

A balancing act

Rosemary Lee was invited to Derry in 2012 by Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company to discuss their commissioning of her to create a large-scale participatory dance project to be performed during Derry/Londonderry's year as European City of Culture (2013). Her keynote lecture and film presentation described the creative process, and considered issues of ownership, the role of the artist/outsider, access, and social outcomes among participants and visitors to the installation. Here she discusses her work interviewed by fellow keynote speaker Professor Victor Merriman



How did you come up with the idea of a film work and what was the response of Echo Echo Dance Theatre company to the idea?

When I first arrived and walked the city wall I was struck by Derry's extraordinary urban topography. It includes neighbouring areas and housing estates whose inhabitants perhaps rarely mingle, as if traumatic histories have inscribed unseen boundaries, and very real walls, dividing them into mutually exclusive urban areas. Looking out over this vista, I felt very strongly that Without should be a cinematic response rather than a live participatory project, as originally envisaged. I'd never made a participatory film project, and Without engaged around four hundred people, including big groups of schoolchildren, and volunteers working behind the scenes, as well as those we see moving in front of camera. It was never a live performance, but, during filming, many people saw the live action we captured. Without took about eighteen months to make and has been

installed in Echo Echo's studio on Derry's city wall several times, in August 2019 it will be exhibited again.

It has also been shown in Dublin and Cardiff. Echo Echo has won many community projects, and prides itself on being a local dance theatre company, embedded in the heart of the city and they invited me to help them create something bigger. When I came up with the film idea, they embraced a process very different to making live performance, and formed unexpected partnerships and relationships. Fascinatingly as dancers they began to move without restriction through their city, to get to know it geographically in a way that perhaps challenged how they knew it as local people, and hopefully opened possibilities for future work.

Can you describe the work?

Without consists of an almost circular seven-screen video installation (running time, on loop: 22 minutes approx.), in a gallery space. Spectators stand at a central point, from which they can view complementary films of Derry sites, shot from a point on its city wall. At the beginning of the loop you see seven views of the city in long wide shots. The cityscape and the people – groups of fifty skateboarders, bicyclists, tri-cyclists, or tandem riders – are like distant dots, gliding in lines and groups through urban streets, playgrounds, carparks, along the city wall.

As the camera zooms in, people appear in more detail, dancing. The camera moves closer and closer to moving bodies, and very slow zooms produce close-ups of circles of people dancing in spaces with complex histories, and cultures. Finally, the faces of the people of Derry fill the screen, as they walk slowly towards the lens. Over twenty minutes or so, we move from very distant long shots of the cityscape to close-ups of individual people.

Could you tell us more about your relationship with your future audiences?

As an artist I'm really interested in reaching an audience that doesn't always see art or wouldn't choose to go to a gallery or a theatre. If work is free to view and shown in non-threatening situations – outdoors or, in this case, in a dance studio where lots of community classes happened – I can reach a different audience and entice them back for more. You can pop in when you're doing your shopping and you can come back another day with someone else, at no cost. Derry does have an unemployment problem and associated poverty, and it's important to encourage people excluded from artworks. My commitment to showing work free, in unexpected places, with unpredictable content, is just my way of trying to welcome people in.



You worked with the city and its inhabitants as the context and focus of the work, can you tell us more about that process?

Comments by participants who saw the finished films suggest that they were intrigued to see their city through outside eyes, and also from the perspective of a camera on the wall. Derry's walls are a tourist attraction and traditionally, historically, they define a fortified Protestant city. People who grew up in Bogside don't walk on the walls, and so the view of Bogside – including their own homes – from those walls really engaged their curiosity. The green place just at the base of the wall, where we filmed people dancing, speaks to Derry's social history as a city of working-class slum housing, now demolished. Catholic Nationalist people in those houses weren't allowed to vote, and you know the roots of the Civil Rights Movement were put down there. But Bogside is also designed for surveillance, and when I looked at it, it was so stark that I thought, 'They can't hide'. So, I was absolutely trying to function as a surveillance camera that zoomed in to find something peaceful rather than to find trouble. It was almost like pursuing secret harmony; zooming in to find secret acts of circle dancing.

I think I managed to portray a city as a dancing space – a moving space. I use 'dancing' carefully because *Without* is really about movement of people and figures through a city and I'd never been able to do that before in film. I think people were really intrigued to see a daytime

city transformed from everyday grittiness barely registered as they pass by. I tried to slowly create and reveal a magical, metaphorical landscape, without changing anything but the speed of images and events; dissolving figures in and out of grass or tarmac, or by slowly zooming in. Slowing dancers' motion transmutes the city into something dreamlike, without losing the texture of its actual life, and that really moved and transported audiences. I wasn't sure I'd manage that, and it's due partly to the techniques of filming and editing, and especially Graham Miller's haunting score, which enables a transformational journey from everyday sound to an almost mythic soundscape.

Without seemed to produce a sense of seeing their city through fresh eyes for some of the general public who came to see it. One lovely piece of feedback from a man in his sixties made me feel that we had done the right thing. He said, 'Thank you. You've helped me see my city through new eyes and see it at peace.' Think of all the memories he carried, as someone of my generation who'd lived through the Troubles. During the research and creative processes, I learned a lot about the invisible city of tacit boundaries and no-go areas that defined divided communities. One Echo Echo dancer said she'd lived in the city all her life, and had never set foot on one of the roads up which I asked her to dance, with local children. The dancing truly enabled people to move through city spaces normally closed to them because of patterns, habits, memories, and associations. To

Without in rehearsal, by Rosemary Lee created with Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company 2013. Photo: Living Witness Photography

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have dancers move through the city as if there was nothing to stop them emerged as an important project aim. Gliding figures on wheels flowed freely through the city, unhindered by embedded, invisible, but very real and understandable barriers.

What was Without's relationship with the City of Culture Festival? Could you say more about how you see the work in that context and your doubts at taking the commission at the onset?

I felt I was both working and not working for the City of Culture. I was working to contribute to a festival programme, but the work had to be for the city itself, and its people, beyond the festival. It was only after I'd finished that I realised Without also documents a moment in time, especially for child participants, some of whom are almost adults now. When they get a chance to look back on it, they will encounter their city – and their own lives – at that moment in time and it may become a multi-layered legacy, almost a historic document as well as a work of art. The word 'legacy', is bandied about, so maybe I should say it's an artefact that is also an archive, and I'm very pleased about that.

I'm pleased, not least because I arrived in Derry with very significant doubts about my own place there, as a person, and an artist. I am of a generation that grew up seeing on BBC news virtually every night the effect of the Troubles on cities like Derry and Belfast. I was absolutely puzzled and baffled, as a young person, by what on earth the British army was doing there, and why soldiers were pointing guns at young people who were my age. I had felt confusion, bewilderment, and shame really, at the role of the British army in those Troubles and when I was asked to come to Derry I asked myself,

A. Who am I to do this work? I don't know that history well enough; it's very complex.

B. Shouldn't it be somebody local?

C. Wouldn't local people resist an English artist, whose voice – especially on a tannoy shouting

instructions from the wall – would inevitably recall dreadful times?

And then, to top it all, Thatcher died as I was filming. I was very aware of how raw memories were – of the hunger strikers, for instance – and, with her death, they'd bubbled up to the surface very fast. I feel very strongly that when you do participatory work – when you move from place to place as an artist – parachuting in is a danger, even if you're aware of it. I tried to arrange as many meetings as possible, especially at the beginning, with artists – not just Echo Echo, but other local artists – to see their reaction to the commission. I met all the people who might dance in the project, gauging their feelings. I made it part of my practice to walk the city, taking in feelings and talking to everybody I met. I watched Paul Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday*(1) – an extraordinary film. Artistic Director of Echo Echo, Steve Batts, really knows his politics and history, so I quizzed him on the history, the city, and the problematic role of an English/ British artist.

After making work in a variety of contexts and media how would you describe yourself, and can you say more about your approach to community settings as an artist?

I tend to call myself a choreographer and a filmmaker. I'm quite wary of terms and labels applied by others, because they can be limiting and even distort perceptions of what one actually does. While it's not quite accurate to call me a community dance artist or choreographer, I do work with communities and I create ... performing communities for a brief creative endeavour, initiating and sustaining a time of creative endeavour – together. I create a community around a project, but I don't make work that is devised with the community. In negotiating with a community, I will not compromise the importance of the work of interrogating things. If you have a vision, as in

Below: Without by Rosemary Lee created with Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company 2013. Photo: Living Witness Photography. Above: The installation, in Dublin. Photo: Joseph Carr



the cinematic vision of *Without* which develops from wide shots, wheeled vehicles, and concludes with faces in close-up, what is required to realize it emerges from following the logic of that vision. In this case, *Without* negotiated an aesthetic dangerously close to the historical surveillance of the city from the very walls we're talking about, which yielded the insights we've mentioned. I learned a lot from working on *Without*, gathering as much contextual information as I could, and then looking at the city, before deciding what my response would be in discussion with Echo Echo. I looked at the community in that sense, and I make no bones that *Without* is explicitly authored by my view of what I wanted to do. The final product is an act of cooperation and collaboration and dedicated community action. That, for me, is the gift of the outsider, who not alone has to take responsibility for the work, but claims certain privileges as she struggles to realise the vision.

There's a right to assert yourself as an artist, and an equal responsibility to respond ethically and sensitively to the people and the place, history included. For instance, I was at great pains to constantly say 'Is it OK if I get the children to dance in that little grassy bit out there near those houses?', or 'Is it OK if we tiptoe round

this pub here?'; we tiptoed a lot. Tiptoeing was a movement motif and I suspect occurred because I subconsciously knew we were moving over murder sites, and places where Civil Rights marchers had waved the white handkerchief on Bloody Sunday (1972). I wouldn't always know the traumatic significance of a location, and I'd have fifty children moving through it. At times I was fighting back tears when someone would just quietly tell me after I'd done it. I was reminded of what WB Yeats wrote, 'Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams'. That quote haunted me because I felt a responsibility to respect the place, its people, and what happened to them there, really keenly. I asked myself constantly if I should be doing this, if it was fair to the people, if I might be exploiting them. *Without* is a vision of the city that I hope is a good gift for that community - if that makes sense. The intention that emerged from the process of doing the work in Derry, with its people, was of finding the light there and bringing it out.

Info

www.artsadmin.co.uk/artists/rosemary-lee

References

(1) 2002; www.imdb.com/title/tt0280491



Below:
'Passage
for Par' by
Rosemary Lee,
commissioned
by CAST for
Groundwork,
Par Sands
Beach,
Cornwall 2018.
Photo:
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