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Gifts from Unknown Islands

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Gifts From Unknown Islands

By

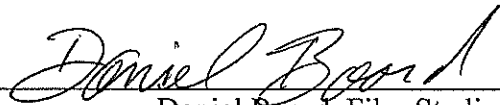
Mark H. McCain

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
of the University of Colorado
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for
the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Department of Art and Art History
2009

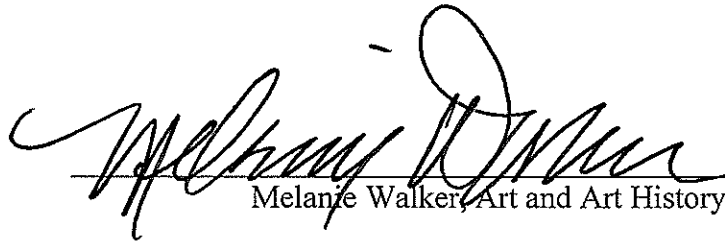
This thesis entitled:
Gifts From Unknown Islands
Written by Mark H. McCain
has been approved for the Department of Art and Art History



Luis Valdovino, Art and Art History



Daniel Boord, Film Studies



Melanje Walker, Art and Art History

Date _____

The final copy has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet the acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Abstract

McCain Mark H. (M.F.A., Art [FILM])
“Gifts From Unknown Islands”, 2009
Thesis directed by Professor Luis Valdovino

“Gifts From Unknown Islands” is an interdisciplinary performance composition that was presented in the Atlas Black Box Theater, November 20 and 21, 2009. It was made possible by the award of an ‘Atlas Innovator Fellowship’ and the support of my M.F.A. thesis committee members, Luis Valdovino, Dan Boord, Melanie Walker, and Michelle Ellsworth.

Its purpose is to explore novel ways of composing duets involving human performers collaborating with technological elements in an interdisciplinary context. Additionally, it considers the primary importance of the blending of disciplines. The meaning does not arrive through the individual discipline itself, but through the combination and resulting alchemical transformation of the individual elements into a unified collective, pushing forward a point of view.

Its overall structure is that of a frame story. It contains three individual performance duets, framed by introductions from a recurring character called the Traveler. The Traveler introduces the three main pieces with revealing prelinguistic rituals.

The content of ‘Gifts’ did not start out as a conscious narrative. It started out as independent performance vignettes. Through the development process it became clear that this piece had more connective tissue than was originally intended, so the choice was made to let the piece tell its own story and trust the structure.

CHAPTER 1

What, Why, and How

What is it?

“Gifts From Unknown Islands” is a one hour-long experimental interdisciplinary performance composition that ran on November 20 and 21, 2009, in the Atlas Black Box Theater. Its purpose is to explore novel ways of composing duets involving human performers collaborating with technological elements in an interdisciplinary arena.

Why?

I have been a co-instructor with Dan Boord and Michelle Ellsworth in a parallel trio of interdisciplinary and collaborative classes that focus on moving image, moving bodies, and surround audio. The students' projects are interdisciplinary and collaborative, and are performed in the Atlas Black Box Theater. We have been teaching these courses in tandem for three semesters and currently Michelle and I are teaching again this semester without Dan. Through this exposure, I've been able to observe and critique countless interdisciplinary performances. I have also attended and participated in numerous multimedia performance compositions (including my own site-specific interdisciplinary works). As often as I am inspired by these experiences, I am also left with the desire for the disciplinary elements to have more adventurous and explorative viewpoints in relation to one another. Perhaps I'm looking for more creatively conscious and innovative relationships. I do not mean to imply that the disciplines should relate literally, but they could possibly connect in more thoughtful, inventive, and adventurous ways that might better reflect the technologies, the space, the times that we live in, and the core expressions put forth by the performance work. In the spirit of this desire, I proposed and produced for my thesis project, **“Gifts From Unknown Islands”**.

Thesis

In an interdisciplinary performance art context, the connective relationships among the various disciplines are often more important to the result, than are the historical modalities, tendencies, references, and aesthetics that govern the individual disciplines

themselves. In order to fully explore and expand the possibilities of interdisciplinary performance, one must practice letting go of the standard and historical modes of operation for each individual discipline. In 'Gifts', the aim is to attempt innovative and experimental connective relationships involving live performer, and/either/or moving image, surround audio, and text. This idea is explored through the lens of duet performances involving a live performer and a given technology.

Duets with Technologies

The main performance vignettes and some of the introductory "framing" performances are "duets involving a person and a technological element". These vignettes stem from the desire to explore the interdisciplinary, artistic, and aesthetic relationships that a performer can achieve with a form of performance tech. The tech could include a machine, a speaker, a light source, a video source, sensors, or whatever is relevant in support of a given idea. The reason for choosing technology as one of the collaborative partnership elements is to personally explore this relationship of machine to human.

I was born with medical technology forcing me from the womb. My first bonding experience was with a machine (an incubator). My first collaborative and rhythmic experience outside of the womb was with the pulse of a machine. Before I even got a chance to understand what a machine or technology was, I was forced into a relationship with it. This piece represents my own exploration into technologies that influenced my behaviors and cognitions in utero and immediately after birth.

How was it possible?

I was awarded an Atlas Innovator Fellowship Residency, which allowed me access to the Black Box Theater in order to develop, rehearse, and perform this original interdisciplinary work with full tech support. I was able to schedule Tuesdays, starting in September of 2009, from 3 until 10 to work in the Atlas Black Box Theater. The piece was conceptualized and the design elements went through an initial construction phase prior to loading in all fabrications and set elements into the theater.

Collaborative Assistance

Collaborators - As in most theatrical performance endeavors, collaborative assistance is necessary and was a considerable part of the vision for this production.

The idea of working with a team is in itself an education in management and delegation of artistic designing, fabricating, logistical tasking, and idea directing. With a piece of this size and scope, I knew far in advance that it could not be done alone, nor did I have the ability to produce many of the props and technologies necessary to make this piece come alive. This changed my role from being not only a composer and performer, but to also being the producer, manager, and sub-contractor. It became my responsibility to make sure that everyone was on task and deadlines were being adhered to. I have had experience in this area of management and delegation via work on past site-specific productions and from leading a performing gamelan orchestra for three years, so this is not a new experience. What has been interesting though, has been the approach. Knowing in advance that I would be giving up certain control aspects throughout the course of this process, has prompted more freedom and compositional permission to allow in outside ideas.

The piece itself is composed as an entrainment device. In other words, it attracts other creative people because there is room for their rhythms and contributions to influence the inner course of the compositional time development. Knowing this in advance and allowing for it, both mentally and emotionally, was very helpful in terms of me letting go of the need to hold onto a kind of creative micro management that could make the production of a work of this size, a very stressful experience.

I was fortunate to be blessed with an amazing team of helpers and collaborators:

Michelle Ellsworth	(Performer and Collaborator in the “Embodiment” section)
Gabriel Todd	(The Traveler)
Nate Wheeler	(Technical Director)
Priscilla Cohan	(Technical and Artistic Design)
Gary McCrumb	(Production Manager)
Selah Saterstrom	(Text Editing and Supervision)
Sara Veglahn	(Text)
Richard Froude	(Voice Over)
Luzia Ornelas	(Artistic Director)

Liza Williams (Set Design) -
 Bob Shannon (Lighting Design)
 Markas Henry (Costume and Prop Design)
 Kurt Bauer (Animation)
 Anja Hose (Stage Manager)

Bios available on page 26.

Mechanics

The piece was developed for the Black Box Theater, but also developed to be modular and road worthy. Each performance section can be performed on it's own in a variety of circumstances. Set design is minimal and functional, and is created primarily out of objects, string, and aluminum mesh/screen sculptural materials, with video projected onto these set “sculptures” in order to accompany or to contextualize specific vignettes. Pre-recorded and live sounds are mixed in 5.1 surround array via the Meyers “flown” speakers.



Innovations

My intention was to find novel ways to combine disciplines and to creatively interact with the:

- use of MIDI sensors on a performers feet to trigger footstep "audio samples".
- use of microscopic camera and light table as live performance and illustrative device.
- use of kinetic mesh sculptures as video screens.
- use of a vintage medical device as one half of a duet with a live performer
- use of drums as screen for both percussive performance and projection
- use of a live movement performer embodying a kinetic mesh video sculpture.

CHAPTER 2

Structure, Content, and Technology

Structurally, "Gifts" began as a set of three performance sections. These sections were framed by introductory performances featuring a character called the Traveler. All of the sections involve a performer collaborating with whatever interdisciplinary technology is employed in its given scene. Focus is on the "relationship" of the performer to what the technology represents in that section's context. A secondary focus is on the expressive and logistical methodologies used to connect the interdisciplinary relationships.

The Traveler

The compositional device used for structuring this piece was inspired by Ray Bradbury's "The Illustrated Man", which itself is a "frame story". A frame story is a larger narrative that encapsulates internal and often unrelated shorter stories. In "Gifts", the character of the "Traveler" is the central unifying character. He is an embodied metaphor for the raw and unprocessed information, traumas, and memories that are often fuel for creative and behavioral output. The Traveler is pre-linguistic and pre-cognitive in the sense that he has not yet formed a cognitive mind. His behaviors are impulsive and instinctual. His expressions are verbal sounds that emanate from the most honest and direct aspects of his immediate being. Within this place of limited intellectual cognition, there lies an unfettered connection to the moment and to direct action. There is no disconnecting from stimulus and desire, from hunger or pain. All aspects of life are immediate and consequential without a complex frontal lobe narrative. Things are, and they happen, and are reactive in that they respond with emotion and behavioral action.

Rondo Form

Structural Outline - The full performance consists of three developed vignettes, each separated by the Traveler's "revealing" rituals. In each variation, he will reveal a nonverbal method of introducing the subsequent performance vignette. This should help illuminate the inspiration for the upcoming performance. Structurally, this creates a

Rondo form variation (A B A' C A'' D), with a provocative introduction.

Provocation

A_ (Traveler Reveal One)

B_ 'Clopsis Island'

A'_ (Traveler Reveal Two)

C_ 'Entrainment Dream'

A''_ (Traveler Reveal Three)

D_ 'Embodiment'

END



'Gifts' Synopsis

Introductory Provocation

"Gifts" opens in a dark environment with the sound of footsteps backstage. The footstep sounds begin on a carpet. The Traveler enters the performance area and begins a slow walk around the stage. Each of his footsteps sound as if they are in a specific indoor or outdoor environment. These environments constantly change and morph as the traveler moves through space. The steps alter their sound, moving from carpet, to gravel, to snow, to hardwood floor, to creaky stairs, to swamp, to forest, and onward. As he reaches and steps onto a platform in the center downstage area, the footstep sounds become silent.

Technological Methods:

Plan A - The traveler's environmental footstep sounds are triggered by wireless MIDI sensors on the bottom of his feet that are designed to activate a pre-recorded footstep

sample sequence.

Plan B – If the MIDI sensors fail, an operator from a laptop can also trigger the sequence of samples along with the Traveler’s footsteps in real time.

The traveler centers himself on the platform
and begins
his first revealing introduction.

A

(Traveler's Reveal One)

The traveler tells a vocal, prelinguistic story. It is the expressed memory of an inner event. It is a narrative from an interior organ or body system. Performances are improvised, allowing emanation from whatever interior anatomical location most desires to express that night. The traveler makes his sounds until a pre-recorded voice over begins reciting a text. The intent of this moment is for the voice over to be perceived by the audience as a translation of the traveler’s vocalizations. As the voice over continues it’s recitation, the lights go dark on the traveler and he leaves the stage.

This leads to the first performance vignette.

B

Vignette1

“Clopsis Island (The Mayflies)”

Text by Sara Veglahn

Reading by Richard Froude

Live soundscape by Farrell Lowe and David Willey

Clopsis

As the Traveler exits the stage, I simultaneously enter stage right, in the dark, with my back to the audience. I am holding a white, sixty-inch sphere over my head, with arms fully outstretched. I begin to slowly walk sideways, crablike. On the curved surface

of the sphere there is a video projection of a large eye, staring directly outward toward the audience. The eye is a moving image video projection that is physically controlled by a stagehand from the catwalk at the back of the theater. It will remain aimed and projected on the sphere as it is slowly walked through the space. When I reach its resting place, I lower the sphere and move toward a light table pulpit downstage. Live “ocular” music is performed by Farrell and Dave as the sphere is carried across the stage.

Some Artist References

The visual language of the eye on the sphere is reminiscent of Tony Oursler’s video sculptures that feature human sensory organs abstracted onto various 3 dimensional sculptural shapes. His work is most often displayed in an installation context. What is different about my work is that it involves physical motion of the object and is in duet with a live performer as a time event. It is also meaningful in the context of the piece.

This scene contains another reference as well. It is a nod to Nathaniel Dorsky. When I see Dorsky’s work, I often sense the presence of an observer. This observer seems like a cyclopean creature exploring and inspecting the aesthetics of the everyday, specifically how light dances, hides, and reveals on surfaces. In the context of this vignette, I am the observer and the microscope is my cycloptic eye.

Microscope Camera Performance (The Mayflies)

This is an interdisciplinary duet combining text (“The Mayflies”, by Sarah Veglahn) and the performative use of a micro video lens to illustrate various real time plot details (magnifying skin, small particles of organic material, pictures or printed material). It also features prerecorded human voice, kinetic video sculpture, written text, and improvised sound design.

After setting down the sphere, I reach for a power switch to turn on the light table and to begin to explore various objects, organics, and liquids with a USB microscope camera. The images of the microscope are digitized and projected in real time onto two, sixty-inch white spheres standing stage left and right. In the center of the stage is an eight-foot long, kinetic sculpture hanging from a wirelessly controlled DC motor on a

theater beam. The sculpture is made of aluminum window screen material that has been painted various shades of flat primer white to grey. It is then molded into a ghostly nest shape. It rotates as live mixed video images and scrolling text are projected onto its surface.

The pre-recorded male voice over (performed by Richard Froude) recites the text. Simultaneously, I combine and explore printed text, oils, soaps, hair, food, maps, powders, webs, dust, and blended (in a coffee grinder) versions of them all with the microscope. The sculpture acts as a screen for upwardly scrolling videotext “cut ups” sourced from various sections of the “Mayflies”. They are controlled and improvised with by operator Luzia Orneles (artistic director). She is using a custom Jitter video-mixing patch developed by (tech director) Nate Wheeler. Luzia also has the choice to layer pre-produced movie clips that were made during previous microscope camera explorations. In addition to pre-recorded soundscape, there is live sound improvisation by Farrell Lowe and David Willey.

This performance section ends with moving images of rhythmic caterpillars
projected onto the mesh sculpture,
which in turn,
lead to the Second Reveal.

A'

(Traveler's Reveal Two)

In this reveal, the Traveler performs a metaphorical duet with a vintage medical device (VMD). He has a metal framing structure on his left arm, up to his shoulder, that is covered with wires and tubes (found by Costume Designer, Markas Henry). It has two microphones wired onto its fingers and a set of pitch shifter buttons in the palm (circuit bent by Nate from a broken pitch shift toy). On his chest and back are small speakers in resonant containers, used to amplify the finger mics and to create feedback noise (assembled by Nate). The Traveler tries and struggles to connect in a biological way with this technological device. He is unable to do so but he keeps trying. As he rounds the platform, he becomes increasingly exhausted. His energy rapidly wanes and he lies down

and goes to sleep.

In his sleep, he begins to have a dream about a successful entrainment.

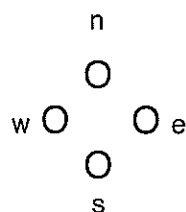
C

Vignette 2

“Entrainment Dream”

“**Entrainment** in the biomusicological sense refers to the synchronization of organisms to an external rhythm, usually produced by other organisms with whom they interact socially. Examples include firefly flashing, mosquito wing clapping as well as human music and dance. “

Wikipedia



Dream Prelude:

As the traveler sleeps, his dream begins to manifest as projected video onto four drum screens. The screens are configured as four round screens set up in a diamond shaped, or four-leaf clover pattern. The conceptual arrangement of the 4 screens is that of North (head), West (right hand), East (left hand), and South (torso or belly). Each of these screens individually hosts discreet video information that connects in some way to the other three screens. The projected moving imagery content is that of memory fragments and disconnected body movements that portray the Traveler’s mind letting go into another dimension of experience.

Tech:

This was achieved through pre-produced video shoots of me performing behind the drum screens with colored backlighting. The style reflects the “wayang kulit” or shadow theater of Bali Indonesia. The difference is that instead of puppets, hands and body were the sources for the video.

At some point, the eye reappears,
 at first calmly looking outward from the North,
 and subsequently becoming more agitated
 as it realizes
 it is
 seemingly
 being
 buried alive.

The Entrainment Performance

The live performance begins with a video of echoed hands, projected onto the top surface of the South drum screen. On top of them, appear the live performer's hands, indicating that collaboration is about to take place. The forces of relationship gather between the performer and the collective of virtual hands. They will soon, rhythmically align their movements as they perform this hocketed or "*kotekan*" entrainment practice.

Kotekan

The idea of the *kotekan* is the fundamental compositional concept of this performance. *Kotekan* is a Balinese word that means "interlocking". It refers to two individual harmonic and rhythmic musical phrases that when played together by two (or more) people, form one complete rhythmic and harmonic phrase. In western culture this musical device is often called a "hocket". Its purpose in the context of this piece is as a vehicle for the live performer to execute one half of the *kotekan*, and the prerecorded video and sound to execute the other half. Together they create a "complete" rhythmic, visual, and musical event. This illustrates the successful outcome of entrainment with a technological system in a way that the Traveler could not achieve in his medical device duet. The *kotekan* used in this section is adapted from a Balinese composition for *Anklung Gamelan*, titled "Sindu Arsa".

Technological Methods

1 - The screens were developed (out of a thirty-inch drumhead and three twenty two-inch frame drums) and painted by Mark. The metal frame sculpture that holds the drum screens, was primarily designed and fabricated by Priscilla Cohan.

2 - The source videos for the drum screens were shot as SD video in a DV NTSC 30 frame Progressive format. They were video taped at my studio in Denver while simultaneously recording the percussion audio on a laptop with an Mbox IO and Pro Tools.

3 - Individual hand parts were recorded separately and later edited, combined, and mixed in the "Brave New Audio" postproduction studio.

4 - The final mixed video/audio outcome ended up as four 720X480 videos that were synced, scaled, and presented in the Black Box Theater. They were organized for projectors with the media management software, Qlab on a Mac G5 going out VGA to a single Barco projector.

5 - The drum screens are miced individually. The prerecorded audio is played through the Meyers speakers in a quadraphonic configuration with the live mics.

6 - I am wearing headphones to monitor the prerecorded and live sounds plus a click, or metronome track. The click track also contains "countoffs" that cue me as to when to start performing along with the pre-produced video. The audience does not hear the click track.

7 - I need to be able to see my hands in relation to the video hands during the performance. To do this, we set up a video camera and monitor facing me on the floor in front of the drum screens, much like a floor, sound monitor wedge.

“Entrainment Dream”

Performance

Compositional and Stylistic Considerations:

The compositional drama of this vignette was developed as a study in both improvisational and freeform, “dark” areas, contrasted by the highly structured and rhythmic kotekan events. I wanted each of these ideas to reference or contain it’s opposite state.

Hands - This section is primarily a hand performance. In addition to the other important life tasks my hands must attend to, the skill of percussion playing has been a deep and driving motivation in my aesthetic universe. I have spent much of my life practicing and developing my hands as a drummer and percussionist. Most of my creative output has been manifested through the hands. In the context of "Gifts", the arms and hands from the Traveler’s Duet with VMD (medical device) segment, become subjects of the Traveler's dream. In his duet with the VMD, the Traveler attempts to entrain with the tech device that is attached to his arm. His freedom is limited and the duet becomes about his inability to unite with the device. The dream, conversely, reveals his desire to connect, and his fantasy experience of unified relationship through a communal rhythm of the hands.

Tempos - Tempo choices are made according to how they interact physically when playing the floppy drumhead. Some tempos are difficult to play on the head because it's bulges want to "snap back" at a specific rate after being hit. In order to collaborate with the head, tempos must be chosen that are in sympathy with the head's internal reactive rhythms.

Light Contrast - The bottom drum is a thirty-inch fiberskin bass drum head. Fiberskin, made by the Remo Drumhead Company, is an imitation animal hide head that has some of the sonic qualities of the real thing. It has no frame or shell in order to give it resonance or sustain. It cannot be tightened or tuned in any way, so it is just a big floppy

head that sounds similar to hitting a piece of paper. The fiberskin has been painted, as all of the drum screens have, with flat white metal primer in order to screen video properly. With various lighting schemes (backlighting, side angled lighting), the drumhead reveals it's bumpy imperfections and strange shadows. It can visually approximate the surface of a planet or moon. Hands on this surface can also be visually interesting because of the thick, high contrast shadows that are cast. By angling light to the side of the drum, the hand shadows become long and exaggerated. When rhythms or motions are made with the hands, the shadows act as characters or entities that seem to add their own interest and create more visual depth.

“Catch and Release”

(Animated and Stylized by Kurt Bauer)

As the Kotekan performance comes to a close, an animation of a man sitting on a cloud appears on the North screen. His head is cut off and there is blood spewing out of his neck. This animation is very stylized and "cartoonish". The blood drops down and drips from the West screen. A fantasy animal appears crawling through the South screen and upward into the West screen and turns his head around and upward. He then begins to catch the dripping blood in his open mouth. The animal then crawls down to the south screen and regurgitates a green liquid and a fish. The green fills up the drum screens.

The fish then swims around the drums in a clockwise circle,

which cues the Traveler's Third Reveal.

A''

(Traveler's Reveal 3)

In this reveal, the Traveler moves through the space holding two smaller frame drums, one in each hand. They each have handles attached, so they can be held like large lollipops or frying pans. On his head there sits a crown like structure holding a steel

drum. *Both the handles and the steel drum crown were designed and fabricated by Priscilla Cohan.* From the light grid, in the upper part of the theater, I am dropping bamboo toothpicks down onto the Traveler and activating the three drums. The composition is the duet between the dropper of the toothpicks and the traveler's movement choices. The structure is based on the way a small rainstorm develops. We start with very few toothpicks and more frequent rests (or silences) and we build into denser quantities and a more consistent flow.

The lighting of this is very important so that the audience can see the toothpicks as they fall and bounce. Lighting Designer Bob Shannon did a terrific job of enhancing this simple duet.

The sound of prerecorded rain playing frame drums rises in the theater, signifying the final performance vignette.

D

Vignette Three "Embodiment"

This is a collaborative section, developed by movement and performance artist Michelle Ellsworth with Mark McCoin. The idea for the oval contraption came out of collaborative discussions between Michelle and Mark. After some initial ideas were found to be too expensive, we settled on this hoop device. The engineering and fabrication was a collaborative effort involving Michelle, Priscilla Cohan, John King, and Gary McCrumb, who figured out how to rotate the kinetic sculpture around the same central point as the hoop. The hoop fabrication was overseen by Priscilla and was built by public artist/engineer John King. The result of this collaboration became a duet involving Michelle Ellsworth and a kinetic oval sculpture. The motivation is based on an in-utero experience.

Michelle is harnessed inside of an oval metal hoop contraption that is vertically longer than she. Through the middle of the hoop is a movable set of bars that fasten around her waist. These horizontal bars are engineered with ball bearings so they smoothly allow Michelle to rotate in a "head over heels" fashion inside of the oval. She is

held in these bars with a harness that contains her firmly.

Surrounding the oval is a large mesh sculpture that can be rotated by hand. The large mesh sculpture is constructed of aluminum screen window material that has been painted with white metal primer (in order to be more receptive to video projection on its surface). There is also light design aimed directly onto Michelle via theater lights at the top of the sculpture. This allows lighting design and moving video imagery to combine and create an illusion of depth and containment. It can appear that Michelle is inside of a three dimensional container.

The hoop and the mesh sculpture are both hung from the beams of the light grid and the hoop is about four feet off of the ground. Directly underneath the hoop sits the Traveler. He is able to turn and slowly spin the oval right or leftward. When this motion is combined with Michelle's movement, it gives the illusion of gyroscopic movement. I stand in the back of the surrounding mesh screen video sculpture and spin it by hand, independently of the oval, for another layer of motion.

Live sound, performed by David Willey and Farrell Lowe, is created by activating electric stringed instruments. These instruments are bowed and manipulated with metal pieces and objects to create sustaining and unstable sounds.

END

CHAPTER 3

Historical Contexts and Influences:

Improvisation:

“ IT'S STUPID TO RENOUNCE THE DYNAMIC LEAP IN THE VOID OF TOTAL CREATION, BEYOND THE RANGE OF TERRITORY PREVIOUSLY EXPLORED.”

Dynamic, simultaneous. That is, born of improvisation, lightning-like intuition, from suggestive and revealing actuality. We believe that a thing is valuable to the extent that it is improvised (hours, minutes, seconds), not extensively prepared (months, years, centuries).¹

From the futurist synthetic theatre by f.t. marinetti, emilio settimelli, bruno corra 18th february 1915

Improvisation is used to provide an experience that is tied into the moment. In most of the performances I am involved in, I will try to allow for, or set up forms that will allow for, a collaborative experience between the moment and the performer. These improvisations can take the form a highly structured idea, or a very open and uncertain format. In ‘Gifts’, improvisation is built into almost every section. From the traveler's reveals to the most structured of vignettes, they all have room for the performer to interact with the moment and their own inner state of being. Unlike most commercial or narrative theater productions, ‘Gifts’, has more of a lyrical approach to its time basis. Since the conceptual and reference foundations are not completely based on language, there becomes more room to push and pull on the boundaries of meaning as it relates to each individual moment. As an observer, one may not be able to tell if the performer is improvising or putting forth a preplanned series of gestures, words, or events. The hope is that when improvisation is involved, there are more possibilities for transcendent and transformational moments. The performer and the audience are more on the edge of the experience together, as opposed to being passively told a story or showed an event.

How a performer deals with the moment is a good indication of how much freedom that performer has in his or her body.

Some Relatively Modern Influences:

Tony Oursler – video sculpture influences

Nathaniel Dorsky – The observer, and the beauty of the “everyday”

Stelarc – Robotic body attachments and cyborg explorations²

Haruko Nishimura - “Degenerate Art Ensemble”

Dumb Type - Japanese interdisciplinary performance

Karlheinz Stockhausen – multichannel audio composition

Raymond Rousell – Parenthetical composition ideas and uber creativity through unique structural procedures³

Leighton Pierce – Moving image texture mapping of 3D objects, simplicity, and patience

Butoh performance – Slow motion and deep embodiment. Proto human. The Traveler.

Mathew Barney – ambiguous imagery and time basis, with high production aesthetic

⁴*Fluxus* – finding novel ways of combining text, things, and artistic disciplines

20th Century References:

Early on in my aesthetic awareness and development, I was shown the works of Max Ernst. Not only did the paintings themselves resonate with my own dream visions but the aleatoric techniques used to conjure up these images was revelatory. The idea that one could have a duet with chance and have it turn into such successful and visionary landscape changed how I conceptualized and approached artistic process. At every point in the process of developing ‘Gifts’, I attempted to introduce at least one element that was not in my control, whether it be the addition of another human that would influence the compositional time flow, or perhaps a set/prop piece or technical element that would

create an opportunity to collaborate with the moment. The largest example of this process is the live performance aspect of each piece.

JOHN CAGE

SIMPLICITY,
SILENCE,

HEARING,

IDEA

BRAVE

SPACE

LISTENING

UNCOMPROMISING

SMALL

IDIOSYNCRATIC

INCLUSIVE,

NOISE

EGOLESS,

INTEGRATION

ZEN

ALCHEMY

COLLABORATION

CHANGE

IMPROVISE

GROUP

Anton Webern

When I first heard Anton Webern's works, I was struck by the simplicity and directness of his orchestrations when compared to those of his 20th century compatriots, Berg and Schoenberg. All of these composers worked in a "serial" composition format

that involved serializing, or setting up "rows" (sequences) of events in order to determine compositional elements. This system started as the "12 tone" compositional technique, which meant all 12 notes of the tempered western scale were put in an order (determined by the composer) and none of the 12 notes could be repeated until all had sounded. The reason for this was to provide a systematic way to escape the "tonality" of the time. Tonal music is based on the history and system of western scales and harmonic tendencies. In opposition to the tonal system came the concept of serializing all aspects of composition. Dynamics, instrument groupings, textures, timbres, rhythms, and tempos could all be serialized.

Webern was an avid serialist and used this technique for much of his composed works. His orchestral works often concentrated on small, yet densely constructed and thoughtful sound events. Every idea was like a small gemstone. They were concentrated clusters of sound that often had silences on either side of them. My first reaction to his composition was revelatory. I had never experienced such sonic art such as this. The idea of making each event in a composition, a purposeful and delightful sound experience is not how orchestral music is usually composed. John Cage remarked on the radio show "Fresh Air" (and I paraphrase), the difference between a musician and one who delights in sound is that the musician is interested in the juxtaposition of sounds and how that creates an alchemy or new timbral and textural meaning. On the other hand, the one who delights in sound can be enthused by the richness and complexity of one sonic event. Within most every sound is a richness of harmonics and textures that are often taken for granted. In "Gifts", both the simplicity and thought of Webern's Orchestrations, and the desire for every event to be a concentrated experience, have been my underlying aesthetic guides in terms of composition.

CHAPTER 4

Post Performance Considerations

The feedback I have received from others has been one of the more fascinating aspects of this piece. The composition obviously did not stop at the end of the performance runs. It has a life of it's own in the minds of others. People have been contacting me about their interpretations of sections of the work, and how it is affecting their thinking. Some people genuinely appreciate the exploration into the more "proto human" aspects and found it a reflecting pool for their own inner stories and belief systems. Others seemed more enthralled by the way the piece moved through time and how their own body systems reacted to a non-or semi-narrative exploration of this sort. One such comment involved the reflective aspect of the work. Someone said the resulting experience was much like giving a deaf person a balloon to hold in order to feel the vibration of music. The deaf person cannot obviously hear the sound of the music, but can feel the vibrations of the sound waves and interpret them in their own way. I have been getting variations on this type of feedback. It seems to conjure up individuals' own internal stories more so than creating a unified specific and concrete narrative.

One audience member spoke about this piece being about beginnings. Every section is about the beginning and ultimate possibilities. It is about the process of birth and gestation and evolutionary recipes/ingredients, but maybe also the birth of creative ideas or situations that allow multiple possibilities to gather and flourish. One audience member explained that every time his attention would start to drift, something in the piece would pull him back. Something would tug on a synapse or tweak a nerve and he would be back on the time experience.

Issues and Revisions

Mark's Character

One of the issues that begs to be worked on would be that of my character. Since the piece was originally developed as three distinct performances with a frame preceding each one, I put little thought into myself as a recurring personality. The "Entrainment Dream", drum screen piece, was originally composed to show only my hands, so a full

character type was not necessary in that vignette. Through the process of development and production, primarily lighting, it became more interesting to reveal more of me as a performer, so I had to adjust the performance. That happened during tech rehearsals where the ongoing compositional thought at that time was to keep the vignettes as separate performances. As we started running the whole show, I started realizing how much more connected these performances are than simply separate vignettes. Since the Traveler is a reoccurring character with an iconic reference, I might need to develop a one as well. This was never consistently realized in this series of performances. I would like to flesh this out as a compositional element. Somehow my character needs to remain consistent from the microscope piece to the entrainment piece. Perhaps the role of the explorer or observer could be played with.

Cloopsis Island:

The Microscope piece was the most difficult to get a handle on for me in terms of flow. Working with the aesthetic of the microscope imagery is very slippery. It has the potential to be a “lava lamp” experience, as does the final section with Michelle in the oval. I had hoped the text would help in terms of content and the kinetic mesh video sculpture would add as a second narrative as to offset the perceived “importance” of the voice over. I don’t feel that I ever achieved what I was after with this section. It seemed to become more of an installation rather than a time performance, in the sense that it did not resolve it’s disciplinary elements in an elegant fashion (or at least in the way I had hoped).

Entrainment Dream:

The Entrainment Dream, or drum screen section, was more successful as a composition and had an energy flow that was dynamic and integrative in it’s interdisciplinary nature. All elements of this section served to enhance the overall alchemy of the final result, thus creating both a connected time flow and a sense of compositional completion.

Embodiment:

The “Embodiment” section is much more of a slice of time, than it is a story, or at least a narrative composition. This section was highly improvised with the intent of creating a dynamic sculptural event based on a primal, in eutero experience. The formal idea was to embody a kinetic mesh sculpture and to find interaction with the human performance experience and the mesh video screening that surrounded the aerial performer. I was onstage for most of this performance, so it was difficult to understand how well it worked visually. I had to rely on feedback from others and hope they are not just being nice. Michelle provided fantastic and deep movement work, while the sound performers added a strong sense of emotion and drama to this section, which certainly gave it more interest, and a feeling of dramatic movement though emotional space.

The choice of how to end this section should be thought about more. Friday night had a natural feeling ending while Saturday seem a bit less elegant. Certain audience members let it be known that it was disturbing for them to not have a conclusive ending. I imagine they desire an ending that is culturally acceptable and helps to process what they have just witnessed. I’m not so sure I want to give them that. I think having to wrestle with that absence might be a good thing.

Conclusions:

This experience has strengthened my view that there is a whole frontier of interdisciplinary connective possibilities with technologies that are begging to be explored. The requisite action is to not be afraid to break some rules or historical precedents, and to attempt something meaningful or ridiculous. Intuition, vision, community, and courage were constantly reinforced by this process and became the foundation for mounting this performance. Interdisciplinary connective research and practice in the theater provides a microcosmic laboratory for interdisciplinary creative thought. I genuinely believe that interdisciplinary approaches to our world climate, economic, and energy issues are the “next level” methods of solving these massive problems. I will spend the rest of my life teaching and working in this interdisciplinary arena.

Collaborators' Bios

Michelle Ellsworth (performer) - Michelle Ellsworth has performed at Dance Theater Workshop, On The Boards, Jacob's Pillow, The Sushi Gallery, The Telluride Experimental Film Festival, Links Hall, and the Solo Mio Festival. Her drawings, spreadsheets, and scripts have been published in CHAIN and her video installations have been presented at P.S. 122 and Boulder Museum of Contemporary Arts. Ellsworth is currently making a 7-inch recording with Drummer Sean Meehan.

Gabriel Todd (Performer) is a dance and music based performing artist hailing from the San Francisco Bay Area, where he lived, trained and performed for 8 years before moving to Boulder. As an interdisciplinary performer/composer/choreographer/director he creates solo and ensemble work bringing together elements of voice, original music, contemporary dance, physical theater, ritual, and video. On a thematic level his work tends to address the complexity of conflicted identity in the spaces in between queerness, mixed cultural origins, family traditions, popular culture, and the personal myths that manifest as a means for survival. He has been seen performing in alleys, bus stops, on street corners, in warehouses, theaters, dance clubs, bars, and in video and film. In the Bay Area he performed with Keith Hennessey, Circo Zero, Kim Epifano, Sara Shelton Mann, Tomi Paasonen, and Krista DeNio. In Boulder/Denver he has worked with Onye Ozuzu, Cortney McGuire, New Denver Orchestra, Lauren Simpson, Nina Rolle's Zen Cabaret and many others. He is a second year graduate student in the dance department at CU where is focusing on interdisciplinary performance, dance for camera, and somatics. He is currently in the process of developing an ensemble cross-training form for performance, blending stick drumming, voice, and contemporary dance.

Nate Wheeler (technical director) - Nathan Wheeler is a composer, sound engineer, recording artist, and producer based in Boulder, CO. His career has included sound design and live mixing for many performances in the Black Box Theater on campus at CU Boulder, as well as many sessions recording music and live sound reinforcement of all styles on both sides of the mixing board, including multichannel audio and video productions. As a composer, he focuses primarily on Electroacoustic Music, utilizing the diverse timbres of both electronic and acoustic instruments in his work, as well as mixing traditional trends with progressive ones. Recently, he has been on tour with The Dovekins as percussionist, and recorded and mixed a piano concert for CU faculty Hsing-Ay Hsu, to be released on CD and DVD in late 2009.

Priscilla Cohan (technical and artistic design and fabrication) - Priscilla Cohan is a visual artist who lives and works in Lyons, Colorado. She has collaborated with Michelle Ellsworth on many pieces including, *The Objectification of Things*, TIFPRABAP.ORG, *Ed: The Word Made Dress* and *All Clytemnestra in the Western Front: A Techno-Feminist Reconstruction of the The Iliad*. She has performed with Richard Goulis in *Block* and with Jamie Geiser in *Evidence of Floods*. She designed sets for Ethelyn Friend's Production of *My Ship: The Rise and Fall of Pirate Jenny* and *Hey! Stop That*, written and directed by Thalia Field.

Luzia Ornelas (artistic director) - Colorado based artist Luzia Ornelas received in 2008 her MFA from The University of Colorado, Boulder with emphasis in Integrated Arts. She has shown her Art work nationally and internationally, performed for Caixa Forum/ Madrid, Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver, Museum of Contemporary Art/Boulder, Museo de Las Americas, Dairy Center for the Arts and others art venues. She is now working for Portable Art School from Downtown Aurora Visual Center in Colorado.

Liza Williams (set design) - Liza spent 10 years working in various production staff and production management positions at the American Repertory Theatre at Harvard University. She studied acting at HB Studio in New York and Viewpoints and Suzuki actor training with Anne Bogart over several years in Saratoga and New York. She has an MFA in Directing from the University of Iowa and she is currently a PhD candidate at CU Boulder. She has taught at the CU Denver College of Arts and Media, and Colorado State University, and has developed courses exploring time based art and devised theater.

Selah Saterstrom (Text Editing and Supervision) - Selah Saterstrom is the author of *The Meat and Spirit Plan* and *The Pink Institution* [both published by Coffee House Press]. She co-curates SLAB PROJECTS, an artist/writer-curator initiative concerned with exploring the gaps between decay and reconstruction in ruined or abandoned landscapes, and she is an editor at Trickhouse (www.trickhouse.org). She is on faculty in the University of Denver's graduate creative writing program and in the Naropa Summer Writing Program.

Bob Shannon (Light Design)

Markas Henry (Costume Design) - MARKAS HENRY is an Assistant Professor at the CU Boulder where he teaches Costume and Make-up Design and Fashion History. As a professional costume and scenic designer, Markas' work has been seen on Broadway (*Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Beauty and the Beast*) and off-Broadway (*Old Wicked Songs* and *The Great American Trailer Park Musical*), in film (*Elf* and the recently completed *Leading Ladies*) and Rock-n-Roll (Britney Spears *Dream Within a Dream* and *Onyx Hotel US/ World tours*). Markas is a member of United Scenic Artists Local 829 and the Costume Designer's Guild Local 892.

Anja Hose (Stage Manager) - Anja Hose (stage manager): Anja is a senior theatre major pursuing her Bachelor's of Fine Arts in Stage Management here at CU. She loves being a part of multi-disciplinary performance, dance, and unusual theatrical events, and thanks Mark for inviting her to participate in this performance experience.

Sara Veglahn (Author of "The Mayflies")- Sara Veglahn is the author of *Another Random Heart* (Letter Machine Editions), *Closed Histories* (Noemi Press), and *Falling Forward* (Braincase).

Kurt Bauer (Animation)

David Willey – (Musician) - Dave Willey is a multi-instrumentalist, dance accompanist, producer, engineer and and composer. He leads the group Hamster Theatre, and is the bassist for Thinking Plague, both of whom have released numerous cd's on the Cuneiform label, and both of whom have played many festivals in the U.S. and in Europe. He has recorded many scores for dance for area choreographers Nancy Smith, Onye Ozuzu, Deborah Reshotko, Michelle Ellsworth and many others. He has co-produced cd's with Lorna Hunt, Henry Winters, Veelah and currently Jesse Manley. He is currently performing in the area with Julie Monley and Frederic DesMoulins, The Glenn Taylor Orchestra, Veelah, MIME, The Corvettes, Jesse Manley, and Hamster Theatre.

Farrell Lowe – (Musician) - Much of my music/sound work is about the ephemeral nature of being and the limits of human understanding. It asks questions about our conception of time, the natural world, our constructed world, and the intersections that occur during the exploration of Self through conscious and unconscious channels. For me, this work is about developing maps that reference time, place, change, impermanence, and mortality.

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