

DANCE TRAINING AS MECHANISM FOR OVERCOMING  
THE TECHNOLOGIZATION  
OF THE BODY

by

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

Our way of life is changing at a speed never before seen in the history of our species. The rate of change is only increasing, and shows no signs of slowing down. Exponentially rapid advancements in technology may now, according to some, be putting us squarely in the face of our own irrelevance or extinction as soon as the next century.

In the face of this encroaching “singularity,” I find myself torn between the empty promises of digitally mediated realities and the satisfaction of “doing real things,” or tactile physical interaction with my environment and other living beings. Between these two polar opposites, I feel that the most important commodity in this new world is our time. By placing our attention to our use of it, and allowing ourselves to reconnect with an attentive lived experience through the use of ritual, I feel that we can rediscover the same interconnectivity promised by our devices – and restore a diminishing empathic acumen.

In this document, I intend to describe the inspirations for my research into the relationships between technology, connectivity, ritual, and time. I will outline the choreographic explorations I have used to dive deep into the issue, and perhaps shed some insight into how we may better integrate technology, media, and physicality to rediscover a crumbling sense of community.

Turn off your computer. You're actually going to have to turn off your phone and discover all that is human around us. Nothing beats holding the hand of your grandchild as he walks his first steps.

Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google,  
(Powers, 2010, p. 76)

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Frank had been my best friend on the USS Arleigh Burke, a guy from my own hometown who just happened to love sarcasm and absurdity as much as I did. We were instant friends from the moment he tried to introduce himself (and I completely ignored him.) He was the only person in 6 1/2 years of military service to whom I ever felt remotely connected, who I ever called a friend and not a buddy, and who I felt I could trust. In the midst of my second year of graduate school, Frank committed suicide. I found out about his death, strangely enough, through the Facebook post of another Navy buddy commenting on how lovely the funeral service had been. I felt absolutely shocked that someone I cared deeply about had gotten to the point of suicide, acted on those feelings, and been buried, all without my knowledge. I felt an overwhelming sense of grief and disconnection as I realized that with all the available methods of communication, I had completely lost track of a close friend's life. I had lost connection in an age of connectivity.

From my earliest days growing up on a farm in southern Illinois, I have always been a somewhat private person. Perhaps a better way of putting it would be to say that my familial and social circles have always been relatively small. I grew up unfamiliar with my father's side of the family – my paternal grandfather, a first-generation German

immigrant, had been an alcoholic and a constant gambler, resulting in the eventual disintegration of the entire family across the country. My mother's family, while generally more stable than my father's, numbered less than 20 people in total. I was the first grandchild, and though my childhood was a happy one, for many years my only companion was my younger sister. We grew up outside the township boundaries, attending two different Christian schools (separated by a brief period of home schooling) and at least three different churches by the time I had reached the sixth grade. When we switched again to the public school system in my freshman year of high school, I was again forced to adapt to new surroundings without the lasting support structures of childhood friends. High school brought a sense of stability for my sister and me as we stayed at the same school and church for the entire period; however, absent funds for a college education, I joined the United States Navy after high school as a way of ensuring my educational future. As I traveled between the endless military carousels of boot camp, "A" school, specialist school, and eventual duty station, I never put down any firm roots – my existence was perpetually mobile and fluid. My college years followed the same pattern – 2 years at a school closer to my family, 3 years at a better school to finish my undergraduate degree. By my 36<sup>th</sup> birthday, I realized that I had not once spent more than 4 years in any one place. I had lived a completely nomadic and temporary life. Social disconnection, with the exceptions of my family and two close friends (including Frank), was a major theme of my life.

As I struggled with the news of Frank's sudden departure, I realized that I had maintained very few outlets to discuss my feelings in a meaningful way. My friend Sean, with whom I communicated regularly through email, text, or phone conversations,

seemed obscured far behind the walls of a glass screen – and this was not a conversation to be held through Facebook chat. Neither my family, living over 1,300 miles from me, nor my fellow students in the Department of Modern Dance, with whom I spent up to half of every weekday, seemed close enough to offer support. Surrounded by acquaintances, yet besieged by devices and websites promising to help me connect to others, I felt completely isolated. Technology had quietly allowed me to organize my life around a series of digital surrogates programmed to translate empathic communication into a series of representational sounds and symbols, none of which could provide satisfying support at a time when I needed it most. As I frantically began working to reconstruct tangible bonds with those around me, I began to uncover two primary themes.

First, as an initiated member of a technologized and interconnected culture, I am regularly offered the promise of *real-time* interpersonal connection through digitally mediated devices. I find the distinction of time, and more specifically, *real-time*, inherently fundamental to the structure of this form of connection; as James Gleick (2000) states in his book, *Faster: The acceleration of just about everything*, “Not long ago, all time was *real time*” (p. 62). By manipulating our relationship to time, these glamorously simple yet exponentially powerful devices have somehow caused us to lose touch with both physical and emotional connections to our surroundings and each other. Anyone who has witnessed a pedestrian absentmindedly walking straight into a street sign or worse, driving while texting can attest to this phenomenon. As a choreographer, this absolute sense of deep focus is fascinating.

Secondly, as a dancer, I have always felt an intimate sense of connection to my surroundings and myself as I move. With every technique class, improvisation, or dance

that I create, I find my perceptions evolving. During the rehearsal process of *for Frank*, the dance for camera, *Exhaust*, my thesis work, *overmachine*, and the installation project, *Nouveau Ma*, I have begun to realize that the ritual of regular physical practice (dance training) has offered me a very real pathway to nurturing these very same connections that devices attempt to facilitate. By actually being in the same space, experiencing physical contact and sharing energy with others, I have rediscovered a meaningful path to communication and interconnectivity.

In my research, I hope to shed some light on the inherently human fascination with technology and how it has defined, reworked, or begun to replace what it means to be human. If our understanding (and thirst) for technology and innovation is a part of the basic definition of who we are as a species, how can we better incorporate its benefits to advance (and not devolve) the embodied life experience? Finally, through a detailed description of the timeline of my choreographic process, from *for Frank* to *Nouveau Ma*, I also hope to delineate how the ritual of regular physical movement research can offer not only a path to self- and group discovery, but reveal a pedagogy of kinesthetic and emotional awareness and connection, both internally and externally. By combining elements of technology (the digital) and dance practice (the physical), perhaps we may reveal some insight into our immediate future, one which perhaps grows increasingly closer to the eventual combination of man and machine:

There will be no robotic “them” and human “us.” We will either merge with robotic creatures, or in a long first step, we will become so close to them that we will integrate their powers into our sense of self. In this first step, a robot will still be an other, but one that completes you.” (Turkle, 2011, p. 141)

Although it is difficult to prove the exact moment that humans began making tools, Kakaliouras (2006) states that archaeologists have discovered that as early as 2.5

million years ago, the hominins of Ethiopia were making rough-hewn stone tools (called Oldowan tools). She further explains that it is widely accepted that simpler, less permanent versions of these tools must have been created far earlier than this. It may be safe to say that from our earliest moments in history, our evolutionary survival has been closely tied to our dependence on technology. Absent many of the bodily tools required for hunting (claws, sharp teeth, and powerful jaws,) we have instead wagered our survival on our creativity and ingenuity to outwit both predator and prey. Recent research even suggests we are designed to be curious:

The human brain is wired to detect and respond to new stimuli. When we become aware of some novel event or object in our surroundings, the brain's "reward system" is activated, which involves the use of neurotransmitter molecules in the form of dopamine. (Powers, 2010, p. 73)

This incessant desire for learning and discovery, described by neuroscientist Jaak Panskepp in Yoffe (2009) as "seeking," exists not only to satisfy our physical needs, but aesthetic ones: "Humans can get just as excited about abstract rewards as tangible ones...when we get thrilled about the world of ideas, about making intellectual connections, about divining meaning, it is the seeking circuits that are firing." In a pre-historic environment, where populations were sparse and threatening stimuli would have passed much more sparingly, we needed our brains to alert us when something new (and possibly dangerous) came into our world. However, in modern Western culture, where "our survival doesn't require that we pay attention to all the new information that now comes our way day and night via screens" (Powers, 2010, p. 74), one could say that our need for this dopamine reward system is no longer beneficial. Unfortunately, because we have yet to adapt to this new paradigm of overstimulation by entertainment and advertising, we may find ourselves unable to ignore the constant stream of information

available to us. Indeed, the speed at which information is presented and consumed begins to play a role in its digestion:

This is the Information Age, which does not always mean information in our brains. We sometimes feel that it means information whistling by our ears at light speed, too fast to be absorbed. (Gleick, 2000, p. 81)

I can recall countless times where I have sat in front of my laptop, mindlessly clicking through websites, aimlessly “seeking.” While this act of seeking may suggest a relentless thirst for knowledge and information, by speeding through headlines, summaries, and sound bites, I am left to wonder if any actual knowledge is being retained, or if I am merely “channel flipping” without being attentive to any of it.

If this rote behavior seems like an addiction – it absolutely is. Since our brains are wired to seek out and reward learning and discovery, each new stimulus we encounter triggers a dopamine release. When the frequency of this dopamine release remains steady, our brains become accustomed to this hyperaware state of mental arousal. With the invention of the Internet and an age of “always on” interconnectivity (where media, news, and targeted ads are constantly available to us), there is never a moment of “down time.” We incessantly cycle through these stimuli like a junkie – and our pushers know exactly what they’re doing. “In promoting a lifestyle of never-ending connectedness, the technology business is encouraging the unhealthy extreme, the digital equivalent of alcoholism” (Powers, 2010, p. 68). We constantly check our texts and email; we allow our devices to send us constant updates on changes in the weather, in stock prices, on sports scores. As economist Herbert Stein said, this constant seeking serves not to inform, but to reassure:

It is the way of keeping contact with someone, anyone, who will reassure you that you are not alone. You may think you are checking on your portfolio, but deep

down you are checking on your existence...it is being alone that they cannot stand. (Gleick, 2000, p. 86)

However, I find that this new connectivity and information sharing is marketed not as a means for reassurance, but as an opportunity for individuality and as a form of freedom. Whether this new freedom has any resemblance to a known ideal is certainly being debated:

Freedom can be a heavy burden, and in a certain sense, the more we're responsible for managing our own destinies, the more appealing conformity becomes. Recognizing this, marketers have learned to sell products in a way that makes us *feel* like bold individualists, even as we're joining the herd. (Powers, 2010, p. 42)

If we've learned anything in the last decade about technology and human interaction, it's that as screen time rises, direct human-to-human interaction falls off proportionally. (Powers, 2010, p. 51)

While my first inclination on this subject of technology-driven freedom was the assumption that this was a relatively recent occurrence (thanks to the more recent inventions of the personal computer, the Internet, and now the smartphone), I was surprised to discover that the use (or misuse) of technology has been similarly obsessed over and denounced throughout history:

At the turn of the 19th century in England, some people had become so immersed in their kaleidoscopes that they were completely disconnected from the world around them. The result can be seen in an early engraving depicting the "kaleidoscomania." The people are so "mesmerized by the visions they see inside the 'picture tube' that they do not even notice that other men are courting their companions behind their backs. At the turn of the century that followed, the bicycle fell under a similar critique. Churches condemned this new technological mode of transportation for disconnecting people from their local community and distracting them with the dangers of the outside world: the promiscuity promoted in places like the cinema and roadhouses. Soon thereafter, the automobile also received criticism about creating social distance and an acceleration of culture (quite literally). Around the same time, in 1926, the Knights of Columbus Adult Education Committee set out to investigate another emerging technology: the telephone. Their meetings were dominated by questions such as, "Does the

telephone make men more active or more lazy?" and "Does the telephone break up home life and the old practice of visiting friends?" (Farman, 2012, para. 12)

Nicolo Perotti, Italian scholar of 1471, also spoke about the newly invented

Gutenberg printing press:

I see that things turned out quite differently from what I had hoped. Because now that anyone is free to print whatever they wish, they often disregard that which is best and instead write, merely for the sake of entertainment, what would best be forgotten, or, better still be erased from all books. And even when they write something worthwhile they twist it and corrupt it to the point where it would be much better to do without such books, rather than having a thousand copies spreading falsehoods over the whole world. (Powers, 2010, pp. 131-132)

And, a thousand years earlier:

Plato argued that writing would disconnect us from the meaningful presence that comes with face-to-face interactions. The spreading of ideas across geographic distances - far beyond the body of the author - limited our ability to engage in meaningful dialogue and produce true knowledge. (Farman, 2012, para. 10)

So, it seems that we have a long history documenting the struggle for optimal balance between that which we consider essential to the human experience and that which we use to improve and expand upon that experience. Our inventions and technologies, while mainly designed to either assist in our daily existence or improve the quality of life within that existence, seem to go through long periods of fine-tuning. Within these periods, it seems logical that a technology or invention might overstep its intended purpose and require a redesign to increase its cultural utility. It is in this stage, where possibilities have superseded usefulness, that we now find ourselves: we have forgotten how to *do* things. We rely on devices to remember numbers, to perform calculations, to get us from place to place. We rely on technology to find statistical solutions to problems. And, finally, we rely on both to mediate our interactions with each other, and it's gotten to the point where we've forgotten how to communicate.

Within these questions about the misuse of technology lies an interesting point: when another person chooses to ignore us for a gadget, we lose our sense of connection, and in some way our sense of self-worth. It stands to reason that if my friend chooses to answer a text on her smartphone while I am speaking to her, then her device becomes more important than I am. This would not happen without consequence if another person interrupted our conversation – there are established specific cultural rules that govern our interactions. However, by shifting our attention away from our companion to a “technology that knows no respect for traditional and helpful lines in the sand” (Turkle, 2011, p. 162), we in effect begin to destroy the existing structures that help our societies coexist. We begin to devalue those around us, and with communication boiled down to the lowest common denominator (a text is devoid of almost everything needed to establish context) we have even begun to ignore what others say in favor of skimming it for basic information. “These days, as a continuous stream of texts becomes a way of life, we may say less to each other because we imagine that what we say is almost already a throwaway” (Turkle, 2011, p. 168). When this happens, the societal bonds that hold our relationships together begin to shift. With a piece of technology as attractive and powerful as the smartphone, which can connect us to the entire world in a matter of seconds, the battle is a short one, and we are put in an uncomfortable position: the inventor (mankind) as subservient to the invention (technology.) It is almost as if our devices have bestowed a new superpower of omnipresence – the ability to be in all places at once and to communicate with everyone simultaneously.

During a discussion with my committee, I came to the realization that the simple act of forgetting my smartphone at home caused a great deal of anxiety; it was like I had

been stripped of my newest superpower. Of course, like any superpower, omnipresence came with a caveat: by being always connected and always able to know what was going on elsewhere, I began to feel a sense of responsibility to *remain* connected and knowledgeable. What if something important had happened, and I had missed it? How many emails, texts, or phone calls would I miss? When I send an email or text, I find that I have an expectation of immediate reply. When my messages go unnoticed or ignored, I've found that my sense of self-worth is adversely affected. This constant connection, a link primarily between time and interaction, has begun to foster a sense of constant anxiety in me to remain "always on," lest I be left behind.

When this ability/responsibility to remain connected was taken away, I felt a sense of both terror and freedom. I discovered that I thought of my smartphone as an extension of my body - by using it as the medium to communicate with my family, I had effectively upgraded my abilities as a human. When this device was no longer a part of me, I felt as though I had lost this something – the ability to deal with important events as they happen. This brings me back to the concept of *real time*. As James Gleick (2000) explains,

Not long ago, all time was *real time*...*Real time* began with the birth of computers. But computers did not create real time. Computers created fake time – simulated time in simulated realities. As they gained speed, the simulations began to catch up here and there with their real-world counterparts. The computer is defined by speed; it depends on speed, more than any of the fast machines that came before...Real time means keeping up. (pp. 62-64)

Having lost my ability to keep up, in an instant I had become virtually disconnected from my family and from the rest of the world. It is in this moment that I realize the value we have placed on our devices. As our devices become more powerful, more accessible, and more alluring, it is no surprise that we choose to devote more

attention to them than to each other. However, I believe that this creates a system that values the needs of the individual over the needs of the group. If I am not in the mood to listen to a friend complain about his girlfriend, I can choose to simultaneously read an article hosted by the NPR app for my phone. I may hear what my friend is saying, but I am not listening. In fact, I am not really paying full attention to either conversation of which I am an active participant. It reminds me of a story that guest artist Daniel Squire (from the Merce Cunningham Company) told during his visit to the University of Utah, which was also quoted in one of my sources:

I went to hear Krishnamurti speak. He was lecturing on how to hear a lecture. He said, "You must pay full attention to what is being said, and you can't do that if you take notes." The lady on my right was taking notes. The man on her right nudged her and said, "Don't you hear what he's saying? You're not supposed to take notes." She then read what she had written and said, "That's right. I have it written down right here in my notes." (John Cage, as cited in Schwartz, 2012, para. 5)

A similar situation is occurring right now in the realm of health care for the elderly. In place of the classical family structure, in which the rest of the group cares for the very young and the very old, we no longer find the time to pay personal attention to those who need us the most. As a result, many senior living facilities have sprung up to meet the challenge. However, Japan faces a crisis situation in which there simply aren't enough young people for the job:

Twenty-five years ago the Japanese calculated that demography was working against them – there would not be enough young Japanese to take care of their aging population. They decided that instead of having foreigners take care of their elderly, they would build robots to do the job. While some of the robots designed for the aging population of Japan have an instrumental focus – they give baths and dispense medication – others are expressly designed as companions... Japanese researchers began to look to artificial companionship as a remedy for the indignities and isolation of age. (Turkle, 2011, pp. 105-106)

While it is an ingenious solution to a social problem that has occurred not by choice, it effectively reinforces the idea that those of who are no longer productive members of society do not deserve the time and personal attention we can provide as fellow human beings. Instead of valuing their experience and empathizing with their situation, we begin to see these people as commodities that have outlived their usefulness. While it is probably easier and cheaper to develop this kind of technology, and I agree that it has a usefulness that should not be ignored, the extreme negative effects of depersonalization are already being documented:

At a government panel to discuss social security reforms, the former prime minister (Taro Aso) called the elderly who are unable to feed themselves “tube people,” then proceeded to say the elderly should be allowed to “hurry up and die” to reduce the burden on a country tasked to pay for their medical expenses.” (Fujita, 2013, para. 2)

Claiming misinterpretation, Mr. Aso later attempted to publicly backtrack from his statements, but this was not the first time he had been documented expressing this desire. Still, the Japanese issue of robotic health care raises an important point: while it might be acceptable for a robotic nurse to perform routine tasks like dispensing medication, cleaning the facility, or storing patient records, at what point do we determine that personal, human attention is needed, if at all? Is it acceptable that a robotic healthcare provider acts as a companion (or other roles that primarily make up the “care” portion of health care)? On the other hand, this is something we do now with other strangers. We routinely

take comfort in the presence of people whose true motivations we don’t know. We assign caring roles to people who may not care at all. This might happen when, during a hospitalization, a nurse takes our hand. How important is it that this nurse wants to hold our hand? What if this is a rote gesture, something close to being programmed? Is it important that this programmed nurse be a person? (Turkle, 2011, p. 133)

And yet, I feel that there is a significant difference between the two. Even though both are what Turkle (2011) refers to as a “deceitful exchange” (p. 107), a forced experience with another living being is still laden with many layers of subtext and information. There is still something valuable about being in the presence, the energy, of another living being. While it may not be perfectly quantifiable, it is still an absolutely different qualitative experience.

We don't ask these questions because they're philosophical, and, unlike technology, which is concrete and quantifiable, philosophy seems abstract and squishy. So we avoid them, focusing instead on the tools themselves, breathlessly trying to keep up with the hot new devices and the latest trends. This is shortsighted since, in the end, it's the philosophical questions that really matter. (Powers, 2010, p. 35)

Every human being is a walking history of his or her lived experience, according to Jarvinen: “bodies and bodily experience are historically specific rather than universally alike” (Reason, 2010, p. 55). My daily physical practice (whether through dance training, powerlifting, or sitting at a computer typing a document) informs its appearance. The way I smell is shaped by the foods I eat, my hygiene, and where I've been during the past few hours. The way I interact with other people is a reflection of how I have been treated in the past. This is why it matters to have a human being hold your hand – because the sum of their human experience, their body and personality, serves as a permanent reminder of who we are. To devalue the sum of our involvement, our history, as a part of a community is to abandon everything we value about being human. Not only am I, in a sense, a creation of my community, a by-product of my relationships to my surroundings, but also I am in turn a reciprocal agent for change within my community. This is also one of the key discussions uncovered during the course of my rehearsal process for *overmachine*: how does one sense their relationship to the group from an internal

perspective (and maintain a sense of individuality), but sense the relationship of the group to the individual from the group's perspective (and adhere to the structure of the group to achieve an overarching goal.)

The diversity that exists within a group of individuals and the sum total of thousands of years of interactive experience has yet to find an appropriate technological replacement. While the Internet may come the closest, it fails to achieve the most important characteristic of our human existence: the lived physical presence that takes time to create, and the rules by which we live. If we are to accept digital surrogates as a means of mediated connectivity, I cannot see how they can be successful without this informed physical element.

In the 1960's philosopher Hubert Dreyfus took on the symbolic AI community when he argued that "computers need bodies in order to be intelligent." This position has a corollary; whatever intelligence machines may achieve, it will never be the kind that people have because no body given to a machine will be a human body. Therefore, the machine's intelligence, no matter how interesting, will be alien. (Turkle, 2011, p. 134)

## CHAPTER 2

### RESEARCH / REHEARSAL / PERFORMANCE PROCESS

This statement, that “the machine’s intelligence, no matter how interesting, will be alien” fascinates me. If a machine’s intelligence will always remain in some way alien to our own, how then are we to integrate the innumerable horde of machines that fill our lives? Have we already begun to imitate machine intelligence as a result of our constant proximity to these devices? Has this begun to manifest itself in the indifference and lack of empathy we show toward our environment, others, and toward ourselves? Perhaps, I thought, it might be possible to gain a better understanding of these questions by simulating the rigid structures under which computers operate. In this way, perhaps my lived body would serve as a translator between human and machine intelligence.

I began with a series of structured improvisations intent on combining the logical (clear spatial structures) with the emotional (informed dynamic changes and narrative intent.) By combining these two, I hoped to create a situation that was both repeatable yet contained an element of vitality and attentiveness. Spatz (2011) describes this natural combination, “although every live event is to some extent unique, it is also an instance of a repeatable structure. This structure may be loose or tight, but it must be stable” (pp. 51-52). Within a stable structure, patterns emerge that may be analyzed and explored.

In a technique similar to that used in collaborative Group Technologies like Wikipedia, in which input from multiple sources is combined and workload is disseminated between multiple processors to solve problems or facilitate results that could not be achieved from a singular source, I asked my cast to be mindful of my thesis questions as they danced. Alfred Korzybski describes this type of collaborative “technology” and its results on the intellectual advancement of human intelligence in the book, *Present Shock*:

In the human class of life, we find a new factor, non-existent in any other form of life; namely, that we have a capacity to collect all known experiences of different individuals. Such a capacity increases enormously the number of observations a single individual can handle, and so our acquaintance with the world around, and in, us becomes much more refined and exact. This capacity, which I call the time-binding capacity, is only possible because, in distinction from the animals, we have evolved, or perfected, extra-neural means by which, without altering our nervous system, we can refine its operation and expand its scope. (Rushkoff, 2013, Chapter 3, Section 2, para. 3).

My cast, with their entire range of diverse experiences and viewpoints produced as a result of their lived bodies, allowed me to utilize each dancer as a primary researcher within the larger context of group collaboration. By documenting the act of a shared ritualistic experience and translating the results into a final choreographic work, it became possible for me to explore the concept even further than the scope of my own personal experience would allow.

Once I had clarified the method of research, the next step was to describe specific questions related to the ways in which technological advances are redefining humanity. Due to their significance in relation to my observations of the daily functioning of Western culture, I settled on the following four primary questions:

1. How has the pace of innovation in modern technological advances and principles begun to rework, replace, or destroy defining characteristics of what it means to be a civilized human?
2. Have we become disconnected from our actions and our own proprioceptive experience?
3. If a sense of internalized disconnection exists, has it begun to affect interpersonal relationships and our culture as a whole?
4. Does movement (and, similarly, dance training) allow the individual to recapture an authentic embodied experience?

With my research focused toward these specific questions and guided by a logical structure, I quickly found a source of aesthetic inspiration within another of my creative outlets: my own template drawings.

### 2.1 Early Exploration: *for Frank*

Since leaving active duty in the United States Navy in 2001 (only 4 months before 9/11), I have been an active artist not only in dance, but also through my template drawings. My primary form of self-expression outside of dance, these drawings align with my sensibilities as a choreographer; within the limitations provided by a series of circles, squares, and lines, I am able to create relationships and patterns that express a personally deeper significance. (I have even gone so far as to change the canvas of the drawings to my own skin, using Sharpie markers to transform the appearance of my body. Within my portfolio of drawings, I found an image that spoke to me as an acceptable candidate for a structure – (Figure 1).

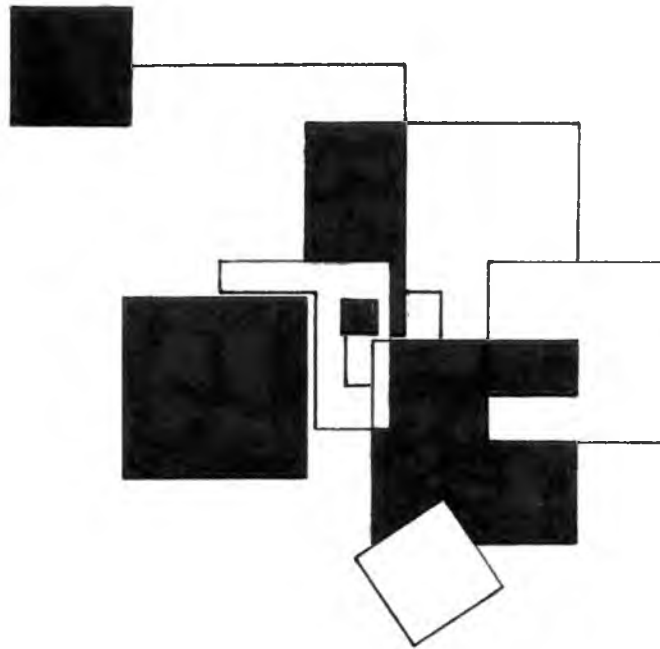


Figure 1. Template Drawing 1

This drawing, at first glance a combination of lines and right angles, black and white areas, and positive and negative spaces, contains within it a specific series of relationships that are only apparent during the construction of the piece. When I begin drawing, I never have a finished product in mind; each drawing begins with a shape or a line. Each successive element is then added in relationship to that original element. This is strikingly similar to the way in which I structure choreography, by beginning at the beginning until I reach the end. To me, this creates a logical flow during the process – one step leads to another – and gives the finished product, wherever it ends up, an aesthetic consistency. Once all the basic elements are present, I may decide to layer

additional elements (color, weight, etc.) to complete the work. This method of creation mirrors how I perceive life on earth to exist – one act leads to another, each object affecting the next. Using this drawing as a template, I began to assemble a series of spatial pathways, gestures, and phrases. Within this overarching structure, I began to explore my predetermined research questions. Suddenly, in the midst of this process, my friend Frank committed suicide.

Frank's death completely derailed my creative process. I wandered aimlessly through rehearsals, mindlessly repeating the set phrasework without any inspiration or commitment. I had become totally disconnected from the emotional side of the research. Exhausted and having decided to momentarily set aside the original piece, I began improvising to Arvo Part's *Fur Alina* and Henryk Gorecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*. I was amazed at how quickly I regained a connection to myself again. By refocusing and expressing who I was *at that point in time* without judgment or a strict overarching structure, I again felt a sense of purpose. A low, deliberate walking phrase began to emerge as I explored my feelings about Frank's loss. After a few rehearsals, I found that the manipulation of time became the key to my connection and disconnection to my own movement. By controlling and stretching time in this phrase, I reconnected with a sense of focus and embodiment that I had felt was missing from the original structured phrases. This became one of the first revelations in my research: by manipulating and owning time, we can reconnect with our actions, our environment, and ourselves.

After a few rehearsals, I had assembled a completely new solo based on this improvisation, and it was at that point I recognized the possibility of juxtaposing the two

separate structures. I brought in another dancer, explained the two roles to him, and began to assemble the two solos. The original phrase, structurally complex yet devoid of much emotional meaning for me, seemed to represent a machine-like intelligence. My improvisation, embodying the grief I felt for my departed friend, expressed something that only a human who has experienced loss could truly understand. I began to find that as we continued to rehearse together, the daily performance of my solo began to take shape as a meaningful ritual, a unique personal experience; as Powers (2010) explains, rituals are “rooted in what they mean to the person performing them” (p. 161). Each time I performed that solo, I felt as though my grief became expressed, acknowledged, and clarified. For me, this combination of a significant emotional experience with an outward form of physical expression had not only become therapeutic, but had allowed me to better understand the movement of the more rigidly structured solo. This work became the duet *for Frank*.

*for Frank* not only allowed me to reconcile myself with the loss of a dear friend, but it revealed an important insight in my research – that by gaining a clarified understanding of the embodiment of a specific human emotion (in this case, my grief for Frank’s loss) through a daily improvisational ritual, I improved my understanding of a more rigid, structured element. Perhaps, I thought, through reconnection to the emotions and experiences that we consider inherently human, we may in turn find a greater understanding of how to better incorporate these ideas into our technologies.

## 2.2 Intermediate Process: *Exhaust*

Having realized that the manipulation and control of time played a key role in my ability to reconnect to meaningful improvisation, my next step was to ask how the advancement of technology has affected my relationship to time. The effective promise of a great many of our devices is the conservation of precious time – and along with it the ability to transform ourselves into masters of our own time:

A mental leap was needed from speed as an attribute of planets and horses to speed as a variable, fine-tunable property. Machines let us make that leap. They gave us the everyday power to change a thing's speed by turning a dial or depressing a pedal. So why not change the speed of the human machine as well? (Gleick, 2000, p. 51)

In reality, unfortunately, we end up feeling anything but superhuman. As Gleick (2000) states, “Speed is connectivity. The state of being connected makes them feel more efficient – maybe even more nimble. Sadly, it also makes them feel busier – maybe even overloaded” (pp. 78-79). Furthermore, I can recall with vivid discomfort the feeling I have when I forget my smartphone at home – the feeling that I had somehow lost a gained superpower (speedy connectivity.)

Wanting to explore this concept further through my existing choreographic research, I decided to combine the two roles in *for Frank* into a solo dance for camera, *Exhaust*, where I could further control the element of time through the video editing process. An interesting struggle began to emerge: as a physically present observer, I received enough subtext that I could form my own connections to the piece. Within bursts of virtuosity and moments of silence, I experienced a greater understanding of my dancer's own personal experience. In actual time, his actions made sense. However, when I began transferring this work to video and editing it through an experimental

process of using only jump cuts and short sequences, the mediation of the work through the element of technology began to seem disconnected. While filming my dancer for *Exhaust*, I'd heard his breath and felt his energy as they happened. Even as I watched him move through the lens of the camera, I could still feel his physical presence as a performer. When I viewed this footage later on and distorted it by manipulating the order and duration of each action, it seemed empty by comparison, almost mechanical. There was something about the digital reproduction of video that wasn't alive enough, and this is how I see our digital media now: I feel like it all begins to appear fake.

### 2.3 Intermediate Process: *overmachine*

If the digital world is failing to satisfy my need for real experiences, what is it about movement (and dance training) that has allowed me to recapture a sense of connected embodiment? This was a primary research goal of my thesis work *overmachine*. My early rehearsals were spent entirely focused on building community, which I felt was important to establish early on, and which also allowed me the opportunity to get to know the dancers I'd never worked with before, including a dancer I'd never even seen dance. The first exercise I asked of them was to walk together in a straight line, shoulder to shoulder...as slowly as possible. After a minute of settling down, they completed the exercise in 3 1/2 minutes. As they walked together for the first time, I could see moments of insecurity and indecisiveness as their focus shifted and their attention was scattered. However, by the end of the first attempt, I could easily see that their embodiment throughout the process had changed. No one spoke, and their energy was decidedly calmer. I asked them to perform the exercise again. Eleven minutes later,

by solely manipulating the time it took to walk from one end of the room to the other, they arrived at the other end of the studio as a group, a collection of individuals arriving at a common goal through a simple exercise. During a subsequent discussion of the experience, they revealed that the beginning of the first trip had been laden with racing thoughts: homework assignments, television shows, and a more analytical sense of how to stay with the group. However, about halfway through this exercise, they had experienced a shift in their perception that allowed them to sense where they needed to be without actively controlling it. When asked to clarify, they mentioned being so focused on being together, on listening to themselves and their surroundings, that they'd completely lost track of time. (In fact, one dancer remembered her walk home as being the best of her year – she'd noticed the sounds of the wind blowing through the leaves, the smell of the grass, and the energy of the people she'd passed. She'd felt connected to her surroundings.)

At our next rehearsal, I introduced an exercise designed to increase their awareness of touch, spatial awareness, and eye contact (common elements of human interaction.) The exercise, in which one person could not move but had to maintain constant eye contact with his/her partner, was by far the most uncomfortable for them. They mentioned how strange it was to look another person in the eye for so long. One dancer brought up how she'd noticed the opposite of this every day – people constantly looking down at their laptops, looking down at their smartphones, looking anywhere but at other people. We discussed how making eye contact with someone is a risky situation; it can be seen as a sign of interest, a challenge, a display of curiosity or vulnerability. To

look someone in the eye is to attempt to connect with them in some way, to know and be known. This, it seems, is something we are forgetting how to do.

Of course, not all human experience is about connecting and getting along. There exists also a need for separation, for independence. In our next rehearsal, I wanted to challenge them by reversing the goals of the previous exercise – the goal was now to avoid eye contact at all costs. By the end, I could see that they were visibly frazzled. When prodded for an explanation, one dancer told me that, “I just wanted to hug them – because they kept avoiding me!” The dancers in my exercise who had to avoid their partner weren’t nearly as shaken as those who were being avoided, because their need to seek connection had not been triggered. After a few similar experiences, I asked them to sit in a line facing a mirror. I had first performed this exercise during a Butoh class at the University of Illinois, and I had been deeply moved by the power of confronting my own image. My dancers hesitated, still visibly agitated from the previous experiments. I told them they had no restrictions except that they should only leave the group if they felt it was absolutely necessary. After about 3 minutes, one dancer shot away from the group like a cannon and curled up on her side. Another dancer stared at the floor, and others soon followed. During the course of our following discussions, we discovered that, for some, the mere translation of their own image in the mirror was enough of a distortion of self-image that it was almost unbearable.

Throughout the final series of rehearsals, I was amazed at the differences displayed by my dancers in the act of responding to different sets of stimuli. When tasked with the reproduction of prestaged choreography, the work seemed to lose its energy, its vitality that appealed to me. When asked to make rapid decisions in real time,

my dancers excelled – the dance had evolved into a living organism. Instead of a planned sequence of events, I designed *overmachine* to more closely mirror the daily act of living in a technologized world, in which “our ability to create a plan – much less follow through on it – is undermined by our need to be able to improvise our way through any number of external impacts that stand to derail us at any moment” (Rushkoff, Preface).

This also brought me back to something I’d read in James Gleick’s (2000) book *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*:

We have learned to grasp quickly. We can read signs, change lanes and avoid other vehicles at seventy miles per hour while also listening to a song and planning our weekend. . . . Things come at us at a rate our ancestors could not have imagined, and we handle them. (p. 176)

During one of our many postrehearsal discussions, my dancers related this sensation to a section of *overmachine* containing a quick succession of improvisational duets. They explained that during this section (which they felt mirrored the rapid acceleration of our way of life), they discovered a necessity to make quick choices about their relationships on stage while maintaining a sense of who they were in relation to the group. While the section was freeing for them due to its speed, it was not without its drawbacks. This element of speed, for Czech novelist Milan Kundera, “is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man” (Gleick, 2000, p. 3). In his opinion, while technology had provided a certain element of freedom from outmoded methods of control placed on man, with that freedom comes a sense of imprisonment to the new ways.

As I continued to finalize the choreography for *overmachine* with my dancers, I became more sensitive to their emotional states. We had tuned in to each other. But more than that, I really noticed that they were forming relationships within the context of

the work. All the exercises we'd performed throughout the process had been taken on board – they now carried those shared experiences with them.

This was the fascinating part: by incorporating their lived experiences into their physical bodies, my dancers were, in effect, carrying an individualized memory of our rehearsal process with them as they performed *overmachine*. As I watched them perform each night, I couldn't help but see them as storytellers. From shamans to historians, it has forever been the responsibility of the storytellers to describe and communicate the myriad perceptions of our events and surroundings. I see the body, this home that we bring with us everywhere, as the new storyteller, the new shaman. As Melanie Bales (2008) states in *The Body Eclectic*, "Dance training of all kinds simultaneously preserves or generates movement ideas, provides a network or forum for artist interaction, and shapes or is shaped by choreographic and theatrical intent" (p. 29). It is then interesting to note the specific verbs she uses to describe dance training: it preserves, generates, provides, and shapes. As our devices push us further away from an experience of presence, it is now the responsibility of the dancer, "formed by rigorous training and movement research" (Nachbar, 2012, p. 8), to be responsible not only for carrying our histories, but for preserving our ability to hand down physical knowledge from generation to generation, for generating new ways to communicate what it means to be human, to provide a medium for open dialogue, and to shape the path from which we have so quickly strayed.

#### 2.4 Final Process: *Nouveau Ma*

Having explored in *overmachine* a familiar method by which dance is choreographed through a regularly occurring rehearsal process, I wanted to experiment with a process that approached the issue of interaction from a different angle. My intent with *Nouveau Ma* (the new space between us) was to design a space for an interaction to take place, while eschewing the rehearsal process and without staging any choreography the typical way. I wanted to see if the interpersonal connections that evolved out of the rehearsal process could exist if the dancers never rehearsed until literally the moment of the show. Could a meaningful interaction occur between performers without specifically guiding the intent of the movement?

I also decided that I would completely design and build the installation myself, by hand. Wanting to keep the sense of improvisation that I have when I make my template drawings, I chose not to start with an overarching design, but to build it as I went. In my template drawings, the finished work always starts with a straight line, a circle, or a square. Piece by piece, I began to assemble a room-sized representation of my drawings – clean lines, simple shapes, and accents of one solid color. I hand-tore over one thousand paper flowers, laid a white paper dance floor, and raised a suspended ceiling with projected squares of light. I further delineated the outer edges of the space by framing a strip of white butcher paper that surrounded the outside of the audience and visually connected the upper and lower areas. I detail my process for assembling the space not for visual purposes, but to express how it was highly important that I *hand create* the space in which my research took place. This was my ritual of creation.

By the end of the thousand paper flowers, I was physically unable to open a bottle of Gatorade without wincing. Before the performance began, I took a moment to look around at each component of the space that I had carefully laid out, assembled, and nailed together. I had bruises on my knees from laying the floor, sore thumbs from clumsy hammer work, and burned fingertips from adjusting the lights. Each piece of biofeedback *meant* something; it had a connection to some part of the space. Like the different parts of my template drawings, each element in the space had been created in relationship to its predecessor, and I was the living record of its construction. By physically preparing each component of the space, I had gained an understanding that could not have existed if it had been digitally created with a few clicks of the mouse. I had, in effect, created the space through a ritual – built in real time, with real objects, with my own body – and there is still no comparable digital substitute for this action. I remember the PBS interview *The Power of Myth* (Perlmutter and Konner, 2010) in which Joseph Campbell explains that humans have always been storytellers. We create myths to explain the workings of the world in which we live, and we reenact those myths through rituals. Without the physical embodiment of the ritual, the myth becomes impotent. Relating this to my installation, if I hadn't physically built every piece of my installation, my connection to the space would not have been as strong, and the story I told would not have had the same meaning.

On opening night, I first told a short humorous story about a former instructor with whom I had yearned to make a connection, and thought that I had, only to find out later that he was attempting to make a different kind of connection with an attractive blonde girl sitting behind me in class. Feeling completely relaxed and timeless, I began

the piece with a solo that explored the feelings of derailment I had experienced, with my movements starting out in one direction, but being redirected midcourse to cope with a newer impulse. My dancers then began to filter themselves into my solo, and a series of short partnering phrases took shape. As they continued dancing, I felt a strong ability to connect with their movements and utilize them to shape my own subsequent actions. At one point, I found myself carrying another dancer on my shoulder – a surprising moment, as the transition was so seamless that I couldn't remember how I'd picked her up. As I rotated slowly, lowering her to the floor, I began to feel the sensation that my part in the dance was drawing to a resolution. I stood up, walked to the chair where the piece had begun, and sat down to watch the rest of my dancers conclude the piece. Although I was no longer physically participating in the movement, I felt completely connected to every action taking place.

The second night, however, began roughly and got worse. An announcement was made that the audience was free to explore all the installations – and shortly afterward, there were numerous people poking around in what I considered an unfinished work without the dancers. A host of other nontechnical issues then caused me to have to make two trips outside the building for snacks and supplies. My normal routine of self-tuning and focusing had been completely thrown off. My thoughts were scattered, my space had been violated, I was exhausted, and I was ready for the installation experiment to be over with... which turned out to be a perfect opportunity for me to really investigate what happens when intentions are derailed.

As the piece began, I told a different story about how strange it was that high school friends would repeatedly friend request me on Facebook, then never say another

word to me until I deleted them months later. Instead of it being a concise story, my thoughts were unfocused and I began to feel indifferent to my own story. Instead of using the story as a way to connect with the energy of the audience, I became solely focused on my dancers entering the space so the dance *could be over and done with*. I began in a similar position to the previous night's solo, but without the same sense of timelessness. Without this sense of altered time, my entire solo was rushed and incomplete. My dancers entered the space, but almost immediately, I felt a need to withdraw from them. After the piece ended, I was told that the group work from the second night had been simply transcendent. I almost laughed – because I had felt completely disconnected from the entire performance, and hadn't really noticed what they were doing - but after talking with my dancers, they mentioned that my withdrawal had created an invitation for them to further their own movement exploration.

As I broke down the installation the next day, I realized that a rather wonderful thing had occurred: a group of trained dancers were able, with zero rehearsals, to communicate effectively with each other and with the audience. They were also able to pick up on my energy the second night, cover for it, and continue the piece in a new direction. They had been trained to listen, and they had done so with great skill. I feel this ability to listen, to sense, and to respond empathetically is slowly being lost. In my experience, I am so focused on my devices sometimes that I ignore the people sitting right next to me. I am keeping track of so many tasks (texts, emails, scores, reports, numbers, etc.) that I fail to attentively listen to those with whom I am having a conversation. I have grown so accustomed to the shortcuts created by technology that I

sometimes only take shortcuts... which is why it was so invigorating to build my entire set by hand.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSION

At some point we must decide that our bodies are not, as Sir Ken Robinson mentions in a 2006 TED talk, “transport for our heads.” Dancers recognize that their bodies are a lifelong repository of hard-fought knowledge and experience. In lieu of storing our experiential knowledge within the confines of the written word and then leaving it on the shelf, we carry everything we know within our mobile and adaptable toolbox. Unlike a textbook, the breadth of our acquired knowledge can never be demonstrated in one technique class, in one performance. Even the technique class, as defined by previous generations, is changing from “the repetition of situations in order to form bodies within a certain movement repertory...to the production of corporeal sensations and perceptions. The body was no longer a style-fulfilling machine to be trained, but an instrument of sensations to be tuned” (Nachbar, 2012, p. 6).

This statement refers to intelligence, a way of listening, and the ability to know something fully as it is being experienced. A trained and attentive dancer maintains a connection between him/herself and his/her surroundings, their actions, and his/her history. Current research backs up this means of existence - neuroscientist Antonio Damasio insists, “that there is no mind/body dualism, no split between thought and feeling. When we have to make a decision, brain processes that are shaped by our body

guide our reasoning by remembering our pleasures and pains” (Turkle, 2011, p. 134). As a dancer spends countless hours tuning their perception and proprioception, establishing routes of interior feedback, and learning how to communicate complex ideas through movement, he/she arrives at a place of what it means to be an actualized and dynamic being. In this place, I find the trained dancer an ideal guide for the technologized culture: they hold the key to a remembrance of human physical intelligence.

I realized this as I viewed *overmachine* on stage for the first time, and I came to another conclusion – when I had learned of Frank’s passing and felt completely alone, isolated from the world, in reality, I was experiencing the sensation of his loss. My life experiences had not abandoned me, nor had any of my friends. In truth, I had only withdrawn momentarily, but by working with a group of experienced dancers, we had refreshed the pathways of connection between us. By experiencing the ritual of physical practice with them, I had experienced what John Martin had first written about in 1936:

When we see a human body moving, we see movement which is potentially produced by any human body and therefore by our own . . . through kinesthetic sympathy we actually reproduce it vicariously in our present muscular experience and awaken such associational connotations as might have been ours if the original movement had been of our own making. (Reason, 2010, p. 54)

The exercises I had designed for my dancers, built out of a desire to build a sense of community and group cohesion geared toward choreographic unity, had in fact brought me back into our community and further strengthened my bonds with my dancers. I realized that by practicing exercises grounded in movement and physical interaction, I had reconnected in a real way with each person involved in the process. By holding someone’s gaze for a moment, I had temporarily conquered the five-mile stare. By holding and being held, I also realized how little physical contact we allow within our

daily lives. This realization was only reinforced by my visit to the Hogar de l'Infancia (a boys orphanage in Panama City, Panama) during the Panama Movement Exchange service-learning trip. From the moment I stepped in their space, I had at least two boys hugging and climbing me. (I believe my personal best for the trip was six youths at once.) It may seem trivial, but these boys are unwanted, forced away from their families due to economic or social reasons. The *only* thing these boys wanted was my time and attention – and it was primarily expressed through physical contact and movement. By allowing them into my personal space, I was saying that they mattered, that they were real people, and that they existed in a real way. By acknowledging their physical bodies with my own, I had communicated my acceptance of them. My dancers, similarly, had done the same for me throughout our rehearsal and performance process.

This concept of movement as healing is not a new one – in fact, it is widely accepted that some sort of physical involvement allows the body to release stored pains and tensions. As the sum of our lived experiences, our bodies carry with them the joys of our successes, the agonies of our grief, and the tensions of our stresses. By remaining attentive not only to our own physicality but to the presence of others, we maintain open lines of nonverbal communication and foster the skills necessary for meaningful human interaction. As a dancer, I am schooled each day in the ability to use my body as a mechanism for dialogue as well as a proprioceptive tool designed to interact with my environment. As an artist, I am trained to observe the world around me and to interpret that within my work. I see groups of people shuffling around, shoulders hunched, and head stooped forward, eyes focused on 3-inch glass screens. I see conversations take

place where neither party is truly present within the interaction, and I wonder what it would do for them to stand up, look someone in the eye, and go for a walk together.

As a direct result of my research, I have recognized the daily stress that rapidly evolving technology places on our personal time. In 1965, Intel co-founder Gordon Moore postulated that chip density (and as a result, computer processing power) would double roughly every 2 years. Initially thought impossible, it has continued to remain accurate, meaning that technology will continue to accelerate at an exponential rate. At some point, it will be necessary to devise some way of recapturing our own time from the pace of modern life. One step I have already taken is the deletion of my Facebook account – a step that caused a great deal of anxiety and confusion among my friends and family until I explained my reasoning. While there has been an uncomfortable adjustment period, I find that my daily life has improved with the subtraction of one more time-wasting distraction. Of course, the deletion of my Facebook account is not without a certain irony; Frank's account remains active.

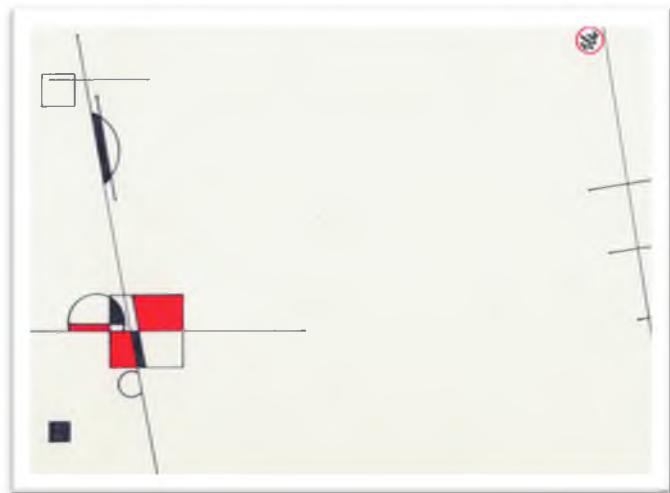
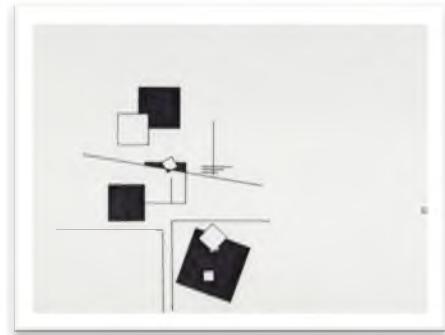
The second revelation, and probably the most important, is the importance of rituals as a way to connect to others and to maintain these connections. The ritual of a daily solo performance helped me express my grief over the death of my dear friend when I could not verbally express it. The daily ritual of technique class and rehearsals has allowed me to train my body and mind to the point where I notice a change happening when I lose myself in the world of the glass screen. And the ritual of building my own installation gave me the opportunity to feel a sense of connection, not only to my dancers, but also to the world around me. I feel this is the most important revelation because, as a member of a media culture whose main ideology seems to be increasingly

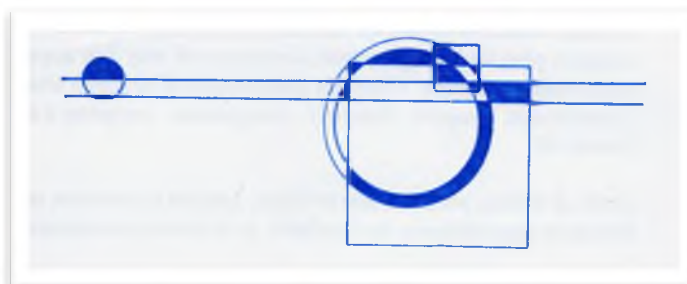
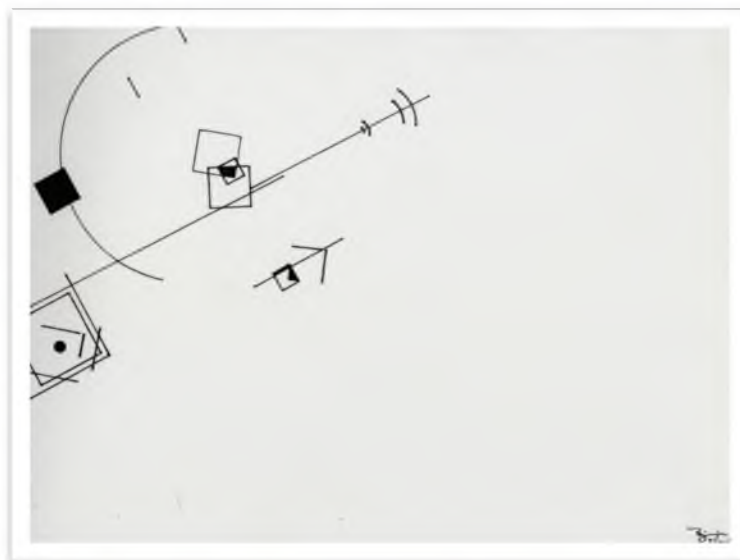
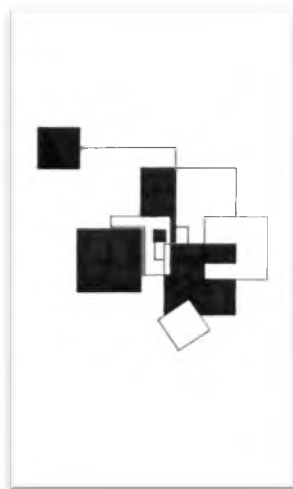
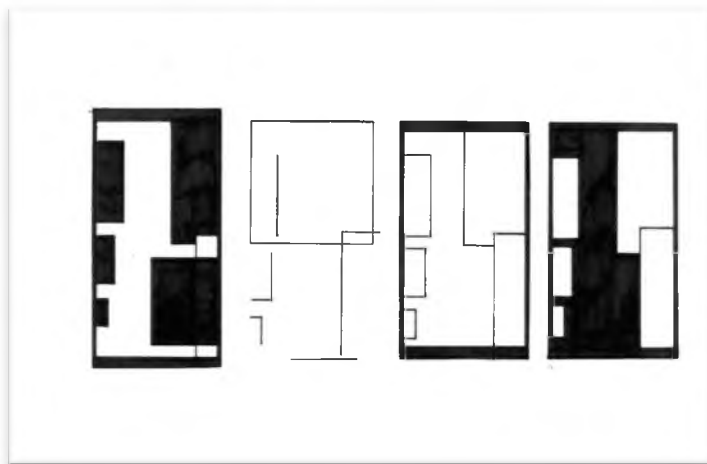
commercial, I find myself fruitlessly seeking the all-important myths that can help me deal with the world as it is. I suspect that the Internet is poised to be our new shaman – a connector for societies, a bringer of news, and the keeper of knowledge. If this mediated reality is going to be permanent, I wonder how we can create for ourselves a new way of looking at each other in a respectful, meaningful way from within the glass screen? As an artist, it is my primary responsibility to observe, interpret, and comment on this mediation, to help create the new myth, and to keep an eye on where we're headed next... so a new myth can be created to deal with that future. As Joseph Campbell said in *The Power of Myth*, "If you really want to help this world, what you should teach is how to live in it."

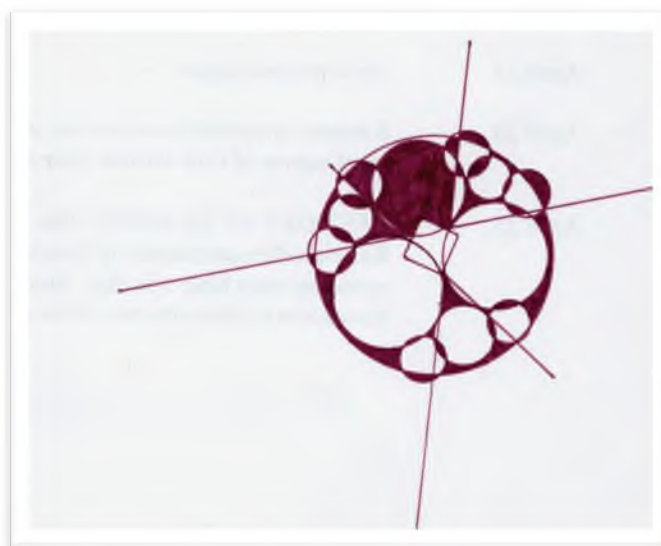
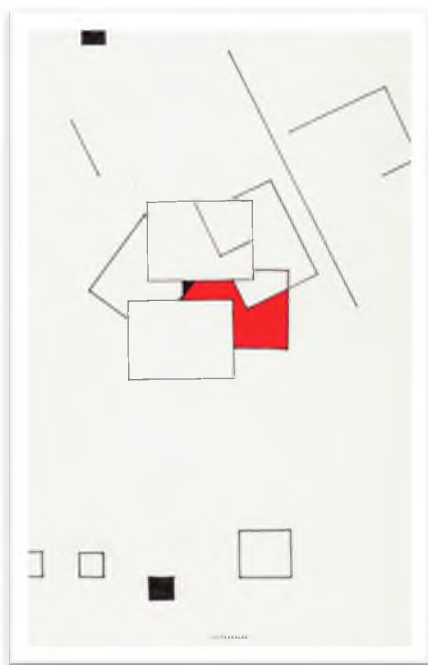
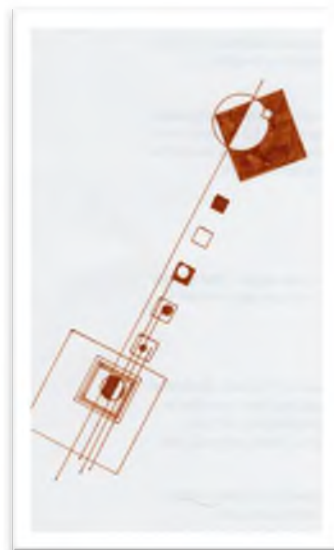
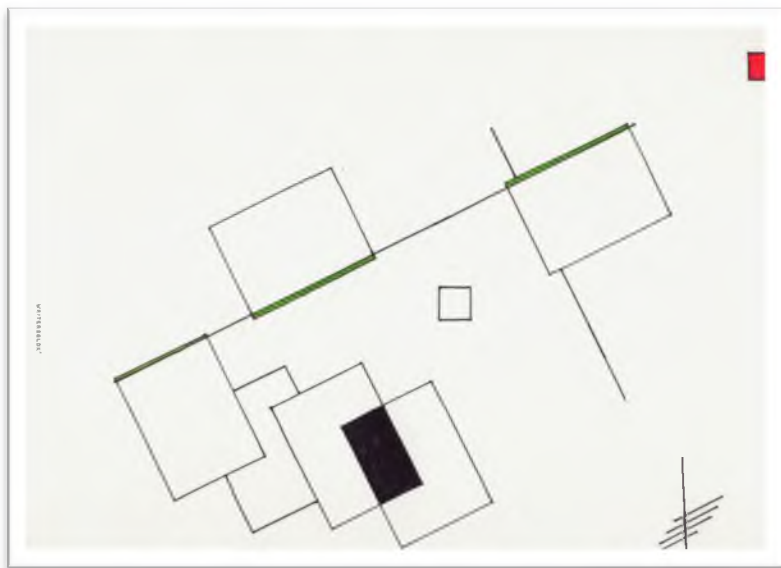
## APPENDIX

### TEMPLATE DRAWINGS

The following is a selection of my template drawings. For a complete listing,  
please visit my website at [www.benjaminallen.org](http://www.benjaminallen.org)







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