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Performance Sculpture--An Exploratory Collaboration between Sculpture and Dance

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PERFORMANCE SCULPTURE-- AN EXPLORATORY COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCULPTURE AND DANCE

Cesia G. Kearns (Art)

James Johnson, Faculty Mentor (Art)

Thomas Bliese, Faculty Mentor (Theater and Dance)

Kinetic sculpture suggests new visual possibilities when combined with dance. Wishing to explore such avenues of interaction for sculpture, this artist sought to develop pieces that could be incorporated into choreography. An artist and a choreographer wove their concepts and styles together to create a performance art piece that rose from the reciprocal influences of interactive sculpture and dance. The creative process included development of concepts, visual imagery, and movement as the artist and choreographer shared ideas. The choreography of the original dance influenced the form, structure, and conceptual elements of the sculpture, which was developed in reaction to the movements. The choreography was then readapted in reaction to the sculpture. The choreography inspired the sculpture's form; the dance evolved in response to the sculpture. The sculpture created more than just an environment for the dancers; it created a new visual relationship in which the movement and form of both sculptures and dancers echoed each other. The result is a collaboration in which both dance and sculpture transcend their individual art forms to become a symbiotic performance piece. This presentation shares the stages of evolution in the creative process and reveals the final outcome of the piece.

Cesia G. Kearns

Vales of Passage: Performance Sculpture Project

"Performance Sculpture" was a project that arose from my appreciation for dance, my love for collaboration, and my affinity for working three-dimensionally in visual art. I believe that choreographers and sculptors are similar in that they each manifest artistic concepts by creating three-dimensional forms. This belief led to my desire to work with a choreographer on a collaborative art piece that combined kinetic sculpture with dance. The artistic process behind this collaboration would be highly dynamic. Sculptural form and dance movements would inspire each other during their respective developments, resulting in a composite performance product in which the influence of the sculpture upon the dance, and the dance upon the sculpture became indistinguishable.

Choreographer Carla Bode agreed to work with me. We began by sharing our recent work with each other and discussing the concepts we were currently exploring. I attended dance rehearsals, sketching movements and forms for inspiration, and Carla visited the sculpture studio, where my art pieces became an impetus to further development of her work (see figure 1). Over the course of the eight month process, I designed several kinetic sculptures that were reflective of the choreography Carla was creating and that embodied the early concepts of "balance" and "the shadow self" that Carla and I agreed to work with (see figure 2). Ultimately, Carla would re-choreograph the dance in reaction to the finished sculpture.

However, none of the early designs seemed to meet the goals I had set for myself. I intended to create a sculpture with enough complexity in movement and form to be intriguing, but one that was simple enough not to compete visually with the movement of the dancers. Ideally, I thought that the piece should complement and support the dance. It should also serve as a canvas for the other collaborators, a costume designer and a lighting designer. The piece had to be abstract enough to allow the other artists to complement it with their ideas, as well as avoid dictating any strict interpretations to the audience. Unfortunately, my early designs felt too elaborate and fabricated to meet any of these goals.

My final piece, after several revisions, was a true reflection of my goals. It consisted of two fourteen feet tall aluminum rod arches on triangular metal bases (see figure 5). These were affixed at a pivot point to a low platform that was ten feet long. The bases had casters underneath them to allow for the arches to rotate on the platform. I commissioned Jones Metal Products to construct the pieces from aluminum, since their greater expertise with metal would ensure structural integrity for the safety of the dancers as well as a lighter material to facilitate easier transportation of the piece. Using aluminum allowed for greater spring, so that movement could occur in the metal rod arches themselves.

Hanging from the end of the arches' curves was an enormous triangle of white fabric pieced together from smaller triangles. It was thirty-six feet at the hypotenuse. The triangles spiraled outward in a nautilus pattern, derived from early conceptual discussions about growth and balance. The piecing of the fabric portion was highly complicated and required mapping the triangle pieces from my sketch to scale (see figure 6). In the "closed position," the fabric fell draped in the middle, hanging from both ends (see figure 7). In the "open position," with the triangle pattern displayed, the piece became more interactive, as dancers pulled on the hanging fabric causing it to spring and rock.

The end result was a remarkable evolution of our ideas, with the final touches provided by the costume and lighting designers at the MSU Theatre and Dance Spring Dance Concert. The piece was successful in its ability to transform. It had a fluid form that could change to meet Carla's choreographic vision, as well as bear the potential to make infinite new shapes and movement for any future pieces. The form was true to the early concepts of "balance" and the "shadow self," and evolved to reflect later concepts of "opposition" and "passage." The sculpture did not hinder the dancers, and the incorporation of the sculpture into the movement brought new life to the piece. The sculpture's form could represent several things. A few interpretations include cathedral arches, a womb, a threshold, wishbones, a passageway, a crane, and the mutual mimicry of the dancers and the sculpture.

This attests the success of the piece as an evolution of Carla's and my work, as well as the freedom given to the audience's imagination. The imagery the piece held as a passageway or threshold was deeply relevant to the concept and influences we used to create this piece in its entirety. Carla's choreographic interpretation of my piece led to our title, "Vales of Passage." Indeed, I felt the process of this

endeavor brought each of us to the threshold of a unique, mature, collaborative art form, and well beyond into a new realm of creative possibilities. You will find the process of constructing this piece documented below in sketches, plans, and photographs of conceptual stages and the final product (figures 8,9,10).



Figure 1

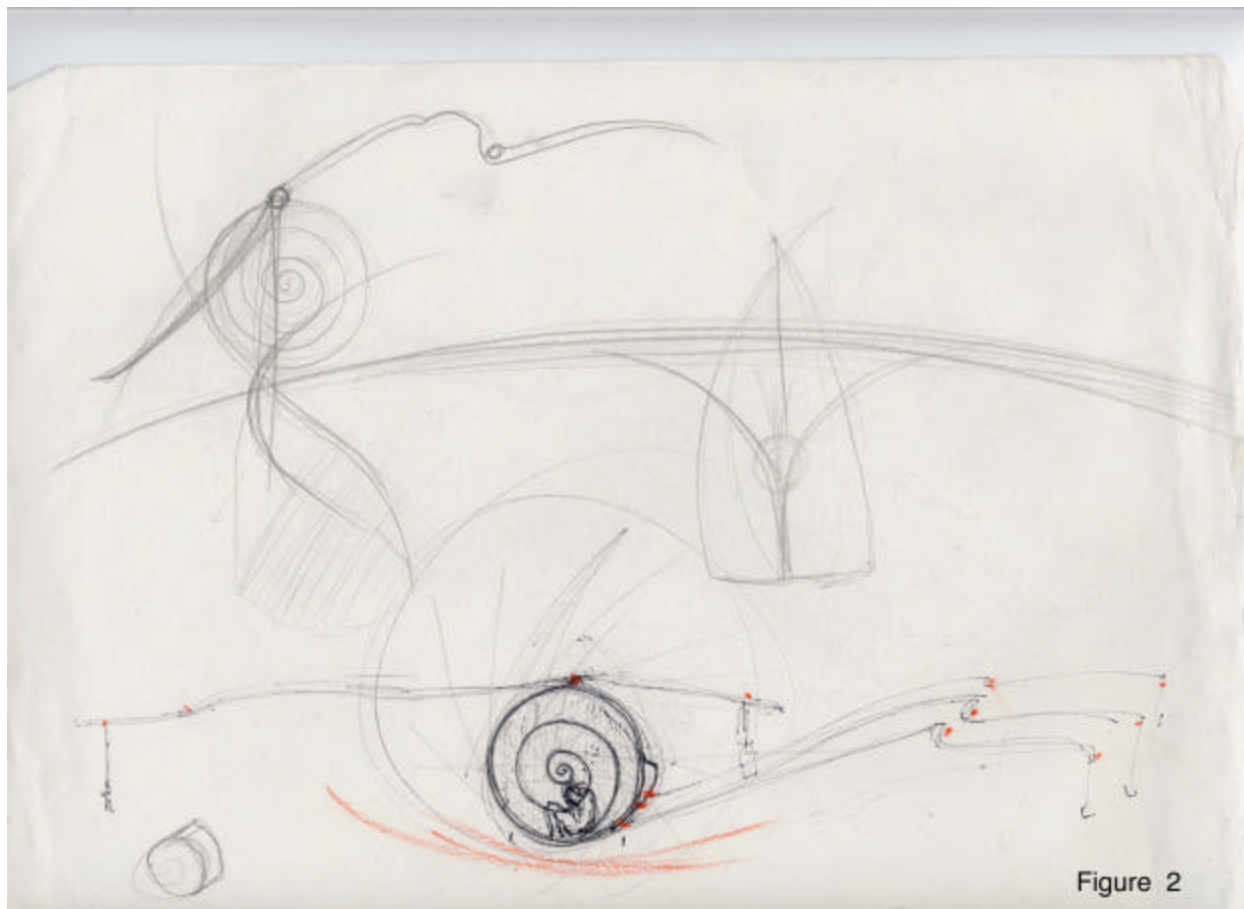


Figure 2

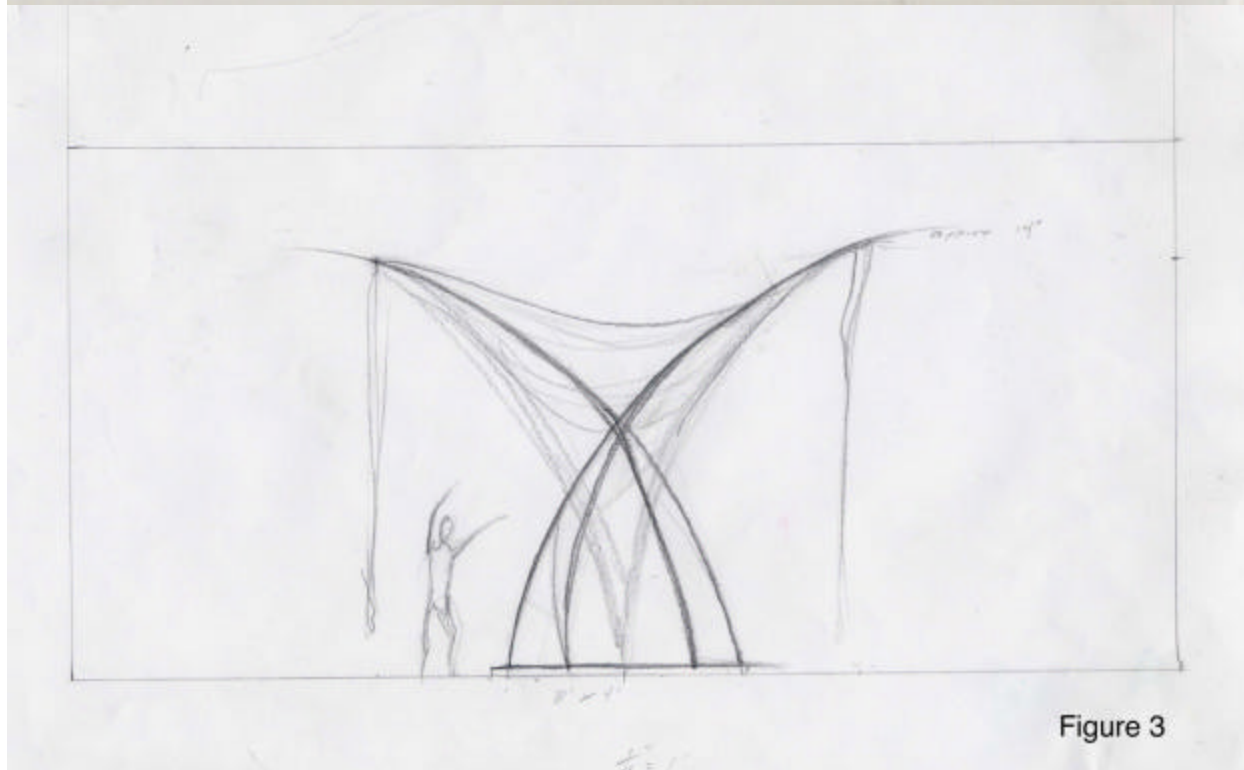


Figure 3

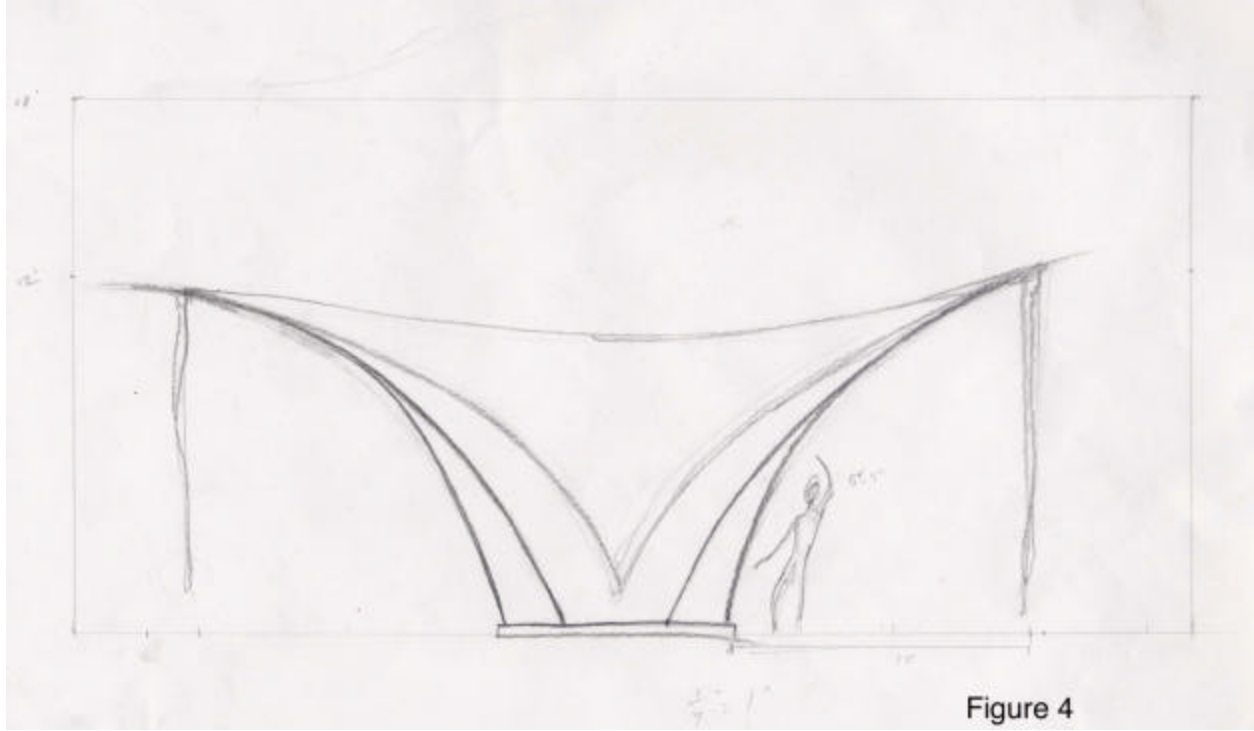


Figure 4



Figure 5

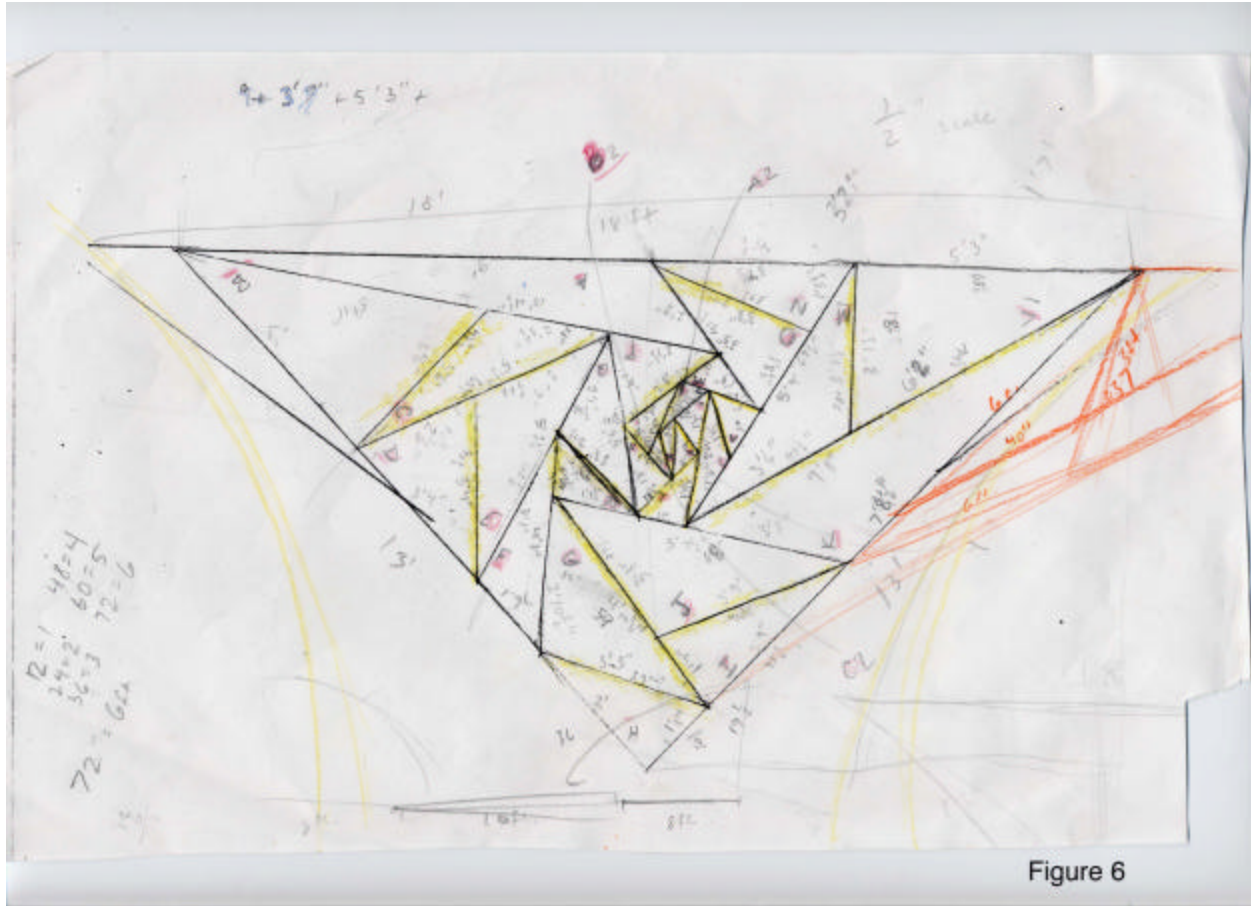




Figure 7



Figure 8

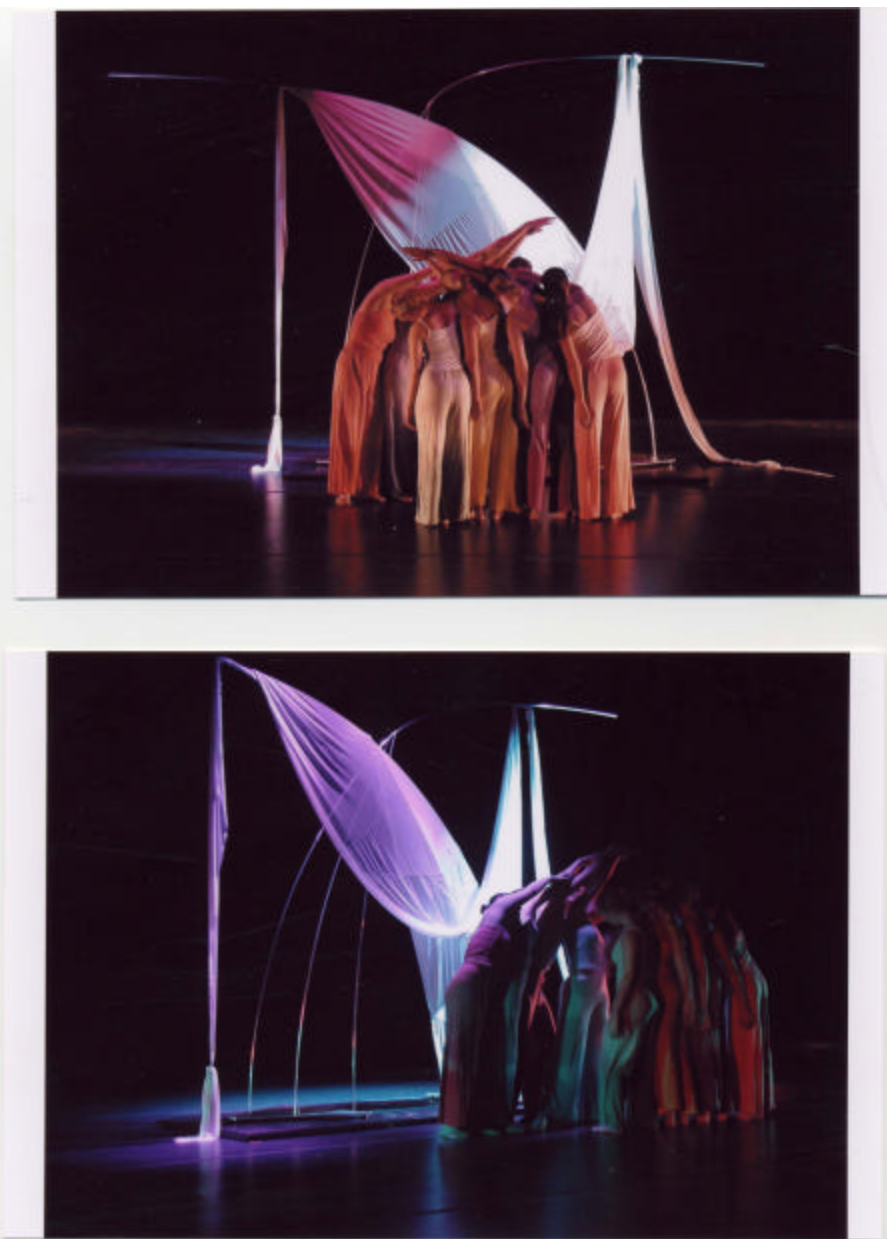


Figure 9



Figure 10

Author Biography- Cesia G. Kearns

Cesia G. Kearns graduated in spring of 2004 from Minnesota State University, Mankato, with a double major. She had earned a BFA in Sculpture and a BS in Open Studies, a multidisciplinary course of study in which she chose to combine Anthropology, Ethnic Studies, and Theatre. Her work includes experience in costume and specialty scenic design for MSU studio productions, as well as work in painting and fibers. Recent exhibitions (2004) include "Curio" at the 410 Project Gallery in Mankato, "Artworks" Spring show at MSU, and the MSU Art Department's senior exhibit. Her love for the arts and her passion for social change has led her also to be a human rights educator. Some of her accomplishments include the Kessel Peace Institute's Undergraduate Fellowship, and organizing "Staging Human Rights", a day long workshop for students to learn about human rights through performance techniques. Future work includes an upcoming artist's residency with Mankato's affordable housing program, and an apprenticeship with German artist Peter Genssler. Her drive to pursue both the arts and education on social justice issues will be a lifelong endeavor.

Faculty Mentor Biography- James Johson, Art

James Johnson came to MSU in 1979. He studied art at the University of Washington, University of California, Berkeley, and UCLA and taught at Ohio Wesleyan University before moving to Minnesota. At MSU, he teaches sculpture and serves as Chair of the Department of Art. Wooden structural forms and machined aluminum elements are combined in his own work to explore issues related to the visual and physical effects of tension and scale.

Faculty Mentor Biography- Thomas G. [Tom] Bliese, Theatre and Dance

Full Professor of Scene Design and former Production Area Coordinator at Minnesota State University, Mankato [formerly Mankato State University] 1977 - present. Free-lance scene designer and scenic artist, occasionally costume design. Have designed over 140 productions in a 35 year career. Received a BS in Art Education in 1968 and an MFA in Theatrical Design in 1971 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.