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TRACES: EMBODIED EPHEMERA FROM HERE TO THERE

by

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BFA, University of Wisconsin-Madison
2020

Presented in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Dance

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Dedication

In a strong way, all of my dancing is dedicated to my queer kin — mom, sister, and the rest.

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1. TRANSLATION ACROSS MEDIUMS (or, Could This Dance be a Painting?)

I am thinking of my creative process for dance works and right now it boils down to this:

Feeling to idea, idea to dance. Dance to performance and performance... Performance to nothing. A disappearing act: my body removed, the dance dies.

The mortality of dances is always on my mind. Coined by many as ephemerality, performances are reliant on the fleeting present moment, and therefore, end when they end. Steps can be reproduced, but not energy. The unique set of bodies in space, all with their own unpredictable histories and knowledge, will never be able to exactly replicate the dance performed. Not even the viewer's memory can act as a reliable source in reproducing such an act. Dances resist reproduction, situating them not in an archival space, but instead in the opportunity of repertoire space. In this way, dance resists the systems of power that aim to control it.

I wonder sometimes about the body as an object. I know that my body and others' bodies are more than just the sum of their parts. Not just blood, skin, fingernails. There is something more to bodies that make them people. And of course there is history and impact that make us who we are, more than our physicalities. But at the end of the day all of these things are also fleeting — and will leave when I leave. Die when I die. With that, I can't help but wonder about the fact that my body — not me, my soul, or my actions — might be a sum of its parts after all and that it could be considered an object (I do not intend to speak of objectification here, however, I acknowledge its associations, and move from an informed place in order to transgress them). If my body is the object of my dances, what are the parts integral to replicating it — translating it — into a medium with more permanence? If I were to distill the following

choreographed sequence into its essential parts, how would I do it? What would I keep as representative, and how would I translate it to the realm of inanimacy?

The dance begins standing, arms straight up above my head, palms forward, head tilted to see my fingertips. Over the course of the next minute, while an operatic and slightly haunting piece of music plays, I let go of this erect shape, crumbling to the floor and surrendering my weight into the earth.

I find the focal points in the body and in relation to it: namely, the eyes, fingertips, and floor. These are the three “objects” in the distillation. They are held up, framed by sound and by gaze, then let go of. But what about the sum? What about everything all together: the sound, the grandeur of the stage space, audience interpretation, body sweat?

Although inspired, and with good intentions, this simple process (which I thought would do my dances justice) of abstraction does not fully capture the *feeling-of-being-there* of dance. It is not to scale. The body, with its (not so) universality and complicated set of associations, norms, and gestures, is relatively simple to represent through non-ephemeral renderings. This is proved by thousands of years of portraiture through various mediums (think painting, sculpture, film, etc.). The translation of an entire 10-minute dance piece as a whole, although it calls upon the body as a tool, presents drastically different challenges. A dance is, indeed, far more than a sum of its parts. I ask:

How does narrative play into these translations? How to translate the complication of, say, the swelling of music just as the dancer shares longing eye contact with their partner while the lights slowly dramatize the space? How to translate the message of a furrow of an eyebrow or the sweat drip on a dancer’s forearm? How do abstract ideas and political commentary boil down to something more permanent?

The politics of my dances are in their queernesses. I am sensitive to the way my body looks queer and is perceived as queer when I perform my as well as others' dances. There are nods to queerness in all of my dances, although some may be successfully read only by queers. These queer aspects of my dances are possibly the most ephemeral: they have the most to do with my body, flesh, and presence. It is scary for me to think of distilling some of my dances down to inanimacy — while retaining their efficacy — because I am afraid they will lose their queerness and in so doing, my identity risks erasure too. Queer sensibilities are an impossibility, always in resistance to be pinned down, striving towards the unknown.¹ I am hyper aware of the ephemera of my queerness in my dances. This is yet another problem that this dephemerization presents: how do I retain the queerness inherent in my dancing body, when my dancing body is no longer there? Through what images does queerness get suggested/how is queerness implied in choreography?

José Esteban Muñoz's phenomenal book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, serves as an important theorization of queerness, calling upon its traits of futurity and potentiality. The author critiques gay assimilation into the bind of "straight-time" as he insists upon a queerness indebted to the future, rather than being concerned with the "prisonhouse"² of the present: all that is allowed to us by heteronormativity. In his chapter, "Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling: Approaching Kevin Aviance," Muñoz offers numerous sentiments relevant to my work, most dealing directly with movement and the body, gesture and dance. In the opening lines of the chapter, ephemera is defined for the purposes of the chapter's conversation: "Think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor."³ This

¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press), 1.

² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 65.

definition is presented in tandem with the conversation of evidence, as it relates to proving queerness in performance. The author insists that queerness is read, proven, by connecting it to ephemera.⁴ Simply: queer performance can be documented — evidenced — through tracking the ephemeral traces left after the act.

I have always thought critically about ephemera — what is left — before, during, and after my own creation processes. I have pondered this aspect of dance making ever since I made my first solo, in Modern class at Milwaukee Ballet School, age 14. When I came across Muñoz's writings in this chapter I was struck by the way I could relate so deeply to the concept of ephemera, and how much it resonated with my intentions as a queer dance maker, even in my timid early teenage years. Although not always concerned with explicit queerness in my dances, I have always made queer dances, just in my being — and doing — queer. After encountering this text I can start to see the relevance of this theory to my dance making. This chapter sparked within me a curiosity to see if I could extract these ephemeral traces from my most recent dances — the ones that have felt most explicitly queer — in order to see what remains. My intention for this thesis work is summed up incredibly accurately by this Muñoz quote, from the chapter that sparked my original interest: “And although we cannot *simply* conserve a person or a performance through documentation, we can perhaps begin to *summon up*, through the auspices of memory, the acts and gestures that meant so much to us” (emphasis mine).⁵ Applied to my own experiences as a queer performance artist, dance maker, and liver of life, I ask:

What are the ephemera (acts and gestures left behind) of my dances? How could they be *extracted*, then *documented*, in order to be *presented* as themselves? And in this extraction, how

⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 65.

⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 71.

may they be queer? Can this process of extraction bring me closer to understanding the (my) making of queer dances?

I start to think about queer acts and how they present themselves in the choreographic works I have made in the past year and a half. *Lullaby* (2020), *Departure Dances* (2021), *Arrival at the Gates* (2021), and *Histories* (2022) are the dances in question. They are all solo works, performed: on a stage, in a gallery space, a different stage, and in a black box-converted-studio, respectively. These dances serve this process as sites of untapped queer resource, waiting to be excavated by my queer performance theory-informed mining processes.

I started my process of distillation by engaging with the cold, hard “evidence” in the form of video documentation as well as the embodied evidence of my having danced the piece. The video documentation is an approximation, as is the embodied memory. Both are falsehoods in their own right. Dr. Laura Griffiths discussed the notion of embodied knowledge as it relates to the problem of dance and the archive in her article, “Between Bodies: Situating the Act.” Although in conversation with definitions of the archive that serve to limit documentation to facts (video, photography, notation, etc.), Griffiths aims to argue that the dance archive complicates this notion in that it requires evidence that has no choice but to be “unfixed” and “unrecorded.”⁶ Griffiths brings into conversation Diana Taylor’s ideas surrounding what constitutes “archival” versus “non-archival” in Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Griffiths uses this distinction to her dancerly advantage in stating that the dancing body holds memory and evidence just as successfully as the material archive may. Regardless of the “immaterial” status of the dancing body, it provides invaluable and lasting evidence for the dances of its kinesthetically-remembered past.

⁶ Laura Griffiths, “Between bodies and the archive: Situating the act.” *International Journal of Performance Arts & Digital Media* 9, no. 1 (2013): 183-195.

I engaged with this “hard” evidence to extract the “traces” — “residue” — of each performance. The medium of these traces are wide in their physical and sensational scope. They could be (and are) white reebok sneakers, projected video of childhood danced histories, a fabric face mask, the holes in bright green socks. A gesture made with the tips of my fingers above my head, the hum of a box fan, or the certain way the light hits my cheekbone when standing still. These ephemera are extracted from their original home, displaced from their stage presence, and asked to carry a (hopefully) equal emotional resonance when placed in the museum gallery space. These traces, formerly secondary elements within a greater performance of the body, are asked to become the primary performative objects in the installation piece.

These artifacts may be part of Taylor’s “archive,” which consists of “enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones)...”⁷ These are the objects that are left in the space after my live performance ends. The live performance, with my dancing body enacting the memories of performances past alongside these objects, I argue is part of Taylor’s “ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual).”⁸ The repertoire establishes a requirement of presence. Taylor notes that elements in the archive may achieve a sense of stability, in that they, for the most part, stay the same. The repertoire does not allow for this sense of fixation: “The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.”⁹ Each of these approaches have lost something. The archive: aliveness and changeability, and the repertoire: permanence.

⁷ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: performing cultural memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 19.

⁸ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.

⁹ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.

I am interested in what Muñoz describes as the “deductive element [of] performance that has everything to do with its conditions of possibility.”¹⁰ I am drawn to the way in which he frames queer performance, queerness, as relating to loss, and find it especially relevant in my thought process for this work. In a sense, the concept of the archive is designed to hold works of art forever as fixed, immobile artifacts. Dance’s rejection — impossibility — of adhering to this norm relates precisely to Muñoz’s framing of queerness as related to the intention of being lost. If dances contain an inevitable inability to be held down by the archive’s force, they are lost in that they can never be quite found again — not in exactitude, at least. At first glance, this notion of elements of my dances being lost in the process of ephemeralization scared me. However, after engaging with Muñoz’s interpretation of loss, and the queer sensibility that surrounds this loss, I start to understand how this research is in conversation with this theory of deduction. I start to settle into the truth that some things are lost in my presentation of ephemera — namely my alive body, and I can begin to accept this loss, in the face of hope for remembrance.

2. “EPHEMERAL”: WHAT IS IT, AND WHY?

The concept of ephemerality as it relates to dance and performance was first introduced to me as a theoretical concept in a course called *Writing the Moving Body* in my undergraduate dance studies at University of Wisconsin-Madison. We read Richard Schechner’s textbook *Performance Studies*, which both fascinated and confused me. From the text: “Performing is much more ephemeral than painting, sculpting, pottery, and architecture. Performing leaves no

¹⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 71.

direct traces.”¹¹ Our conversation about ephemerality had an air of sadness: mourning the apparent “loss” of traces Schechner suggests. Last summer, I was given context when I read Peggy Phelan’s book chapter “The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction” for my graduate coursework. Phelan’s 1993 text insists that performance is nonreproductive — resistant to reproduction — therefore making it the “runt of the litter of contemporary art.”¹² This upheld the notion I had been introduced to with the Schechner text. However, I kept reading further, until the author claims that dance is in direct opposition to the capitalist value of production in that it places value on “emptiness” and “valuelessness.”¹³ Rather than the majoritarian belief that art should be a product for purchase and consumption upheld by the Schechner point of view, the concept of dance as a site of resistance due to its ephemerality excited me. The disappearing act of performance, according to Phelan, is an oppositional value that performance articulates through its “life in the present.”¹⁴ I related my outlook and work more strongly to this point than to the odd sadness and inferiority given to dance as a form with no traces — no evidence.

This theory is bolstered by Muñoz, throughout the fourth chapter of *Cruising Utopia*. Although the author does not directly quote Phelan’s chapter, the concept of dance and performance as a disappearing act is echoed throughout his discussion of the acceptance of loss as integral to queerness, and queer performance (art). In his discussion of the poem “One Art” by Elizabeth Bishop, Muñoz points out Bishop’s reminder to not become saddened by the loss of certain objects, or even pieces of ourselves: “their loss is no disaster.”¹⁵ In a strong way (as well

¹¹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies* (Taylor & Francis, 2017): 222.

¹² Peggy Phelan, “The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction,” In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 1993): 148.

¹³ Peggy Phelan, “The ontology of performance,” 148.

¹⁴ Peggy Phelan, “The ontology of performance,” 146.

¹⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 71.

as backed up by his inclusion of a note that directly addresses the connection to Phelan), Muñoz's passage on loss ruminates on Phelan's notion of disappearance as the only way to *do* performance. Ephemerality is not (simply) negative: the ephemeral offers an opportunity to strive to catch the uncatchable body. "The ephemeral does not equal unmateriality."¹⁶ In the context of my work, Phelan's theory is central in that it encourages me to regard my dance work as inherently in opposition to dominant forms of reproduction. And in its defiance of such trappings, I aim to confront values of reproduction through my inclusion of this work inside of the museum space.

3. DANCING A VALUE SYSTEM — Politics of Dance in a Museum

The museum is not a neutral, nor apolitical space. The main gallery of the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum, with its white walls, high ceilings and cement floor (the typical aesthetic of gallery spaces intended to hold art), is not exempt from upholding "correct" processes of documentation and the archive. Marcia B. Siegel, in her *At the Vanishing Point: A Critic Looks at Dance*, describes the museum as "a static place dedicated to preservation and the resisting of change."¹⁷ Dance, on the other hand, resists documentation due to its naturally ephemeral, fleeting qualities. Placing dance inside of a museum is not simply an interesting artistic choice; it is a political one that calls into conversation topics of control, capitalism, and access.

In his *Manifesto for a Dance Museum*, Boris Charmatz radically suggests a re-naming of the National Choreographic Centre to a fresh, innovative, new: Dancing Museum. In doing so, he

¹⁶Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 81.

¹⁷ Marcia B. Siegel, *At the Vanishing Point: A Critic Looks at Dance* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973): 269.

articulates the dancer's perceived boundary to the ephemeral. Charmatz points out this boundary as a limitation of dancers being in constant opposition to the fixed mediums of visual art, more commonly presented in museum spaces. He calls for a reckoning of this thinking and instead proposes an oppositional attention towards the possibilities of his Dancing Museum to oppose the status quo. In his space of possibility, dance is no longer excluded from museum spaces, and museum spaces are no longer pinned beneath the strict rules of formality and preservation. Especially in our contemporary, experimental moment, Charmatz addresses our current era in which "museography is opening itself up to ways of thinking..." Charmatz is clear in addressing the impossibility and paradox of this suggestion, and even so, begs for a shaking up of "both the idea we have of the museum, and the idea we have of dance!"¹⁸

The paradox of dancing in a museum is evident and alive inside of this work. Marie Bardet, in her 2018 "The Paradox of Dancing in a Museum," addresses this: "...museums seem to be made to preserve works of art frozen in time and to show them to the public over very long periods (that seem almost infinite, in their mission for posterity), while dance most often produces mobile and ephemeral works, presented for a short time, usually in theaters. Dance seemingly opposes the stability and permanence of museum works, with its inherent mobile and ephemeral characteristics."¹⁹ The only "moving" aspect of my installation (besides the live performance, of course) are the projections included as a part of each vignette. These video installations are my attempt at re-capturing that sense of temporality that the museum so often freezes. But even these digital renderings of my moving body are recorded — in the past — and are programmed to loop.

¹⁸ Boris Charmatz, "Manifesto for a Dance Museum."
<http://www.museedeladanse.org/fr/articles/manifeste-pour-un-musee-de-la-danse.html>.

¹⁹ Marie Bardet, "The Paradox of Dancing in a Museum." March 1 2018,
<https://www.pewcenterarts.org/post/paradox-dancing-museum>.

These inherent differences between dance and gallery temporalities have prodded my interest in placing objects inside of the museum. The gallery space is not an apolitical one, however, neither is the dance stage. Each space carries with it biases, traditions, and associations placed by histories of elitist gatekeeping. My approach with this work, albeit an experiment, is that it may also serve as a commentary on and about the commodification of dances, and the impossibility of capturing bodies inside of permanent mediums. This impossibility is what fuels the drive of this work. This (im)possibility is also queer in that it is a striving for something that is not yet here, but may be instead, felt.

4. THE QUESTION OF LIVENESS, “IMPACT,” AND “AFFECT”

It has been my intention with my latest choreographic work to insist upon a sense of liveness within the dancing. To make dances that themselves feel alive, inside of set parameters. This notion takes my dances from what one could see as just movement in space timed to music and thrusts it into the possibility of experience. In my performances, I strive to make things happen on stage in real time, so that dancers, most often myself, are changed throughout the unfolding of the dance.

Similarly to liveness, I have long been pondering the questions of my work and its “impact” and “affect.” An excerpt from a past artist statement (December 2020, pre-grad school) reflects this desire nicely:

“That which would make me rise out of my seat, dry my throat, believe, disbelieve, fall in love... I aim to present.”

At the time I was really concerned with the idea of audience impact, and I became obsessed with trying to get people to feel — do — create — something. I wanted viewers to go on a journey inside of their emotions and come out on the other side changed, different, affected by what they witnessed. At the start of my thesis process I was still tied to this notion of viewership and how this process of the transfer of emotion from performer to viewer happened. It is more than just kinesthetic empathy; it concerns more of energy transmission, the conjuring of emotionalities, than the relatability of kinesthetic sensation while watching a dance. In researching empathy, I came across scholarship from Dr. Dee Reynolds, Professor at the University of Manchester, that offers a distinction between the notions of empathy, contagion, and affect. The author explains:

Empathy is the ability to perceive and understand other people’s emotions and to react appropriately.” and: “By contrast with empathic behaviour, to be ‘affected’ is to be moved in an embodied manner which is not yet dependent on emotion or cognition.” Finally: “...unlike empathy, emotional contagion does not require preservation of the awareness of distinctions between self and other.”²⁰

In engaging with this article, I started to understand a difference between these three phenomena that I previously considered to be under the umbrella term of empathy: empathy is emotional and voluntary, affect is physical and involuntary, and emotional contagion exists as an involuntary taking on of both emotion and physicality. Throughout my experience as a viewer of dance works, I have felt all three of these experiences, sometimes all at once.

In the context of this work, I still feel tied to this notion of viewership, but only as it relates to the finding of ephemeral traces. This process begs the question: how can I use the knowledge of empathy vs. affect vs. emotional contagion to my benefit, in thinking about how to

²⁰ Dee Reynolds, “Empathy, Contagion and Affect: The Role of Kinesthesia in Watching Dance,” in *Touching and Being Touched: Kinesthetic Empathy in Dance and Movement*, ed. Gabriele Brandstetter, Gerko Egert and Sabine Zubarik, (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013): 211-232.

retain emotional poignancy within the vignettes of ephemera I create? If I can understand on a psychological level the complicated and politicized ways in which viewers attach to the experience of watching dances, is there a possibility to use these same tactics in the translation process?

Dance arts call upon the living body to express sometimes abstract, other times explicit, ideas. These living bodies accentuate the notion of ephemerality through their ability to produce that sixth sense, that thing you can't quite touch. In looking at my dances as a point of reference, I start to question how liveness may be translated by the ephemera I present in the installation space. Does the process of extracting the ephemera, and placing them as performative objects themselves, deplete the wealth of this "liveness" apparent in my live and *alive* dances?

Referencing the distinction between the three phenomena: empathy, contagion, and affect, I can start to understand that dances — my dances — my queer dances — could do all, one, or any combination of these three. The concept of "liveness" is especially interesting to break down in reference to these three categories: empathy, contagion, and/or affect. When I think, speak, and theorize about keeping the "liveness" alive in my dances, even under the translation process in presenting them as ephemera only, which of these three categories houses that striving?

There is something particularly physical about the alive quality of my dances. Of course, my live body in space is physical and three dimensional. It takes up space and gives off heat. I understand the audience through this lens of being alive in my physicality, just as they are understanding me, albeit (most often) sitting in their chairs. I wonder how my liveness could make an audience feel, as well as what it could make an audience do. In this way, I no longer consider empathy — in the way that Reynolds defines it — as relevant in striving to keep the

liveness inside of the presentation of these dance ephemeras. What I believe to be relevant instead is affect, and in some small way, contagion.

Affect, how I have come to understand it based on Dee Reynolds' article, is most relevant to this work on ephemerality and residue, due to its physical representation. Since affect is purely physical (not yet dependent on emotion), I am thinking about this most in relation to how audience members have moved throughout the installation space — through, with, and around the residues of dances I present. Further, audience choreography comes into play in relation to the live performance aspect of this work. Seated in the round, beside and between the installed vignettes, the audience must twist and turn their bodies in order to keep track of my dancing throughout the space. I even cross behind each section of seating at least once, proposing a moment of affect to the audience: they can turn and watch, succumb to the proposed choreography, or they may stay in their original spinal alignment, waiting for my dancing to return to their natural view.

Contagion, on the other hand, presents a fascinating dialogue with the boundary between self and other. Muñoz posits, again in Chapter 4 of *Cruising Utopia*, that the dance floor carries particularly important weight in the dissolving of such a boundary. He states: "...the dance floor increases our tolerance for embodied practices... [because] it demands, in the openness and closeness of relations to others, an exchange and alteration of kinesthetic experience through which we become, in a sense, less like ourselves and more like each other."²¹ Although Muñoz is of course speaking to the nightlife dance floor found in queer clubs, his point is particularly interesting to consider in relation to Reynolds' definition of contagion, which blurs the same boundary he mentions. Self and other, performer and audience: where is the line? Contagion also

²¹Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 66.

assumes the existence of something that is independent of the two bodies involved, that which is spread by these bodies but exists outside of them. This thing here, in the context of my work, is Muñoz's "kinesthetic experience" of emotion, and although it exists outside of the bodies that spread it, the experience comes from within, and punctures the line, into the other.

With this work, I consider the performer/audience line particularly relevant, especially considering that my performing — living — body will not be present for the majority of the installation's existence (the live performance will only last 20 minutes). What may it say about control and power for my body to be left out of the conversation? And what could it mean for objects to take over this performative role?

5. CONTROL (And Its Effect on Art Making)

I feel more comfort in making solos — and, solos on myself — than I do in making work on others. The closeness of my body and mind offers a sense of immediacy to ideas, which makes for a simple process of translation. Inside of such a tendency also exists a need for control. If I only ever work with myself, I am never required to hand over agency to someone else, potentially risking creative collaboration, a tweak of my vision. This installation work is the first time my work will ever be shown without my physical body present in the space. Even when I have presented choreographic work on others, I am in the wings or the audience, a vantage point from which I can critique and control through my own thought processes. In this way, my artistic comfort is being critically, necessarily, challenged. And although I am up for this risk, I cannot help but feel still paranoid about audiences having their own time to sit with the work, inside of the gallery space, without me present. This anxiety is both worrying as well

as curious for me as an artist. What still haunts me is the feeling of immense risk inherent in allowing strangers access to my work without my presence — personhood — there to greet them.

It worries me that the installation is not a dance. My dancing body has limits in that it cannot be at two nor ten places at once; it is only 5 foot 8 inches tall; and it will, too, someday degenerate. I cannot be present with this work throughout its period of viewing. But body memory lives on, some sort of permanence.²² My dances are stored in memories of that physicality, and in the memory of those who witnessed.

Admittedly, I hoped no one would interact with the exhibit for these very reasons. Last week I was passing by the gallery space during the hours of public access. To my surprise, there, in the gallery, were a number of families engaging with the work. It was terrifying. I walked into the space and pretended to be one of them. I wonder if anyone remembered me.



Figure 1

²² Dorota Sosnowska, “Ephemera: Matter and Memory,” *Performance Research* Vol.23 (2018): 415.

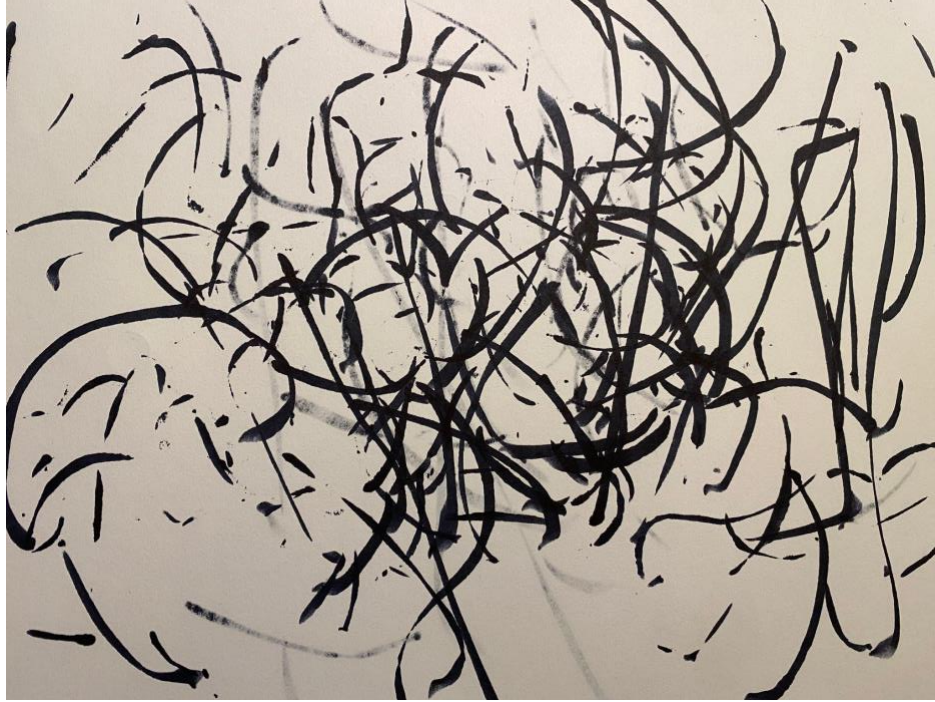


Figure 2

TIMELINE

The process that has led me to this thesis work's completion has transformed many of my strengths and successes, weaknesses and failures, insecurities, passions, dislikes, relationships, and loves. I created an installation art piece that was on view for ten days in the Eleanor D. Wilson museum. Last Thursday, June 23rd, I performed a 25-minute long solo in the gallery space, interacting with the space and the work I created. I knew none of these things last year at this time.

I wrote my thesis proposal last September. I wanted to research how “emotions were transferred from the performer to the viewer in dance performances” — what I called “performer-viewer affectation.” I asked: “what is the watching of dance? What are the social, cultural, and political implications of audience membership, and how do we wrestle with these truths? What is my reason to see and be seen?” It's amazing how much my curiosities, commitments, and

interests have changed over the course of the past year, over the course of this intensive degree, and throughout the process of creating this work.

Where my work now lives is at the intersection of ideas surrounding ephemera and ephemerality, performance and performativity, my own queerness and queer theory, choreography, dance in museum, and “the archive.” I am in conversation with scholarship — real research — about these topics, engaging work by José Esteban Muñoz, Boris Charmatz, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Sarah Michelson, Peggy Phelan, Diana Taylor, and many others. The installation and live performance work was a look at my own past, present, and future choreographies, using them to extract queer embodied experience and document their resonances. The installation housed a series of four vignettes that acted as preserved documents of these queer performances. The live performance called the alive, dancing body into the conversation of the ephemeral — and serves as a reminder of what may be lost but never forgotten inside of this work.

Around January 2022, I applied to present the work in the museum, a process that narrowed the scope, as well as swerved towards a new conceptual direction: the concept of “ephemerality.” I realized the curiosity I felt around the conflict between the museum space and dance, which took my research in a direction I had not yet considered. More and more, the “viewership” research I had proposed in September became less interesting, and ephemerality emerged as a focal point, especially as it continued to show up in my Spring coursework.

In April 2022, my ideas started to solidify into clarity. When we were assigned Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: the then and there of queer futurity* in class, I became entirely engrossed in reading this text and it quickly became my inspiration and primary source of theory for this project. The 4th chapter did so the most. Pages 65-81 of the book are filled with underlinings,

asterisks, notes, words, and figures in their margins. These etches are ephemera themselves, traces left over after my passionate engagement with this text.

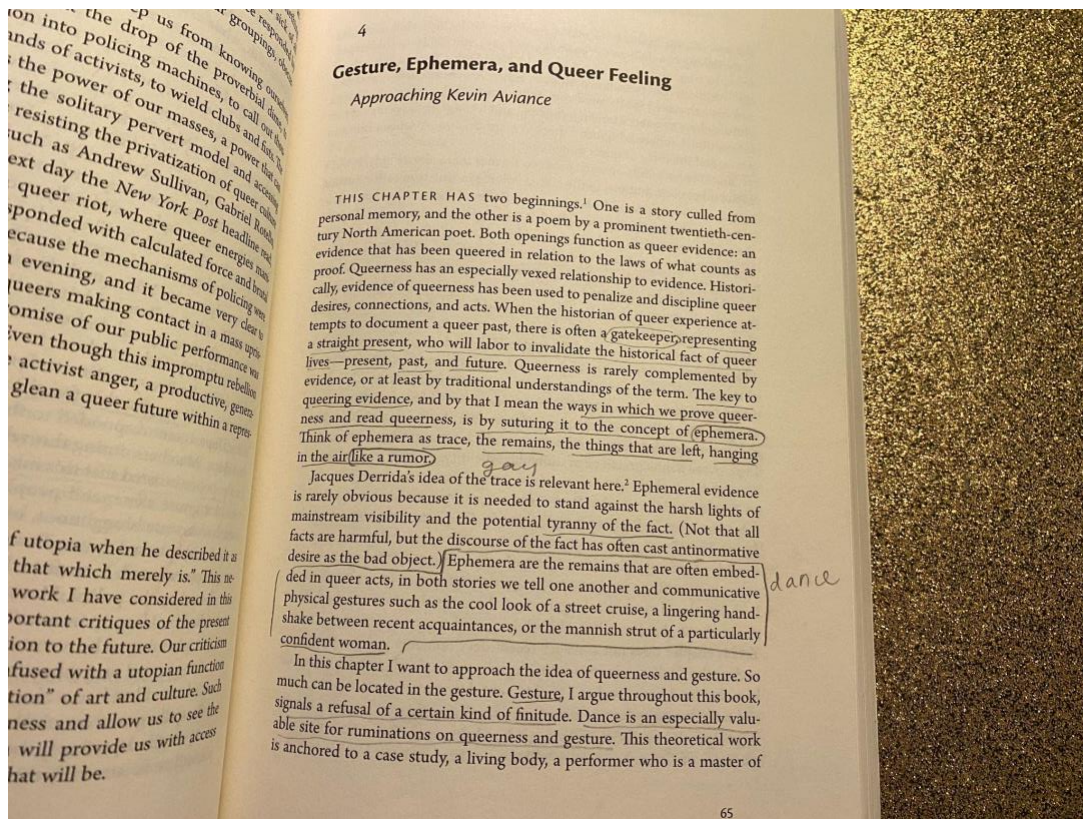


Figure 3

I also spent a week in April experimenting in the gallery space, which was emptied out between shows. This week was interesting and fun, but the material I generated proved not entirely useful for the final product. My ideas were not yet fully formed — and I hadn't narrowed the scope of my interests in terms of what, where, and why to place objects in space.



Figure 4

DOING (SHOWING?) “EPHEMERA”

Muñoz conceptualizes ephemera in various different ways, using drag performer Kevin Aviance as a case study. The author speaks to the complicated relationship between queerness and documentation, yet offers the concept of ephemera as a way around this: “the key to queering evidence, and by that I mean the ways in which we prove queerness and read queerness, is by suturing it to the concept of ephemera.”²³ Further, defining ephemera: “Think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor.”²⁴ I was drawn to the poetics and imagery of this definition. First, “*trace*” I felt summed up what I wanted to present in the installation: traces of my past dances; things that are left after the performances end. The scuffs on my white reeboks, holes in my green socks, wrinkles in the curtains. Even throughout the install process, I had the choice of hemming curtains (rather than leaving the edges threadbare), cleaning up scuff marks, etc. I became aware of all the details left unfinished

²³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 65.

²⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 65.

— ephemeral — in trace form, and decided to intentionally keep them. “*Traces*” made it into the title. Second, the line: “*hanging in the air like a rumor*” was equally fascinating to me as it was haunting. In each vignette, two words were hung from the ceiling of the gallery with fishing wire. In a simple word association exercise, I thought of terms that I associate with each piece: “god,” “wind,” “loss,” “angst.” I chose the two most resonant terms that spoke to the essence of the choreographic intent or feeling of the work, and they were hung. This choice was meant to give the effect of someone whispering a “*rumor*” into your ear as you encounter the vignettes, giving potential meaning to what you see.



Figure 5

Muñoz’s chapter offered such clarity to what I *thought* I knew about the concept of ephemerality. Prior to engaging with the text, I had only heard the term used in relation to dance and performance being likened to disappearance and anti-materiality. This notion was always off-putting to me, ever since first hearing it in my undergrad dance history courses. It felt wrong to conceptualize dance as having this looming “mortality” attached to it. What Muñoz

illuminated for me was that there are indeed traces of performances, that of course dance continues on in some way after it ends. He writes: “the ephemeral does not equal unmateriality. It is more nearly about another understanding of what matters. It matters to get lost in dance or to use dance to get lost...”²⁵ I started thinking about how bodies remember, how things are left to be dealt with. Memories construct themselves... Skin warms or even cools. I thought it might be perfect to go into the vault of my recent works to see if I could summon up their traces, their ephemera, and what it might mean to place these queer artifacts inside of the museum space.

The paradox of dancing in a museum is evident and alive inside of this work. Bardet’s article addresses this: “...museums seem to be made to preserve works of art frozen in time and to show them to the public over very long periods (that seem almost infinite, in their mission for posterity), while dance most often produces mobile and ephemeral works, presented for a short time, usually in theaters. Dance seemingly opposes the stability and permanence of museum works, with its inherent mobile and ephemeral characteristics.”²⁶ The museum aims to fix art to place and time, often with little context. Undoubtedly, the installation I’ve made does some of this. I’ve extracted inanimate objects from past dancing works and I have placed them aesthetically in a room with white walls and cement floors. However I think there is another dimension, a queerly invisible layer to it all that complicates things. The act of placing my dancing body inside of a space historically meant to de-mobilize art does something. The reebok’s scuff marks are indicators of movements past — movement with meaning, dancing that did something.

²⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 81.

²⁶ Bardet, “The Paradox of Dancing in a Museum” <https://www.pewcenterarts.org/post/paradox-dancing-museum>.



Figure 6

INSTALLING THE INSTALLATION

These thoughts remained thoughts until about a week from the live performance date. The creation process finally began when I started to make decisions — set parameters within which I could be creative. This is one of the many guidances Alex Ketley, my thesis mentor, gave me. The museum is a huge space, with seemingly limitless possibilities. This overwhelmed me early in the Spring semester and I continued to be overwhelmed, lacking concrete ideas for the installation, honestly until the start of the summer term and even more so, in the week leading up to the installation process and live performance. What helped was getting it all out in front of me. Just like the act of choreographing with bodies in space and time, I found that

mapping it all out — not drawing the space or even drawing the installation itself — rather, writing the ideas out — was incredibly helpful.

I decided on seven main elements to each vignette. First is what I call the “encasing” — what is the outside of the vignette? Second, the words that hang in the air like a rumor — two words per vignette. Third, a clothing item, fourth a projection. The fifth element was individual sound, which I originally wanted to be unique to each vignette so that the viewer would experience a different sound score for each when they approached it. This quickly was thrown out due to the echo-y acoustics of the gallery — it would have been a messy “wash” as a mentor called it. The sixth element is a light source, and the seventh, now mostly cut, was an extra object unique to each piece. These four vignettes are, to the best of my ability, ephemeral replicas of solos that I have danced over the past two years.

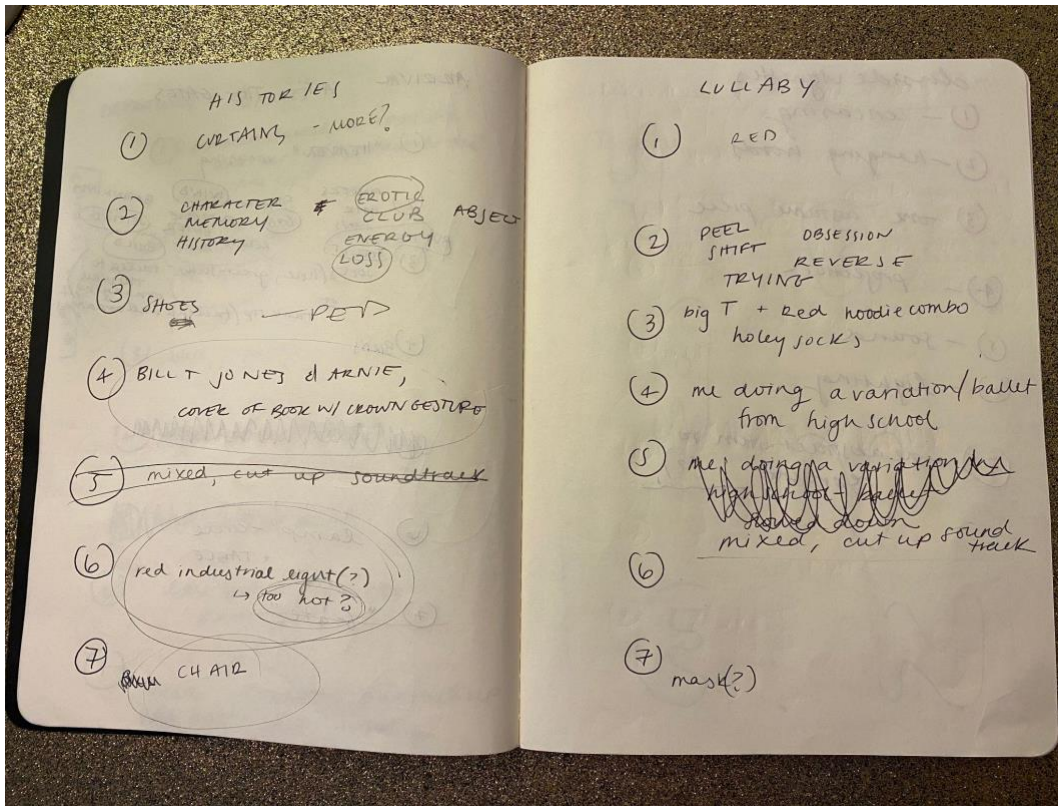


Figure 7

Lullaby, the oldest work, is from September 2020. I performed it at my alma mater UW Madison at what they called the “Alumni Festival.” It was a chance for the class of 2020 cohort to present abbreviated versions of their senior projects that were taken from them due to the COVID pandemic. This solo was part of my reel for my application into the Hollins MFA program. I see this solo as a sort of CV in reverse. It is in conversation with ballet vocabulary in the last section and uses “O Mio Babbino Caro” as its soundtrack, a melody that our master pianist at Milwaukee Ballet often played for adagio combinations. The ephemera within this vignette include the pair of socks I wore on stage (now incredibly holey), black sweatpants, a fabric face mask which was essential at the time, and footage of me in high school rehearsing a variation from the pas de deux *Diana and Acteon*. When I look at this vignette, through the curtain to its insides, I am filled with an introspective sensibility. I watch myself *trying* — to achieve perfection as a young ballet dancer, to get into Graduate school, to make impactful dances. *Trying* is one of this vignette’s “rumors.”



Figure 8

The second work that I have memorialized is *Departure Dances*, a 50-minute solo performance that I directed and performed in May of 2021. This work was my senior project, my biggest opportunity yet. I had a cast of eight dancers, and turned it into a mostly improvisational performance for one. The show was at the Backspace Gallery in Madison, WI, a huge open space with white walls and concrete floors. The show was angsty and emotional, sometimes sensual and alluring, and definitely very me. A theater professor that I knew from a dance workshop volunteered to run the production, and let me use his multi-thousand dollar lights for free. It was an act of friendship and love of theater, emerging newly vaccinated and fresh faced — hoping for what we thought was “the end.” I was so proud of what I accomplished and said with this piece.



Figure 9

The white pedestals construct the perimeter of the vignette, referencing the three white pedestals I used in the original show as set pieces. This is one of the museum aesthetics that I purposefully took and reclaimed as a part of my work — both in *Departure Dances*, in the Backspace, and also with *Traces*, in the EDW. *Departure Dances*' vignette also includes

costume pieces from the work including a pair of high waisted, electric blue denim Wranglers and only slightly-hole socks (this pair is not as old as the ones worn in *Lullaby*). Projected onto the wall are two films, one titled *Poetry* that was made for a choreographic workshop in early 2021; the other is titled *PAUSE* and it was itself a piece of the original *Departure Dances* performance. In both of these films, I am topless. Spring 2021, the season during which I made this work, was a time of new, raw, emotional exploration. Almost all of the work I was doing during this period (including sections of *Departure Dances* itself) included my topless body. I thought it would be important to include these films in the work's vignette as they were integral to the making of *Departure Dances*.

The third piece is titled *Arrival at the Gates*, a solo I created for the Fall Dance Concert, and performed in the Hollins Theater in November of 2021. I was already interested in Muñoz back then, not having read the full *Cruising Utopia* yet, but just from having heard about it and read the iconic opening passage. I was most inspired by the line: “we may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”²⁷ Even before I knew the author's ties to dance and performance later on in the book, I started to see this line for its senspirations of warmth, feeling, and hope — and wanted to make a dance based on this. I was falling in love, and Roanoke felt like our own shared utopia - the mountains looming, yet protective. I worked with Arne Johnson at the theater to construct large pieces of hung fabric, and animated them with box fans, which also became part of the set. The piece opened me up to really understanding what the role of research — real, invested research — meant to my choreography. Engaging with histories, texts, and documents is now an important aspect of my process. Every time.

²⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.



Figure 10

The outside of the vignette is defined and decorated by a red curtain that reads, “HEAVEN.” It is meant to resemble a gate — possibly, even, the gates of heaven, and was made by queer writer and textile artist, Isabel Houck. Isabel was inspired by the visual and textile artist Simon Petepiece. The artist’s work “Praise the UltraLight”²⁸ served as aesthetic and colorful inspiration for the “Heaven” curtain. It was important to me that queerness was alive and present inside of my rendering of “utopia,” and therefore, “heaven,” concepts normatively linked to a religion that does not interest me. The curtains were imbued with queerness in that they were made by a queer artist who has queer relations to myself and therefore the work. The “rumors” in this vignette are the words “wind” — a nod to the fans; and “god” — intentionally left in the lowercase letter “g” in order to destabilize a presumption of normative religion and, for some,

²⁸ Simon Petepiece, “Praise the UltraLight” <https://simonpetepiece.com/Praise-the-UltraLight>.

hint to a potential queer god instead... Whoever, whatever, that may be. The projection element is a recording of one of the many flocks of birds that I see in my queerest moments around Roanoke. My bedside table and lamp were used as set pieces in the original work, and therefore are placed inside of the vignette and light it from the inside out.

The final piece that I chose to include in the installation is *Histories*, a ten-minute solo which first premiered in April, at Hollins, as a part of DRAFTWORKS. The work is in direct conversation with the text *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the age of AIDS* by David Gere. In this book, Gere theorizes with the question: what makes a piece of choreography an AIDS dance? What are the characteristics of dances that deal with the subject, and how do audiences understand and interact with them? I was interested in queer history and the queer kin that had made way for me to exist. In terms of activism, I thought about and read interviews with Marsha P. Johnson and Silvia Rivera. In terms of dance, I have always loved and felt a deep connection to Bill T Jones and his late partner Arnie Zane. I revisited Jones' memoir, *Last Night On Earth*, and found myself, again, wrapped up in their love. *Histories* conjures memories from my queer past, including my queer childhood with my lesbian mother, and growing into adulthood with my queer sister. Together we make a beautiful queer trio of support and mutual admiration. It is a sense of true love and understanding whenever we are together. The work again employed Arne Johnson from the Hollins theater department to construct three black chiffon curtains that were hung in the space for DRAFTWORKS. For these curtains, I was inspired by Felix Gonzales-Torres' series, *Curtains*,²⁹ for its simple beauty.

²⁹ Felix Gonzales-Torres, *Curtains*, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/c/curtains>.



Figure 11

The *Histories* vignette places these three curtains, as well as the chair that was used in the set piece, and three costume pieces (brown oversized pants, blue socks, and the infamous white reeboks that have made it into three of the four works ephemeralized in *Traces*). Projected onto the wall are images of book pages (*Last Night on Earth* and *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*) that document the research process.

REMINDERS: The Live Performance

The live performance, set within / in / around these four vignettes, acts as a reminder of my alive body inside of all of these works. Yes, I have stripped these works of my physicality throughout the act of finding their ephemera and extracting them to place them in the gallery. Yet my body feels always still relevant and present inside of these objects that make up the vignettes. It took my feet brushing and stretching along the floor to make the holes in the socks.

By *re*-placing my body in the space with these traces, the live performance called on these histories and asked them to *re*-present themselves.

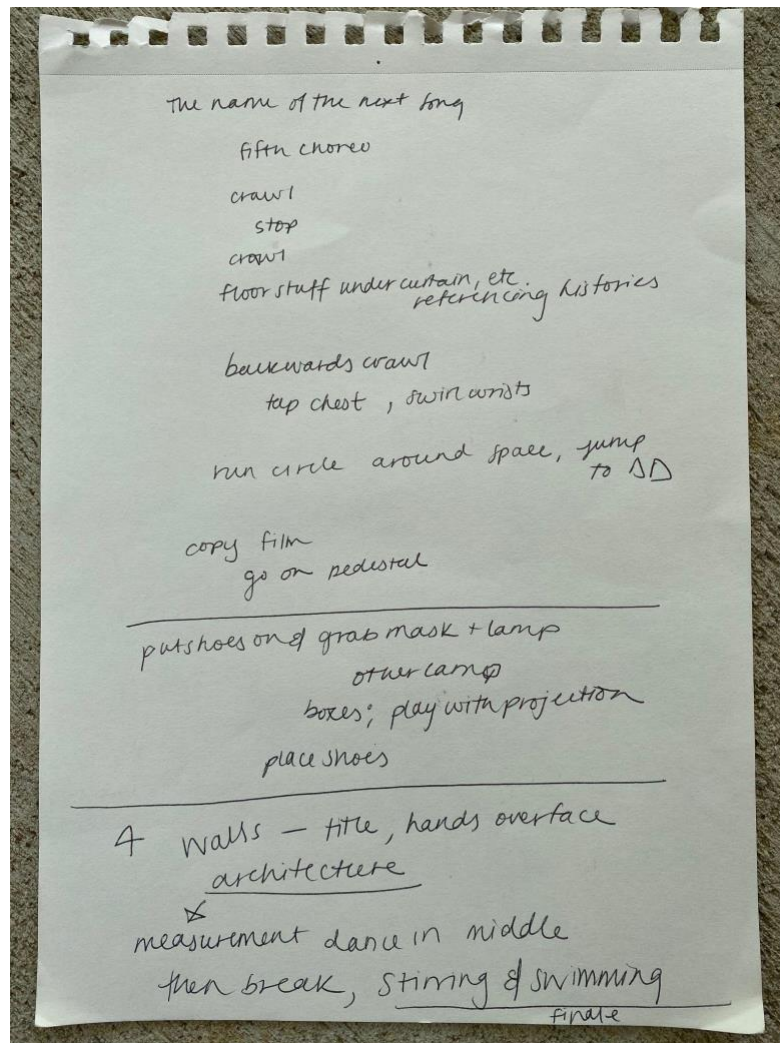


Figure 12

The performance starts “simply” with an 8-minute long dance piece, in which I effectively place myself and my dancing body in the time and space of the room, remembering specific dancing steps, gestures, or energies from each solo. This introduction is set to Arthur Russell’s song “The Name of the Next Song,” which prescribes pauses throughout, a moment to *re*-set my intentions, and to make new choices. This dance is mostly improvisational: the “score” being the starting and ending places, with known stops at each vignette along the way. The

purpose of this opening section is threefold: to show my body in dancing movement, converse with the objects of dances past, and “christen” the space with my physicality.

The second section is set to Yo La Tengo’s “Saturday,” a piece of music that was included in the original *Departure Dances*. In all but one of the solos in the exhibit, I chose to show the aspect of setting up the space — the world within which the dance lives. In *Departure Dances*, I enter and configure the lighting system to its setting. At the beginning of *Arrival at the Gates*, I enter from the house with a lamp and box fans, place them in the stage space, switch them on, and then set myself for the choreography. The choreography in *Histories* does not start with the intention of setting up the space, however, I chose to manually switch the lights throughout the piece myself, to show the sections shifting, the intentions coming all from me and my impulses as the performer, rather than from the tech crew. There is a similar intention with the second section of the live performance in the gallery space. I take trips to the back storage space behind the main wall of the gallery, through the “secret” door that is meant to blend into the room. Behind the floor-to-ceiling hinge door lies the last few objects still not yet placed in their vignette: two lamps, the fabric face mask, the pair of white reebok sneakers, and two clear mini pedestals. One by one, I enter the storage space and retrieve these finishing touches. I allow the audience to witness my alive body in the act of setting up these objects. In some way, I consider their exact placements, their final positionings, as the ephemera — traces — of this performance: they make up the fifth “vignette,” a secret one that only the Thursday night audience and I recognize.

This section ends, and I disappear behind the large swinging door for the last time. Rufus Wainwright’s “Les Feux D’Artifice T’appellent” belts through the speakers as my fingers, then hands, then arm and eventually entire body emerge from the cracked doorway opening. The next

four minutes of this track, with its rolling, tumbling, piano sounds, allow me to trace the architecture of the space: four(ish) walls, high ceilings that my jump will never reach, cement floors. This section is meant to make the audience physically twist their spines — choreography — in order to follow my quick movements around the space. Their seating arrangement in the round, around the perimeter and in between each vignette, allows for this. My performative intention was to bring into view the reality of being in this alternative (for western concert dance) space, and to subtly nod to the politics of dancing in the museum. In this process, those actions included relentless measuring, taping, exacting, and sacrificing. I aimed to represent these actions within my improvised dance.

FINALE

The final section is perhaps the most vivid, lasting image for me inside of this performance. The fury of the third section comes to a close, and there is a moment of pause. The opening chords of Perfume Genius' "Cenote" echo throughout the space as the lights dim to a single spot light. I stand in the light pool it creates in the center of the room. I begin to shed my layered get-up: first the red sweater and button-up to reveal a flimsy camisole that highlights my neck and arms. I shed my socks next, placing them in my back pocket for this last dance. Four crew members on the perimeter of the space quietly, yet notably, turn off the projectors and click off the lamps, leaving only my body and its words as the final focal point. I let my hair out of its slicked back up-do: leaving only what is essential. I start to slowly turn, gliding my sight around the room, starting up high with the untouchable ceiling. As I tip-toe-turn, I let my gaze lower slowly, tracking what I see: shadows of people I love, artifacts of past dances, my 17-year old self dancing in the ballet studio. I lower my gaze even further, still turning, and eventually find the floor. I let myself rest, still circling, my weight held by the cold cement. I notice the closing

chords of the song and I look towards the exit of the gallery. I make the decision to exit, as that final light fades.

It was important for the audience to be granted permission to really look at me: my body, my hair (which I only ever wear in a queerly pulled back style, hiding the sometimes “feminine” length), my emotion. I wanted there to be a sense of reverence or dedication to the dancing body, the emotional dancing body, in the space. Inside of a work that so intentionally sets aside the dancing body and questions inanimacy, I felt it important to impress this final image of my body in the space as a way to — even briefly — thank the body for its efforts. After all, there would be no holey socks without the friction created by my feet stretching along the floor. No scuffed up Reeboks without tripping, scraping.

Throughout this process, and even still today, I continue to be confounded by the role of my queernesses — plural indicating multiplicity, fluidity, and choice — in this project, and in my dance making more broadly. I have not seemed to be able to effectively “land” when it comes to theorizing this aspect of the work. It is still just a feeling inside my body, with no real way to explain or to make tangible the fleeting ideas in my head. I feel lost when it comes to why my dances are queer, why this work is queer, where the queerness is. Of course, Muñoz has already thought about this. In Chapter 4 of *Cruising*: “queer dance is hard to catch, and it is meant to be hard to catch — it is supposed to slip through the fingers and comprehension of those who would use knowledge against us. But it matters and takes on a vast material weight for those of us who perform or draw important sustenance from performance.”³⁰ In many ways, the installation and entire project of ephemeralizing my dances into an installation and then dancing alongside them

³⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 81.

is to show that “vast material weight” — the materiality of my queer dances, the weight of my queer dance making.

In a course titled *Graduate Performance Workshop and Critique*, ten fellow thesis presenters and I each gave artist talks on our projects. In a Q&A session, I asked a peer what their mission statement would be for their work. Ever since then, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about what I would say in regards to my purpose for engaging in this project, this research. I think it has to do with being a young dance maker and being critically engaged with the work I make, and why I make it. Wanting to find resonances with objects in space as choreography so that I can take a step back, look at my queer dance from another perspective, and learn something from doing so. It is all of these things but yet I still don’t really know. It is about me and about my love for dance, finding my voice, and running uninhibitedly towards that — queer — horizon.

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