

# Dance and Spectacle: A summary of a talk given at the Foundation for Community Dance Conference 2006

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In this short summary I shall be discussing three key points from a much longer talk.

Spectacle is a form of performance with extraordinary power. It appears that the sheer effort of constructing a work on a large scale galvanises people and engages them in a different relationship to the work. Spectacle based works can appear to take on a life of their own.

A spectacle occurring in the everyday changes the nature of that day. The power of large scale effort given over to something which is not the pursuit of everyday goals speaks of broader values. It gives worth to a sense that other images of the everyday have a place in our lives. The fact that in the production of a spectacle large numbers of people and relatively large resources have gone into the endeavour gives testament to the creation of images as a shared goal. In spectacle we can see that which escapes our everyday histories, our hopes and dreams, which slip through our routine of life. The common effort of spectacle based work bears witness to the fact that we are more than passive consumers in a soulless society. We are not a vast inert and lifeless mass. We are in fact a great seething aggregation of life, like a 'coral reef' of individual hopes and dreams. Spectacle is big enough to allow for the glory and colour of that 'reef' to enter the everyday and thus be validated as part of our lives which need not go unremarked and subsumed in the next job to be done. Every fish and plant creates the glory of that reef and so spectacle requires each and every participant as creators of a vivid expression of life.

Spectacle as an art form in this country has generally been the preserve of theatre. There have been many notable exceptions of course for example the work of artists such as Royston Muldoon and Rosemary Lee. I continue to find Rosemary's work inspiring.

That theatre should be so dominant in spectacle based work is curious because dance is particularly adept at dealing with the problems of large scale imagery. Dance is a fluid form which deals with the flow of images adroitly and circumvents many of the problems of trying to convey conventional narrative forms over long periods of time and large distances.

The role of the artist in the creation of such works is a volatile process. Everything is challenged by the need to engage with life in a passionate embrace of images. I believe that to allow the 'reef' to be seen the artist must be a guide. There must be a subtle and delicate interplay between the artist's vision and the glory of the 'reef'. If a vision is imposed too much the reef becomes inert as one person's view and the colour and life are lost. If there is not enough form, the view from the glass bottomed boat that is the 'look here' of direction, the 'reef' becomes chaotic and is subsumed and obscured by the ocean of mundanities which is the everyday in which it occurs.

I am sure there are as many possible answers to this challenge as there are artist who will undertake it. My own solution to the problem has been to conceive of the work as a 'string of pearls'. Each pearl is an image, idea or section which is complete in and of itself. Each pearl joins the next, unique in its individuality, and yet one of many related in its form. The pearls are held together by the string which functions as a concept, idea or course along which the 'reef' is travelled.

The role of the choreographer is first one of explorer and researcher to unearth the string from interaction with the site and the performers of the spectacle. What does the site say to me? What does the site say to them? Through an interrogation of these questions a search is undertaken to discover a way of seeing the 'view' that we can share.

It is important to note that in the creation of such works for the 'glory of the reef' to be real there can be no separation between artists and participants. The demarcation between professional, semi-professional and 'community' participants has to blur. In essence we strive to create a community of the 'reef' that is our performance and on the reef each glows according to their own lustre. Once the 'string' has been discovered the nature of the 'pearls' begins to suggest themselves. In this way the artist choreographer brings their own creativity into a sympathetic relation with the opportunities offered by abundant life. Each pearl offers its own unique opportunities for creation or collaboration. For some of the pearls I may have a very specific view of what should occur and attempt to realise that in a traditional way. At the other extreme, a whole pearl may be completely devolved to other artists or groups. Between these extremes exists a myriad of possible working relationships. Working on spectacle offers the opportunity to devolve the creative process over a very wide group of participants with each contributing from their experience and their vision.

The key to this process is the navigating of the 'reef'. The choreographer becomes more involved in the rhythms of the performance. Controlling the dynamics and charting the course, choosing the order of the pearls and making sure that they are revealed as a string of pearls with the related unity that this implies rather than as a random collection of things. Creativity is shared and celebrated. Responsibility is continually devolved. However, not everything can be included. Each journey over a reef gives you the view of that journey. This is the responsibility of the choreographer who navigates this journey. This navigation is what brings the 'reef' into view and the choreographer is responsible for that view.

Spectacle offers so much opportunity to dance artists to engage in the everyday and at the same time to learn so much about the making of work. On the large scale the pressures are intense and the stakes are raised but so are the rewards. The dance based spectacle can be a wonderful thing.