

Lance Gries: The FIFTY Project, part 1 – Lance’s essay

*For his fiftieth birthday, **Lance Gries** invited fifty dance colleagues, from a twenty-five year career span, from all over the world, to meet him in a studio for a fifty minute dance encounter. The intimacy, immediacy and vulnerability of some of the most beloved dancers and choreographers from New York and Europe is captured in these edited studio sessions. These fifty video documents are presented in a multi-dimensional immersive installation, a visual moving family tree of the New York dance community in a mass choreography of images, personal stories and dancing bodies. Critical Correspondence has teamed up with Lance to host a series of essays and visual documentation of this expansive project.*

As my collaborators and I organize sixty hours of video and archival material into a form for public consideration, I hope that writing this will remind me of and ground me in my initial motives for creating this format, re-balancing my current desire and preoccupation to create a cohesive meaningful, even impressive, art work with my earlier intentions.

This project arose from a basic desire to dance with people—intimately—to rekindle, rediscover or discover for the first time deep personal dancing connections with a group of artists who have been formative to my identity as a dancer.

This project was designed to be a loving birthday gift to myself, a bouquet of moving experiences shared with cherished friends, a reminder of where I want my art making to originate from, a form which first valued and took as content the energetic exchange between people dancing.

Since July 2012, I have so far danced with, celebrated with and videoed forty-five sessions with wonderful colleagues.

Meeting each of these dancers in our native language has been a precious experience, an affirmation of the pure joy and importance of sharing our selves as movers and of the deep wisdom and humanity in what we practice as dance artists.

Producing a video installation is inspiring in its own way: seeing these physical memories adhere to time and space in otherwise impossible and unimaginable combinations. But it is also technologically demanding, exhausting. As my eyes become portals to a pixilated reality, I yearn for my analog soul, my sweaty dancing body against another.

I don’t recall the exact moment I conceived of dancing with fifty people. I do remember passing the idea by some friends and how immediately the proposition excited them. I also remember the anxiety that arose when I tried to imagine a list of who to invite.

Who are those people who've been present and formative in my dancing life? Would these friends and icons of my world accept this invitation? And what about all of those people I could not include now?

It was safe to begin at the beginning, inviting life long friends I have known and danced with since 1982 as students at SUNY Purchase, followed by a group of deeply influential colleagues and mentors with whom I grew up aesthetically in Trisha Brown's life changing vision and company. It was a relief when the first acceptance emails came in. This part of the written archive, responses expressing enthusiasm to share a birthday dance remains very touching. I was reminded of how much I desired to be asked to dance, how much we all do; and so with that in mind, I went on an inviting spree. (To date, there are fifty-six accepted invitees and I don't want to stop.)

The next wave included colleagues whom I had known and respected since my arrival to New York in 1985. To me they represented the pillars of New York's downtown dance community; embodying a history that I was just beginning to embrace as my path. Over the years, some became dancing partners; but for most, a warm acquaintance developed, but not necessarily a dancing history.

The vagabond dancers' life of touring and teaching followed and in 1997 I began to meet another community through my involvement with Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker's school, P.A.R.T.S. and her company, Rosas in Brussels. Many teacher/student relationships from there have grown into rich dancing relationships and are among the invitees.

With the list nearing fifty, finally there were invitations to people I only admired from afar, but whose work, individuality and integrity excited me; and so with a healthy dose of "why not", I just asked. Amongst those I have danced with to date, it is by far the norm that this was our first dance together in many many years; for about twenty invitees, it was the first.

In an early flash of idealism to preserve the purity of these meetings, I considered not recording these dances. My informal board agreed that this was insane, artistic suicide; finally, each session has been recorded by two stationary unmanned cameras.

And so, day after day through one of the hottest summers in New York history, I met people in the studio.

Besides a simple suggestion as a starting point, there were no specific instructions or expectations for what could happen over the fifty minutes. The natural rhythm of coming together, of exploration, developing trust, discovering mutual paths of movement and thought, allowing intentionality to deepen and shape longer arcs of action, to then disperse and recollect, or fall apart – all variations of sharing time and space were welcomed. The occasion, the time frame, two camera "eyes" and the unknown provided just the right amount of tension to the environment and each time I loved the dancing that transpired.

Nine months later, I now have a collection of forty-five neat packages, of two compact tapes rubber banded together, labeled with the name of a newly embraced dance mate and lovingly filed in a special box. With this growing archive, I possess material evidence, a "real" birthday gift and tangible proof of my interconnectedness, a lasting artifact and record for the history books.

As I write this, I feel a bit “Gollumesque” about this treasure. The loving sentiments of these private dances fading as deadlines approach and a necessary ambition takes over to fuel the long work of editing, of making something substantial and conspicuous for a public. I want to show how connected we are through our dance practice and how my circle is only a small part of this, located alongside and inside other people’s trajectories, other personal maps extending the boundaries of my own. These dances have forever shaped the narrative of my now “post fifty” dancing life.

-Lance Gries

Lance Gries is an independent dancer, teacher and choreographer. Besides continuing to expand on “The FIFTY Project”, he is also working on a trio with Juliette Mapp and Jimena Paz for the NYLA Studio Series in May and Danspace Project Winter 2014.