

intERRUPTION:

Re-Viewing Motion, Image & the Dancing Body

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Abstract

intERRUPTION: Re-Viewing Motion, Image & the Dancing Body is the written exploration of *intERRUPTION*, my Bachelor of Fine Arts dance piece that was performed in *Catapult: A BFA Dance Concert* on February 15-17, 2013 in the Charlotte York Irey Theatre on the University of Colorado at Boulder's campus. In the year-long process of creating *intERRUPTION*, I choreographed, directed, and harvested material in collaboration with my cast of dancers through writing, conversation, mining gestural movement, improvisation, and embodiment of choreography. I was interested in women's personal and cultural experiences with body image, and investigating these themes through movement and through a feminist lens. In my research I discovered a relationship between motion and interruption. Through this paper, I explore how interruption's dual roles of judging the body along with interjecting and redirecting personal and cultural narratives of female body image manifested in movement material. The power that motion holds to subvert the objectified female form is also located within this conversation on interruption. Overall, I intend the work to expand and more deeply secure the understanding of the dancing body's personal nature as political, as well as the dancing body's important place in academic scholarship.

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intERRUPTION: an Introduction

The Composition Notebook

February 2, 2012:

An artist is someone who can mine through the experiences of her life, take an objective look, and turn it into a statement of humanity. She who can take the dregs of living and transform them into something abstracted that speaks truth. A person who can research herself - literally turn her life into art. It is brave, it is vulnerable, it is the hardest thing one could do, and ultimately the most powerful (Behm).

This journal entry came from musings written for Assistant Professor of Theatre Beth Osnes' Performing Voices of Women class. At the time I wrote these words, I was unaware of the relevancy they would hold for my ensuing dance-making process. I was preparing to create a Bachelor of Fine Arts dance piece, but had yet to comprehend the real meaning of the words I scribbled in my composition notebook. They were the deepest seeds of the work that was about to unfold, which had been taking root since I began studying dance composition.

On March 24, 2012 there is an entry in my journal where I pose the question of how to implement research with the process of bodily exploration. Ironically, only four days before this, on March 20, 2012, I quoted Beth Osnes as saying in class that we must learn "knowledge making through self-research": that the process of bodily exploration *is* research and documenting one's rehearsal is valuable as scholarly knowledge (Osnes). By the time Fall Semester started and I began rehearsing with my cast, I was still grasping to understand this. In a meeting on September 12, 2012, Assistant Professor of Dance and Thesis Advisor, Erika Randall asked me how I could already blur the lines between content and movement -- I had to make the

movement the content (Randall). While I may have understood in theory how an artist can take material from her life and craft it into dance, it took the actual physical art-making practice for me to learn the lesson I had been hearing and processing in my mind. It is fascinating to reflectively witness the learning process I underwent to make sense of how my personal experiences, fleeting thoughts, random scribbles, spontaneous improvisations, daily routines and habits all combine and manifest in the dance. It was not until I read back through my composition notebook that I was able to fully realize its role of recording our rehearsal process as a main and valid source of research.

Discoveries

Throughout my process, I made a few big discoveries that permeated the work. First, the authority of the body to know one's instincts -- to know how to move in order to express the content I was exploring -- became paramount as I made choreographic choices and worked collaboratively with my cast. Domnica Radulescu explains this phenomenon by saying, "I understand intellectually now what I instinctively understood then" (35). This is the exact discovery I made: that what I know physically comes before what I know intellectually. The ability to pinpoint this instinctual, bodily way of knowing is an elusive and challenging task that I honed through the creation of this work. Thus, I argue that this process of experiencing, detecting, and translating embodied knowledge into language, into words I used to communicate with my cast and into language I am now using in this written exploration, locates the body's invaluable place in scholarship. Another discovery I made that deals with the body's academic function is the concept that feminist theorist bell hooks calls "theory as liberatory practice." hooks advocates for turning lived experiences into theory and asserts that this process is

liberating because it allows us to enact theory in our lives and make it relevant to our own feminist struggles. I learned in this process that the body is the site for this posited transformation. We experience our lives through our bodies, and thus the *embodied* art of dance-making enables us to turn theory into liberatory practice.

Not only did I make discoveries in the process of creating *intERRUPTION*, I formulated new definitions for the concepts of two-dimensionality, three-dimensionality, and interruption. As I ruminated on the two-dimensional images of female bodies in the media, I began to conceptualize the way we as a culture see women's bodies as overall being two-dimensional. We see flat, shallow images that do not represent the whole person and translate this into the way we see our own bodies and the bodies of others' around us. Rejecting this narrow two-dimensionality, I wanted to locate the value of how women experience our bodies, not just how we, or others see them. Through movement, my cast and I researched sensations in the body and found fully embodied feeling to be a three-dimensional experience. Interruption is the other concept I redefined through the piece. Interruption became a feminist function used to disrupt societal, patriarchal codes that cause women to feel insecure and inadequate about our bodies. I enacted this function through the physical interruption of dance phrases with disarming, awkward gestures, stillness, and colliding duets that emerged from unison movement.

Fusing Interests

As I reflect on my journey to become the artist I am today, it is clear that Beth Osnes' class was a crucial juncture where I learned to fuse my dual interests in dance and women's studies. I have always had an interest in women's stories and in cultural issues that affect women. A dominating societal conversation that has been in the back of my mind for years is body

image. While Beth's class brought my desire to make dance inspired by women's experiences to the forefront, I know that women's stories and their relationship to the body have been surfacing in my choreography for years; in my Advanced Composition class, I made a dance for the camera where I wrote the words "It is here where she must begin to tell her story" directly on my body. Through my BFA work, I hoped to explore how to allow those words written on my body to sink in, to be read as a text expressed not only visually *on* my body, but *through* my dancing body. I hoped the story expressed through my dancing body would serve as one representation of "her story" -- of a larger female collective.

An individual woman's experience as an essential part of a larger collective whole has had political significance in the history of feminism. During second-wave feminism in the 1960's and 1970's in the United States, "the idea that art could be political was in itself a radical concept . . . because the art world was still dominated by the belief that the purpose of art was . . . to transcend . . . but as women began to consider the implications of the feminist axiom that 'the personal is political,' they realized that no aspect of life, art included, is exempt from politics" (Wark 5). "The personal is political" inherently must mean that the body is political, because what is more personal than the body? Dance scholar Jane C. Desmond has taken this idea and furthered it to prove that movement is political through its "production of gender, racial, ethnic, class, and national identities" (31). She also draws attention to the "academy's aversion to the material body," exposing the dancing body's unfortunate absence in scholarship (Desmond 30). I find Desmond's argument extremely important, as my BFA piece is a testament to this truth that the dancing body is important. The dancing body can express personal narratives

that also have political ramifications, and thus the body itself deserves an indelible place in scholarship.

Writing the Piece

intERRUPTION is my Bachelor of Fine Arts dance piece that was performed in *Catapult: A BFA Dance Concert* on February 15-17, 2013 in the Charlotte York Irey Theatre on the University of Colorado Boulder's campus. The piece featured seven female performers: Aundrea Anderson, Cassandra Block, Annie King, Samantha Lysaght, Meredith Chupka, Julie Luehring, and myself. In addition, Jamie Holzman was my understudy. The final work shown onstage was the lava erupting from a volcano, the visible part of the year-long process in which I choreographed, directed, and harvested material in collaboration with my dancers through writing, conversation, mining gestural movement, improvisation, and embodiment of choreography. In this written investigation of *intERRUPTION*, I will illuminate the influences that were immersed in feminist study and led me to shape the formalist content of the work. I will explore how interruption's dual roles of judging the body as well as interjecting and redirecting personal and cultural narratives of female body image manifested in my movement material. The power that motion holds to subvert the objectified female form will also be located within this conversation on interruption. On a broader scale, I will discuss how I have interrupted my usual flow of physicality and musicality to create more than simply a pretty dance, but one that erupts beyond the expectations of the audience, the dancers, and myself.

Re-Viewing the Body

Journals from the Cast

September 26, 2012:

I am insecure about my thighs . . . I also hate the bulges of flesh between my arms and boobs, near my armpit. *I am super insecure about my legs.* I am always insecure about my stomach . . . physically I am not where I want to be. I feel like my mother has always been on top of making sure I stay in shape, so when that little stomach comes I get slightly paranoid about it. *I am insecure about my complexion. I am constantly comparing parts of my body to other girls around me and putting value and hierarchy on different parts -- arms, stomach, waist . . . basically chopping myself into parts like the media does . . . I am hypersensitive to the slightest changes in myself and other's bodies* (Behm et al.).

These excerpts come from various members of my cast from a journaling exercise in which I prompted us with six questions: What insecurities about your body hold you back? What insecurities about your self/personality hold you back? How do these insecurities affect your relationships? What do you love about your body? What do you love about your self? How do these things you love affect your relationships?

The Mind-Body Problem

The above quotes were all part of answers to the first question and act as individual evidence of a larger institutionalized problem -- that "Body image dissatisfaction among adolescent and adult groups has been found to be so predominant for women that it is considered to be a normative component of their living within modern Western society" (Kostanski, Fisher and Gullone 1317). Kostanski, Fisher and Gullone also say that "Extensive research has indicated that socialisation processes (i.e., media, peer, family) are major determinants of these high levels of negative attitudes in women" (1317). A component of these socialization processes in our culture is the split between mind and body. Michael Gelb, in his introductory book to the

Alexander Technique, calls this the “mind-body problem” -- the lack of seeing oneself as a whole person (35). Gelb asserts that “such lack of inner harmony does not appear surprising when we look at the nature of the institutions that dominate our society” (35). He uses Western medicine and physical education as examples. Western medicine treats symptoms for individual parts of the body rather than pinpointing the underlying cause, while the educational system perpetuates a disconnect between subjects; “the very term ‘physical education’ suggests the belief that the mind and the body can be educated separately” (Gelb 37). I see popular culture and the media as other institutions that teach this separation. We are constantly bombarded with two-dimensional images of objectified bodies and there is no integration of fully-embodied feeling and sensation into the perception of the whole person. Gelb’s contention that an “uneconomical use of energy creates inner conflict and can obscure an individual’s sense of identity” fits right in with the media culture’s segmentation and consequential judgment of the body (35). All of these institutions collide to prevent people from positively viewing themselves or others as whole humans, complete selves with thoughts, emotions, and many different parts that function as one.

Two-Dimensionality vs. Three-Dimensionality

My vested interest in fully-embodied sensation was fostered by Gaga technique, which I was first exposed to during Spring Semester 2012 when Uri Shafir taught as a guest artist in the dance department. Gaga originated from Ohad Naharin, the artistic director of the Israeli Batsheva Dance Company. Naharin’s technique is steeped in sensation and focuses on connecting to pleasure. On the Gaga website, Naharin writes that through Gaga “we become more aware of our form. We connect to the sense of the endlessness of possibilities. We explore multi-dimensional movement; we enjoy the burning sensation in our muscles, we are ready to

snap, we are aware of our explosive power and sometimes we use it. We change our movement habits by finding new ones” (Naharin). Through this practice, I got to know the inner contents, knowledge, energy, and capability of my body in an incredibly visceral way. Mirrors are not allowed in Gaga class, which was a liberating experience and allowed me to connect to internal conceptions of my body rather than focusing on the external.

In fusing Gaga’s “multi-dimensional movement” into my art-making process, I began to think of sensing the body as three-dimensional and seeing the body as two-dimensional (even though the body is truly three-dimensional). Seeing the body became two-dimensional in the same way an image of oneself in the mirror or a photo in a magazine is two-dimensional. Thus, the audience’s view of the proscenium stage could also be seen as two-dimensional. With my newfound love for sensory saturated movement, the proscenium created the challenge for my cast to exude the innate three-dimensionality and feeling of our bodies to the audience across this fourth wall boundary -- literally transforming the two-dimensional shallow image into true human three-dimensionality through physicality.

The Moving Body vs. The Static Body

In the journal questions I posed to my dancers, I specifically made a distinction between insecurities about body and insecurities about self to see how we as humans (and women) automatically separate the two. While this distinction was acted out in the answers my dancers provided, I was struck that everyone referenced being a dancer as either part of their body image, in terms of their relationship to self, or in how they relate to other people. Two of the most striking entries said, “I love my body’s adaptability as a dancer. My ability to take on qualities of movement, to pick up things quickly - my ability to imitate, but also to express myself and my

emotion,” and, “I love the way my body reacts to dancing . . . The insecurities I have related to my body are usually fixed with more dancing, like it puts me back at its homeostasis” (Behm et al.). In all our writings, motion seemed to be the antidote to negative body image. The moving, three-dimensional body, not the static, two-dimensional body allowed for greater understanding and appreciation for our bodies. By means of movement, we can escape the gap between visually scrutinizing the body and the pleasure of feeling sensations in the body. Having movement as an integral part of our body image provides me evidence that dancing is an empowering and prime vehicle through which to transform negative body image and push back against a culture that denigrates women’s self image.

Theory as Moving Practice

October 14, 2012:

A Case Study in Power Dynamics:

As he lays on top of me, kissing me with a much-too-eager lust, the irony of the hierarchy strikes me. Right now it is boy > girl. Literally. But the moment I interrupt to tell him that I am not going to have sex with him, the inversion of power is palpable. I immediately have the power. Inside I want to laugh, but what I actually do is apologize. Why the need to extend him that courtesy? I am not sorry (Behm).

Throughout the process of creating *intERRUPTION*, I was in a constant state of critical analysis. No thought or interaction remotely related to gender or body image was safe from the neuroses of my mind. I was in constant artist-mode: experiences like the one from my journal described above automatically became fodder for the piece. I was putting “the personal is political” into practice by regarding my experiences and the experiences of those around me as

part of “the socio-culture norms of Western society [that] serve to place pressure on females to be dissatisfied with their bodies and to have a desire to lose weight, while they serve to keep men satisfied” (Kostanski, Fisher and Gullone 1317).

Feminist scholar bell hooks would describe the process I was undergoing as “theory as liberatory practice.” hooks argues for theory to be seen as lived realities beyond the classroom (30). She believes in those who:

use their experience to teach and guide, as a means to chart new theoretical journeys. Their work is liberatory. It not only enables us to remember and recover ourselves, it charges and challenges us to renew our commitment to an active, inclusive feminist struggle. We have still to collectively make feminist revolution. I am grateful that we are collectively searching as feminist thinkers/theorists for ways to make this movement happen. Our search leads us back to where it all began, to that moment when an individual woman or child, who may have thought she was all alone, began a feminist uprising, began to name her practice, indeed began to formulate theory from lived experience (hooks 32).

The act of turning personal experience into inspiration for my piece was a liberatory one: we used movement to abstract and transcend restricting conceptions of our own body image. By creating gesture material that manipulated our bodies, mined from our habitual, insecure patterns, we were able to view these personal, vulnerable movements in a different way -- and thus use them as rich content for the piece.

Another feminist writer, Kath Weston, expresses a similar ideology to hooks, but calls it “street theorizing” (348). She says that “street theorizing is the activity that engages people as

they go about their business,” a “bit of everyday wisdom [that] is cognizant of power relations” (Weston 348). This is exactly what I found in my daily critical analysis -- everyday experience that had greater implications outside of myself. Without intending to, I was following Weston’s conviction “not to treat street theorizing as ‘raw data’ that remains TBE--to be explained--but to approach street theorizing as a wellspring of explanatory devices and rhetorical strategies in its own right” (Weston 349). My street became my daily interactions with gender and the body that I then took into the studio to be synthesized.

In my street theorizing process, I was overwhelmed by my habit of absentmindedly comparing my body to other’s bodies. One humbling moment happened in ballet class; I came into class feeling very insecure about my legs, with an inner monologue of negative self-talk consuming my thoughts, until suddenly a friend standing behind me at the barre told me I have beautiful legs. I was brought to tears by this obvious subversion of insecurity. Reading about the insecurities of the dancers in my cast pushed me further down the road of mining lived experience for the content of the piece. The women in my cast wrote: “I am sexually insecure, awkward, uncomfortable . . . My insecurities affect me most with romantic relationships . . . I put a wall up because of these insecurities” (Behm et al.). My own journal was soon fraught with questions about insecurity: May 3, 2012: *Insecurities - where did they come from and why do we let them run our lives?* May 8, 2012: *What if I didn’t care; care about the rules and the tools and the JUDGMENT. Not what if, but HOW. How to toss them into the wind - the insecurities - the fears - shoot them with a laser gun. Where is the freedom -- it must live somewhere otherwise the word would not exist -- to be as LOUD, as quiet, as silent, as bold, as brash, as outrageous, as*

political, as boring, as passionate, as sexual, as crass, as natural, as authentic, as fake, as ugly, as dirty, as mean, as honest as I want -- as I desire (Behm).

Though my analytical and critical mind knew that insecurities should not hold power over us, how to find freedom was not clear. Therefore, it made sense to trust the knowledge of the exact site where insecurities are acted out: the body. I looked to the *moving* body to assuage shared narratives of insecurity.

The Piece

Influences: Gesture

“I am fascinated by the shared narratives that live in our bodies -- the familiar, repetitive storylines that move across cultures and generations, and the body’s role in providing the illustrative shape of those moments. I’m curious about the way in which the body can convey profound meaning through the simplest of gestures, and how distortion, iteration and analysis of familiar human action provide an opportunity to recognize and re-frame ourselves in each other” (Pite).

One of the first experiments I conducted in rehearsal with my cast was accessing gestures that we do as part of our daily routine. This was inspired by a performance study from Osnes’ class where I actually performed the habits that I use to fix my body as I get ready in my private space. I messed with my hair, pulled at my face while putting on makeup, changed outfits multiple times, and manipulated my body in certain ways in front of a mirror, such as sucking my stomach in, toning my arms to make them look thinner, and pushing down on my sides to flatten out my love handles. My interest in shedding light on these subconscious movements relates to feminist scholar Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Butler defines gender

as “an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (419). I was interested in revealing these gestures because of what information they could provide about our individual and collective identity and gender -- how “bodily gestures, movement, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 419). How the repetition of these acts becomes a normal, subconscious, and seemingly natural part of female experience also fueled my choreographic and conceptual process. What are the unnecessary instinctual movements we do without realizing? How do these gestural habits serve us/create and affirm our selves? Do they originate from a place of insecurity? How does it feel to be doing them? Posing these questions to the women, we each developed our own short gesture phrases. Once each woman had solidified her phrase of personal gestures, we taught them to each other in order to create a bank of gestures that could serve as material to augment the piece.

A major insecurity that permeated my dance-making process was the fear that the work would be cliché, as body image is a cliché topic. Yet, it is cliché because it is a relevant and important conversation that will always be undergoing cultural shifts and changes and will never be a “resolved” issue, as it intersects with many other cultural forces such as gender, race, class, and capitalism. My fear of being cliché also reveals how women have been made to feel as if our fears of inadequacy are not important, but rather overused. Using gestures where women are fixing and primping themselves is even a cliché in the dance field -- countless dance works have overused these gestures, often displaying them with no new contextualization. Therefore, our task was to find a way of abstracting the gestures. Through abstraction, we could allow our bodies to truly exist, as Butler discusses, as a “set of possibilities” (420). We explored our possibilities. Recognizing our habits as imbued with external influence gave us the freedom to

break out of unconscious patterns and to share and perform each other's gestures, as the performative act of gender is "clearly not a fully individual matter" (Butler 425).

Our gestures ranged from normal, publicly habitual patterns such as putting our hair up, to very personal gestures like dancer Samantha Lysaght grabbing her inner thighs to see what her legs would look like if they were skinnier. Everyone in my cast has incredibly distinct, beautiful hair by our culture's traditional standards of desirable feminine expression. Many of their identities are in part shaped by their long, voluminous, curly, naturally colored hair, and thus hair emerged as a motif in the piece. Like choreographer Crystal Pite, I am interested in "shared narratives that live in our bodies," and our collective relationship to hair was one of those narratives that manifested physically in the piece. We fussed with our hair, took it down and put it up in preparation to dance, and allowed the audience to witness our natural relationship to it, even brushing it out of our faces on occasion (see figure 1).



Figure 1. "Hair" performed by Annie King ¹

While gestures such as these served as beautiful and unifying themes throughout the work, other gestures manifested as awkward and strange, clearly demonstrating an absence of comfort in the body. Dancer Julie Luehring told me that I was “bringing up some serious stuff” for her as she emerged as the last one to perform her gestures onstage as a solo (see figure 2). The tension in the piece was building at this moment, and Julie’s unnatural and exaggerated manipulation of her body, especially being the only dancer in a spotlight downstage became very personal and vulnerable for her. One gesture she indulged in was a simple swipe of her cheek with her hand that morphed into pulling her skin tight across her face in different directions, distorting the face and delving into the grotesque. Julie’s solo emerged in our final rehearsal and fulfilled the role of the gestures that I desired -- an uninhibited rawness that, while performed, was undeniably real.



Figure 2. “Gesture Solo” performed by Julie Luehring

Originally, the piece began with the whole cast performing our gestures in a horizontal line at center stage, the idea being that we would start the piece as our everyday selves, performing our everyday gestures, and they and we would be abstracted and transformed as the piece progressed. However, this beginning proved to play too much into obvious, shallow, and two-dimensional representations of our bodies. After seeing this first iteration of the gesture material, I knew that I desired this movement to communicate more than simply displaying us as if scrutinizing ourselves in front of the mirror. That narrative was too familiar -- I knew we could peel away deeper layers of ourselves through these gestures.

Influences: Improvisation

Improvising with the gesture material became the mechanism through which we discovered these deeper layers of ourselves. I was inspired by Chris Aiken and Angie Hauser, who taught a guest artist residency in Fall Semester 2012, to explore this improvisational section of the piece. Chris Aiken is deeply interested in researching emergent gesture -- by inhibiting self-consciousness and exploring gesture, you can access material you would never get to otherwise (Aiken). Through their residency, I could literally feel and see the breaking down of movement self-consciousness and I used this idea of dropping into what is naturally being expressed to reshape our gestures in the piece into an improvisation score. Through improvising, we were able to more effectively relate to each other -- actively witnessing one another, sharing movement vocabulary, employing repetition, and using space to create relationships to each other and thus peeling open deeper layers of meaning for ourselves and the audience (see figure 3). During the improvisation section, I shared one of the most powerful moments with dancer Samantha Lysaght. One of Sam's gestures was to fold her arms across her breasts, as if in an

attempt to flatten them. Sam's conviction in this gesture always captivated my attention. I felt a connection to her honesty and I desired to know her experience more closely, even though that is not a gesture I would inherently perform, or a part of my body I feel the need to manipulate or fix. Yet, re-inscribing Sam's gesture onto my body was a telling experience; it paralleled the way we as women reflect each other -- we take on each other's insecurities, ask questions of ourselves because someone else asked them of herself, and feel the need to compare and fit into other's images. However, transforming this phenomenon into a shared expression through movement allowed me to feel a more honest relationship with Sam.



Figure 3. "Improvising with Gesture" performed by whole cast

As we prepared to perform, we adopted the practice of using our improvised gesture score to warm up as a group. This allowed us to remember the original intention of the

gestures -- to ask ourselves, what is the purpose of these movements? Are you comfortable? Are you being honest? It helped us relate to each other and connect to our own sensations and feelings within the larger structure of the dance. Overall, this personal content became the lynchpin of the piece. Each woman's contributions were vital and without it the piece would have lacked considerable depth.

Influences: Gaga

The moment in improvisation when we tune in to what is naturally being expressed through our bodies is intimately connected to the tenets of Gaga, which directly prompted one of the most raw and vulnerable parts of the piece. During Uri Shafir's residency, he shared a video with us of Batsheva Dance Company's piece *Mamoot*. At one point in the piece, a woman slowly traverses the stage in silence by doing minute undulations on her back. I was absolutely caught in rapture watching her. I could see and feel in my own body the conflicting tension and fluidity that was propelling her in such an alien, yet fiercely raw, human manner (*Mamoot*). This image is seared in my mind and I will not forget how it inspired the movement in my piece. Our legs came cascading down into a clump from high-powered cartwheels. We landed in a squat and with no transition time rolled over our shoulders to pivot on the right foot, steadying ourselves in a tense and awkward position. Our hips and left legs were raised, toes gripping in a mangled, spread fashion as if using the air to steady the whole leg. Meanwhile, our hands grasped an invisible object raised above the stomach and face, gathering balance and gravity to the center of the body. The gut-wrenching rhythm of the music dropped away, leaving only the sound of our



Figure 4. “Researching Self, Connecting to Sensation” performed by whole cast

breathing and writhing on the floor. As we melted out of this striking image, it was as if some force took over our bodies: yet, we were actually exploring the traveling stuff inside our cores, negotiating breath, fluidity and sharper moments of undulation as we seamlessly shifted on our backs on the floor (see figure 4). We were researching ourselves, our bodies, connecting to sensation. Be it pain, ecstasy, or any emotion at all, we collectively formed a shifting mass meant to leave the audience with a haunting image in their minds and a knot in their guts.

We spend so much time in our lives looking at ourselves instead of feeling ourselves, so connecting to visceral sensation in the piece was very important to me. I never defined for my cast though, what exactly the intention of this section was. It spoke -- and felt -- for itself, and manifested differently for each woman.

Following the Movement with Laban

It was after the first showing of the piece to my readers, and through an ensuing conversation with Erika Randall that the melding of form and content became clear to me. I so desired to create a piece of work that would say something important that I was not giving movement's inherent expression enough credit. Instead of forcing the content to be explicit, I simply needed to follow where the movement was taking the piece. While I could have dug deeper into content by making obvious statements and references toward overt issues of body image through text, costume, use of props, etc., I chose instead to trust that the layers of theory behind the practice, of lived personal and political stories that drove the original inspirations for the work were articulated through the arresting conviction of sensation, form, and energy in my dancers' bodies.

The language of Laban Movement Analysis, a method used to describe and express specific effort qualities, space, weight, time, and flow in the body, helped me to more effectively follow where the movement was taking the piece. Being in Movement Analysis class during my rehearsal process, Laban language had inadvertently begun to surface while directing my cast. In order to find enhanced clarity of movement, I therefore chose to view the piece through this lens to discover how Laban could help clarify and deepen our understanding of the work. The feedback I received from my BFA showing was my entry point into this exploration. Both my readers felt that the cast could find more tension in the core in order to reflect the overall intense tone of the piece. This lack of tension was especially evident in a motif that reoccurred throughout the piece, a move we referred to as "dead girl" (see figure 5). Erika Randall coined this moniker because she thought the shape of the body looked like a dead girl on asphalt. "Dead

girl” happened in the first moments of the piece: as the lights abruptly illuminated the stage, we swung our arms to the left of our heads in a strong moment of attack, only to tense up through our whole bodies out through our fingers as if hitting a wall. Our focus pierced through the fourth-wall to the audience, a fierce surprise. However, there was something lacking after our original momentum of attack as we descended to an internal focus and slowly moved our torsos. In the rehearsal dedicated to Laban exploration, we collectively agreed that something felt too



Figure 5. “Dead Girl” performed by whole cast

soft about that particular movement. A search for more bound flow through the core was very effective. Using the words screw and wring also allowed for a tightened, tethered effect. To create juxtaposition and to keep reenergizing the sense of bound flow, we added moments of quick impact and impulse. While impulse and impact are different, we found that the way to avoid impulse looking too soft and consequently losing tightness in our centers is to immediately

return to bound flow in the release of the impulse. This beginning section and each time “dead girl” reappeared in the piece were by far the most profoundly enhanced by this increased and honed tension.

One discovery that surprised me when applying Laban to my piece was the question, how does effort create emotion? This surfaced when we were experimenting with indirect focus compared to direct focus as the women slowly moved through the section of bound flow in their core with moments of quick impact and impulse in “dead girl” (see figure 6). Using a direct focus made the dancers feel more sexual, as if seducing the audience. With an indirect focus it felt more personal, and therefore a better fit for the emotional tone of the piece. Watching my cast struggle with direct focus here made me realize how poignant subtle changes can be within movement and how Laban helped clarify the mutual intention of the choreography.



Figure 6. “Indirect Focus and Bound Flow” performed by whole cast

The Solo and Collective Female Body

One of my earliest visions of the piece included a soloist dancing as far downstage as possible, staying in a flat trajectory close to the audience. Through her close proximity, I hoped the audience could feel honesty and realness emanating from her. It is fitting that Annie King became this soloist, as honesty and realness were a theme throughout her journal responses: “My friends, family, and boyfriend all know who I am -- no mask, no being fake -- because I am honest and real . . . I don’t ever want to be just a ‘pretty girl’” (Behm et al.). Annie’s performance truly was honest. Being close to the audience, Annie was able to use her gaze to project past the fourth wall, calmly and slowly panning across the audience making eye contact. At one point she even sat on her knees, directly downstage center, in stillness for an extended amount of time (see figure 7).



Figure 7. “Stillness and Eye Contact” performed by Annie King

Even when the movement was fast, with flinging arms and a quick double turn that she landed effortlessly up on her toes as her arms slowly dropped to her sides, Annie maintained an obvious inner cool. She was comfortable simply being herself, nothing more and nothing less, in movement and in stillness in her body. Juxtaposed behind Annie, the rest of the cast was improvising with the gesture material. It was as if we represented the thoughts and insecurities buried in Annie's subconscious. Eventually, the gestures built up and exploded into a duet that interrupted Annie's solo.

This duet by Cassandra Block and Aundrea Anderson slipped in at Annie's most tender moment, as she lowered in a plank to her stomach with her arms covering her chest, as if sheltering her heart from vulnerability. Through this duet's interruption, I hoped to express how we are constantly in conversation with ourselves about our self image, as seen by Cassie and Aundrea dancing upstage of a still Annie, as if they were manifestations of her mind. Simultaneously, their duet could also express how we as women exist in bodily conversation with each other. A theme in this duet is that one partner tracks the other with their eyes and their movement, reflecting how we are constantly aware of each other, cognizant and constantly learning to, as choreographer Crystal Pite puts it, "reorganize and re-frame ourselves in each other." The creation of this section was collaborative. I cast Cassie and Aundrea as the two dancers that ended up performing the entire duet because they possessed a chemistry and a mutual ferocity that was unmatched. Looking back at their journal entries about how their relationship to their bodies affects their relationships with others illuminated why they made such a successful duo: their entries were strikingly similar. Cassie writes, "I think that the way I am confident in my body and care so deeply makes me have wonderful friendships," while

Aundrea says, “Because I can accept my body and my personality as a whole I think I am able to meet and make so many friends which is my real love” (Behm et al.). The presence of this duet enriched the depth and beauty of the piece as a whole because relationships and the way we view each other is an important value for my cast (see figure 8).

After the duet concludes, the idea of the solo body against the collective reappears, but this time the roles of the two have switched -- Julie is the lone dancer, downstage left performing her gestures while the group takes on the movement of the duet. We confidently walk on stage right, putting our hair up, preparing to face off with different duet partners. The structure and movement of this section of the work demonstrates how I experience the relationship between the personal and the collective. Using space to separate the soloist from the group reflects the uniqueness of our individual experiences. However, our individual experiences exist in relation to each other. Women are always in conversation with each other, interrupting in a way that we sometimes finish or reroute each other’s thoughts, constantly influenced by a group larger than ourselves, and one that Julie eventually folds back into in an unexpected moment of unison -- a moment that disrupts the previous flow of movement and intended to shake the audience awake as we are suddenly unified in a moment of stillness.

Interrupting, Motion, and Judgment

An interesting facet of the duet between Cassie and Aundrea is that it read as aggressive to many viewers. In large part I believe this is due to the ferocious and strong capabilities of my dancers’ bodies. However, the nature of this movement also holds larger implications for the piece. Along with tracking each other, the duet movement involves knocking each other off balance, pulling and tossing each other -- literally interrupting and redirecting the other’s motion.

Yet, simultaneously the duet moves so fast that it is hard to always tell who is in control. One moment a partner throws the other one rolling downstage and the next moment she has tumbled over the thrown partner, rolling downstage in unison with her. This ever-shifting quality



Figure 8. “Duet” by Aundrea Anderson and Cassandra Block

of the piece reminds me of how Edouard Lock, director of the company La La La Human Steps talks about his work and specifically about his principle dancer and muse, Louise Lecavalier. In response to people asking why his dancers are also moving so fast he says, “. . . we’re always measuring: Beautiful-not beautiful, tall-short, fat-skinny. We go through this list as soon as we lay eyes on someone . . . If the dancers are moving fast, you’re not going to be able to measure . . . If the audience wants to know what Louise Lecavalier looks like they have to buy a picture, because she’s almost never at rest” (qtd. in Breslauer). This ambiguity of labeling the performer or seeing her as one specific thing is a beautiful concept. In motion there is no time to

make judgments. Watching a body in continuous motion allows us to move away from a shallow and more two-dimensional vision of that body as a compilation of parts rather than as a whole person. As dancers, being in motion brings us back to sensation and feeling -- we forget about insecurities and negative self-image while moving because it makes us feel powerful to revel in the body's ability rather than its looks.

Lock acknowledges the “tendency to look on [bodies on stage] as a political statement,” but he is not “interested in that. Even when [he] started and Louise was throwing men about, it was a physical expression rather than a political one” (qtd. in Watson). While Lock may not intend his work to be political, by feminist notions this cannot be avoided. Therefore, I see this physical statement of motion as a political one. The relationship between interruption and motion furthermore exists in conversation with Judith Butler's theory that “the female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law's self-amplification and proliferation” (qtd. in Albright 31). In this context, what Butler calls the “paternal law” can be articulated as the patriarchal binds of society and the media's message that women are objects -- the message that implants negative notions of body image in women in our culture. Considering the history of the objectification of women's bodies on the proscenium stage, I understand how Butler could see the body as “posing as subversive.” In response to Butler, I see the *recognition* of her claim as the ticket to subverting these outdated narratives of societal and personal objectification and judgment. Even though objectified conceptions of the female form will inevitably continue to exist and affect us, and even though the body in motion will inevitably be interrupted, maybe there is another perspective from which to view interruption. Maybe it is

interruption that can lead to liberation. The constant motion of our bodies on stage can turn into complacent flow for the viewers. Thus, it is the interrupted nature of the piece -- the uncomfortable tension in our cores, our abstracted use of gesture, the off-centeredness of the duet -- that demands a reawakening in ourselves and in the audience.

The end of *intERRUPTION* articulately embodies this concept, of using the power of our moving bodies to move something within the audience. For approximately the last minute of the piece, we are moving fast and fluidly as the static underneath the pulsing beat of the music builds until it ultimately cuts off as if the static screen of a television had suddenly been shut off. There is no time for stopping -- but just before the music hits its peak and the piece ends -- we come to an abrupt and collective stop. Breathing deeply as a group, we take one last look at each other, acknowledging the inevitable interruption of our movement. We then run and jump with all our power, throwing our arms, legs, and head up into the air. The piece ends with us in motion. This final image, the title, and our red and orange costumes conjure up images of fire, passion, volcanoes, and so on; as the title suggests, we are erupting.

The Personal

Another component of my BFA concert was a solo entitled *The Personal* that was set on me by N.Y.C. and D.C.-based choreographer Sydney Skybetter. Learning his piece while making my own at the same time was a rewarding experience because the conversation between the two works helped me to more clearly define aspects of my dance as well as illuminate and influence some of my proclivities as a dancer and choreographer. While Skybetter's solo is starkly different than my usual aesthetic of movement, his work informed my piece through our shared formalist tendencies. At its conception, I saw my piece as content driven, when in truth I am

more inclined to focus on structure, form, and physicality. Learning and performing Skybetter's work helped these qualities seep back into the way I view my artistry and provided a key example of how formalism can successfully communicate meaningful content.

The way Skybetter used space in this solo was very different from my normal appetite for spatial intention. His use of space stayed almost completely stationary in a spotlight, whereas I am used to traveling and devouring space in my movement through the use of vast spatial patterns. Thus, I had to learn how to inhabit the same amount of space via the extension of

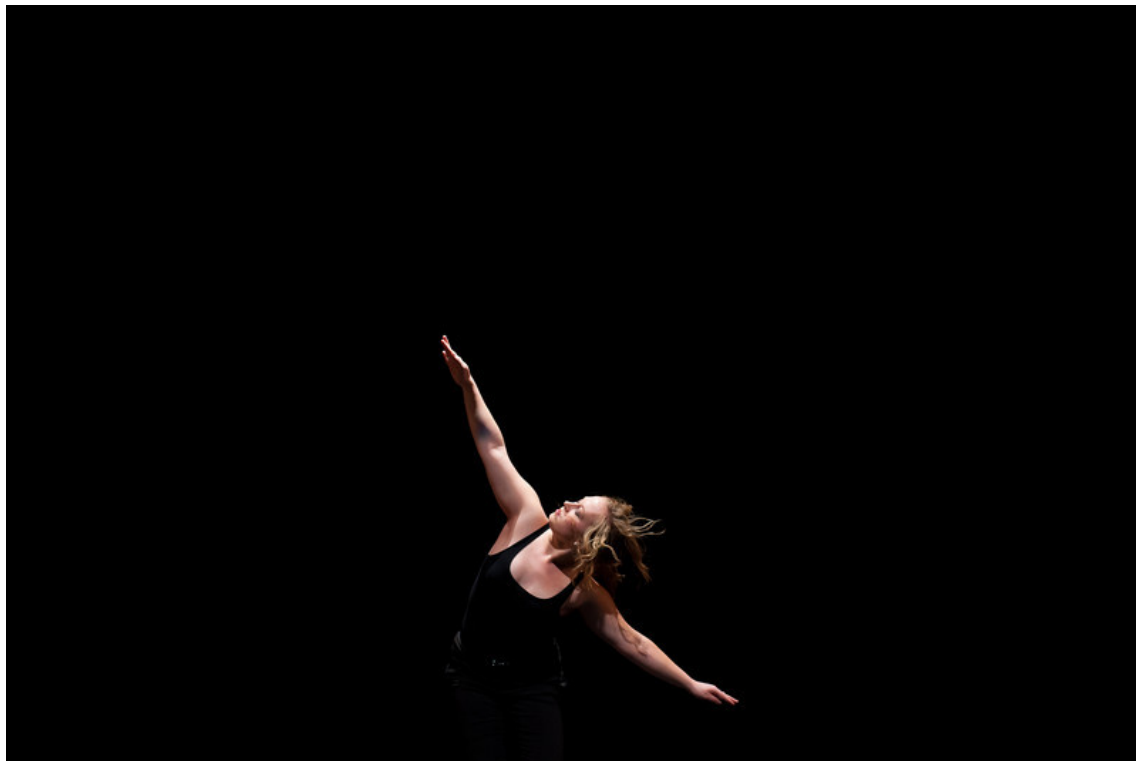


Figure 9. "Inhabiting Space in *The Personal*" performed by Margaret Behm

energy through and beyond my limbs and my eyes instead (see figure 9). It was also a challenge to learn choreography from someone else as I was so steeped in my own process. Erika Randall (who will also be performing *The Personal* at the faculty dance concert *The Current* in April

2013), Cassie Block, our understudy, and I all began learning Skybetter's choreography from a video. Strangely enough, this challenge paralleled the experience I had when attempting to re-inscribe my own choreography on my body after teaching it to my cast and then spending a while outside of the piece directing. In a way, the choreography of *The Personal* has undergone this same transformation, as it has been set on multiple dancers since Skybetter originally performed the work in 2007. There was, as well, an element of masculinity in this solo that provided a nice contrast to my work and helped me locate the femininity in my piece. In her book *Time and the Dancing Image*, Deborah Jowitt discusses the early modern choreographers' use of the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy in relation to the form and content of their dances (Jowitt 165). Apollonian qualities are tied with masculinity and focus on reason, order, and structure, while Dionysian qualities are associated with femininity and are linked with chaos and emotion. An Apollonian form can be seen in Skybetter's piece. *The Personal* was choreographed by a male on his own body and through this process was transferred to my female body. Masculinity was apparent in the way I was costumed, wearing business-like black pants with my hair pulled back. The regality and strict structure of his dance provided contrast to the fluidity of *intERRUPTION*. However, recognizing the Apollonian nature of the form of my dance in contrast with the Dionysian content exploring femininity and body image made for a richer work, by combining the contrasting sides of this dichotomy.

Skybetter's piece also furthered my exploration and personal relationship with form versus content. In "Perspectives of the Dance" by Harry Elion in *New Theatre* from September 1934, Elion states that:

The weaknesses so glaring in almost all the dances result mainly from a lack of understanding of the relations between content, form and style . . . It was as though content and form were not integrated but paralleled. At times content overshadowed form and at other times form completely obscured the content.

This seeming contradiction between improved technique and lack of clarity in expression is the very basic difficulty of dancers. It arises from the rigid adherence to form technique when the question of a new content is involved. It is a generally accepted principle that revolutionary art form is dependent upon its content (qtd. in Franko 127).

Dance artists today are still seeking the balance and integration of form and content, and it is this skill that Skybetter is commended for in his work. In a recent article, Skybetter's process is described as "a working method grounded in both a depth of feeling and an appreciation of formalism" (Hoffman). Of his creative process, Skybetter says it is "one of gradually abstracting and distancing away from" content, where the "resulting works are abstract but contain a kernel of deep feeling that is not legible but palpable" (qtd. in Hoffman). He also says, "I think of dance more as a means to create a terrain through which an audience can experience their own emotions or narratives or ghosts rather than me expressing some thing" (qtd. in Hoffman). Skybetter's way of working is a prime example of the way I desire to mesh form and content. By using inspiration to create the dance, without the dance necessarily being *about* that inspiration specifically, the audience can experience their own emotions and create their own narratives. This was evident in *The Personal* as Skybetter put an emphasis on not overly dramatizing the emotional content of the piece through exaggerating facial expressions, but letting the emotion

speak through subtle gestures of the body. This resonated in *intERRUPTION* through our use of gesture. Both Sam and Annie told me that there were moments when they made eye contact with the audience and they never felt as though they had to communicate any emotion through their face. Rather, the vulnerability and simplicity of the movement did all the speaking necessary.

The use of music in *The Personal* also related to my musicality. Each section of *The Personal* was intimately connected to the music and I took movement cues from the music. Skybetter has said that he “‘make[s] very specific dances to very specific piece of music’” (qtd. in Hoffman). While I used to work like this, my time in college has expanded my choreographic relationship to music. However, the formalist way in which Skybetter uses music -- rhythmically and melodically driven, using music to relate to space, and so on -- is seductive to me and I ultimately returned to a strong connection to music in the final iteration of *intERRUPTION*. In keeping with the theme of powerful femininity, I used the artist Bjork for two of the three pieces of music in the overall work. The first piece by Bjork matched the tense and *intense* tone and the choreography was supported by Bjork’s heart-quickenning bass beat as well as the guttural screeches she emits for part of the song. The second piece of music, also by Bjork, was juxtaposed with the movement whereas the first song was directly related. During the quick and aggressive moves of Cassie and Aundrea’s duet, her voice was stripped away to simple and beautiful tones, while minimal piano played underneath. Finally, the last piece of music created a structure for the dance, with an atmospheric drone that located us within a specific world in the piece. A pulsing beat layered on top matched the continuous flow of movement as the piece built to an end in which the music deteriorated into static that abruptly cut off, just as the movement abruptly cut off as we jumped into the air right as the lights bumped to black.

From Interruption to Integration

“Art slips past our brains straight into our bellies. It weaves itself into our thoughts and feelings and the open spaces in our souls, and it allows us to live more and say more and feel more . . . It matters, art does, so deeply. It’s one of the noblest things, because it can make us better, and one of the scariest things, because it comes from such a deep place inside of us” (Niequist 227-8).

I discovered this quote in a chapter on art-making in the book I was reading the day before opening night of my BFA concert, *Catapult*. The words consumed my body with convulsing sobs. It was as if our whole process and the end product that was to be shown onstage was somehow being validated as so much bigger, so much more important than me, than my cast, than all the time and work used to create it. *intERRUPTION* had become its own entity, an abstract expression of lived theory; a work full of power, ferocity, sensation, vulnerability and unabated rawness.

Two years ago in my Intermediate Composition class, I will never forget when Erika Randall told me that I know how to make a pretty dance. What would be a compliment from anyone else, I knew that from Randall it was a push to go further. To me, pretty meant lacking meaningful depth and complexity. She knew there was a “wildebeest,” (as she described my movement after the first BFA showing) inside my good-girl persona, something grittier behind my wardrobe-staple pearl earrings (Randall). In reflecting upon the BFA process, I wrote in my notebook right before our final rehearsal that this is not a pretty dance. Just like Annie does not want to be seen as just a “pretty girl,” I hope *intERRUPTION* is seen as more than just a pretty dance -- but an honest, complex, real, and raw piece of work. I hope the audience was viscerally

affected by the performance and could feel the layers of content emanating out of the form.

Whether the theme of body image was explicit to the viewer or not, I simply hope they felt something -- that they left different than they came. A fellow dancer told me his mother has never felt beautiful, but felt beautiful after watching my piece. Many of my non-dancer friends that saw the show kept coming back to the word “powerful” to describe the work. Sam wrote in a note to me that I “managed to form a piece with physicality that has meaning.”

In the final reflections on this process, I see how I was led by both research and intuition. Understanding my affinities, habits, and patterns of choices as a choreographer will be an ongoing learning process, but it is clear how I used my body’s instinctual knowledge to make poignant choices in the creation of this dance. As I move forward in my art-making career, I will continue to integrate what I came to know during this experience. I will refine the skill of melding content and form. Using my interest in specific content, I will aim to create landscapes through which my audience can imagine their own attachments, emotions, narratives, and opinions. Two-dimensionality versus three-dimensionality will remain a theme in my work and I hope to constantly deepen my fully embodied self and discover new ways to share this with my audience. I am interested in the role of interruption as a feminist theoretical device and a choreographic tool, and trust that it will resurface in my future work. As I move on to other artistic explorations, I am equipped with the invaluable information that the body is a site of knowledge and truth. By using the body and personal experience as theory, I will continue the lineage of creating autobiographical, feminist work.

The process of creating this piece truly mimicked the process of learning to accept one’s body and whole self. I transitioned from struggling to understand how research and movement

could balance each other out, let alone become fused, to subconsciously realizing that exact truth through the process of physical practice. I desire *intERRUPTION* to serve as a testament to the fact that the movement of the dancing body can function as theory and thus as liberatory practice. In the context of body image discussions, the body itself is the prime medium in which to have these conversations. Through *intERRUPTION*, I was able to acknowledge the forces that create insecurities that can hold us back. Through the carefully honed movement of the piece, we embodied, interrupted, and then transcended those forces. As I conclude this process, I have to acknowledge that I subconsciously knew -- my body knew -- all along the most poignant and important lesson to be learned. On the very first page of my composition notebook, at the very beginning of this journey on January 30, 2012 I wrote: *YOU, I, am an artist who has something to say, a story to tell, and it is important. Never lose sight of that. And always, dance, dance, dance. It's what you are made of* (Behm).

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