

May 2019

## Locating Meaning in the Art-Making Process

Jesse Bodony  
*Dominican University of California*

**Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.**

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Bodony, Jesse, "Locating Meaning in the Art-Making Process" (2019). *Master of Arts in Humanities | Master's Theses*. 5.  
<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2019.HUM.03>

This Master's Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts and Education | Graduate Student Scholarship at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Arts in Humanities | Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact [michael.pujals@dominican.edu](mailto:michael.pujals@dominican.edu).



This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the department chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Master of Arts in Humanities Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Humanities. An electronic copy of the original signature page is kept on file with the Archbishop Alemany Library.

Jesse Bodony  
Candidate

Joan Baranow, PhD  
Program Chair

Chase Clow, PhD  
First Reader

Christian Dean, PhD  
Second Reader

## **Locating Meaning in the Art-Making Process**

By

Jesse Bodony

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Humanities.

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, California

May 2019



## **Abstract**

Examining the ways that humans derive, cultivate, and encode a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives has always been a concern at the heart of humanities scholarship. In my own journey as an undergraduate and graduate humanities student, this sentiment held true. Through the cross-pollination of my humanities scholarship and my passion for dance led me to the question that guides and structures the project at hand. Specifically I ask: Where is meaning located in the art-making process? To explore this question, I hone in on the processes that guided my own dance-based practice, which exists within the methodological framework of arts-based research. In this essay, I will first give a definition of my craft and of arts-based research, briefly situating the methodology historically and in reference to existing research paradigms. Then I discuss the problem that this project seeks to address, which is namely a lack of focus on public scholarship in the academy. The section to follow delineates my research procedures. In the conclusion I offer my reflections, ultimately averring that meaning in the art-making process is located in acts of spontaneity and deliberation.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandparents Andrew and Agnes Bodony.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Research Process .....	6
Dance .....	6
Song .....	13
Location .....	15
Attire .....	16
Filming .....	17
Editing .....	18
Conclusion .....	20
Works Cited .....	23
Bibliography .....	23

## Introduction

The medium of my arts-based research is freestyle dance, a form grounded in the spontaneous action of spirit, body, and mind. Freestyle dance is a form in which the practitioner, through awareness of oneself and one's surroundings in the moment, pursues the manifestation of movement. It is a process of internal and external exploration—of introspection and extrospection—towards the end of conscientious bodily expression. Whether dancing to song or moving in silence, freestyle demands a sensitivity to sensory information, which is received, digested, and reinterpreted through the body. My experience of free-styling combined with the experience of creating of a freestyle dance video serves as the primary focus of this research.

Prominent arts-based scholar Shaun McNiff explains, “Art-based research can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies” (ix). The key features of McNiff's definition are the systemization of the artistic process, the actual making/expression of art, and the attention one pays to the experience of the researcher or of their participants. As such, I strived to make sure that the dance video I set out to create aligned with these criteria. The process needed to be rigorous, thorough, and systematic, art needed to be produced and expressed, and that my ultimate goal was to examine my own experience.

Arts-based research is a relatively nascent movement that arose in reaction to the limiting factors of quantitative research, a research paradigm that emerged in the later stages of the 1800's out of European rationalist movements. The hallmark of quantitative methodology is the “scientific method,” which places special emphasis on empiricism, pure objectivity, and the idea

that knowledge is both “out there” and discoverable. Here, arts-based scholar and author of *Method Meets Art* Patricia Leavy writes a concise explanation:

The scientific method, which guides so-called ‘hard science,’ developed out of a positivist ontological and epistemological viewpoint. Positivist science holds several basic beliefs about the nature of knowledge, which together form *positivist epistemology*, the cornerstone of the quantitative paradigm (7 Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2005, 2011)

Leavy outlines the key pillars of quantitative research: the scientific method, positivism, positivist epistemology, objectivity, researcher neutrality, and deductive process. Positivism contests that the research process can exist independently from a knowable reality that is discoverable and measurable by way of objective inquiry. These defining characteristics of quantitative research lead to both a knowledge building process and a way of understanding what knowledge is that, while important and useful, is narrow in its scope.

Qualitative research, and by extension arts-based research, rose in response to these deficiencies. This mode of research designates wide range of methodological practices that are grounded in an equally wide range of theories and epistemologies. Qualitative approaches typically employ inductive methods, acknowledging the role and positionality of the researcher in the research process. Social rights and feminists movements in the 1960’s and 1970’s propelled qualitative theory and method forward, reexamining how quantitative methods had power dynamics built into their structures and substructures. Qualitative research, unlike that of quantitative research, values the subjectivity and positionality of the person conducting the inquiry. As such, qualitative methodologies rely on epistemological theories that acknowledge embodiment, subjectivity, and positionality in the knowledge building process.

Where does ABR as a methodology situate itself in relation to these dominant research paradigms? Some, such as Patricia Leavy, aver that ABR is a third research paradigm in and of itself. She makes this argument on the grounds that ABR has posed considerable challenges to qualitative methods conventions, just as qualitative research did to positivist science. Scholar Jordan Potash sees ABR as having the flexibility to be both quantitative and qualitative, saying:

There are the expectations of objectivity embraced by quantitative, positivist traditions on one end of the spectrum and immersion in full subjectivity by qualitative, post-positivists on the other. Not merely a mediator between the two extremes, art-based research offers a profound way to move between in order to acknowledge and affirm both (153).

Still, others contest that ABR is more appropriately characterized as a heuristic that falls squarely under the umbrella of qualitative research. Regardless as to where on the spectrum arts-based research falls, it is a powerful mode of heuristic inquiry that excels at examining experience.

Just as ABR research methods serve as correctives to positivist quantitative methods, the products of ABR serve as a corrective to the "ivory tower" problem endemic to humanities research. McNiff explains,

For many years there has been a public critique of academic researchers 'in ivory towers,' implying that they are disconnected from the communities in which they are enmeshed, naval-gazing and doing work that is of little use to other. In short, the vast majority of academic articles and their research findings are totally inaccessible, and we are all becoming increasingly aware of this problem (274).

Thus, instead of keeping scholarly knowledge sequestered in academic circles, particularly via specialized conferences and jargon-filled scholarly journals, ABR seeks instead to produce "pub-

lic scholarship," that is, to produce creative works that are grounded in research yet are accessible to and of interest to the public. In this way ABR helps to further democratize knowledge and to disrupt traditional avenues of dissemination.

There are two main reasons as to why arts-based research causes this disruption. The first is that the product of ABR is often inclusive and accessible. ABR projects are frequently participatory in nature, which helps close the gap between academic and public spaces. Also, the artistic products of the research are more easily viewed and interpreted by non-academic groups. The second reason is that a major criteria for evaluation of research—as defined across many arts-based scholars—is the utilitarian component. McNiff explains that “the decisive factor about the value of research based in artistic enquiry is whether or not the work is useful to other people (6). Measuring the value of arts-based research by looking at its utility for others encourages arts-based researchers to push their work beyond academic walls and into broader communities. In thinking about their work, arts-based researchers must necessarily take on the responsibility of accessibility; thought must be dedicated to how work will be made accessible and disseminated to the public.

By virtue of being arts-based research, the project at hand aims to advance public scholarship. The non-academic group that I intend to present my art to is that of my social media network—a community of 1600 people that embody a wide variety of backgrounds, lifeways, and vocations; a community that has gathered and grown since my youth. Because the artistic product of the research is a video, it made sense to push the work through to a digital community. This paper serves as brief overview and context of the work, but I aim to have the video primarily speak for itself.

This effort aligns itself with the general ways that ABR serves to promote public scholarship. It is an act of taking academic research beyond the walls of academia into a public space, and it will be done so in a way that allows for said public community to engage with the work; it allows for the commenting, reaction, and feedback on the video/research, which is an appropriate indicator of usefulness to others. In so far as my research successfully reaches this community, and that it proves useful in some capacity for those who come into contact with it, this project at once promotes public scholarship and takes a stand against academy-exclusive research.

## **Research Process**

In keeping with the research and literature of other arts-based scholars, I chose a mode of investigation that was consonant with my research aim, which was to closely examine the way meaning arises in the art-making process. I was particularly interested in how movement, embodiment, and positionality within a given environment affects one's sense of identity. I chose to research these by carefully analyzing the way my free-style dance techniques emerged in response to not only music but to my internal and external environments. I used video as both a vehicle to capture these movements and as a tool for heuristic inquiry, as video-making requires extensive editing and thus analysis and reflection. In all, there was the actual creation of the video, the documentation of the process, and the reflection on the experience. The content to follow contains the documentation of the thoughts, feelings, and processes used in the making of the dance video.

### ***Dance***

Prior to the start of this video project, I constructed a separate dance study that looked at embodiment and embodied knowledge by way of freestyle movement. This study, which began several months earlier, became part of how I “trained” and also how I documented the experience of dancing. The video piece produced in the project at hand was largely informed by that study, and so the following paragraphs will be dedicated to its explanation. The place of the study was a dance studio—a small, 10 x 18 room with a linoleum floor and ceiling-high mirrors covering one wall. The small area and relative confinement ensured that the research could be repeated at regular intervals in a location that remained closed off to external variables, providing important locational consistency. At minimum I would be in the studio for three hours a week and maximally fifteen hours.

Prior to beginning a session, I would first warm up the body and quite the mind to effectively “clean the slate.” This process would look something like a 10 minute period of mindful meditation followed by a fifteen minute warm up to get the blood flowing. Once warm, I would set up my Cannon Rebel T3i Camera to record that day’s session. I would then go to my computer and play whatever music I was interested in at that moment. The genres of the music would span from hip-hop, to folk, to electronic, to R&B—anything that I felt had interesting sonic qualities. There would be some days that I would dance to a single song exclusively, maybe 20 or 30 times, and other days when I would simply move in silence.

Typically, my sessions would begin slowly, as I first became aware of my body. How am I feeling? Are there any aches or pains? What is my emotional state? What sorts of thoughts am I having? Then I would turn my attention to my surroundings, gradually becoming aware of each sense as I shifted the gaze of my being around the room. Next, I would turn towards the music, beginning with a bodily analysis of the general mood. What sort of atmosphere was this music creating? How did that atmospheric quality influence the way I felt? Then, I would move on to a more detailed examination of the sonic layers. Could I pick up on every kick, snare, synth, vocal cadence and adlib? If not, could I go deeper into a state of presence to access a more delicate receptivity? In the case of dancing in silence, I would pay attention to the sounds that I was generating; sounds of the breath, sounds of the aesthetic quality of my thoughts. Finally, I would begin to dance with the intention to be as fully engaged and immersed as I could.

My method of data creation was straightforward in that I was simply filming the sessions and then archiving them. I compiled all of the footage that I had gathered throughout the course of the study onto a hard drive. The entire study ended up being 76 freestyle sessions that added

up to just under 105 hours of dance. My method for analyzing that data was slightly more nuanced. First, I would watch that day's session directly after I had finished dancing. I would sit and absorb the footage as presently and sensuously as I could manage, in order to receive the information in a spontaneous way. Then, at the end of the week, I would go back and watch the total footage from that week. This re-watching was geared towards picking out features of embodiment as they appeared in my movement. Some of the concepts that arose from the analysis were: stimulus (inner and outer), surrender, energy, body, thought, balance, impulse, enjoyment, rhythm, order, judgement, presence, and attention. Four of the concepts will be explained as I experienced them in the study.

I experienced, there are two categories of stimulus—inner and outer—that are distinct but have significant overlap. Outer stimulus can be described as anything that existed outside and external to my being, but that I came into contact with through my senses. Passively, I would receive external sensory stimulus and information through my faculties of touch, taste, sight, hearing, and smell, which my nervous system would then process and translate into thought and feeling. In the context of my study, the primary outer stimuli was the music. The sonic information provided by a given song was absorbed through my faculty of hearing. I processed that sensory information, and it was converting into feeling.

I discovered that feeling and thought catalyzed by outer stimuli had certain magnitudes. A song, or a moment in a song, may stimulate an emotional reaction or bodily feeling that is at once discernible and easily identifiable. The feeling of sadness serves as a good example in that it is a familiar bodily sensation that I was able to detect and classify with relative ease. Sadness is a heavier feeling and elicited a certain kind of textured bodily response, primarily in my stomach

and chest. Other feelings that were stimulated, by contrast, were faint and unfamiliar. For instance, particular lyrics or sounds generated minute thoughts and feelings that did not fall under the major emotional categories, or did not appear in the forefront of the mind. A drum kick might stimulate a small sensation in the back of the knee, thus prompting the spontaneous kick of a leg. Prominent sounds and lyrics tended to generate bodily sensations of a larger magnitude, where softer, background sonic layers such as a shake or a subtle synth progression produced smaller sensations.

Outer stimuli, furthermore, existed in other forms aside from the music. The space provided a plethora of external information that I was always absorbing and processing. The studio had a particular smell, however indistinct and unnoticeable at times. The colors of the walls, the physical quality of the studio floor, the hotness or coldness of the space—these were omnipresent sources of outer stimuli that formed the sensory building blocks of my spontaneous action. When dancing in silence, these features of stimulus would take on a more prominent role in informing my movement. The beige walls often provoked a sense of calm, and the sound of my feet against the floor would make me conscious of them.

One of the more fascinating aspects regarding outer stimulus was the visual information provided by the studio mirror, which came about both in the experience of dancing and in the experience of watching myself dance. Watching oneself in real-time (and then later again on camera), excites an unparalleled feeling of depth and scope. The thoughts and emotions that result from the viewing of our own being is irreducibly complex and layered, always referencing a sense of our current identities. When we take the image of ourselves and combine it with a provocative sonic backdrop in the form of a song, there exists a treasure trove of intense outer stimuli ready to prompt one's embodied movement in a new direction.

The distinction I draw between outer stimulus and inner stimulus deals in the differing origins of the stimulus. Inner stimulus can be thought of as a meta or secondary stimulus, in that the thoughts and feelings originally produced by specific outer stimuli in and of themselves catalyze movement in a new direction. For example, if a moment in a song excites bodily feeling in an arm, and that arm is prompted to move spontaneously towards the ceiling, then that motion is now an instance of inner stimulus that excites further spontaneous reaction. Or, if a song produces a thought in the mind, the content and mental texture of that thought may excite a bodily response or a new spontaneous thought altogether. It was impossible for me to determine exactly where outer stimuli ended and where inner stimulus began, for in the moment, outer stimuli, inner stimuli, and subsequent spontaneous action mix and meld in fluidly. Still, they were distinct enough to be able to identify in retrospect.

In my research I also found that “surrender”—the notion of ceasing resistance and letting go—plays into how embodied I felt in a given moment. To surrender specifically asks that one discontinues a mode of being that is not conducive to existing in the present moment, which is where spontaneous action most easily and purely originates from. In some of my sessions, I would enter my studio with a heavy head or a heavy heart, meaning that I was mentally or emotionally (or sometimes both) preoccupied. Existing in such a preoccupied state was antithetical to being present; I was acting from a place of deliberation. In these instances, my movements were bogged down and muddied by the entanglement of feeling and thought existing within me. As such, my movements were deliberately constructed rather than organically excited in the moment. Being in a state of preoccupation drastically reduced my ability to be sensitive to the subtle, small feelings that a song would excite, and thus my movement would become less purely spontaneous. Worth noting is that my preoccupations were almost always categorized as mental.

An excess of thought would get in the way of being in a state where I could clearly and concisely receive stimuli to fuel free movement.

Surrendering to the present moment, to the stimuli that existed sensuously before me, was a necessary condition for accessing a purity of spontaneous movement. The times in my research where I was able to silence the mind and let go of attachment to thought were the times when spontaneity flowed most freely from my being. This is because when I existed in a state of surrender—which I also conceive of as a state of silence—the intensity, clarity, and nuance of feeling excited by stimuli was considerably easier to access. The spontaneity that sprouted from this mode of being was pure and continuous.

Only on several occasions was I able to experience a surrendered state that was profound in terms of its effects on spontaneity. In these instances, the intake of stimuli and subsequent spontaneous movement felt absolutely free and harmonious. The movement felt pure, and most interestingly, the movement felt good. The few times that I was able to truly and deeply surrender to the present and let spontaneous action arise out of that state of being resulted in a feeling that is best described by words such as vital, essential, organic, free, and good, though I recognize inadequacy of these words as I write them, incapable of doing justice to the feeling. That we have the ability to surrender or to let go signifies that states of presence and states of preoccupation can be arrived at by free will. This, while theoretically true, always proved to me much easier said than done. Sometimes the intensity of our preoccupations are so great that despite a desire to surrender to the moment, it feels immensely difficult if not impossible. I found that many of my day-to-day living provoked thoughts and feelings that felt inseparable and irremovable. However, as the study progressed, surrendering became an easier feat.

John Dewey's *Art As Experience* contributed greatly to my thinking about rhythm and embodiment. In it, Dewey delineates his aesthetic theory, which aims to reorient aesthetics in the entirety of experience rather than in isolated 'works of art.' Importantly, rhythm for Dewey, is a grounding point for all aesthetics. He says:

Because rhythm is a universal scheme of existence, underlying all realization of order in chance, it pervades all the arts...Underneath the rhythm of every art and of every work of art there lies, as a substratum in the depths of the subconsciousness, the basic pattern of the relations of the live creature to his environment (150).

Dewey's definition helped me broaden the scope of the types of relational patterning that I was both aware of and looking for. Instead of searching for rhythmic patterns only in terms of myself and the music before me, I began looking for the subtle, underlying rhythms that existed between my being and the whole of my environment. I noted in my sessions how the exploration of these more subtle environmental rhythms made me feel my body with more sensitivity and nuance.

Energy was another concept that Dewey's literature helped me explore more fully in the course of the research. Energy in terms of stamina was something I was familiar with, but not in an aesthetic sense. He says, "Things may be too far apart, too near together, or disposed at the wrong angle in relation to one another, to allow for energy of action. Awkwardness of composition whether a human being or in architecture, prose or painting is the result" (211). Thinking about the flow of energy as it informs composition was especially helpful when dancing in front of the mirror. Tinkering with and developing an aesthetic that spoke to me in terms of line, form, grace, texture, weight, speed, composition, balance, and other aesthetic-related concepts now included, in Dewey's words, "...gatherings of energy, its discharges, its attacks and defenses, its mighty heavings and its peaceful meetings, its resistance and resolutions" (236). Having a more

fine-tuned understanding of energy aesthetics, similar to that of rhythm, proved to deepen and strengthen my sense of embodiment as I moved.

### *Song*

The song I chose for my video is titled “Enough to Believe” by Bob Moses. I selected this song over several other potential candidates for several different reasons. I felt that the content of the lyrics were particularly resonant with my personal sentiment during the conception of this video. At the time, I was studying course material entitled “Religion and Public Life,” which dealt with the role of religion and spirituality in public and private dialectics. This class prompted me to consider how dance as an expressive art holds the potential to merge public and private spheres. Additionally, it brought to light that there was a glaring lack of religion/spirituality in my own life. There was a time in the past that my spiritual cup had felt very full, but in that moment I felt as though my spiritual connection was largely severed, that I had lost spiritual direction, and that I was existing in a late-millennial culture that was spiritually barren. The song expresses a similar feeling. For example, the first few lines of the song are:

Wondering where to begin

Loneliness rises again

All I knew isn't right for me now

Oh, I've nowhere to turn

Heaven isn't holding my hand

Wondering flavored by loneliness rather than hope, realizing that what you once knew and were certain of no longer serves you, feeling like you have nowhere to go and that ultimately you are disconnected from something vital and spiritual in nature—these ideas are all apparent in the

opening lines. The lyrics of “Enough to Believe” embodied a variety of uncomfortable existential emotions within me, and I felt compelled to express them in the video.

In terms of its production, the song is relatively simple, but therein lies much of its eloquence. There are a few notable sonic layers, such as the main piano riff, the drum kit, and the big-bodied synthesizer that sits in the background. These sonic layers each have their own textures and qualities that are delightful to move to and explore independently. However, when they come together they create sonic momentum that gently lifts and carries the listener at a sublime pace. The rhythm of the song exists at a happy median between slow and fast, which keeps the track drifting continuously forward. The movement of the song is punctuated by a definitive beginning, middle, and end, which gives it a sense of fullness and completion. It begins slowly and deliberately with only the piano riff, then picks up steam as the drums, synth, and lyrics are introduced. It takes its time in concluding, phasing out one sonic layer at a time until all that is left is the decrescendoing footsteps of the drums, growing fainter and fainter until the listener arrives at silence. In the mid-section of the track, the lyrics effortlessly coast on the waves of the sounds, gently texturizing the song with human voice in a quiet, yet urgent and lucid way.

The atmosphere created by the song is complex. There are distinct atmospheric threads that are calm, light, and airy, combining to create a feeling of penetrating tranquility. The more subtle features of the atmosphere are those created by the lyrics, which convey existential uncertainty and spiritual disconnection. Lyrics expressing existential uncertainty and spiritual disconnect, when paired with the tranquil overtones of the song, create a juxtaposition that is cleansing and freeing. It suggests that there is a peace to be found in very act of existential fearing, and that not-knowing contains within it both beauty and catharsis.

### *Location*

In determining the location of the video, I intuitively knew from the onset that the setting would take place in nature. One reason for seeking to use natural locations is because I had originally fell in love with dancing in the wildness of my backyard, and so there existed some sentimental value. I wanted to express the feelings of connection, freedom, oneness, and overpowering love that I feel when dancing in nature. Another reason is that at the time of conception, I also was interested in the idea of positionality, inspired by my studies in Ecofeminism. Positionality says that our identities, with regard to race, gender, sexuality, class, status, and so forth, are in part created by the political and social contexts in which we exist. In terms of the location of the video, I considered positionality in a more literal sense. I wondered, for instance, how my position in natural contexts would come to influence the image of identity I was portraying in my video. In what ways did placing myself in a space of nature convey a different idea of identity to the viewer as compared to an urban setting or indoor setting? In what ways did my current positionality affect my sense of identity in the moment of dancing? While I didn't have readily available answers to these questions, their consideration factored into how I thought about the locations I would use.

I also considered the possible locations of the video in reference to the song. I wanted to create something that was not only coherent with the song's meaning and atmosphere, but enhanced the content. The notion of depicting an existential, uncertain, yet tranquil journey—as put forth by the song—resonated with me while surrounded by nature, highlighting the idea that what one is looking for may exist in nature, that nature can help point us in new direction, or perhaps even that the natural world is essential to our sense of existential purpose and meaning. I also looked into locational aesthetics and variety. Places in nature contain within them their own

set of powerful aesthetics, and I wanted to try to capture these in my video in combination with my own aesthetics of dance. It was my hope that the movement of a beautiful place in combination with my own movement might add to something greater.

In terms of variety, it was paramount to have a range of locations in order to give the video more breath and variation. Fundamentally, having locational variety is important in order to avoid producing a video that is stagnant and unexciting. There are many ways that one can pull and play with a viewer's attention, and locational diversity is one of those ways. Ultimately, I decided to use three distinct, natural locations for the video; the beach, woods, and desert. These biomes each have their own aesthetics, which I hoped would stimulate different kinds of movement from me and also different responses from one watching the video. I settled on three locations because I feared that having too many would take away from the coherence of the video, making it scattered and disorganized, whereas having less than three would run the risk of being too narrow and uninteresting.

### *Attire*

Tangential to thinking about location for the video was deciding on the kind of clothes that I would be wearing in each location. Different kinds of clothing evoke different kinds of ideas and emotions from viewers, which might also bring more depth and meaning to the video as a whole. For example, in the desert shots, I wanted to use a darker color scheme of grey and black in a formal style suit. This aesthetic gently plays on the common image of the devil wearing a black suit and appearing in the desert—a harkening to general spiritual imagery. Black and grey against a lighter desert color palette also stands out crisply for the viewer, bringing clarity and visibility to the movement. There is also an interesting play going on between a desert setting and formal suit attire. Because the setting and outfit do not necessarily line up in a logical

way, one might be prompted to ask “Why?”, which is ideally the kind of question I would want a viewer to be asking.

In the woods shots, I chose an outfit that was all white with no shoes. I meant for this outfit to contrast with the devil-in-the-desert outfit in order to symbolize a kind of angelic purity. I hoped that the all-white outfit in combination with sun beams splitting through the branches of the trees would create an overt representation of “heavenly” imagery. The lack of shoes had two-fold intention: to establish a sense of connection with the place and to express a child-like undertone. Physically touching and interacting with the earth helps diminish the space between myself and the location. I did not want the video to feel as if I were dancing in a space that was merely acting as a backdrop, but that the space and I were connected and intertwined in our movements. One aspect of the joy that I get from dancing is that it makes me feel like a kid full of wonder and awe, and so I wanted to tip my hat to that idea. Lastly, there was the location of the beach. The clothing I chose for this location didn’t have any explicit symbolism. Instead, I tried to pick clothing that complimented the aesthetics of the beach primarily in terms of color. The gradient of browns and beiges found in the sand are reflected in my brown and beige socks, for instance.

### ***Filming***

The filming of the video was the most challenging aspect of the project. Fortunately, I did not have to film alone, which would have resulted in static shots set up on a tripod. Instead, I was lucky enough to have my wife, Kyawt, who studied cinematography and is a filmmaker, shoot the video. The entire video was made in a week-long road trip that began in Fairfax and passed through Big Basin State Park, Joshua Tree National park, Sequoia National Park, and Roy’s Redwoods in West Marin. Our process for filming was fairly spontaneous. We would typically shoot early in the morning or in the late afternoon to capture the best light, walking around until Kyawt

or I found spot at the location that had a good composition. After determining a spot, I would bring out the speaker and begin dancing while Kyawt filmed. There was no storyboard or pre-meditation to it; I danced to the song many times through with the hope of capturing a few interesting moments.

In each location, we wanted to make sure that we had a variety shots. Some shots should be close up, some far away, some medium distance, in order to capture both my movement and the place in different frames. The interplay between Kyawt and I during the actual filming of the video was dynamic and spontaneous. Sometimes she would suddenly begin moving with the camera or capturing close shots, and I would respond in dance in real time. This dynamic was composed of subtle, intimate, non-verbal understandings between her and I. She understood my movements and my movement preferences, and would adapt the composition or stillness of the shot accordingly. Similarly, if she found an amazing composition, I would change my movement to accommodate. Sometimes the shots would come naturally and easily. I would dance openly and freely and she would have a great shot lined up and ready to go. Other times finding the right shot was a big challenge. There would be days when I wasn't as feeling the music as much as I felt I needed to be, or that the light was too flat and the shot turned out grainy, or that a good moment from the session had been captured the previous day. As we had limited time and budget to film, we had to power through these speed-bumps.

### ***Editing***

Finally, once all the footage from the various locations had been gathered, I began the process of editing the video. The editing processes encompassed a range of considerations, spanning questions such as: Which clips should be chosen and which should be discarded? How long should each clip be? In what order should the clips be sequenced? Are the transitions smooth and

organized, or are they clunky and noticeable? Does the video as a whole align with what I intended and set out to do? Addressing these questions in order, selecting the clips was simple at first, but then grew to be more of an obstacle. When I first went through all the footage, it was easy to pick out moments that I liked and that I knew I wanted to have in the video. As more and more clips were added into the video, certain portions of the song did not have a clip, and so I had to find footage to fill that gap. This was tedious because these “filler” clips were not always ones that I felt strongly about having in the video. In retrospect, this was a result of filming the video in the spontaneous manner that we did, rather than having a dedicated filming plan. The length of the clips was also something I generally considered. A clip that was too short would not properly portray the essence of the clip, and it would also result in a video that was jolty and jittery. Clips that were too long, by contrast, could amount to stagnation and boredom. As such, the length of the clips generally fell between two and eight seconds, the shorter and longer ends of attention span. Then there were clip transitions, which had to do with the ordering and sequencing, specifically with regard to how one shot moved into the next. Some shots flowed seamlessly into another despite there being a different location or distance of shot, while some took hours of tinkering and trimming to get right. At regular intervals during the video editing process, I asked myself if my edits were contributing to a vision of the video as a whole that I supported.

## Conclusion

In documenting and reflecting on the experience of art making I was able to identify two fundamental locations of meaning. There was a kind of meaning that arose from a place of spontaneity, and there was a kind of meaning that arose from a place of deliberation. Certain aspects of my creative process were inherently deliberative, such as the outfit selection and editing process. These were processes defined by a careful, sustained consideration. Other aspects, such as the dancing itself or the moments of filming with my partner, were completely improvised; they were impulsive and uninhibited. The kinds of meaning that grew from spontaneous or deliberative locations differed with respect to their differing origins.

To act in a way that is unplanned and unpremeditated—in a way that flows organically from the present moment—is to act spontaneously. When I dance, the experience of letting go of all the excess thought and feeling that is preoccupying me is at once freeing and ecstatic. Accessing continuous bodily action that blooms from a place of spontaneity contains within it a primal, raw, visceral feeling of being unmistakably alive. There is a kind of purity and rightness to one's actions; actions that could have never manifested by plan or rational intent. One example of this in my study was the way that each location where I danced influenced my movement. When on the beach, I could have not foreseen the exact way that the softness of the sand, the sound of the waves crashing behind me, or the bright sun in my eyes could have affected the quality of my movement. The same can be said of the desert earth and penetrating heat of Joshua tree, or the pain from the sticks poking my feet and shivering in the cold of the shaded redwood groves. My impulses to move were pushed and pulled by the kind of place that I was in and the feelings that place elicited. These unplanned, unexpected, variables that contributed and defined moments of

spontaneity were meaningful in that the raw feelings of those moments would live and die as they passed.

There was also the dynamic of dancer and filmer, which was a spontaneous, meaning-making conversation in and of itself. The meaning that existed in the spontaneous interplay between us in the heat of the creative process conjured an emotion and feeling that was unique to that moment in time. They were unique moments marked by connection, intimacy, and deep non-verbal understanding. Spontaneousness seemed to be a well, a source, a location, from which a kind of meaning arises and manifests. This kind of meaning is raw, pure in its presence, and powerful in its impulsivity. My actions that were truly spontaneous were meaningful by the very nature and virtue of them originating from a spontaneous location.

By contrast, there were also many components of my process that were highly deliberative. By deliberative, I mean that one can set a course of action with intent, desired result, and diligent premeditation. Being deliberative, or acting from a place of deliberation, is the other fundamental location of meaning. It has a different kind of meaning from spontaneous meaning precisely because it was planned and intended rather than impulsively arrived at. When I deliberated, I generated thoughts, visions, and ideas about my project. My subsequent actions happened in relation and in reference to these ideas, and thus a different kind of meaning was generated by this structure.

In my study, there was a considerable amount of deliberation that went into the conception of the video and the editing process. In choosing a song that was defined by peaceful yet uncertain existential questioning I was able to intentionally create a feeling that I desired. In deliberating over outfit and location I was able to add in further layers of spiritual symbolism, deepening and broadening that feeling. Perhaps most poignantly, the editing process was an experience

of near pure deliberation. Presented with a large hard drive of footage, I had to deliberately select what clips to use and where to put them, which was a sustained thoughtful, intentional, rational process. I found that deliberation localizes and characterizes meaning in that it allows one to exercise their autonomy, agency, free will, and ability to think. It is a location from which I could set a course of action (which is a valuable endeavor because it allows for the exercising of these human capacities), bringing a sense of control over my product and my art.

While spontaneity and deliberation are two divergent locations of meaning, I found in my study that they were symbiotic to one another. The spontaneous elements of the art and art-making process would have felt less meaningful if not given deliberate form, structure, and organization. On the other hand, the elements that were deliberative would have been boring and uninteresting if not imbued with spontaneous inspiration and insight. In this way, spontaneity and deliberation assist one another in producing meaning that is greater than each could produce alone. The broader ontological question that this study raises deals in meaning outside of the artistic process. Namely, are spontaneity and deliberation structural aspects of human being? Perhaps a question to consider beyond this project.

### Works Cited

- Barone, Tom, and Eisner, Elliot W. *Arts Based Research*. SAGE Publications Inc, 2012.
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. Perigee Books, 2005.
- Leavy, Patricia. *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*. The Guilford Press, 2015.
- McNiff, Shaun. *Art as Research: Opportunities and Challenges*. Intellect, 2013.

### Bibliography

- Barone, Tom, and Eisner, Elliot W.. *Arts Based Research*. SAGE Publications Inc, 2012.
- Blackie, Sharon. *If Women Rose Rooted*. September Publishing, 2016.
- Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of the Sower*. Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993.
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. Perigee Books, 2005.
- Erdrich, Louise. *Future Home of the Living God*. Constable and Robinson, 2018.
- Ghazzālī , et al. *Al-Ghazālīs Path to Sufism and His Deliverance from Error: an Annotated-Translation of Al-Munqidh Min Al-Dal'Al*. Fons Vitae, 2000.
- Gracyk, T. and A. Kania, eds., 2014, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*, New York: Routledge.
- Guest, A. H., 2005, *Labanotation: The System of Analyzing and Recording Movement*, New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Harris, Melanie L. *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*. Orbis Books, 2017.
- Hooks, Bell. *Teaching To Transgress: Education As The Practice Of Freedom*. New York : Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Houlgate, S., 2014, "Hegel's Aesthetics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Web.
- Hsüeh Kuang-ch'ien. *Tao Teh Ching*. St. Johns University Press, 1961.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

- Lavender, L., 2000–2001, “Post-Historical Dance Criticism,” *Dance Research Journal*, 32 (2): 88–107.
- Leavy, Patricia. *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*. The Guilford Press, 2015.
- Leopold, Aldo. “The Land Ethic.” *The Ecological Design and Planning Reader*, 2014, pp. 108–121., doi:10.5822/978-1-61091-491-8\_12.
- Levin, D. M., 1983, “Philosophers and the Dance,” in *What Is Dance?*, R. Copeland and M. Cohen, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 85–94.
- Macy, Joanna. *World as Lover, World as Self*. Rider, 1993.
- McNiff, Shaun. *Art as Research: Opportunities and Challenges*. Intellect, 2013.
- Merleau-Ponty, M., 1945, *Phenomenology of Perception*, C. Smith (trans.), London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2008.
- Moustakas, Clark E. *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*. Sage Publications, 1992.
- Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 2015.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *World as Will and Idea Vol. I, II, III*. Forgotten Books, 2015.
- Singer, Irving. *Modes of Creativity: Philosophical Perspectives*. MIT Press, 2013.
- Singer, Irving. *The Creation of Value*. MIT Press, 2010.