I've talked about this with a number of site choreographers - we tend to think of places as richly layered and choreographing in dialogue with site can bring forth some of those layers. But, as my fellow site artists Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig note, sometimes you need to break out of those layers and find a kind of freedom of space as opposed to place - maybe have the chance to write some quite alternative layers on a site. "Quarantine" really took that route. For example, when Kyle starts mixing diasporic forms and contemporary forms together, not even interacting with the site (like the pillars) that are around him, normally I would wonder at the missed opportunity for engaging with the site. But in this case, it felt like he was carving out a space for himself, making it his own and writing his own history.

Siobhan:
And maybe also intervening in the history of screendance's relationship to buildings because we have all seen so many screendances set in cavernous buildings that have sad histories. I don't quite know why it is but there's a preponderance of screendances made in disused buildings that have deeply fraught histories, such as prisons, orphanages, or mental asylums. It's a significant thread within the genre, and there's often very particular ways of approaching the sadness. And so, like yourself, I was initially baffled and intrigued by the multiplicity of forms of engagement in "Quarantine", and my bafflement was an invitation to look again and try to understand. I know we've already talked quite a bit about "Plant" but I wondered if I could bring it in briefly again here. In addition to loving Olive's risky camera work, the other reason I included this work was that it also offered a different way of thinking about screendances set in derelict buildings, in this case an abandoned munitions factory. As with Kyle, though for very different reasons perhaps, there is a productive playfulness in the way the performers relate to the site. Olive acknowledges that though these men are of war age, they can only imagine what that experience would be.

Melanie:
Yes, the intersection between the real and the imaginary gets really highlighted in "Plant". We see these three men engaged in odd activities - activities that are meaningless to us as viewers but that seem to hold meaning for them. And the randomness of the activities makes them feel kind of insular, as if these activities may have been meaningful at one time and place, but now that we are witnessing from this present perspective, their meaning can no longer be interpreted. Like I mentioned before, it feels like both the activities and the men are kind of remnants of an earlier - or maybe an imagined - place and time. The men and any knowledge of their actions have been displaced, and although we can try to imagine backwards - conjuring potential activities of a munitions factory - we no longer have the means to access or interpret these activities. So there's something quite amusing about the odd behaviours we witness, but also not amusing based on the viewer's inability to interpret the remnants. As we were saying, it's kind of challenging to watch because you're trying to make meaning out of it when maybe that's not the point at all.

I think what we've been uncovering is that if one remains purely in the phenomenological or the sensory as the sole thing that's being communicated, then that might be another missed opportunity. This links to another question you sent me, where you asked what kind of problematic erasures or occlusions might occur when you're only focused on the phenomenological. As we said at the beginning in relation to First Nations peoples and waterways in Canada or similarly in Australia, such erasures can definitely happen and are highly problematic. In other words, while attending to a place phenomenologically feels both right and important much of the time - in part because we've become so disconnected from our environment in contemporary culture - revelling in the materiality of a site can at times be offensive if we are either ignoring the historical significance of a place or dismissing protocols for place-based engagement that have been endemic to the cultures of a given place (or also by damaging animals or ecosystems, naturally!). I think that's really important to remember.

But the other thing that I was thinking about in relation to your question is how there can be a kind of a flattening of experience. There can be an assumption, for example, that everybody's going to have the same experience with a given site or with specific materials. And that's problematic. It makes me think of that Tik-Tok video that came out a couple years ago - the one where those two teenage kids, one Black and one White, are doing a hip-hop dance to a pop song in a parking lot? The cops pull up while they're filming and the reactions of the two dancers in that moment reveals an entirely different world of experience.

It's only like a split second but you realize - particularly by the looks on the teenagers' faces - that the expectations for the end result of that moment is not going to be the same for those two kids. The power of that moment, when we can no longer assume a flat or equivalent experience of the world, is something that I would love to see more of. To show the differences of experience when we engage with materials, when we engage with circumstances, and when we engage with sites. It's hard to do but I think it's actually vital, especially if we are invested in how art can engage with contemporary issues.

Siobhan:
I think these problems can crop up when, as we said at the beginning, one thinks of site as a backdrop, an alternative theatre in which a work can be re-staged. Gently paying sensory attention to materials definitely aids in ameliorating the gap or disassociation between dancer and place, but as we've been hinting, there is a certain non-transferability that remains. It's a thorny issue.

Melanie:
Yes, I would argue that there's something about the thorny that should entice us. In some ways, it is so valuable that - if we do our job well - we can communicate via kinesthetic empathy across the screen divide. The instant sensation you get from Marc's hand dropping into the water - which starts the set of films - as well as the intense splashing of the kids in "Where the Desert Meets the Sea" - which ends the set - are important reminders of how we can interact and integrate in a sensual and joyful way with the elements of this planet.

But it is important to remember the limits of the medium, as only so much can be communicated or generated through this two-dimensional experience of film. In truth, the capture of the body and the rendering of the body on film is still a shadow of what Marc experienced in that moment. Which brings me back to "Where the Desert Meets the Sea". From the vantage point of the highly produced films that are coming out of Europe, for instance, "Where the Desert Meets the Sea" feels a bit like nascent filmmaking. Certainly, there is a communication taking place - I mean, when that third little boy in the film realises that he can just throw himself into splashing in the water, we can sense the intense joy and wonder of that moment. But, what's even more important, is knowing that that moment developed from a much larger community project that brought Elders, children and artists together to focus on that intersection between art and place. Thinking about the long-term history and also the larger [Big hArt] project - I would guess that the filmmaking experience of "Where the Desert Meets the Sea" has had a bigger long-term impact than most of the other films in the set. This is because it developed out of an in-person community project focused on the connection between people and place in the Pilbara, a dialogue that has been undermined due to the impacts of colonialism. And, while "Where the Desert Meets the Sea" may have attempted to capture the love of place for the first nations peoples of the Pilbara, which is an admirable goal, clearly it could only offer a shadow of the depth of that experience.

Certainly, in this moment of climate crisis due to the pressures of colonialism and capitalism, it is important for films to emphasize our connection to our planet and I felt like all the films in this set were evocative in terms of highlighting that connection. But "Where the Desert Meets the Sea" was a reminder that the film is not the full experience and to be in that full experience, you have to go past your screen into the natural world, a natural world that is struggling to support us even as we continue to damage it.

NCEHOUSE DANCEHOUSE DANCEHOUSE

'Little Farewells' (2020), Shantel Liao and Han Ning. Photo by Shantel Liao.