

THESIS PROPOSAL III

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The relationship between the ephemeral and the physical is an intimate one. Movement is the displacement in a medium caused by an object passing through it; the resistance of the medium makes possible the recording of movement over time. This recording becomes evident when the physical medium is one visible to the eye and the presence of movement, an ephemeral phenomenon, is seen through its mark mapped onto the medium. By virtue, then, of the ability of movement through time to inform space, architecture can be informed by the type of movement characteristic of contemporary dance performance, since it is one that reflects the symptoms of our culture today.

The perception of movement in contemporary dance performance is affected by elements present in the performance experience, which combine with the movement itself to form a singular effect. In her book *Liminal Acts*, Susan Broadhurst uses the term “liminal” to describe the nature of marginal performances today. The term, coined by performance anthropologist Victor Turner, signifies crossing from normalcy into a suspended, timeless state likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility; it is a marginalized space of potential forms, structures, conjectures, and desires. Based on my own observations backed up by the analysis of Broadhurst, the elements present in contemporary dance performance can be broken down into several areas of experiment. These areas include the actual movement of the dancers, the use of new media technology, and the relationship between spectacle and spectator.

As life becomes more ethereal, dance responds by becoming more physical. Throughout the course of the twentieth century, there has been a growing interest in the exploration of the inherent nature and possibilities of the human body. From the creation of modern ballet through the liberation of the dancer from pointe shoes, illusion and artifice, in favour of bare feet and natural movement, to the artist's body as subject and catalyst in 1970s performance art, to contemporary dance experimenting with speed, shock value, aggressive, electronically-inspired, or seemingly impossible movement, there seems to be a move towards an opening up of natural human physicality free of social taboo. This is also reflected in our society and its obsessions with violence, sex, and bodily functions, as made explicit by the media. The corporeality of the human body is a relevant issue today in a world where technology is developing at an exponentially rapid

pace and virtual reality is becoming our everyday reality, action on the theatre stage reminding us of our physical nature.

The exploration of the human body and its limits has been facilitated by and goes hand in hand with the development of media technology as used to represent and capture motion; it was at the end of the nineteenth century when scientists such as Marey and Muybridge were working on the first sequential photographs freezing and taking apart movement by representing the same human body in different positions over time, a concept radical at the time. The emergence of photography and film, capturing frozen and real time, as well as studies in abstraction of movement in the world of Fine Art has unveiled new relationships between the human body and its mobile existence in space and time. In contemporary dance performance, as movement of the body is on the edge of the possible, reality itself is also challenged through perception by experimenting with the representation of movement in time through media technology and simultaneity. This area can be sub-divided into hybridizing pre-recorded moving images with live movement, variation in scale, and variation in speed.

The juxtaposition of pre-recorded and live movement in film and video projection occurs simultaneously. The difference between live performance and cinema is that the first is interactive by virtue of its response to the audience and space. As well, according to Peter Brook in *The Empty Space*, cinema works like human memory in its creation and destruction of images from the past, while live theatre appears more real than the normal stream of conscious. The simultaneity of the two blurs boundaries between realities, between past and present, to create a heightened state of awareness and a new sense of reality. This is contributed to by the simultaneous presence of responsive and non-responsive performance media, which are hybridized. The presence of different scales at the same time and within one field of view, made possible by projecting objects of differing scales in relation to the real moving body, also questions reality. Through change of scale, nearness and distance become ambiguous and space takes on new dimensions and pockets; this occurs in Merce Cunningham's use of over-sized, computer-modeled people dancing before real dancers. Finally, through the use of different speeds, presence and absence can be perceived simultaneously. Objects moving in slow-motion

tend to “deconstruct their own presence” (Donald Kuspit: *Bill Viola: installations and videotapes*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988, p.73). Objects moving in real time seem finite while slow motion transforms them into duration and renders them eternal and infinite, as they exist in our unconscious. By juxtaposing the two distinct speeds, the finite and infinite are simultaneously present, hybridized through being undifferentiated; this results in a changed perception of time where one’s own presence in time and space is likewise altered. The questioning of reality and own’s own existence in time and space through media technology combines with questioning the physical nature of the body through gesture.

The role of the spectator in the contemporary performance is an active one. As the dance usually lacks any linear narrative, is often discontinuous and fragmented, the performance becomes totally sensorial and about the movement itself. Such renouncing of objective clarity and text can be traced back to the Dadaists at the beginning of the twentieth century:

“In an age like ours, when people are assaulted daily by the most monstrous things without being able to keep account of their impression, in such an age aesthetic production becomes a prescribed course. But all living art will be irrational, primitive, complex: it will speak a secret language and leave behind document not of edification but of paradox.”
(Hugo Ball: *Performance Art; from Futurism to the present*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988, p.37)

Hence, meaning becomes open-ended and subject to interpretation by the spectator, a concept well-articulated by musician John Cage in his use of silence to signify that which is beyond the predetermined parameters of the work (*Art into Theatre; performance interviews and documents*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers GmbH., 1996, p.23). To choreographer Merce Cunningham, the space of dance is a space of endless possibility. The concept of ambiguity is illustrated well in contemporary art such as the sculpture of Rachel Whiteread where the space underneath, around or in between objects is cast to render space palpable. Here, there is a play in the perception of presence and absence, the original and the copy, the particular and the replacable, inside and outside. Richard Schechner compares the audience-performance relationship to a two-way mirror, as spatially manifest in the storefront performance space of New York experimental performance group, Squat; there is a layering of back and forth movement through the interface as one constantly switches between seeing the performance through the

glass and seeing one's own reflection in it, being conscious of seeing. This layering is what allows the spectator to engage their subjective self in interpreting the performance.

These areas of experiment, which focus mainly on physicality, ambiguity of variations present simultaneously, and engagement in the process of definition, can lend themselves to architecture. Dance realistically portrays a forgotten humanity of physical imperfections and roughness of the body underneath the glossy finish of our society; architecture can also take on as its task to allow people to re-connect to their bodies through sensorial variations such as lighting, acoustics, or texture. This can also be done through movement, where these sensorial experiences can be discovered through movement that is spatially mapped. Ambiguity and undefined space can enrich this process by allowing people to define areas, limits, uses and meanings in their own subjective way. Blurring the line between scales, the permanent and the temporary, the mobile and the static, the private and public, light and built form defining edges, are all ways of pursuing this exploration.

As contemporary dance performance uses the human body to raise a new awareness of physicality and questions through the blurring of boundaries, architecture can use the interactive principles of performance to address the cultural issues raised by contemporary dance. Two pertinent issues emerge. The first is that of the increasing ethereality of everyday life due to media and computer technology; architecture can attempt to create a balance in the environment by emphasizing corporeality through perceptual and sensorial interaction. The second issue is that of the multiplicity of meanings in a media-suffused world; by eliminating all signs and symbols except those generated from using the human body, its movement and basic functions as a reference point, architecture that can be related to across cultural boundaries can emerge.

“dancing is a spiritual exercise in physical form”

(Merce Cunningham: *Art into Theatre; performance interviews and documents*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers GmbH., 1996, p.20)

The chosen artifact was a stop-motion photograph by Etienne-Jules Marey, taken in the late 19th century. The photograph shows the continuous motion of a man walking in separate plates, each capturing a given moment in time, a singular fragment of the whole. The analysis and transformation involved recording the movement of a subject moving over time through a medium and within spatial limits (a fish swimming in a glass container); this movement was then recreated in physical form.

“(Movement in space) too can be experienced as an absolute, likewise disengaged from the performer... Is not the endless flow of movement in skating more significant than the body of the skater? As we watch a fireworks display, is it merely the luminous trajectory against the dark background that arrests us? Is it not rather the disembodied movement of the rockets through space that so appeals to our imagination?”

(Siegfried Giedion: *Mechanization Takes Command; a contribution to anonymous history*. London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969, p.108)

The movement, lasting three minutes, was taped on video from one angle and photographed with long exposure from another angle. Based on the information supplied by these two different media representing the

movement in two different ways, the movement was reconstructed three-dimensionally in an axonometric drawing, yet another mode of representation. Using watercolour, density was used to signify slower motion or stillness. This three-dimensional shape was then made physical through sculpture and cast in resin. As a result, the movement constituted negative space within a solid mass of matter; the path of movement that had displaced its medium had been mapped.

The resin piece is made of opaque and transparent parts which fit together like a puzzle to form the entire movement. In the piece, the element of time and direction that was present in the earlier steps is lost; time and direction become ambiguous. Viewing the piece in its entirety, one can never see the whole path of the movement at one time as the opaque parts block views; hence, one is forced to interact with the piece by turning it around in order to follow the complete movement. The parts can also be taken apart and examined separately as fragments of a whole. The viewing process here is a process of unveiling. The casting process incorporated renders something present by virtue of its absence. It also renders tangible something ethereal and brings us closer to understanding the foreign space of a fish constantly discovering its limits within the tank. It is a deathmask of a movement, an unrepeatable event from the past, a record of time.

The next step in the process will be to choose a program and site based on my thesis work so far. The program will include an experimental dance theatre center hybridized with another public program typical of the urban landscape and one which can financially sustain the theatre. Working with the program requirements for such a dance theatre creates the opportunity of designing it an appropriate container while at the same time complementing it with a physical counterpart, developing the idea of the relationship between the ephemeral and the physical. It also institutionalizes this type of dance and allows it to further develop, something invaluable for a deeper understanding of humanity. The dance groups it would house would be, at the core, independent artists in need of a space, as well as international artists passing through. This collision would make possible a rich exchange of ideas leading to new understandings about human nature and society on a global level. Theatre anthropologist Richard Schechner writes:

“The intercultural phase of humanity will not bring the “retribalization” of industrial societies, but it will promote the coexistence of metaphoric and linear knowledge. Metaphoric knowledge – the kind of knowledge released by the arts - is gaining an equal footing: it is not inferior to “realer” facticities but is primary reality, one of several that braid into the human helix. And theatrical metaphor – restored and reactualized behaviour – is a root metaphor. It is root because theater = action = transportation/transformation.”

(Schechner: *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Philadelphia: UofPenn Press, 1981, pp.149-50).

The spreading of this “metaphoric” knowledge parallels the spreading of linear knowledge via Internet, but on a corporeal level. Finally, designing for an intercultural clientele would give the opportunity of creating a “global” architecture; it would consist of basic signs understood by everyone which could be derived directly from the movement and basic functions of the human body itself, one of the most obvious intercultural common denominators.¹

“When we look at objects or buildings which seem at peace with themselves, our perception becomes calm and dulled. The objects we perceive have no message for us, they are simply there. Our perceptive faculties grow quiet, unprejudiced and unacquisitive. They reach beyond signs and symbols, they are open, empty . . . Here, in this perceptual vacuum, a memory may surface which seems to issue from the depths of time. Now, our observation of the object embraces a presentiment of the world in all its wholeness, because there is nothing that cannot be understood . . . Our times of change and transition do not permit big gestures. There are only a few remaining common values left upon which we can build and which we can share. I thus appeal for a kind of architecture of common sense based on the fundamentals that we still know, understand, and feel.”

(Peter Zumthor: *Thinking Architecture*, Basel: Birkhauser, 1999, pp.17,22-4.)

Apart from the actual performance spaces which should be flexible to accommodate experiment, new media technology, rentable space for various events, and space where

spectators or visitors can somehow be engaged in the dance, there should be the usual support areas but also studios and temporary dwellings. There should also be spiritual areas for meditation, as well as conference space. These additional programs, especially the domestic, will create an exercise in applying the architectural ideas to the banal, everyday experience. Spaces of rehearsal are of special interest as they involve watching one's own movement in the mirror as well as on video. New media technology and recording studios, an essential part of the program associated with the production of contemporary performance, will counterbalance the physicality of dance with their ethereal nature.

The site that is most appropriate for testing out the described goals for the architecture is an urban one; this is because the type of dance theatre at hand is one born out of the city itself and its conditions, which it is addressing. If the theatre is a symptom of something, perhaps the architecture can offer a remedy. The site to be worked with shall be located close to downtown Toronto but it will be in a marginal area in need of revitalization. It will likely be an industrial site, as the flexible operation of an experimental theatre requires the scale, openness and mechanisms of a factory; such is the successful case of the Ex Machina theatre, which is housed within a transformed fire hall. The building itself can be hidden inside a block, with the passage leading to it becoming an important experiential element of unmasking; this passageway can be rich in public urban program serving functions of the body. As the dance I am interested in is about revealing hidden parts of the human being, awkwardness, and flipping things inside out, the project will likewise incorporate expressive ideas about outward explosion, with impact on the larger urban realm. It will record movement in time through various ways such as surfaces wearing away with use; movement will also be created, using the idea of markers defining space. It is important to note, though, that movement in time must be accompanied by stillness.

1 Similar intercultural mixing experiments have been and are being done. Examples in theatre include director Jerzy Grotowski and his University of California Objective Drama Institute project, Peter Brook and his International Center for Theatre Research in Paris, and Eugenio Barba and his International School of Theater Anthropology.

WORKS CONSULTED

The following readings helped me formulate my thesis. I acquired an introduction to performance and its theory, mostly focusing on the twentieth century. I gained an understanding of how dance and performance as an expression relate to life, social and political issues. I learned about the spatial and anthropological structures of performance as well as about the continuing experimentation with perceptual limits as an ongoing trend. I became interested in the ideas of those such as Oskar Schlemmer, John Cage and Merce Cunningham, as they relate to the movement of the body in space and time. Since there is still little written about the meaning of what is occurring right now, based on these historical examples, I was able to postulate about the role of contemporary dance in today's society. I made observations about contemporary dance through watching live performances and then used this experience to try and tie it into what I have read. Reading about communication theory helped me formulate these relationships.

As my thesis topic deals with movement itself, I also looked to material on motion studies. This especially helped clarify my transformation work, which dealt with the representation of movement in physical form; studying criticism of the casting process of Rachel Whiteread further helped me understand my own work, albeit her work being static and unconcerned with movement. Looking at video art, as represented by an analysis of the work of Bill Viola, introduced me to perceptual manipulation through new media technology, a current area in performance addressed by my thesis.

HISTORY AND THEORY OF MOTION STUDIES

Braun, Marta. *Picturing Time; the work of Etienne-Jules Marey*.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., 1992.

A chronological compendium of the work and working process of Marey; compares his work to that of Muybridge; fully illustrated.

Giedion, Siegfried. *Mechanization Takes Command; a contribution to anonymous history*.

London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969.

A comprehensive exploration of the influences of the industrial revolution on contemporary life with sections on the recording of motion in science and art (pp. 14-31, 100-113): i.e. Marey, Muybridge, Gilbreth, Miro, Klee, Duchamp.

Hodgson, John & Valerie Preston-Dunlop. *Rudolph Laban; An Introduction to his Work & Influences*. Plymouth, UK: Northcote House, 1990.

Marey, Etienne Jules. *Animal Locomotion*.

More plates of time-lapse photography.

Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of Perception*.

London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1962.

Pickover, Clifford A. *Chaos and Fractals*. New York: Elsevier, 1998.

T 385C453

The introduction to this otherwise very mathematical yet illustrated book explains chaos theory and fractals in terms of their describing the path of non-linear dynamic systems.

Ullmann, Lisa, ed. *A Vision of Dynamic Space*. London: The Falmer Press, 1984.

CONTEMPORARY ART

Bois, Yve-Alain. "A Picturesque Stroll around Clara Clara".

Bradley, Fiona. *Rachel Whiteread: Shedding Life*.

London: Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd., 1997.

NB 497 W5A4A

A series of critical essays on the artist's work as well as on the process of casting itself; contains colour illustrations of pieces. The introduction by Fiona Bradley (pp.8-18) compares casting to photography; Bartomeu Mari talks about the work's ghost-like qualities as well as its touching upon questions of inside and out, of private and public (pp. 61-73); Rosalind Krauss comments upon its openness of meaning and its resistance to the multiple copy (74-81); Michael Tarantino discusses how the knowledge of what is present is defined by what is absent.

Lingwood, James, ed. *Rachel Whiteread: house*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1995.

NB 497 W54 A64

An exploration of the social and political implications of one piece by the artist; especially interesting is the essay "Space-Time and the Politics of Location" by Doreen Massey, pp. 34-49.

London, Barbara, ed. *Bill Viola: installations and videotapes*.

New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988.

NX 600 I67V56

An analysis of individual pieces by the artist according to themes surrounding the concept of simultaneity and the perception of time.

Pacquement, Alfred. *Richard Serra*. Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1993.

Serra, Richard. *Richard Serra; writings, interviews*.
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

Zumthor, Peter. *Thinking Architecture*. Basel: Birkhauser, 1999.
A series of lectures by the architect addressing natural beauty, materiality and sensorial experience in architecture; includes photographs of the spa in Vals. Extremely clear and inspirational.

PERFORMANCE HISTORY AND THEORY

Artaud, Antonin. *The Theatre of Cruelty*.
DRM 230

Art Press special no. 20 1999: Le cirque au-dela du cercle.
This issue is devoted to the circus, from history to recent developments in this experimental and travelling form of performance which never ceases to challenge the limitations of the human body. Includes an article on circus architecture (pp.112-114) and talks about Cirque du Soleil as well as the contemporary dance company of Philippe Decoufle.

Beacham, Richard C. *Adolphe Appia; artist and visionary of the modern theatre*.
Coventry: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994.
PN 2808.A6B43
A book dedicated to the work ideas and influence of Appia; chapters 4-7 talk about his work with Jaques-Dalcroze and the theatre at Hellerau, as well as about using light to render space as an extension of movement in performance and to connect the spectator with the spectacle. Contains drawings of spatial ideas.

Broadhurst, Susan. *Liminal Acts: a critical overview of contemporary performance and theory*.
London: Cassell, 1999.
PN 2193 E86 B76

This very recent book hits directly upon and supports my previous observations and ideas regarding the nature of contemporary dance. It analyzes several works, such as that of Philip Glass, representing different art disciplines and illustrates how a common thread binds them all, embodied in the idea of "liminality"; it also critically uses philosophy to support the arguments presented.

Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1968.
A series of four lectures on different forms of modern theatre from an anthropological perspective; contains relevant material on the difference between live and pre-recorded performance, theatre and cinema (p.111).

Cage, John. *Silence*. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1966.
ML 60.C1355
Alongside pages of poetry, in this book, Cage writes about the art of noise, chance operations, the relationship between music and dance (pp. 86-96), as well as the potential of silence in music to dissolve limits; quite inspirational as the ideas can be understood in terms of architecture.

Current, Richard Nelson and Marcia Ewing Current. *Loie Fuller; goddess of light*.
Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997.

GV 1785.F86C87

A biography of the dancer's life and career; describes the Serpentine Dance (pp.23-44).

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. 1967.

HM 291.D413

Goldberg, Rose Lee. *Performance; Live Art since the 60s*.

London: Thames and Hudson, 1998.

NX 600.P47G66

An overview of recent and current experimental work in various disciplines. Chapter 3 is dedicated to body art while Chapter 5 examines contemporary dance. Very informative and complete; contains illustrations as well as a useful section on the artists' biographies (pp.213-228).

Goldberg, Rose Lee. *Performance Art; from Futurism to the present*.

New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988.

NX 600.P47G64

A complete chronological documentation of the evolution of this century's performance art; examines by movement: Futurism, Russian Futurism and Constructivism, Dada, Surrealism, Bauhaus, Living Art c. 1933 to the 1970s, the Art of Ideas and the Media Generation 1968 to 1986; shows the importance of each movement in the historical continuum; very useful as a comprehensive overview.

Hamlet – machine: Theatre populaire; Theatre proletarien; La lumiere au theatre.

Lausanne: La Cite, 1979.

PN 2635.H35

Jugendstil, Getantzer. *Loie Fuller*. Munchen: Prestel, 1995.

GV 1785.F86C87

A book written in German but containing beautiful photographs of the Serpentine Dance.

Kaye, Nick. *Art into Theatre; performance interviews and documents*.

Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers GmbH., 1996.

NX 600.P471228

This book focuses on interdisciplinary exchanges in performance between 1952 and 1994; it examines the work of artists such as Denis Oppenheim, John Cage, Cliff McLucas and Mike Pearson (Brith Gof, pp. 208-234), a group appropriating different spaces for its performances.

Kostelanetz, Richard, ed. *Merce Cunningham; dancing in space and time*.

Chicago: Chicago Review Press, Inc., 1992.

GV 1785.C85M48

A book in which interviews with the choreographer potentially address architectural issues in their discussion of limits; one section talks about work with John Cage (pp. 48-65).

Litak, Anna and Grzegorz Niziolek (ed.). *The Labyrinth Called Theatre; On Theatrical Space*.

Krakow: Galeria BWA, 1994.

An overview of the evolution of modern theatre in Poland; an exploration of set design and theatre architecture in the work of famous directors such as Tadeusz Kantor (32-37) and Jerzy Grotowski (pp. 38-48); also has an interesting introduction that talks about performance ideas and relationships in general.

Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater and Anthropology*.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.

PN 2042 A57S33

A volume that analyzes the relationships between spectator and spectacle, performer and spectacle, etc., treating performance as a ritual through an anthropological investigation of case studies from different cultures; also looks at the process of performance in terms of all of its phases of rehearsal etc.; extremely useful study on human psychology

Schechner, Richard. *Environmental Theater*. New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1973.

Schlemmer, Oskar. *Theatre et Abstraction*. Lausanne: Editions L'Age d'Homme. 1978.
N 332.G33

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process*.
GN 473.T82

In this book, Turner coins and defines the term "liminality" which is later extensively used in architecture and performance theory.

Von Maur, Karin. *Oskar Schlemmer*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1972.
NB 588.S43.M3813

A representation of the drawings and ideas of Schlemmer; includes coverage of dance figurines as abstracted kinetic sculptures constituting movable architecture, as in the famous Slat Dance.

Walker Art Center. *Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham / Merdith Monk / Bill T. Jones*.
GV 1785 A1A78

A series of interviews and other material surrounding the work of the three choreographers; in the section "Space, Time and Dance" (pp.18-65), Cunningham talks about the space of dance as one of endless possibilities; also talks about his work with Cage as well as about the Life Forms computer program for choreography which can, amongst other things, slow down movement to reveal detail.

Whitford, Frank. *Bauhaus*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1986.
N 332.G33B487

An overview of the art movement with material on performance; more information on the work of Oskar Schlemmer.

OTHER

Hallendy, Norman. *The Silent Messengers*.

This book of photographs explains and describes the origin of the Inuksuit, a sign system marking the landscape used by the Inuit to indicate direction and provide information relevant to survival.