

**Videodance/screendance, a contemporary discussion –
An interview with Douglas Rosenberg
by Beatriz Cerbino and Leonel Brum**



Douglas Rosenberg, personal archive

Themes such as image politics, authorship, curatorship, festivals, genre, dance, moving body and academic universe are brilliantly addressed by Douglas Rosenberg, one of the most important artists and theorists of screendance today.

Clearly and accurately, in this e-mail interview, Rosenberg presents his perspectives for the field of videodance / screendance, weaving considerations on the current state of the art of videodance, as well as pointing out the possible paths it may take. From his important 1999 Manifesto to the present, Rosenberg tells us about his projects for the screen, the approximation of theory and practice in his artistic and academic work, as well as the prospect of a videodance festival curator. In addition to presenting a broad vision of those who work in the area also in collaborative ways.

He is Professor of Art and Head of the Art Department of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. His most recent book, *The Oxford Handbook of Screening Studies* (2016), was published by Oxford University Press. Rosenberg is also the author of *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* (2012), published by Oxford Press. He is the editor and founder of *The International Journal of Screendance* and his work for screen has been running internationally for more than 25 years.

In addition, he was founding director and curator of the Screendance Festival at the American Dance Festival and his latest work entitled *Circling* is the result of a collaboration with Sally Gross, an artist from the original line-up of The Judson Dance Theater Group. The work has already been shown at several international videodance festivals.

1. In your paper published in the “dança em foco” book (2012)¹, you refer to your 1999 manifesto as written a state of youthful passion and how, now, you have a more mature look at the theoretical and practical production of screendance. From the perspective of an experienced director and researcher, how do you introduce screendance to anyone who is interested in this topic?

Rosenberg: *I say that screendance is the intersection of dance and the screen, or*

¹ BRUM, Leonel e CALDAS, Paulo (org.). *dança em foco: Ensaios Contemporâneos de Videodança*. Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano, 2012.

more simply, it involves any kind of dance on any kind of screen. I admit that even now, in 2016, I find myself using examples of popular culture and film to illuminate those descriptions. I still find that an example such as a scene from a Hollywood musical, (Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers) or the way in which advertising uses the same techniques to sell products or the visual culture of music television all prompt the conversation toward an understanding of moving bodies on screen in a discussion with someone unfamiliar with our field.

2. Still on your above-mentioned paper you say that the ideas of the 1999 manifesto were the basis for your research in the following years. From this historical perspective, what actually changed in your career from 1999 until now?

Rosenberg: *Almost everything changed except the singular idea of screendance itself, which has come into sharper focus over that time. The technologies of the moving image have changed completely; we went from the analog age to the digital age seemingly overnight, making videotape and 20th century screen esthetics (even early 21st) a kind of nostalgic trope. The global recognition of screendance and the generational shift to a younger group of artists has created a wellspring of activity, a sense of internationalism and inclusion and brought new ideas about gender, the politics of the image, access and other contemporary concerns to the field. In my career specifically, my own work has evolved into a kind of theory/practice hybrid. The projects I have made for screen inform my writing and my writing in turn has informed the production of work for the screen. As I have gotten older I am more interested in representations of bodies and tasks that are closer to my own life as well. Acts of intimacy, gestures of forgiveness and tenderness, images of people whose life is visible in the way they perform their own identity; these are some of the things I am drawn to in the present.*

3. As we reflect on the issues and debates around the theme of authorship nowadays, in times of unlimited Internet access and circulation of

contents, how to think about authorship in screendance, the relations between choreographer, dancer and videomaker?

Rosenberg: *Such ideas of authorship and egalitarianism (though you did not use this term) within the production of screendance are more evident than in the past. This does not mean that it is not still a space that is fraught and complicated; it is. However there is space for consensus now, which perhaps is the most important achievement. Collaboration is a possibility and the ethical sharing of ideas and credit is always a possibility as well. This evolution seems to re-state some of the ethos of the 1960's and we see ideas and concerns about social justice, ethical treatment of individuals, dancers, technicians and collaborators and a sense that what we are doing matters in the world. Partly, these observations are a bit utopic on my part, as screendance is not a monolithic practice. Yet, I feel that there is a surge toward "humanness" in the field. It is a space where people feel a sense of possibility.*

4. Recently the "dança em foco" provided a space in its schedule to exhibition and reflection on the work carried out in the university environment. There was a great demand for both national and international universities interested in exchange works from their undergraduate courses. How do you see the increasing production of screendance in the academic world with the opening of disciplines and research projects directed to experimentation and research about screendance?

Rosenberg: *If you could look at a topographical map of the world where concentrations of screendance activity were "pinned", you would see a global spread of such activity. If you could further zoom in to the map, universities and colleges would be hot spots at the center of each. Places of higher education are a refuge for experimentation and even given the financial burdens and shrinking budgets of institutions, they still serve to concentrate or focus like-minded individuals on sometimes very narrow fields of research. Academic environments are a living archive of the histories of knowledge from the sciences to the arts and humanities. They are places where one can find solace in the creative process as an end in itself, without the burden of the marketplace. Screendance extends the discourses of video art, experimental film, dance, performance and other contemporary methods of cultural production. The research and open space that universities provide for screendance,*

filters out into the communities in which institutions are situated and multiplies exponentially. The result is an increase in awareness of the form; we see festivals and screening opportunities increase as well as an increase in the production of screen-based work in the communities around such institutions. We also see a kind of diasporic spreading of the local to the global as artists travel from their home-base to other global hot-spots of screendance. This kind of nomadic flocking keeps screendance moving forward, growing and mutating into an ever-changing form that reflects both the point of origin and the relationships between contemporary practitioners of the global present.

5.The International Journal of Screendance (2010), Screendance: the ephemeral image (2012) and The Oxford Handbook of screendance studies (2016) are important books and references to the area. Please, talk about these academic publishing experiences and how they dialogue with your artistic production.

Rosenberg: *My writing and publishing are directly related to the question above. I was not trained as a scholar, but when I came to the University of Wisconsin-Madison I was drawn to the way that scholars navigated the academic world. Knowledge production and research were a part of a scaffolded practice; often starting with teaching, then folding the theses worked out in the classroom into conference papers and subsequently shared via publishing, conference proceedings, as chapters in books etc. I have long maintained that, for me, there is no boundary between scholarship and "artistic production". They are equal part of a holistic approach to my work that includes facilitating discourse through hosting conferences and festivals, curating, theorizing and other kinds of interdisciplinary crowd-sourcing or crowd-gathering around ways of thinking and doing. I have been very lucky to have the support of many individuals and institutions who have allowed me the conduits by which to move such ideas out into a public forum.*

6.Do you think that there are formal elements to create in screendance? And if so, do you think they should be established?

Rosenberg: *I have suggested that what must be present is, as a minimum, any kind of screen and any kind of dance. However, as in any art form, there is the*

more ephemeral element of framing that, in a post-modern world is essential. It seems unlikely that a work of art, in this case screendance, can be expected to "speak for itself". Part of the form of any practice is its readability in relation to all that is either a part of the history of that practice or not a part of its history. Form is a relative construction. Intentionality can be thought of as a part of form as can style and surface qualities, etc. Such considerations enhance readability and a greater understanding of the practice in general. This interview is a formal element in my own understanding of screendance...it extends my own vision and understanding of the form and perhaps someone who reads this will find that it extends their own. We could simply say that, yes, there must be a concrete set of parameters for screendance based solely on "form" but that would be regressive. What I would propose is a more expansive idea of screendance that includes the kind of activist curating and knowledge gathering that these interview questions provoke. Curating illuminates greater meaning that is sometimes latent in individual works. However, it is the responsibility of the artist to attempt to create meaning in whatever way they can within the work. Form has historically been linked to meaning in some way, yet one often find screendance to be seemingly void of meaning. Of course, I am also being a bit provocative here.

7.How do you understand the body - camera - space relation in screen-dances currently produced?

Rosenberg: *If one has looked at a lot of screendance over the years, as a viewer or as a juror, etc. It is not difficult to identify trends or tropes in screendance production. One of the things I recall writing about in the 1999 manifesto you asked about earlier, is the sort of repetition of ideas or tropes already attaching to screendance in those earlier days. Mimesis is part of the nascent stages of any art form; we copy and repeat to understand the way other artists think and the process by which they get to new knowledge. Mimesis is often followed by a break with tradition, the stage in which artists and movements mature and gain traction, separating themselves from their foundational tethers. When I think about bodies in space and particularly in camera space I note that all bodies have particularity. Such particularity has to do with a myriad of things; age, ability, gender, race, etc. Yet, camera space is relatively fixed and space is somewhat limited to*

the landscape and/or the built environment. Yet bodies are never so static; each possessing extraordinary malleability and identity, each an unlimited topography and communication system at the same time. Camera space and locative space telegraph meaning and further, impose a narrative layer that can suppress the possibility of bodies to tell their own story. That is a long way of saying that what I still long for are those breakaway moments when something the artist steps over a line; when the relationship you describe above is actually challenged and shattered in the process of a progressive vision of screendance. What that is, of course is up to the artist and to the collaborators. However, I tell my students art is about changing the world one project at a time. Finally, I also understand that certain tropes are pre-determined by the festival mechanism. Such things as duration, style, dance itself as well as technical proficiencies often manifest such tropes or at the least conspire to maintain them.

8.Regarding the number of screendance festivals, what do you think about its growth during the last decade? In your view what is necessary for a screendance to be selected or awarded?

Rosenberg: *This is a good segue from the end of my last response. Having insinuated above that festivals may have side effects that impede the growth of the form in some way, the expansion of festival venues and opportunities can only be seen as a positive step for the field. The possibility of such a critical mass of both practice and exhibition opportunities was only a dream a decade ago. It is through the activism and generosity of people in our field that such opportunities exist. I mentioned above the generative qualities of mimesis, the idea that through mimesis we understand how something is made and bring that knowledge toward us. The festival world is similar; we see that festivals provide access to new work and opportunities for our communities and want to create that in our local spaces. There comes a time then, when the festival must break away and state its own identity, separate from the others. What does it want? What do its viewers want and further, what do its curators want to say/do with the opportunity that they have in this moment for screendance? That is the task, to sharpen the focus of each festival and define difference via curatorial practice. The question of selection and further, of awards is fraught. At the outset, I would say that both*

are highly subjective. To say that there is any sort of pre-existing criteria for either would be damaging to the field. What I do know from my involvement both as a maker and as a juror/curator, etc. is that something happens in the viewing of certain works that galvanizes a group of people. For me, it seems that when I have an affinity with the performer in some way, when I feel a sense of empathy and affection for the "mise en scene", for the politics of the work and for what it is willing to sacrifice for the viewer, the risk it is willing to take and by extension, of course, the willingness of the filmmaker to step away from the comfort zone of screendance tropes; then I am drawn to the work in a way that makes me willing to take a risk for it. I need to believe in a work in order to take that risk.

9. In the creative process, what are the similarities and the differences among screendance, dance film and other creations in the interrelationship dance & theater and dance & audiovisual?

Rosenberg: *I have been thinking a lot about entertainment lately and the differences or similarities to what we call "art". Screendance serves wholly different desires from its constituencies. On the one hand there is the desire for some sort of entertainment value, that it holds the viewers attention against a myriad of other diversions in the contemporary world. On the other hand, another constituency desires that screendance (and its offshoots) achieve the condition of "art". There is a historical tension between entertainment and art. It is the elephant in the room with both dance and film (and theater as well). By extension, it is the question that needs to be addressed with screendance as well. Dance is a seductive subject for the camera; there is extraordinary beauty in a body shaped by dance practice and the camera exacerbates such beauty. In the creative process and further, in these moments of overlap where dance and the technologies of representation swerve across boundaries, there is often uncertainty. How does a work of "art", perhaps with a mission to provoke and take formal and material risks, vie for attention with work that seeks to entertain without asking for a similar amount of sacrifice on the part of the viewer? How do such works, with their differing expectations of the viewer, conform to any one metric of "success"? This is perhaps my own anxiety but it is a question that I would like to pose here and I would like to leave it as a rhetorical question. Perhaps the reader can help me to think further*

about this. We live among screens and projections. As I write this, I am in New York and if you have been to Times Square, you will understand the reference. However, the scale and omnipresent images of bodies in motion (both real and digital) along with the overwhelming soundscape of the city, make me think again of how valuable the intimacy of screendance is, if only as an act of resistance.