

ARTISTS LIVE ON ISLANDS: LIMITATIONS AS A CREATIVE RITUAL

by

Katherine I. Pottratz

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

The thesis of Katherine I. Pottratz
has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

Eric Handman, Chair April 26, 2012
Date Approved

Ellen Bromberg, Member April 26, 2012
Date Approved

Connie Wilkerson, Member April 26, 2012
Date Approved

and by Stephen Koester, Chair of
the Department of Modern Dance

and by Charles A. Wight, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to show how implementing limitations as a creative ritual may lead to a more optimal artmaking experience. Research has shown that creating parameters within a challenging activity increases an individual's concentration to the point that work seems effortless, and the individual experiences a state of *flow*. There are many psychophysiological rewards to this state of deep concentration that may encourage an individual to re-engage in the pursuit, despite its rigorous challenge. The most powerful motivating reward of flow is *self-fulfillment*.

It is my intent to offer the dance field new insight into how limits may enliven the creative process of making our choreographic and filmic work. I draw from my own experience of applying boundaries to dance in the studio and on set. The limits are sometimes geographic and other times psychological. Some involve a cast of dancers, while others involve only me. By recognizing that parameters lead to flow, and that flow leads to enjoyment, it seems crucial to our dance companies, education systems and personal practices to discover how to harness the freedom of limitations.

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INTRODUCTION: FROM *CLEAR, WHITE NONSENSE*

Antarctica.

America.

Clear White Nonsense.

I think I remember you.

You were in my dream.

I rode the river on an iceberg with you on my back.

I rode it until it melted into the great wide ocean.

Riding down the river fantastic sweetness on my back.

She is the honey and I drink her.

Until I fall fast asleep into the great wide.

And now like the honeybees I think of nothing.

Clear white nonsense.

And I forget everything.

This monologue was recited by dancer Shih-Ya Peng during the thesis work *Clear, White Nonsense* choreographed by Wyn Pottratz at the University of Utah's Marriott Center for Dance on November 17-19, 2011.

CHAPTER 1

IDEAS: A NATURAL RESOURCE

Imagine living alone in the wilderness. Your tiny cabin is situated on an isolated island in the middle of a lake in northern Minnesota. Your interactions with people are minimal, just a few fisherman crossing your lake who stop in to say hello, or the times you go to town for supplies. To keep order in your lone world, you attempt to personalize your living space, ordering it against the chaos of the wilderness, to an uncommon degree. Your day is scheduled. Books on every subject line your walls, funny sayings on the fridge, eccentric junk everywhere, anything to keep you from losing sight of your own self-made civilization, the one within your mind.

This paraphrased story about one person's designed day was part of the research done by Hungarian social psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his highly influential book *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*. As the psychologist (1990) suggests, "The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something that we make happen" (p.20). The woman living in northern Minnesota imposed structure on her environment to carve sense out of the chaos that potentially occurs in solitude. By adhering to self-generated rules, the woman built a satisfying, optimal experience out of solitude.

To a degree, I feel that artists live on isolated islands in their minds. To borrow from Bayles and Orland (1993) in *Art and Fear*, artists make work because they feel the world does not accurately represent their experience, and art is a way to infuse their voice into the culture. On our islands, there comes a time when we must arrange our artistic living space so that it is personalized and productive, akin to the woman living in northern Minnesota. I believe *arranging* is setting limitations on an unbound universe of ideas.

Boundaries can create a healthy tension that holds our attention captive toward new discovery. This tension is a play between emotion and the analytical, between logic and gut instincts. Education theorist Parker Palmer (1998) points out that our inability to cope with paradox is a gap in our own lived experience (p. 67). Emotion without logic is chaotic in nature, while logic without emotion seems sterile. When the polarities balance themselves, a rigor is created that lends itself to new ideas.

How can limitations be used in the creative ritual of making art? Can we understand the word *limit* as something freeing versus something that hinders, so that the idea of *limit* is not a straight-jacketed concept but an opening to the unknown? Can we absorb the word *limit* into our lexicon without fear that it will sterilize the color of our art, so as to not *limit* our expressiveness?

I believe our intellect thrives with limits, and that the artistic process can be considered a type of creative conservation, much like ecological conservation, where we limit our actions to improve the health of the system. Why not apply this mentality to creativity? Our ideas are no different than natural resources. Instead of clear-cutting, we selectively choose what is essential to our work.

Graduate school is an island in itself, with certain rules, tendencies and a known history that makes it an attractive place for artists seeking refuge. I sought out an MFA program 3 years ago because I knew other invested, knowing artists would be there, and the school curriculum would be like a treasure hunt, leading me to the ultimate goal: to learn how to devote myself to an artmaking practice.

Throughout my studies, I've been making order out of this reliable, yet wildly unexpected academic wilderness. It's been a practice of creating new habits and a personal commitment to letting go of the unnecessary. Three years ago at the graduate audition, I remember being asked, "Why graduate school now?" My response was, "So that I can learn to work in the way Twyla Tharp (2003) suggests in her book, *The Creative Habit*." Tharp offers several limitations as habits to improve creative health. She suggests no looking in mirrors. No newspapers. No speaking or clocks for an entire week. According to Tharp (2003), doing without is somewhat like going on a diet. It liberates the mind from distraction by doing less (p. 32).

Before graduate school, I struggled to make meaningful work in the community partly due to the fact that I was overwhelmed by distractions. Without a strong sense of my artistic practice, I felt swallowed by the realities of finding space, time and dancers to ensure successful collaborations. Once I did manage to coordinate a show, I felt so drained by the logistics of it all that my work showed nothing but the hardship it took to get the event arranged. My gut reaction to the stress of the situation was to make audience approved work, which interestingly never really drew an audience, at least not the audience that I was interested in attracting. It did not attract the dancers I wanted to work with either. I felt cornered. I had so many dreams of making impactful dance and

film, but I could not get past making work that failed to change the dancers, the audience or me in some significant way. Graduate school, with its rules and latitude for experimentation, seemed a perfect solution for my creative dilemma.

At the university, I have been fortunate to be surrounded by a generous community of artists who have opened me to explore new choreographic and filmic possibilities. Also, I learned to manage the work with a healthy discipline in mind. I've found that there is no difference in the way I manage the day-to-day happenings of my life, and the way I direct a rehearsal or film shoot. As a participant at the *2011 Dance for Camera Festival* at University of Utah, I asked renowned dance filmmaker Katrina McPherson "What does it mean to be the director?" She (2011) replied that directing is about "throwing your own party" (personal communication). The challenge has been to organize a shoot like it's a party, my party, and harness the excitement and anticipation as if throwing a bash for good friends in my very own home. This involves planning and anticipating what may or may not happen. Coincidentally I've learned that it is crucial to choose dancers wisely, just as I would choose my closest friends. Dancers are the linguists connecting the audience and the choreographer. Accomplished dancers successfully reflect ideas back to their original source. I meditate upon the fact that strengthening my creative process, invariably improves the way the rest of my life works.

In my readings, I have been most moved by the rugged words of Tharp and the psychological ponderings of Csikszentmihalyi. Tharp talks about rules and Csikszentmihalyi does too, but they are concerned about them in different ways. Tharp is all about habitual routine for success. She rolls out of bed at 5:30 am, hails a cab, drags herself to a personal trainer and then spends hours alone choreographing in an

empty, white Manhattan dance studio (pp. 14-15). She anchors her day in this routine and is one of the most successful choreographers of our time. I always keep her story close to me, and the thought of it stops me in my tracks when I am having a lazy morning and I so desperately reach for the snooze button on my alarm. Instead, I pry myself from my sumptuous bed, wake my snoozing hound dog, and get on with it.

The moment I found Csikszentmihalyi, it was if the Hungarian social scientist was putting me up to a hypothetical dare: “I dare you to design a rehearsal in which time disappears, and everyone is at work in a state of *flow*.” His research deals with consciously living in the moment in order to achieve *flow*, a synonym for what he considers happiness. A state of flow comes from ordering the consciousness through engaging activities that require complex skills and attainable goals. To attempt this state, I experimented with the structure of my creation process. I tried to make work feel like a game, regulated by a known set of guidelines and just within the skill level of the participants. As Csikszentmihalyi points out, “When a person’s relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenges of the situation that person’s attention is completely absorbed in the activity. There is no excess psychic energy left over to process any information but what the activity offers” (p. 53). The “game” also extended into the social realms of my process because, according Csikszentmihalyi, *flow* happens when people aren’t worried about their performance. They just perform. I didn’t want the dancers to stress about or judge what they were doing. Instead, I wanted to establish a social environment where dancers were absorbed in the moment and quick to laugh.

I tested the first game of limitation, not on my colleagues, but on myself. I was very intrigued by Lars Von Trier’s (2003) film, *The Five Obstructions*. In this

documentary, the Danish director challenges fellow experimental filmmaker Jørgen Leth to remake one of his early films by adhering to new rules generated by Von Trier. Subsequently, due to the success of this creation, Von Trier will attempt a similar collaboration with Director Martin Scorsese (The Guardian, 2011). To apply the same creative method to my own work, I asked fellow graduate students to give me one word, a person, place or thing. That word became integrated into my work for one week or more. The suggested obstructions were *library*, *love* and *Antarctica*. Automatically my method felt shaken up and dangerous because I had relinquished control and committed to chance as a rule.

For instance, *library*. I would not normally choose to shoot a film in the library. The light is problematic, there are many rules about when and where you can film and the industrial carpet is aesthetically displeasing. Throughout the shoot, I mainly tried to figure out how to get around the carpet. But every shot, the same grayish-ness appeared underfoot. I found the solution to this predicament during postproduction. While editing, I flipped everything upside down, which deemphasized the carpet and changed the entire sense of the piece. Flipping the vertical altered the dancer's gravity, and the library morphed into a piece about the weightless element Helium. The original obstruction forced me to deal with new limitations, like carpeting, and sent my filmmaking in an unexpected direction.

While some limits proved to be powerfully captivating, others quickly went into extinction after a short time. For instance, *love*. In the past I have bulldozed this subject. I have a thick history of works stemming from unrequited love, or love that lasts forever, or love that dies. Nauseated from the thought of producing another *love* piece, I instead

dropped it as a subject and used it as a casting tool. For an afternoon I worked with a couple *in love*, which eventually turned into a momentum study. What I enjoyed about this process was seeing how easily the two related to one another. Their comfort was a lesson about the potential for open space between collaborators, the permeable nature of boundaries.

The randomly assigned *Antarctica* became a fascinating theme for the duration of my thesis work. I never gave much thought to the landmass at the bottom of the world until the limitation game caused me to contemplate what it means to live in polar isolation. Since I really knew *nothing* about the place, I asked everyone about it. To my astonishment, one of my closest artist friends had lived there for a time to work as a computer programmer in the United States military base McMurdo, having a peak population of 1000 (A. Safran, personal communication, 2011). Her experiences of Antarctica were the opposite of my expectations. I assumed that she found solitude and space there, but it turned out that McMurdo actually drew a closer resemblance to summer camp than a meditation chamber. She found herself engaged in more lively exchanges on the military compound than on the mainland. Since the climate was often inhospitable and sometimes deadly, weather structured life there.

I believe Antarctica models itself as island living, where its people make meaning of their lived experiences, separate from the rest of the world. Islands are a popular destination for people to vacate their everyday lives for a few weeks in the summer. Our North American homes also have designated rooms, studies and dens, designed for the same purpose, to free oneself of social clutter in exchange for a deeply personal focus. Like Antarctica and household dens, the open space of the rehearsal studio is an island.

There is something important about how one's attention is focused while in a room of one's own, and its crucial to keep that place a sanctuary of one's own design.

I like to think of limits as healthy irritants. Maybe they are ideas that bullied their way into existence out of necessity. Or maybe they are aesthetic biases. The less I knew about the obstruction, the more I wrestled with it to make it my own. In the past, I abandoned ideas long before they found a voice, because I was overwhelmed with possibilities. Limitations within a ritual provided me with a framework to allow new meaning to inhabit and infiltrate my work. My work looks and feels differently than it did three years ago, because I have a better understanding of how to self-compose my own artmaking practice, and have figured out why artists congregate on islands.

CHAPTER 2

PLACE: ARTISTS LIVE ON ISLANDS

Before graduate school, I lived in a small coastal town for several years in the Pacific Northwest, situated adjacent to the coolly idyllic San Juan Islands. The artists who seek refuge in these somewhat remote, forested islands, known for their gentle beauty and ethereal quality, have always fascinated me. Instead of heading to the Seattle metropolis where one is logically more likely to find opportunity and social connections, these artists chose islands as their dens. I love to imagine how author Raymond Carver might have peered out of from his Port Angeles cabin study upon the misty, low-sitting isles, taken a drag from his cigarette, and contemplated the next perfect line in his short story. Or the artist colony on Orcas island, where trading and bartering handiwork for gardening advice or dance class is the norm. These island dwelling artists are workers not procrastinators.

When I moved to Utah for graduate school, I immediately responded to Salt Lake as if it were an island dropped from the sky, landing in the middle of the open desert, surrounded not by water but by mountains and then dry, crusty land for miles. A certain isolation fell upon me as I gazed up the street from my snug bungalow duplex and saw the very nearby Wasatch Range's mammoth rise up from the ground, marking the city's edge, the edge of civilization as it seemed. There is a historic reason Salt Lake is all by

itself. In the 1840's Brigham Young, pioneer in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints set out on an exhaustive journey to find the religious Promised Land and picked this spot amongst a wide ocean of geography. He and his followers were looking for their island, as the Library of Congress puts it, "These pioneers wanted an isolated place after the violence they had experienced, so the Great Salt Lake Valley seemed ideal" ("Brigham Young settled,"). The settlers of this place were looking for some peace and quiet, just as I was, to do our work respectively.

In Washington it was harder to feel alone. There, I was used to several little and big towns all linked together, stemming from historic settlements belonging to native coastal tribes. The population, with its thickest point in Seattle, was hugely stretched out and tangled up along the curvy coast from Olympia up to Vancouver, BC. I usually take a cue from how traffic flows in towns as to whether the place is going to present itself metaphorically as the household den or the buzzing kitchen in a shared college flat. The Seattle area, beloved in its own way, was clearly the crazy kitchen, and I was in need of a den.

The most thumbed-through, worn out paperback in my personal collection is Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968), where the author spends three seasons as a park ranger at Arches National Park and writes in celebration of the gifts of spaciousness and aloneness in his den, the desert:

I wait. Now the night flows back, the mighty stillness embraces and includes me; I can see the stars again and the world of starlight. I am twenty miles or more from the nearest fellow human, but instead of loneliness I feel loveliness. Loveliness and a quiet exultation. (p. 16)

Abbey's den is not the tiny man-made camp trailer issued to him by the park department as designated shelter, as it cuts him off completely from the landscape, his freedom. The

desert in its singularity is where “Suddenly it comes, the flaming globe, blazing on the pinnacles and minarets and balanced rocks, on the canyon walls and through the windows in the sandstone fins. We greet each other, the sun and I, across the black void of ninety-three million miles” (Abbey, 1968, p. 7). Abbey’s words yield a bounty of lyrical beauty and insightful details into the way he experiences his Mecca. His place of work is reminiscent of the ideal dance studio, a vast, bright, open expanse of surface, with bodies rising up as if monoliths breaking the surface of the desert floor.

Before Utah, I danced in a program that possessed two beautiful studios, one on campus, and the other off. From campus, dance majors would tear downtown on bike, bus or foot in order to bridge their work between the two worlds. When we were working in either studio, we were fully invested and present. Though both studios provided a solid place for working the drop swings of modern dance, I believe the program wasn’t communal, in part, because of this geographical split. There was no central place for students to congregate, except for the neighboring Food CO-OP that didn’t belong to the dancers; rather it belonged to eco-food-hungry shoppers. Admittedly we had a tendency to trade in dance for eco-food, sometimes forgetting about the great thing that captivated us and made us work to become our best selves in the first place. What we needed was one space that would bind our communal focus. Palmer (1998) affirms, “If we want a community of truth in the classrooms, a community that can keep us honest, we must put a third thing, a great thing at the center of the pedagogical circle” (p. 119). Without a recognizable home, we did not whole-heartedly feel what Palmer calls the *transcendent center* of our pedagogical community, the vocal, vivid clashings and daydreams revolving around the great thing. I was broken hearted when I heard that

the program lost its main turf downtown (which is now an unfortunate overly bright kid's play land) and modern dance ended up borrowing acting studios on campus, a space that belongs to actors not dancers.

In sacred, designated places of work, there is a strong reverence for a clear space that nourishes the daydreamer's self-expression. Virginia Woolf found it crucial to write with a lock on her door, which to her "means the power to think for oneself" (Pollan, 1998, p. 8). The study or room of one's own actually comes from Renaissance architecture where as Michael Pollan (1998) reports in *A Place of My Own*, "The new space and the new self actually helped give shape to one another. It appears there is a kind of reciprocity between interiors and interiority" (p. 8). In his memoir, Pollan builds a workspace outside of his home as a way to find a certain interiority within himself during fatherhood:

As our rooms filled up with the bassinet and booster seat, the crib and high chair and changing table, the walker and stroller and bouncer and monitor, a house that had always seemed a distinct reflection of two individuals living a particular life in a particular place began to feel more like some sort of franchise, a generic nonplace furnished in white polyethylene and licensed fictional beings. (p. 6)

A studio has the potential to become a "generic nonplace" if the dancers involved lose their charged focus. Before my thesis work and without careful consideration, I approached a highly technical dancer to work on a piece who proved to be out of place for the social environment required in my process. Since the dancer's technique was strong, I assumed that the gift of virtuosity would translate my idea with clarity, and I mistakenly didn't worry about intention beyond mechanics. As the process began, the dancer expected me to hand down a series of negotiated steps, but I preferred to work with intuition to create the movement vocabulary, so that the energy of rehearsal

constantly renewed itself. I knew the dancer was dissatisfied with the work, evident in her unenergetic response to my cues. Obviously we failed to find a common language. I wanted the dancer's creativity to change the studio's four walls into a sacred place with its own sense of self, stemming from their own intuitive responses, as spiritual author Denise Linn (1995) elaborates, "Our homes are mirrors of ourselves. They reflect our interest, our beliefs, our hesitations, our spirit and our passion. They tell a story about how we feel about ourselves and the world around us" (p. 1). The piece reflected the fragmented personality of the space created between us, evident in moments that felt as a "generic nonplace." This experience made me respect the vast potential of energy created when people gather in the studio around an idea. I try to remember that the sanctity of the idea directly relates to the sanctity of the rehearsal space, which then is relayed to our audiences who are the guests in our homes.

CHAPTER 3

WORK: LIMITATION IN ARTMAKING

In the Studio: Diamond Rings and Yoga Mats

In Salt Lake, I found my very own island within an island at the University. Graduate school was a place set apart from other places, designated for the purpose of getting work done. As my graduate years passed, the process of making art, which seemed only imaginary and done by romantic people who lived in the San Juans, became real to me. Though what I first noticed about working, is that it is not often that romantic. Aside from those moments in rehearsal where we end up rolling on the floor in laughter or when the dancers completely inhabit the material, making work has a lot to do with logistical parameters. The creation process needs to be somewhat mapped out, as Tharp (2003) confirms,

A plan is like the scaffolding around a building. When you're putting up the exterior shell the scaffolding is vital. But once the shell is in place, and you start work on the interior, the scaffolding disappears. That's how I think of planning. It has to be sufficiently thoughtful and solid to get the work up and standing straight, but it cannot take over as you toil away on the interior guts of a piece. (p. 119)

After the piece finds its main idea, or its *spine* as Tharp calls it, the plan needs to be able to naturally dissolve into its next evolutionary form. This is the moment when gut reactions and a good sense of play are necessary for the personality of the piece to develop.

In order to generate play in rehearsal, I invited the dancers to break down my own scaffolding, my own rules. In my thesis work, *Clear, White Nonsense*, I noticed that the dancers often revealed themselves and their motivations through our casual conversations. During the process, one dancer was right in the middle of planning her marriage, and very shortly after our performance, was to move to Singapore with her new husband. She came to rehearsal beaming and buzzing in anticipation for these momentous life changes about to occur, and on one particular occasion, told us about her wedding ring design. I never gave any thought to the vast differences in wedding bands. To me they just seemed gold, sometimes sparkling. But the band was an important architectural distinction and an emblem of the dancer's unique union to her partner. All of us had felt something about wedding rings, and I began to see her story as an attractive source of energy that anchored the piece together. This one idea stood out against many and the final product of our time together included stories about diamond rings and dreams about losing them. The process of coming together energetically in order to build new scaffolding beyond my own limited point of view made the world of the piece its unique self.

When we first started talking about wedding rings, an eventual *spine* of the piece, I could hear an inner voice telling me that rings were just a distraction from the real life of the piece. I had to fight with myself to allow the very conversation to happen, thinking, "We are not being productive enough. We shouldn't be daydreaming about wedding bands. But rings are actually so interesting. No, I need to get this next phrase out...." In *Free Play*, Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990) explains how the artist assimilates the outside world into their work to create something new: "When, however he has to

match the patterning outside him with the patterning he brings within his own organism, the crossing or marriage of the two patterns results in something never seen before, which is nevertheless, a natural outgrowth of the artist's original nature" (p. 79). The wedding ring, with its constant fixture in the piece, was the third body of information created when the dancers and I merged our experiences. Consequently, on opening night, the dancers gifted me with a big cubic zirconium diamond ring, which I gratefully received as a token of our union. The ring made the piece important to us, and served as the scaffolding which we had built the main body of material.

I also experimented with limitations in a very literal sense in the studio. On the first rehearsal, I placed eight yoga mats in a rectangular pattern in the middle of the floor, marking off an area 16 feet wide by 25 feet long. All of the movement material generated in rehearsal up to this point had to be transported into this tight spatial arrangement. I knew this would shake up the dancers' movements in their own kinespheres and would create new pathways through space as they dealt with bodies as obstacles. Rehearsal began to resemble the colored-dot, body-part game "Twister." Their negotiations were no different than the "Right foot, green! Left hand, blue!" parameters of the game, since the dancers had to fulfill movement in a delineated time and place.

I think the tight quarters were frustrating to the dancers at first. They were used to working with large, limitless phrases that encompassed the vast space. After all, they do live in Utah, a place with enough open space to make anyone want to move bigger in their lives. At first, the limit took away their momentum because it stripped away the delicious feeling of moving with a voracious appetite. So for the first few minutes, they just paused, maybe thinking about the danger of getting kicked inside tight quarters, or

maybe thinking in frustration about trading in their huge, seamless phrases for dinky, tight ones. However, after some time was spent negotiating the original choreography in the new space, they began to find new possibilities that open their bodies up to moving differently within a smaller playground. They swerved around, dipped under and dodged in unexpected ways, based on intuitive movement responses to one another.

When faced with a challenging limit, I think it is possible for dancers to react as what Edward Warburton labels “dance tourists” or “dance explorers.” He (2010) states, “Tourists desire recreation, treating travel as a glorious distraction from everyday life, an avocation to be enjoyed for its salubrious qualities. Explorers seek meaning, embarking on journeys of discovery without guide or predetermined destination” (p. 104). He goes on to say that on-and-off dance tourists collect vocabulary *like frequent flyer miles* and never successfully experience the depth of their art. (Warburton, 2010, p. 104) On the other hand, the explorers *strive to learn the language of dance*, absorbing a much more meaningful experience. (Warburton, 2010, p. 104)

I loved Warburton’s notion because it metaphorically puts words to the atmosphere I was trying to produce with dancers in rehearsal. They might have responded as tourists at first, skeptical of where the road was going to take them, feeling secure enough with what had already been produced. As movers, attracted to kinetic changes throughout their bodies, I would argue that their natural inclination toward being “limited” in space was negative, as if their bodies were to be bound, as the word could suggest. However, being invested artists, they quickly transitioned into intuitive explorers, accepting limits as a challenge to claim the space as their own.

After we explored movement occurring within the limited spatial arrangement for several weeks, I decided to get rid of the rule completely. The tiny choreographies discovered inside were too congested and the material just piled up on itself, though their pathways around each other were much more sophisticated than before the rule. The moment I pulled away the yoga mats, there seemed to be a sigh of relief, like they could finally extend through their limbs once again, though the stress of the situation made them work harder to find a new homeostasis in their movement. The geographic parameters were incredibly useful because they re-sculpted the original material into the unexpected. When the frame was lifted, the movement regained its original force so that the dancers could reclaim their largeness, but now they moved with more awareness and intention.

Part of the creative ritual of limits is knowing when to throw them out. Guidelines can be a powerful force as long as they don't overly dictate the work so that it becomes lifeless and predictable. The artist needs to be ready for unexpected inspiration to strike, as Tharp states, "Your creative endeavors can never be thoroughly mapped out ahead of time. You have to allow for the suddenly altered landscape, the change in plan, the accidental spark-and you have to see it as a strike of luck rather than a disturbance of your perfect scheme" (2003, p.120).

To capture the moment of inspiration that breaks the predetermined rules, it is important to keep in the present. Tharp elaborates upon how *luck is a skill*, meaning the artist needs to be focused on the work in front of them, so that they will notice when inspiration strikes (2003, p. 120). Being physically present in rehearsal, but spending mental energy elsewhere is a pitfall to avoid. As counselor and author Sandra Anne

Taylor (2006) elaborates, “Oftentimes we don’t have any desire to stay in the present because we simply don’t think that it’s special enough to be worth our full attention. This approach is just filling time while waiting for something better to come along ” (p. 148). In rehearsals, dancers can feel when they are just passing time at the whim of the choreographer. If there is nothing special about the moments spent together making art, then why do it? Maybe rehearsals can become so deeply ingrained as a habitual patterns, that one can forget their purpose and mindlessly follow. But true creativity through the use of limitation needs a spirit of presence so that the work doesn’t die out in the process of building upon itself. As the piece unfolds onstage, audiences are intuitive and can sense the living, breathing nature of the work, or lack thereof.

On the Set: The Gaze, a Designed Point of View

What lured me into cinematic work during my graduate studies was the medium’s ability to induce a powerful viewing relationship with the audience, the gaze, made possible through the constructs of the frame. Filmmakers show the viewer what they want them to see by focusing the view, or *limiting the possibilities* to maximize and shape the psychological impact of the moment.

Through editing and shooting choices, film has the capability to transport viewers into a suspended state of reality in which the viewer loses their ego and becomes involved with the power dynamics onscreen. In this virtual reality, the viewer becomes emotionally involved with a fantasy that allows them to feel the experience of the onscreen persona as if it were their own, without being physically present. French film theorist Jacques Bazin believes that suspending reality “allows artists the use of any

aesthetic invention he may introduce into the area left vacant to increase his chosen form of reality” (Silverman, 1988, p. 3).

The camera involves the viewer in a voyeuristic spectatorship that gives heightened meaning to the gaze. The gaze is not the act of looking, but it is the desired viewing relationship in art (Sturken, 2001, p. 77). To create a new dialogue with the viewer, dance film reconsiders time and space to a degree that is not possible in live stage performance. This relationship is a direct result of a selective point of view, which transports viewers to an imaginary island of the artist’s design.

Dance film employs an array of cinematic rules to alter the use of space, distinguishing itself from stage performance. In stage performance, the fourth wall separates the audience and the performers, and is considered the barrier through which the suspension of disbelief occurs. Film aims to suspend disbelief; however it does not rely on the fixed position of the fourth wall for effect. Instead, through the camera lens, film has the capability to assume an extremely variable, designed point-of-view. On stage there is a prescribed front from which the audience statically receives choreographic material. In film the camera lens has the capability to reorient and direct the viewer’s eye quite dynamically with ever-changing fronts (McPherson, 2006, p. 12).

Live postmodern works, which reject the notion of a proscenium stage, even further detach the audience from their desired relationship with the gaze. Deborah Jowitt (2009) relays her experience with the porousness of the fourth wall in the recent article “No Gaze for You!” from the *Village Voice*:

I’m lying on a clear plastic inflatable mattress, staring up at a mirrored ceiling; there are 24 of us, hang in rows of four. We have surrendered our coats, our shoes, and our bags....A dancer stands beside me and stretches a long leg over

me: I gaze up at her footcalfthighcrotch and know- have to know- that she is not going to step on me. (p. 27)

In film, the constructs of the frame dictate an imaginary physical and mental space. Due to this illusive state, film transports the audience into a realm where deep psychological relationships within the viewer may occur. Film creates a mental landscape that allows the viewers to become and experience their inner desires without real life repercussions (Haron, 2009, p. 92). The fact that the viewer can experience desire without dealing with reality, may be one reason that our culture tends toward trauma in film. As filmmaker Mark Cousins (2008) further elaborates upon the idea of filmic trauma, “Movies allow us to enter a disturbing experience in a uniquely vivid way without breaking down, or hyperventilating or having the inability to cope. Indeed at their best, they are like the moment at which a traumatized person feels as they begin to recover” (p. 29).

Decisions in filmic structure, which organize our sense of space and time, impact the viewer on a deep level as well. Close up shots allow for a powerful gaze. Viewers are able to intimately empathize with the onscreen persona. Contrastingly, the long shot or panoramic view is able to fill the screen with a sweeping geographical environment, which offers viewers an adventurous type of “manifest destiny.” Interestingly, as of late the mainstream prefers widescreen epics over the intimate close-ups as seen in the Hitchcockian era of filmmaking. Cousins (2008) writes about this shift in his book *Widescreen* and notes his surprise at the evolution: “As I’ve said before, the whole point of cinema is surely the close-up of the human face....At times of great change in cinema it seems the movie world has abandoned its unique selling point, the close up, to impress the audience in more conventional ways” (pp. 49-50). In the same way that conventional

films use widescreen shots to land box office hits such as the disaster movies *Titanic* or *Day after Tomorrow*, conventional stages also offer a singular widescreen version for viewing dance.

Editing choices may give the audience time to ponder what they are seeing by distancing the viewer from the action. Hitchcock used overhead distance shots in order to offer the audience a “breather” as Marc Strauss (2007) puts it. He elaborates, “It is as if the film’s viewers themselves become visitors to an art gallery, pausing now and then to step back and contemplate the paintings to consider their elusive meanings” (2007, p. 55). A distance shot has even more impact if it is placed next to a close up. In this way, the dynamism between opposite shots create a much more active experience for the viewer. Dance filmmaker Meredith Monk (2002) describes the placement of close-ups and long shots from her *Ellis Island* film: “The contrast between the long shot of the lively dancing and the still, mute close-ups creates the tension of the actual ritual: the very real possibility of the immigrants’ forced return to their country of origin and the end of their dreams” (p. 92). Editing creates an emotional environment.

The choice of camera angle may also suggest cultural meaning by limiting the way the viewer looks at the subject. Asian American dance artists Eiko and Koma relate the camera angle with their own cultural viewpoints in their dance film *Wallow*. They experienced great controversy with Western videographers who wanted to shoot their piece from a much higher distance than they wanted. Asians experience the world from the ground as Eiko Otake (2002) relates, “Westerners in general do not view the world from a low angle as we Asians do because they do not live, eat, or sleep on the floor. They sit high and die high” (p. 84).

Film edits have the ability to discriminate between genders in their prescribed formatting. For instance, Ann Dils (1992) notes how the archival footage of American Ballet Theater's *Dark Elegies* heightens gender differentiation found in traditional ballets due to the camera's location. The camera placed in a "fixed location halfway-back in the house" brings forth the spatial patterning from classical ballet that deemphasized the individual, and separates genders (Dils, 1997, p. 30). Another filmed version of this same production was shot mainly with close ups, which made gender less important to the viewer (Dils, 1997, p. 29).

Editing techniques limit the way one looks at the subject, thereby establishing the gaze between the viewer and the viewed. The gaze is a way of "choreographing perceptions" as feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey states (Coorlawala, 1996, p. 20). Mulvey's research is concerned with onscreen gender differences and the cinematic devices that create these perceptions. Mulvey believes that the narrative layout of film, and that the voyeuristic act of the spectatorship are both masculine in nature (1987, p. 6). Voyeurism, which is indulging in visual pleasure without being seen, is rooted in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Looking pleasure or *scopophilia* acts unconsciously upon the viewer (Cartwright & Sturken, 2001, p. 74). Psychoanalytic theory follows the belief that viewers repress thoughts, ideas and fears into the unconscious in order to function (Cartwright & Sturken, 2001, 74). These repressed thoughts may have stemmed from childhood events. The unconscious directs the individual to gravitate toward activities that fulfill unmet needs and acquire pleasure. With the gaze, the viewer and the viewed are exchanging in a power dynamic that may elicit emotion. This unconscious quest for pleasure absorbs the viewer deeply within the

world of the film, and is manipulated through the director's ability to limit what is seen on screen.

Constructing the Gaze in *Antarctica*

In my dance for camera piece *Antarctica*, I wanted to choreograph perceptions by designing the gaze. Instead of beginning this work from a shot list, followed by another list of editing ideas for postproduction, I daydreamed. After all, it was summertime in Utah, a time of year that begs for lazy, kaleidoscopic thinking, and I found the perfect time for brainstorming happened in the morning before I ousted myself from bed. My clearest ideas for this piece came during this hazy, illusive time halfway between sleep and awake. In the summer, I had more time to think, which produced clearer mental images that were soon-to-be blueprints to follow while on set. The images were storyboarded in my head, and most often drawn out on paper. I wanted to siesta every summer afternoon just to daydream, but I settled for thinking while I walked to class, cooked dinner or took a bath. These were all productive times, but could not compare to the magical output of the morning.

I remember Canadian Dance film artist Laura Taler telling us that she daydreams to create her story sequence. She was a guest artist at the Dance for Camera Festival at University of Utah in 2009. I remember her in lecture, standing there, closing her eyes, and telling us that she just sees what's coming next in her films, meditatively. This little act itself convinced me early in my graduate studies that daydreaming was a creative ritual worthy of development and respect. Words don't get in the way while the images float around easily, and they edit themselves mid-thought, no Final Cut Pro needed. I now welcome daydreams to creep over my consciousness whenever necessary, to invite

spontaneity into my scheduled life. By allowing myself these little slices of time, I regenerate an ongoing excitement for my work (L. Taler, personal communication, 2009).

With my mental shot list ready and the Utah desert waiting for me, I wanted to make a film about the barren space between a man and woman. I could imagine the man, a solo figure grounded against the white canvas of the salt flats. The man came from a holy, pristine place, clarified by the astringent August sunlight on the white desert floor. The woman, I thought, came from the rugged ground beneath her feet. She was to be shot under a dark, October sky, where the autumn light would dull the whiteness of the salt. I knew from experience to be ready for the unexpected, and to remain flexible throughout the work. However, there were several clear anchoring images, or daydreams that could not be compromised in order to convey the metaphor of a barren mental space between two people.

During the fall and summer shoots, I kept pondering, “How can I sculpt the gaze to create a disparity between the dancers in filmic space?” Having such deep interest in the viewing relationship between the subject and the audience, I designed the shots so that gender issues of dominance and submission would surface. I did this with Mulvey and Sturken in mind, but mostly I thought of Eiko and Koma. The New York performance artists visited the Modern Dance Department at the University early in the summer of 2011. When Eiko and Koma performed together, one seemed to complete the other. Dominance and submission shifted between the two seamlessly so that they became a singular entity, intertwined. I wanted to re-create a seamless partnership on

screen. I imagined the individuals in my duet to be born from the same mold, yet have a large, emotional gap between them.

Because the two dancers were never physically together during the project, I created an imaginary island, *Antarctica*, which unified the pair. To make this place real, I cast two people that seemed to be at the same place in their lives. They were both around the same age, had danced in professional companies in New York City around the same time, and were completely magnetic in their performance and personal lives. They were both what I consider to be nomadic adventurers, traveling from one city to the next, not afraid to bring their history to the work.

I created space between the two by cutting and treating their work differently during the shoot and postproduction. With the male dancer, I slowed his languid motion during editing, so that the viewer interpreted his presence as ethereal and dream-like. I shot him in panoramic view, so that he and the environment became one, a somewhat untouchable being. To contrast his vastness and heighten the viewer's psychological interest, I also shot him in close range, in one continuous circling shot. I chose not to disturb his movement material while shooting, and allowed space for his physicality to evolve over longer periods of time, a cue I took from Eiko and Koma.

The shoot with the male dancer was somewhat unearthly in nature. First, the project happened over at least 12 hours on a hot August afternoon, where the desert was well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. With our gallons of water and florescent electrolyte drinks, the sun baked the desert so much that the air was nearly too hot to breathe. The equipment was in a constant state of meltdown, even with the protection of solar blankets. Though the man seemed totally fine in the environment, the heat made my

mind a little hazy and my body a little shaky, so it came as no surprise that I carried that feeling into the editing suite.

The fall shoot with the female dancer was rushed, due to the inhospitable environment. It was miserably cold and rainy that day, making it difficult to fulfill my daydreamed shot list. The precipitation did not absorb into the ground, so there were large expansive pools of water several inches deep that ran for miles along the highway. Also, it was doubly difficult to set up shots because there were shards of glass from broken beer bottles littering the dirty-white salt flats near the highway, a clear safety hazard for the dancer. Though all movement had been prepared beforehand in the studio, it did not matter. We had no time to luxuriate in the particulars of the pre-set material. Her movement involved tearing into the ground, but the salty ground felt like wet sand paper on her skin, so the original movement scored needed to change on the spot. Whereas the man's movement slowly sifted through the environment, hers violently cut the space in tight, bursts of desperate energy, partly due to the weather and her aesthetics.

By natural limitations in the environment and a designed point of view, the gaze began to take form. Since I wanted to capture the woman as somewhat conflicted (with the help of the weather) I often shot her to emphasize her vulnerability. During one memorable shot, I approached her with an unsteady hand held camera while looking down on her. She was directed to be oblivious to this intrusion, which added to the voyeuristic quality of the moment. I also wanted the viewer to empathize with her conflict, so I designed a close up where she stood completely still and watched the monotonous traffic roar by the roadside. By narrowing the focus on the woman in a particular way, new meaning was created about her in the context of the duet.

During the making of this piece, I thought about the film in relation to the continent at the bottom of the world. One key thought in my mind was that Antarctica and the Utah desert are potentially deadly wildernesses. All inhabitants arriving in Antarctica, scientists and adventurers it seems, are required to take part in a safety course just in case they find themselves in danger, like in a whiteout condition where the horizon completely disappears due to hovering weather. According to my Antarctic computer programmer friend, the very moment one sets foot on the continental island, it is possible to feel the severity of the situation. When she got off the plane to work in Antarctica, one of her first memories was about air. It was so cold that with every breath, the air seemed to crystallize in her nostrils, down her throat and into her lungs. I felt similarly about the desert in August. There was something so extreme about the geography, that its presence could not be ignored (A. Safran, personal conversation, May 2011).

Edward Abbey forewarned me about the desert heat. In his chapter, “The Heat of Noon: Rocks and Trees and Clouds” from *Desert Solitaire* the writer knows the summer desert, evident as he describes the sweltering heat radiating from his trailer in Arches National Park:

July. Though all the windows are wide open and the blinds rattle in a breeze the heat is terrific. The inside of the trailer is like the inside of a kiln, a fierce dry heat that warps the loose linoleum on the floor, turns an exposed slice of bread into something like toast within half an hour, makes my papers crackle like parchment.

I take off my shirt and hang it over a chair; the sweat-soaked armpits will dry within five minutes, leaving a rime of salt along the seams. Hastily I assemble a couple of sandwiches: lettuce, leftover bacon from breakfast, cashews, raisins, horseradish, anything that will fit comfortably between two slices of bread-and take the dewy-cold pitcher of juice and hasten outside and through the storm of sunlight over the baking sandstone of the 33,000-acre terrace to the shade and relative coolness of the ramada. (1968, pp. 161-162)

During my shoot, the sandwiches in the cooler didn't even survive the heat, due partly to my insufficient plastic-wrapping technique but mostly due to the rapidly melting ice. We did manage to produce a spot of shade on set, thanks to our patio umbrella battling against an ocean of violent sunlight. Despite Abbey's initial warning, I still decided that the desert was the only possible place for my story to occur, and unfortunately ended up serving the crew sad, soggy sandwiches for lunch.

The first time I went out to test the site in early August, the light was so bright, and the ground was so white that I could barely open my eyes to see where I was going, a whiteout condition. I ventured out later in the month and prepped myself with loads of sunblock, a cotton button up shirt, a wide-rimmed cowboy hat and a shady hood for my camera viewfinder. Even with this additional gear, my eyes gushed from the blinding rays, my face muscles ached from squinting through the camera viewfinder too long, and I ended up with a mild case of heat exhaustion. The geography won every time in Utah. After working in the safety of the studio spaces, the completely unpredictable nature of the environment turned my process upside-down. The natural limitations of the environment could not be stretched or broken, and strongly affected the barren tone of the piece, the barren place between two people.

CHAPTER 4

THEORY: FLOW AND RAPTURE

In some creative activities, where goals are not clearly set in advance a person must develop a strong personal sense of what she intends to do. The artist might not have a visual image of what the finished painting should look like, but when the picture has progressed to a certain point, she should know whether this is what she wanted to achieve or not. And a painter who enjoys painting must have internalized criteria for “good” and “bad” so that after each brush stroke she can say: Yes, this works; no this doesn't.” Without such internal guidelines it is impossible to experience flow. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 56)

When an artist is able to organize their consciousness so that their psychic focus unfolds seamlessly, then they are said to be in “flow.” This isn't the low grade of flow one experiences while watching the television, where attention eventually grows restless because little dynamic challenge is offered to the psyche. Here, the flow under investigation happens in the dance studio or on set, when the rigor of the activity is in constant flux, so that the goals are constantly being renegotiated as the game changes. As Csikszentmihalyi writes, “ When all a person's relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenges of a situation, that person's attention is completely absorbed by the activity. There is no excess psychic energy left over to process any information but what the activity offers” (p. 53). The activity then becomes spontaneous to the participant because they are fully concentrated on the relevant stimuli. Some describe this feeling of focus as being in rapture with the subject.

The state of flow may actually provide a psychophysiological reward system for the individual. De Manzano, Theorell, Harmat and Ullén (2010) studied the relationship between flow and psychophysiological responses among professional classical piano players. The scientists monitored the artists while they were playing and then asked the subjects to rate their state of flow. The researchers report, “A significant relation was found between flow and heart period, blood pressure, heart rate variability, activity of the zygomaticus major muscle, and respiratory depth” (pp. 301-311). The high state of attention may act as a psychophysiological return, prompting the individual to continue immersing him or herself in the challenging activity.

Prehistoric humans may have experienced flow more often than modern day humans due to limitations in the type of work available. Prehistoric humans were not bombarded by the vast array of life options, so they fully devoted themselves to the work at hand (Schumaker, 2007, p. 55). Because of technological advances, people today often carry the misbelief that humans now are smarter than prehistoric people. Not so. In primitive culture, their survival depended on how they used their intelligence to develop the skills necessary to cope with their environment. The best hunters fed the community, a clear incentive to excel in a mindful pursuit. As Charles Hayes states in *The Rapture of Maturity*,

Among our Stone Age ancestors, survival depended upon devoting one’s full attention to one’s present activities, whatever they were at the moment. That we assume our ancient ancestors were stupid reflects an enormous gap in what we refer to today as intelligence. (Schumaker, 2007, p. 57)

The wilderness classroom offered a dynamic learning environment, which required an articulate intelligence of resourcefulness, which does not exist in the present consumer culture. Schumaker (2007) continues with Hayes’ point that, “from the standpoint of the

rapture that a well-exercised mind can deliver, the primitive environment was far superior to that of the consumer culture with its steady diet of intellectual shortcuts and brain-numbing distractions” (p. 57).

In modern day, the dance studio is analogous to the prehistoric wilderness classroom. A challenging pursuit in artmaking is no different than searching for sustenance. Whereas nourishment motivated the prehistoric hunt, today’s artist works for a sense of inner satisfaction. In the studio, the body and mind are confronted with an ever-changing environment of movement, bodies and ideas. The dance artist develops a kinetic, emotional and intellectual intelligence because of the challenges required in the dynamic studio environment.

The anxiety of achieving fulfillment found in modern culture was most likely absent in prehistory as well, since the natural world dictated a clear set of guidelines for the individual’s purpose in life. Paleolithic people acted on their emotions and responded to feelings as they occurred (Schumaker, 2007, p. 56). Current day culture abstracts fulfillment to the extent that it perplexes the individual, and renders them action-less. Due to an ambiguous emotional vocabulary, they no longer have the ability to read feelings, their own or others. This displaces power from selfhood and often times reinforces the control of the state. Power may be willingly handed over to any authoritative figure, because the culture hasn’t taught the individual to generate inner guidelines to cultivate a sense of well-being. The individual often mistakes servitude for freedom as Eric Fromm relates in *Escape from Freedom*:

...freedom has a twofold meaning for modern man: that he has been freed from traditional authorities and has become an 'individual,' but that at the same time he has become isolated, powerless and an instrument of purposes outside of himself, alienated from himself and others; furthermore, that this state undermines his self,

weakens and frightens him, and makes him ready for submission to new kinds of bondage. Positive freedom on the other hand is identical with the full realization of the individual's potentialities, together with his ability to live actively and spontaneously. (1969, p. 268)

In current culture, contentment seems a phenomenon that occurs only to celebrities; so claiming it for oneself is ambiguous, as Thomas Szasz relates, "Happiness is an imaginary condition, formerly attributed by the living to the dead, now usually attributed by adults to children, and by children to adults" (Myers, 1992, p. 25). Even though the current day quest for fulfillment is hazy at best, there still exists a wide array of *how-to* advice on the market. These recommendations often do not remedy the root of the issue, and reinforce a dangerous self-centeredness, as Vernon (2007) states, "For when people organize their lives to increase their happiness, they also, perhaps unwittingly, practice becoming self absorbed. They risk orienting themselves in a way that the world serves to deliver on their happiness" (p. 38). This is problematic because making art requires the individual to selflessly serve an idea, so there is a single-minded focus on the work and not the individual. Furthermore, because consumer culture teaches self-centered gratification, it is more convenient for people to adopt a list of prescribed techniques for satisfaction, rather than learn to cultivate their own inner guidelines, a process that takes time. The recipe for a good life is a force-fed product, rather than a nurturing endeavor within the community. Pop happiness disregards the compassionate, communal side of human nature.

Another point about achieving fulfillment is that people need a balance between solitude and company to find it. Sir Francis Bacon said, "Whoever is so delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a God" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 173). It is not necessary for an individual to become a hermit on a desert island in order to find flow.

Times of solitude can be effectively built into a life filled with social connection, and those associations have the capacity to take on characteristics of flow. Relationships are built on compromises and habits as people merge responsibilities to create boundaries unique to their situation. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) elaborates, “When two people begin to go out together, they must accept certain constraints that each person alone did not have: schedules have to be coordinated, plans modified. Something as simple as a dinner date imposes compromises as to time, place, type of food and so on” (p. 177). When two individuals are willing to accommodate and reorient their focus toward common goals, then the relationship has the capacity to flow.

Successful collaborations in art merge responsibilities to create new social boundaries in order for the work to flourish and find its own voice. These finely balanced interactions allow for flow to happen cooperatively, and for mutual trust to develop. When the unexpected arises, as it always does, established boundaries and trust invite the unexpected to infiltrate and deconstruct the work itself. Impactful art happens in those surprise moments, when the artist or group of artists is secure enough in their foundation to allow for the extraordinary to take over what may or may not have been planned. Artists yearn for both order and disorder because it leads to heightened experience as Dissanayake (1988) elaborates in *What is Art For?*, “In human beings in particular we find highly developed yet another related proclivity, to experience something that is outside order and the ordinary-which we can call extraordinary. There is an unquestionable appetite for human intensity, and though we can exist without them, intense emotions make us feel that we are living” (p. 134). Social boundaries between

collaborators need to be challenged through order and disorder, so that we may surprise ourselves with a heightened intensity.

When flow happens, the artist disappears, as Nachmanovich (1990) states, into an absorbed, selfless state (p. 52). Although the dancer is hyper aware of everything happening with the body, there exists surrender. It is a balancing point between friction and ease, where the body is anchored in technique, yet free of anxiety so that it can easily play in uncharted territory. Nachmanovich (1990) continues, “You lose yourself in your own voice, in the handling of your tools, in your feeling for rules. Absorbed in the pure fascination of the game, of textures and resistances and nuances and limitations of that particular medium, you forget time and place of who you are” (p. 52). The artist becomes the activity itself, a union of free play and grounded technique.

Summary of Theoretical Research

This theoretical research points to cultivating optimal experience through the artmaking ritual, which happens when we are in rapture with a subject. In particular, Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow psychology has provided a springboard for this inquiry into the art making process. To attune one’s focus, specific expectations must be respected in terms of the goal, whether those expectations are social contracts between collaborators, structures of improvisations, rules of technique or limits of the human body. Guidelines and motivation potentially ignite flow. Flow intrinsically offers the artist a psychophysiological reward of well-being. In the studio, flow has the potential to occur when the body is being asked to risk beyond the known, so that the limitation becomes the catalyst for a new freedom in movement. The positive feeling of rapture

associated with flow, causes the artist to continue wrestling with their art, even if the work is difficult.

CHAPTER 5

REFLECT: FULFILLMENT AND BOREDOM IN ARTMAKING

When I lived in Montreal several years ago, an incredible North American Mecca for modern dance, I surprisingly found myself bored with my own creative life. It was a time when I was questioning my role as an artist. I spent an excruciatingly hot summer playing guitar on the deck of our urban apartment, watched the hyperactivity of our neighborhood and skipped dance class. Eventually, my clunky guitar playing just wasn't enough to satisfy my creative urge and I reluctantly dragged myself back into the studio once again.

With the little money I had, I paid hourly for an empty, white-walled studio in the hip Plateau district, hoping to find my creative voice again. The first time I went to the studio, I just sat there, looking at myself in the mirror, thinking, "What am I doing here?" "Why do I not feel anything right now?" Without knowing it at the time, just by placing myself in an empty studio, I was combating my artistic boredom, with more boredom. The studio, with its open canvas of opportunities, was the desert solitaire; the guitar-playing deck was a raucous Disneyland, my failed attempt at an artmaking short cut. The deck was an entertaining distraction from work, and the studio was work itself.

The product wasn't as important as the process. I just pulled material together, as if I was doodling or journaling for no one in particular. Nothing felt keep-worthy, as most of the movement seemed to come from what I'd done time and time again, which

was true because I skipped dance class and had no new movement circulating in my system, aside from my sweaty uphill hikes to the community pool. My body and mind both complained, but it was a starting place. I was trying to reconnect with the flow of making dance, which was somewhat intuitive for me, though it would take me several more unfulfilled works, and three years of graduate school to really understand that a selfless process was key to finding my work.

Lately, I have recognized that being fascinated with my work depends on cultivating flow with other people. I work for my audiences; they motivate me to find more because they are changeful and desire to be regenerated through new ideas. I work for the right dancers; they are often responsible for jump-starting the creative process, and offer their own rules and guidelines, but are not afraid to wrestle with mine. I work for trusted collaborators; they offer me insight into the material, and shift the personality of the work in surprising ways. Dynamic colleagues maneuver and reorient their goals to match their environment and are responsible for creating a communal flow.

I do think finding satisfaction in the studio often comes down to working with the same rigor and diligence that our prehistoric ancestors demonstrated. There is an intelligence cultivated in graduate school about habitual, guided work. As the projects and papers pile up, I have found more ease in my work ritual because I'm around so many people who know how to work. Like our ancestors, I have less time to self-consciously dote on whether I'm happy or not but rather must concentrate on my work for survival.

CONCLUSION: PACKING LIGHT

Late into my research, I stumbled upon a very neatly written and finely printed pocket book by Philip Harnden about artists traveling light, what Thoreau packed to Walden or what Edward Abbey took with him down the Colorado River, for instance. Having thought extensively about how *place*, as a limit shapes the experience of creativity, I was captivated by a book on how *things* reflect a kind of mentality too. In list form, Harnden describes the clutter or sparseness in artists' surroundings. Very much how an artist designs their island, the things reflected the peculiarity and simplicity of their journeys. What Harnden wonders, as he puts it, "What would it mean to make one's life a journey of simplicity? a journey unencumbered, uncluttered and without distraction-a journey of focus and intention? a journey of lightness and light?" (2003, p. 1). This book considers the journey of the artist, and gracefully points out what is essential to their life work by observing things. This is no different than what has been investigated here. By observing process, our creative limitations may point us in a new direction so that we may learn about our art and ourselves.

It was in Harnden's book that I ran across the beloved Raymond Carver, once again. I have always been enthralled with Carver's work and I thought about him early on during my research as being a prime example of an island dwelling artist. Unfortunately, Carver died of lung cancer at the age of 50, though he is remembered as "America's Chekhov" and as one of the country's greatest short story writers. His

unencumbered work approach was, “not to save up things for some longed-for future, but to use up the best that was in him each day and trust that more would come” recalls his partner, Tess Gallagher. (Harnden, 2003, p. 38) She found an errand list in his shirt pocket after his death that poignantly captures the spirit of the artist and the journey of this research *Artists Live on Islands*:

Raymond Carver’s Errand List:

Eggs
peanut butter
hot choc

Australia?

Antarctica??

EPILOGUE

While presenting this thesis to my committee and colleagues, it became apparent that the issue of power has been an undercurrent throughout this research. The investigation, which deals with the artmaking process, also wrestles with how I identify and carve sense out of power. This power is a complexly deceptive relationship between the culture, the dancers, the audience and me. How I interpret the dynamics of the relationships, whether these reactions are conscious or not, directly affect the work.

“What do you think about power?” was a challenging question to answer during my oral defense. This question seemed to get to the core of something that I have been dealing with all along, though I had not fully formed an opinion about the answer. I began to think about the full spectrum of power in my life, power on a very personal level, and then power in the context of culture. Most often, I think about how power fluctuates during rehearsal, the ebb and flow between individuals. I try to capitalize on power by creating an environment where the energy flows seamlessly between people as we focus on the work. My ability to cultivate chemistry while working becomes the personality within the piece.

I think my work aesthetically exhibits these subtle power shifts. In *Clear, White Nonsense*, the movement and dialogue often formed an aesthetic collage derived from our studio collaboration. The movement and dialogue was naturally diverse because ideas came from everyone. Instead of favoring my own impulses within the choreography, I

found myself listening to the dancers often. Yet, I also felt strongly about coordinating the overall vision of the work. The collaborative nature of the process allowed the dancers and I to develop a healthy respect for each other, so that each voice was honored.

These power shifts are extremely transformative, and as a result I tend to populate my rehearsals with dancers who work very differently from each other. This casting strategy creates a certain productivity, because a healthy challenge is created when confronted with difference. There are two collaborators I work with often who are opposites in their approach. One dancer is reliable, pushes the movement forward, and transcends the material into art by being articulate. The other dancer offers an unpredictable vulnerability to the process. Her honesty reveals the incredibly imperfect and variable nature of humans. Both of these dancers are powerful because they are confident in their natures, and yet are willing to fully support others.

I've written about how artists feel like they live on isolated islands in their minds. Though artists do feel compelled to describe the world through their unique experience, I believe those experiences are richly articulated while working in collaboration. With others, the world of the piece becomes complexly layered with multiple viewpoints. In the past, I firmly held onto my own power, as if relinquishing control to others would be detrimental to my vision. Now I understand that clutching onto power actually hinders the process, and that collaborators often mirror a deeper vision back to me. In my view, the most complexly interesting work comes from the power dynamics of collaboration. The kind of artmaking that suits my nature best requires an accumulation and distribution of power between participants, so that the work continually evolves to reflect the

relational activity. By honoring others in the process, it is my hope that the work expresses the deeper octaves within us.

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