Watching

Slide 1. Title - Watching

Slide 2. Inert – video

Slide 3. This video was screened simultaneously with one other video.

Slide 4. Both videos had only one audience member each.

Slide 5. The videos were rear-projected on screens that were 1.5m away from their respective viewers.

Slide 6. What lies outside of the frame?

In dance-on-screen writing and thinking there has been an invaluable emphasis on overcoming the problems of framing and screening movement. The language is strong: Slide 7. "the rigid, rectangular window" (Nagrin 1988 p.33), Slide 8. "the often-deadening space of the screen" (Rosenberg 2006 p.13). Within this screen we witness the body's Slide 9. "flattening" (Preston 2006 p.79). The screen topples three dimensions into two. This flattening, powered by what Andre Lepecki calls the Slide 10. "reductive operation of the camera as perspectival machine" (2006 p.75), has occupied our thinking, acting as a reason to engage with screendance. Slide 11. (and a reason to avoid it).

At the heart of this language is an overwhelming concern for what the camera sees, and consequently, what is produced on screen. Doug Rosenberg describes the phenomenon of *camera-looking* as an act that Slide 12. "implies a reverence for that which is framed and eschews all that is outside the frame" (Rosenberg 2006 pp.14-15). However, to (over)emphasise what is within frame (or onscreen) is to run the risk of joining conventional cinema in presupposing the viewing experience. Our shared performance heritage – itself a critical aspect of screendance hybridity – necessitates an acknowledgement that screendance content also lies beyond the frame.

Slide 13. There were also two live performers.

Slide 14. Both audience members watched their 'own' performer (but were able to see the other if they chose to).

Slide 15. BLANK.

But before I talk about aspects of the nature of content, I need to back up a bit.

Slide 16. This is a love story.

In 2000, I was teaching choreography to final year dance students at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne. We were dealing with a rather formalist approach to choreographic ideas, and the question of form-content existing on some kind of continuum was raised. That night I was talking about this with my girlfriend at the time (Slide 17. That's the love story part) —a visual & installation artist called Elizabeth Boyce—who suggested a small book by Thomas McEvilley Slide 18.Art & Discontent image. Actually, she didn't recommend the book so much as give me an

old photocopied handout of a section of the book called Slide 19. *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*.

The book's language is plain, and clear, and is an excellent example of arts theory writing that is inclusive, provocative and evocative. Better still, McEvilley appears to hold no fears in tackling many of the 'givens' in arts theory. That is, to discuss in detail the things we might believe are self-evident Slide 20. (or even *obvious*), but so easily forget, ignore or avoid.

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Slide 21. "Every critic should give indication of the sources and limits of his knowledge" (Pound 1968 p.56).

Slide 22. Some confessions:

What I am going to talk about this morning is heavily based on McEvilley's writing.

I am not suggesting that I am an expert on questions of form and content.

Occasionally I read art theory because, as a *Doctor* Slide 23. [Doctor Image], I feel a little obliged.

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Slide 24. Each audience member was located on a viewing platform.

Slide 25.The ambient sound of the live performance (prior to the video performance) was miked and sent to the audience's headphones.

The principle concern for McEvilley in *Art and Discontent* is to forcefully debunk any notion that works of art—of any kind—exist in a formal vacuum. In other words, that the formalist dream of excluding non-audiovisual elements from how work is *experienced* is implausible.

To attempt to deprive work of content probably sounds a little bizarre considering our contemporary awareness for the cultural imprinting of how (and what) we *watch*, but this is what formalists desired.

In 1966, Susan Sontag wrote: Slide 26. "It is the habit of approaching works of art in order to *interpret* them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art" (Sontag 1966 p.11).

But, for McEvilley, such formalist ideals are seriously compromised simply because he wonders how, when viewing works of art, we can ever avoid the "associative habit" (McEvilley 1991 p.45) of the human mind.

The question becomes not whether content is present, but rather what its relationship to form is. Here, McEvilley uses semiological terms to clarify the form/content relationship as being either *motivated* or *unmotivated*.

If the relationship is *motivated*, then content is inherent in the formal properties of the work. If the form-content relationship is *unmotivated* then content is added to the work by the work's audience – including the artist or artists (McEvilley 1991).

Slide 27. Each audience member had a pillow under their head.

Slide 28. Each audience member wore high quality headphones.

Slide 29. It was all very comfortable.

Slide 30. BLANK.

The distinction is more subtle than it first appears. Many things that are 'outside' of a work can easily—and intuitively—be placed within it. Examples might be the reputation of the artist, her record of earlier work, or even the assumption that an artist has *seen* a certain work (McEvilley 1991).

Slide 31. "What *is* content, anyway? And, are *we* involved?" (McEvilley 1991 p.69)

In this presentation I am going to consider some aspects of content in dance on screen that are typically (and easily) forgotten as being *content*. These are derived from a selection of McEvilley's *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (McEvilley 1991 p.70), and are: *content added to a work over time*, *content arising from the genre or medium of an artwork*; and *content arising from context*.

Slide 32. Before the videos were played, each audience member watched their 'own' performer live.

Slide 33.This performer was also the 'subject' of that audience member's video.

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Slide 34. Content added to a work over time

Slide 35. "Whatever occurs to a work as its history unfolds becomes part of the experience of the work, and part of its meaning, for later generations" (McEvilley 1991 p.79).

An example of this is the German-born, Australian-based choreographer and dancer, Tanya Liedtke, who died tragically in Sydney in August this year. The 30 year old, known in the UK for her work (in particular) with DV8, was about to take over the artistic direction of Sydney Dance Company – an extraordinary challenge, and one she clearly was excited about. Content is accrued to her work as its 'destiny' is added to through time. Tanya's work becomes the work of "the emerging choreographer whose life ended tragically at age 30". In effect, and I mean this with sensitivity and a certain amount of sadness, her death has added to the content of the work she has made, and impacts on how it is experienced and viewed as it continues to be presented around the world.

A more banal (and less terrible) example might be a screendance work that is re-edited some years after its first cut. In much the same way as Ridley Scott has treated us to various versions of Blade Runner (Scott 1982), it is not so much that footage Slide 36. (or voiceover) has been added to or removed, but *that* a reedit has occurred that contributes to and becomes part of the meaning of the work through time. Of course, the edits also shift the content of the work. Slide 37. – but that goes without saying.

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Slide 38. Content arising from the genre or medium of the artwork

Implicit in the notion that genre adds content to an artwork is the categorisation of artworks as existing within particular genres Slide 39. (and not others). Such categorisation invariably leads to questions about *popular* versus *elitist* works of art. In screendance this, perhaps, is evident in the rather fraught relationship that contemporary dance practices have with music videos.

I am currently editing a project called *Tuesday* that could, in effect, be described as a music video. Recently I was working on an application for a festival and read the following guidelines:

Slide 40. “Illustrative or interpretive work, (eg music videos), will not be suitable” (Studios 2007).

Is this what I am doing? Illustrating a song? Indeed, is this all that music videos do – illustrate or interpret songs? Don’t some genres of dance performance do precisely this? Is this bad? Are there rules? How do I get a copy of the rulebook?

When asked, “What is taste?” Marcel Duchamp replied Slide 41. Habit.

Spike Jonze’s work is wonderfully unsettling in this respect. His video work in the late 90s with the fictitious Torrance Community Dance Group simultaneously parodied modern dance and dance video clips. And in *How They Got There* (Jonze 1997) Jonze creates what might be described as a familiar screendance scenario, including a delightful little ditty between two dancing strangers, only to have the 3-minute film end in a massive out-of-nowhere car crash sequence.

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Slide 42. In order to watch the videos, both platforms were manually rotated from vertical until they were almost horizontal.

And what about questions of format? To shoot on film unquestionably adds content to a project. But then, so too does shooting on my camera phone.

Another example of genre adding content to artwork might be a screendance director deciding to return to a single fixed camera setup filming live performances in a proscenium–arch theatre. Considering screendance’s origins in documenting live performance, for a choreographer/director to work this way adds political and cultural significance and content to the project, and the screendance field more generally.

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Slide 43. Content arising from the context of the work

I’d like to talk about Katrina’s recent DVD Slide 44. [Image} *Five video dances* (McPherson 2006) to exemplify this idea. Billed as a companion to the book *Making Video Dance* (McPherson 2006), the DVD effectively ‘bundles’ these five works together, encourages them to be viewed together, and compared with one another.

But, perhaps more importantly, by connecting the DVD with the book, the works take on pedagogical content: Tools for the aspiring screendance artist to watch, learn, and even imitate.

The five video dances are no longer the same works when first presented; not only has the physical format of their presentation been altered, but they have taken on alternate contexts; and are now reframed as essential undergraduate screendance viewing.

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Slide 45. The presence of screens above the audience (as they were tilted backwards) was a surprise to them.

Slide 46. Whilst the videos were playing, the two performers remained active in the (peripheral) performance space.

Slide 47. BLANK.

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As a Physical Education undergraduate in the late 1980s, when Bobby McFerrin sang, [Slide 48. Don't Worry, Be Happy] and U2 were still cool, our most feared Professor would occasionally, at the conclusion of a student oral presentation, lean back in his chair, stroke his cleanly shaven chin, and ask that most dreaded of all questions: Slide 49. So what?

To remember, to examine, and to consider how content is developed and accumulated in the construction, presentation and watching of screendance, invites Slide 50. newness.

Slide 51. "By foregrounding an element of content usually taken for granted and invisible, a whole new artistic mode or direction can be discovered" (McEvilley 1991 pp.87-88)

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Slide 52.At the end of the video(s) the platforms were (slowly) tilted back to vertical.

Slide 53.This experience of being tilted (very slowly) had a major impact on the watching. One audience member commented: "At the end I felt I had passed through something, and had a strong sense that something had been done to me."

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If one of the current concerns in screendance research and thinking is to articulate the medium and form clearly, then in this presentation I have been interested in broadening and roughening the edges – in threading *movement* (or uncertainty) into our critical engagement with the form – and in questioning the Slide 54. *in/stability* of the screendance viewing process in the emergence and development of content.

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Actually, there's one other of McEvilley's thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird that is perhaps worth considering:

Slide 55. Content arising from verbal supplements supplied by the artist

McEvilley quotes Edward Said, and although Said is talking about literary texts, I have transposed this word with a more general term: 'art works'.

Slide 56. “[Art works] impose constraints and limits upon their interpretation … because as artworks they *place* themselves … they *are* themselves by acting, in the world. Moreover, their manner of doing this is to place restraints upon what can be done with (and to) them interpretively” (Said, cited in McEvilley 1991 p.48).

To add content, to constrain the interpretive process.

The most blatant example of ‘verbal supplementation’ is the title given to a work by an artist.

Slide 57.The project's title is *Inert* (Ellis, Corbet et al. 2006).

Slide 58.www.skellis.net/Inert

Slide 59. Inert. Developed by Shannon Bott, David Corbet, Cormac Lally, Scott Mitchell and Simon Ellis.

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