

Audrey Simmons

Honors Thesis

May 1, 2017

Camera Roles



Photo by Jiyon Song

A dance created by Audrey Simmons in collaboration with five female dancers who also performed in the piece. Premiered on April 1, 2017 in the Gershman Y Gym. Music includes "Poker Face" by Lady Gaga, "Nulla in Mundo" by Antonio Vivaldi, and "Guilty" by Al Bowlly.

A dance for women. A dance of images. A dance in quest for liberation.

When examining where the process for my piece *Camera Roles* began, I must go back to my ideas as a junior in my Junior Seminar class with faculty member Lauren Bakst. During this class we focused on writing an artist statement, and a “project” statement which would be a jumping off point for our thesis research. These ideas were the first seeds of what my thesis has become. On April 27, 2016, I wrote:

“My thesis will explore the idea of one on one relationships as a series of ‘first impressions.’ I intend to format the work in a collection of short duet vignettes, as if the viewer is walking through an art gallery or catching glimpses of what lies before them in a dark room only by the flash of a camera. Each vignette will dissolve into the next; perhaps each will not seem to be resolved. Each duet will be framed in a different way using either a score, pattern, limitation, or peculiarity.

“Using this structure I will question: how does gender play a role in our impression of one another? What patterns have emerged in our society in relation to gender? What roles have gender played in dance? I will study the assumptions we make about one another, the nature in which we learn about each other, the effect of knowledge that we do or don’t possess. Stories will undoubtedly be told through the beauty of interaction and learning through commonalities.”

Many of these initial ideas I had still have traces in the evolution of this piece. Particularly, my ideas about the structure of camera flashes and the themes of gender and impressions. While it was difficult to give such definite language to a project that was yet to be created, I found it extremely helpful to put my thoughts into proactive statements. A lot of these ideas are certainly researched and developed in my thesis

and are topics that I wish to continue to work with.

In the early stages of this process, the senior class held auditions where all dance majors of any age were welcome. When choosing dancers to perform this work, I initially wanted three men and three women. Jamal Abrams, Carrie Chandler, Marco Ferroni, Patricia Suarez, and Haley Sung, and Ramon Vargas. I planned to create duets which would all explore ideas of gender. There would have been at least one duet with each gender pairing: male/female, male/male, and female/female.

Specifically, I was interested in studying the way gender has informed dance and wanted to restructure the format in which the history has been shaped. However, I soon had to adjust my cast because I had some dancers who could no longer be a part of the piece. My new cast was comprised of five women: Stephanie Bernal, Carrie Chandler, Chloe Newton, Patricia Suarez, and Haley Sung. While at first this seemed like a major set back as I could no longer keep my gender themed duets, this has actually allowed me to think about this piece differently and I am pleased with the access points it allowed me to find.

In my research, I found myself constantly thinking in terms of images, rather than in terms of movement. This I found discouraging at first; how was I to create a dance piece solely based on these images in my head? However, I wanted to challenge myself to create something live and performative as opposed to a video or a series of photos. I then realized that I could use this method of “imaging” to my advantage. I started to question how I could bring images to life through dance. I also found my experience in Jesse Zaritt’s Senior Seminar class to be really helpful in my process. We

spoke about how important it is to create images that the world needs to see. I think this can be directly applicable to my research for this piece. I want to ask of my dancers and myself: what images do we feel need more representation? What images have been misrepresented? How do we aid in bringing those images to life?

This was the first step I took in generating movement. I took a series of photos of my cast in their interpretations of images of vulnerability or victimhood, and then in an image of liberation. I was specifically inspired by writer Bell Hooks in



her talk entitled “Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body” at The New School. The title stems from Shahrazad Ali’s book “Are You Still a Slave.” Hooks, along with a panel of other great women including Marci Blackman, Shola Lynch and Janet Mock, speak about many topics surrounding the imaging of black women and others. Hooks specifically points out the lack of attention paid to how women (and

specifically black women) are portrayed in the media. She emphasizes the importance of taking care in the way we are imaging ourselves. How can we not play into



the victimhood of whatever binds us, but instead find liberation. Shola Lynch then speaks about the term “symbolic annihilation” which is defined as not only under-representation of a certain group, but also as only portraying this certain group as denigrated or victimized. She then goes on to speak about the importance of realizing the impact that this has on the future: children.

This really inspired me to ask my cast to write about images they wish they would have seen as children that they didn't. We then discussed what they wrote about and I will share examples a few responses here. One wrote that they wished they would have seen more images of vulnerability as a child. The acceptance of emitting emotion and the validity of not “being ok.” Another wrote about the lack of mixed race families portrayed in the media. One spoke to me about how she always found the portrayal of news anchors to be this fake or non-accessible person. She described how it was troubling to her to see these people reporting on everyday, real occurrences while completely glamorized in appearance. Another wrote about her constant longing for straight hair when she was born with the curliest hair imaginable and what lengths she would go to in order to make her hair look straight. This is actually where the final solo in my piece stems from. Likewise, many of my ideas in the creation of this piece come from these lack of images as children. I soon started to realize that I wanted to try to show all of these images through a lens of liberation and freedom.

Once I had started to think about these issues, I then started to question: When I image myself as free, what does that look like? Where does that image come from? Can I even trust it? This is perhaps still unresolved. I don't know that I will ever be able

to create pure liberation in general, but especially in a performative setting with an audience. However, the process of attempting to reach this place created some really interesting images and movement. The phrases that my dancers performed all stemmed from this yearning for liberation combined with a phrase that I had previously created and then taught them. As this developed I found it appropriate and pleasing to me to pair it with Antonio Vivaldi's aria "Nulla in Mundo."

The phrase that was the base for this material was something I created as an art installation on the University of the Art's winter trip to Europe. We were asked to create solos which were dependent upon and unique to the space we had chosen at the Beursschouwburg in Brussels, Belgium. My solo was created in front of a large mural entitled "My Life as a Former Sculptor" that seemed to be charcoal on the white wall. The entire solo was in reference to sculptor who was the subject of the work. To me, this was something that went hand in hand with my thesis research, as it was referential and



dependent on an image. The movement I generated was a mixture of referencing this male figure, and completely ignoring it. However, there was something looming about the height of the mural in comparison to me that I was drawn to. This phrase was then

taught to my dancers, and in combination with certain directives, they created their own versions that went into the piece.

I initially had trouble ordering the piece. I had these sections that seemed to work for me, but I couldn't seem to find the right way to order them. This all changed when I started thinking about what I wanted for costumes. Originally, I had pictured them all in a uniform look, but with certain unique pieces that would set them apart. I was drawn to this image on the cover of

Vogue magazine. There was something about it that I liked aesthetically, but I think I also was drawn to the fact that it was a diverse group of women who were grouped together. I drew certain similarities to the group of women in my cast. However, I also found that I wasn't completely satisfied with how this would frame the way my cast looked. Even though I was attracted to certain things about this image, I still found



them to be very glamorized. I couldn't imagine my sole inspiration coming from something like *Vogue* which, to me, does not symbolize the degree of liberation in which I was interested.

This then prompted me to think about how I could use this idea of glamour and critique its artificiality. I then realized I wanted to show a journey from glamour to a

liberated simplicity. My goal was then to find costumes for my five dancers that were all completely different versions of glamour, each with its own flair and personality. I came up with these looks easily as I went through my mother's old clothes from her days in the fashion industry. When the dancers put them on, there was a definite sense of power or confidence that overcame them. This is what I then realized I wanted to explore. How has power been misidentified or misconstrued as freedom. Why do we feel so good when we have these materials of wealth that shape how others view us?

This then created the beginning section of the piece which I soon started to call the "power stances" section. I asked my dancers to clump together one by one to create images that they thought emulated a powerful woman. I gave them prompts of strong women that we often see portrayed in the media such as a femme fatale character, a single mother, a businesswoman, a supermodel, etc. I decided that I wanted this section to be lit in such a way that it almost looked like we were viewing these bodies as moving sculptures in a museum. We also explored ideas of framing. How could we portray how the media chooses who and what we see in the manner in which things are framed.



This continued into a section where a “karaoke” sounding version of Lady Gaga’s “Poker Face” was playing. All of the dancers except Patricia went into their own worlds and the guard of power and glamour came down. However, Patricia remained in this world of glamour and pomp and circumstance. There was something about this contrast that was really comical to me, but also really effective. I found that the audience was waiting for the lyric of “Poker Face” to come in, and then when it doesn’t, you almost feel stuck in this world of artificiality. Patricia starts dancing with very minimalistic movement and then suddenly goes into this wild, thrashing manner which is pulling the eye towards her. Yet, the audience is also curious about what the other dancers are doing as they seem to have no recognition of the fact that they are in front of an audience and in essence, breaking “character.” The eye wants to go back and forth and it creates a sort of confusion and anticipation. I found this discomfort to be very important in the overall arch of the work.

During the next section, the dancers moved into an improvisational score I titled “Lanes.” The section was performed in silence and each dancer was confined to stay in the plane in which they were assigned. While the dancers ran back and forth, they would gradually take off their shell of glamour. I was very clear to mention that this was not to be anything remotely close to the way a stripper might take off their clothes, but rather a moulting or a shedding. As this section continues, the lights start to come in and out; almost as if a camera is flashing. This to me signifies the climax or the essence of my piece. To watch the dancers go through this score where they are all moving so similarly, but never really interact with each other is the transition that the

piece needed. As the glamour comes off, it is then revealed that the performers all are wearing different basic black items. This unifies them, but also, the simplicity of the outfits makes you pay more attention to the faces and the bodies of the dancers. It makes you realize what was there the whole time underneath these layers of glamour. I also enjoyed that the glamour that was shed remains on the floor. It serves as a reminder and takes on a new presence within the space.

The next two sections were my interpretations of a quest for liberation through the movement and bodies of my dancers. (Throughout the songs “Nulla in Mundo,” as previously mentioned, and “Guilty.”) These sections were when the dancers were finally able to break free from such structure and dance with the intention of freedom. I always found that these two sections made me feel a sense of warmth. Perhaps it was simply because I was proud of what I had created with my dancers, but I believe it was also because of how starkly different this new section was. It finally feels as though the dancers are breathing, interacting with each other naturally, and creating an individual narrative for themselves. This starts with Haley and Patricia dancing together, goes into a duet between Chloe and Patricia, and continues with solos from Haley and Stephanie. Each has their own trajectory and journey and each continues until Carrie’s solo to “Guilty.” As Carrie is dancing, the other dancers go to the opposite corner from where they started and continue these “power stances.” Except now, they are facing the back and their body language is non presentational. The narrative shifts. They are now going through these poses in a completely different manner and Carrie joins them as the lights come down to end the piece.

When reflecting upon my music choices, it is interesting to see what persevered through the editing and cutting of my process. The two primary songs that I used were Antonio Vivaldi's aria "Nulla in Mundo" and George Shearing's "Guilty." Interestingly enough, these are songs that I have documented in my notebook dating back to almost a year ago as potential options. I found this puzzling because my ideas surrounding my thesis have shifted so much since then, but somehow this music stayed throughout the process. As I started to question this, I realized that these are songs that I have loved and listened to for many years and I believe that they worked in my thesis because of how ingrained they are in my mind and body. The song that I was experimenting with but ended up cutting was "Freedom" by George Michael. This was a song that was more new to me and while I liked the song, I think the lyrics were too literal. This also meant that I had to cut the movement that corresponded to this song. This can be difficult to negotiate because it is hard to cut some things that you really like. However, for the greater good of the piece as a whole, editing and eliminating is important. To me, the editing out of this portion of the piece cleared some of the cloudiness of the intention of the work.

When I think about "Nulla in Mundo," I realize the lyric of the aria is meaningful to the piece. The lyric is sung in Latin, but in English it reads:

"In this world there is no honest peace

free from bitterness; pure and true

sweet Jesus, lies in Thee.

Amidst punishment and torment

lives the contented soul,

chaste love its only hope.”

While I don't aim to include religious themes into the intention of my piece, there is something in this about the balance of good and evil, the difficulties that we face in life and the ways in which we seek liberation. My intention is to say that there are different ways in which we seek freedom from whatever system binds us. Each person's journey will be unique. I was also really drawn to this woman's angelic voice as a way of manifesting the emotion behind the music.



Once this song has ended, the segue into “Guilty” is fairly immediate. I was drawn to this retrospective love song for many reasons, but I think mainly because of the use of the word “guilty” itself. To frame a love song with a word that has derogatory connotations lies in the same realm of paradoxical realities of life. The lyrics read:

“Is it a sin? Is it a crime? Loving you dear like I do.

If it's a crime then I'm guilty. Guilty of loving you.

What can I do? What can I say? After I've taken the blame?

You say you're through, you'll go your way. But I'll always feel just the same.

Maybe I'm right, maybe I'm wrong. Loving you dear like I do.

If it's a crime, then I'm guilty. Guilty of loving you.”

While Carrie is dancing this solo, I loved how the song supported this love song to herself. While it is not always easy to love ourselves in our most pure form and even not always encouraged or seen as valid, we try anyway. This solo also meant a lot to both Carrie and myself as the material was driven mainly from her story of the difficulties of loving her natural hair while growing up. The song only elevated this narrative but also allowed the audience to create their own narratives.



When the time eventually came for me to name the piece once the choreography was done, I found this to be very challenging at first. I wanted to find the correct balance of giving an insightful title without giving too much of the piece away. I really wanted to find a way to have the audience create their own narrative and meaning. This was important to me as I typically do not respond to work that is too didactic in only a singular direction or way. I went through many titles and finally came upon *Camera Roles* with the help of my friend and sounding board, Molly Kennedy. She helped me to think about where my research in creating the piece had started and then tying that into where the piece ended up. We came up with this title together and the play of the word “roles” made this title perfect to me. I was able to have something that would inform the watcher without laying everything out for them and placing it right into their lap.

The transition into the Gershman Y Gym was fairly seamless. The dancers were familiar with the space and I was able to get exactly what I wanted through a few quick spacing fixes. The lighting was something new that I had not had experience with before, other than my years of performing in different lighting and being familiar with how the lights function or at least what the options are. With the help of faculty member Peter Bertini, this also went pretty seamlessly. I knew I wanted to piece to start with very stark and dull lighting. The dancers were to look as if they were placed in a museum. As the piece went on, I gradually added color to the lighting scheme which created a trajectory that I really loved. By the end, the stage was lit by primarily blue and pink tones and had a softer yet lively look. The section I was most nervous about was the section in which the dancers would be lying down in the dark and each would

stand as the “flash” would happen. With Peter’s help, we found that this could be done easily via one of the lights in the front. As opposed to cueing this light like the others, I would



simply press the button manually. This created an interesting improvisational score for me as I was able to play with the duration in which the stage would be light or dark. Overall, I was very pleased with the lighting.

Once the time came for the piece to be performed, I was the most nervous I have been in a long time. As this is the first piece of choreography that I have put together at this scale, it was something that I felt was uncharted territory for me personally. I found that within the context of the show as a part of the Festival of Senior Dance Works Program B, I was happy with where the piece was placed and I was happy with how the dances that preceded and followed mine allowed my piece to be seen. After intermission, Aleixa Freire’s piece started. Her piece utilized the space in a very unique way as she had sunflower petals spread all over the floor. The dance and the music seem very surreal and you almost lose perception of time. This dreamy feeling set up a

great contrast to the beginning of my piece which was striking and clear. Additionally, we both used all female casts of dancers which I thought created an interesting through line. I also thought it was nice that the clothes that the dancers took off mid-dance remained on the floor, much like Aleixa's petals. As my piece ended, I also found the transition into James Mertz's piece to be very pleasing. He utilized a large group of dancers and a wide range of music much like mine.

The reception I received from the audience was really helpful in negotiating how this piece would be moving forward to being performed again on May 1, 2017 at the Honors Scholars Thesis Presentation show. I found the audience really responded to the section where the dancers frame Haley Sung before carrying her almost like a mannequin. To me, this section reads as not only the way we are framed and viewed by others, but also the way that the media frames those that we are accustomed to seeing constantly. I also found that they responded really well to the costumes and the way I utilized them within the piece. This was great feedback because I did not want the costumes to overpower the dancing, but inform or shape the movement in some type of way. I would be interested in continuing to work with this dance in a much more stripped down way and seeing how I could reach the same result. However, this did make me think about the importance of costume in dance. I felt as though I had seen a lot of dances with costumes that seemed to be picked haphazardly with no attention to how it was framing what the audience was seeing. I knew that I did not want to fall into this category. I also got great feedback about my musical choices. People seemed to

respond to the widely vast range of genres and the way the music aided the narratives of the piece.

While reflecting on the challenges surrounding this piece, the largest obstacle was definitely scheduling time with my dancers. Each of their schedules was so different that we had to resort to some really early mornings and late nights. I found to be a real challenge for not only myself as their leader, but also for the dancers in the way they would respond to my directives mentally and physically. I had to have many rehearsals without everyone present which I really disliked, but I had to learn how to manage my thoughts with only part of the group. While I felt that all the dancers were dedicated to me and my process, it took a lot of strength to not be discouraged when we consistently did not have everyone in the same room to rehearse at the same time. I also found the process of working with my peers to be enlightening. I have taught and directed peers before, but it has never been a group of dance majors or people who I consider such close friends. This was actually more challenging than I anticipated because I had to find a balance of work and play. I had to quickly learn that I had to be different in my rehearsal process than I would normally be in any other scenario.

I am happy with the research that the piece allowed me to find, learn, and live. In Gaye Tuchman's *Hearth and Home*, George Gerbner asks, "Can the image of women in the mass media be changed? My answer is: It depends to a large extent on how one defines change. There are two kinds of change. One kind is a further extension or intensification of the built-in tendencies in the social structure; the other is a change in the structure itself" (46). While this is a specific example, it is something that I believe

can be applied to many other things and is something I am passionate about. I aim to change the structure which binds us (whatever it may be) with images created through dance. I believe that we have the power and the responsibility to do so. My hope is to continue creating works that continue the themes that I have started to explore with this piece. I am passionate about studying the way society images people, but especially people who do not have the voices to speak out in their own defense. I have quoted my artist statement here which is a living and changing statement about how I want to continue to aid the world in which I live.

I WANT TO CREATE A MUTUAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE VIEWER AND THE
PERFORMER.

I WANT TO CREATE EMPATHY.

I WANT TO CREATE BEAUTY.

I WANT TO CREATE TANGIBLE MEMORIES.

I WANT TO CREATE IMAGES THAT AID US.

I WANT TO CREATE TO COLLABORATE.

I WANT TO CREATE FOR OTHERS AS A SERVICE.

I WANT TO CREATE TO FOSTER THE FUTURE.

I WANT TO CREATE TO ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND.

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