

### Abstract:

For a ballet dancer, the studio is her space, her container, and her home. There is comfort in and attachment to the studio as it is a place she is told what, where and when to move. Over the years and through my studies, I have shifted where my comfort zone [my home] and my creative process lives because I am no longer comfortable in the conventional studio space. Through my research, I discovered how three different spaces, the studio, the Hangar Theatre, and the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum, influenced my movement and how the "self" (a dance maker) and a "space" cannot stand alone to create the narrative. The need for the "self" and the "space" to co-exist is essential in my process of developing and sustaining a cohesive idea of movement. The depth of complexity when listening to my "self" and the "space" has developed a vital and clear relationship. This paper will explain the pathway I created in my new-found knowledge of each space and how I began "listening" and reacting to each space so that the work and energy of the dancers, and myself, could adapt and live purposefully.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

*A Portrait of Imprints through the Canvas of the Landscape*

by

Amy Walker O'Brien

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

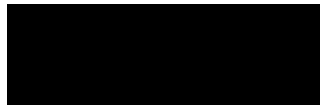
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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my family, my colleagues, faculty, and dancers for the incredible support and push to dig deeper into my newly found, authentic self.

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*"A mutual respect developed through discussions between curator and choreographers, each pushing the others to commit to ideas or trust the improvisational process... But the Moving Canvas performances successfully amplified the conceptual underpinnings of each artwork, adding a rich, contemplative dimension to each piece by constructing an environment that captivated the audience" (Victoria Eleanor Bradford).*

## **Introduction**

My engagement in this topic stems from a very distinct and vivid moment I had in the first June MFA session with Claire Porter. As I intensely worked on creating a solo for the final showing, I felt a huge disconnect with how I was dancing and what I was saying. I felt frustrated and embarrassed to present and seemed to pull further away from my material and movement. As I was standing near the incredible windows one day, peering outside and watching the breeze pick up a leaf and sweep it into the air, I thought that I, too, would love to feel a sense of freedom and be swept up into the air into the sunlight. I turned to look at Claire, and she looked at me... I said, "Would it be possible to do my solo outside?" Claire smiled and said "absolutely!" That moment lifted an incredible amount of mental and physical pressure that I did not realize I was holding. I stood outside and absorbed the brightness and warmth of the sun and immediately connected my "self" to the "space." The natural sounds, breeze, and people walking by composed a score which created a rhythm for my solo. I imagine the audience's perspective of looking out was similar to the day I stood looking out into the openness and the moving canvas of possibilities. The site captured a unique perspective as the space transformed from an ordinary area of straw and dirt into a canvas for movement and art. That day my creative

process shifted and my sense of space and shapes, specifically, geometric shapes (squares, rectangles, triangles), became heightened. I discovered that an empty space or a container can become full of breath and life from the development of the work by a dance maker who intentionally incorporates shapes and curves.

When I look at the landscape of a specific space, the curves may seem hidden--housed within the structure of a space. Can the hidden curves in the space be evoked with the movement from the bodies of the dancers and the intent of a dance maker? Through this thesis project, I have discovered a creative process that involves the imprinting of movement through the canvas of the landscape. I have worked through three spaces, The Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum, the Studio, and the Hangar Theatre, each providing the proper time, spatial awareness, and connections to the work and process. Through my research, I discovered how the "self" (a dance maker) or "space" cannot stand alone to create a narrative, therefore, the need for the "self" and "space" to co-exist is essential for the process. The depth of complexity of "self" and "space" develops a vital and clear relationship, one that cannot exist without the other.

*A Portrait of Imprints through the Canvas of the Landscape* was a 6-month long creative research project which culminated in a performative site-specific dance installation at the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum in Ithaca, New York performed by six Ithaca College students. The work investigated modes of collaboration including improvisation and set movements between myself and the dancers within the space of the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum. The performance took place April 7th during museum open hours in order for the public to interact with and witness the work.



## **Review of Literature and Work by Others**

Theoretical works which heightened the research process include the following: *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard, *The Phenomenology of Dance* by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, and *Moving Sites* Edited by Victoria Hunter.

Gaston Bachelard writes, “For our house is the corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (Bachelard 4). Bachelard’s work examines space and how we as humans relate to space. He never sees a space as ordinary but as a canvas for the creation of the artists. This idea provoked my desire to look at site-specific dance. The notion that a space can dictate the emotional and physical state within a creative process provided an invaluable entry point for me. My thesis work has been about connecting spaces (the studio, the Hangar Theatre, and the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum) to memories, and, thus, has given me the sense of arriving home. I have realized through reading *The Poetics of Space* how impactful a space can be in our daily lives. The foundation [literally and metaphorically] is a substantial tool which is an idea I have connected through Bachelard’s writing. The powerful acknowledgement of “listening” to the space is an idea that became central to the development of the thesis. The practice of being uncomfortable within a space can propel a dance maker to investigate what it means to discover a site. Victoria Hunter describes the concepts of a performance work and the progression as, “Experience the site, Express the site, Embody the site and Receive a site” (Hunter 95).

Vitoria Hunter clearly digs deep into my emotional attachment of site as she describes these experiences with each space in her book, *Moving Sites*. Hunter's approach in acknowledging a *moving body* and how the *moving body* influences a space is an extraordinary and informative component in site-specific work. I questioned this theory only in the sense that a space can equally influence the movement. I also argue that having audience members attending and witnessing the performance adds another element which cannot be predicted until the actual event.

There was a moment in a my creative process when thoughts and ideas transformed and a realization occurred. I realized from reading *The Phenomenology of Dance* by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone how profound listening to a space can be in my process. It's about listening and taking in the sensation of the space, allowing it to speak so that I may respond and speak for the space. Entering a space and observing, like a ritual, allows the space to speak to me before I assume what should be put in the space. I understand that as a dance maker, I am a physical thinker and artist, and that I connect myself to a space for reasons perhaps unknown to me at the time. Sheets-Johnstone's work validated what I was feeling and how vital "experiencing a space" can be to a dance maker's creative process. Words that seemed to make little sense to me this past summer, all of a sudden connected every dot in the puzzle and revealed such potency to my research.

I loosely investigated and watched other site-specific creators, however, I wanted to pave a path for my work to unfold in a way which wasn't influenced or subconsciously directed by other philosophies or ideas. It became clear to me, however, that many of the

site-specific dance makers' intentions and ideologies are deeply rooted in rebelling from the historical conventional stage. There is a freedom in creating dance in spaces such as museums, subway cars, and abandoned buildings that convey a different story than the stage.

### **Artistic Methodology**

As a dance maker, I am equally captivated with the shapes and sleek lines of the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum as I am to the human body. For this project, I wanted to connect the strict lines and silhouettes of the building to the edges and curves of the body (of a dancer) by directing the dancer to stand, walk, and breathe through space. I want to shape and challenge my comfort level within this process in order to create different avenues to direct my body and clearly communicate my intentions. The research involved in *A Portrait of Imprints through the Canvas of the Landscape* produced clarity, specificity, and a reflective experience that allowed me to tap into a new and innovative way of entering the process of creation. I was hopeful this new work would invoke questions and ideas, while exposing a creative outlet that resists my past training in classical ballet. For example, I am not interested in creating on a group of dancers in only one specific pattern; I am interested in how many patterns I can create with the dancers. I am deeply affected by the words of Bachelard, as he articulates how I have rooted an idea and inhabited the space with my full artistic self and shared my connections with the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum. Our daily lives create parallel relationships with people, spaces, and ideas and, as a dance maker, I have found the Herbert F. Johnson Museum is an ideal space to call home. "We should, therefore, have to say how we inhabit our vital space, in

accord with the dialectics of life, how we take root, day after day, in a "corner of the world" for our house is our corner of the world" (Bachelard 4).

I often ground myself spatially with my environment. Upon entering a site, I take it in by observing its shape and dimension, feeling the light, and listening to the sounds that are naturally occurring there. I find myself also visualizing "how" a dance can *live* in another container. I imagine the differences a new environment or atmosphere can have on movement within that container, whether in the studio, the Hangar Theatre, or the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum.

As a young ballet student my sense of self was deeply tied to the open and empty mirrored space of the dance studio. The historical etiquette of participating in a ballet class (standing in line, looking at one's reflection in the mirror, holding onto the barre) is one which *contains* the dancer in a specific space (the studio) and defines the relationship for the dancer. My relationship to the space in the studio was clearly defined as it provided the outline of where and how I should move my body. The simple structure of the studio space naturally set the perimeters and borders which consciously heightened my awareness of geometric shapes of rectangles, square edges, vertical and horizontal lines, and diagonals.

The understanding of the studio being *home* brings memories of youth and the feeling of "what is known." The distinct memory of my swollen feet being pinched into my pointe shoes for rehearsals, and feeling that there wasn't a choice, seems relevant to my connections with the studio space. Learning to articulate my feet through the floor when executing a step brought satisfaction and strength. I loved my feet and understood

how they brought attention to my dancing and self. I could always count on my feet to grab the floor, helping to propel me through the space. My body moved through the studio with such determination because my feet could carry and lead me. The moment the music began to play, as my hand reached for the barre, I began to breathe it all in and exhale with fullness. Three walls of barres and one full wall of mirrors gave depth and yet created a feeling of loneliness when I stepped into the middle of the space. What once felt intimate and individualized, now seemed exposed and vulnerable. I was drawn to the back corner where my body sensed support and protection afforded by the barre and the walls. This way of being (dancing) made sense to me for so many years, until one day I felt a shift. I discovered what was once a comforting way of moving (a ballet dancer at home in the studio), began pulling me into discomfort and confusion. This overwhelming feeling of discomfort resurfaced in the summer of 2016 even though it was more prevalent when performing on proscenium stages as a professional dancer. (I would become paralyzed by stepping out onto the stage and anxiety would flush over my body as I heard the curtain draw up.) It wasn't about my ability to perform; it was about the space in which I was performing. The relationship had shifted. I was not my authentic self nor was I able to be contained in a geometric shape of a box.

As a dance maker, I also had a preconceived idea that my dance making had to be "beautiful" or flowing. These qualities of "how" I moved interconnected with "what" I created. But what defines beauty and who makes these choices? These ideas restricted and weighted down my expressiveness which boxed me within the "space" and decreased my desire to perform or create. This new voice has deepened my appetite and devotion to

my creative practice and how I may explore new entry creative points. Site-specific work has allowed me to gather information and investigate the “why” and not be satisfied with what feels comfortable. I focus on what does not feel comfortable, and then dig deeper.

What happens when I deviate from being comfortable and feeling safe? Can the work of the dancers and myself in the studio continue to be authentic in each new space? I would say, yes, because authenticity comes from within and is only partially affected by the space. I often imagine what would have become of the work if I had created the piece in the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum space first? I have been looking at the museum since I was a child. When I created the piece in the studio, I brought the images of the museum space with me. With my research, I became more curious about the historical elements of the architecture and how the building was designed. I discovered how the space exhibits characteristics and threads within my current work.

The deep history and connection I have with the building allows my movement to unconsciously develop even though we are not physically in the space. The dancer's interpretation adds to the development and structure of my work. One of my dancers reflected:

I feel that there would be a stronger focus put onto space. Almost as if it has taken on its own dance identity similar to those of the dancers. After all, it plays just as large a role in my opinion. It is important to me that the creator has a deeper emotional/inspirational connection with a specific space other than that they think it's suitable to execute pirouettes in. Personally, I love when a choreographer/creator has a specific space/setting in mind, because of how it provides me with a better understanding of the piece as a whole. I guess it figuratively (and quite literally, as well) creates borders for which the art will grow within. Almost like a painting or sculpture. It creates a tone for the piece that could either be played up or perhaps even completely ignored. Those being two extremes of course. It's often interesting when the messages and stories within the piece directly contrast with the limitations the physical space creates.

How the movements and the location compliments each other is also something that I feel must be discussed as well. Whether or not specific areas within the location should have stronger value or weight, and also if the performative level of the dance is heightened because of the location or perhaps made to be seen as simpler and more pedestrian.” (Peter Garza, dancer of Portrait)

With the fresh eyes of my dancers, I separated my two creative spaces as “thinking” and “performance” containers. My thinking container was where the work was created and the performance container was where the work was presented. A moment of stillness in the studio could mean something different in the museum space and be equally profound. Will these moments make the dancers look smaller or larger, significant or insignificant? In one section of the full work, two dancers in the piece were performing contrasting and staccato actions in relationship to the other dancers in the space. In the studio, these movements are poignant and strong, which I believed would be equally contrasting and vivid in the museum site. Changing the rhythm or the direction of a movement was a clear example of the dancers taking a movement idea and allowing their bodies make their own interpretation. The dancers must have the permission to add their true, authentic, and honest selves to the movement. Balance and opposing elements in any space speak differently to me. Each site has brought out different attributes from the dancers and the audience members. The importance of hearing how my dancers experienced space and their attachment became vital to my process. My dancer, Dharon Jones, reflected:

My relationship to the space is always changing when working with a site specific piece. I think the beauty lies in the discovery of new things based on the five senses. In a studio, I feel very comfortable in allowing my body to explore in ways that are experimental to me. When I have to bring myself to a new, specific environment, I do become more conscious of the lines I create and the focus I have at any given point. For me, the space holds emotions, it holds an atmosphere

that I either allow to overtake myself or completely combat against it. This allows me to bring my body and mind to a new place every time, making each experience different and unique. I find myself most comfortable in conventional studio and performance spaces. With that said, I am not attached to them nor opposed to them. I think the privacy of the studio and the divide of the performance space allows me to go inside myself in order to bring it out. The site specific spaces like the Johnson Art Museum have so much more to explore. There is no divide, there is no separation. I think the differences of experience are the give and take game. In studio 3 or studio 1 and at the Hangar Theatre, I find myself only giving. I find it hard to receive impulse from the audience because of the black curtain of separation. The Johnson Art Museum is a nest of impulse and inspiration. There is so much to take in that it can become mind-bottling. I find myself very drawn to the Johnson Art Museum because it's a new discovery. It's a new atmosphere and a new experience. There comes a point where I want to get out of the studio and show different people what I do in private. I think a museum is a great place to do that because the artistry is flowing all around. The atmosphere is one of brilliance and motivation. Motivation to be different, to carve your own path, and to reassure yourself that what you have is unique.

My artistic and aesthetic choices changed within each site and undoubtedly changed the unspoken physical language of my "self". In the conventional dance studio, the Hangar Theatre, and the lobby of the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum, I adapted to the different dimensions of each site and made decisions to best represent my creative process.

Insofar as we are reflectively aware of the dimensions of our body as an object, we are aware of the dimensions of the other objects in the World. The body becomes a relative point of spatial orientation toward the world and at the same time becomes one subject among many objects which are contained in the given space. (Sheets-Johnstone 21)

My investigation into The Leo Villareal: Cosmos Installation at the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum further developed the ideas of constellations which I am loosely labeling each duet. Concluding our week-long rehearsal process, the dancers and I met at the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum and walked through the space. There was a true



"aha" moment when the dancers stood in the main lobby and looked at each other and said, "this is it." It was almost too instinctual and I was a bit overwhelmed. They were drawn to the openness, the high ceilings, the panorama windows and views looking out. I, too, saw this space differently than in my previous visits, yet it reminded me of the Cosmos Courtyard upstairs. Was I more drawn to this space at that particular moment of time because of the material I had created, and I could imagine the dancers very simply in this space? No, I believe I was drawn to the instantaneous connection we as a collaborative unit sensed at that moment. Was I already so attached and committed to what we created in the studio that space didn't matter other than the fact that it should be site-specific or adaptive? No. All six dancers had been to the museum before but not in this context with having the intention to "listen" to the space.

De Certeau speaks about how space is a practiced space, and a place is an order where the space makes sense (Kaye 5). What does an audience notice when at a performance? When does space become a part of their experience? If the space is not in a conventional venue, will the audience already have perceived ideas? Lefebvre says that space commands bodies, prescribing or proscribing gestures, routes, distance (Kaye 38). In my process, I am wondering if space dictates the movement, or do the dancers command the space and create the relationship?

A pre-reflective awareness of space is thus also intrinsic to any lived experience of the consciousness-body –hence, intrinsic to the dancer's lived experience of the dance. The preceding descriptions of temporality and spatiality make clear the fact that any lived experience of the body incorporates a pre-reflective grasp of its temporality and spatiality because these structures are inherent in human consciousness-body. (Sheets-Johnstone 2)

The sun was bright, creating a warm and calm atmosphere as we stepped up to the doors of the museum. Right away the feelings of ebb and flow seemed to be a part of our experience. Before walking into the museum, we planted our bodies in the outdoor entryway of the museum resembling an outdoor stage, sensing the borders and outline of a rectangle, observing the restrictions of the space. For us as a unit, listening incorporated breath and quietness, and a lingering in the space that felt as if time stood still. Taking in the space and taking in each other's energy was a much different experience for all of us and in which a relationship with the space was introduced. As dancers, we flock to spaces that provide freedom in our abilities to take up space, whether that's physically or metaphorically. It's perhaps instinctual to hover near a space which reminds us of a stage or studio. We spent an hour and a half walking through the multiple floors and very easily could have stayed all day. As a unit, we walked together and took pauses using our senses to observe and listen in many different spaces, almost as we were waiting for the space to give us permission to let us find it. The space in which the dancers and I felt most connected was not the space I had originally chosen. I was deeply adamant about using the outdoor sculptural court. It was an incredible moment as I stood with them and together. And yet, when we found the lobby of the museum, it was an experience of arriving home. One of my dancers reflected: on their relationship to each space;

I don't think I'm more drawn to the museum specifically but more so the idea of fresh topography. The idea of how a new setting can influence new discoveries within ourselves as dancers and the choreography entices me. I find myself growing tired of specific spaces once I feel that the amount of discoveries is waning. It starts to feel stale to me and I crave fresh soil in which to plant these ideas that we have all fostered. The history that I have with a space absolutely influences that thought process as well. In the case of Studio 3, I have so much good and frankly not so good memories associated with that space. It's a creative

and experimental location by nature of course, however I often find myself the most in my head when I am in that space. Thoughts of judgmental eyes and “art for a grade’s sake” come flooding in at times. Never for long, and often they are overpowered by the creative impulses that I’ve learned to trust over these few years. Still, I wonder if I had not first viewed the space through a collegiate education lens would I have a different relationship with it today. The Hangar just felt like a fish bowl frankly. A nice fish bowl though. We had our little deep sea diver and porcelain castle with decorative rocks, but since it was surrounded by onlookers and since we quite literally just copy and pasted our movements onto a new canvas of sorts it felt more like a transitional home. Though, I was happy to switch up the music for the performance. That brought our attention back into the work and centered us much more. In that sense, the differentiation of music I feel is key in our situation in our situation in helping us tune into each other and maintaining a level of curiosity and exploration so that we don’t cut off any discoveries we may have. (Peter Garza, dancer Portrait)

Is this a "Chance" opportunity? Site-determined, site-oriented, site-referenced, site-conscious, site-responsive, and site-related are all new ideas to me and new ways of approaching my work. It is an entirely new way of entering into the process for me. I have come to the realization that I can be drawn to different spaces within a site, as entering into the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum with my dancers, and a new relationship is formed. In the past, when I spent time in the museum space, my vision and efforts were directed to the Cosmo Sculpture Court with its apparent determination and energy. I sensed the spaces so differently when the dancers and I visited the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum; it was as if each space spoke to me in relation to bodies in the space. It allowed me to visualize the dance and understand that it could be housed anywhere at the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum. My conscious body was connecting to a space that seemed familiar however, it provided a new adventure and environment to explore.

Consciousness-body, through its implicit awareness of its spatial presence, constitutes the spatiality of its environment. At the same time, it knows the

meaning of that constituted spatiality in its very point of view upon it. Consciousness experiences its world and itself through its body. If we have conscious experiences, it is because our body moves within the environment as a spatial presence and intuitively knows the meaning of its spatiality. (Sheets-Johnstone 19)

It has become clear to me that an audience, when looking upon movement in different spaces, unconsciously provides each space with their own physical presence, which allows the space to speak. The container (each space whether it was the studio, the Hangar Theatre, or the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum) needs not only to be filled with movement, but the makers and viewers of the work. At this point in the process, my questions became more structure-driven: How do I determine where the audience sits or stands? Can they move throughout the work? Should we (myself and the dancers) decide to shift the direction of the work to best understand the viewpoint of the audience? Can there be a rotating spatial evolution of the work? I questioned these structural ideas because, as a dance maker, my objective is to draw the audience's attention to the space through the dancer's movement. This way of designing the work is a reflection of my sensitivity to, or connection with, my surroundings.

Midway through the process of creating *Portrait*, I was invited to show the work in the Hangar Theatre, a traditional black box in Ithaca. I found it most interesting to talk with the audience after the performance as they did not know *Portrait* was created with the purpose of being a site-specific performance. They took in the work without any preconceived notions of location, story, or music; they were experiencing the atmosphere presented in front of them. From my perspective, the dancers took up the space physically with their bodies and the movement provided; however, I felt there was a disconnect in

the relationship between themselves and the space. Perhaps, as the dance maker, I felt detached from the work because, in my mind, the movement was intended for the museum site. Did the dancers not have enough time to sit and listen to the space? Was this an example of a true site-adaptive work, even if they did not have ample time to digest the space and allow the space to change their experience? For a dancer, listening to a space and sensing the past, present and future of a space is a powerful and sophisticated experience which could influence their performance and attachment to the space.

Throughout the process of developing the movement with the dancers, I imagined each space [studio, Hangar Theatre, and the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum] changing as I worked through the creative process and established the dance work. With my deep roots in classical ballet technique, I had previously established a way of moving and had a relationship between that specific space [the studio] and my “self.” My perception of working this way was established through the discipline and instruction of the ballet technique. In this process, I pushed past my previous experience of the studio, and explored how nontraditional dance spaces could influence and open my creative practice and allow for innovative and authentic movement. Developing a dance work in a nontraditional space allows for constant change and adaptations; the work continues to develop and thrive with time. The construction of the movement is in clear partnership with the space. “Whatever knowledge we may have of dance, in general or in particular, is extraneous to the lived experiences of any dance. Such knowledge may affect only our authentic expectations and judgement of that experience” (Sheets-Johnstone 2).

When I have entered my creative process in the past, I had what I thought was a formula of how to organize and construct the dance. This formulaic structure brought a sense of predictability and gave me a direction in which to work. Much like the structure of a ballet class, I could predict and organize for the next rehearsal; this process was what I believed to be successful in my creative process. The organization is subjective, and each dance maker will have their own process and vocabulary (habitual or not) that they follow in their practice. A dance maker's creative practice is established by what is known, taught, experienced, and learned. To break away from what is known in my process and what was established in my training has been liberating and has provided clarity as to where I want to go - out of the proscenium stage and into different landscapes. My curiosity to explore natural landscapes and environments has significantly intensified as I yearn for more creative fulfillment and discoveries with my canvas.

Through this process, I welcomed my lived-experience and memories of the conventional dance studio space to influence the work. However, I didn't want my lived-experiences in the studio to have full control or skew the final results of my site-specific work. As I continued working in the studio with the dancers, I was constantly evaluating the studio and connecting moments of movement to the space (even though I was only visualizing and relying on the memory of the space at the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum).

## **The Process**

The importance of building a trustful and a free-flowing environment with the dancers and myself was immeasurable. The establishment of an honest dialogue allowed the work to unfold and created an environment where the dancers and I could improvise as part of the process. In this environment, I allowed myself to let the "happenings" occur, which guided the next decisions or pathways. Giving into the process, with no expectations or preconceived plans, has liberated my creative self and has connected the purposefulness of the movement to the space in a more profound way. For example, there were moments when the dancers created subtle changes or allowed their bodies to breathe into the space, creating spontaneous accidents that changed the work. I was drawn to the philosophy of Merce Cunningham and his focus on the chance method, the idea of seeking the unknown and finding spontaneous movements from the dancers. I applied this method to my work when I felt my movement would begin to lose its authenticity.

Cunningham believed that art need not be tied to a particular ideology or to self-expression to involve emotions and expand perception. His aim was to represent a deeper level of reality- beyond subjectivity-and he hoped that by surrendering to chance (or, as he saw it, the ordering principle of nature), he could avoid habitual patterns of muscular response as well as the limitations of his personal imagery and aesthetic biases. (Reynolds & McCormick 358)

As the dancers and I collaborated in this work, I was wondering how the idea of Cunningham's surrendering to "chance" moments would influence my process and add layers and overlapped the connection of each space. I wanted this "chance" method to become a natural way for me to communicate my voice through my work by simply letting the work unfold. By allowing the dancers to interpret my movement through their

own bodies, they took responsibility of the work, which further developed my investigation in this project. During the process, one of my dancers reflected:

As artists, and also as human beings, we tend to associate foreign people, places, or objects with ideas and tactile things that are more familiar to us in order to better understand them. While we may not do it consciously, it does create a sort of preconceived perception of something. From that view, we tend to base our dealings with said locations almost subconsciously or filter it into the movements. Of course, those preconceived attachments can be changed through a dancer's developing relationship with the space. A space that is first perceived as spacious and explorative can turn out to be one of the most restrictive environments that a dancer has ever experienced and vice versa. I think that's also what's so exciting about site specific dance is that each dancer has an individual interpretation of the space and how their movements fit within it. Discovering and fostering those specific view points can help create new and interesting dynamics within the piece that may not have even been thought of before. (Peter Garza, dancer Portrait)

As a dance maker, there is a moment when the work is released and transitioned over to the dancers so that the work may continue to develop. Throughout the rehearsals and in the final performance at the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum, the dancer's spontaneity brought a sense of freedom to the work which became essential to its progression.

The chance moments were vital as a rehearsal and performative tool for my newly found process, allowing the work to continue to live and breathe in a way I could have never have imagined. For example, I would often provide the dancers time to explore a movement idea I had given and watch them experiment to produce an unconventional solution to my initial idea. On one particular day, further into the rehearsal process, I sensed a disconnect between the dancer's spontaneous moments and my intentions for the movement. At that point in the process, I fell into my habitual pathways of choosing



movement from my tool box, forgetting to consider how powerful surrendering to the chance method could be.

The juxtaposition of thinking about one space yet creating in another added complexity to my process. This showed me the depth and sensual clarity of my childhood memory of that museum, which I was able to bring into the studio space as a dancer, dance maker, and teacher. However, at the moment, imagining myself *performing* in the studio space created a different perspective which shifted my relationship to the museum space and I felt myself become disconnected. I immediately began to associate the studio space with confinement and strictness in performance, yet in rehearsals and classes, my relationship with the studio space can be comfortable, calming, and creative. Many elements made up the environment in the studio, like the lighting and the energy of the dancers, which contributed to me feeling fully present and made me acknowledge the relationship between the two spaces. This interaction of spaces allowed me to receive and respond in a new way of working within my creative process. Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space*:

Of course thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated. (Bachelard 8)

I found this immediately intriguing and fundamentally relevant as to why I decided to use The Johnson Art Museum as the performance site and why I felt drawn to construct the dance in a studio space. Each space held an intense connection and memory to my classical ballet training and my "self." I have a deeply rooted relationship which was established with the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum and stems as far back into my

childhood; I clearly recall looking over the hill onto the Cornell campus and taking in the strength of that building. This shift happened because I yearned for a deeper awareness and understanding of space and how my "self" fit into the space. The idea of creating a dialog with the "self" and placing the new relationship into an environment outside of the dance studio sparked a new-found knowledge and awareness. My senses were heightened! I could feel the sun on my skin; I could hear the birds and chaos of the construction and an airplane flying overhead; I could smell the flowers as the breeze blew past me. I was vulnerable, yet grounded, and emotionally swept away with my moving canvas. My subconscious body gave my conscious mind the permission to move without hesitation. The body naturally carried me through space. Gaston Bachelard writes, "that within our memories of a space we begin to ask questions about the self in relationship to the space (Bachelard 9)."

I desire to dig further into a space to find more poignant connections, permitting the space to speak for itself and letting my voice speak through the movement. Through my investigation of space in the studio, the black box theatre, and the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum, I am activating my past, present, and future connections and memories. I was curious as to how the dancer's understood my process and I gave them the prompt, "Can the "self" (a dancer) or the "space" stand alone to create the narrative?" One of my dancers reflected:

While I think that one could definitely take more of a backseat to the other at times, I feel that they are ever influencing each other at all times. Whether the location is simply an empty studio with four walls, or a dancer does not move one inch; statements like these, at far ends of the spectrum, are precisely that... statements. Not necessarily proclamations, nor messages which we slap those who are witnessing across the face with, but rather points which help the observer

focus in on what the creator wants whether that be physically or intellectually.  
(Peter Garza, dancer Portrait)

The studio, the Hangar Theatre, and Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum spaces each demanded their own voice and presented distinct architectural characteristics which could not be ignored in my creative process. Changing the space from the studio, to the Hangar Theatre, to the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum has permitted the work to transform and change its textures (layers), feelings, and outcomes. The Johnson Art Museum is monochromatic, angular and open. Windows give way to a longitudinal view of the outside, allowing the space to feel infinite. The contrast of nature versus architecture within the same space felt important. Looking out into the courtyard from the inside of the museum, I felt surprised to see pedestrians walking by, unaffected by the performance inside. Outside, “everyday life” was happening as the performance light illuminated from within the museum. The concrete brought a cold, smooth, slick texture to the space. The bricks on the floor were small and fit together like a puzzle. The space reminded me of looking through a cereal box where the ends have been cut out...long and sleek, yet if you point your focus to the ceiling, there were many layers above. The color tones were of brown and grey. The sunlight came in through the long wall of windows. The parallel connections of bodies moved through this bold, clean container and brought a story to the space. I believe the dancers’ bodies spoke for the space and they are the bodies bringing in their interpretation of movement and space. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone describes her interaction with space and the world at large, "consciousness experiences its world and itself through its body. If we have conscious experiences, it is because our body moves

within the environment as a spatial presence and intuitively knows the meaning of spatiality (Hunter 96).

Space doesn't necessarily need to be interpreted by the dance maker, but there is a conscious presence of the individual resulting in a human lived experience of that space. This seems deeply important to the dancers who are the carriers of the movement in the space by translating the movement from the dance maker (me). They will experience the present, in-time phenomenon of living in the movement in actual time and space.

I found myself in the state of deep concentration when in the studio creating the work. I found there was a sense of intensity and pressure put upon myself to produce something extraordinary. This self-induced anxiety shifted when I began to listen to myself and trust the process. It is as if strangers are meeting for the first time and don't know what the outcome will be (Kaye 2). Working with the landscape of a site creates a perception for the audience which may be conscious or unconscious by the dance maker. These feelings brought forth many questions when I was in the studio working with the dancers. If my work (about another space) is presented in the dance studio, what am I saying? It becomes about the movement and what the movement is saying, even if the movement was created with another space in mind. Does the work become flat and the intentions lost? If dance/movement is the language which is being performed and witnessed, then changing the site means changing the language. Traditional, conventional dance spaces and the traditional ballet technique have an established vocabulary. What becomes of the work when that vocabulary is changed to best inform the movement?

Dance is always an exploration of the body's relationship with space, but it is also always this relationship of the body's relationship with time. Dance explores this

relationship of space and time to the body, and this body is a living boy. Every breath is taken, every beat of the heart, is a passing of time, every gesture made and progression through space is a relationship with time. (Hunter 65)

### **Results/Conclusions**

I will never look at a space in the same way again. I have felt and experienced the extraordinary way a space can reveal and bring together my deepest authentic self. I may have had a preconceived idea of the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum, however I did not realize how incredibly influential the space would be to the movement. The unexpected sounds echoing throughout the museum, as the dancers fell to the floor, transformed the movement and space in a way I could have never imagined. The shapes the dancer's made in moments of stillness and in moments of active movement enhanced the linear structure of the museum and brought the architecture to the forefront of the work. The addition of the audience sitting in a curved formation, which embraced the dancers as they traveled through the space, made the audience as much a part of the space as the environment outside. The wall of windows, through which we viewed the landscape with its trees, hills, the setting sky, people walking their dogs and riding bikes, all became a part of the process and performance. Responses from the audience were collected at the end of the performance for reference and insight.

In the time the piece existed, there was no one without the other. They fed each other. The sounds, echoed through, and seemed to inform the movement, creating a feedback loop. The sights through the windows with light changing informed the movement and the dancers seemed to breathe it in and incorporate. I couldn't imagine this piece in a different space. (anonymous)

I have found clarity through the exploration of my creative process; the moving canvas, which embodied my movement, can indeed be shaped and influenced by the

landscape of a site. Even before my time in the studio, I was affected by my childhood memory of the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum. I remember looking over the hill as a child and wanting to know more about the story behind the building. Hunter says, so fittingly, “I affect the landscape through my movement interactions and it, in turn affects me. I then return to the interaction with a deepened sense of understanding and “knowing” and the process of reversibility and reciprocity then deepens and develops in a spiraling format” (Hunter 305).

This has been witnessed through the lens of the third and final location of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University. What was revealed was truly unexpected and, in fact, a natural phenomenon. The dancers lived kinesthetically with their bodies and they whole-heartedly experienced, and reacted to, each other in a way that felt raw and human; they became a part of the landscape. It became clear, and poignant, that the architecture of the museum influenced the movement and the dancers became a part of the structure which housed their movement. For example, in the beginning of the work the dancers laid on the floor and used this platform of bodies to form a sculpture that blended seamlessly into the sleek lines of the museum. As each dancer fell to the floor or took a breath, their sounds echoed and bounced off the walls throughout the museum. These sounds, amplified and echoed in the cavernous and open space, were unique to the performance in this particular space. In this site, to which I have been drawn for so many years, a canvas of imprints were made and interpreted by the dancers from my lived experiences and memories. My hope was to be able to communicate the ideas of the work and give permission to the dancers to reconstruct the

movement in their own way. I was interested in how the dancers would respond to the challenge of putting their own characteristics into the work. My associations to the movement clearly would not be the same for the dancers. “Whatever knowledge we may have of dance, in general or in particular, is extraneous to the lived experiences of any dance. Such knowledge may affect only our authentic expectations and judgement of that experience” (Sheets-Johnstone 2).

The beauty in the dancers’ forms gave such volume to the space, and the distinct characteristics of each body created the narrative by executing my choreography and intentions through their dancing. The work cannot ever become stagnant; it continues to live and develop each time it is performed in a new space. My commitment to immersing myself in a new relationship with space, partnered with lived experiences and memories from the past, allowed the work to unfold and reveal itself. I have discovered that each space ( the studio, the Hangar Theatre, and the Herbert F. Johnson Museum) has a deep impact on my creative process and contributes greatly to my new choreographic style. I acknowledge, as the dance maker, that I can be significantly influenced and deeply attached to a space because of how it allows me to see movement and how movement can live in the space. This partnership is a gift to be shared, explored, and listened to, for we, as dance makers, have the responsibility to provide the freedom to see a blank canvas in every space. Each new space *is* a blank canvas in respect to space, time, and energy if we just quiet down and listen to it.

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