

**Creative Placemaking: Bridgman | Packer Dance**  
Interview by DownStreet Art Intern - Angela Medrano

Bridgman | Packer Dance's *Truck* encourages creative placemaking by bringing performance to nontraditional and unexpected locations. Designed to be performed inside a 17-foot box U-Haul truck with live performance and video technology, a utilitarian and ubiquitous vehicle will transform into an accessible stage for dance. *Truck* is presented with support from the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA) Expeditions Grant, and will tour seven venues in five New England states.

Within creative placemaking, public, private, not-for-profit, and community sectors partner to strategically shape the physical and social character of a city or region around arts and cultural activities. It provides the platform for an entire region to feel the positive influence of the arts, its many partners, and its inevitable economic impact. Creative placemaking is one of the key factors to a community's wellbeing and resilience.

Art Bridgman and Myrna Packer, Artistic Directors and Guggenheim Fellows in Choreography, are acclaimed for their innovative integration of choreography and video technology. They are also recipients of nine consecutive grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (2007 - 2015), two Choreography Fellowships from New York Foundation for the Arts, four National Performance Network Creation Fund Awards, and grants from New England Foundation for the Arts, New York State Council for the Arts, and National Dance Project.

"It could be introduced to people who might not normally go to a dance theater," says Myrna Packer, half of the Bridgman | Packer Dance duo. By crafting a mixture between the utilitarian truck and the artistic dance performance outside of a traditional theater setting, the pair hopes to reach new audiences while challenging the traditional reasoning behind art and performance. "People have seen [U-Haul trucks] everywhere and suddenly they're looking into it and there's a whole other world being created in there," explains Packer. Almost serendipitously, this practice has proved quite fruitful.

Once both Bridgman and Packer understood that they were working with the transformation of an object and of a place, their creative process flourished.

Their work with technology on stage started about 14 years ago. Myrna recalls that "it was around the time that cameras and projectors were affordable and we had just finished a piece where we were working with our shadow projections on a translucent red curtain." Shadow imagery encouraged them to explore the creative avenues between their two-dimensional shadows behind a curtain and their three-dimensional selves as they peeked beyond their translucent covering. This process piqued an initial interest in video technology.

Myrna, however, was the self-identified hesitant one: "I resisted it because I thought that it may be distracting. The audience might have to choose whether they are watching the live version of us or the video." Her opinion soon adjusted when Art Bridgman showed her otherwise.

Bridgman went to their dance studio, projected his life-size image, and started stepping in and out of it. "It was an a-ha moment," says Myrna. "I saw what technology could

help us say on stage, and I saw that it could be all one entity, not that one was simply accompanying the other.” She understood that his stepping in and out of his own image worked as the perfect metaphor for struggles with identity and perception, “of somebody fracturing off of himself,” and once again returning to his own.

By analyzing the process and realizing how well it connected to terms of reality versus perception of existence, Myrna began to actively question what is real about “true” existence in comparison to one’s “perception” of their own reality. Following this, both Art and Myrna began to dissect how people spend their lives in front of screens of various sizes, and how that can become somebody’s reality. This growing dialogue soon engrained itself into their work. As a result, they continued to experiment with various contexts (i.e. audience demographics, location, etc.) and various landscape projections. Since then, they have created about seven major works that present such philosophical questions through a visual medium via video, and visceral medium via live performance. One of which is *Truck*.

They created *Truck* through their process of "video partnering". Myrna explains that “one very important element of our work has been physical partnering” between herself and Art, “and the push and pull that happens there.” When they are on stage with their own video images, however, they are partnering the images, and the images are partnering them. This means that they have to be exactly at the right place at the right time to suit the projected landscape and projected figures within their U-Haul truck setting. Bridgman and Packer partner with their own video images that change in size, scale, and context to encourage various reference points. Packer clarifies that “we are interested in the live and the virtual having equal presence on stage.” Thus, the video is not simply background for their performance, but also plays a vital and equal role in the performance dynamic.

A unique aspect about Bridgman | Packer Dance’s *Truck* is its locational accessibility. “We’ve performed it in a loading dock in New York City... in a meadow, [and] next to theaters,” explains Myrna. She has noticed a common thread no matter the performance’s location: “If somebody sees *Truck*, let’s say in a parking lot, then the next time they walk by that parking lot, they might have a memory of having seen *Truck* there, so it transforms the place for that person.” In relation to creative placemaking, the environment itself somehow gains a print of a memory and thus a feeling that their work has brought there. It is crystal clear: audience engagement is at their performance’s core.

Packer shares internationally acclaimed novelist Siri Hustvedt’s thoughts of the relationship between art and its observers. As such, she believes that the transformative effect of art becomes accomplished only once the observer “finishes the artwork”. That is to say, a work of art is not so unless somebody looks at it and experiences it. One may surely assume that when Bridgman | Packer Dance’s *Truck* comes to town, each audience will experience the work in the context of their specific community, bringing a distinct perspective to the performance. An artistic imprint is made on the location. That is creative placemaking.