

# Siobhan Davies and David Hinton in Conversation with Claudia Kappenberg, Part 1

*Siobhan Davies, Siobhan Davies Dance*

*David Hinton, Film-maker*

*Claudia Kappenberg, University of Brighton*

## Abstract

Siobhan Davies and David Hinton met with Claudia Kappenberg at the Southbank Centre London on 2/7/2015, for a conversation about the making of *All This Can Happen (ATCH)*. In Part 1 of the conversation, Siobhan Davies and David Hinton each give a snapshot of who they are now as artists and makers. The conversation then explores the current state of the art and the screening of *ATCH* in different contexts and venues.

**Keywords:** choreographer, film-maker, disciplines, experimental fields, constituency, Cinematèque Française, Maynard Festival, Siobhan Davies Studios

Claudia Kappenberg (CK): To start this conversation about *All This Can Happen (ATCH)*,<sup>1</sup> I would like to get a sense of where you each are as artists now. If I were to take a snapshot of each of you as a maker or a producer, what would I see in the snapshot?

Siobhan Davies (SD): You'd see someone who has been at work for over forty years. I am enjoying all the experiences which have helped me get this far, but I went through a period of time when I felt that I needed to dissolve them all and not let the new work be weighed down by the previous works' failings! However, now I enjoy the remembering and seeing all the long threads and the stuff that thrived from work to work. Then (and now) I wanted to find out how to work and make with other people, and dance has been the medium that I find continually beguiling. I enjoy the doing of dance and the thinking within and around it. Dance, and all that it relates to, has become the mulch I can now draw down from.

Initially I made work for theatres and also worked with the traditional but formidable companions to dance, design and music. As a young maker, I was conscious how strongly these two companion arts could shape my work, but over time I felt as if all the fine detail, the nuanced behaviors that can be revealed by people moving, were swamped by the customary forms put in place to support dance making. I wondered what would happen if I dismantled those relationships, or if I let a performance of

movement be un-accompanied and show it on its own terms? I got stuck into the craft of making solely with dance material. It was exciting for me to also find other dance makers and to explore with them what movements really mattered to us, to others, and why? And then there are the structures to frame them and make what we have found visible without using the weights and measures or presence of another art.

We can be connective tissue to so many disciplines within the arts, including architecture, design, and crafts, but also to the sciences, the social sciences, and for geographers, anatomists, curators, and more. We all have a relationship to movement, and much of our dance- and movement-related exploration is relevant to these other subjects. And when my work combines dance with another discipline in a new way, my own thinking is affected as a result, in that I relate differently to my materials, processes, and capacities.

Any snapshot of me would also have to include this beautiful building, the Siobhan Davies Studios, and what happens in it. I helped to instigate it in 2005. There are many other choreographers, teachers, and performers at work in the building, each with their own passions and motivations, and each with a history of working with or alongside others. That history of passing on information, of learning and making through exchange, is a fine tradition within dance. It could be valued more.

CK: Thanks Siobhan there is a lot going on in this image.

SD: I've had a bit of a roll rather than a snapshot.

CK: David, if I were to take a snapshot of your life as maker, film-maker, and collaborator, what would I see?

David Hinton (DH): I definitely regard myself as a film-maker, and I'm a film-maker who works with dance, but I'm interested in many other things apart from dance. My background is in documentary, and I could happily go out tomorrow and make a documentary about Chinese politics. Quite happily. But one thing I find increasingly is that I don't like fulfilling formulas. The world of television—where I learned my trade—is full of formulaic work, and resisting that was one of the things that led me to dance in the first place. I started making dance films partly because it allowed me to work within mainstream television and still make unique and experimental films. We are talking twenty or thirty years ago now, but dance then was regarded as such a minority pursuit within television that executives weren't interested in it, and that left me with a lot of freedom. Also, within television, and within the circles where I grew up, contemporary dance was regarded as pretty much a joke. I'm interested in investigating things that are despised, and why they are despised. This also relates to *ATCH*, which is preoccupied with paying heed to what is humble and un-regarded. When I first got interested in dance, it was the most humble of all the arts, and the people who worked in dance were the least arrogant among all the artists I worked

with. That was another good reason to work with the dance world, I think. It seemed to be full of good people.

The first dance film I made was *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* with DV8,<sup>2</sup> and that was about twenty-five years ago. The excitement for me was that I was working for ITV and making something that was essentially a silent movie! It was allowed onto television only because it came under the rubric of “dance.” That fascinated me and represented a fantastic opportunity. One of the things that I loved then, and continue to love, about dance film is that there are no rules about how it should be done. The very essence of this realm is experiment and adventure. There may be a time further down the road when people feel like they’ve solved the question of what to do with the combination of dance and film—then formulas will emerge, and dance film will become just as brittle as all the other genres of film-making. But at the moment, that isn’t the case. I always think that the best time to have worked in mainstream movies must have been at the very beginning—in Hollywood in 1910. Fantastic. People were inventing things as they went along. And, to me, dance film is the contemporary equivalent of that.

In terms of my own career, what I’m interested in is following my own mental processes. I like to get up in the morning and think about things that interest me—and that often has nothing to do with what executive types want me to think about. I don’t really regard myself as being part of any particular world or school of thought. I float around in a dream mostly. A man without a place! I prefer to keep trying to do new things, rather than repeating things I’ve done before. I’m always having new ideas, but I often don’t know how to fulfill my ideas in any practical sense. I don’t know where to find the money, and so on. And of course, that creates difficulties, because in order to survive in life, it’s usually pretty important to have a particular place in the world. You’ve got to have a system around you to support you financially and institutionally. In the case of *All This Can Happen*, of course, Siobhan’s organization supplied that—for which I’m profoundly grateful—but usually I’m walking a tightrope. I feel I have to live on my wits, but what I get in return is freedom. Freedom to think my own thoughts is what I like best.

SD: I am noticing that dance artists in the last few years have also struck out for a more independent practice, to take a risk, to conceive and make as individuals whilst using materials that are the best for their needs. Many of them don’t wish their work to be defined by structures put in place before they begin to make. Some dance-based artists develop a coalition of practices, with one informing the other, such as choreography, research, performance, teaching, connecting, and writing. This fluidity may be necessary in order for the artists to financially survive, but the different kinds of expertise also gives them a boldness.

CK: Both you and David talk about dance as an experimental field, where rules either don't exist, or can be questioned as part of the practice. In Paris or Vienna in the early 20th century, dance was also part of the experimental avant-garde, challenging ideas about the body, about dance, and trying out the new medium of film. Now, we have a new wave of galleries and museums reaching out to dance to do something "different" with regards to, say, the exploration of architecture, the relation to audiences, or the process of art making itself. What is it about dance or dance artists that allows for this?

SD: I like dance artists for their sense of questing: as if we know that we can do more. We can establish relationships not previously explored, or work in the gaps between different disciplines and connect to or release something unforeseen.

I am curious also how dance artists choose between their independence and when they want to work more as a collective, or join up with one or two others. To me there is an originality about how dance-based artists maintain degrees of authorship in both these structures. The experiment is in how to remain creatively agile in all the relationships needed to sustain a practice and a living.

DH: When I talk about "experimental" with regards to film, I'm not talking about that orthodox view of what "experimental film" means in academia and the associated film festival circuit. For example, there are some people from the academic world who frown on the narration in *All This Can Happen*, because they think it makes certain things in the film too explicit. This makes me laugh, of course, because as soon as someone suggests to me that it is not "experimental" to be explicit, then my instinct is to experiment with being explicit, and see what happens. Maybe that's one reason why our film is called "*All This Can Happen*." This also relates to Robert Walser, I think, because he was an artist who started off within the institutions and published in respectable journals, but strayed away from them. He drifted off and went his own way. I'm more likely to be inspired by an outsider artist than someone who is at the centre of the art world, or at the centre of academic thinking about film or art. I suppose that whatever the academy or the institution is telling me to be interested in, I'm suspicious of, whereas one person pursuing their own vision, however eccentric it is—that interests me.

CK: The context in which one works is hugely important, and I guess an artist and their piece of work always speaks to someone or some context; it implicitly comments on this environment. We can continue here with the idea of snapshots by adding a third image, which is of this world of dance/film/visual arts now, the world for which you've made *All This Can Happen*. What do we see in the snapshot of that world?

DH: A snapshot of the world for which we made *ATCH*? I don't think the world exists for which we made the film. By making the film, we're trying to will that world into being! I don't think the film fits into any particular niche, and that's the whole beauty

of it. Of course, when you launch into something like this, your dream is that it will eventually be of interest to all kinds of people precisely because it isn't a standard fit anywhere. But there's also the possibility that it will be ignored by everyone and won't find an audience at all. Mind you, I always hoped that *ATCH* would, at least, receive some respectful attention in the dance film world. I had already made two other dance films using found footage, and I knew that some people in that world would pay heed to the fact that I'd produced a new work of this kind. Siobhan has obviously got a much bigger constituency that is interested in what she does, because of her stature in the dance world.

CK: We have shifted from one issue to another: first we talked about the orthodoxy of experimental film, and how *ATCH* challenges this orthodoxy, and now we are talking about each of your constituencies. Are these two different issues?

DH: I think the issues are related. Where your work gets seen, and how it is received, is very much dependent on where you are known. In other words, it depends on where you already have a constituency. What gets exhibited within any "world" or "scene" within the arts is much less to do with the quality of any individual piece of work, and much more to do with whether you have built up a reputation in that world. Most worlds are clubbish and suspicious of outsiders, so it takes a bit of time to be accepted into any of them. That is one of the reasons why it is so hard to make original work that genuinely crosses the borders between genres. Such a work is bound to be something of a bastard child that, at first, no-one wants to acknowledge as their own.

I think anything that is designated a "dance film" is likely, first of all, to make people shudder in the wider world, because I don't think the form enjoys a very high standing, except among a small cohort of people who are professionally interested in it. Now, I certainly feel that that cohort of heroes is "my constituency" when I make a film like *ATCH*. They are the people who can be relied upon to watch the film, and take an interest in it, and I thank god that they exist. But if I make a film that only appeals to that constituency, then, to me, that is an abject failure. It is very important to me to try to make work that reaches out beyond an obvious audience and communicates with people *who don't think they are going to like it*. In other words, if I make "a dance film," then I see it as very much part of my job to try to defy people's expectations of what they are going to get when they sit down to watch a dance film. That is a big part of what I mean when I talk about not being formulaic. You have to try to move the form on beyond people's expectations of the form. You have to try to communicate with an audience who are not the obvious audience for the form. Otherwise, there is no challenge.

There's another point worth making about dance film here too. As I've said, I don't think "dance film" as a form has a very high standing in the film world, but because it is so open and flexible as a form, it allows you to make things which can find their way

into the film world under all kinds of other guises. I found this out when I made the film *Nora* with Alla Kovgan.<sup>3</sup> That was made as a dance film, but it got shown in innumerable different contexts: at women's film festivals, black film festivals, African film festivals, short film festivals, experimental film festivals, all sorts of places. It was a clear example of making something for a dance film constituency, which then found its way to all kinds of other constituencies. For me, this was great. Whatever I make, I want it to reach as many people as possible.

SD: I think dance in Britain is going through positive changes. We are pursuing a less isolated position within the arts and we are active in other areas as well. Dance is now seen in and made for galleries, museums and other spaces, our constituencies are growing, and we are appreciated and judged from other perspectives.

David is right that dance has had a particular reputation, and the familiarity with that was what drew an audience to it; but now it has more heft of its own. I believe I am braver now when thinking about who I can approach or involve to be an essential part of a new work I would like to make. In *ATCH* we do have the extraordinary companionship of Walser who has been recognized more fully by the literary and the art world in recent years. In other words, without being conscious of it, we made a good choice; because for us *The Walk* was the best writing we could wish for, but his reputation has helped us to connect to others who could then connect to this film through their own interests.

I also enjoy the simplicity of the task, sending the film in its brown envelope to countries I have never visited and where we might create a new relationship.

And for me, this is one of the best dances I have made, because it is close to what I wish my dances to be. It is structured in order to see the immense orchestration of expressive acts each of us uses individually and collectively all the time. Oddly, by not using dance steps as a metaphor we can concentrate more on how our own movement, using all the scales, tells a story. There is my fascination with the million moments in fluid movement and expression. I know they are there, but we don't experience them unless we find the means to glimpse them by concentrating on a single chosen frame, by finding that fragile moment when an expression alters or the body shifts, almost imperceptibly, in a response.

Somewhere in this noticing is a kinship to painting and how an artist finds exactly the right pose to hold the thought needed to express a situation, a scene. Also I think there is a relationship to the flickers of psychological shifts that each of us goes through but think are hidden. These fragments of different attentions, I hope, help us to find audiences within and outside dance. Judging by the different festivals and countries the film has travelled to, we have created something that crosses borders between the arts.

DH: This is another of the reasons why I got interested in dance film in the first place, because I have this deep intuition that dance can enrich film to a much greater degree than it has ever been allowed to up until now. And in that, I feel great creative possibilities. For instance, one thing you've got with dance is a massive cohort of fantastic performers whose abilities have never really been fully exploited by film-makers. If we can work out how to properly harness the talents of dancers in the service of cinema, then we can create a whole new genre of film which can be just as powerful as mainstream movie-making. For me, a big part of that is to do with developing a cinematic conception of what dance is, which may be entirely different from the theatrical idea of dance.

CK: Thinking about where the film has been screened, are there particular memorable places or contexts, where you think the film was well placed, a particular curation maybe, or a certain physical space?

DH: Normally with a film, I'm happy for it to get shown and seen anywhere. The more places it's seen, the happier I am. But it's a bit different with this one, because the beauty of it is so dependent on the quality of the projection and the quality of the sound. I've made a lot of films where those technical things don't matter as much, but much of the character of this one is to do with subtleties—seeing the grain in the image, or hearing tiny things in the sound. When the film is shown in circumstances where the quality of the projection is low—and I've seen this a few times now—I get depressed, because a lot of what is beautiful gets lost. So the quality of the projection has become an important thing for me.

As to particularly memorable contexts, the screening at the Cinematèque Française in Paris was a good one, because the place represents so much about the history of cinema. This is where Godard and Truffaut received their education in film, and it felt like a great honor to be there, to see our film flickering on the same screen where so many iconic films have flickered before. We have talked a lot about which worlds might accept and endorse our work, and this felt like being embraced by the gods of cinema, because the Cinematèque is really a temple of cinema.

CK: Was it a homecoming of sorts?

SD: Seeing the film shown with the best technical equipment on a big screen in a cinema dedicated to the history of film was not what my young self would ever have imagined. So that pleasure was huge. The scale of the screen also meant that the audience could see the attention we put into the research to find the best image for our needs. We concentrated on finding the earliest photograph or film we could which would represent a moment in Walser's novella. There is an exquisite photograph of a parkland and tree which must be one of the earliest uses of color. I anticipate its arrival each time I see the film, and the pleasure is physical. In the brief time it is up on the screen I try to see the fineness of how the light, colors, and textures work together. My

eyes are surprising me as if they are not quite working, but they give me another slant on beauty. Then there are the decayed black and white films which appear so fragile, the images only just holding on to the celluloid. They allowed us to compose using texture and erasure as much as the image to tell the story.

To mention a very different kind of screening, I also saw *ATCH* in the Maynard festival in Wales, in a village hall, with very basic equipment. It was beautifully curated by Simon Whitehead and the generosity of attention by the audience was very special. In part it had to do with a community coming together to share an experience, and with the fact that they could talk about it for longer than they would in a more urban situation with a dispersing audience. It did not feel far from something Walser would have appreciated. Everything from curtained windows, single chairs, the smell of homemade popcorn, no rush to leave, people gathering intently to talk about what they had seen, and the smell of the countryside coming in through the door before it closed against the evening light. Everything gave our film a different context than the one at the Cinematèque, and both felt valuable.

CK: I asked you about screenings and contexts, because this influences so much how a piece of work comes across. As you say, in the Cinematèque Française the work spoke to the art of filmmaking and its histories, to the evolution of film technologies and the pleasure of image making. In the Welsh festival and the village hall, it spoke about community and humanity, and about the meaning of a place. Something very different is foregrounded in each of the screenings. I am glad we are touching on this, as I think it can encourage dancefilm-makers to think more about the dialogue between an environment and the work that is shown, and even to deliberately explore different kinds of exhibition contexts for a piece of work.

DH: I'm very happy when the work gets shown in galleries or art institutions, because then it feels like the film is doing valuable work to help break down those historic distinctions between film and dance and visual arts. Dissolving those distinctions is good for the kind of work that we're trying to make. It's great that the film had its premiere at Dance Umbrella in the building of Central St Martins College of Art and Design, and the screenings at the ICA had a real buzz about them. They made me feel that we could start to make an impression on the visual arts world. The film was also treated as a visual artwork in Korea, where it screened constantly in a gallery. And, of course, it is terrific when you feel that you are storming the great bastions of European culture, as with the screening at the Prado. That was an interesting one, because the film was being shown to people from museums all over Europe, as an example of how archives can be used to fuel creativity. So we felt that we were really part of something valuable there. Helping to shape the future, with any luck.

SD: If there have been formulas about how to make something in television or film, there are also formulas about where work is shown. Art galleries would not have



shown a film like this a few years ago, and now they will. This introduces the work to different kinds of audiences, and eventually dance and film audiences also go to galleries to see moving-image-based work, and gallery audiences go to cinemas or dance venues, etc. I'm generally excited about how audiences evolve alongside the different patterns in art making.

CK: And because of the different context, the film will be looked at in different ways. People will notice different things.

SD: People who go into an art gallery bring a sensibility of going into an art gallery to the situation. They will look at and speak about this work from that perspective and that not only enlivens how the work is experienced, but it also helps us to expand our subsequent work, whatever work it is.

CK: I was thinking that if there is a particular experience like the one in Wales that you're describing, it may also change how you yourself perceive the work, and it might give you something that you take to the next piece of work.

SD: In Paris at the Cinematèque Française, the film was an extraordinary object in an incredible circumstance, and it looked beautiful. In the other situation in the village hall in Wales, somehow the barrier between the film and the audience was less...visceral? It had warmth. I'm not saying that one was cold and one was warm, but the space in between the screen and the viewers had a unique quality in each venue. I think I can feel a physical sense of touch in an auditorium, and the different screenings allowed me to think of these different contexts and the impact they have on an audience. I was delighted that the film worked in both, but I don't know if that experience directly influenced the next work.

DH: One of the great things about the art world is that this is the place where you can show something without audiences worrying too much about what it is.

SD: Because the gallery context is less prescribed?

DH: Well, in the world of screendance, for instance, it has always been hard for me to show anything without people worrying about the question: "Is it dance?" I've never heard anybody actually give a convincing definition of what dance is, but still, there are always people worrying over this question. In fact, I'd still dearly love to hear a good definition of what dance is, if such a thing exists.

CK: How does this compare to film?

DH: Well, in the film world, I've never heard anyone asking: "Is this film?" They are much more likely to be asking: "Is this a good film?" But then their answer is likely to be based on a pretty standard set of criteria. In the art world, I think people feel much more free to react in whatever way they want, without worrying so much about "Is it

art?” or even “Is it good art?” The whole question of “Is it art?” was a 20th-century question and doesn’t seem to bother anybody anymore. So the art world now feels like the place with the most freedom, in terms of what you can show, how you can show it, and how people respond to it.

CK: Thank you for these three snapshots. They can serve us as a prologue for our following discussion on the making of *ATCH*, your research, inspirations, and the nitty-gritty aspects of the editing.

End Part 1.

## Biographies

Siobhan Davies is a renowned British choreographer who rose to prominence in the 1970s. Davies was a founding member of London Contemporary Dance Theatre and in 1982 joined forces with Richard Alston and Ian Spink to create the independent dance company Second Stride. Founding Siobhan Davies Dance in 1988, she works closely with collaborating artists to ensure that their own artistic enquiry is part of the creative process. By 2002 she moved away from the traditional theatre circuit and started making work for gallery spaces. Davies applies choreography across a wide range of creative disciplines including visual arts and film. In 2012, Davies created her first film work *All This Can Happen* with director David Hinton.

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Film-maker David Hinton has won a host of awards for both his documentaries and his screendance works. He has made many films about the arts for television, including portraits of Francis Bacon, Michael Powell, Alan Bennett, and Little Richard. He has also made films about Dostoyevsky, visual comedy, and the Cultural Revolution in China. He has made film versions of two stage shows by DV8 Physical Theatre—*Dead Dreams* and *Strange Fish*—and he has collaborated with many choreographers to create original dance works for the screen. He has led dance film workshops all over the world.

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Claudia Kappenberg is a performance and media artist and Course Leader for the MA Performance and Visual Practices at the University of Brighton, UK, as well as founding editor of *The International Journal of Screendance*. She has published widely on performance and screen-based work, including in *Anarchic Dance* (Routledge, 2006), *The International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* (2010), *Art in Motion*

(Cambridge Scholars, 2015) and the *Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Her performance practice consists of minimal choreographies which have been shown across Europe, the US, and the Middle East in the form of live interventions, gallery-based performances, and screen-based installations.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *All This Can Happen*, Davies and Hinton.

<sup>2</sup> *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men*, Hinton.

<sup>3</sup> *Nora*, Hinton and Kovgan.

## References

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