

MOVING FROM SITE-SPECIFIC TO MUSEUM-SPECIFIC DANCE: AN EXAMINATION
OF *MUSEUM WORKOUT'S* DIALOGUE WITH THE MET

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“In the best possible sense, it would feel as if you’re taking this glorious walk through nature, but you happen to be in a museum, and you happen to be looking at different pieces of art, so there isn’t this obligation to understand anything or to know anything, you’re just observing, which is the best part of taking a walk. And that way, you are free to feel a million different feelings and there’s no judgment. I mean you might be making a judgment about the paintings, but that’s another conversation. So, um, so, take a walk in the museum.”

Maira Kalman’s voice instructs a group of about twenty people, mostly women of varying ages, standing at the foot of the stairwell in the Great Hall of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Robbie Saenz de Viteri, the Creative Producing Director of Monica Bill Barnes & Co., presses a key on his Mac, and the first notes of the 1977 Bee Gees hit “Stayin’ Alive” tune in. The disco melody reverberates through the marble antechamber of The Met, a room modeled off of two-thousand-year-old Roman Baths. This song, an artifact of the disco era – one of flared pants, extravagant hairdos, and rampant partying – boldly clashes with architecture referencing the beginning of Western civilization. The lobby of The Met has almost certainly never heard the Bee Gees, and definitely not at 9 a.m., preceding the museum’s opening. Two women stand side by side on the bottom steps, donning flashy, sequined dresses that expose their chiseled backs. Their attire embraces the glamorous ethos of “Stayin’ Alive,” and they attentively listen to Kalman’s voice. These women are Monica Bill Barnes and Anna Bass, the Artistic Director and Associate Artistic Director of Monica Bill Barnes & Co., and the creators of *Museum Workout*, the “glorious walk” that Kalman introduces. Why do Barnes and Bass, despite their festive attire, look so serious, with pursed lips and tight, low buns? Are you, the audience, supposed to laugh?

There are no correct answers for these questions, although Barnes does embrace humor in her choreography. Instead, these questions speak to the tensions that arise in *Museum Workout*, tensions underlined by Kalman’s introduction. Kalman speaks casually, but frames *Museum*

Workout as a “glorious walk” that just “happens.” Kalman describes *Museum Workout* as a walk that you could haphazardly join, but also as an extravagant adventure eliciting a “million” feelings. *Museum Workout* is both unassuming and grand, a work that is meant to be unpretentious but occurs in one of the most pretentious venues in the world. In order to grapple with this contradiction, Kalman suggests that the audience should approach *Museum Workout* as they would a walk in the outdoors. However, instead of trees or wildlife, the scenery in *Museum Workout* consists of historic masterpieces of art. Due to this carefree approach to the walk, there is not an “obligation to understand anything or to know anything,” and the artwork can be observed without analysis of its context or history. Rather than attempting to rationalize a work’s creation or understand a work’s cultural significance, audiences are encouraged to react to pieces emotionally. Although judgment may arise from an emotional reaction, the purpose of the walk is not to make a conclusion about a specific work’s value. Kalman says that a conversation about judgment is for another time, implying that judgments about art are difficult to suppress, but distract from the intention of the walk. Therefore, Kalman foregrounds emotional reactions over historical understanding of the works. Through this experience the museum becomes a site of investigation, and enables visitors to forgo their preconceptions about canonized artworks in favor of new, personal interpretations of the works.

Although Kalman tells the audience to “take a walk,” Barnes and Bass are actually leading participants through a forty-five-minute aerobic workout traversing empty galleries of The Met. This choreography requires running around ancient Greek columns, squatting in front of John Singer Sargent’s *Madame X*, pumping fists towards King Henry VIII’s chain-link armor, and lying on the ground below Augustus St. Garden’s *Diana*. *Museum Workout* sold out almost immediately after receiving positive reviews from various New York City publications

with titles such as “Raise your (He)art Rate with a Workout at the Met” (*WNYC*), “Working Out – In a Museum” (*The New York Times*), and “Burning Calories at the Met” (*The New Yorker*).¹ These titles encapsulate a fascination with both the venue of The Met and the fitness component of the performance, yet neglect to mention how *Museum Workout* fits, or does not fit, into the larger genre of site-specific dance. To address this question, I argue that the collaborators of *Museum Workout* translate characteristics of site-specific dance to the museum, upending the audience’s typical museum-going experience and challenging The Met’s standard institutional narrative about the value and history of the artworks it displays. I will explore how Barnes and Kalman employ the dancing body to counteract dominant historiographies celebrating America’s colonial past by examining *Museum Workout*’s interactions with two works of art – an undated sculpture of a Dogon elder and Emanuel Leutze’s lauded painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*.

Barnes reinterprets the performative aspects of what museum studies scholar Carol Duncan calls the “museum ritual,” or the learned activity of wandering around museums and pausing to look at artworks on display.² Visitors who undertake the museum ritual embark on a journey into a site vested with power, prestige, and opulence, as Western art museums have been designed to mimic ancient Greek temples and teach visitors about the artistic masterpieces of European and American culture. Western art museums are traditionally male spheres of

¹ Sean Rameswaram, “Raise Your (He)art Rate with a Workout at the Met,” *National Public Radio*, February 8th, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/02/08/513765866/raise-your-he-art-rate-with-a-workout-at-the-met>; Alexis Cheung, “Working Out – In a Museum,” *The New York Times Style Magazine*, January 18th, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/t-magazine/museum-workout-metropolitan-art-monica-bill-barnes-company.html>; Brian Schaefer, “Burning Calories at the Met,” *The New Yorker*, January 16th, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/burning-calories-at-the-met>.

² Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 13.

influence, displaying works created by male artists for enlightened male viewers. However, the creators of *Museum Workout* devise a feminist reinterpretation of the museum ritual by replacing The Met's contextualization of its artworks with Kalman's narration and Barnes's movement. This enables the participants of *Museum Workout* to engage with artistic masterpieces without being burdened by The Met's extensive wall texts and gallery labels. Barnes and Kalman therefore "challenge the status quo," applying Maria Lind's definition of feminist curatorial practices to dance.³ *Museum Workout* operates in a threefold manner by (1) arming visitors with an unexpected, empowering, physical vocabulary, (2) encouraging women to reclaim the museum space and (3) divorcing artworks from contextual information, thereby foregrounding individual emotional reactions to artwork. Although dance performed in museums is often understood as belonging under the umbrella of "site-specific" dance, I define museum-specific dance as a subset of this genre that physically and conceptually reinterprets the typical museum-going experience. I will briefly describe the genesis of *Museum Workout*, followed by a discussion of the theoretical foundations of both site-specific dance and Western art museums in order to elucidate how Barnes and Kalman have radically reconfigured the museum ritual.

The history of *Museum Workout* and the goals of its collaborators reveal a lengthy creative process designed to transform a normal visit to The Met into a witty, unconventional, and participatory dance. Despite the titles of the aforementioned reviews, *Museum Workout* is not just a trendy fitness class, but is the product of Barnes and Kalman's thoughtful engagement with the site of the museum. Even though the popularity of wellness culture in middle and upper-class New York City populations has brought audiences into *Museum Workout*, Barnes says that

³ Maria Lind, 'Selected nodes in a network of thoughts on curating' in *Words of Wisdom: a curator's vade mecum on contemporary art*, ed. by C. Kuoni, (New York: Independent Curators International, 2001), p. 100

she is not teaching a workout class. Instead, *Museum Workout* reflects Barnes's desire to redefine the physical activity of visiting museums and therefore change the audience's interaction with The Met. Barnes began creating the piece in 2014, when Limor Tomer, who is the General Manager of MetLiveArts, asked Barnes to make a work for The Met. Barnes, in a phone conversation with the author, described her enthusiasm at the prospect of creating dance for The Met, but revealed that she was daunted by the task of bringing her characteristic choreographing elements – humor, theatricality, and audience interaction – to a site already filled with exceptional art.

After much brainstorming – Tomer recalls a six-month gap between asking Barnes to collaborate and Barnes pitching her idea – Barnes decided to create a participatory piece using the choreographic language of the workout.⁴ Subversive yet accessible, Barnes's concept of asking an audience to perform workout moves in The Met has been critiqued by some Met employees as “sacrilegious.”⁵ Barnes and Bass spent years formulating the movement of *Museum Workout*, a task that was surprisingly difficult, because as professional dancers Barnes and Bass don't normally take workout classes. In a process that Barnes describes as trial and error, she and Bass pitched many different movements to sample audiences, separating phrases that felt unnatural or complicated from those that were challenging, yet doable. Kalman helped with this process, sampling workout moves in her living room. The choreography of *Museum Workout* is meant to be accessible, but assumes that audience members have physical ability, or as Barnes puts it, are “healthy New Yorker[s] who walk all the time.”⁶ This, however, can be

⁴ Limor Tomer, phone interview with author, October 19th 2017.

⁵ Page Knox, Met employee, in conversation with author, October 26th 2017.

⁶ Monica Bill Barnes, phone interview with author, October 22nd 2017.

seen as contributing to the exclusivity of the work, as the fifteen-person audience must also be in moderate athletic shape.

Despite critiques of exclusivity, *Museum Workout* is not pretentious. Barnes invites audiences to embrace the humor of the piece, and acknowledges that working out to Motown and Disco in a highly revered cultural institution feels absurd. Doing jumping jacks in front of Greek busts is laughable, and Barnes's gold-sequined dress and deadpan face are incongruous with the glinting marble muscles of Perseus holding the head of Medusa. Barnes gives audiences permission to laugh and smile in The Met, typically unusual responses to viewing Medieval artwork. Although Barnes recognizes the humor of her work, she maintains that "It's using humor for the purpose of inserting a more sincere idea – to question the way that we look at art."⁷ The use of humor, combined with the concept of the workout, can be risky, and contributes to misconceptions about *Museum Workout*. Some audience members have asked Barnes if *Museum Workout* is a partnership with a gym, and to others, humor is debasing, undermining the classicism of The Met's collection.⁸ Hearing "Stayin' Alive" at 9 a.m. in the Great Hall is disconcerting, and as Tomer observes, requires the audience to stop thinking and surrender to the experience.⁹ This, however, is Barnes's goal, to forgo preconceptions and use humor to bring a fresh, unique perspective to viewing The Met's artworks.

Barnes's effort to disrupt and alter the audience's typical museum-going experience is indicative of a common theme in site-specific dance – to challenge ordinary physical relationships with a site. The roots of site-specific dance are worth discussing in order to

⁷ "The Museum Workout at The Metropolitan Museum of Art," *The Dance Enthusiast*, updated January 3rd, 2017, <https://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/from-the-press/view/museum-workout-Metropolitan-Museum-Monica-Bill-Barnes-Company>.

⁸ Page Knox, Met employee, conversation with author, October 26th 2017.

⁹ Limor Tomer, phone interview with author, October 19th 2017.

understand how Barnes's work is characteristic of a larger interdisciplinary genre that originated with visual arts, specifically sculpture. The term "site-specific" was coined by visual artist Robert Smithson in the 1960s, and was first applied to dance in the 1980s.¹⁰ Desiring to bring visual arts out of museums and into the public sphere, Smithson and others turned to landscapes as inspirations for their work, creating sculptures that directly responded to the locations in which they existed. The roots of site-specific dance are often traced back to Anna Halprin and her Judson Dance Theatre contemporaries in the 1960s and 70s, who removed dance from the stage and brought it into unconventional spaces, such as roofs.¹¹ Dance scholar Victoria Hunter warns against constructing a linear narrative of the progression of site dance, instead suggesting that site-specific dance comes from a variety of influences over of time. Although Ruth St. Denis, Isadora Duncan, and Lucinda Childs all created dances for sites other than the theater, these three women were not necessarily looking towards their predecessors for inspiration to challenge the traditional spatial conventions of dance. As Hunter indicates, scholars are only now attempting to define "site-specific dance," a term that can be applied to work made by many twentieth and twenty-first-century choreographers.

Site dance, like site-specific visual arts, is also created and performed in an environment other than the stage. The choreography of site dance is explicitly influenced by factors such as the architecture, beauty, history, or everyday functions of the site in which it exists. British dance scholar Fiona Wilkie has identified a continuum in which dance can be "site-sympathetic," "site-

¹⁰ Victoria Hunter, *Moving Sites: Investigating Site-Specific Dance Performance*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 6-7. See Hunter for list of Smithson's 10 characteristics of site versus non-site work.

¹¹ Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik, *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2009), 8.

generic,” or “site-specific.”¹² Whereas “site-sympathetic” work is simply an outdoor rendering of an already choreographed piece, “site-generic” dance is made for a series of similar sites, such as museums, and “site-specific” dance explicitly reveals characteristics of a singular site in performance. In the first anthology on site-specific dance, published in 2009, Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik describe four choreographic approaches to site-specific dance: drawing choreographic inspiration from the history of a site, bringing attention to an unusual or underrepresented site, emphasizing the aesthetics of a site, or using site dance as a method of strengthening community.¹³ Both of these frameworks prioritize the singularity of the site, implying that dance is only “site-specific” if it is uniquely suited to one location. In these discourses, the “specificity” of a work is privileged, and is used to theoretically separate site-based works from dances performed on the stage.

However, in an effort to de-privilege the singular site, I suggest that *Museum Workout* is “museum-specific,” because it was created for and is exclusively performed in museums that display historic art. *Museum Workout* has already traveled to the North Carolina Museum of Art, and Tomer and Barnes have expressed desire for *Museum Workout* to tour around the country.¹⁴ Even though *Museum Workout* can be performed in multiple sites, each iteration of the dance is an authentic, innovative challenge to the museum experience. De-privileging the singular site has gained popularity in recent visual arts and dance scholarship, and visual arts scholar Michelle Kwon notes that current conceptualizations of site recognize the site’s transitive and interdisciplinary properties.¹⁵ In a recent article, Melanie Kloetzel begins to redefine site-specific

¹² Hunter, *Moving Sites: Investigating Site-Specific Dance Performance*, 15.

¹³ Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik, *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces*, 19.

¹⁴ Limor Tomer, phone interview with author, October 19th 2017

¹⁵ Michelle Kwon, “The Wrong Place,” *Art Journal*, 59, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 33.

dance under these auspices, describing efforts to “serialize” site-dance. In “serialized” site dance, which she also describes as “site-adaptive,” a work created for one site is relocated to another site, but is revised to “fit” its new location. Kloetzel points to the economic appeal of creating a work that can be performed in multiple sites, and argues that “re-siting” does not endanger a work’s authenticity. Instead, re-siting involves a process of examining a new site and appropriately revising choreography to adapt to each new location.¹⁶ This type of interaction is evidenced in *Museum Workout*, as the intention behind *Museum Workout* remains provocative and original even as the choreography adapts to the galleries of different historic art museums. As a museum-specific work, *Museum Workout* exemplifies how a site-based dance can effectively engage with multiple, similar sites.

Barnes and Kalman engage with the site of the museum by physically and verbally commenting on its ritualistic function, and transform the museum ritual from an implicit to an explicit performance in *Museum Workout*. The museum ritual has been defined by museum studies scholar Carol Duncan as the act of viewing art for personal growth.¹⁷ Even though Western art museums were established to celebrate the rise of secular, rational civilization, they are still sites of ritual. Rituals are often associated with religious traditions, but can be described as any experience performed for transformation of the self or of one’s community. The performative aspect of the ritual is key for my argument, as *Museum Workout* converts the incidental performance of the museum ritual into formal choreography. In the traditional museum ritual, this performance is only implied, as visitors must engage with artworks in time and space by walking through galleries, pausing to look at specific artworks, and reading

¹⁶ Melanie Kloetzel, “Site and Re-Site: Early Efforts to Serialize Site Dance,” *Dance Research Journal*, 49, no. 1 (April 2017): 6-23.

¹⁷ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, 15.

informational plaques. This is usually performed in silence, and although museum-goers may come with friends or family, the gallery is enforced as a quiet space. Visitors may whisper their thoughts about the artwork to companions, but loud talking is solely permitted by employees giving tours. This behavior is enforced by guards, who are stationed in each gallery to ensure that visitors act appropriately, and above all, do not touch the artwork. If viewers broach these rules, they will be reprimanded and possibly asked to leave. However, In *Museum Workout*, guards must stand to the side while participants romp through the galleries. Although some guards appear annoyed with these disruptive guests, while others want to partake in the dancing, they no longer have the authority to stop this normally frowned upon behavior. Here, the audience is aware that they are performing, even if their audience only consists of fellow participants and museum guards. The conventional “set” of the museum remains, but with an augmented soundtrack and two sparkingly clad docents: Barnes and Bass.

By providing a space in which to deviate from condoned museum behavior, Barnes challenges the power ingrained in the site of the museum. As arbiters of ritual, museums assert power, both by dictating which artworks are deserving of cultural importance and by enforcing codes of conduct that determine how these works will be experienced. Barnes undermines the disciplinary power of the museum, as security guards must stand to the side while *Museum Workout* participants squat in the American Wing. Further, participants in *Museum Workout* are encouraged to ignore The Met’s educational gallery labels and instead form new relationships with familiar artworks. Traditionally, art museums exert influence on viewers by assuming a didactic role, working to “improve its visitors morally, socially, and politically.”¹⁸ This has been achieved by showcasing artwork that espouses patriotic ideals or represents tenants of Western

¹⁸ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, 16.

rational thought, thereby converting visitors into ideal citizens. *Museum Workout*, however, is not didactic, and encourages the audience to think freely as they travel along the route in order to minimize the curatorial influence of The Met.

Barnes's reinvention of the museum ritual challenges the male dominated history of The Met, revealing *Museum Workout*'s implicit feminist bent. The idea for The Met was first proposed by John Jay, a wealthy New York City diplomat, in 1866 as a symbol of American power that could compete with Paris' Louvre Museum and London's National Gallery.¹⁹ In the late nineteenth century, historic art museums were seen as hallmarks of progressive civilizations, and New York City was ready to showcase its own cultural capital. The art inside The Met would represent Enlightenment ideals, and visitors would learn about the development of rational European society, but with an American twist. The Met, and other American art museums created in the late nineteenth century such as The Art Institute of Chicago, initiated a new American art ritual, one that "makes visible the ideals of a republican state, frames the 'public' it claims to serve, and dramatizes the unity of the nation."²⁰ America was molding an identity for itself, and used the historic art museum to propagate patriotic ideals and solidify the American image as cohesive and powerful, on par with older European powers. Just as European art museums were to be sites of moral enlightenment, The Met was to be a site of learning, a home to classics where visitors would come to be "uplifted."²¹ However, this enlightenment was reserved for men, as women, who would not be enfranchised until 1920, were expected to refrain from entering the civic sphere. Therefore, The Met, which was created and funded by wealthy male entrepreneurs for the audience of the average male American citizen, solely framed a

¹⁹ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, 48.

²⁰ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, 49.

²¹ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, 49.

‘public’ composed of white men. Barnes rebels against the exclusion of female voices in *The Met* by inviting her audience, who is mostly women, to join her as she runs and lunges through spaces conceived of by men, for men.

Kalman’s narration contributes to this feminist reinterpretation of the museum, as she replaces *The Met*’s captions and audio guides with her own opinions about art, revealing intimate details about her experiences as a female artist. These clips of Kalman speaking come from a three-hour interview conducted by Bass and di Viteri in Kalman’s home. In her narration, Kalman ponders the importance of art and describes her ideal museum-going experience – one that is personal and uninterrupted. Kalman’s musings are often anecdotal; she describes an onion ring that her and her husband preserved for several years before selling it to a museum for fifteen dollars. This story critiques the arbitrary monetary values assigned to art and the process of placing art in museums, eliciting the question of how much her art should be worth if an onion ring is worth fifteen dollars. Kalman, who is 67, acknowledges looming thoughts about death, and how in response she tries to “slow down.” Kalman describes her “Buddhist shoes,” which she bought two sizes too big and make her walk slowly, “because they make me be in the moment and they make me not race through time. Everybody’s being productive and everybody’s creating work. And then it’s going to end.”²² Kalman is concerned about the futility of making art, and questions the art world’s emphasis on productivity rather than process. While listening to Kalman, the audience is privy to Kalman’s anxieties about the value of her own work and her frustration with the museum establishment, providing rare insight into her usually private contemplations.

²² Schaefer, “Burning Calories at the Met.”

Barnes's interactive choreography and Kalman's intimate narration restore emphasis on the artworks in The Met, not their contexts, in order excite curiosity and awe in viewers. By divorcing artwork from context, Barnes and Kalman suggest that the information provided by museums can be overwhelming, unnecessary, and unilateral. In a 1980 guide to the American Wing, director Philippe de Montebello describes how the museum educates viewers through "audioguides, explanatory labels, gallery lectures, guidebooks, lecture programs, symposia, and similar projects."²³ This extensive list illuminates the extraordinary amount of information that is often unloaded onto viewers about art, which viewers often spend more time digesting than looking at the actual artwork. The art curator Susan Vogel is dismayed by these distractions because "text tells us things, whereas objects make us wonder and question."²⁴ Text provides little interpretive leeway, whereas art objects provide ample opportunity for investigation and questioning. Vogel's statement is reminiscent of Kalman's opening to *Museum Workout*, which celebrates the wondrous quality of the art museum. However, *Museum Workout*'s prioritization of feeling over information risks masking the complex and often fraught histories of the artworks shown in The Met.

To address the absence of contextualization in *Museum Workout*, I now turn to two artworks the audience encounters while working out – "Male Figure with Raised Arms" and *Washington Crossing the Delaware* – to suggest that Barnes and Kalman pose physical, feminist challenges to the Western, male-centered narratives presented in The Met's collection. I contextualize these two artworks from a historical viewpoint by integrating primary sources published by The Met with theoretical frameworks discussing primitivism, patriotism, and

²³ Philippe de Montebello, "Forward" in *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Volume II*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), vii.

²⁴ Susan Vogel, "Bringing African Art to the Metropolitan Museum," *African Arts* 15, no. 2 (1982): 41.

Western aesthetics. By providing this context, I show how The Met has funneled these two artworks into neat narratives that emphasize the artistic brilliance and superiority of Western culture. Through dissecting The Met's discussion of these works, I emphasize the depth and necessity of Barnes's and Kalman's critique of the museum ritual.

The wooden statue, "Male Figure with Raised Arms," (fig. 1) is situated in the Main Africa Gallery of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, and greets the audience of *Museum Workout* in the nude with arms raised. Created between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries by the Dogon Peoples in modern-day Mali, this anonymous man stares ahead, in a shallow squat with body exposed.²⁵ One of his hands is missing, broken off at some point during the several centuries since he was formed. His feet have also degraded, leaving one fully extended arm reaching upwards with fingers pressed tightly together. Upon approaching this figure, Barnes and Bass have also raised their arms, razor straight and topped with tight fists. The audience recognizes the similarity between their own arms and the singular, remaining arm of their wooden companion, but fails to achieve the same clarity in their own form. Nevertheless, the effect of this mimicry is profound, putting the audience in physical conversation with an ancient work made thousands of miles away from New York City. This moment assuages Kalman's worries about the value of art, suggesting that making art is not futile if works such as "Male Figure with Raised Arms" are able to influence and relate to intergenerational bodies across cultures.

However, the audience's understanding of "Male Figure with Raised Arms" is limited to seemingly superficial observations, as neither Barnes nor Kalman provide any context about this piece during *Museum Workout*. Although the audience can likely infer that this is a work of

²⁵ "Male Figure with Raised Arms," The Met, no date, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310765>.

African art from its gallery placement, there is no discussion of who created this piece or who it depicts. According to The Met's website, "Male Figure with Raised Arms" is a Dogon village elder, whose rank is denoted by the bracelets on his wrists and ankles. He is praying, possibly asking for rain, in a physical and mental effort "to link earth and heavens."²⁶ This spiritual function is characteristic of Dogon sculpture, and the figure was likely created for a shrine. The audience, by raising their arms, joins this Dogon man in prayer. However, because raised arms are not the common Christian prayer gesture, the audience is likely unaware that they too are asking the heavens for rain. By removing "Male Figure with Raised Arms" from its historical and cultural context, Barnes and Kalman leave the audience to speculate about why this figure is raising his arms and what it means that they, too, are raising theirs.

"Male Figure with Raised Arms" is one of the few pieces visited in *Museum Workout* explicitly created for a ritual function, and is therefore an important place to reevaluate Duncan's concept of the museum ritual. Duncan fails to acknowledge how Western art museums such as The Met appropriate African cultural artifacts for their own ritual function, one that emphasizes the superior rationality of Western culture. The ritual function of "Male Figure with Raised Arms" has been altered twice since its conception; first it was transformed into an art object in the Western museum ritual, then reimagined as an interactive sculpture in *Museum Workout's* choreographed museum ritual. Originally, "Male Figure with Raised Arms" was placed on a shrine that Dogon peoples visited to honor their ancestors and pray for rain. These rain altars, called *andugo*, were sites of sacrifice to Nommo, the Master of Water. Many of the sculptures found on *andugo* have been identified as representations of Nommo, who is also a central

²⁶ The Met, "Male Figure with Raised Arms."

character in Dogon creation myths.²⁷ The performative aspect of this ritual is a sacrifice, likely of agriculture, undertaken to improve the weather and harvest of the community. Since these rain altars were usually placed on rooftops or on the outskirts of villages, these sacrifices were public performances.²⁸ Upon being moved to a museum, “Male Figure with Raised Arms” was given the label of “art,” transforming the sculpture from a religious object into a secular artifact. Despite its apparent secularity as an artwork in The Met, Duncan would argue that “Male Figure with Raised Arms” is actually involved in a new Western ritual, the museum ritual. In the museum ritual, the Dogon elder is the subject of the Western gaze, which immediately identifies “Male Figure with Raised Arms” as belonging to a foreign aesthetic tradition. The curators of The Met try to bridge this gap of unfamiliarity by emphasizing how African cultures are similar to the West. The Met must cater to the desires of their visitors, since many of them come to the museum to learn about art, often searching for facets of themselves in these creations. The museum ritual therefore transforms the Dogon elder’s ritual function into a personal, rather than communal, act, placing the Dogon elder into a narrative that is relatable for Western viewers.

In choosing which African art to display in their galleries, The Met often reinforces primitivist and ahistorical stereotypes about African cultures. For African art to be displayed in The Met, it must be deemed authentic and of appropriate aesthetic value.²⁹ Both of these categories, authenticity and aesthetic worth, are superficial parameters defined by The Met. Often, African art is only claimed to be “authentic” if it is representative of a recognizable, tribal past that has been constructed in the West’s imagination. The anonymity of the artist has become synonymous with authenticity, implying that African art is not created by visionary individuals,

²⁷ Kate Ezra, *Art of the Dogon: Selections from the Lester Wunderman Collection*, (New York City: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), 22.

²⁸ Ezra, *Art of the Dogon: Selections from the Lester Wunderman Collection*, 23.

²⁹ Vogel, “Bringing African Art to the Metropolitan Museum,” 40.

but grows out of ancient traditions. However, the frequency of authorless artworks is a result of centuries of pillaging, as African artwork was first brought to the West after being stolen by European colonizers.³⁰ The disturbing arbitrary assignment of authenticity by the West is intensified by faults in constructing the history of African cultures. African art historians tend to divide the timeline of African peoples into pre-colonial and post-colonial eras. Before European intrusion, Africa was devoid of history, and tribes existed in a stagnant, if pleasant, state.³¹ All change, whether beneficial or not, is due to European influence. Art collectors search for pre-colonial works as representative of “untainted” African life, an artifact of the authentic African culture that preceded European domination. The study of the Dogon has often succumbed to this fetish of the unchanging African culture, and ethnographic fieldwork on the Dogon has been undertaken to learn about the customs of a “primitive” people that have been able to resist Western influence.

Although attempts have been made to understand and respect Dogon culture, these accounts are often guilty of celebrating the Dogon as an exotic, primitive peoples. These narratives have been incorporated into The Met’s presentation of Dogon art, as shown in The Met’s 1988 exhibit guide “Art of the Dogon.” Dogon culture has come under extensive ethnographic attention since the 1930s, when French ethnographer Michel Griaule dedicated his profession to understanding the complex mythological foundation of Dogon philosophy. Griaule tried to rectify common European perceptions of the Dogon as “savage” and “backwards,” but instead his ethnographic accounts have been criticized as being unverifiable.³² Despite flaws in

³⁰ Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, “African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow,” *African Arts* 25, no. 2 (Apr. 1992), 44.

³¹ Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, “African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow,” 43.

³² Walter E. A. van Beek, “A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule [and Comments and Replies],” *Current Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (Apr. 1991), 140-141.

Griaule's methodology, his interest in Dogon culture and artwork represents a Western post-colonial fascination with African peoples. This interest in African art was accelerated by the Cubist movement, when artists, most notably Pablo Picasso, began drawing inspiration from African masks.³³ Only after catching the eye of European artists did African art become valued for its aesthetic worth. One fanatic of Dogon art, Lester Wunderman, donated most of the pieces to The Met's exhibit "Art of the Dogon" from his personal collection. Wunderman became fascinated with the Dogon peoples after happening upon one of their sculptures in a Los Angeles gallery, and dedicated most of his life to living with and researching the Dogon. Although Wunderman deeply respected and adored the Dogon, his "Preface" to the "Art of the Dogon" exhibition guide imply an awe of the exotic, as he writes about visiting the Dogon and being greeted with "warmth and love," and was taken in to their society as a "brother."³⁴ Wunderman's rhetoric emphasizes the congeniality of the Dogon people, highlighting their "otherness."³⁵ The Met aligns their interpretation of Dogon sculpture with Wunderman's perspective, therefore reinterpreting Dogon art through a framework of Western values.

Given these flaws in the Western interpretation and framing of African art, the lack of context provided by *Museum Workout* is refreshing. Instead of presenting African art as a window into our primitive past, Barnes and Kalman physicalize the museum ritual to create a more personal relationship with the Dogon elder. Barnes's ritual, although nothing like the act of approaching a Dogon shrine, encourages respect, and physical imitation enables the audience to embody the Dogon elder. This is not an explicitly spiritual encounter, but conveys an

³³ Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow," 46.

³⁴ Lester Wunderman, "Preface" in *Art of the Dogon: Selections from the Lester Wunderman Collection*, (New York City: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), 7-9.

³⁵ For a complete discussion of "otherness," see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978).

understanding of common humanity and the power of gesture. *Museum Workout* undoes some of the problematic curatorial practices that emphasize the “otherness” of African art by highlighting the artistry of the Dogon sculpture and its ability to engage diverse audiences. Despite this innovative approach to engaging with African art, I heed warning of the dangers of forgetting *how* African art has ended up in Western museums and the stereotypes often perpetuated by the discourses surrounding these works.

Even though Emanuel Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (fig. 2) was created centuries after the Dogon elder and is painted in a European aesthetic tradition, *Museum Workout*’s engagement with the work instigates similar conversations about the importance of contextualizing art. Further, when compared to The Met’s scant writing about African art, the Met’s plethora of publications about the American Wing, the home of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, reveals an institutional focus on Western masterpieces. These writings, which date from the 1930s onwards, make transparent The Met’s hegemonic discourse celebrating the patriotic importance of Leutze’s painting.

During their first circuit of *Museum Workout*, Barnes and Bass pass in front of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, the monumental 1851 oil painting by German-American artist Emanuel Leutze. Barnes and Bass enter Gallery 760 of the American Wing with hands on hips, and stare straight ahead as they walk towards Leutze’s 20-foot long painting before turning right and exiting the room. They lead the audience in the opposite direction from Washington’s path, crossing the route of his soldiers as they attempt to row across the Delaware River to conduct a surprise attack against the British. This brief encounter with one of The Met’s most popular paintings can be read as a challenge to the nationalistic narrative that often accompanies *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Barnes and Bass offer an alternative method of interacting

with the painting; they refrain from glorifying George Washington, instead simply sharing the space with him. In fact, they easily intersect his route, suggesting that the choppy waters that Washington is forging across are not as perilous as they may appear. Barnes refutes the masculine, heroic grandiosity of Washington's famous enterprise by leading her female team across his path. Leutze's painting is not one of Kalman's chosen stops, and Barnes physically engages with *Washington Crossing the Delaware* in the same manner as many of the other pieces. This is significant because it dismantles the praise and scholarship *Washington Crossing the Delaware* has received, as this image has been the subject of books and articles and has been reproduced, analyzed, and criticized.

Although Barnes and Kalman do not provide any context about the history of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, it is likely that audiences in *Museum Workout* will recognize the figure of Washington standing in a small boat, American flag waving behind him, as he leads his men through icy waters. This is undeniably a patriotic painting, and the impact of *Museum Workout*'s engagement with *Washington Crossing the Delaware* can be better understood by discussing the history of the work and its relationship with The Met's American Wing. Emanuel Leutze was born in Germany, and although he lived in America as a child, he was trained as a painter in Dusseldorf. A proponent of American democracy, Leutze painted *Washington Crossing the Delaware* in the wake of the Revolutions of 1848, a series of uprisings throughout Europe that protested autocratic rule and feudalism.³⁶ Leutze was hoping that his painting would inspire revolutionary zeal in Germany, and would encourage viewers to align with his pan-German, liberal ideology. However, the German Revolution was largely unsuccessful, and German-

³⁶ David Hackett Fischer, "*Washington's Crossing: An excerpt for President's Day Weekend, Introduction: The Painting.*" Oxford University Press. Updated February 17th, 2006. https://blog.oup.com/2006/02/washingtons_cro/

speaking regions were not united under a single government. Despite the failure of the Revolution, Leutze kept painting, altering the tone of his work to accentuate darker colors while he continued to celebrate this revolutionary moment in American history.

In America, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* was praised as a representation of American patriotism and contributed to the glorification of Washington. Leutze sent a copy of the painting to New York in 1851, where it instantly became famous.³⁷ Viewers celebrated this image of Washington, which helped concretize his legacy as a great American hero and leader. Many Americans had learned about the crossing of the Delaware in history classes, when Washington led his freezing, starving men across the icy river on Christmas of 1776 to a surprise attack against the British. Historian David Hackett Fischer argues that Washington's victory against the British restored American morale after a series of decimating losses. The momentum of this battle pushed Washington's troops to eventually winning the war, legitimizing the fledgling country over which Washington would earn presidency. Fischer suggests that Leutze accurately captures the spirit of this moment – the desperation and determination of Washington's men – which excuses its historical inaccuracy. Critics have denounced Leutze's representation of the scene for including the wrong version of the 1776 American flag, unrealistic outfits, and a dangerously small boat.³⁸ Despite these criticisms, Leutze's work has remained popular, crafting a positive narrative around Washington and his ideas of freedom and democracy.

Since joining The Met in 1897, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* has become an important part of The Met's engagement with American works, and The Met's official

³⁷ Fischer, "*Washington's Crossing: An excerpt for President's Day Weekend, Introduction: The Painting.*"

³⁸ Natalie Spassy, edited by Kathleen Luhrs, "*American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Volume II,*" (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), 17.

publications about Leutze's work reveal how Leutze's painting contributes to a larger project of celebrating American patriotism. A reading of official Met publications cataloguing the American Wing, which opened in 1924, uncovers the creation of a singular narrative of the history of American art, one that traces the growth of the American colonies and the artwork of white men within those colonies. The Met's 1938 *A Handbook of the American Wing* introduces the scope of the art presented in the American Wing as dating from "the introduction on the eastern seaboard of those European influences which have predominated in America for more than three hundred years," suggesting that the most significant contributions to American art have been made by European colonists and their descendants. This *Handbook* reveals the original attitudes and goals of The Met, and as one of the first catalogues of the American Wing, illuminates how The Met equated high art with European ideals. Early seventeenth century American colonists, who arrived from primarily lower middle-class families, solely built "decorative arts," or furniture, for utilitarian purposes. As colonists began to arrive from higher social classes in Britain, a wealthier and more educated demographic created work that embraced European aesthetics, culminating with the "full sophistication of the eighteenth" century.³⁹ The Met's *Handbook*, primarily describing colonial furniture, equates refined, high-quality art with European tastes and techniques.

Although since its inception the American Wing has physically expanded and showcases the work of more artists, the white, male-dominated perspective of American history articulated through this artwork has remained unchallenged by The Met. In a 1980 guide, the American Wing is prefaced as presenting the "finest" art made by "native talent," in order to provide

³⁹ Halsey, R. T. H. and Charles O. Cornelius, *A Handbook of the American Wing*, 36.

important insight into the “American experience.”⁴⁰ However, these “natives” are British colonists, not Native Americans who originally occupied the land, and this “American experience” only applies to the lives of these colonists. There is no mention of diversity in the American experience or acknowledgment that the lives of other people, such as slaves or Native Americans, may vastly differ from the colonial narrative. In the 2001 publication *A Walk Through the American Wing*, the then-director of The Met, Philippe de Montebello, calls the American Wing “literally a living organism,” yet only describes the growth of this organism in terms of increasing donations from collectors.⁴¹ De Montebello’s preface lacks any criticism of the narrow history represented by the works in the American Wing, and fails to acknowledge that populations apart from British colonists have contributed to American art. In the introduction of *A Walk Through the American Wing*, curators Morrison H. Hecksher and H. Barbara Weinberg praise the contributions of many wealthy businessmen to the American Wing, describing how the American Wing reflects an interest in America’s “colonial past.”⁴² Again, Hecksher and Weinberg fail to recognize a multitude of American histories. Through these guides, The Met’s rhetoric remains remarkably unchanged, and solidifies the identity of the American Wing as a place to learn about the colonial, and therefore the American, experience. The Met participates in a dangerous rewriting of history, glossing over histories of injustice and persecution to represent the triumphs of one population.

Although *Washington Crossing the Delaware* wasn’t created for an explicitly ritual function, as was “Male Figure with Raised Arms,” The Met’s *A Walk Through the American*

⁴⁰ Spassy, “American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Volume II,” 12.

⁴¹ Philippe de Montebello, “Director’s Forward,” in *A Walk Through the American Wing* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), vi.

⁴² Morrison H. Hecksher and H. Barbara Weinberg, “Introduction,” from *A Walk Through the American Wing* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), viii.

Wing, as well as the personal accounts of viewers, confirm that *Washington Crossing the Delaware* functions within Duncan's museum ritual. These testimonies reveal that viewing *Washington Crossing the Delaware* involves a performance resulting in personal transformation. However, *Museum Workout* provides a rebuttal against each of these interpretations of the conventional museum ritual. The title, *A Walk Through the American Wing*, addresses the normative, implicit performance of viewing Leutze's painting – a casual walk. Although Kalman also introduces *Museum Workout* as a walk, the physical requirements of Barnes's choreography involve much more than walking. The implications of de Montebello's and Kalman's walk may appear similar, but de Montebello's walk is an instructional exercise in the history of American art, whereas Kalman's walk is a workout meant to free the mind so it can appreciate art.

Anonymous writings in an 1851 catalogue and Met curator Carrie Barratt's audio guide express feelings of awe and personal transformation upon viewing *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, confirming Duncan's assertion that the museum ritual is undertaken for individual growth. An 1851 review of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, following its first showing in New York, describes it as an image, "by the sight of which, in this weary and exhausted time, one can recover health and strength.... [it] has power to work upon the hearts, and inflame the spirits of all that behold it."⁴³ This description articulates a healing, revelatory experience upon viewing *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Ironically, through the choreographic language of the workout, Barnes actually helps viewers "recover strength" while viewing this painting. *Museum Workout* literally achieves the catalogue's figurative description of the viewing experience. In 2011, Carrie Barratt, the Associate Director for Collections and Administration at The Met, praised the work for its emotional poignancy and for its tribute to a pivotal moment in

⁴³ John K. Howat, "Washington Crossing the Delaware," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 26, no. 7 (1968): 299.

American history. Barratt says that “you can almost hear” the voice of the head of artillery directing Washington’s men across the river.⁴⁴ This statement attempts to bring vivacity to a two-dimensional work, and Barratt tries to make her readers feel as if they are in the scene of the painting. Barratt ends her description of Leutze’s work by stating that she hopes her analysis will enable the audience to “enjoy it more” the next time they view the painting.⁴⁵ Barratt implies that an appreciation of the painting’s historic and artistic importance will lead to greater audience enjoyment, as if realizing that the glorification of George Washington in this painting and in American history will somehow make viewers – many of whom are international tourists – have more fun at their next visit to The Met. However, in *Museum Workout*, Barnes avoids Barratt’s heavy-handed prose while possibly providing the most “enjoyable” experience the audience has ever had at The Met. Barnes, by engaging her audience through exercise, catalyzes endorphin-fueled enjoyment that counteracts the physical trauma of war depicted in Leutze’s painting. Although in *Washington Crossing the Delaware* this trauma is patriotically glorified as an essential American experience, Barnes suggests that dance provides an equally powerful, yet more pleasurable, method of interacting with American history.

Barnes relies on the power of moving, communal bodies to illuminate works, pushing back against the traditional contextualization of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Instead of presenting Leutze’s painting as a solidification of the patriotic, colonial narrative of the American Wing, Barnes invites the audience to craft a new interpretation of the work. In *Museum Workout*, decontextualizing *Washington Crossing the Delaware* removes the painting from its often-congratulatory scholarship and challenges the standard goal of the museum ritual

⁴⁴ Carrie Barratt, “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” The Met, last modified 2011, <https://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/audio/collections/washington-crossing-the-delaware-2011>

⁴⁵ Barratt, “Washington Crossing the Delaware.”

to transform visitors into loyal, patriotic citizens. The audience is encouraged to partake in rewriting the unilateral historical narrative articulated in the American Wing, and can choose whether or not to account for the diversity ignored in The Met's publications. By giving the audience the agency to reexamine their presumptions about *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, Barnes allows for a multitude of interpretations.

Although "Male Figure with Raised Arms" and *Washington Crossing the Delaware* come from two different cultures with distinct artistic traditions, they have both been acquired and reframed by The Met into a context that celebrates Western tradition and aesthetics as the pinnacle of artistic achievement. Remarkably, *Museum Workout* is able to challenge this narrative, pushing the boundaries of site-specific dance and recreating the museum ritual to foreground personal emotional connections to The Met's collection. Before closing my discussion of *Museum Workout*, I would like to challenge Barnes and Kalman about the identity of the public that *they* frame. According to Duncan, the act of attending art museums requires an understanding of the importance of presented works and a familiarity with cultural mores – cues often associated with race and class.⁴⁶ By creating a dance for art museums, Kalman and Barnes necessarily limit their audience to those populations already familiar with the museum. In America, these populations are largely white, urban, and middle to upper-class. Museum-going is a cultural phenomenon, celebrated by those segments of the American public able to afford tickets that often exceed \$20. *Museum Workout* does not promote economic or physical accessibility, with astonishing prices of \$75 per ticket at The Met. The requirement of physical ability limits *Museum Workout*'s audience, as most dance performances don't require audience members to speed walk or do jumping jacks. If *Museum Workout* is to seriously challenge the

⁴⁶ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, 8.

exclusive, patriarchal underpinnings of Western art museums such as The Met, I suggest that Barnes and Kalman prioritize making their work available to all individuals. Nevertheless, Barnes and Kalman have embarked on exciting adventure, one that I hope encourages more discussion about how radical feminist dancing can engage with the site of the museum.

Museum Workout ends at the American Wing, with the audience lying down in front of Augustus Saint-Gauden's golden sculpture of *Diana*. *Diana*'s body reflects the morning sunlight pouring in through the gallery's skylights. These look out onto Central Park, which is filled with runners and bikers also completing their morning workouts. Barnes thanks the audience for participating, and the audience claps as they reorient themselves within the vast, sculpture-filled room. Everyone is then ushered to the café to enjoy a small breakfast curated by Kalman. Breakfast consists of coffee, which received several mentions in Kalman's narration, whole-wheat bread, butter, nuts, and clementines. Small notes inscribed with a solitary sneaker and the words "keep moving," are placed on the breakfast table to be taken by the audience as souvenirs. The group disperses, and Barnes and Bass depart from The Met until the next morning, when *Sappho* will awake to "Stayin' Alive" again.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1

Fig. 1. Unknown Artist, “Male Figure with Raised Arms,” 14th-17th century, Wood, patina, H. 82 7/8 x W. 14 1/4 x D. 8 3/8 in, The Met, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310765>



Fig. 2

Fig. 2. Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, Oil on canvas, 149 x 255 in, The Met, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/11417>

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