

The Importance Of Knowing *how*

Six years ago, Middlesex University embarked on a project, based at the specially created entity Rescen, to research into the process of making performance. The project has been completed and a book is out.* Bithika Chatterjee talks to Prof Chris Bannerman who set the project and entity in motion about why we need to know how artists make performance.

Tucked away in the idyllic green and leafy Trent Park campus of Middlesex University in North London, ResCen, the centre for research into creation in the performing arts, has the good fortune to be remote from the buzzing life of London and yet maintain close links to the pulsating world of contemporary art in the capital. Formed in 1999 by Chris Bannerman, Professor of Dance at Middlesex University, the centre has been pursuing, thanks to the generous funding of Middlesex University and NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts), research into the “fuzzy” and “grey” area of art-making: the creative process.

The research is not about poets sniffing at rotten apples for inspiration, at least not entirely, but involves the unique approach of performing artists discovering and contemplating their own creative process. The approach is indeed unique, because although the creative process has been studied before (check out the packed shelves in the Middlesex university for books on the subject), it has mainly been done by academics. To encourage a fresh approach on the subject and to make the artist’s voice heard, ResCen chose a group of six practising performing artists to engage in challenging dialogues and debates amongst themselves, and with the public and artists outside the group, to discover more about their own processes and to attempt, if not its definition, at least, in part, its description.

The group came together at regular intervals and the artists were paid on a contractual basis for one and a half days per week. Chris Bannerman remains grateful to the university for not requiring the artists to teach, and thereby enabling ResCen to study them in their role as art-makers and observe their creative process with as little interference as possible. Their time was used in intensive blocks where they participated in internal seminars, had discussions with a guest or engaged with the public. Much time was also spent on observations and discussions, and, contrary to what you might expect, very little collaborative work was done.

“What we have is a group of individuals. They didn’t come together, as it has happened in the past, to form a kind of school centred on a particular kind of aesthetic or a particular concern”,

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says Bannerman in an interview with PULSEdance. He sees one of the achievements of the ResCen project in the fact that over the years the artists have learnt to sit down and talk about art-making in a group. “There is always someone who will profoundly disagree with somebody else, but we can now carry on talking, carry on working together and take that disagreement to be something positive to work with and develop from, as opposed to: ‘That’s it, I’m leaving!’. Often those sort of debates in choreographic forums or groups of artists would not be able to be developed – and would be dividing people in a way that they could not be bridged. And so that’s one of the exciting achievements of our work.”

Process is about change

Six years on, a stretch of time that, as Chris Bannerman points out was not part of the original plan and involved some more stretching of the available funds, ResCen has produced a book entitled *Navigating the Unknown*, a colourful volume that resembles an artist’s log book with articles by the participating artists, their notes and thoughts as well as transcripts of their discussions. The title and design of the book aim to reflect the openness of the concept and to allow for the fact that “things are contradictory and paradoxical”. Leafing through its 268 pages,

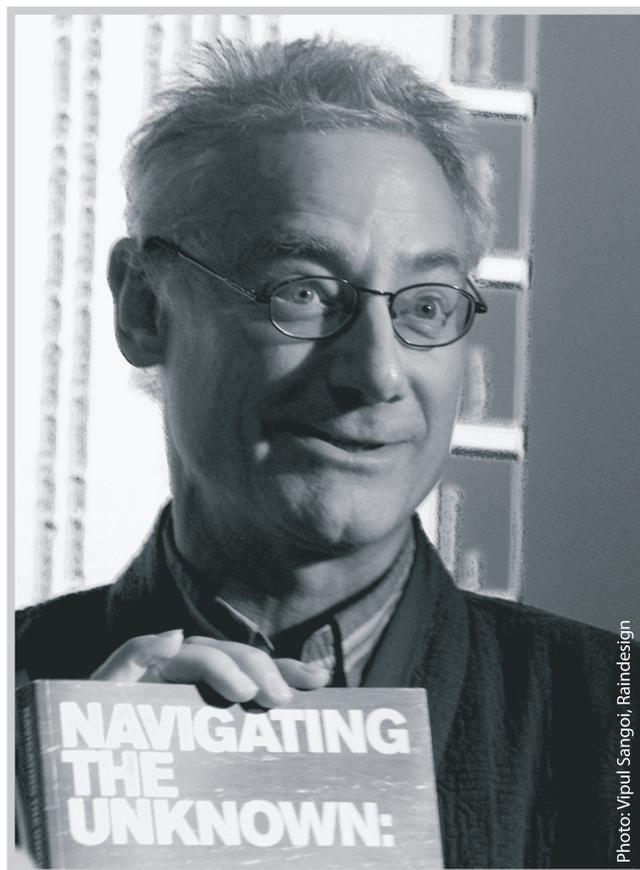


Photo: Vipul Sangoi, Raindesign

it becomes quickly evident that creative process is complex, individualistic and idiosyncratic. In the book the artists make several attempts at self-definitions that sometimes contradict and oppose their previous ideas and views of themselves.

“Process is about something that involves change”, says Bannerman as I nevertheless press for a more succinct defence. “It is not a solid state. Philosophically speaking it is about something that is evolving or changing. If you looked at it in isolation, it might become quite problematic and definition might be necessary in order to have an exploration that is meaningful. Artists present work and therefore, arguably, there is a product. This involves an ongoing stream of developments, of change, that leads to an event.”

*Navigating the unknown (PULSEbeat, Books, page 6)

Emptiness and the moment of transformation

Part of the reason why it is so difficult to define process, is because it involves the equally nebulous idea of intuition. Choreographers might agree that intuition or inspiration do not necessarily come to you on walking into a studio. In the ResCen book Rosemary Lee describes the empty page or studio like a “manifestation of your state of mind: a threat, or an ally, a forest of possibilities or



Rosemary with Henri in a rescen session...

Photo: Vipul Sangoi, Raindesign

a barren wasteland”. Intuition often happens at a level that is not fully conscious: somebody might be working on a dance while having a nap, or might be getting their best ideas while driving down the street. It seems that intuition is part of the starting point and the first decision that sets off the creative process which Lee calls the artist’s choice to “dive into that emptiness”, forge a path, “get busy”, or wait – for “the moment of transformation to occur”. Shobana Jeyasingh also mentions her “difficulty in knowing, at the beginning, what the new piece is about.” She likens the process of finding the “central thing” to trying to hold a slippery eel in her hands, “when I’m not sure that it even is an eel”. She will work with her dancers, try out different things, making “tiny, tiny choices”, not knowing what all those choices are actually leading up to. “And I won’t know until I recognise something”, which, as she writes, often happens when she takes all her choices into the choreographic theatre space.

Expert Intuition and experience

The first decision that sets off the creative process is frequently not done in an arbitrary manner and is closely linked to what Bannerman calls “expert intuition”. The composer and ResCen artist Errollyn Wallen, for example, was commissioned to write a piece of music about Nelson, who she felt represented a time and achievement that was distant to her, to her roots and her beliefs. She felt she had to do some initial research on Nelson in order to be able to write this work and found out that her great-grandfather was called Horatio, and was named after Nelson. By discovering things about her past and her family, the process became much more open than simply the task of sitting down and writing clinical notes on a page. “Maybe some people can,” adds Bannerman, “we’re not making judgements about every artist, but in talking to her, it seemed she needed to go through some process of engagement and somehow these connections to her life sort of spilled out. So you could say the starting point was she accepted the commission and then maybe she sat down and wrote notes on a page, but actually a lot more was going on. And to only represent her sitting down and writing down notes, in my view, would be a misrepresentation.”

Experience in “inducing” creativity seems to play an important

role as well. Working so closely with a group of artists over that many years, Bannerman has seen them change and evolve. “Here is one thing I suspect is correct: there might be a conflict between the conscious and the unconscious processes. It could be that for an inexperienced or younger artist the consciousness of the process is disturbing and that the two things can’t be contained within one personality very easily. It could also be that the conscious becomes

a block on the unconscious, or that the unconscious takes over and the conscious seems irrelevant. Over the years, with growing experience and through self-observation, this group of artists has become more comfortable with things becoming conscious, and more comfortable with allowing the unconscious its place. Because of their experience they felt a kind of confidence in what they were doing and didn’t have to say: ‘Oh my god, am I a choreographer?’. If they did say it, they meant it in a more philosophical way than the angst of having to prove themselves. What’s happened is, I think, that they’ve seen themselves making work and slowly realised what they are actually doing.”

The art of fluffing and on how to pass it on

Like many things, some parts of process can indeed be taught. Artists accumulate strategies and tricks – Graham Miller, for example, calls it “fluffing”. If this is taught at all, the usual method is the kind of “guru” method where the teacher shows the student how he or she does it. “But I am not sure that is suitable for our culture and our society,” says Bannerman. “So you might say ‘this is how I do it, you can learn how I do it and yes, there are a hundred other ways of doing it’. Some things might not work for you and you take what you find appropriate. And then everything else is time and place. Ten years later you might think – hmm... fluffing!?”

The tricky part is, of course, when it comes to relaying your thoughts to your collaborators. Shobana Jeyasingh, for example, works with the same group of dancers for many months, sometimes even years. In the book, she writes that she gets much further if the dancer senses what it is she is trying to do. In her case,

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this usually happens with a dancer experienced in both classical bharatanatyam and western contemporary dance like Mavin Khoo. This changes when working with dancers who might not be really interested in her work and only interested in being a dancer. “In the past I may have almost had to seduce them into my way of seeing, or try to find a way of keeping my vision as choreographer separate, making sure that their vision for themselves is also being realised while doing what I want them to do. So that does fracture my own vision in the making process,” she writes.

“I think artists have to learn to adapt their creative process to the requirements of an individual project,” Bannerman points out. “Because they are dependent for their livelihoods on their creative work, and because it will only be realised through other people, they are absolutely dependent on their ability to communicate with those people. It takes artists out of their mundane routine and to see a kind of significance in things they might have not seen before. Ideas are often passed back and forth and many artists

often need the engagement and the process of negotiation." The very fact that they have to withstand the pressure and demands of the art market and react to the things and the people in front of them makes them artists. "Maybe it's true that we all have one novel, a concert piece or a dance inside of us, and maybe we have two," muses Bannerman, "but to actually be a creative artist for decades - there must be something about you - and what is it?"

'Traditional' artist not included

This question - 'what is it?' - required a group of performing artists with a proven track record to come into the project. Email shots were sent out and ads placed in the Guardian, inviting artists to apply. The selection process was quite mechanical; being part of a university, ResCen had to go through its 'recruitment process'. Many applied and Bannerman would have gladly taken on at least 25 artists, but the funding restricted him to select only six. No traditional artists were included in the selected array. Bannerman's explanation for this choice is convincing: "Our selection process was dependent on certain research questions, and the central was the one on creation in the performing arts. It seems to me that traditional work has rules and vocabulary that are more present, and they are not open, or, the person practising doesn't feel they are open to reinterpretation or re-manipulation. It is a different kind of creativity that we wanted to examine. From my experience, someone creating work within the traditional framework, deals with vocabulary and content in a much more structured way."

This may change in the future, once a new set of research questions has been set and a new round of funding is applied for. In south asian dance, for instance, Bannerman has observed an increased interaction between tradition and innovation. "We are currently seeing a very creative period in south asian dance. There is a wider range of interpretation in traditional work now and the way how society is judging traditional work has shifted. It seems to me that ten-fifteen years ago, there were very clear distinctions between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' work and I think that these divisions are not that clear today. You can see Akram Khan presenting concerts of traditional work and also have a contemporary practice, and people like Mavin Khoo presenting traditional and contemporary work in one programme - this has changed our perception. We are now perhaps in the process of reinterpreting some of those cultural and traditional rules and looking much more at the actual dance knowledge, at what is the text of a traditional work. Now it is not so much the context but actually the movement knowledge, and clearly that knowledge can be manipulated in lots and lots of different ways."

What next?

The funding from NESTA has come to an end and a book on the research results has been released, and ResCen is already preparing a new set of research questions and is looking for international links. "We are looking for EU funding and perhaps links with Asia, because certain research councils in the UK have suddenly realised that there are some important things going on in Asia and they have been told to start being more focused in developing our understanding of those areas."

The question of funding reminds me once again of my initial wariness when I first heard about the ResCen project some years ago. The nature of research is, of course, not tied to visible outcomes and achievements, but nevertheless I always felt that the project, despite its intriguing approach and area of study, had an 'academic's pet project dream-come-true' air about it. Even though the amount of funding money spent on the project seems modest in comparison to the budgets of other research projects, I wonder aloud who stands to gain from this research - apart from a handful of academics?

"I suppose the general, broader, more philosophical point [of this research] is about the nature of knowledge and [recognising]

that perhaps traditionally we haven't valued very much 'knowing how'. So we think we're also contributing to [the] debate on the importance of knowing how... and not just knowing things, but knowing how to use them, apply them. It's not knowing how in a mechanistic way, but it's knowing how in a skilful way. You have a number of strategies, you have used them before, but you can see that this particular strategy needs to be nudged that way or that way or another strategy needs to come in, and this one needs to be dropped, [or] two strategies need to work at the same time, or one after another. So this is about a very skilful engagement, a very skilful way of knowing how. And I think people in a number of fields may find that interesting. It kind of counteracts the notion that (or it seems to me that) in very few areas we value 'knowing how', even for physical skill. Obviously footballers get paid a lot of money, but we don't value them in the same way that we value knowledge. You would never allow a surgeon to operate on you if all he has to fall back on is the twenty books of theory he has written about the surgery. A surgeon, on the other hand, who is skilled and knowledgeable because he has performed the surgery a hundred times makes you feel much more confident and you'll be valuing that kind of knowledge. So this is an argument about the nature of knowledge. And that's why people might be interested in knowing more about process, in knowing how." ■



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