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The Exchange: An Investigation of Engagement in Dance

THESIS

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MASTERS OF FINE ARTS
in Dance

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Exchange: An Investigation of Engagement in Dance

By

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Professor Lisa Naugle, Chair

The process of dancer-audience engagement includes pursuit of knowledge in the areas of aesthetics, philosophy, performance studies and history, and audience development. Theories related to engagement in dance attempt to deepen the understanding of the artistic experience by proposing a focus on the relationship between the dancer and audience. By establishing a theoretical understanding of engagement and exploring models of such practices, I aim to clarify what engagement is and how I can respond to the inquiry as a choreographer.

This thesis works to make evident that a more engaged arts experience should address the relationship between dancer and audience, choreographer and dancer, and amongst dancers. I explore definitions of engagement in my own movement research entitled The Exchange, inspired by Arnold Berleant’s discussion on aesthetic engagement, Sondra Fraleigh’s examination of dance and the lived body, and Erika Fischer-Lichte’s understanding of co-presence and performance as event. In doing so, I propose that a focus on engagement has the potential to open other dimensions of the aesthetic experience, subvert theatrical boundaries, encourage participation and democratization within the aesthetic experience, and connect art to
lived experience. My research revealed the importance of the experiential value of dance performance for the choreographer, dancer, and audience, and not simply its product. It also showed that an investigation of engagement becomes a catalyst for exploring a more fluid boundary between audience as receiver and dancer as performer, one in which the experience of art is continuous and shared between the two.
Introduction

A relational approach to dance performance implies that dance involves neither passive spectatorship nor active performance but rather interplay between the two. The archetypal model in which a choreographer creates a dance work for the stage and dancers perform that work (choreography) for the audience has a long-standing history in the concert dance world. However, the experience of dance, where the choreographer’s intention is to connect with the performers and audience in more unconventional ways can present a more complex dynamic of performance and social interaction. This can be better understood through the concept of engagement, where participation and observation are structured into a complex mode of choice making and the boundary between who is performing and who is causing an effect is questioned.

Engagement in dance contributes to an understanding of art practices that encourage a reciprocal dialogue and situations for connection within a community of people or amongst performers and audience members. Many mid-20th century performing art developments, including Happenings and postmodern dance, have paved the way for this particular investigation. Today in the dance field there is a growing awareness of participatory arts practices. Theories related to engagement in dance attempt to deepen the understanding of the artistic experience by concentrating on the relationship between the dancer and audience. To explore engagement in my own practice, I emphasized the experience of the creative process and the relationships between choreographer and dancer, and amongst dancers.

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1 Earlier influences within the twentieth century include Futurism and Dadaism, two European avant-garde movements as well as the teachings and works of experimental music composer John Cage, modern dance choreographer Merce Cunningham, and modern dance artist Anna Halprin.

2 More recent developments include the work of Jerome Bel, David Zambrano, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, Troika Ranch, and Third Rail Projects as well as research initiatives supported by Dance/USA funding projects that focus specifically of engaging dance audiences.
In dance studies, there are limited publications on choreographers who use strategies to explore performer-audience engagement. Instead the work, and experience of the performance, is left to speak for itself. Unless the artist has made it part of her practice, choreographers, performers, and audience members might not engage beyond the accustomed models of a dance experience (dancers onstage, audience members seated in a theater, and choreographer backstage or in the audience). The choreographer’s desire to explore engagement might mean deconstructing the conventional experience of dance performance.  

This thesis attempts to bridge the practical and theoretical by bringing attention to the choreographer’s intention to explore the relational nature of a dance performance. In doing so, I stress the need for a theoretical and historical framework for this type of approach, answering questions such as: what is engagement as it relates to dance performance and how does a choreographer introduce the concept of engagement into the creative process? I begin by constructing a theoretical framework so as to define engagement and contrast traditional understandings of performance with the more “relational” embodied activity of performance articulated by scholars such as Arnold Berleant, Sondra Fraleigh, and Erika Fischer-Lichte. I then provide a model of engagement in two performance events, Allan Kaprow’s *Happenings* and Deborah Hay’s *Ten Circle Dances*, which together elaborate a pragmatist procedure for producing work of this kind. Finally, I apply this creative scaffolding and theoretical approach in my own choreographic practice. I propose that engagement has the potential to open other dimensions of the aesthetic experience, subvert theatrical boundaries, encourage participation and democratization within the aesthetic experience, and connect art to lived experience. My

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3 The text *Audience Participation*, written by Susan Kattwinkel is a series of essays on direct audience participation in which the artist’s aim is either to include the audience in performance or to create works that would not exist without them. This book provides a comprehensive look at fourteen theater and dance works of this nature that question the experience of performance.
hope with this thesis is to reconsider how the relationship between choreographers, dancers, and audience members is positioned within the framework of the creative process and performance. This work, both written and performative, provides an introductory study for an artist interested in exploring the relational aspect of the experience of dance.

**Situating the Artist Researcher**

During my graduate studies at the University of California, Irvine, I was a dance performer in three faculty-directed contemporary dance and theater productions: *Virtual Venues*, *The Sacre Project*, and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. While *Virtual Venues* and *The Sacre Project* (both directed by John Crawford) were dance-media installations with non-traditional architectural designs to allow for physical interaction between the audience and performer, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* was a non-traditional play in which the audience became witness to a series of court trials and historical events. In each of these performance events, the separation between performer and audience was disrupted creating the potential for more performer-audience involvement.

These performances took place in the Experimental Media and Performance Lab (xMPL), a kind of black box space specifically designed to allow for projects that call for new methods of interaction between performer and audience. All of the work I have performed in the xMPL shared a common element of engagement and exposed me to an experimental structure of

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4 *Virtual Venues* was a self choreographed Graduate student series of performances with mentorship by John Crawford and Lisa Naugle. I participated in the inaugural performance in 2012 and the following festival in 2014. *The Sacre Project* was a Dance Department faculty directed performance celebrating the 100th year anniversary of *The Right of Spring*. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* was directed by Jaye Austin Williams from the Drama Department written by distinguished UC, Irvine Professor N’gugi wa Thiong’o in collaboration with Micere Mugo.

5 Though *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* did not present itself as a clear example of performer audience involvement, it did represent an alternative to the conventional model of engagement between performers and audience within a theatrical event.
performance I had not considered before, where the creative process reflected a move toward new ideas about the potentials of a live performance experience.

As a dance performer in *The Sacre Project,* I participated in a creative process with choreographers, other dancers, and the director of interactive media. During that time we spent several weeks in the dance studio developing improvisation structured by time and architecture. Our improvisation consisted of a set of tasks associated with five different locations or stations in the performance space. The creative process between choreographer and performer was open and collaborative and though they were not present during rehearsal there was also a constant consideration of the audience. As a result, the relationship between audience member and performer was more complex and evolved once the show began. Every performance became a sort of lab for experimentation between performer and audience as we made physical and spatial contact and related to each other in new ways.

I enjoy performing works that challenge my own preconceived notions of dance, including work that is vigorously multi-disciplinary and questions or plays with conventions of performance. In choreography, I choose to adopt a creative process that is transparent and egalitarian, moving away from the idea of the ‘genius’ artist and authoritarian structure. In the context of this research, transparency allows for demystification of the creative process and the relationship between choreographer, dancer, and audience.

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6 For more information on the legacy of authoritarian practices in dance refer to Robin Lakes’ *The Message behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique*
Chapter 1

A Framework for Engagement

Defining Engagement

In this chapter, I articulate a definition for engagement and discuss the theories that informed my understanding of the topic. The range of disciplines presented reflects my history as an artist with a background in dance performance, communication, development, and digital technology. As a result, I express a philosophical as well as empirical understanding and recognize that the study of engagement requires a conceptually integrated approach. I define engagement in dance as the act of involvement within the aesthetic experience and the means of enacting this involvement as, practices of engagement. Practices of engagement attempt to deepen the art experience and connect those within a performance event in a type of reciprocal situation.

Engagement occurs on multiple levels but for the purpose of this thesis I pinpoint three understandings that are present in my research and lived experience: Experiential Engagement, Perceptual Engagement and Creative Engagement. Experiential engagement recognizes and emphasizes the connections between the experience of art (here dance performance) and human or everyday experience (past, present, or future). It focuses on the action or activity of an aesthetic experience. Perceptual engagement calls attention to the blend of sensorial activity that is experienced despite the primary discipline of a particular artistic medium. Finally, creative engagement reveals and shares some part of the creative process, other than the final performance, either through live experience or technology. These ideas bring attention to a more complex dynamic between the creator, performer, and audience. There are three theoretical areas in my literature that provided insight and illuminated a framework for my investigation into
engagement: Theory of Experience (John Dewey), Aesthetic Engagement (Arnold Berleant), and Audience Engagement (Dance/USA).

**Theory of Experience**

The first understanding of engagement in this research originates from the concept of experience as it relates to the arts. In the book, *Art as Experience* published in 1934, American philosopher John Dewey’s aim was to dissolve dualisms that disconnected art from other modes of experience. His main task was, “to restore continuity between refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings…” that he believed constituted experience. In the beginning of *Art as Experience*, Dewey argues that we should focus more on the experience of art (doing, making, perceiving, interacting) rather than the art object because, “(i)n common conception, the work of art is often identified with the building, book, painting, or statue in its existence apart from human experience.” Experience can occur “continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living” and an experience can be distinct, carrying “with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency.” For Dewey, experience relied on two main ideas continuity, an understanding of experience as it relates to the individual, and interaction, experience as it relates to the world. Dewey also describes experience as ‘heightened vitality’ in which:

> Instead of signifying being shut up within one's own private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events.

Moreover he writes:

> Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ. Even in its rudimentary

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8 Dewey. 1
9 Dewey, 36
forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience.¹⁰

Experience brings art into life through action. In its most basic form, art (here dance) is a process and event of engagement between self, other, and environment. For Dewey, the lived experience of art signifies connection with the world and it can be argued that this “active and alert commerce” between the human experience and art experience plays a key role in the determination of aesthetic appreciation for the artist and audience.

**Aesthetic Engagement**

In the mid 1960s, Arnold Berleant, a philosopher of aesthetics and music, began to develop a new idea concerning the artistic experience called, *Aesthetic Engagement*. *Aesthetic Engagement*, like Dewey’s theory of experience, pursues “aesthetic experience as it is manifested in the wider domains of human social life.”¹¹ With *Aesthetic Engagement*, Berleant challenged traditional aesthetics by arguing that engagement is the substance of art appreciation. “Appreciative perception is not merely a psychological act or even an exclusively personal one. It rests on a mutual engagement of person and object that is both active and receptive on every side.”¹² In other words the appreciation of art involves active participation achieved sometimes through physical action but always by perceptual involvement. The crux of *Aesthetic Engagement* is this idea of perceptual involvement, which, he states, places aesthetics in direct connection with its etymological origin: sense perception.

Focusing on dance performance that questions the relationship between dancer and performer, this theory is significant because it provides an alternative to ‘the Enlightenment’s aesthetics of distance and disinterestedness, which is, Berleant argues, ‘a history more than a

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¹⁰ Dewey, 19


tradition in Western culture’. In concert dance, this history of traditional aesthetics includes, the conventional proscenium arch stage, architectural separation of performer and audience promoted by the imagined fourth wall, and the suspension of disbelief deemed essential for immersion into a production. These aspects of Western performance have impacted how people perceive and receive dance works, the ways in which choreographers create dance works, and the dancers intention while performing as well. The structure and socio-cultural history of this tradition often emphasizes not only a distance between performer and audience but also a separation between creative process and performance.

Many developments in the performing arts, such as the Happenings of the late 1950s and the Judson Church era of the 1960s, attempted to subvert this history and bring alternative practices to light. The theory of Aesthetic Engagement responded to new shifts in the arts led by artists and theorists who turned their attention to the experience of art as opposed to the production of art. In an article on Aesthetic Engagement, Berleant points out that during the mid-twentieth century, “the traditional separation between the sequestered experience of art and the world of ordinary experience was deliberately and persistently breached.” This ‘traditional separation’ between aesthetic experience and human experience, he says, is constituted by three dogmatic understandings of the arts: “that art consists primarily of objects,” “that these objects possess a special status,” and “that they must be regarded in a unique way.” Aesthetic Engagement focuses on the interplay of perceptual forces in the reciprocal activity between art and art appreciator emphasizing relationship and involvement, as opposed to, separation and distinction.

13 Berleant, 44
14 Happenings and the Judson Church era will be reviewed further in a later chapter
16 Berleant, 11
Experiential Unity: Continuity, Perceptual Integration, and Participation

Through Aesthetic Engagement Berleant reminds us that perceiver and object (here artist and audience) join in perceptual unity in three modes of engagement: continuity, perceptual integration, and participation. The notion of continuity promotes aesthetic experience as, “assimilated into the full scope of individual and cultural experience without sacrificing its identity as a mode of experience.”\(^{17}\) Similar to John Dewey’s argument, the artistic experience enters into the activities of ongoing human culture. For Berleant, perceptual integration helps us grasp these continuities through a blending of sensorial activity, which includes visual, auditory, and kinesthetic to name a few. He posits that perception and experience come together in most art forms; an idea that undermines the common tendency to divide and align the arts with specific senses such as: visual (painting), musical (concert), spectatorial (dance), and tactile (sewing).\(^{18}\) Perceptual integration not only emphasizes perceptual synthesis or the mixture of sensorial activity, but also deconstructs the conventional perceptions of the creator, perceiver, art object, and performer within the aesthetic field.\(^{19}\) For Berleant, these ideas “suggest the importance of a participatory model that recognizes the aesthetic reciprocity of both perceiver and object.”\(^{20}\) His argument highlights the significance of a more unified perceptual and experiential understanding of the art experience.

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17 Berleant, 46
18 Berleant, 47
19 The ‘aesthetic field’ is further described in The Aesthetic Field: a Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience as “the situation in which all the forces that enter into aesthetic experience join in mutual interplay.”
20 Berleant, 49
Aesthetic Embodiment

Throughout the text, *Art and Engagement*, Berleant seeks a different understanding of aesthetic experience, one in which the Western tradition of dualism or “divide and organize” does not overwhelm. He uses *Aesthetic Engagement* to consider dance and embodied aesthetic experience:

Aesthetic appreciation has typically been described as an act of consciousness, a certain, distinctive sort of consciousness. Such an account is not only inadequate but distorted, for there is no consciousness without body, no disembodied consciousness. If an aesthetic is to be non-dualistic, it must proceed differently.\(^{21}\)

With this quote, Berleant questions conventional mind-body dualism and also initiates an inquiry into the subtle and active ways the body is involved in aesthetic activity. Involvement is further explored in an essay by Berleant titled, *The Legacy of Dewey's Aesthetics* in which he describes the interplay of artist, art object, and appreciator by explaining:

On conventional occasions the appreciative experience of an art object may be complete and fulfilling. But there are other works of art that end unresolved and require thoughtful consideration afterward to give them coherence and resolution. In these cases the perceiver’s contribution is necessary, not just to receive the experience but to precipitate it, to work in and on it, and eventually to complete it.

In these types of works:

The appreciator then becomes not just a receiver but an activator and a creator, and, what is most to the point here, cannot be reckoned apart from the art object. Nor can the work itself be understood apart from its audience.\(^{22}\)

The ideas presented in this essay and throughout the text *Art and Engagement* shed light on the potential ways in which the art experience can be interactive but also require active contribution on all sides of the aesthetic field including artist and audience. Thus Berleant suggests that a performative factor, “active perceptual participation,” can be identified in the ‘active’


embodiment of any work. However, creative actualization and active perceptual participation, he says, are most central within the art of dance because dance, “...embodies a remarkable coalescence of artistic creation, presentation, and active appreciation, all as part of the process of performance.” For Berleant, an effective dance creates an, ‘aura’, which encompasses all of the many elements of performance each of which contribute to a collective experience. His analysis of the aesthetic experience reveals that a full understanding of art does not come distinctly from the side of creator or appreciator. The fusion of the creative and responsive, as well as the aesthetic and human experience, offers the beginning to a theoretical basis on which to understand engagement. My research follows that line of questioning by exploring subtle and active modes of involvement between dancer and audience, choreographer and dancer, amongst dancers.

**Audience Engagement**

It is through investigating Dewey and Berleant that my research enters the current discussion of engagement in dance, which includes a focus on arts advocacy through national service organizations such as Dance/USA. With the rise in federal funding cuts in arts education and a decline in audience numbers, several organizations like Dance/USA are responding to defend the relevance of dance through research that explores how audiences are connecting to the arts. Although this type of research tends to focus on audience activity, in doing so it moves beyond ticket sales and marketing practices to consider the entire art experience. For the purpose of my research, these ideas were necessary to provide a more contemporary context for the study of engagement.

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The word engagement is generally used today by a variety of dance professionals including Dance/USA, to mean, “emerging practices and new attitudes about the inter-relationship between artists, presenters, and audience, going well beyond accustomed practices of marketing, outreach, and audience development.”^24 In 2008, Dance/USA launched the Engaging Dance Audiences (EDA) research initiative in order to support various projects that investigated new methods of engaging dance audiences. This research was collected and shared nationally and benefits my own work by articulating a definition of engagement as it relates to dance performance. Audience engagement:

- Invites audiences to be participatory rather than passive and values their involvement; May be tied to specific performances, but also may occur independently; Plans in good faith that a more knowledgeable and involved audience will lead to better sales or donations and will attract new faces; (and) Inevitably involves risk, investment and innovation.\(^25\)

In this context engagement appears to focus solely on the experience of the audience, however, in dance performance it also involves the performer’s activities and the choreographer because she has designed them. This definition calls attention to the connections made between the performers and audience. In other words, the creative methods, usually encouraged by the director or choreographer emphasize a concern for the relationship between an audience member and work.

There were two prevalent themes in EDA research: social bonding and meaning making. As defined by Dance/USA, social bonding refers to the relationships built between people based on some commonality of experience, while meaning making is determined by some personal

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In a report summarizing the results of EDA research, the idea of creating relationships and encouraging a more intimate understanding of dance was realized through, “the power of peer-to-peer meaning making, transmission of curatorial insight, and leveraging technology to connect people around dance experiences.”

During projects with dance organizations such as Oberlin Dance Collective, American Dance Festival, STREB and Trey McIntyre Project, methods of engagement included social media or an online element where audiences could connect with performers and performance events to gain a better understanding of what they were experiencing or develop a deeper connection to the organization. Although many of the engagement practices revealed in EDA research included live interaction before, during, and after performances, most of these companies and artists also used online platforms either through a social media presence, transmitting performances online, or dance film websites. This is a common trend in the dance world reflecting a shift in the ways in which the audience and artist can connect inside and out of the theater.

Dance/USA gathered evidence to show that audiences generally value communicating about dance experience with peers and often look for the ‘why’ behind a particular performance.

In consideration of these relevant insights from the first round of engagement research, EDA Program Manager Suzanne Callahan concluded:

In short, a workable way to think about and plan for engagement may be to frame and strengthen the connections that can be made among the people who experience the dance, or the connections between the audience members and the art itself.

26 Definitions for social bonding and meaning-making were published by Dance/USA in the Relevant Insights From Round One
28 Dance/USA | Relevant Insights From Round One. Dance/USA, Web.
Although there is no universal definition of engagement in dance, each concept reviewed here highlights the possibility of interconnection, relationship, and reciprocity. These various theories and definitions provide a way of understanding engagement, a basis from which I am able to move the conversation forward. I am building upon a body of knowledge that is both philosophical as well as empirical and I recognize the need for multiple approaches in the current climate. Dewey’s theories of experience as it relates to the arts, Berleant’s aesthetic engagement, and Dance/USA’s investigation of audience Engagement all provide conceptual underpinnings which acknowledge the potential for a more in depth experiential connection between those involved in the creative process and the realization of a performance event.

**Traditional Understandings of Performance**

The move to explore engagement often results in a tendency to deconstruct the conventional experience of dance performance, dancers onstage and audience members seated in a theater. *For an Audience*, written by philosopher of the performing arts, Paul Thom, is a conceptual analysis of the performing arts. In it he explains that performances fall into two categories: works of art (performances of work) and performances developed that are self-sufficient (performances without works.) He claims that artistic performance can operate outside of the traditional framework, but “none of these practices is as valuable (aesthetically) as artistic performance within the traditional structure.” Thom concludes by asserting that “much ‘radical’ performance is just new wine in old bottles, and does, despite its disclaimers, fall within the traditional structure.”

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30 ibid
The traditional structure of dance is typically defined as one where a choreographer (author), makes a work (choreography), and later that work is performed for an audience. Thom analyzes the implied cultural values within this traditional structure of performance through the lens of three ideas: romanticism, self-sufficient artwork, and audience-centric philosophies. The romantic theory argues that, “the value of the author’s work is derived from the value of the author as an individual.” He or she is assumed to be the active maker of a work of art and is or should be an, “original genius.” Alternatively, the self-sufficient theory proposes that both the author and performance are ancillary and valuable insofar as the work is transmitted to an audience. The final theory views the audience as the site where aesthetic value originates, as their interpretation is paramount. Like Thom, I find that these theories insufficiently describe the performing arts, for embedded in each conception is a power relation, one in which a specific element of performance holds more value than another.

Although Thom criticizes the traditional framework, his aim in *For an Audience* is to present two points of view, one ‘antitradi tional’ and one ‘antiradical.’ First, he challenges the traditional philosophies of the performing arts that valorize making over doing and works of art over performances. However, for Thom, nontraditional performances are not as valuable as traditional performances because they lack “significant dimensions of aesthetic complexity” and

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31 Thom, 12
32 Thom, 15
33 Thom, 17
constitution of an “artistic performance.” He then asserts that radical performances have not succeeded in discrediting the notion of a work of art (this may be especially true in dance) yet he provides very few examples of dance performance. Although there may be substantial limitations in the structure of traditional performance, Thom argues that the cultural value found in those more traditional performances is still “superior to any alternative that has yet been suggested.”

What remains unclear is the status and definition of value in Thom’s argument.

In an attempt to balance two conflicting points of view, Thom expresses his own judgment providing very little specific evidence to support his arguments. My thesis does not follow in the vein of value determination nor does it attempt to reify a hierarchy amongst author, audience, and work; it explores newness without maintaining traditional/radical binaries. By entering into the conversation surrounding engagement, I hope to reveal new considerations of the artistic experience, ones that are more egalitarian.

**New Understandings**

As the art of the moving body, then, dance is embodied movement; it is the manifestation of the self in movement, as movement.

Sondra Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived Body*

Arnold Berleant uses the quote above written by dance scholar Sondra Fraleigh to argue that, “through the moving presence of the body, dance establishes a world, defining space and establishing the passage of time.” Berleant states that, “Fraleigh makes explicit such a sense of the dancing body by expressing that: ‘Dance is lived not only through the body but also *as body*...”

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34 Thom, 17  
35 Thom, 211  
by the performer and the perceiver.’ Indeed, ‘Dance celebrates embodiment.’37 This celebration of embodiment is the essence of Fraleigh’s book, *Dance and the Lived Body*. In it she states, “Dance is an embodied art” because “the body is the lived (experiential) ground of the dance aesthetic.”38 She continues to argue that the, “aesthetic purpose and phenomenal essence of dance is defined as it exists in relation between dancer and the audience.”39 What is key for my own research is the experiential essence of dance, as it is understood in the body (embodied,) and in relation to others. For my research on engagement, the self in relation to self and the self in relation to other is a major theme.

In the ‘lived body’/‘lived experience’ theory of dance, the dancer and the dance are inseparable. In other words, the dancers’ movement is bound to the personal (self in relation to self) but also moves beyond it (self in relation to others.) Fraleigh explains these ideas best in this experiential account of dance:

I cannot decide by looking in a mirror whether what I make has value as art. I must risk myself toward others. I can judge, and I must judge, my own work; the artist’s judgments are actually the basis for the work.

More over she writes:

But part of the work’s reason for being is not realized until it becomes an aesthetic object for others until it is finally subjectively revealed in them, lived through their own experience and body aesthetic. Something in dance causes me to risk myself toward the world, to test my reality - indeed; to create myself beyond my body as ordinarily lived. My dancing is most real when realized in an other. The other intensifies and tests my experience of myself.40

Fraleigh suggests that dance becomes “effective as art” in a communal context. Identification of the dancer, dance, and the perceiver as separate elements in the aesthetic field could disrupt or

37 Berleant quoting Fraleigh
39 Fraleigh, XV
40 Fraleigh, 35
disturb what Fraleigh deems the “aesthetic transaction.”¹⁴¹ She declares that value is created in
dance because of the interrelationship and interplay between all of the elements in the aesthetic
field.

In the book, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, German theater scholar, Erika
Fischer Lichte discusses a performative turn in the arts that emerged with the idea of
performance as an event as opposed to the notion of performance as an object or work of art.
Central to her argument of performance as event is the reciprocal and transitory nature of
performance as described by the term *autopoiesis*. Autopoiesis, originally coined by Chilean
biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, is used to explain the self-producing
operations of living systems. For Lichte, the concept best captured the experiential aspect of
performance, which operates as a feedback loop of ongoing interaction between the co-present
performer and audience. Autopoiesis as it relates to performance is introduced as a concept that:

… (t) ies the living process of the theatrical event back to the fundamental
processes of life itself, and as the creation of embodied minds on both sides of
the loop (actors on the one side, spectators on the other) demonstrates not only
how performance operates within human society, but why it is important, indeed
essential. As a self organizing system, as opposed to an autonomously created
work of art, it continually receives and integrates into that system newly
emerging, unplanned and unpredictable elements from both sides of the loop.⁴²

Co-presence challenges conventional dualisms associated with artistic experience and proposes a
reciprocal relationship. In her book, the main arguments are 1) that performance comes into
being because of the bodily co-presence and interaction between actors and spectators 2) in the
course of this interaction the materiality of performance (its spatiality, corporeality, and sound
quality) also emerges 3) performance brings forth meaning throughout its duration and 4) in

⁴¹ Fraleigh, 64

8 Print.
order to understand performances, they are not to be regarded as works of art but as events. These events are ephemeral and transitory and exist in the process of performance. Unlike Thom’s reading of the performing arts, Fraleigh, and Lichte see value being created because of the involvement between the elements in the aesthetic field: performer, choreographer, audience, music, lights, etc. These elements set out to make evident presence, interaction, and reciprocal relationship in the experience of performance between dancer and audience and amongst dancers. The foundation of this thesis can be understood through concepts such as the theory of experience, and experiential unity as well as contemporary examinations of embodied activity and co-presence within performance. However, in order to put these new understandings of performance into practice as a choreographer, it is necessary to analyze models of engagement that indicate a focus on embodied activity.
Chapter 2

‘Contemporary’ Modern Dance via Post Modern Rhetoric

As an artist with many disciplinary points of inspiration, my work in the past has included the use of digital technology, film, contemporary modern dance, and experimental performance techniques. I am defining contemporary modern dance as following what is generally understood as the postmodern lineage, and in the current context of eclectic, self-styled dance one can find markers of a certain historicity. I recognize a commonality between my research and the Happenings of the 1950s, Judson Dance Theater of the 1960s, and the postmodern aesthetic that followed. \(^{43}\) Developments from this era serve as a precursor for evolving aesthetics that expand the range of what dance can be and who can be a dancer or choreographer. A more in depth analysis of the totality of the Happenings and postmodern movement exceeds the scope of this research paper. Instead, this chapter will look at the Happenings and postmodern choreographer Deborah Hay’s development of the Ten Circle Dances as creative models. I have pinpointed three choreographic and theoretical methods from these developments that I believe inform my work today, they include:

1. Deconstructing hierarchy in the creative process
2. Reimagining the creation and presentation of performance
3. Embodied engagement in the artistic process.

\(^{43}\) In the text Terpischore in Sneakers, dance scholar Sally Banes articulates a definition of the postmodern aesthetic. “The experiments and adventures of the Judson Dance Theater and its off-shoots laid a groundwork for a post-modern aesthetic in dance that expanded and often challenged the range of purpose, materials, motivations, structures, and styles in dance. It is an aesthetic that continues to inform the most interesting work in dance today.” p15 Banes, 1980.

For more on the global and interdisciplinary history and current context of contemporary dance refer to Philippe Noisette’s Talk About Contemporary Dance.
Happenings

In defining art as experience, Dewey attempted to locate the sources of esthetics in everyday life. In defining experience as participation, Kaprow pushed Dewey’s philosophy— and extended his own measures of meaningful experience—into the experimental context of social and psychological interactions, where outcomes are less predictable.44

-Jeff Kelley

Allan Kaprow was an artist who questioned the nature of human experience and its relation to art by arguing that art should not be separate from everyday life. His philosophy as described in a collection of essays titled, *The Blurring of Art and Life* called for the removal of the barriers between art, audience, and artist. In the introduction to *The Blurring of Art and Life*, Kaprow scholar Jeff Kelley explains:

For him (Kaprow) the modernist practice of art is more than the production of artworks; it also involves the artist’s disciplined effort to observe, engage, and interpret the process of living, which are themselves as meaningful as most art, and certainly more grounded in common experience.45

The *Happenings* movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s consisted of ephemeral activities presented in various modes from experimental avant-garde to the most mundane of tasks. Everyday themes, materials and actions, unrehearsed and rehearsed performances by nonprofessionals and professionals, and the idea that art is participatory characterized the *Happenings* movement. In a 1961 essay titled *Happenings in the New York Scene*, Kaprow explains, “Happenings are events that, put simply, happen. Though the best of them have decided impact—that is we feel, ‘here is something important’—they appear to go nowhere and do not make any particular point.”46 In this description of happenings, there is an emphasis on unplanned action, but often these performance events were meticulously organized and

45 Kaprow, xii
46 Kaprow, 16
Mostly unrecorded and seen by few, Happenings were usually structured to remain open-ended and are ironically remembered for their ephemeral existence and ‘impermanence.’ Participation was a core theme during this movement and Kelley remarks that:

…Of course we can say that any artwork, no matter how conventional, is “experienced” by its audience, and that such experience, which involves interpretation, constitutes a form of participation. But that’s stretching common sense. Acts of passive regard, no matter how critical or sophisticated, are not participatory. They are merely good manners.

This quote gets to the heart of Kaprow’s philosophies, the essence of which can be found in the work of John Dewey. According to Jeff Kelley, Kaprow was influenced by Dewey and the text *Art as Experience,* but challenged Dewey’s notion of experience by focusing on participation and lived experience or embodied action.

In an interview with Kaprow from 1979, he further explains his philosophical and contemporary art influences mentioning that he learned from taking classes with experimental musician John Cage and watching the performances of modern dance choreographer Merce Cunningham. It is interesting to note that his influences include Cage’s chance operations and Cunningham’s focus on “doing actual things in real time.” Originally a philosopher and visual artist, Kaprow described his influences as “enormously complex and varied.” In the beginning of his practice he decided that a professional artist had to operate under terms he “believed to be new modern ones. Totality. Everything.” In other words, modern for him meant multidisciplinary and lived.

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47 In the text *Performance Art,* by RoseLee Goldberg, she refers to one of Kaprow’s first Happenings, *18 Happenings in 6 Parts,* and explains that “the term ‘happening’ was meaningless: it was intended to indicate ‘something spontaneous, something that just happens to happen.’ Nevertheless the entire piece was carefully rehearsed for two weeks before the opening, and daily during the week’s programme.” Goldberg, 130.

48 Kaprow, xvii


50 ibid

51 ibid
The *Happenings* celebrated embodiment and Kaprow encouraged the idea that artists “dip into life” instead of taking “a slice of it.” Later in his career when Kaprow pulled back from public exposure and entered the academic world, he turned his focus to ‘Activities” instead of Happenings, which incorporated his interest in the dynamics of relations and actions. Kaprow explained if, “I provided a schema in which people could interact the way they normally do without thinking about it, but now by thinking about it, it might make us all more insightful about who we are, what we do, and why maybe.”52 From *Happenings* to Activities, present in Kaprow’s ideas about the “blurring of art and life” is an argument for disrupting asymmetries between artists and observers and setting up situations for relation and reciprocity.

**Ten Circle Dances**

Dancer and choreographer Deborah Hay’s performance practice spans multiple arts movements and time periods. An analysis of her career, like that of the entire *Happenings* movement exceeds the scope of this research and is so vast that it would require a thesis of it’s own. Instead I will focus on her creation of *Ten Circle Dances*. Hay was a member of the Judson Dance Theater group, which began in 1962 in Robert Dunn's composition class at the Merce Cunningham studio, and ended in 1964 when many of the artists began to grow apart.53 Dance historian, writer, and critic Sally Banes describes the Judson Dance Theater as:

> The seedbed for post-modern dance, the first avant-garde movement in dance theater since the modern dance of the 1930s and 1940s. The choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater radically questioned dance aesthetics, both in their dances and in their weekly discussions. They rejected the codification of both ballet and modern dance. They questioned the traditional dance concert format and explored the nature of dance performance.54

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52 *ibid*
54 Banes, xi
In the move from Robert Dunn’s composition class to the Judson Church (where the artists met), the group maintained a focus on chance technique, social or collective creation, and challenging the expectations and conventions of performance. This movement is known for influencing the postmodern dance aesthetic that followed and these influences are still recognized today.\footnote{For a more detailed description of performances, chance technique, and the aesthetic of the Judson Dance Theater refer to Sally Banes' Democracy's Body.}

Hay left New York to join a land-sharing cooperative in Vermont during the late 1960’s and early 1970s. It was at that time she developed the Ten Circle Dances, a series of dances intended for participation by any willing group of individuals. Moving Through the Universe in Bare feet, written by Deborah Hay published in 1975, is a collection of the instructions for the dances with illustrations. In the introduction of the book Hay explains that the dances are:

“…a culmination of a four year search for a way to get people together dancing. They started in a Spring Street loft in New York City. I made dances for large groups of people and decided to create a situation where people would come and participate in free classes and I would see realized some of my choreographic ideas. Over a two year space these ideas became less and less important to me. What was happening to us all, individually and as a group…moving together, was much more exciting.”

In the text Hay explains that the Ten Circle Dances are to happen outside of traditional performance settings over ten nights in which there is no delineation between performer and audience. The result being one community with no audience (only participants,) and inclusion of trained and untrained artists. Hay emphasizes this informal context throughout the text. Directions are simple and meant to be memorized or read aloud by a facilitator who also participates. The suggested musical accompaniment consists of familiar R&B, Folk, and Rock songs and albums. Dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster describes Hay as having “created a number of opportunities for people untrained in dance both to develop sensitivity to the movement of
daily life and to learn how that movement relates to social and natural patterns.”

Foster views *Moving Through the Universe in Bare feet*, as a “new approach to social dancing that emphasizes the vitality of simple movements and the communal experience of performing such movement with others.” In reading about the Ten Circle Dances, I recognized that the dances become emblematic of the communities that create them, make visible a lack of hierarchy, and embody a sense of direct engagement with the artistic process. Both Deborah Hay’s *Ten Circle Dances* and the philosophies underlining Allan Kaprow’s *Happenings* emphasize a commitment to linking life and art. Hay concludes *Moving Through the Universe in Bare feet* Hay with a message that emphasizes this understanding of the art experience:

- Bring the dances with you to the lab and the A&P.
- Bring ‘em on the bus, into the garden, and upstairs.
- Take them out walking and take them to bed.

The ethos of experimentalism and diversity of expression are characteristic in these two models. Some of this history is manifest in the practice of contemporary performance today and revealed by analyzing historical events such as the *Happenings* and *Ten Circle Dances*. Although extreme in their example of disrupting the conventions of performance, both the *Happenings* and *Ten Circle Dances* provide an introduction to historical ideas surrounding engagement by deconstructing hierarchies in the creative process, reconsidering definitions of performance and performer, and striving for a connection between lived experience and artistic experience. I introduced these ideas in my own creative process.

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57 Foster, 8
Chapter 3

Creative Process as Investigatory Practice

_The Exchange_ was both an experimental choreographic process and a performance event. In this chapter, I discuss the practices and concepts introduced into the creative process, which lasted from January to May 2014. _The Exchange_ began with five graduate and undergraduate dancers from the University of California, Irvine Dance Department and myself. These performers were chosen through observation of their distinct approaches to movement, dissimilarities, and their willingness to experiment with ideas of what performance could be. All five were selected to form a diverse group to contribute to the aesthetic realm of this investigatory practice through interactions with each other, the potential audience, and me as choreographer. Due to the time constraints of this process, the group of dancers selected became an important element to provide a variety of options for an open system of choreography.

_The Exchange_ served as a space for collaboration, participation, and discussion surrounding ideas of engagement. I created the title, to use language that avoided the conventional expectations of a rehearsal, one person leading a group in a process toward an end goal. 59 During the process, I used improvisation, choreography, and discussion to investigate levels of engagement between choreographer and dancer, among dancers, and within dancers themselves, both in and outside of the dance studio.

As introduced in chapter one, I define engagement in dance as the act of involvement within the aesthetic experience and practices of engagement as the means of enacting this involvement. The practices, as I define them, attempt to deepen the art experience and connect

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59 _The Exchange_ refers to both the creative process as well as performance event. In this chapter, however, I am focusing solely on the creative process.
those involved in a performance event in a reciprocal situation. During *The Exchange*, I took into consideration the philosophical and empirical models reviewed in the literature concerning engagement as well as the practical applications of the *Happenings* and *Ten Circle Dances*. I incorporated the ideas of experiential, perceptual, and creative engagement to take a more integrated approach in the creative process.

We began our first session in the studio with an exercise in which I guided the group in an exploration of motion in the smallest to largest aspects of the body including consideration of body alignment and muscular movement. I then asked that they discover interpersonal relationships through spatial consideration with a partner. The final direction was to create physical points of contact and maintain those points of contact for extended periods of time. In this exercise, I gave most if not all of the direction for movement, but the dancers had to make decisions in order to communicate and consider their bodies in relation to one another.

During the second half of this session, we added a spatiotemporal component to consider embodied engagement in which the interplay of space and time revealed the different ways in which the body can be actively present. In an attempt to re-explore a section of our normal journey to the dance studio, we traveled outdoors from the borders of Claire Trevor School of the Arts to a specific dance studio in five minutes. Guided by our own sense of time, we moved individually at different paces. During this journey the task was to notice your body in relation to the space, paying particular attention to sensorial aspects of that relationship that may have gone unnoticed. This development of a “sense of time and body in relation to space” was an important as a foundation for the different levels of engagement that would be explored thereafter. In our discussion of the journey, I asked the group to consider the points at which aesthetic experience meets their everyday life. This conversation influenced the decision to have
the performers involved in an element of performance they normally are not in engaged in: the sound score and creation of choreography.

**Language of The Exchange: Improvisation, Collaboration, and Reflection**

In the creative process, we used improvisation as a method to develop a movement vocabulary. As a result we were able to create movement structures while leaving room for unfixed performance elements such as tasks, projections, or props. Most importantly this choice was made in consideration of the future presence of the audience. Early in the process, I was interested in the phenomenological understanding of dance presented in Sondra Fraleigh’s writing and used this as critical component of the creative process. Specifically, we considered the idea that the dance cannot be separated from the self or the individual participating in the dance. As Fraleigh states, “[s]he dances her dance as an aesthetic projection for others, a projection that includes them since they are reflected in the human material of her dance. As her dance includes others, it moves beyond the personal; yet it is inextricably bound up in her individuality.” I wanted to see how the intuitive self influenced movement vocabulary and communication with others. Improvisation became useful as a language for the dancers and collaboration developed as that language expanded.

In an effort to introduce creative collaboration in the process, I used different ways of relinquishing my authority as “choreographer.” First, I asked that the group create movement ideas individually and form a phrase to teach another person to develop “material” for experimentation. After combining two or more phrases we used this technique to create movement patterns that everyone contributed to, resulting in a series of duets and group sections. I introduced two experimental choreographic methods that included upper body gestures as
signals and verbal cues in order to prompt movement from the dancers. In the first version, I was the sole facilitator using hand signals to cue improvisational movement that was created collaboratively. During the second version, I used verbal cues that included the names of movement phrases and improvisatory instructions that we created together. Both cueing methods gave a semblance of choreographic direction but called for the dancers to make individual choices in order to transition between ideas. In the gesture cueing system, for example, a signal for a duet followed one for a solo in a group of three dancers. At this point the dancer had to determine who would be dancing, with whom they would move, and what they would be doing. The verbal cue prompt, gave direction to one dancer while the others had to determine if and how they would respond to the single mover.

Throughout the process, reflection and discussion were highly encouraged. I introduced discussion and writing as a way to reflect on movement exercises as well as concepts and theories brought into the studio. We would often move through an exercise and then have short open discourse about the work in which I would ask about their experience and observations of the exercise. One of the first prompts for written reflections was to describe what engagement meant to them, a personal issue in their lives, and something they notice people around them struggling with. I was interested in creating a space where the performers could voice their opinions and experiences, thus influencing their relationship with each other and the direction of the work. Another prompt was to discuss which aspects of performance the audience does not experience and similarly which aspects the performer does not experience. These reflections

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This cueing method was inspired by a strategy used by the Occupy Movement during their mass meetings where hand signals were used to generate consensus. During the summer of 2013, I attended the Crisis Arts Festival in Arezzo, Italy where I developed this exercise during a movement workshop titled Experimental Practices in Performance.
played a huge role in the structure of the final performance event, which is structured to blur the distinctions of performance audience space, invites the audience to be involved in aspects of performance they normally are not, and encourages communication between performer and audience.

**Art as Everyday Life**

I introduced the overarching theme of art as everyday life early in the process as a means of exploring experiential and perceptual ideas of engagement. I recorded sound from around UC, Irvine campus specifically walking from the dance department to the UC Irvine library, a pathway familiar to the dancers. When I brought this into the studio, I prompted the group to follow physical impulses, paying particular attention to volume, speed, and activity while still allowing for spontaneous reaction. After this session, I asked that the performers bring in sound from their everyday life that was particularly interesting to them. We incorporated sound from a coffee shop, cooking, water dripping from a faucet, and personal voice memos into the creative process. The physical and verbal impulses we discovered were used to structure and inspire movement. Following these movement investigations, we discussed their experience listening to sounds of a familiar environment in the context of the dance studio. Experiential as well as perceptual engagement was a consideration when we brought sounds into the dance studio and also when we took our work sessions outside of the studio.

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61 As defined in Chapter 1, experiential engagement recognizes and emphasizes art (here dance performance) as not separate from human or everyday experience (past, present, or future). Perceptual engagement calls attention to the blend of sensorial activity that usually occurs during an art experience despite the primary discipline.
Site Specific Exchanges

Twice in the creative process we moved our work sessions out into specific sites. First, we walked to the UC Irvine student center where the group was prompted with four movement tasks: performative and pedestrian stillness, contact movement with the environment, “silent disco”, where they used iPods to initiate responses to music, and “meet and greet” where dancers had prolonged moments of interaction with each other. These improvisational tasks were created in the dance studio and taken outdoors in an attempt to introduce creative engagement of mover and spectator. I observed the interaction between dancer and observers and noticed high and low levels of engagement. Engagement was high between the dancers as there was physical contact and direct communication and involvement but engagement between dancers and observers was low. Many people watched from a distance and appeared confused yet interested. Only a few observers watched for prolonged periods of time and those were the students selling food or soliciting information to people passing by. One person in particular came in conversational distance or close in spatial range to engage with the dancers or me. This observer approached me to ask what was going on. I explained the movement prompts and the observer responded that he understood it better and now could enjoy it more. This person then went on to describe the tasks to other people. The interaction between this observer and me seemed to infer that there was a necessary intellectual rather than sensorial component in which comprehension of an art experience created engagement. For many students the improvisation seemed to make them uncomfortable but simultaneously enlivened the space in ways they had not considered before.

The next site-specific session took place on the UC, Irvine Anteater Express, a bus line on campus. The proximity of dancer and observer in the space was an interesting encouragement
of engagement. Each dancer was prompted to do four tasks: to move with one or more persons as if on a crowded public transportation line; “silent disco,” where they used iPods to initiate responses to music; “bus lunch,” a communal sharing of food with other bus riders; and finally to explore brief moments of acknowledgment and recognition with other bus riders.

In the beginning of the bus ride, which lasted 30 minutes, the dancers began to move subtly, attempting to pass each other or share seats as if a crowd of people surrounded them on the fairly empty bus. The movement at first represented a relationship between the body and itself including small gestures that were almost unrecognizable in the first iteration. Eventually the actions increased through repetition and scale to start to catch the attention of people nearby or entering the bus. The dancers soon made their presence noticed with movement combined with polite utterances of “excuse me” and “pardon me.” Every so often, a dancer would disrupt the action to nod, smile, or say hello to any bus rider looking in their direction and decide either to continue the movement prompt or interact with the observer. There were many times when the dancers’ response to observation or initiation of communication appeared to make the bus riders uncomfortable or confused. For example the dancers started sharing food and asked the bus riders, “would you like some?” or “anyone want some?” (referring to the specific snack being shared.) First the dancer had to make her presence known and directly communicate with a specific person or group of people. Only two observers accepted the snack but all of them responded in some way with either yes, no, or asked, “What are you all doing?” On one such occasion, the last question initiated a conversation between a bus rider and a dancer that started two stops away from our final destination. During this conversation, prompted by a seemingly mundane task (sharing food) the dancer and single bus rider exchanged information and talked about the movement prompts, my research and about themselves.
The site-specific exchanges were process-based, creating an opportunity to make transparent an aspect of choreography, namely improvisation. This became a multifaceted exercise and included the audience of observers who were mainly students at UCI. As *The Exchange*, extended into the everyday life of students passing by, students were made a part of the creative process. People physically journeyed around or through the performers in the student center and on the bus choosing how long and from what angle they would experience the movement improvisation or if they would experience it all.

**Co-presence**

In our work session both in and out of the studio, the presence of observers was a crucial consideration. All of our movement structures remained open and avoided any solidification before the audience could be included. In an effort to introduce the potential of audience, *The Exchange* also maintained an online presence. Through Facebook we revealed certain aspects of the process that normally are private between choreographer and performer. We also invited the audience to our site-specific events and open work sessions closer to the final sharing of our creative process. By the conclusion of *The Exchange*, there were 25 guests invited by the dancers to the Facebook group to participate in the creative process either by viewing photos and videos, liking and leaving comments, and joining our performance events. Erika Fischer Lichte’s concept of co-presence or that “performance comes into being because of the bodily co-presence and interaction between actors and spectators” was explored and challenged via the virtual presence and consideration of an audience throughout the creative process. Invited guests became a creative intervention similar to choreographic interventions of space, (the use of public spaces in addition to the privacy of the dance studio,) place, (by introducing site specific improvisations,) and time.
The month leading up to our performance event consisted of activities and experiments to incorporate potential audience members into the structure. On one occasion we invited six people to participate in an engagement experiment and discuss their experience with us afterwards. Each person was given a paper handout with specific tasks assigned at a time mark. Projected on the wall was a timer counting down, starting at five minutes. Each handout specified personal and group tasks that either cued movement in the dancers or structured movement amongst the audience-participants. The aim was to disrupt the distinction between audience and performer as everyone contributed to the event. Each cue was influenced by ideas previously explored during The Exchange, including hand signals and verbal cues such as: “at the 2:00 mark, put 2 fingers in the air for 5 seconds,” “at 3:00 put 1 finger in the air for 5 seconds,” or “at 3:30 Yell BOBA at the top of your lungs.” Two fingers cued a duet, 1 finger cued a solo, and the word “Boba” cued a movement phrase performed by the dancers.

After the experiment ended we held a short discussion where I invited the participants to share their experience. In general everyone voiced a level of satisfaction in being apart of the experience and expressed a sense of responsibility to the community. Alternatively, some members of the group voiced discomfort with the unpredictable behavior of the dancers who were instructed to find moments of improvisation between movement cues. These responses were taken into consideration during the structuring of our performance event. The multifaceted nature of The Exchange as a creative process reflected the range of disciplines that influenced my understanding of engagement. Each step of the process was a way of introducing interventions to explore levels of engagement, and these levels became more prominent through observation. What began as a focus on experiential, perceptual, and creative engagement, expanded to make evident the many ways in which engagement can occur.
Chapter 4

Analysis and Conclusion

Indeed, engaged experience is experience from the inside.
Arnold Berleant

This project, which introduced experiential, perceptual, and creative concepts of engagement into the creative process, resulted in three observations: 1) it was necessary for the dancers to become familiar with different understandings of engagement in order to achieve a reciprocal creative relationship; 2) introducing practices of engagement into the creative process significantly altered my relationship to the dancers as well as their relationship to each other; and 3) throughout the creative process and final presentation of The Exchange it became clear that engagement is embodied and evolves over time resulting in many different levels of engagement. My research revealed the importance of the experiential value of dance for the choreographer, dancer, and audience, and not simply its product. It also showed that an investigation of engagement becomes a catalyst for exploring a more fluid boundary between performer and audience, one in which the experience of art is continuous and shared between the two.

During The Exchange, I realized the group of dancers I chose to work with had a huge impact on the creative process. I wanted a diverse group where everyone could contribute a different perspective, and I found that the group worked well together because each person could provide a variety of options for an open system of choreography. Within the group, one person acted as a catalyst often igniting creative exploration while another contributed individualist and nonconformist character with great personality and life experience. Another dancer encouraged exploration by continuing or expanding ideas, while someone else was skilled at taking ideas to

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abstraction. Finally the last person contributed great maturity and willingness to investigate. By the end of eight work sessions these traits could no longer be attributed to one person but instead were shared throughout the group. This group dynamic was the basis on which further explorations developed.

In the beginning of the process, the improvisational exercises were geared toward exploring the relationship between ‘dancer and dancer’ and ‘dancer and self.’ It was important to create a sense of connection with the dancers and allow them to make choices to contribute to the experience. I found, however, that this development took time, as it required encouraging the individual voices and intuitive decisions of dancers who may not have worked in this context before. A project of this type requires a longer creative process in order to encourage new ways of approaching expression, build a rapport between the dancers, and extend that mutual understanding to the audience.

To compensate for the lack of time, the group and individual improvisations as well as hand gesture and verbal cueing exercises worked as a method for de-training habitual responses to the conventional choreographic process, which is typically directed by a sole choreographer. These exercises supported a variety of approaches to movement and encouraged intuitive responses to ideas and situations. I found that a focus on engagement required thinking bodies. In other words, the dancers needed to be confident in their own decisions without feeling judgment from other dancers, the future audience, or me. At first, the group often looked for consistent “direction” from the choreographer but eventually and more increasingly made choices despite the unknown. In the beginning, a few of the dancers were more willing than others to dive into choice-making but over time this trait became more shared throughout the group. I found it was necessary for them to practice the flexibility of being responsive to me and to each other in order
to become more comfortable with uncertainty. This is because the intuitive self formed the foundation in problem solving and communication between dancers, especially during moments of improvisation. Improvisation not only helped develop a vocabulary for the dancers movement but also disrupted the conventional structure of the central choreographer, where my voice dominates the creative process. This shift in my relationship to the dancers required me to let go of precise choreographic control.

The decision to explore engagement, as opposed to the emotional arc of a more stable narrative created by a sole choreographer, resulted in a more open and transparent process. By including the dancers in the conceptual as well as practical application of engagement through movement experiments and subsequent discussion, I presented aspects of the creative process that a choreographer might not reveal. These included: inspiration, uncertainty, and in general giving up the safe position of one who seems as if they are in control and knows everything. In the progression of The Exchange, my own voice became less central. I worked to enable and assist the dancers where possible, often stepping back so as not to impede any thought processes, problem solving, or communication happening amongst them. As the process grew to be more collaborative, I became excited about the increased input from the dancers both in movement ideas and in discussions we held about the process. Over time the group contribution increased, which led to a more connected and involved relationship between the dancers and myself.

Though many of the dancers were familiar with each other, they had not previously worked together as a group on any other project. The collaborative process encouraged familiarity and comfort amongst the dancers. Although this usually happens when people work together over a period of time, during The Exchange, the level of engagement between the dancers and awareness of each other was particularly high. As a choreographer, I decided to
include dancers’ personal experiences in the creative process and encouraged sharing this information with each other through movement experiments. The dancers not only learned about each other but also discovered a way in which their everyday life could meet aesthetic experience. Physical as well as emotional exchanges increased engagement and trust between the dancers who each had their own experience of movement but often entered into a dynamic state of intersubjectivity with others. This other-oriented state of being was especially necessary once we introduced the audience.

In the course of this research, I found that engagement is not static but dynamic and evolves overtime. There are many different levels of engagement and in the interaction between choreographer and performer; engagement opened a range of creative possibilities. In the beginning, I gave directions, and led the group in exercises as well as discussions. However, I soon realized the actively intuitive dancer was able to make choices that influenced the direction of the group without my input. The intuitive dancer also made choices that opposed or resisted my direction. Both scenarios added to the dynamic nature of engagement. Below are some of the levels of engagement I observed between choreographer and dancer:

1. Give direction
2. Give direction-response from dancers
3. Give direction-respond-extend idea
4. Give direction-respond-extend idea-contribute
5. Give direction-respond-extend idea-contribute-involve the group
6. Give direction-respond-extend idea-contribute-involve the group-get response from group
7. Give direction-revolt
8. No direction-input from individual dancer
9. No direction-input from group
10. No direction-no response or input

In the site-specific improvisations, levels of engagement became even more apparent. During the student center and bus improvisations, engagement between dancers was high.
However, people observing were removed from the experience although it took place in public areas and in close proximity to them. After speaking with a few observers in the student center, I found that when the tasks were revealed and more information was provided, the observers could now place the activity in a context. It became evident that it was not enough to bring dance to the audience outdoors as a means of exploring engagement. The act of revealing the creative process through site-specific improvisation also included me as choreographer/researcher conversing with people to inform them about the process they were seeing. For many observers this made the experience more compelling.

In the final work sessions of *The Exchange*, we invited people to join the creative process and participate in a movement experiment in the studio. The dancers commented on the jarring effect of introducing the presence of others. This is not unlike most creative processes where the audience is absent until the final sharing of the work. Although conceptually we considered the audience throughout the creative process, the presence of other people still had significant effects on the dynamic between the dancers. It was my belief that engagement between dancer and dancer, dancer and choreographer, and dancer and self had to be at a high level before extending to the audience, but now I realize that engagement between dancer and audience has to happen earlier in the creative process if the relationship hopes to be reciprocal and involving.

The responses from those involved in this experiment made evident that the relational aspect of dance is powerful. By disturbing the expectations of audience participation we called attention to the dynamic potential of performance. The tasks assigned attempted to disrupt the distinctions between audience and performer causing everyone to share a five-minute experience in which each person contributed. The responses showed that everyone participating felt some sort of responsibility to complete tasks. In my attempt to construct open pathways between
audience and performer I also encouraged the switching of roles and the taking on of multiple identities (audience as performer/choreographer and performer as audience/choreographer.)

**The Exchange: A Performance Event**

The final performance of *The Exchange* represented three things: 1) an open space for collaboration and participation, 2) the conclusion of an experimental choreographic process that investigated engagement between choreographer, performer, and audience, and 3) a performance event in three parts. There were a total of two performances both of which took place in the xMPL (Experimental Media and Performance Lab) and each group of audience members contributed to making each performance completely different.

The structure of the performance, design of the performance space, and material shared, encouraged the act of involvement between audience and performer within an aesthetic experience. *The Exchange* began in the lobby of the xMPL. A whiteboard was placed in the lobby and written on it were instructions for the audience to write a task (an action or activity,) a mood (a state or feeling,) and a number. The whiteboard provided the first opportunity for engagement. Eventually, I stood up and introduced the concept of *The Exchange* and it’s development from an experimental choreographic process to the performance event that would be shared with the audience. During that time, one of the performers, who stood amongst the audience, began a personal narrative improvisation. This improvisation consisted of a series of short stories about the performer and moved amongst the audience standing in the lobby. During each performance this improvisation changed based on who was in the audience and how they responded to the performer both physically and verbally. When the improvisation concluded, the performer and I led the audience out the front door of the theater and around the side of the
building in order to enter the xMPL from the back door. This small choice allowed the audience to enter the space from a different entrance already working to defamiliarize the performance experience. Inside the xMPL there was no delineation between audience space and performer space; instead the two were shared. Along the walls, floors, and chairs were signs with exclamation such as: “sit where you like,” “it’s all about engagement,” and “you don’t have to like it, just experience it.” The signs were provided to assist people in navigating the remainder of the event.

The structure of *The Exchange* included three parts. Part 1 explored the relationship between the individual and self. During this section the performers began improvisations to a sound score that consisted of recordings of their own voices. As the performers moved about the space they responded in both subtle and abrupt ways to the presence, sounds, and proximity of the audience as well as the rhythm of their own vocal score. Part 1 ended in a solo in which a performer shared a personal narrative in a pool of light surrounded by the audience. Part 2 explored the individual in relation to others. During this section, the solo from Part 1 became a duet that included spoken narratives expressed directly to the audience, and a solo in which a performer invited individual audience members to join her for “tea.” The whiteboard, which was previously in the lobby, was wheeled into the space and used to initiate the last solo of the section. This particular solo required active participation and, depending on what was written on the whiteboard, direct physical and verbal input from the audience. The solo concluded with the phrase “Nia, I think we’re ready for the next section,” which not only identified me as the choreographer but also as a performer in the event.

Part 3 of *The Exchange* was a performance experiment in which paper handouts were passed out to the audience with tasks at specific time marks. The audience was instructed to
complete the tasks in the allotted time of five minutes while a timer was projected on a screen mounted above the audience. Each task required physical and verbal involvement in both subtle and visible ways. For example one task was to “Yell ‘Lights’ and put a peace sign in the air.” Many of the tasks were movement cues for the performers. As a result, each performer needed to actively pay attention to the audience because they were uninformed on when the cues would take place. This section was designed to be incomplete without involvement from both the audience and performers. The result was a series of actions performed by the audience and simultaneous movement performed by the dancers. Part 3 concluded with the audience yelling “5, 6, 7, 8” cueing the final movement from the performers.

During the performance of The Exchange as well as the creative process, it became evident that self-awareness during one’s own experience could cause one to become more alive to others, moving from an individual to a relational sense of embodiment. Practices of engagement drew attention to the self in relation to others and that reflexive nature was heightened by external conditions such as physicality, seating or lack thereof, proximity, location of movement, or introducing a timer and specific tasks assigned to each person. In the beginning of this research, I proposed that engagement in dance could open other dimensions of the aesthetic experience, subvert theatrical boundaries, encourage participation and democratization within the aesthetic experience, and connect art to lived experience. Not only did these things take place, but also introducing engagement in a dance performance inspired me to rediscover and enliven embodied relations within an aesthetic event. Although the performance consisted of interplay between active and passive modes of interaction, it became clear that both the audience and performers were unable to be engaged disembodied. The theater
became a laboratory while the body and relationship between bodies became the site of the experiment.

By encouraging perceptual and creative involvement, *The Exchange* transformed dance performance event into a shared experience of participation where unpredictable outcomes reflected the risk of destabilizing conventions of art making. In my experience as a choreographer and researcher, these developments forced the artist to start asking questions about the nature of performance, rethink the reasons why she makes work, and consider the experience of others. This research led me to a primarily new understanding about choreographic practice and the creative process where the push toward connection in dance manifests in a broadening of what it means to be involved in a dance performance as a choreographer, performer, and member of the audience.
Bibliography


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Kirby’s Happenings


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