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Honors Thesis

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*Suspen-*

“My piece is boring. I mean I’m into it, but I’m not sure it will be that engaging for



*Figure 1: Opening pose of Suspen-. Photo credit: Bill Hebert.*

you guys.” My mom, dad, sister, and best friend and collaborator had all come to watch the premier of my senior thesis *Suspen-*, and I had to warn them. Not to say that I didn’t believe in the piece as a quality piece of work – I just knew I had made something that wouldn’t be interesting to an audience.

This, you will come to understand, is a great irony. I needed to make this piece because contemporary audiences don’t connect to contemporary dance. I don’t mean to say that they don’t like it (which they mostly don’t) or that they don’t appreciate it, but rather that most contemporary dance doesn’t capture the experience of people alive today in the same way it used to. Mikhail Baryshnikov, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers,

Bob Fosse, Gwen Verdon, Michael Jackson: all managed to inspire generations of people with dance. So strongly were we inspired, in fact, that we all jumped off the couch to join these greats. We explored our bodies and the bodies of others. We learned to open ourselves up to be seen and to see others through critical eyes – eyes that look for cues, opportunities, warnings, all sorts of social communication. All because we felt like Michael Jackson's body in some way mirrored our own. Maybe we saw our own potential to be beautiful or powerful or confident. Maybe we wanted to be more desirable, like these people we idolized. One way or another, dance used matter. It doesn't any more. What can I do about it?

My curiosity with "*Suspen-*" was the construction and conveyance of meaning. Essentially, I was researching the questions "Why do audiences care to watch dancing bodies?" Or, "Why do audiences *not* care to watch dancing bodies?" Given that all meaning in the world is relative and no meaning is inherent: How can an audience observe a dancer, a human body, and not find anything to relate to? In what ways does contemporary dance contort or manipulate the human body so as to make it *unreadable, inaccessible, incomprehensible* to other human beings?! Our bodies are the matrices, the interfaces, through which our consciousnesses interact with the world around us. We only know each other by perceiving and experiencing each other's interface, each other's body.

I don't mean to imply, of course, that the consciousness is in some way divided from the body; quite the contrary: my body is formed the way it is in the exact same way a flower has a stem so it can strain for the sun. No one would argue that a flower's photosynthetic desires are housed inside a shell with leaves and petals. My body holds tension, grows, shrinks, sways, runs, sleeps in exact rhythm with my personality, my

philosophies, my needs, my luxuries. And so does yours. And so does every other body, if you know how to look. Infinite potential for meaning, for narrative, for reference, for invocation exists.

Don't just take my word for it! In an article from the October 2005 *Moniter Magazine* about mirror neurons, republished by the American Psychological Association, neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese, MD, PhD said, "'It seems we're wired to see other people as similar to us, rather than different. At the root, as humans we identify the person we're facing as someone like ourselves.'" Recent scientific studies suggest that neurons that fire when a human completes a certain task will also fire when that human *observes* someone else doing that same task. This is quite literally the science of empathy. And, of course, it proves with research what all theatergoers and performers alike have known for centuries: Theater is a reflexive relationship. Audiences don't watch movies or plays or dance or concerts to see someone else's story; they go to see their own. And so I ask again: How does a dance performance organize moving bodies in a way that does none of those things?

Once I had secured for myself from multiple perspectives that dance even *could* connect with audiences in the way that I wanted – because sometimes I doubt the place of dance in today's culture – I began my choreographic research. The name of the game was meaning, so I visited and revisited great pioneers of meaning and framing that I was familiar with: Austrian choreographer Michael Klien; creative power couple Merce Cunningham and John Cage; and French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir.

I began my research with Michael Klien, a choreographer with whom I studied briefly during my time in Frankfurt, Germany. Klien is Austrian, but has worked primarily in Ireland with his company, Daghdha Dance. He is an avid disciple of philosopher Alain

Badiou, and writes extensively on the potential for dance choreography to explore systems of organization within human society. In his own words, “Choreography is emerging as a way of seeing the world; a world full of interaction, relationships, constellations, dependencies, arrangements, and proportionalities. . . The way our society has choreographed dance has always been reflective of the larger phenomena of how we, as a society, deal with the unknown, the unframeable, the spirit, the animal (Klien, *Choreography - A Pattern Language*).” His perspective that we are always living within a choreographed world, and that as a maker I was doomed to reflect the social choreography back onto myself, my dancers, and the audience – the constituents of Klien’s original choreography – only fueled my desire to experiment with meaning. If my choreography was inevitably a participant in the very social structures its trying to reveal, how could my audience not understand?

In his workshop, Klien introduced what he calls the state of dance. The state of dance is a state in which a dancing body experiences any type of transcendental awareness or consciousness, specifically because it is dancing. In language that is a bit more grounded, the state of dance is the reason we dance. Many of us participate in dancing of one type or another throughout our lives: Whether it’s at the club, or at a wedding, or in our bedroom, dancing may be a more or less common occurrence. But every once in a while dancing, just the simple act of moving the body around, makes us feel, act, see, experience things differently! We feel *alive* because we’re dancing. In this moment, we feel connected to the music, to our surroundings, to ourselves, to a greater sense of humanity. Or we just feel sexy. Or we experience happy emotions, or sad emotions, or angry emotions completely unrelated to our surroundings, drawn up from our consciousnesses through the activation of our physical memories.

Each time we dance or view dance, we hope of finding our own state of dance; perhaps we don't expect to find it, but we certainly hope. We don't date people and hope they will be unremarkable; we don't dine out at a nice restaurant and hope for mediocre food.

Now, all of that being said, through Klien's lecturing and my own thinking, the seed of thought entered my head: in watching dance performance, we are hoping to observe not just any dance, but the state of dance! Because, if you think about it, the state of dance is the remarkable, universal truth hidden in all dancing, everywhere. We all can relate to the pleasure to be had from indulging our bodies. (As an entire generation of post-modern dance makers illustrated throughout the 1980s and 90s in America, anything can be viewed as dance, but we are not moved by just any dance. As Curt Hayworth says, "Dance is just a frame through which we view all movement." I would add that the frame of dance, all viewing of dance, is in relation to the audience's understanding of the state of dance.) As a performer, people tell me what they enjoyed about one performance I gave over another: "You really looked like you were enjoying yourself!" "You were so invested in it!" "I really believed your struggle!" "You made me want to get up and dance with you!" Dance audiences are looking for a dancer who is genuinely caught in the midst of an experience – a dancer who is experiencing the transcendence of the state of dance.

What I learned from all this was a theoretical languaging of something I already had experienced to be true: dance is a universal. The human body is universal. But I still hadn't managed to find literature on how, exactly, one could plan the movements and spatial patterns of a group of dancers in order to invoke that meaning. What follows is an excerpt from Klien's 2007 writing, *Choreography: A Pattern Language*:

In the late 90's I became dissatisfied with the fixed nature of my work and I followed various leads, including Bateson's, to establish choreographic procedures of active ordering and steering that would be closer to the way nature works. 'Duplex' – a pas des deux for Ballett Frankfurt was created for dancers to play out a duet every time anew. A pas de Deux, that with the help of a computer software allowed to maintain its movement proportionalities in terms of its compositional structure. I aimed to loosen up rigid compositional structures (such like a Pas de Deux), whilst maintaining a specific, overall Gestalt or form. The central question that arose was how to keep this overall Gestalt whilst keeping the substance, or the narrative of the piece -even in its abstract nature- quite fluid. 'Duplex' tried to preserve immediacy and the moment of creation while at the same time providing a structural skeleton of relations for the whole piece not to fall apart. The dancers took instructions from screens around the stage that constantly provided them with information to be translated into movement. The script was running past them like a music score. It took about a year to get comfortable with this procedure but at the point of the premiere the reading-off and integration into performance was rather effortless. The complex and problematic elements were the lifts and physical contacts between the dancers because it required them to read it off and interpret the information the same way, otherwise it would cause confusion or create a certain conflict. It soon became apparent that these moments were actually the very interesting elements of 'Duplex'. In this work the dancers had to continuously be in the moment, forming strategies in regards to the other and in regards to exact timing and spacing; all of which required an active, present mind. Over and over

situations arose that caused conflicts. These circumstances helped to developed [sic] little stories within the piece that were not preconceived and very much emerged in the moment. The work became most interesting when the dancers adapted the movement material to their own needs. 'Duplex' allowed very personal elements to arise ; the performers weren't just 'dancers' in a conventional sense but 'real people', living their lives on stage, and because of the compositional methods applied, these elements became very vivid (Klien, *Choreography - A Pattern Language*)."

Huh. So here we move another level deeper. The state of dance is a universally recognizable. Check. But in order to help dancers activate their own states of dance, Klien found that something within a choreography needed to be alive, breathing and changing with the dancers at the same time it is being created. Dancers searching for their states of dance must search not just as dancers, but with their entire selves. As Klien says above, they must earnestly try as "real people," as subjects, and not just as dancers, who traditionally operate and are viewed as objects.

The idea of living, breathing choreography brought me to look into Merce Cunningham and his collaboration with John Cage. Cunningham used chance operations – rolling dice, flipping coins, pulling cards – to generate movement randomly using pre-invented sequences or movements. He also worked, for the most part, entirely separately from Cage, so that the dance and music lived separately from each other and any relationships or intersections that arose were purely by chance. To paraphrase, Cunningham trusted that the human brain searched for meaning and for relationships automatically; his job as a choreographer and maker was simply to create



the circumstances for those relationships to arise, fresh and vibrant because of their serendipity.

Through the use of chance operations and working separately, Cage and Cunningham removed the shackles of their own capacity to imagine relational possibilities. No longer was the piece limited by one or the other's perspective on which elements would combine the most clearly – the piece and the audience were free to choose together what worked and what didn't.

In relation to the writings of Klien, Simone de Beauvoir has written in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that “man must accept the tension of the struggle [for freedom], that his liberation must actively seek to perpetuate itself, without aiming at an impossible state of equilibrium and rest. . .” (Beauvoir 96). Such is the state of dance performance: I had to make a piece through which my dancers can live the reality of their own struggles. How exciting! So much more exciting than inventing dance steps, which would invoke de Beauvoir's impossible equilibrium.

At this point, I would have loved to continue researching, but, as de Beauvoir says, “Just as the scientist, in order to know a phenomenon, does not wait for the light of completed knowledge to break upon it; on the contrary, in illuminating the phenomenon, he helps establish the knowledge: in like manner the man of action, in order to make a decision, will not wait for a perfect knowledge to prove to him the necessity of a certain choice; he must first choose and thus help fashion history.” (Beauvoir 123) I began making.

My first step was to provide myself with raw material. I began working with Taylor Woodie, a first-year dancer, for short weekly rehearsals in the fall semester. We made short dance phrases, took them apart, repeated them. My interest was in generating

material, both on her body and mine, and rehearsing it to the point of what can best be described as physical satiation (based on the coined phrase of semantic satiation, when a word or phrase loses meaning after prolonged repetition). I wanted the movement to lose the personal weight of something that we made up and were responsible for. My goal was to generate a palette, if you will, of charged movement that we could put to use in making the piece. Once I began rehearsals with Haleigh Nelson and Libby Rush, my other two dancers, I taught them this material and together we invented a common language with which to move forward.

During the same rehearsals, I immediately began playing with meaning making by creating a word association game with my dancers. For durations of up to five minutes, my dancers and I were to associate words as quickly as possible: one word following another. Our first discovery: fast word association is hard! We would become tongue tied, speechless, repetitive – all manner of confused and discombobulated. And how interesting it was! In a small way, I had succeeded in what I set out to do: the exercise created a struggle, a task, through which my dancers were made visible. For example, if a dancer stood in front of the mirror and said “Mirror – Reflection – Lake – Boating – Summer camp,” in just six words the dancer has created not just an arc, but a relationship from the present moment to a past nostalgia. For more in-depth examples, see any of the files “Libby Speaking,” “Haleigh Speaking,” or “Taylor Speaking,” submitted with this paper.

As we became comfortable with word association, I imposed restrictions: we couldn't refer to ourselves; we couldn't repeat words; we had to pair up and associate words one at a time with our partner. Through language, I hoped to provide the audience with an entry point into the choreography, a frame through which the view the

dance. Of course, vital to the integrity of the material was that the text be improvised, revealing the dancers' thought processes in the immediate moment.

As we continued, I stewed more on my readings of Cunningham and Cage, and watched a video of Canadian contemporary dance choreographer Crystal Pite speaking about her creative process. Pite reiterated wisdom that I had found both from Cunningham and also from Klien, which was that a choreographer must try to be as clear in intention as possible, despite the fact that the audience will perceive whatever perceived meaning arises. Beyond my curiosity about the beauty of struggle and the concept of universal meaning, I had to make crystal clear my subject matter, which was the revelation, the unveiling of the three women who were dancing.

My dancers choreographed what we called "introduction solos" that they felt embodied a part of themselves. I made a solo on each of them designed to pull them away from movement patterns and habits, also generating a challenge through which their personalities could be revealed. All this material we added to our already common language of movement that had been established.

Klien's language surrounding choreography as a way of activating a dancer's humanity echoed into my choreographic process at this point. My challenge was in how exactly I chose to negotiate choreographing the activation of my own dancers. We had imposed tasks, struggles – of text (in the word association), of execution (in the introduction and foreign solos). For myself, my negotiation lived between two poles: on the one hand, I considered mirror neurons again. I considered what an audience would see in movements that they, laypeople, had experienced in their own bodies. Particularly in task-based dancing, my dancers could carry out the movement with little to no aesthetic consideration, resulting in movement that appeared pedestrian and

belied none of their exceptional corporeal awareness. The movement became an honest struggle, rather than a representation. But, they weren't dancing!

On the other hand, I wanted to use the expansive virtuosic vocabulary that my dancers had at their disposal. The type of dance that they are capable of has the potential to be relatable in the same way superheroes are relatable: They are capable of fantastic, legendary feats of coordination, strength, flexibility, and expressivity. All within a body that is made of the same stuff as the rest of us. Here I reference again Mr. Klien:

“As I am aiming to work with the whole person all the movement material within a work is generated out of his/her own processes such as his/her memory and



his/her ability to learn and to forget. The final choreographies cannot be rehearsed because all processes of learning and creation are encoded within the choreographic (compositional) structure of the piece. Therefore, the piece, once it is set, can only be run once or twice a day, till it reaches a critical state through the various processes of individual learning and integration. At some stage an overall

compositional Gestalt arises that is stable enough to be performed as ‘a piece’ in front of people. The challenge in such work is to work with the individuals as an artist, to bring their memories, experiences, physical knowledge, moods etc into the creative process, giving space for such processes to be recalled and developed within the work. The choreographic framing has to happen for the

whole individual – including their thoughts and memories. This leads to issues of ‘steering’ and group-dynamics as the act of choreography takes political dimensions. The dancers are no longer ‘employed to perform’, but they are taking part in ‘living on stage’, negotiating their personal freedom and subjective reality within a larger group. The choreographer is no longer concerned with the creation of particular patterns or instances, but is providing conditions for things to happen (Klien, *Choreography - A Pattern Language*).”

And so I posed the question to them, and to myself: If obstacles are my chosen key to full-consciousness activation, how can I invoke a genuine struggle with meaningful stakes – as in there are consequences to failure – without dumbing down my potential for alien beauty?

I searched for examples, and found one in *The Vorrh* by multimedia artist B. Catling. It is written in episodes of maybe a dozen narratives, some intertwining, some not. What follows is one of my favorite excerpts:

“I shaved long, flat strips from the bones of her legs. Plaiting sinew and tendon, I stretched muscle into interwoven pages and bound them with flax. I made the bow of these, setting the fibres and grains of her tissue in opposition, the raw arc

congealing, twisting, and

*Figure 2: Haleigh leaps in her solo in Suspense. Photo credit by Bill Hebert.*

shrinking into its proportion

of purpose.” (Catling 10)

The novel itself features characters drawn from real life people, as well as completely fantastic events, such as the one above. Included: Raymond Roussel, a proto-surrealist who lived from 1877 to 1933, in the book known merely as “the Frenchman”; historical photographer Eadward Muybridge (1830-1904) and his

zoopraxiscope, which features heavily in the novel and in our world was a predecessor of the moving picture. Here I found a wonderful example of comingling fantasy and reality. Humans that actually existed and experienced trials and tribulations in the same world we now inhabit cross paths with fantastic musings of the artistic imagination.

There is no central protagonist, nor is there a unifying thread among all of the stories. The reading of the story requires the suspension of logical critique. The reader needs to allow the author to take him or her by the hand, and simply be guided through the twists and turns of the story. The invented characters themselves are anything but ordinary – a cyclops raised by robots, an assassin with leprosy, a forest that houses the biblical Adam. And regardless of the presence of actual historical figures, my perceived meaning for this story comes not from my literary mirror neurons. I've certainly never done any of the things featured in the novel.

Where does my engagement come from? What is it about fantasy that is so appealing to us? How can something that is only made real by the constructs of imagination be meaningful? And yet it is! Harry Potter. Lord of the Rings. Batman. Superman. Figments of imagination turned into cultural phenomena spanning decades. My answer: potential. In the same way Cage and Cunningham and Klien allowed for potential to live and die in their works, fantasy shows us the possibilities of what could be. Laypeople may never be able to synchronize their movements to music as well as a Cunningham dancer, but they can dedicate themselves to their own lives with the same embodied zeal. None of us will ever attend Hogwarts, but we can live our own lives with gratitude and empathy. The maker need only provide us with a bridge to access the foreign world.

From *The Vorrh*, I returned to choreography inspired. I'd learned that audiences need points of accessing the world of the piece, wisdom I had also received from professors Jesse Zaritt and Jack Fervor. A book has an exposition. I need to be rigorous about making a dance that also has an exposition, a dance that guides the audience into my world and gives them a map for how to experience it. From there, the world can be surprising and heartbreaking and touching and inspiring and all the things performance has the potential to do.

At long last, we find ourselves at Figure 1, which appears on page 1. *Suspen-* begins with an image of the dancers' hands and legs intertwining. I introduce the surreal; I destabilize the known image and orientation of the body. Lights fade to black. A flash of light reveals the dancers to be in a horizontal line across the center of the stage, evenly spaced. They shout something unintelligible. The black out resumes. As the lights come up, the dancers are in vertical corridors, diving through space. They eventually arrive back in a horizontal line, and begin their dance.





*Figure 3: Poses of Suspen-. Photo Credit to Bill Hebert.*

The respective solos never interact – each dancer changes her movement every 15 to 30 seconds, but never moves out of her vertical corridor. What results is a series of side-by-side vignettes, all combining to create a cohesive story. At one point, Haleigh begins word association, then stops abruptly. Eventually Haleigh moves downstage and Taylor moves upstage, engaging a diagonal. Libby begins speaking; her text continues to build until all three are jumping, throwing themselves into space, confined by their corridors.



*Figure 4: Diagonal in Suspen-. Photo credit to Bill Hebert.*

Through all of this, Libby is barely lit, while Taylor and Haleigh receive their own sources of light. In this position, she represents the idea of the misunderstood, the imperceptible but still contributory; possibility; potential. In two quotes:

“Man is always, as Heidegger puts it, ‘infinitely more than he would be if he were reduced to being what he is.’” (Beauvoir 102)

“Man is a being of the distances, a movement toward the future, a project.”  
(Beauvoir 102)

Libby’s solo continues, regardless of the audience’s ability to completely perceive and understand her. In fact, in reference to the first quote, her solo has the space to exist now that it is not bound by conventional perception. There is guesswork in what she’s doing, conjecture as to why she might be doing it. When light shines on her, her

relationship is seen to be quite clear. But in fact, all three solos continue; Libby's is not special because it is less visible; it is simply less visible.

Each dancer has her own choreographed solo consisting of 15 or so repeated movements that I carefully selected from the pool of material we began with. I chose repetition a potential point of entry for the audience. I am testing a hypothesis: perhaps audiences don't understand dance because there is *too* much expressive range; perhaps if I limited the movements the dancers did, and made them last longer, the audience would have time to contemplate their significance, and the dancers can continue to engage with their dancing bodies in struggle.

As the solos each draw to a close, Libby's final act is to thrash, invoking passion, energy, physicality, space itself. Haleigh and Taylor break from their respective corridors and walk toward the audience to collect her, as may be seen in Figure 6. After a parting word to the audience, they resume an evolved version of the opening image, this time downstage, as illustrated by Figures 7 and 8.



*Figure 5: Libby's final solo of Suspen-. Photo credit to Bill Hebert.*



*Figure 6: Libby being collected in Suspen-. Photo credit to Bill Hebert.*



*Figure 7: Final pose in Suspen-. Photo credit to Bill Hebert.*



*Figure 8: Final pose in Suspen-. Photo credit to Bill Hebert.*

The Cage to my Cunningham was sound engineer Megan Barnwell. A longtime friend and first time collaborator, we generated a completely original digital soundscore. Our goal in framing the piece was to create sound that independently wove its way through a landscape, referencing its own narrative. Sometimes it flowed smoothly through various mountains and forests, other times transporting without segue from desert to tundra.

We had two priorities in the composition: full-bodied, fully-realized musical environments; and carefully-navigated transitions between them. Much like the solos, the music sought to generate energy through the friction of juxtaposition. For example, if we could craft a truly seamless transition from a dance club beat into church choir organs, perhaps we could discover for ourselves, as well as show the audience, what those two worlds have in common. That transition exists within all of us – from the dance club beat mover to the faithful community member (even if not necessarily religious in nature). What meaning would the layer of music add to the piece, in conjunction with the text, spacing, lighting, costuming, and dance?

Well, the answer to that question returns us all the way back to the page 1, where I warned my loved ones not to expect to find much in my piece. After months of rehearsal and research and collaboration and experimentation, what I created became more of a personal experiment than a performance piece. I managed to take apart many pieces that I believed went into the art of meaning-making, but I didn't have enough time to put them back together again. Simply put: if the experience of performance is always greater than the sum of its parts, my piece was bent on an exposition of those parts.

So you see, I'm not disappointed – in fact, I am delighted with the final project! Ecstatic! I feel the piece still vibrating with untapped potential, avenues as yet unexplored. I just can't help but laugh that I was so caught up in my choreographic research of meaning that I decided to make a piece that didn't actually mean much of anything - like a child who kills a baby animal by hugging it too hard.

When asked for feedback on the piece, others have revealed that it was interesting, and not boring as I had promised. However, viewers with whom I've spoken felt pushed away by the piece, as if it were something they weren't necessarily supposed to see. Jesse Zaritt commented that he could clearly see the piece was “not a whole, not an entirety,” which was absolutely true. He and others have said they could clearly see the dancers engaged in the labor of the movement, which was engaging. However, while the dancers were clearly engaged in physical struggles, they appeared to be fully aware of what was going on in the piece – not discovering anything. This meant I lost an important contextual layer. Why are the dancers engaging in these physical struggles?

In relation to the transitions from scene to scene, choreographer Ishmael Houston-Jones had this to say: “Not that I was looking for narrative, but I was having a hard time connecting many of the scenes one to the next. The different ‘scenes’ seemed to be non sequiturs, which is fine, but I didn't connect to your logic in the way the were sequenced.” I have heard similar responses, which means in the future I look forward to playing more with the potential relationships to be developed in the piece. He also said, “There definitely was an atmosphere of mystery for me. I felt like I was peering in on something very private. This is not a negative thing. But if that was your intent, I think you could have been more clear in your ambiguity.”



And so I boldly go! I look forward to continuing to struggle with the choreographic balance between clarity and freedom, personal value and universal meaning, experience and demonstration. From this process of making, I've certainly learned a lot: there is no formula to reaching an audience; It never hurts to question the science and technique of art-making, but a piece made with only technique in mind will likely lack human direction. Perhaps most importantly is a lesson I learned from a conversation with Congolese choreographer and dancer Faustin Linyekula: As a maker, your first role is to draw the audience in from wherever they are. That's it. Everyone enters a theater space, a gallery, a concert in a certain headspace. His wisdom was only corroborated by Israeli choreographer and dancer Arkadi Zaides. Zaides believes strongly in crafting every aspect of a performance, from when an audience enters the theater to when they leave. In order for a performance to be properly received, the first role of the performers is to bring the audience together from their disparate lives. I absolutely skipped this step. I can't wait to try it!



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