

## **Optik in Montreal**

*Xstasis project May 2003*

### **Participants' responses**

xstasis was conceived as both a training and a production project, and was commissioned by Canada based director Kate Bligh. In addition to the core artists from optik (director Barry Edwards, performers Clare Allsop and Simon Humm, sound artist Ben Jarlett, video artist Howie Bailey) there were sixteen participants on the project drawn from Montreal based professional and student dancers, actors and musicians.

Work on xstasis took place over an intensive two week development period hosted by Concordia University Music and Theatre Departments. The project culminated in three site specific performances given during Montreal's Festival of Theatre of the Americas.

My work as director draws on Asian dance theatre practices of breath, energy and impulse, the key traditions of Artaud, Grotowski, Schlemmer, Laban, and the more recent European and US schools of actionists, happening and improvisation artists.

xstasis integrates improvised live action with live video and live electro-acoustic sound. In spite of this sophisticated software and electronic equipment, however, the core of the xstasis training was the development of the individual self as a creative process. The performances were then constructed around each artist's engagement and openness to encounters with the body, emotion, with one's own self and with others.

### ***Post performance / workshop statements from the musicians***

1. The players construct the space. Its size, depth, and the patterns that emerge within it grow denser as movement, and in some instances, moments of non-movement accumulate in the space, filling its boundaries as time elapses. The space in is constant evolution, with boundaries shifting as the players' branch out and explore the space's dimensions. The space is subject to the performers'

interpretation, which is influenced by the other performers' movements and proximity, the sonic environment reverberating throughout the space, the visuals that in a way recreate moments that occurred within the space and the audience members who occupy a place within the space. There are moments when the activity reaches a point of saturation; as a result the space is filled to capacity with all elements working at maximal intensity. In instances where saturation occurs, the only options are to either sustain the saturation phase, or revert to its opposite pole through the elimination of some elements.

Each participant, regardless of the medium that they used to interact with the space and each other, introduced an element into the performance, which could either elicit a response or non-response from another. All participants must be aware of as much as they can possibly take in and be prepared to respond to what they are seeing/hearing/sensing. Decisions are made in an affirmative way as there is no going back, no hesitation to be expressed when transitioning from one state of movement to the other, one sound to the next, or one image to another. Perhaps my grasp of the principals remains at a basic level, as it seems that the fundamental principals are very simplistic, almost Zen in the decisions one makes, in the line that one chooses to follow I was able to slow down my actions, to stretch out the moment, to go to the end of an impulse, and keep it going until reaching the point of exhaustion. Being aware of everyone else's actions, how

they relate to each other, how my decisions may influence others, and how it is perfectly fine if my contribution has no influence whatsoever. The practice of putting yourself in the state of heightened perception is exhausting, watching others physically exhaust themselves is felt by one who watches. The heavy breathing of the performers filling a room is tremendously powerful, and practically contagious, and when a breath deprived performer gets up, and starts running again, it's almost dizzying. The sensations felt by the performers is almost

indescribable, it is all about being in tune with those who surround you, falling into their rhythm or prying yourself away from another's action, fighting the impulse to move because that is what you have decided to do. The heightened state of perception seems to call for the players to be in tune with ones own impulses while being open and receptive to the energy fields of those in proximity to you, as they are easier to anticipate or predict.

The sound that emerged from the coils and coils of tangled wires plugged from midi to jack to XLR to four Fostex speakers were electroacoustic in the free form of the composition style that emerged from the sound engineers. In many ways, it's guess work, removed from the action, it's all interpretation and anticipation. The performers serve as a stimulus, the "point de repaire", as all lies within them.

My initial experience with the movement work was really quite exhilarating, I felt what I could not see; the connection to another individual's movement as I was pulled into their field of energy and practically dragged along in the wake of their decision to move. Enter the realm of sound. When manipulating sound, it is easy to be engulfed by your actions, and how they are shaping the textures and colors of the signal. Immersing oneself in sound comes without effort, the tricky part is to step back and be open to outside stimuli, and then crafting your sounds according to what actions are unfolding in the visual and sonic environment around you Where you were no longer matters, what you saw a fraction of a second earlier is no longer important, however its effect on you may be

subconsciously affecting your output. I was immersed in the experience, not calculating, just absorbing what I saw, heard and felt, and transforming my sensory perceptions into sound that would play with the other players' senses, influencing them intentionally and unintentionally. Exploring basic impulses, and getting lost in the possibilities.

***Andrea Jane Cornell***

2. There is only one mistake that can be made by an Optik musician: turning your volume off when you make a sound you don't like. Leaving the sound there and having to deal with it is part of the game. It is like life; we all make mistakes, but we can't go back in time to fix them.

In Optik, it is the "you can do that" that gave me the motivation to create. It is this positive attitude that I want to use as a guiding philosophy in my daily life. This, to me, is the "dynamogenesis." The origin of an action is not thinking "I can't" but rather "I can" and then acting on it.

***David Zilbert***

3. The whole idea of different people taking random decisions and within this chaos comes total organization. This is where the impossible choreography idea comes from, even within total chaos, something I think humans do not have the capabilities to reproduce, we create a form or pattern, an order, so that we can feel secure and so we can 'understand" what is happening in front of us. Just this concept, if applied to a person's life, can be very shocking and disturbing to think about. All our actions have a point of origin that is unknown to us and our actions have an impact on other actions that are also unknown to us.

We, the musicians, had some sort of protective barrier with our tools and other technological gadgets. Our contact was less direct and so are reactions we're biased and filtered by the tools we were using to express ourselves. I couldn't really get in that state of chaos like the performers were when they were spinning or running mad. If I would get out of control, which is hard to do with highly ordered digital machines, I could just be shut off by Ben if he thought it wasn't the time to be out of control. I wasn't on that edge where the performers could find themselves. Come to think of it, I feel jealous about it.

***Philip Viel***

### **Actor -Performer responses**

So I'm there in the space, almost crying or rolling on the floor with laughter and I don't have any intellectual understanding of a why. There's something really fascinating about that, something really sacred, tapping into something that raw and unpredictable. As moments of synchronicity happened in performance, I felt that the audience instantly became part of them - so much so that I would look over at someone watching - usually someone who was REALLY watching - and I would feel as if they could read my mind, like they were in on whatever was making me do what it was I was doing - something I didn't always know myself.

#### ***Laura Burke***

There was always a catastrophe, an event that stood apart in some way or another, and each time it felt like everything else was the natural build up to that climactic event, and everything after was the natural recovery from it.

Xstasis had several 'macro functions' it could operate in - running, walking, spinning, rolling, running in place, looking, etc. But it had a core operating system - something deep within the core of it - which was simply lines of code, which the computer would understand as zeroes and ones, and which the performer would understand as one of two choices that we were constantly cycling through: stay ...or go.

**Fajer Al-Kaisi** A simple turn can change everything. One moment you are walking alongside someone, the next you are both alone. It doesn't have to mean anything other than that. There is no bigger reason as to why you chose to move, or what situation you are in that makes you want to move. You simply move. The audience interprets what they want, but you yourself just turn.

#### ***Amanda Knapp***

There was an impulse inside of me that I could no longer stand still. I had reached my stillness threshold and the impulse to move came from the urgency that I thought I might die if I had to stay still for even one second longer.

I had moments where humans stopped being humans and buildings stopped being buildings and trees stopped being trees. They all became the same things; they were all just matter, including me. I saw everything as being the same and as being completely connected with one another and with the other performers and me. We were all just there, just standing.

***Vanessa Johnson***

I feel incapable of putting into words the thoughts and feelings that I experienced, despite the fact that I have a lot that I want to say.

It's the feeling when you're learning to drive standard and you keep stalling the car and you can't figure out why, then eventually by fluke you find the right timing and you never forget it.

***Stephanie Bogue-Kerr***

Performing is doing. It is an experience. And the only way to get better at it is to do it.

***Joe Cobden***

Decisions are made: there is no going back, no hesitation when transitioning from one state of movement to the other, one sound to the next, or one image to another.

Puttin yourself in the state of heightened perception is exhausting, watching others physically exhaust themselves is felt by one who watches. The heavy breathing of the performers filling a room is tremendously powerful, and practically contagious, and when a breath deprived performer gets up, and starts running again, it's almost dizzying.

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