

Dancing the Dialectics of Change:
American Site-Specific Dance as Public History
In the Twentieth Century

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Introduction

Site-specificity and Dance: Building Definitions and a Theoretical Foundation

*“Landscape’s most crucial condition is considered to be space, but its deepest theme is time.” –
Rebecca Solnit¹*

*“The body, no longer the stylus, the parchment, or the trace, becomes the process itself of signing, a
process created mutually by all those—choreographers, dancers, viewers—engaged in dance.” –Susan
Leigh Foster²*

*What is history? Seldom is it invoked to signal its professional or academic conception: the study of
change or process through time. –Susan Leigh Foster³*

“Living History” and Dancing History

Under cloud-covered moonlight and light rain, three women wander in white dresses, walking and gesturing among a cluster of bushes near the ruins of a former small pox hospital on New York City’s Roosevelt Island. They are madwomen, confused and restless, searching for something. One of them moves with the drifting weight of a ghost, while a contemporary archeologist several feet away examines artifacts through a magnifying glass.

In a reconstructed pilgrim village in Plymouth, Massachusetts two women dressed in Puritan attire converse about milking goats in a variant of 1627 English dialect. One is churning butter while the other is washing clothing. They are friendly enough and will answer most questions if you ask, but they are moving through the tasks of the day. Their movements are repetitive, just like their tasks, and in their heavy clothing they are pleased to be toiling inside, out

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 13.

² Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, ed. American Council of Learned Societies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 227.

³ Susan Leigh Foster, ed. *Corporealities: Dancing, Knowledge, Culture, and Power* (London: Routledge, 1996), xii.

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of the hot summer sun.

These descriptions are representative moments from site-specific dance and living history museum interpretation, two distinct strands of arts and cultural practice that have developed over the course of the last one hundred years to explore the links between history and identity.

Choreographer Meredith Monk's 1994 dance work *American Archaeology*, described first, was a performance given over a single weekend to an audience of Roosevelt Island residents and dance enthusiasts. Plimoth Plantation, described second, is ultimately a tourist park, ready for time travelers from all over the country to walk through its' visitor gates into 1627. Monk engaged in a temporary physicalized dialogue with a place as-it-was in 1994. Plimoth Plantation set up a permanent heritage attraction meant to recreate a historic town and educate with near-scientific accuracy.

The brief portraits of *American Archaeology*, and Plimoth Plantation, etched above, highlight the physical and phenomenological similarities between two performance traditions of expressing history in geographic context—two traditions which otherwise have highly differing degrees of popular and scholarly recognition as “history.” They are comparable representations in that they are performance-based, site-specific, and historically oriented. Both are interested in seeking meaning in the tasks and interactions of everyday life. They aim to engage audiences in untraditional ways and their “choreography” and designs are based on research. Both might be considered responses to a sense of loss or to cultural feelings of nostalgia. Both are instances of performing history in public. Nonetheless, the specificity of Monk's local audience, her choice to let movements communicate more than words, and her willingness to work with the performance site as-it-was, all differentiate the practices of site-specific dance from those of conventional living history seen in outdoor museums. Works like Monk's *American Archaeology* deserve to be

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considered under the umbrella of living history for the ways they engage with local change. But site-specific dance work also warrants recognition and analysis for the different representational approaches that it employs, mainly: moving bodies in space and time.

Throughout American history, and all human history, rituals were performed to mark major events and the more continual passage of time. Rituals can be performed for the community, for witnesses, or both. Pageants of history, for example, are usually performed for an audience, whereas a movement workshop is performed solely for the benefits of its participants. Modern dance is performed for an audience, and post-modern dance turns to self-conscious methods before it even approaches an audience.

Site-specific and Postmodern Dance

Site-specific choreographers study, interpret, and perform aspects of “place” as a profession. Site-specific dance takes *location* as the primary source of movement inspiration by thoughtfully integrating details of the performance site (i.e. the architecture, the community demographics, the cultural history) into the choreographic design.⁴ Due to the degree of research and intervention involved, site-specific dances cannot be performed elsewhere.⁵ Forgoing the black box of the traditional stage, site-specific choreographers seek to understand how movement can contribute to public life by situating dance in new and unusual contexts, like on the roof of a particular building, among ruins of a small pox hospital, or through the spare contours of an industrial structure. To be clear, site-specific dance is a complicated genre, and its choreographers are motivated by its different potentials at different times in their careers. Some make work to

⁴ Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik, eds., *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 17-19.

Although some choreographers strictly abide by the term “site-specific,” like Kloetzel and Pavlik, at times I will use “site dance” and “site choreographer” for the sake of clarity.

⁵ When a choreographer “moves” a work made for one alternative space to another performance site without initiating a new process of research and development, it is generally deemed “site-adaptive” and not “site-specific.”

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raise consciousness about environmental issues, some do it for purely aesthetic reasons, and others hope to engage their audiences politically. A small subgroup of site choreographers focuses their attention on themes of memory, history, and cycles of change. Artists from this subgroup and their many predecessors form the backbone of my inquiries into the evolving objectives of site-specific dance in the twentieth century.

Time, space, and bodies are the primary elements of dance. When these components are organized within theatrical time, fitted inside the dimensions of a rectangular stage (often framed by a proscenium arch), and conditioned by a rehearsal process inside an empty studio, dance is less likely to challenge dominant ways of viewing the world. Concert dance operates within an institutional system and follows theatrical convention, segregating art from life. When removed from this typical western theatrical dance framework constituted by a musical score, a proscenium stage, and pre-established choreography, dance presents innumerable opportunities to subvert traditional relationships to linear time, challenge the singularity of place, and to collapse the distance between performer and audience.

The qualifier “specific,” is also highly important to the definition of the genre. It indicates that the performance is unique to and wholly reliant on the exact location and community in which it was developed—it cannot be performed elsewhere.⁶ The issue then becomes, what, where, or who is the artists’ “site”? This obviously depends wholly on the intention of the artist. Many contemporary site-specific choreographers aim to use local resources to create grass roots dialogue and activate greater civic awareness. Usually open to any pedestrian passerby, site-specific dance has frequently taken the form of community activism, addressing relevant political or cultural

⁶ Some choreographers use the label “site-adaptive” to describe works that are moveable.

issues and hoping to create spaces for dialogue and democratic engagement.⁷

Site-specific dance is typically considered a subgenre of postmodern dance. Postmodern dance has been defined variously since the 1960s, but most simply it describes practices that involved (and evolved) a rethinking of modern dance's methods and insular hierarchies. The first stage of this process was the avant-garde experimentation of artists like John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Anna Halprin, Allan Kaprow, and Robert Dunn in the 1950s. A younger generation of rebels (including future members of Judson Dance Theater and other independent dancers) worked with these experimenters in the fifties and early sixties before setting out their own artistic intentions in what is considered to be the period of analytic postmodern dance in the early 1960s to mid-1970s.⁸ One of the major ways postmodern dancers in the sixties challenged mainstream modern dance was to remove the theatrical context and then “find” new ways of framing dance. More and more dances were purposefully composed in alternative spaces like churches, galleries, streets, and parking lots. Another innovation was their investigation of pedestrian movement, which in turn prompted the inclusion of non-dancers as performers. Due to the substantial documentation of analytic postmodern dance and the iconic images of Trisha Brown walking down walls, it is often credited for the “creation” of site dance. However, as I have mentioned, there is an intersecting family tree of dance and performance history practices that are also site-specific, but more closely aligned with community arts. Modern dance has upheld serious progressive ideals for a century. In the case of site-specific dance—in scholarship and practice—

⁷ Not everyone agrees on the need to define site-specific dance as separate. Choreographer Ann Carlson explained: “I also used to be a little annoyed by the term *site work* because it seemed to privilege concert stage-based work. Actually, I think the issue is really that the term is a bit watered down at this point—domesticated, easily dismissed. So I just like to call it all work.” Quoted in Kloetzel and Pavlik, eds., *Site Dance*, 104.

⁸ Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Postmodern Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), xvi.

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one faces the complicated challenge to reconcile the scale of the possibilities, ambitions, and public spaces available once theatrical walls have been deemed insufficient (in my case, the scale is the entire twentieth century of body-based, site-based art) with artistic professionalism and “specificity.”

“Site-specific” was a term coined by the visual art world in the 1960s and seventies to describe sculptures made for particular public locations. By 1986, with the creation of the producing organization Dancing in the Streets, founded by Elise Bernhardt, dance adopted the same descriptor. New administrative practices evolved to accommodate the needs of site dance (e.g. obtaining city permits), and it began to be recognized by some as its own genre. However, while it is derived from ideologies directly related to aspects of postmodern dance, it is important to acknowledge that site dance incorporates ideas from other arts and scholarly disciplines. It is important to reveal and recognize the existence of earlier intersections of modern dance, public art, and history. In the introduction to *Time and the Dancing Image*, dance historian Deborah Jowitt confessed: “Those of us who write about dance sometimes find that our anxiety to capture and chronicle a notoriously ephemeral art we do it an inadvertent disservice: we focus so intently on it that we sever it from the culture that spawned it and which it serves.”⁹ Modern dance was tied to education, social life, politics, and identity beginning early in the twentieth century. It is inherently a critical art form and it is important to note modern dance’s engagements beyond art.

That is also my aim for this thesis. Chapter One will discuss the American historical pageantry movement that spread the seedlings of civic art and modern dance across the country. It is about public history in the form of commemorations and dramatic narratives and dance's role within that structure. Chapter Two will discuss alternative representations of history by modern choreographers in the 1930s. Chapter Three will use postmodern dance and feminist performance

⁹ Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1988), 7.

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art of the 1960s and 1970s to talk about individual empowerment and the shaping of community. Chapter Four is about professional site-specific dance, about local history, and about pointing out the larger choreography of change. The performance practices of these chapters overlap in intention and artistic philosophy, but ultimately come back around to the starting place of pageantry. This suggests community oriented, civically oriented art is practice with some staying power.

Time, Performance, and Place

Performance Generates Places of Subversive Potential

Performance and place are essential components of site-specific dance. A shift into the state of performance can cause a break in the normal rules governing space and time. Performance theorists Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks have articulated the extraordinary process of performance and elaborate on more traditional definitions of “performance” to emphasize that it generates a liminal *place*. Shanks writes:

Performance is a mode of cultural production that works with material and intellectual resources to create meaning. Performance is a special world set aside from everyday life by contractual arrangements and social suspensions, not entirely hermetically sealed, but a devised world, all elements of which—site, environment, technology, spatial organization, form and content, rules and practices—are conceived, organized, controlled and ultimately experienced by its orders of participant. It is a locale of cultural intervention and innovation, a place of experiment, claim, conflict, negotiation, transgression: a place where preconceptions, expectations, and critical faculties may be dislocated and confounded; where extra-daily occurrences and experiences and changes in status are possible; a place where things may still be at risk—beliefs, classifications, lives.¹⁰

This multi-faceted explanation designates performance as a transformative practice that has the power to make the regular appear extraordinary, and vice versa. Chapter three, which is focused on community and feminist art, will expound on the idea of performance as an arena of experimentation and a world of “social suspensions, not entirely hermetically sealed.” Chapter

¹⁰ Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2001), 27.

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four, on contemporary site dance, will dive further into the contention that performance can be a “locale of cultural intervention and innovation,” bringing socio-political awareness to public life. Feminist artists tried to do this in the 1970s and 1980s, but I contend that their interventions gained little attention outside of the community arts dialogue.

Place is a Text of Culture and History

Shanks refers to “site,” “locale,” and “place,” but never to “space.” The difference between “place” and “space” is what differentiates site-specific dance performed in the context of lived-in environments from dance performed in empty, unmarked spaces of the studio and the theater. Space defines physical landscape and place is the synthesis of space and cultural memory, according to art and place theorist Lucy Lippard. Lippard writes: “Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person’s life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there.”¹¹ By the 1990s, a growing number of choreographers viewed “place” as multi-layered historical texts or archaeological sites of excavation in which to seek physical, emotional, and intellectual answers to questions about local identity.

Dance Intervenes in Culturally and Spatially Produced Sense of Time

Why is site-specific dance uniquely positioned to challenge institutionalized versions of history? The speeds and spaces through which we live our lives enable varying levels of cultural, economic, political, and social engagement. We take for granted constitutions of time and space, both of which are at least in part, culturally regulated and produced. The pace of life varies depending on the places we live: our proximity to an urban center, our careers, the closeness of the

¹¹ Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 7.

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community, the cycle of gentrification, our usage of technological and environmental resources, our level of attention to national and global media, and our divergent senses of permanency, all of which influence our local rhythms. Living, “dancing” history performed in the context of people’s neighborhoods provides an interruption in the regulated spatial and temporal patterns of everyday life, and consequently opens the potential to shift public awareness to the processes of history and change that have impacted their local environments.

What dance can do, which other performance practices cannot, is to make the “interruptions” in public space less intrusive, quietly pulling people into alternate visions of their own world. It invites curiosity instead of reaction. In other words, because dance uses movement, and rarely words, and because it can produce a sense of awe in witnessing unique and powerful juxtapositions of the human body against intimidating urban landscapes, that dance has greater potential to inspire shifting of perspectives. At different times, this strand of dance has been used as a tool of commemoration, identification, exploration, provocation, and critique, and its record of audience engagement is undeniable.

Questioning the Silences

Strangely, despite its relatively lengthy period of development, site-specific dance represents a large silence within the discursive realms of both public art and dance studies. The several scholars who write on site dance including Camille Lefevre, Melanie Kloetzel, and Carolyn Pavlik, have pioneered an inquiry into the genre almost entirely on their own. Kloetzel and Pavlik’s anthology *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces* appeared only two years ago and was the first book published on site dance. Thankfully, their contributions in assembling a kind of “directory” of American site-specific choreographers gave me entry into a practice that is often so localized, it goes unnoticed in broader and necessary discourses about art,

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politics, and identity. Still, though Lefebvre, Kloetzel, and Pavlik regularly describe examples of site-specific dance, they have yet to formulate challenging genre-defining questions or draw wider conclusions about the genre as whole. Nor have they sufficiently analyzed the relationships between site dance and disciplines like art history, anthropology, cultural history, and political theory that inherently shape it.¹²

By contrast, art history scholarship on site-specific and public art is active and fruitful. Site-specific art emerged in the 1960s as a form of conceptual art that was often materialized in large, abstract, urban sculptures, or in Land Art made of wholly organic resources. In the 1960s and seventies through its development, artists investigated the relationship between sculpture and the site's daily processes.¹³ The dialogues between art theorists Lippard, Miwon Kwon, and Nick Kaye, among others have been instrumental in defining and locating site-specificity and site-specific art in relation to contemporary art and public art practices. Lippard investigates the intrinsic cultural component of place, and believes her interest in the "local" stems from a combination of a "commitment to grassroots politics" and a "feminist fascination with the processes of everyday life."¹⁴ Both of these lenses will be explored in relation to dance in chapter one and chapter three. Kwon, on the other hand, separates site-specific art into theoretical categories that describe the artist's motivation and angle of research.¹⁵ According to Kwon's classification, this thesis is concerned with "second level" of artistic intervention in a site:

¹² This is partly due to choreographers' reluctance to speak of their art in feminist, economic, and political terms. The site choreographers featured in chapter four seem to fear categorization and in the case of acknowledging their work as "community art," they may fear dismissal.

¹³ Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik, eds., *Site Dance*, 10.

¹⁴ Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 4.

¹⁵ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

Kwon's first level is an interaction with the material, physical conditions of the site (often in the form of sensory exploration), the second is engagement with historical, social, and political layers of place, and the third involves participation in discursive realms (not actually confined by space).

engagement with historical, social, and political layers of place. For Kwon, the objectives of a site artist include “the aesthetic aspiration to exceed the limitations of traditional media, like painting and sculpture, as well as their institutional setting,” and rising to “the epistemological challenge to relocate meaning from within the art object to the contingencies of its context.” The town pageantry movement is an essential early example of making place the subject of art through grass roots organizing. Additionally, site artists aim for “the radical restructuring of the subject from an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience.”¹⁶ Isadora Duncan, innovator of early modern dance, began to do this in her dancing and her life at the turn of the twentieth century. Why, then, does Kwon avoid discussing performed “movement” and dance in her theory?

Site-specific art theorists scarcely refer explicitly to “dance,” if ever. They mention “performance” generally, but never acknowledge or seem even aware of the large number of site choreographers. This may be due to the fact that so many site-specific choreographers are women who situate themselves between concerns of the art world and those of community organizing, concerns which have long been associated with lower quality art. Or the absence of dance’s contributions in debates about site-specific art may be a reflection of the fact that the small field of dance is among the most marginalized in academic discourse.¹⁷ In dance, there is also the difficulty of documentation. Videos cannot capture all of the elements of a live performance and they privilege a certain audience viewpoint. Generally, very little information is available on site-

¹⁶ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 12.

¹⁷ Especially in contemporary art, but also in cultural studies writings from the last twenty years, I have noticed how the word “performance” has subsumed “dance” as a category. More often than not “performance” refers more closely to theater, which also features attention to bodily expression. But theater relies on gesture to communicate meaning, whereas in dance this is not necessarily true. Most of the examples used in this paper should be considered in the realm of theater, but also that of dance. Dance has greater power to create visual spectacles and illuminate negotiations between more concrete aspects of lived experience—it deserves mention by name.

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specific dance performances outside of newspaper reviews, notes, clippings files, and sometimes, short video clips. They are so ephemeral and so specific, that they seem to slip through the cracks.

Like Lippard and Kwon, public history scholars, except for David Glassberg and his work on town pageantry, rarely, if ever, come into contact with dance as a mode of historical representation. Public history scholarship also is impoverished in the area of place studies. Glassberg asserts that there has yet to be published a serious study of Americans' changing sense of place over time. Yet, public history has been analyzed using performance studies analysis, and is well suited to it. Pageants, reenactments, living history museums, parades, tourist attractions, house museums, and even certain holidays have performative and participatory qualities that impact local and personal identity. They are traditions that mark the passage of time and our understanding of how change took place.

In surveying the scholarly landscape: dance studies is weak in its coverage of place-specific work, site-specific and public art studies are weak in their investigation of dance, and public history scholarship rarely comes into contact with dance, though it does converge with performance studies at distinct junctions. In seeking to understand these absences and interpret dance across disciplinary boundaries, it was necessary to move back further in time to assess whether or not site-specific dance was actually "born" in the 1960s, as the dance studies narrative asserts, or instead, whether it is founded on a combination of ideologies that had sprung up fifty years before. In juxtaposing the histories of Progressive Era American historical town pageantry and historically oriented site-specific dance of the 1990s and early 2000s, a thread emerged. Dance in these genres occupied the nexus of place, public history, and embodiment for over one hundred years. If this particular combination of interests still holds urgency, or perhaps holds urgency again now (in a cyclical pattern), why? And more importantly, how does the unique combination

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of time, space, and public participation resonate in the state of “performance” to create a unique disruption and critique of dominant cultural continuums to make space for idiosyncratic versions of history, place, and identity? This is a question yet to be answered in depth using dance in scholarly conversation, but which has begun to be theorized at the intersection of performance studies and public history studies, particularly as designated by Scott Magelssen in his critique of living history practice, in particular. Individual site-specific choreographers, however, approach this question of “how” dance can accomplish goals of critique and open exploration on a daily basis, often using the local powers of ritual, oral history, and community participation to create art that has depth and transformative potential.

Educating or Heightening Awareness: Spectacle of the Other vs. Inclusive Models

One way of comparing the differences in the molding of time and space in representations of public history in living history and dance is to look at their relative continuity or discontinuity in relationship to the present.¹⁸ For example, many commemorative performances of local history in the twentieth century showed generations as continuous entities, sometimes depicting multiple characters representing different times in one place. “But by the late 1920s,” Glassberg wrote, “it was far more common to represent a single historical event rather than a sequence of events, and to choose that event from the distant past.”¹⁹ The heritage industry that began to emerge in the 1930s with open-air museums like Colonial Williamsburg and Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village, increasingly isolated the past “as a foreign country,” in the well-known words of David Lowenthal, capitalizing on the sudden increased mobility of Americans and treating the past as a tourist destination.

¹⁸ David Glassberg, “Public History and the Study of Memory,” *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Living history museums and public history professionals to the present day make public education their primary goal. But often, especially since the innovation of utilizing first-person interpretation practices at living history museums, public historians have carried on the tradition of isolating the past. Such extreme differentiation from the present creates a “Disneyland” effect, erasing much of the potential for visitors’ critical engagement with the past. Although living history museums would prefer not to admit it, their financial success is highly determined by its visitors’ pleasures in suspending disbelief and entering a naturalistic microcosm of a bygone world. Theater, dance, and all of the arts are forms of entertainment in this realm. But within the artistry or spectacle, they contain the capacity to instruct and inform. Living history museums could be considered a form of edu-tainment, whereas most site-specific dance work by the second half of the twentieth century was focused on a combination of artistry and heightening the audience’s critical awareness. Instead of fixing historical knowledge in one place, and one time with actor-interpreters and a limited archive, postmodern site choreographers were more interested exploring process and participation in history and change. When one visits a living history museum, like Plimoth Plantation, one moves from the twenty-first century to the seventeenth in an instant and the process in between is entirely lost. Site-specific dance typically does not tend toward this same kind of illusionism. Its context is the present, even if its subject is the past (or multiple pasts). Furthermore, whereas institutions of public history work to attract visitors to their sites, site choreographers often make the first move and put themselves and their dances in the lived-in public space of audience’s lives.

Drawing our attention to the structures and people around us, site-specific dance is naturally involved in an audience-choreographer dialogue of civic engagement. Humanistic and optimistic, “civic engagement” describes a level of social and political awareness needed to make a difference

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in the civic life of communities. It describes a care for the health of existing systems of organization and an understanding of the individual's place and responsibility within the whole.²⁰

Dance is an inherently social art. Choreography can be seen as a patterning of human relationships. For example, modern dancers Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey took up the project of creating individuality within rhythmic unity and also examined the self's relation to society, especially during the 1930s.

Gendered Approaches: Site-Specific Dance, and Public History

Dance is a female-dominated form and the large majority of site choreographers are also women, disproportionately so. Embodied physical action and expression in public is a demonstration of control. Some choreographers, like Jo Kreiter of San Francisco, seek to show women in positions of power and athletic strength and hope to engender a sense of political empowerment. Kloetzel and Pavlik admitted in 2004 that while some choreographers may not highlight a feminist agenda, "it is hard to overlook that women are reclaiming space with a vengeance."²¹ Yet, they do not further their observation or try to explain why. It is important to investigate and see Kloetzel and Pavlik's definition of site choreographers as artists who "tend" and "attend" to place, as gendered work. Beginning with community arts developments in the 1960s (and several earlier antecedents, like Anna Halprin) site-specific choreographers have "tended" to the health, justice, and community understanding of the immediate environment that shapes our everyday reality. But they were almost exclusively female, and almost always shaped in part by the various feminist movements of the twentieth century. Consequently, site-specific dance, as considered in this paper, embodies both a care for community and environment and an

²⁰Thomas Ehrlich and Anne Colby. "Introduction," *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, ed., Thomas Ehrlich (West Port, CT: Oryx Press, 2000), vi-xxvi.

²¹Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik, "Reclaiming Place: Female Choreographers on Site," *In Dance*, (October 2006): 6-7.

assertion of agency in public space.

Suppositions around gender differences in public history also need further study and consideration, as David Glassberg points out. “Who does history, and how?” Glassberg asks. “It seems that in the U.S., men narrate history as a succession of events, whereas women curate history as a web of objects and places.”²² This is just a hypothesis of Glassberg’s but there is ample evidence in female-dominated realm of site-specific dance that site choreographers conceive of their work as “web” of material, topographical, and human connections. For example, pageant masters and women who organized early twentieth century pageants read instructional guidebooks which explained the composition of theatrical vignettes as “knitting a web of patriotism.” Then eighty years later, writing of site-specific postmodern choreographer Meredith Monk, Deborah Jowitt recounts that Monk’s artistry “makes us aware of the submerged connections between islands of difference.”²³ Moreover theorists like Shanks and Pearson describe site work as a “weaving of connections,”²⁴ and Lippard claims the genre’s value is that “artists can make the connections visible,” especially those between public and private space.²⁵ Weaving, knitting, and connectivity are all productive “home-making” tasks. When transferred to the level of a community, neighborhood, or to larger society, dance can knit a web of human and spatial connections. The fluid nature of movements strung one after another illustrate that spatial and interpersonal relationships and transitions—body to wall, body to body, face to face—that form the daily dynamic values and identities of a place.

There is certainly beauty in this kind of display of human interdependence, but most often, there is also an intended service. And though public history was “created” and signaled as

²² David Glassberg, “Public History and the Study of Memory,” *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 23.

²³ Deborah Jowitt, ed., *Meredith Monk* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 16.

²⁴ Pearson and Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology*, xvii.

²⁵ Lippard, *Lure of the Local*, 19.

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different from the history field at large in the 1970s, the idea of “encouraging the utility of history in society” through more “service-oriented,”²⁶ *professional* work, as opposed to academic work, has existed at least since the turn of the twentieth century. What it comes down to is a discussion of tradition and the uses of performing a kind of collective history in the present. If public history is about the usefulness of history to the present, then the strand of site-specific dance that I am looking at is about the usefulness of dance as history and also about dance's role as an objector or co-conspirator to larger societal change. Here, “change” encompasses physical or commercial development, socio-political change or empowerment, and most importantly a shifting of awareness consciousness in the minds of audience members.

Contradictory Impulses

Within site-specific dance that takes history as its subject, contradictions abound. It situates female dancers and choreographers in a position of power within the politics of public space, while giving them a stereotypically gendered “connective,” “local,” and “ephemeral” role. At once, it maintains (and thrives on) the concept of a “singular unrepeatable instance of site-bound knowledge and experience”—a nostalgic desire for markers of former roots—at the same time as it embraces a “nomadic fluidity of subjectivity, identity, and spatiality.”²⁷ It is based on a conservative desire to keep things the way they are, holding on to old value systems and social norms. Yet, it also contributes directly to experimentation, the constant flux of personal identity, place, and culture, and perhaps increases our sense of transience.

The level of duality may vary, case by case, but either way, it poses a new model of relating to time—perhaps a model that may resist the concept of “progress” as a whole. Georgio

²⁶ Barbara J. Howe, “Reflections on an Idea: NCPH’s First Decade,” *The Public Historian* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 85.

²⁷ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 8.

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Agamben wrote, “the notion of a homogeneous continuum of time leads us to believe we can fill in the gaps of knowledge, while at the same time obfuscates the fact that we often determine the shape of the jar first, then pick from the multiplicity of shards based on those that fit.”²⁸ In his scholarship on living history, Magelssen critiques the fact that most living history museums situate their narratives in a linear fashion, based on a concept of American “progress.” Historical narratives in site-specific dance choreography are rarely oriented this way, but the performances themselves might be seen as operating as part of community development narratives in the process of gentrification.

Living history museums and site-specific performance have sought to “progress forward” in different ways. The former is often towards heightening a sense of “accuracy” in its ability to hold onto exact details of the past, while the latter tends to seek some kind of human, social, or community impact that starts a conversation about the present. Rather than to educate and entertain, many site artists hope to galvanize deeper public involvement within their community or environment. Living history’s obsession with remodeling a historical moment with scientific accuracy sometimes loses its active teaching value in the present. In the end, the grass roots nature of site-specific dance makes it more actively political, and hence more progressive in driving toward the future.

Often discontinuous with or “dislocated” from larger histories of dance, public art, and American history, this story of site-specific dance is one of thinking, moving bodies that revealed the continuities and interconnections in local histories—opening the theatrical curtain on the ultimate primary source document: where we live. Instead of creating Plimoth Plantations and simulations to modify the landscape to suit one point along a linear continuum of time, in site-

²⁸ Scott Magelssen, *Living History Museums: Undoing History Through Performance* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 136.

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specific art, scientific ‘accuracy’ and ‘authenticity’ are subordinated to draw particular attention to the human element of history—to the human faces on the underside of our “progress” and development—to reveal that the audiences themselves are those faces and agents of change. The power of site-specific art lies in its interdisciplinarity and its ability to embody seemingly contradictory impulses.²⁹

I hope to demonstrate a web of the uses of site dance in the twentieth century, which, admittedly, may occasionally seem like a narrative of progress leading to the most sophisticated synthesis of practice and intention (which I claim is reached in the 1990s), when in reality, it is not so simple because the time lines overlap. The artistic practices of the choreographers, dancers, and directors featured in this discussion are meant to provide a particular picture of site-specific dance’s forms and uses in the last one hundred years that is by no means comprehensive. I have chosen to show the layered growth of the discipline, with respect to historically motivated intentions and approaches, through a somewhat linear unfolding of subgenres that constitute or contributed to site dance.

In *Living History Museums*, Magelssen called for more hybrid and experimental forms of living history, arguing that:

In...the written history of living museums, the institutional understandings of time and space, the approach to the past, and the models of performance used in representing the past—there exist tendencies to reduce, confine, stabilize, interpret, simply, sharpen, and focus. These tendencies are the most threatening to thought... it would be more responsible to seek those practices that open up a discourse, trouble the narratives, ask questions, tease out limits of understanding, make visible the gaps, insert anxiety, and foment doubt.³⁰

²⁹ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 26.

The disciplines that inform site-specific art include: anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, psychology, natural and cultural histories, architecture and urbanism, computer science, political theory, philosophy and even fashion, music, advertising, film, and television.

³⁰ Magelssen, *Living History Museums*, 166.

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Unbeknownst to him, postmodern dance had already offered an answer. In its many forms, site-specific dance played a part in articulating the complexities of change, development, and progress and in contextualizing history where it is lived. It was and still is grass roots and even revolutionary in its capacity to activate critical awareness and incite dialogue about how municipalities, the nation, particular communities, and urban identities change over time.

Serious studies of gender, body politics, class, race, economics intersect with site-specific dance could and should be done. One could also inquire further into how specific performances formulated branding of place or specific dialogues that followed. I am most concerned with the overall practice of more community-, and historically-based site-specific work—and most interested in dance's pressing salience in times of large scale social and structural change. I cannot be comprehensive through this college thesis, but I will trace the history of modern dance's engagement with socially motivated art, and the various forms it found voice through in the twentieth century.

Chapter One

Mother Nature, Mother Nurture: The Uses and Legacy of Modern Dance in Town Pageantry

In August of 1913, American Pageantry Association (APA) President, William Chauncy Langdon, directed the following dance scene in his *Pageant of Darien*:

The Interlude begins with smoothly-flowing music, ever advancing and receding, in the violins. From the water comes the Spirit of the Tide, the Changing Tide, periodically changing herself and changing all things. Her color is chiefly a greenish blue, the color of shallow sea-water. Following her come a body of Water Spirits flowing up over the shore and up the land in obedience to the Tide. She beckons, lures, guides them over the land.³¹

Produced primarily between 1905 and the early 1920s, pageants were outdoor community dramas, where, as Langdon, wrote in 1913, “The place is the hero and the development of the community the plot.”³² Dance scholar Naima Prevots defines the pageant as “the story of an idea: Peace, Progress, Education, Brotherhood, Liberty, Freedom”. The typical pageant, performed in an open field, consisted of three to seven self-contained episodes representing different periods in history. Produced locally across the country, often in conjunction with historic anniversaries, they featured a spoken prologue, vocal and orchestral music, and expressive and symbolic movement.³³

In the face of urbanization, increased immigration, and proliferation of communications and transportation networks, pageant scholar, David Glassberg explains that the town unit required redefinition.³⁴ Many rural towns battled population decline as farmers moved to cities for work.

³¹ William Chauncy Langdon, *The Pageant of Darien* (New York: Clover Press, 1913), 31.

³² William Chauncy Langdon, “America, Like England, Has Become Pageant Mad,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1913.

³³ Naima Prevots, *American Pageantry: A Movement for Art & Democracy* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1990), 4.

³⁴ David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 281.

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The Country Life Movement and American historical pageantry sought to counteract these economic changes by boosting local pride and promoting the “country town as an ideal place to live.”³⁵ A European form that inspired an American civic-artistic movement, historical pageantry had sweeping appeal because of its attention to place-specific folk identities. The part narrative, part allegorical pageant form offered unique potential for the historical and cultural self-definition of American communities in transition. Led by middle class progressives and dramatic artists, pageantry assumed responsibility for conveying historical information on historic days while simultaneously encouraging full democratic, community participation through art and play. Prevots describes it concisely: “It was an evening or afternoon of entertainment; an educational and moral vehicle for change.”³⁶ Prevots contends that the pageantry movement was the first instance in American history in which a diverse group of educators, dramatists, dancers, musicians, citizens, women, men, and children united around the cause and concept of community arts as a vital element to democratic process.³⁷

Since thousands of pageants were performed across the country during the Progressive era, it is difficult to synthesize their many intentions and forms, but scholars Glassberg and Prevots have documented the American pageant movement in detail. Michael Kammen also comments on pageantry, but participates in its dismissal by focusing on its amateurism. I narrow on pageantry’s collaborative relationship with dance and on the ways in which it served as a precursor to site-specific dance practices of the 1990s. Prevots gives true attention to the role of dance in her study on pageantry, and I hope to show the ways dance allowed women to take on a prominent but anonymous and highly gendered role in “performing” history. Using the metaphor of “Mother Nature,” alluded to frequently in pageant publications, I will concentrate on how progressive

³⁵ Prevots, *American Pageantry*, 42.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

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ideals and hopes of civic engagement motivated the use of dancing outdoors. After relate the relationship between pageantry and dance, I will first describe how attention to *nature* made pageant dance “site-specific” by contemporary definitions. Second, I will show that dance served to make many pageants continuous narratives of progress, engaging participants in the sense that they were part of history and under guardianship of the *nurturing* women involved. I will explain how progressive education influenced both dance and pageantry, third, and I conclude with the ways pageantry was a platform for the spread of early modern dance.

Pageantry as a Collaborator with Early Modern Dance

As Glassberg and Prevots have shown in great depth and detail, historical pageantry abounded in contradictions. To appeal to the elites who once dominated public historical consciousness and to ground the new in a sense of tradition, pageantry “borrowed liberally from earlier forms...the procession, tableaux vivants, costumed reenactments.” But new elements were needed to make “pageantry the characteristic form of representing the public history in the Progressive Era.” According to Glassberg, these vitalizing elements were “modern dance, the reenactment scenes from social and domestic as well as political life, and the elaborate grand finales resembling playground holiday festivals.”³⁸ As indicated in Langdon’s scene of the “Changing Tide” in the *Pageant of Darien*, movement served a crucial role in demonstrating and even glorifying the passage of time. Dancing in pageants was usually choreographed, but free in form, in imitation of Isadora Duncan, and amateur. It was performed through four or five different “Dancing Interludes”—a word used to describe their role in connecting disparate local stories, not simply filling an intermission. Described as Greek, folk, aesthetic, and expressive dance, it was decidedly different from ballet and vaudeville dancing. By the Progressive era, the acknowledged benefits of dancing were no longer confined to the physical, but also encompassed the

³⁸ Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 284.

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psychological, intellectual, moral, and emotional, due in large part to the outlook of progressive educator, G. Stanley Hall.³⁹

In the spirit of civic betterment, the pageantry movement held on to the local imagination and engendered a spirit of inclusiveness that helped support and serve as a testing ground for expressive modern dance. Modern expressive dance was quietly developing in certain corners of the country, particularly through the solo dancing of innovators Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, and the marriage of early modern dance and the American Pageantry Movement reinforced the utopian ideals of both artistic practices. François Delsarte, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, and others created systems of physical training that aimed to promote healthy bodies, teach spatial awareness and impart graceful coordination. These practices influenced pageant dance and were part of the same progressive arts, play, and physical education dialogue, but “symbolic” early modern dance was the pageant’s crowning jewel.

Guidebooks on pageantry and civic theater such as Ralph Davol’s *Handbook of American Pageantry* were often couched in high-blown language: “Modern pageantry,” Davol wrote, “aims to increase the world’s store of happiness by interpreting the meaning of human life and by bringing art and beauty into the minds of all people.”⁴⁰ All of the guidebooks feature a prominent section on dance and its uses, and they all proclaim that the dancing interludes differentiate the American historical pageant from its English counterpart. Expressing the “soul” of the community, the individual, and the nation is a common theme in writings by pageant masters and

³⁹ Selma Jean Cohen, ed., “Social, Folk, and Modern Dance Education,” *The International Encyclopedia of Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), <http://www.oxforddance.com/entry?entry=t171.e1784.s0007> (accessed April 10, 2011).

Folk dance typically drew more from immigrant forms, but was used mostly for physical education and conditioning initiatives. “Folk” also designated the fact that it was performed for the participants, “not a display for observers.” Greek and expressive dance (sometimes called ‘natural dance’) are all used to describe the dancing of Isadora Duncan. Aesthetic dancing was introduced by Dudley A. Sargent at the Harvard School of Physical Education. It was a combination of ballet, social, and folk dance steps.

⁴⁰ Ralph Davol, *A Handbook of American Pageantry* (Taunton, MA: Davol Publishing, 1914), 17.

early dance innovators. Davol declared in 1914, “Pageantry *is* expression—a visible manifestation of the community soul, and should not be simply a sensational exhibition.”⁴¹ Art’s revolutionary potential was clearly not to be taken lightly.

In the essay “I See America Dancing,” Duncan also equated the spirit of democracy with exalted expression of the soul. Like early modern dance innovators, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, Duncan sought to express the national spirit and mythology more than the local. According to Duncan, an “America dancing” comparable to Walt Whitman’s “America Singing,” would be “the vibration of the American soul striving upward through labor to Harmonious life.”⁴² Duncan describes that when the children of America learn to express artistic feeling, “it will make all of them Beautiful Beings worthy of the name of Democracy.”⁴³ To Duncan, the ideal dance was the progressive-minded “living leap of the child springing toward the heights, toward its future accomplishment, toward a new great vision of life that would express America.”⁴⁴ The ambitious and spiritual aims of Duncan’s ideal dance were suited to pageantry’s goal of inspiring Americans through embodied collective experience. Perhaps, after all, the correspondence is no coincidence, as Duncan mothered one of the most prominent theater reformers’ children. Among his many writings on civic theater, the father, Gordon Craig, was widely known by pageant leaders for the remark: “When Drama went indoors, it died.” The two had a wildly passionate affair in 1904, during which Duncan reports a lively exchange of artistic ideas.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴² Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance*, ed. Sheldon Cheney (New York: Theatre Arts Inc., 1928), 47.

This essay of Duncan’s was compiled from two handwritten notes and first published in the *Herald Tribune* on October 2, 1927.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁵ Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1927), 135.

“Site-specific” by Nature

Spirits of the Land

As in site-specific dance of the 1990s, pageant performance sites were carefully chosen for symbolic value and accessibility.⁴⁶ Advocates truly believed in bringing art to where life was lived: “History is more convincing to an audience when the players stand with feet on *terra firma* than when clattering on boards behind footlights.”⁴⁷ Davol’s 1914 handbook glorifies natural landscapes and the everyday settings of American towns: “Like the American eagle, a national festival must have freedom. Mother Earth must be its tutelary saint.”⁴⁸ The loose clothing, bare feet, and free energy popularized by Duncan, provided a ready icon mother nature, herself. Attention to essences of place and environment seems a logical feature of the pageant form. In 1911, Langdon’s dancing characters in opening scene of *The Pageant of Thetford*, (Vermont) included the “Spirit of the Mountains... tall, dark, clothed in green” and whose movements were “slow and stately.” The “Spirit of the River” executed “swift and smooth movements,” draped in blue, and the “Spirit of the Intervale” wore “pale gold” revealed “vibrant” stillness, alternating with movements that were “rich, opulent, votive, with a suggestion of maternal womanliness.”⁴⁹ These roles were ceremonial, and many pageants emphasized nature to resist the speed of modern life. Visions of Mother Nature invoked the past and the depictions of spirits of place reinforced reverence of the beauty surrounding them.

Gordon Craig’s most well-known quote to pageant masters was likely: In her autobiography, Duncan writes, “It was my fate to inspire the great love of this genius; and it was my fate to endeavour to reconcile the continuing of my own career with his love. Impossible combination! After the first few weeks of wild, impassioned love-making, there began the waging of the fiercest battle that was ever known, between the genius of Gordon Craig and the inspirations of my Art.”

⁴⁶ Prevots, *American Pageantry*, 3.

⁴⁷ Davol, *A Handbook of American Pageantry*, 37.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ William Chauncy Langdon, *Book of Words : The Pageant of Thetford, in Celebration of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Granting of the Charter* (White River Junction, VT: Vermonter Press, 1911), 9.

On the Stage of Town Development

Another way pageantry corresponds with site-specific dance practices of the late twentieth century is in the attention paid to town development and planning. Where Darien, Connecticut's pageant in 1913 was concerned with posing and answering more identity-based questions such as, "What is home to a commuter? Of what nature was the country and village life that led up to the life of the suburban town of the present?,"⁵⁰ pageants like Thetford's in 1911, were aimed at producing more concrete solutions and results. The foreward of *The Pageant of Thetford* reads: "In connection with the Pageant, the people of the town have entered upon a movement for a general development of their resources,—agricultural, educational, and social." The University of Vermont and the U.S. Department of Agriculture partnered with the town to determine plans of action.⁵¹ Several months following the pageant, Langdon sent a letter to the Russell Sage Foundation detailing the implementation of twelve reform efforts spawned by the pageant including more formal collection of local history, beginning a choral group, and requesting a soil survey from the Department of Agriculture.⁵² Langdon, more than other pageant masters, took seriously the call for pageantry to be an art that inspires civic engagement. He realized that positive change wouldn't happen magically, so he often helped towns mobilize toward next steps. The prospect of inciting institutional change in the artistic and cultural life of a town was of great interest to pageant specialist, Mary Porter Beegle. She dreamt that the "formation of a local orchestra" or "classes in dancing" might be established in towns after residents' temporary tastes.⁵³ It is hard to measure the economic, social, and results of artistic intervention, but for many, the arts provided a new way to spend one's leisure time.

⁵⁰ Langdon, *The Pageant of Darien*, 5.

⁵¹ Langdon, *The Pageant of Thetford*, 5.

⁵² William Chauncy Langdon, *Letter to the Russell Sage Foundation* (February 24, 1911) excerpted in Prevots, *American Pageantry*, 47-48.

⁵³ Prevots, *American Pageantry*, 95.

Civic Engagement by Nurture

Visions of Fluid Progress

From 1876 to 1916 World's fairs held in major U.S. cities served to promote the nation's economic, technological, and artistic successes. Fairs like the Columbian Exposition of 1893 were diverse attractions, but categorizing exhibits in a clear hierarchy belied their heterogeneity. In the ordering of these symbolic universes, Robert Rydell, writes, "one function of the expositions was to make the social world comprehensible," yet the organizers formulated "the direction of society from a particular class perspective."⁵⁴ In 1901, President William McKinley proclaimed: "Expositions are the timekeepers of progress."⁵⁵ They marked progress by comparing nations in adjacent exhibits, giving Americans a panoptic sense of their place in the evolutionary order. In contrast, grass-roots traditions, like pageantry, aimed to establish a sense of local consensus, and were also used to mark and make sense of the passage of time.

Pageants were less focused on commercial gain and conveying nationalism. Instead they showed different generations' struggles and triumphs together in two-hour-long local commemorations. Rather than putting generations up for comparison with one another, pageantry was conceived as a fluid form to bolster its aims of inspiring linear progress. If the message of World's fairs was the current imperial might and resources of the United States, pageants seemed to say, 'We have weathered change before, and we will triumph again.' Dancing and music revealed the beauty of the transitions and changes among social, political, and economic troubles. Even if pageant vignettes were written to highlight a particular American theme, unlike the convention of World's fairs, those themes were not isolated in separate buildings, but were danced and acted as continuous narratives with real momentum. Because the narrative material was

⁵⁴ Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

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presented in isolated historical events, Kammen suggests that pageants isolated the past from the present.⁵⁶ This claim is likely based on a consideration of patriotic pageants and reenactments produced in 1890s, and in generalizing, he fails to take seriously the primacy of the dance element to the leaders of American pageantry between 1905 and 1925. Dancing carried momentum into the present, engaging a sense of civic duty. At the end of *The Pageant of Darien*, “The Man” builds a fire with his family and dancers dressed as angels emerge from the woods. The fire symbolizes the “Place of Rest and Strength.” The other pageant performers add more wood and the fire continues to grow as the town begins to sing. Final images like this or of people on horseback at the top of a hill indicate the symbolic threshold of the future.

Women’s Role in History and Change

In the cases of pageantry and expressive dance, spirits of nature are assumed to be female. While men did occasionally dance in pageants, they rarely played symbolic solo parts, and almost never directed the dance scenes. The positioning of “Mother Earth” and other nature spirits as model progressive women, made pageants celebrations of femininity, but also contributed to the conservative view that women had a natural power and place in the domestic sphere. Young women in draped white gowns suggested the celebration of the youth, beauty, and fertility of a town, whatever problems it faced. Nevertheless, pageants also offered the opportunity for women to actively participate, and even lead, an aspect of civic life. It is probably no coincidence that the women’s suffrage movement used the pageant form before it became the primary outlet for local commemorations. In most pageants figures such as “Spirit of the Tide” in *The Pageant of Darien*, and the “Spirit of the Home” in *The Pageant of Thetford* acknowledged women’s contributions to history and community by emphasizing women’s roles of connecting generations, keeping time,

⁵⁶ Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 280.

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and cultivating of places of rest and relief.

Davol concludes his chapter on dance in pageantry with the rather awkward statement that “the female form divine in graceful action supplies the most delightful sensation in the world.”⁵⁷ This statement seems to reduce the role of women to merely decoration. Dance in pageants offered new opportunities for women to create and have a hand in civic life, but it also established a separate part within the pageant framework where women were represented as quiet, graceful, and appealing. Still, in contrast to Victorian standards, Linda Tomko notes that Duncan created a “fluid subjectivity for the female dancer.” Duncan’s example freed dance from an essentialist sexual identity.⁵⁸

Acting as a mother and a daughter, Duncan prompted the “children of America” to “come forth with great strides, leaps and bounds, with lifted forehead and far-spread arms” to dance “the language of our pioneers, fortitude of our heroes, the justice, kindness, purity of our women, and through it all the inspired love and tenderness of our mothers.”⁵⁹ In pageants, women either played nurturers or forces of destruction, such as the “Spirit of War.” Most female dance roles however were keepers of moral and emotional health, such as “Principle.” Davol saw pageantry’s “lyrical impulse,” demonstrated in dance interludes, as making “more keenly alive those fine, sensitive feelings which round out human character and give birth to such arts as represent the flower of the nation’s growth.”⁶⁰ References to “birth” and tending to the “flower” of “growth,” link the cultivation of community connectedness to the grace, poise and “natural” qualities of women.

Progressive Education as a Mother of Modern Dance

Progressive Goals and Teaching a Useable History

⁵⁷ Davol, *A Handbook of American Pageantry*, 200.

⁵⁸ Linda J. Tomko, *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance 1890-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 70.

⁵⁹ Duncan, *The Art of the Dance*, 50.

⁶⁰ Davol, *A Handbook of American Pageantry*, 45.

In the early 1900s, locating a collective perspective on national and local histories became central to how communities dealt with the rapid technological and social changes brought on by industrial capitalism and mass culture. By 1903, Progressive educators like Charles McMurry noticed the public need for a usable history, acknowledging a need for democratic histories of the everyday to help children understand their neighborhoods and how to participate in civic life. “The teacher of history... has been brought to a change of base,” he wrote, adding that “The Aim of History Instruction” was “to bring the past into manifest relation to the present, and show how historical ideas and experiences are being constantly projected into the present, and are, in fact, the controlling forces in our social and industrial life.”⁶¹ Pageants like Percy MacKaye’s, *Caliban*, for example, featured the constant presence of a “serene female figure” playing the “Spirit of Time.” Pageantry also drew from John Dewey’s well-known ideas on educational reform, which challenged rote learning and advocated for education through experience. Cultivation of play, attention to surrounding environments, and artistic expression were important components of Dewey’s philosophy.⁶²

Aside from historical pageants’ celebration of nature, which served to remedy the perceived disconnection from the land, and the use of dance to show a world of connections, their educational value to children and immigrants was often cited. Sometimes pageants sought to teach a common history, sometimes they celebrated the richness of a town’s immigrants and workers, and sometimes they attempted to teach a political lesson. In *The Pageant of Stoughton*, Massachusetts, held in 1926, the final movement scene demonstrated “Anarchy” circling a group of immigrants with a red flag. “The Spirit of New England” calls forth “Liberty” to eliminate

⁶¹ Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 58.

⁶² John Dewey, *The School and Society, Being Three Lectures by John Dewey, Supplemented by a statement of the University Elementary School* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1900), 21.

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“Anarchy” from the pageant stage.⁶³ Less political pageant writers like Constance D’arcy MacKay, held a more inclusive view, suggesting that more pageants should ask what “America” gave immigrants, and not only the other way around.⁶⁴

Pageants involved anywhere from 200 to 5,000 producers and performers and typically reached audiences of 2,000 up through 80,000.⁶⁵ Large audiences and the common practice of publishing pageant texts for wide distribution gave progressive educators the chance to inform and engage with large and diverse populations.

Physical Education, Playgrounds, and Dance in Education

Progressives took for granted the importance of arts education and learning through play. “The educative value of art as a vehicle of power is everywhere recognized by school teachers,” Davol wrote, “The pageant is a hundred-headed teacher who educates by wholesale.”⁶⁶ In her 1916 book, *Community Drama and Pageantry*, Mary Porter Beegle, a graduate of Teacher’s College and a professor at Barnard College, wrote: “Education is abstraction, not a concrete object.”⁶⁷ For this reason, the dance component of pageants was integral to progressives.

The Playground Movement played a large role in defining pageantry in the early years. Mass culture was seen by all leaders of pageantry and expressive dance as polluting the public imagination, especially that of youth. Rapid urbanization had forced many Americans and children into slums, and the Playground Movement addressed the need for a safe space for children to interact, socialize, and learn. The concept of learning through play was also important in progressive education. Davol weighs in: “Any fool can work but it takes a genius to play. The need of better recreation opportunities for the masses arises from oppressive industrial conditions,

⁶³ Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 250.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁶⁵ Prevots, *American Pageantry*, 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶⁷ Mary Porter Beegle, *Community Drama and Pageantry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916), 64.

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unsanitary tenement-houses and bar-rooms.”⁶⁸

Mary Wood Hinman, mentor of modern dancer, Doris Humphrey, served on the folk dance committee of Playground Association of America (PAA), taught summer courses on directing festivals at Teachers College and worked at the Hull House in Chicago.⁶⁹ Dance was the most open-ended “play” element in pageantry, showcasing dance as a living art, unbound by technique. Beegle saw a need for constant experimentation with the form. “Vital things grow,” she wrote, “to define and standardize is to kill.”⁷⁰ While dramatic, Beegle clearly expresses a resistant view toward systems of categorization and evaluation. She praised pageantry for providing “a sane outlet for the unconquerable play-spirit which, when lacking outlets, may become a source of danger instead of a benefit.”⁷¹ This heightened attention to organic creation became an important part of modern dance in both the pedagogic and choreographic methods of artists at the Teacher’s College and in Margaret D’Houbler’s dance program at the University of Wisconsin.

Percy MacKaye thought of pageants as a “new self-government in which political self-government must be rooted to have its flowering; self-government of those leisure hours which the vast movements of labor are fighting for and gradually attaining...from which our repressed generations have been too long divorced by the treadmills of machine industrialism.”⁷² Here, MacKaye, whose father was the protégé of Francois Delsarte, the teacher of emotional expressive methods (which also influenced Duncan, St. Denis, and Shawn), encouraged kinetic bodily awareness as a means to the political understanding of the self.

Pageantry as a Platform for Early Modern Dance

Allowing for Expansion and Legitimizing the Form

⁶⁸ Davol, *A Handbook of American Pageantry*, 109.

⁶⁹ Tomko, *Dancing Class*, 155.

⁷⁰ Beegle, *Community Drama and Pageantry*, 43.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷² Percy MacKaye, “The Gospel of Community Drama,” *Blue Triangle News* 96 (1920).

While the dance interests of early revolutionaries like Duncan and St. Denis were aligned with Progressive Era optimism and opposed to mass culture, the American Pageantry Movement strengthened the public acceptance of expressive dance, challenging narrow Victorian perceptions of the body and extolling dance as a healthy pastime for girls.⁷³ Furthermore, according to Prevots, “The American Pageantry Movement gave dance a role in society for men, women, and children who were not dancers, just citizens.”⁷⁴ The widespread pageantry movement publicized dance in photographs and articles, while offering numerous opportunities to gain practical experience and to experiment with symbolic dance for anyone willing to take the “Director of the Dance” role. In addition to a monetary bonus of about five hundred dollars,⁷⁵ pageantry converted many a schoolteacher to the cause of dance, and anyone studying at Teacher’s College between 1911 and 1925 would have come into contact with ideas about the uses of pageantry as an active learning tool as well as justifications for early modern dance through new ideas about physical education.⁷⁶ Dance found students, teachers, and teaching methods already converted to its cause through the exchange of pageant methods and exaltations in the press and guidebooks. Moreover, many gained dance experience through local practice and classes offered in universities. In other words, through pageantry, youth who found fulfillment in expressive dance over Delsartian physical culture, women who took on directorial roles in pageants, and individuals who were interested in the uses of active play in progressive education all became part of a grass-roots network of Americans that fostered the development of the American movement tradition that became known as modern dance. The first major group dance choreographed by Shawn and St. Denis was *The Dance*

⁷³ Davol, *A Handbook of American Pageantry*, 104.

⁷⁴ Prevots, *American Pageantry*, 131.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 132-3.

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*Pageant of Egypt, Greece, and India.*⁷⁷ Modern dance innovator Lester Horton choreographed and performed in pageants for years growing up in Indianapolis. In short, pageantry connected aspiring modern dancers and fed the idealist vision of modern dance as the form that would best express “America.”

Setting the Precedent for Modern Dance to Engage with History

Pageantry and early modern dance explored similar mythic, often allegorical subjects. The casting of Ruth St. Denis, for example, as “Freedom” in *Lexington: A Pageant Drama of the American Freedom*, gives dance an essential role in the performance of American history. This legacy of dance’s responsibility in representing history continued into the 1930s, when modern dance became professionalized. Through pageantry, dancing became a way not just to fill space between acts, but to represent and glorify women as nurturers and reformers in the process of change.

The Pageantry Movement had a very strong national presence and according to at least a few sources, the word “pageant” was used indiscriminately in publications of the time. Pageantry was a “think globally, act locally” kind of grass-roots movement, well before that paradigm was labeled, and for this reason it fostered the rapid spread of ideas about dance in books, associations, and higher education. It fostered genuine curiosity and exploration at the local level. However, due to World War I, the growing malaise with reform, and “revival of profound social divisions,” progressive optimism was on the decline. Pageants became standardized and were published for use with school children, leaving the practice of specific community-based, and intergenerational creative processes by the wayside.⁷⁸

As dance moved forward after the demise of pageantry, it too abandoned for a period the

⁷⁷ “Plan Dance Tableau for Greek Theater,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 1916.

⁷⁸ Prevots, *American Pageantry*, 9.

community, site-specific element of that earlier moment, however, retained almost everything else. Pageantry and dance sought to create expressively embodied depictions of democratic, visionary progress through uniquely American art forms. Both forms were legitimized in part by their Progressive goals of educating through experience, making connections to the natural American landscape, and laying claim to the expression of local and national historical narratives—all of which gave civic festivities substance and grounding. Universities carried on the tradition of dance as a “useful” art for the development of mind, body, and soul, even if this notion disappeared from the professional modern dance world. During dance’s twenty-year affair with pageantry, the solo tradition of modern dance allowed dancers to reach the status of specialized “genius,” which eclipsed the Progressive-era notion that made “everyone a creator,” and everyone a dancer.⁷⁹ Significantly, the increasing isolation of the artist paralleled the distancing of the past and a growing commoditization of participatory public history traditions.

⁷⁹ Tomko. *Dancing Class*, 164.

Raymond Williams argues that the “genius” formulation and isolation of artists was a result of the Industrial Revolution. Up until that point, the creation of art was seen as a “general social activity.”

Chapter Two

Construction of the American: Performances of National Identity In Modern Dance

The Great Depression provoked a cultural search for meaningful traditions to unify the nation and also restore local pride. The country debated whether the cultivation of a national high culture or greater acknowledgment of folk culture should take priority.⁸⁰ Tensions between modernism and nostalgia pervaded this era in part because of technological innovations in transportation and communications and simultaneous social and economic changes as a result of the Great Depression. The 1930s saw a search for American identity in art and myth, in particular, as the public thirst for history and origin stories continued to intensify. It was also the decade that saw the formation of several outdoor history museum villages including Henry Ford's Dearborn Village and Henry Ford Museum and John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s Colonial Williamsburg, which both opened their doors in the early 1930s.⁸¹ While there are no cases of modern dance that could be considered site-specific in the 1930s, in particular, modern dance took great inspiration from the American past, often asserting narratives that were rarely acknowledged in public life.⁸²

In the 1930s, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Helen Tamiris were arguably the three leading modern dance choreographers. May O'Donnell expressed that Graham created dances made of social content that "expressed the protest, anguish, frustration, and mood of the times," through angular movements, dynamic and dramatic intensity, and the body rhythms

⁸⁰ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 307.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 304-305.

⁸² Martha Graham's *Primitive Mysteries* from 1931 was inspired by the landscape and culture of the American Southwest. It was not site-specific, but was based on a region, as was *Frontier*. I have chosen not to analyze these works because they are similar to Humphrey's *Shakers* in their relationships to history and place.

instilled in her technique through the breath and muscular tension.⁸³ According to Merle Armitage, a writer and promoter of Graham's early works, modern dance "comes from the depths of man's inner nature, the unconscious, where memory dwells." Graham felt she was expressing something vital about "the history and psyche of the race."⁸⁴ For Graham, the tools of her system of dancing were contraction and release. Humphrey found her mode of expression in the time and space between balance and unbalance. For Tamiris, dance was "the melting pot of all superficialities, sentimentalism, and affectations of the theater of foreign countries." All three drew on the past in order to comment in some way on contemporary life—Humphrey's approaches more sociological than psychological. Tamiris' interest was more political. Yet, they each sought to portray the American spirit, at times, and also expressed darker aspects of American life. Among all of the arts there was a growing obsession with finding a unique American idiom to express America's unique "exceptional" experience. Modern dance, however, had a unique ability to use abstraction combined with emotion to express different American "spirits" through physicalized processes.

Modern Dance Deepens Its Project

"Vital" Movement, The Female Body, and Social Consciousness

Newspaper articles that tried to explain "the enigma" of Martha Graham were not uncommon in the 1930s. The individualism of new modern dance provided a deep contrast to the celebratory fluid movements of Isadora Duncan and pageant dance. Margaret Lloyd, a newspaper columnist, explained that the "definite leg positions, gestures of arms and hands, postures, springs, turns of the head and flexions of the body...belong only to Martha Graham."⁸⁵ Modern dance pioneers including Graham, Humphrey, Tamiris, Hanya Holm, and Charles Weidman began

⁸³ May O'Donnell in *Martha Graham: The Evolution of Her Dance Theory and Training, 1926-1991*, ed. Marian Horosko (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 1991), 60.

⁸⁴ Merle Armitage, *Martha Graham*, ed., John Joseph Martin (New York: Dance Horizons, 1966), 83.

⁸⁵ Margaret Lloyd, "The Enigma of Martha Graham," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 9, 1935.

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working in close proximity to each other in the early 1930s.⁸⁶ One of the main tenets of modern dance was the crafting of one's individual movement philosophy and vocabulary. In contrast to Graham's years dancing in and out of tableaux and exotic costumes with Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn and graduates of the Denishawn School, where the dancers were "praised for their pictorial beauty," Graham's new movement was not as easily accepted. A caution to audiences about Graham's work in *The Christian Science Monitor* in 1935, read, "these movements may seem strange, grotesque or ugly." Despite the discomfort the author implied in viewing a Graham work, she qualified her warning, saying Graham's movements, while different and intense, "always are vital, affirmative, never weak or negative."⁸⁷ Strong, direct movement offered a very different subjectivity than Duncan's fluidity. It signified struggle, action, and depth of emotion and enacted a more complex female subjectivity. Graham asserted her agency through the complexity of her solo work.

The urgency of the early moderns' visions and the angular qualities and "rhythmic vitality" of the movements signaled new and bold roles for women as choreographers, dancers, and framers of female bodies. If the flapper epitomized the image of women in the 1920s, Graham, Humphrey, and Tamiris recast the female body as an instrument of force and power.⁸⁸ Most often, dancers were costumed in long dark dresses that downplayed and even hid women's curves. This artistic choice was the norm in 1930s modern dance, for it allowed for more serious treatment of traditionally masculine themes like strength and expansion.⁸⁹ Dance scholar, Julia

⁸⁶ The "Big Four" plus Tamiris, participated in the Bennington School of the Dance at Bennington College in the 1930s, teaching, creating, and showing work within a small community of dancers.

⁸⁷ Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1988), 163. Lloyd, "The Enigma of Martha Graham."

⁸⁸ Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 21.

⁸⁹ Julia Foulkes, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism From Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2002), 45.

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Foulkes writes that modern dancers aimed to create a new type of cultural event somewhere in between the theatrical conventions of ballet and the active engagement of audiences in pageantry.⁹⁰ They established modern dance as a profession that negotiated the differences between authorial and populist intentions. Graham did not care much if audiences considered her work “ugly or beautiful,” as long as they “stirred to some sort of response.”⁹¹ Also, because many modern dancers in the 1930s were children of immigrants and had been involved in dance programs at settlement houses offering varied social perspectives, a developed social conscience was an expected part of a modern dancer’s identity.⁹²

Meanwhile, some dancers coming out of settlement houses like Henry Street Settlement continued the tradition of grass roots dance organization, but for expressly political reasons. Edith Segal staged dance for an elaborate Communist pageant in 1930, called *The Belt Goes Red*. It featured dancers from the Workers Dance Group, and unlike most American historical pageants, which rarely told the stories of class and racial tensions in favor of producing a feeling of consensus, communist pageants purposefully used performance for its propagandistic possibilities.⁹³ The Workers Dance League in New York, a supposedly nonpolitical organization, believed all art was propaganda and believed art should address class struggle before all else.⁹⁴

Tradition of Dancing American History

Representing Ritual in Humphrey’s “Shakers”

The Shakers, an American Utopian Christian sect, attracted Doris Humphrey’s interest because of their communal life style, strict rituals, and industrious spirit. The separation of men

⁹⁰ Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 131.

⁹¹ Lloyd, “The Enigma of Martha Graham,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 9, 1935.

⁹² Deborah Jowitt, “Graham, Martha,” *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (Oxford: Oxform University Press, 2011).

⁹³ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 32.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

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and women in most Shaker activities and their union in “exalted worship” were key to Humphrey’s composition of *Shakers* (1931). Humphrey researched the religious sect judiciously and even re-created the more formal Shaker dances from descriptions and lithographs.⁹⁵ As with many of Graham’s works during the 1930s, Humphrey played with the dynamics of the group versus the individual. In *Shakers*, the Eldress faced the congregation of men and women who bordered the wings and front of the stage, forming a square. This separation gave the audience a sense of what the individual contributes to the whole community. Attentive to harmony and discord, Humphrey wanted both. She told her dancers to “be individuals” and “move in a common rhythm.”⁹⁶ This room for pluralism within a cooperative unified structure was demonstrative of modern dance’s democratic philosophy.

The dance takes the form of a Shaker religious service, beginning with slow lunges, hands clasped and praying. It moves from the section “Women’s Song” into “Ecstatic Hops,” which represented their internal war between body and spirit, carnal and divine.⁹⁷ Because Shakers vowed to be celibate, the dance played out as a “virginal expression” and a ritual of tension, spontaneity, and dancing. The conflict was represented through balance and imbalance. In some of the procession sequences, one step involved a complete side bend and the next was strictly upright, indicating mediation between control and release. That her primary research and cultural investigation into the beliefs and embodiments of Shaker life was then put into embodied dance practice brought a social and spiritual understanding of the Shakers’ life choices to light on a national stage.

Historical Collage and Graham’s “American Document”

⁹⁵ Marcia B. Siegel, *Days on Earth: The Dance of Doris Humphrey* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 95.

⁹⁶ Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 36.

⁹⁷ *The Shakers*, VHS, dir., Ernestine Stodelle (Highstown, N.J: Dance Horizons Video, 1998).

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In 1937, Graham premiered *American Document* at Bennington College. Arranged in episodes of American history, each section was performed to readings of a specific historic document like the Emancipation Proclamation. Graham framed the show as a minstrel show, juxtaposing moments of entertainment and virtuosity with serious inquiry into American history. At the start of the second episode, the Interlocutor asked, “What is America?” He followed with a list of Native American tribes as Graham walked out in native costume and performed “native folk gesture and ritual movement.”⁹⁸ However, records show that no claim was made that it was “authentic.” The show included cakewalks and acrobatic tricks borrowed from minstrelsy. Following such interludes came a dance for Graham and Eric Hawkins set to a sermon by the Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards. His sermon drew on excerpts from Solomon’s love song, one place in the Bible that celebrated sexuality.⁹⁹ Graham had never used men in her work before and the addition of Hawkins to the company allowed her to express a new range of social possibilities.¹⁰⁰

Later in the dance, the Emancipation Proclamation was read as a chorus looked up to the sky, and a dance of prayer and sorrow followed to show the “heavy burdens carried by African Americans in the United States. It concluded with a “resolution of themes of injustice with the implication that wrongs could be made right.”¹⁰¹ Graham’s *American Document* was immensely popular over the period in which it toured. She brought the stories of the oppressed to the center stage of American history, holding them up against cherished national documents. The minstrel format allowed for a sort of multimedia collage, which illustrated many diverse parts of an

⁹⁸ Maureen Needham Costonis, “American Document: A Neglected Graham Work,” *Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Conference: Society of Dance History Scholars* (February 1989), 77.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78

¹⁰⁰ Agnes De Mille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham* (New York: Random House, 1991), 233.

¹⁰¹ Costonis, “American Document: A Neglected Graham Work,” 80.

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“American” whole. It was described similarly to pageant dance when Hawkins remarked, “This is visual choral movement such as has never been seen.”¹⁰² Agnes De Mille thought it was such a strong representation of the United States that it should have been revived for the nation’s bicentennial, but restaging such a large-scale work would have been close to impossible.¹⁰³

Modern dancers “wanted debate, not amusement,” and they took risks, knowing that they would be disliked. Especially in the American themed dances, choreographers’ critical views on the cultural manifestations of history offered new alternatives to other more institutionally backed representations of history.¹⁰⁴ Popularly successful works like *Shakers* and *American Document* were also framed in a more serious way than commemorative American themed works in ballet and musical theater from the same period. In the 1940s, however, modern dance became more commercialized, and turned to more theatrical and mythic themes. The McCarthy era produced an atmosphere that was unwelcoming to dance with any kind of political implications. Also, as the key modern dance pioneer women aged, they put more of their energies into creating institutional frameworks through which to teach, preserve, and enact their movement philosophies.¹⁰⁵

Holding History on Site Versus Sharing It on Stage

Outdoor history museums were site-specific reconstruction projects. However, until the late 1960s, museum interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg acted as tour guides by explaining history in third person. This practice, combined with the isolation of a single historical era within museum gates, created a distancing of the past from the present.¹⁰⁶ Americans could be tourists in time to gauge the nation’s progress. But a simulated atmosphere of the American past without

¹⁰² De Mille, *Martha*, 234.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁰⁴ Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 132.

¹⁰⁵ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 143.

¹⁰⁶ Magelssen, *Living History Museums*, 66.

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embodied representations of history is a void. It does not help people understand that history is made up of human stories, and not science. Arthur Goodfriend, a friend of Rockefeller, wrote a report on Colonial Williamsburg that said it best, “Williamsburg’s appeal seems directed more to the eye than to the spirit. Its emphasis is more on material things, and less on men and ideas. If Williamsburg’s message is not as visible as its beauty, little wonder. To build and furnish a fine house is a hard and challenging task. But to install memories and meanings...is a task transcending in difficulty all others.”¹⁰⁷ That Rockefeller was aware Colonial Williamsburg was almost entirely a visual experience missing the stories of “men and ideas,” suggests that he avoided integrating performance-based museum practices because of their potential to incite political awareness.

By the late 1970s due to the various social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including feminism, most out-door museums transitioned their energies toward social history and first person interpretation practices through which visitors initiated dialogue with actor-historians.¹⁰⁸ But in the 1930s, with the dwindling out of pageantry and other historical commemorations and the limited potential of open-air history museums to convey a sense of the humanity in history, modern dance made pageant-like historical collages and sociological-anthropological studies to frame the past. Modern dance made women its subjects and unlike American pageantry, made women the shapers and critics of history. Moreover, the American themed works provided important, if short-lived, emotional, and embodied contributions to American memory.

¹⁰⁷ Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 552.

¹⁰⁸ Magelssen, *Living History Museums*, 73.

Chapter Three

'The Personal is Political' in Public: Postmodern Dance, Feminist Art, and Community Creation

Imagine the scene of a dozen young women pushing each other's elbows to the floor of an outdoor deck, vocalizing their struggles.¹⁰⁹ That this is from a lesson plan of one of Anna Halprin's dance classes in 1960, and not a self-defense drill, may come as a surprise. Structured improvisations like "The Struggle" offered opportunities to investigate the lines between art and life, body and experience. In the 1960s through the 1970s, a large segment of the art avant-garde began to frame the objects and everyday tasks as art. At the same time, the social and political life of the average American turned to a theater of identity politics. "One can see the late Sixties as a long unraveling, a fresh start, a tragicomic *kulturkampf*, the overdue demolition of fraudulent consensus, a failed upheaval, an unkept promise, a valiant effort at reforms camouflaged as revolution—and it was all of those," cultural historian, Todd Gitlin summarized.¹¹⁰ The stagnant view of "performance" as a fixed end product of art, dominated modern dance for thirty years, but beginning in the 1950s, Halprin and Merce Cunningham led the so-called "postmodern," rebellion—challenging the fixity of dance as "performance." Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks imagine performance as "a special world set aside from everyday life by contractual arrangements and social suspensions." In this time of cultural conflict, performative arts provided places for identity formation (or deconstruction) at the individual and the communal level.

Because site-specificity describes a relationship between an artwork, its public audience, and its site, this chapter examines performance-based practices that focus more closely on the

¹⁰⁹ Anna Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, ed. Rachel Kaplan (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England for Wesleyan University Press, 1995), 113.

¹¹⁰ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 26.

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socio-political dimensions of a site by conceiving of “site” as a particular community or audience with unique political and ideological concerns. Also known as “art-in-the-public-interest,” this category of art foregrounds social issues and political activism, and aims to create an opportunity for cultural participation, contemporary critique, and lasting dialogue.

Postmodern dance and embodied performance art (explored by feminist and new genre public artists) of 1960s and 1970s provided places for individuals to play with conflict, negotiation, and transgression within exploratory workshops and in the context of public life. As “community-based art” as a concept became reinvigorated on the heels of feminist performance and activist art in the late 1970s, it raised questions about the social function of art and how we define communities. According to Raymond Williams, “‘community’ has been used since the nineteenth century to contrast immediate, direct, local relationships among those with something in common to the more abstract relations connoted by ‘society.’” Art historian and place theorist Lucy Lippard advocates a more flexible approach to the concept of “community” through processes of working within the differences of individual people and interest groups as they adapt and take new shapes.

Carol Hanisch, a civil rights worker and feminist activist, coined the often-cited feminist dictum, “The personal is political,” in 1968. From this revolutionary awareness that power relations “shaped life in marriage, in the kitchen, the bedroom, the nursery, and at work,” followed the practice of “consciousness-raising,” which allowed women to share their stories, question the “natural order of things,” and view their personal experiences through a wider lens.¹¹¹ I will explain how female artists used the body to challenge social roles at the most “local” level, the personal, and later, to communicate social critiques to wider publics through self-conscious

¹¹¹ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 196-7.

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disruptions of everyday life. I will begin by outlining the 1950s and early 1960s avant-garde to show how art and dance placed themselves in alternate contexts and how quotidian life became the scrutinized newest subject of art.¹¹² I then argue that dance and feminist performance-based art in the 1960s and 1970s constituted participants as agents of change, forging new distinct art communities in the process. As the vibrant dialogue between pageant masters proved vital to the influence of American historical pageantry as a movement, the feminist art community provided a supportive pool of resources to encourage community-based artwork beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through the present. While the feminist art movement resulted in an expansion of collectively authored public artworks, artistic compendiums of new genre and activist art like *Mapping the Terrain*, edited by Suzanne Lacy, and *But Is It Art?*, edited by Nina Felshin, both published in 1995, clinged to identity politics and self-righteously condemned modernism for its attention to the individual limiting its potential.¹¹³

Art as the Everyday

Before the reconstitution of art-in-the-public interest, avant-garde experimenters followed their own interests and started to examine and rebel against the ways art was framed in institutions. Beginning in the 1950s, Allan Kaprow and Anna Halprin sought to narrow the divide between art and life through participatory workshops and performance events. Kaprow was the originator of Happenings, and Halprin, working in San Francisco, catalyzed postmodern dance. Happenings were primarily visual theater events (featuring nonverbal theatrical elements), structured as patterned occurrences of sequential or simultaneous action-events that did not relate to a narrative. Importantly, they took place in lofts, stores, and other alternative public spaces, influencing the emergence of site-specific postmodern dance. Kaprow designed elaborate

¹¹² Jeff Kelly, "The Body Politics of Suzanne Lacy" in *But is it Art?: The Spirit of Art as Activism*, ed. Nina Felshin (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), 232.

¹¹³ Eleanor Heartney, "Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art," *Art in America* (June 1995): 1.

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Happenings in which the performers appropriated some aspect of the real environment and performed many layers of objective tasks incorporating behavior, the weather, ecology, and political issues.¹¹⁴ In Oldenberg's 1965 *Washers*, "a motionless girl covered with balloons floated on her back in the swimming pool...while a man bit the balloons and exploded them." Later, "a record player and a motion-picture projector were turned on and off in plain view of the audience." At another point, "four men dove into the pool and pushed sections of silver flue pipe back and forth along a red clothesline."¹¹⁵

Various tasks tended not to have practical purposes, but instead were carried out for the simple phenomenological immediacy of "doing" an activity. Even though Happenings were primarily objectivist visual art assemblages, their proximity to the everyday and their participatory nature suggested a democratization of art. Claes Oldenberg, a friend of Kaprow's and public artist, articulated the desire to create active art in a 1961 manifesto: "I am for an art that is political-erotic mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum. I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap and comes out on top. I am for an art that tells you the time of day, or where such and such a street is. I am for an art that helps old ladies across the street."¹¹⁶ The desire to "do" rather than produce material art made this a time of rich activity in performance-based, conceptual workshops. Participation in Happenings was a fundamental part of a number of site-specific artists' development, especially for Suzanne Lacy and Meredith Monk.¹¹⁷

The 1960s were a textured era with radical spontaneity existing alongside rooted traditionalism. The increasing affluence of the nation, the civil rights movement, Vietnam, and

¹¹⁴ Suzanne Lacy, "Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys," in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, 25.

¹¹⁵ Michael Kirby, "The New Theatre," in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sandford (New York: Routledge, 1995), 36.

¹¹⁶ Bradford D. Martin, *The Theater is in the Street: Politics and Public Performance in Sixties America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 3.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Cold War fears all weighed heavily to produce a sense of dramatic discontinuity with the past. In *Mystic Chords of Memory*, Kammen explains: “During the 1960s the American psychohistorian Robert Jay Lifton introduced his provocative notion of ‘protean man,’ a new and different sort of personality in terms of psychological orientation, character and identity. According to Lifton, protean man was the product of ‘historical dislocation,’ a person profoundly affected by an unsettled feeling of change owing to a ‘break in the sense of connection which men have long felt with the vital and nourishing symbols of their cultural tradition.’”¹¹⁸ Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, and Steve Paxton, among others, made that break very consciously when they collectively formed Judson Dance Theater in 1963. Rebelling against the construction of mainstream modern dance, they sought to liberate dance from traditional theatrical parameters and explore objective movement, like walking, in their choreography. According to dance historian, Sally Banes, they possessed a collective idealism that celebrated democratic processes like improvisation, spontaneous determination, and chance as a metaphor for freedom, along with a “refined consciousness of the process of choreographic choice.”¹¹⁹

Rainer was a “sculptor of spectatorship” in her deliberate avoidance of the “seduction” inherent in the performer-audience relationship. As in *Happenings*, heterogeneous absurd elements were often mixed in a nonlinear structure with everyday gestures to produce an “environment-with-action.”¹²⁰ In 1966, Rainer addressed the problem of performance head-on with her repeating, rotating movement sequences in *Trio A*. Her movements are understated and her gaze is always averted, allowing the audience to peer closely and look critically at every step. Rainer

¹¹⁸ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 533-4.

¹¹⁹ Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 25.

¹²⁰ Michael Kirby, *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sandford (London: Routledge, 1995), 12.

presents movement as an object, as it might appear in a museum.¹²¹

Lucinda Childs' *Street Dance*, made for Robert Dunn's composition class in 1964, can be considered the first postmodern site-specific dance. The performer played an audiocassette recording before darting out of the studio space. Moments later, the recording told the audience to move towards the windows and there they could see Childs moving around in the street scene, stopping in doorways, pointing at signs, and meeting up with another dancer. This piece created a play between presence (her voice) and absence (her body), and between past (that which was previously recorded) and present.¹²² Other than its critical engagement of time and the audience-performer relationship, it importantly revealed the site as the primary subject.

As part of the first group of Judson choreographers, Trisha Brown, a pioneer of site-specific dance, witnessed many of the experiments by Lucinda Childs, Simone Forti, and Steve Paxton, and she felt drawn to the idea of working in new spaces. In famous statement, Brown noted, "I have in the past felt sorry for ceilings and walls. Its perfectly good space, why doesn't anyone use it?"¹²³ In her series grouped as the "Equipment Pieces," Brown attempted to inhabit outdoor environments in unusual ways. Using harnesses and other supports to put the body in unconventional orientations to space, Brown created works such as *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1970). In this iconic work, Brown literally walked down the side of a building in Soho, using abdominal strength and muscle control to give the illusion that gravity had switched its poles. For such site works, Brown used the present structure and details of a site to inspire her pieces, a point about which she was adamant. Kloetzel and Pavlik note that she said, "I'm not interested in taking a work which was made in a studio and performed in an interior space and

¹²¹ Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*, 54.

¹²² Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 135.

¹²³ Brown quoted in Kloetzel and Pavlik, eds., *Site Dance*, 13.

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placing it outside. I don't like it at all."¹²⁴ However, she did set a number of her equipment pieces in museums. Her work was still presented as objectivist, minimalist art based on movement-for-movement's-sake, existing wholly in "the now."

Brown's *Roof Piece* (1971), featured twelve dancers, on the roofs of eight New York City buildings, covering ten city blocks. "Through imitative gestures that passed from building to building in one direction over a 15-minute period and then back for another 15 minutes," one could sense the processual, immediacy of the movement as "audiences on a ninth rooftop could see the eventual (and inevitable) distortion of movement that occurred when attempting translation over such distances."¹²⁵ Brown's work in the 1960s and 1970s was both intellectual and phenomenological, but she framed her movement practices the visual art world. Robert Whitman once said of the 1960s, "There was no longer a pedestal for sculpture, there was no longer a proscenium for dance."¹²⁶ Instead, as long as it was framed by the downtown dance or art worlds, any place could be a museum or a stage, regardless of the existent cultural landscape.

On the whole, Kaprow's public art did not aim to reach a particular community or raise questions about socio-political issues. The Judson group, too, believed itself to be founded on democratic participation in dance, but while it did include non-dancers, it did not extend its notion of performance to feature their involvement to the extent of Anna Halprin, Judy Chicago, and others. Happenings and postmodern dance were concerned with disrupting theatrical and visual art conventions. The objectivists brought performance into the everyday, and vice versa. But they mostly continued formulate their critiques within the dance and visual art worlds, without seeking broader (or deeper) audience engagement.

Performer as Site, Art-making as Community-making

¹²⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹²⁶ Rebecca Davis et al, *Trisha Brown: Early Works 1966-1979*, DVD (New York: Artpix, 2004).

Art as Bodily Exploration

Halprin learned to approach movement as problem solving after five years of studying with Margaret H'Doubler, a pioneer of dance in higher education who emphasized behavior in dance as a means, not just a result¹²⁷. She danced with Doris Humphrey briefly in New York only to be disappointed by the hegemony of modern dance in the 1940s and early 1950s. In 1959, this prompted her to start the Dancer's Workshop in San Francisco to research the potentials of collaborative creative process through improvisation, scoring, feedback, and performance. A mid-1960s "Vision for the Dancer's Workshop" read:

At Dancer's Workshop, we believe that each person is his own art, and each community is its own art. We believe that art happens through a creative process of growth, in which performance provides closure, which facilitates creativity, which facilitates. We believe art becomes more valuable as more diversity and energy in unified and incorporated within it.¹²⁸

Beginning in October 1967, Halprin held a series of "community happenings" called *Myths* on ten consecutive Thursdays. Different from Kaprow's objective compositions, but equally as inclusive of audiences, Halprin's *Myths* were more sociological in design. People came to watch a performance, but when they arrived found that they were the performers. Halprin said, "I don't want spectators. Spectators imply a spectacle that takes place to entertain and amuse and perhaps stimulate them. I want witnesses who realize we are dancing for a purpose—to accomplish something in ourselves and in the world."¹²⁹ For each myth, she would organize a spatial and material score for the group of fifty to 100 people who would then develop a community ritual. For example, myth #3, *Trails*, was dedicated to exploring touch between strangers. Janice Ross recounted the series of events:

¹²⁷ Ross, *Moving Lessons: Margaret H'Doubler and the Beginning of Dance in American Higher Education* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 194.

¹²⁸ Halprin, *Moving Toward Life*, 129.

¹²⁹ Anna Halprin, *Moving Toward Life : Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, 249.

When the audience entered the studio, they were directed to a small platform at one end, where they discovered chairs arranged close together. After sitting down, they were told to relax into the chair, letting out whatever sounds flowed from their breathing. The group sound eventually grew into a shout and then quieted into a prolonged humming. Ann's dancers then blindfolded the audience members who were instructed to grasp someone's hand and form a line. Then the last person in the line was told to move to the front by feeling his or her way along a row of strangers.¹³⁰

Multiple "trails" formed and the action of following them continued for an hour and a half, in silence. In New York City, Julian Beck and Judith Malina, founders of the Living Theatre, also planned large-scale, participatory public performances—often with more explicit activist intentions—like the 1968-1970 work *Paradise Now*.¹³¹ Halprin was more interested in what movement could develop within a community of people.

In the late 1960s, Halprin began to focus on developing organic¹³² works with a set group of diverse performers. She approached some of the same kinds of physical and emotional problems as Chicago, but in the case of her 1969 *Ceremony of Us*, with performers who got to know each other only in the two weeks integrating the work before the performance. She rehearsed a group of white performers in San Francisco and a group of black dancers from the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles (just after the riots) for several weeks. Then Halprin put the groups together, unleashing "risky sensual intimacies between the black and white male and female performers." Halprin used her strategies of creative collaboration to perform social experiments that made an actual impact on her performers, their assumptions, and the way they related to various more complex communities. In this way, Halprin's primary communicative and problem-solving goals were aimed and sited within the performance group itself, and less toward

¹³⁰ Janice Ross, *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 216.

¹³¹ Martin, *The Theater is in the Street*, 3.

¹³² In dance studies, "organic" describes a process of developing work that that is open-ended, naturally unfolding, and does not operate from pre-conceived notions of what the final product should "look like".

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an already existent community audience. In *Ceremony of Us*, the workshop transformation was genuine, and she hoped that the authenticity of the performers' experience would translate into deeper audience understanding and questioning of racial barriers, and according to several newspaper critics, it often did. As dance writer Nancy Stark Smith noted, "the artifice of performance was one of the things Halprin had deliberately left in New York." She also went further than the New York choreographers of the early 1960s in using non-dancers, shrinking the distance between audience and performer, and positioning the performers as a community.¹³³

Art for Individual Agency

The feminist movement sought greater understanding of the individual self and like Halprin, moved toward careful research and practice in smaller performance groups. In 1969, Judy Chicago began her performance and consciousness-raising workshops devoted to the examination of "issues of authority, representation, historical revision, and the pedagogical effects of public disclosure on political systems."¹³⁴ Chicago started the workshop classes at Fresno State because she noticed that "So many women came into the art school and so few came out," the other end at the time of graduation.¹³⁵ Many women who planned to be artists either married and dropped out or had trouble finding their voices in such a male-dominated tradition. Chicago changed that fact for women artists at Fresno in a few short years. One performance method Chicago featured in her workshops was semi-scripted stereotyped gender-based, role-play. "Will you help me do the dishes?," one college girl chirps in an absurdly high-pitched sing-song to another college girl playing her husband. "Help-you-do-the-dish-es," young Suzanne Lacy thunders in a thumping,

¹³³ Halprin, *Moving Toward Life*, 73.

¹³⁴ Lacy, "Cultural Pilgrimages," *Mapping the Terrain*, 39.

¹³⁵ Judith Dancoff, *Judy Chicago & the California Girls*, VHS (Fresno, CA: California Girl Productions, 2007).

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Neanderthal-like disposition. The semi-narrative exchange is also highly physicalized with rhythmic, very mechanical and bound gestures pertaining to the utterance of each syllable. By creating awkward, rigid power dynamics in a performance context, many of the workshop participants gained stores in self-esteem and their ability to notice and face the gendered power dynamics they faced in their own lives.¹³⁶

Public as Site, Art-making as Protest

Art as Public Communications

Artists and theorists like Suzanne Lacy, Jerri Allyn, Arlene Raven, and many others established their own groups and practices, engaging audiences through performance art and protest-like interventions through the 1990s.¹³⁷ For example, Allyn's performance group, The Waitresses, formed in 1977 to address the injustices of the restaurant environment where many of the group's members worked and to link the position of waitresses to the status of women worldwide. The subjects they addressed included: "work, money, sexual harassment, and stereotypes of waitresses / women, such as mother, servant, and sex object." Out of the gallery and into the streets and restaurants: The Waitresses adapted their art form to reach a broad public. They staged public appearances like "The All City Waitress Marching Band," which featured 100 women performing with pots, pans, spoons and eggbeaters, in Pasadena's DooDah parade.¹³⁸

Suzanne Lacy, while not a dancer, also saw the body as a conduit to "acting out." Through her work with Chicago and Kaprow, she aspired to extend the physicality of the body into social settings (as opposed to the art world's extension into *public* space) to create the opportunity for empathetic connection. Her work *Inevitable Associations*, performed in 1976, was her first

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Lacy, "Cultural Pilgrimages," *Mapping the Terrain*, 40.

¹³⁸ Jerri Allyn, "Performance Art: The Waitresses." Otis Learning Management System, http://ospace.otis.edu/jerriallyn/The_Waitresses. (accessed February 12, 2011).

response to the experience of aging, and in particular how it was gendered. News that the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles was undergoing renovations generated headlines like, “There May Be Life in the Old Girl Yet.” Images of the hotel’s exterior were accompanied by captions that compared the Biltmore to “a woman’s face about to get a public makeover.” For Lacy, these gender-stereotyped metaphors illuminated the need to address the public on awareness surrounding the personal and private process of women aging.¹³⁹ During a conference that took place one weekend, Lacy passed out fliers on the hotel renovation and had a group of elderly women from the community wear black and sit in the lobby. Another part of the performance allowed these participant-performers to discuss their personal experiences with aging. The final integral detail was Lacy’s slow transformation by a Hollywood makeup artist to an elderly woman herself.¹⁴⁰ Lacy’s works made strong political statements using multi-media forms like lecture-demonstrations, exposing the female body, and visual mapping methods to make the public more aware of problems like domestic violence and rape.

Opportunities for participatory embodiment (for the audience and other unlikely performers) extended the bounds of art and made certain socio-political ideas more immediately useful and accessible to open-minded audiences. Even so, social and activist performance art had their critics. Benjamin DeMott was a sympathetic example: “The effort of the so-called environmental theater to dynamize theatrical interiors is fascinating as often as it is loony, and the whole tickle-touch body-contact school of dramatic production induces a kind of anxiety that’s conceivably stimulating to certain types of self-bound heads.”¹⁴¹ Many critics seemed to react with hesitation. They vaguely understood the aims of these artists, but did not condone the practices. This kind of work does after all resist the dominant modes of criticism, lessening the critic’s

¹³⁹ Jeff Kelly, “The Body Politics of Suzanne Lacy,” 221.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁴¹ Benjamin DeMott, “Can’t I Just Watch? Why Can’t I just Watch?” *New York Times*, March 2, 1969.

relevance, as Arlene Croce noted in the early 1990s.¹⁴² Yet, DeMott's point should be heard:

Absorption, attentiveness, concentration on otherness—these are hard for a playgoer to sustain in a situation in which the immediate urgent question inside him is: does that actor heading my way mean to hit (kiss, fondle, solicit) me? Security vanishes, and with it, guarantees of continuous outward focus. It is not all loss, naturally. Challenge and interruption are values...¹⁴³

That “challenge and interruption” were recognized as values acknowledges the new role of artist as social critic. But Halprin, Chicago, and Lacy did not simply point out problems; they acted as progressive reformers, fostering spoken and movement dialogues to increase mutual understanding.

Lacy describes a need for actual analysis of this art rather than stumbling over the question of whether or not it qualifies as “art” to one person or another.¹⁴⁴ Unfortunately, one of the biggest problems with analyzing participatory performance art work from the past fifty years is that its documentation is sparse. A few photographs, an informational blurb, and possibly a small newspaper mention are usually all that are available to the public. With art critics not treating participatory work seriously then and now, we are left with very few records of its social impact. When the goal is to incite broader socio-political awareness, there should be a response.

As with historical pageantry, new genre public art is steeped in humanism, optimism, and education, and may only reach the eyes, ears, minds, and hearts of its audience in moments of recognized need. Supporters of new genre public art decry the damage done by romanticizing the myth of the autonomous, individualistic artist. According to Suzi Gablik, “Its nonrelational, noninteractive, nonparticipatory orientation did not easily accommodate the more feminine values of care and compassion, of seeing and responding to need.”¹⁴⁵ Partly due to the socio-political

¹⁴² Lacy, “Cultural Pilgrimages,” *Mapping the Terrain*, 20.

¹⁴³ DeMott, “Can't I Just Watch? Why Can't I just Watch?”

¹⁴⁴ Lacy, “Cultural Pilgrimages” in *Mapping the Terrain*, 41-42.

¹⁴⁵ Suzi Gablik, “Connective Aesthetics: Art After Individualism,” in *Mapping the Terrain*, 80.

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framing of feminism and part to the avant-gardism of postmodern dance, female artists restored the goal inspiring change through art; first in redefining their own bodies, and second by assuming the role of social critic.

With the major revolutions in identity politics in the past, the feminist art movement and its derivative, new genre public art, may have lost communicative immediacy. At the same time, in the wake of the “dance boom” of the 1960s and 1970s, postmodern dance has found itself in an isolated corner. Both ought to reconnect with interdisciplinary discourses to strengthen, rather than divide and categorize artistic practices that are just as mutable as social relations. Even so, the contributions of the objectivist avant-garde, the community-arts experimenters, and feminist performance artists questioned theatrical parameters for art and simultaneously questioned social parameters in life, leading to a more sophisticated, self-conscious understanding of reaching audiences and going beyond the status quo.

Chapter Four

Recontextualizing Places in Transition: Embodying the Relationships Between History, Urban Renewal, and Transitional Identity

“I often find myself conflating place and community,” explains Lucy Lippard in her multidisciplinary work *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. “A peopled place is not always a community, but regardless of the bonds formed with it, or not, a common history is being lived out.”¹⁴⁶ Even if the stories that live within communities are hidden and nonlinear, the stories are always there. Those that are partially obscured are precisely the kinds of subjects that site-specific choreographers since the 1990s excelled at identifying and bringing life through performance. Those choreographers who took a primarily historical approach to the places in which they danced, added the deepest layer to the development of site-specific dance by calling purposeful attention to the element of time. In doing this, they ultimately extended site-specific practice from something that embodied American ideals of liberal humanist progress, challenged movement possibilities in the public environment, and stopped to listen to contemporary political issues of communities. They formed art that comments fully on the ethics of change, i.e. how we remember, how we participate in “urban renewal” or “removal,” and how we make sense of ourselves and our homes in an age of ever-increasing mobility.

The choreographers who approach their work with all of these questions about history and change in mind almost always hold dear the artistic ideals of embodying hope, defying conventional architectural space, and activating the audience-performer relationship. But they bring even greater reflexivity and reflection to their sites by creating collisions in time. Putting moving bodies back in historical time, in present environments, calls people’s attention to the constancy of change and future-oriented conception of time that dominates urban environments.

¹⁴⁶ Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 24.

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Immediacy, money, and power obscure the fact that “cities are enormously complex palimpsests of communal history and memory.”¹⁴⁷ Site-specific choreographers Meredith Monk, Joanna Haigood, Ann Carlson, Jo Kreiter, and Martha Bowers are all public historians as much as they are dancers, choreographers, and community activists. Their historically-oriented works have all been highly researched and have involved a multitude of historical and interdisciplinary methods to re-imagine dynamic pasts, and to call a dynamic historical consciousness to the present moment. While there are a handful of other choreographers in New York City, San Francisco, and beyond who have made site-specific dance works attending to the histories of places, six dances from the five aforementioned site artists serve to demonstrate the choreographic methods of engaging with the transitional identities of urban places. These dance works invoke the various and layered histories. These approaches have included large-scale, multi-sited modern pageants, utilizing nonlinear time; recreations of archival photographs or building infrastructures, featuring suspended time; performances in abandoned buildings that create a dual and haunting sense of time; dances that include community voices and oral histories in the score; and finally aerial dance, which allows for a transcendence of phenomenological limitations, creating empowerment, enchantment, and anomaly in public space.

Goals of the Public Historian Meet Impulses of the Site-Choreographer

Choreographers of site dances shaped by history have different goals than traditional academic historians, but share a lot of the same assumptions as public historians. In *The Public Historian*, David Glassberg discusses the potential development of the public history movement, which was widely discussed in the late 1980s and early 1990s in academic journals. He laments the absence of a serious study on the evolution of the American sense of place, assuming that high mobility, centralized economic and political power, and instant architecture “had left Americans

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 196.

with a sense of ‘placelessness.’”¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Glassberg explains that having a fuller sense of history can lead to ways of orienting oneself in the geographical landscape.¹⁴⁹ In his essay “Monuments and Memories,” Glassberg calls for an integrated public history that includes and examines “the idiosyncratic versions of the past of artists, writers, and composers... imaginative reconstructions that often bring the prevailing official and commercial versions into sharp relief.”¹⁵⁰ Site-choreographers are entirely a part of this cohort. Beyond asserting that their works constitute a valuable part of public history work in the 1990s and early 2000s, it is important to acknowledge what dance studies can contribute to ways of conceiving historical time and space. Dance theorist Randy Martin explains that “motional dynamics” of bodies moving in space may help demonstrate and deepen the understanding of “how a sense of time and space is generated through social life.”¹⁵¹ Revealing the characters and humanity that have produced a sense of place over time is an important strength of site-specific work in recent years. And unlike living history museums, artists are able to abandon traditional worries about exact authenticity in favor of creating temporary subversions of our sense of time that may allow them to cover a wider array of people and historical eras in one place. What some public historians and most site-specific choreographers assume is that historical agency is not produced by time, but as Martin writes, “it is instead the production of difference through human activity that makes sense of time.” Thus, “Time as it relates to history is not the abstraction that makes human life concrete, but an effect of the various densities, aggregations, and mobilizations of human activity.” Martin uses the work of Michael Brown to explain and emphasize “the centrality of difference (as internal to a historical

¹⁴⁸ Glassberg, “Public History and the Study of Memory,” 18.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵⁰ David Glassberg, “Monuments and Memories,” *American Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (March 1991), 144.

¹⁵¹ Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 35.

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moment) to the constitution of history and time.”¹⁵² So in terms of connecting audiences to an actual living sense of history in their own lives (that is not confined to a tourist site), the acknowledgment of human difference and demonstration of the fluidity of communities is important. It may serve as a better catalyst for activating people’s awareness that they are agents in history than more permanent installations. Lippard considers sense of place “a kind of intellectual property”¹⁵³ that can be developed and even re-ignited with every event that causes a shift in consciousness in one’s neighborhood. It is both powerful and grounding to step outside the usual urban pace in a moment of simultaneous critical observation and cultivation of wonder at the seemingly ordinary.

Modern Multi-Sited Pageants: Commemorations by Meredith Monk and Martha Bowers

Choreographer Meredith Monk was one of the early pioneers of the site-specific genre of postmodern dance. When Trisha Brown was doing publicly sited work in unconventional places, like rooftops and walls, Monk was exploring more mythic relationships to space. She conceived many of her early site works as audience journeys through a site, or even an entire city, always weaving them in and out of real and mystical environments. Dance historian Deborah Jowitt wrote, “She makes us aware of the submerged connections between islands of difference. In some sense, all her works are about communities. And despite the darkness that sometimes threatens these small worlds, her vision is essentially moral, humanistic, and hopeful. She opens our eyes to the prevalence of miracles and the miraculousness of everyday life.”¹⁵⁴

Monk made a handful of large-scale site-specific dance works in the 1960s and 1970s, including *Juice*, *Vessel*, *Needlebrain Lloyd and the Systems Kid*, and *Tour: Dedicated to*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵³ Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 33.

¹⁵⁴ Jowitt, *Meredith Monk*, 16.

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Dinosaurs. In the 1990s, after a long period of concentrating on work for the stage and work that incorporated complex original vocal scores in “extended vocal technique,” Monk returned to making site work with *American Archaeology #1*¹⁵⁵ in 1994. *American Archaeology* took place on Roosevelt Island in New York’s East River. The island was first inhabited by the Leni Lenape Indians; it was then known as Blackwell’s Island from the 1600s to 1921, and later as Welfare Island, a place for “cast-offs,” before it was rebuilt as a model community in the 1970s.¹⁵⁶

Part I of Monk’s multilayered work, which traversed all of these time periods, took place in the late afternoon, on the northern tip of the island at Lighthouse Park. In her choreographic notes, Monk actually described Part I as a “pageant” that she hoped would be a “visual and aural feast.”¹⁵⁷ The vocal ensemble, dressed in nineteenth century black costumes, was first to enter the open field in front of the lighthouse. As they sing wordless music, an Indian, children, and a group of elders make a brief appearance and then exit. The performer playing the gardener and Leni Lenape begins to plant small green of corn stalks while airplanes fly noisily overhead (not planned), and a skater circles the park in the background (planned). A Dutch Governor appears and then a group of policemen from an indeterminate time period. Children dance under the trees, holding hands, spinning in circles, while the elders begin a sequence of arm gestures, including pointing to the airplanes flying above.¹⁵⁸

Video does not provide the most faithful record of an artistic “epic” like this one. Monk noted in an interview with Melanie Kloetzel that one of the problems with the site was its noise level. “One of the ways that I dealt with this was to design the piece so that the audience had to

¹⁵⁵ A note about the spelling of “archaeology:” Monk’s 1994 work was entitled *American Archeology*, but in a note in *Site Dance*, Kloetzel and Pavlik explain that Monk preferred to change the spelling to “Archaeology” for sake of consistency and its use in scholarly discourses.

¹⁵⁶ Jennifer Dunning, “Meredith Monk Looks into Roosevelt Island’s Past,” *New York Times*, Sept 22, 1994.

¹⁵⁷ Meredith Monk, “*American Archeology* Notes File” (accessed March 15 2011).

¹⁵⁸ “*American Archeology*,” VHS, from Monk’s personal archive (accessed March 15 2011).

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keep scanning.”¹⁵⁹ By having all the groups in different period attire entering and exiting constantly, Monk created a non-verbal, non-linear pageant with her multigenerational cast of sixty people. While it may sound like a rather amateurish community commemoration, Monk’s artistic hand can be seen, or more precisely, heard, in her juxtaposition of her often eerie-sounding vocal score (a characteristic of much of Monk’s work), and in her timing of group movements—streaming in and out of the large park, sometimes seeming to pop up from the ground out of nowhere. The first part of the work ended with a ghostly vocal solo performed by Monk in a white dress at the top of the lighthouse. According to Monk’s clippings files, she conceived and created the “lighthouse” part of the work as an actual archaeological score, mapped out with each of the various character groups constituting what may be seen as a layer of “sediment” within the entire record. The work moved slowly, almost certainly a decision on Monk’s part to pull the audience into a meditative place. Part of the cast was made up of Roosevelt Island community members who committed to the three-week rehearsal schedule, so some of the movement looked amateur. Even so, Jack Anderson’s New York Times review was glowing. He called the first half “idyllic,” and “celebratory,” and claimed,

Before her singing brightened the air, all sights and sounds seemed enigmatically distant and hushed. The music was quiet, even when it was accidentally punctuated by the noise of boats on the river, passing traffic and airplanes overhead. The entire production suggested that everything that happened was instantly sinking into history.¹⁶⁰

Part II of *American Archaeology* took place in the evening on the southern part of the island, in and around the ruins of an old smallpox hospital. The evening work was much more macabre in tone and featured many different character groups of outcasts ranging from mad women to hobos, and criminals. The audience was surrounded by darkness except when Tony Giovannetti’s lighting

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Monk in *Site Dance*, eds. Kloetzel and Pavlik, 37.

¹⁶⁰ Jack Anderson, "Roosevelt Island as a Stage," *New York Times*, Sept 26, 1994.

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“suddenly pierced the gloom.”¹⁶¹ The two-part work came to a conclusion during a slow sort of death march, flanked by a giant skeleton. The entire cast mournfully trudged across the space with umbrellas (it had begun to rain), sometimes punching their umbrellas high into the air above their heads. According to Monk, “The idea is to invoke the spirits of outcasts of the past,” then end with a “sort of pageant,” “like a medieval procession,” which the *New Yorker* preview claimed would “bring the audience back to our own complicated time.”¹⁶²

Choreographer Martha Bowers, who was directly influenced by Monk, found the same kind of inspiration in Brooklyn’s Red Hook neighborhood beginning in 1993, but focused on themes of gentrification, immigration, and community. Bowers who makes work in Red Hook, began to choreograph there in the early 1990s when she was teaching in the neighborhood’s public schools. Most of her works, including her first in the area, *On the Waterfront* (1993), contend with the forces of economic redevelopment. When Bower’s made *On the Waterfront* on the piers of Red Hook, they were abandoned, and the neighborhood was considered a dangerous place. But she wanted to connect the residents of the nearby housing projects to this waterfront, which she knew was going to be the site of a large number of redevelopment projects. In 1998, Bowers made *Safe Harbor* with a collaborative team of artists and the community. *Safe Harbor* addressed the issue of immigration in a multi-sited journey that had the audience moving with the performers. First, the audience walked along the shore, tracing parallel journeys of immigrants from different periods on boats, barges, floating stages, and in the water.

As the journey continued, the audience stopped to listen to the family histories of local residents who had been part of the fabric of Red Hook for different durations of time. Bowers sees her work as taking the elements of what was already there and animating the people and places by

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Listing, "American Archeology," *New Yorker*, Sept 19, 1994.

giving them a frame. Dance critic Jennifer Dunning describes *Safe Harbor* as “a series of imaginatively staged side-shows set to a vivid score.” She also mentions its “charming” tap and step routines. In the end, Dunning commended the large-scale production for its “strong-visual images,” which like *American Archaeology*, were lit by Tony Giovannetti. Among the images she singled out, “stilt women overseeing Ethiopians of other centuries wading into the river in crimson cotton,” and “a jetty that suddenly sprouts eager arrivals to America.”¹⁶³ Bowers conducted documentary research “as well as field research through interviews, storytelling workshops, and working in dialogue with community members to hear stories from multiple perspectives.”¹⁶⁴ Over the years Bowers has refined her practice and become one of the most self-reflective site artists in the field.

American Archaeology and *Safe Harbor* both address different social issues with different depths of community involvement, but both were structured as imagistic “live movies,” incorporating elements of the historical tour into the their choreography of the audience.¹⁶⁵ Like directors of American historical pageantry, Monk and Bowers plumbed the past characters of their sites in search of the human spirit. Monk, responding to the history of Roosevelt Island, represented the sadness, illness, discomfort, and dejection of those confined to the smallpox hospital, prison, or insane asylum before the island reached its contemporary incarnation. The pageant near the lighthouse cast a more ambivalent and in the end hopeful cry for the acknowledgement of what had been. Bowers’ personal relationship with immigrant high school students and long-time members of the Red Hook community allowed her to focus more on personal and family histories: Thus Sunny Balzano, proprietor of John’s Rest and Bar, engaged audiences with stories from 1940s Red Hook. In the end, Bowers took a positive view of

¹⁶³ Dunning, “Meredith Monk Looks into Roosevelt Island's Past.”

¹⁶⁴ Kloetzel and Pavlik, eds., *Site Dance*, 271.

¹⁶⁵ Monk likened *American Archaeology* to a “live movie” in several interviews in 1994.

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immigration to Red Hook. Many of her students came from devastated areas across the globe, and *Safe Harbor* celebrated the urban renewal and rejuvenation of Red Hook, as a safe haven amid global turbulence. Gestures of open-armed, arched-back release in the water and on jetties conveyed mixed feelings of displaced despair and grateful attainment of sanctuary. It may be that Monk and Bowers romanticize (and even gothicize) the human spirit in these places, but if they do, they are certainly aware of it. In any event, the creation of atmospheric feeling is part of their artistic aim. In the end, these multi-sited works are not all that different from historical town pageants from the turn of the twentieth century. Instead of taking linear form, however, they collapse multiple time periods into a performance at a single place and show them moving side by side as an archaeological reminder that places are endlessly layered, made and remade over centuries of human activity.

Urban Renewal and Its Invisibility

Dance writer Camille Lefevre sees contemporary site-specific choreography as a process of “de-familiarizing” local environments by putting them in performance contexts and “disordering the rhythm of the everyday.” The next stage involves “recontextualizing” those places through the process of gathering a community audience and bringing particular pertinent subjects to center stage.¹⁶⁶ This destabilization that the performance context creates in a community allows for a refocusing on aspects of the neighborhood that may have become invisible over time, “either through day-to-day familiarity, or blight and neglect, or by being physically erased from the urban landscape.”¹⁶⁷ This destabilization is also about audience participation, which for many choreographers is the only true political goal they profess to hold. Like New Genre Public Artists, they hope to stimulate participatory democracy and create a space

¹⁶⁶ Camille Lefevre, "Site-Specific Dance, De-Familiarization, and the Transformation of Place and Community," *Dance & Community: Congress on Research in Dance* (Spring 2005), 148.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

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for dialogue about local change. For some choreographers, such as Meredith Monk and Jo Kreiter, a historical site-work is as much about acknowledging and paying respects to the invisible, abandoned, or displaced, and offering valuable counterhistories to those that dominate the physical and everyday spatial environment. Bowers explained this aim in an interview with Melanie Kloetzel:

We are barraged daily with images from the dominant media, selling us everything from underwear to fear. Governments, corporations, and major media organizations use imagery and metaphor, mass spectacle, costume, and music. Artists working in public space can offer a counterhistory.¹⁶⁸

Is moving amongst the culturally and economically changing environment speeding up or slowing down the process? In the cases of many of the works selected for review in this chapter, artists played a part, if not a large or direct part in gentrification and redevelopment schemes. Randy Martin theorizes that all dancing creates momentum for social movements. I would posit that site-specific dance occupies a hybrid role that both attracts more artists to move to a neighborhood, pushing the cycle of urban renewal forward, while simultaneously creating opportunities for local human resistance to the forces of government and economy. Choreographers and dance organizations that maintain a long-lasting relationship with the places in which they work (by creating works there on a regular basis) have much greater potential for helping communities negotiate with the processes of gentrification. Martha Bowers has created work in the Red Hook area for almost twenty years. Jo Kreiter has done work in and around the Mission District of California for over ten years. Joanna Haigood has created work in San Francisco and the Market District for many, many years, and Meredith Monk sticks mostly to New York City. Some site artists roam more than others, and depending on the kind of work they aim to create, they can be just as successful.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Bowers in *Site Dance*, eds. Kloetzel and Pavlik, 277.

Re-Creations, Hauntings, Suspension: Installations by Ann Carlson and Joanna Haigood

In the case of Ann Carlson's historical tableaux work *Night Light* and Joanna Haigood's recreation of demolished buildings in *Ghost Architecture*, measured slow or still reanimation of the past implicitly calls attention to change around it. Unlike *American Archaeology* and *Safe Harbor*, which pulled the audience into a stratified past, *Night Light* and *Ghost Architecture* pulls historical moments and facts into the present, and puts them on slow, deliberate view. Both Carlson and Haigood have created site work on a number of different themes, but Haigood has tended to explore historical site work more often throughout her career. In her essay "Looking for the Invisible," Haigood writes, "I have spent the best of twenty-five years examining places for details that would lead to some sort of story or memory of past lives, a clear picture of the distinct forces that I feel still resonate in the present state of things." She remarks that the cracks and marks in the landscape or a wall form "a tangible and beautifully poetic map of time." Many site-choreographers have likely asked themselves, "What if we really had the capacity of trans-temporal perception? What would it be like to view the intersection of events separated only in time but not in space?"¹⁶⁹

With the 2004 work *Ghost Architecture*, Haigood and architect Wayne Campbell addressed this possibility head-on. Their site was the contemporary Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in the Market area of San Francisco. But Haigood's site was also the former location of The West Hotel, the Peerless Movie Theater, and two apartment buildings. Armed with the actual former architectural coordinates, Campbell and Haigood agreed that they would represent whatever had been on that site, and Campbell re-assembled fragments of old buildings "in a discontinuous way, rather like a partially re-assembly of a crashed airplane during an accident

¹⁶⁹ Joanna Haigood, "Looking for the Invisible," <http://www.zaccho.org/ghost.html> (accessed Nov 10, 2010).

investigation,” he said. Instead of trying to simulate the architecture of the Peerless and the West Hotel (as seen in museums and theme parks), Campbell says that he “wanted to express the location of the old structures in an abstract way.”¹⁷⁰ His crafted abstraction of the former site served as the set for Haigood’s dance installation.

According to some, true site-specific choreographers derive all of their inspiration from the site itself. This was certainly the case during *Ghost Architecture*. The West Hotel was home to one hundred and twenty-two older men in 1970 just before the redevelopment of the Market area. In 1974, the tenants of the hotel were evicted and the building was razed to make space for the new Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Haigood maintains that anyone familiar with the area “knows something about the battle between the hotel tenants, along with local business owners, and the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency” during that time. Haigood commented that the story of the West Hotel “reflects our ongoing lack of humane and socially just methods of urban renewal.” Her research process became more personal over the months of talking with a photographer named Ira Nowinski. Nowinski’s photography series entitled *No Vacancy*, captured the last residents of the West Hotel and everyday intimacies of their lives.¹⁷¹ From these photographs and from his stories of the residents and those who fought the forces of redevelopment, Haigood began to conceive of movement material.

Camille Lefevre described the experience of stepping into the dark Forum of the Yerba Buena Arts Center as “something that’s already at place—not only a performance, but perhaps peoples’ lives.” Haigood had two performers in the space (a series of platforms with steel cables marking where the original coordinates were) at a time enacting sets of actions for half an hour, then switching positions. *Ghost Architecture* is by no means a traditional dance piece, and as

¹⁷⁰ Wayne Campbell, "Modeling the Past," <http://www.zaccho.org/ghost.html> (accessed Nov 10, 2010).

¹⁷¹ Haigood, “Looking for the Invisible.”

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Lefevre noted, it “wasn’t for the restless.” Lefevre recalled the sense of time in the work and its effects in “Site-Specific Dance, De-familiarization and the Transformation of Place and Community”:

To underscore the exploration of time and space inherent to the piece, it ran six days a week for two weeks, six hours a day. In order to absorb the pace of this vanished world and recognize the subtleties of variation that occurred within the repeated patterns, the audience was required to slow down and settle in. Despite the fact that the performance was free, many people walked out after fifteen minutes or so. The result of staying with the piece for one hour, or more, was to enter a meditation on time and space, and how humanity is often lost in those continuums.¹⁷²

Even if some audience members could not suppress their restlessness, critics for multiple newspapers lauded Haigood’s haunting installation.

Ann Carlson, a site choreographer who danced for Meredith Monk is also interested in physical environments and the history of where human bodies have been. From studying her own thumbprint in depth, Carlson began to think about physical mapping of bodies. She says of the early process in conceiving *Night Light* (2000), “I imagined a potential collision of time and space that might occur in a dream, in a book or even on a street corner...What if people who walked here 75 years ago emerged from the sidewalk like in a pop-up book?”¹⁷³ Participating in historical walking tours, Carlson became fascinated with their entertainment value, history “mixed with the allure of a bedtime story.” She noted the tendency of public history programs to cater to popular audiences, to heighten the drama because of the audience’s material proximity to the “real,” but also soothe the public and present a history that is digestible. Historical dioramas provided another source of inspiration for Carlson’s project. She admits to loving “particularly the dusty, predictable ones at the Museum of Natural History.” Uncomfortable with the cultural assumptions

¹⁷² Lefevre, “Site-Specific Dance, De-Familiarization, and the Transformation of Place and Community,” 151.

¹⁷³ Ann Carlson, “Thumbprint,” in *Site Dance*, eds. Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik, 113.

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that produced those dioramas, Carlson explains how she sees them as “stuffed with a sense of victory and progress as well as death and decay.”¹⁷⁴

Carlson then turned to archival photography as a source for “a modern-day diorama,” and proceeded to recreate on location, in full-costume, and in full-bodily gesture, a series of photographs throughout downtown New York City. Like many social historians, Carlson hoped to evoke the “quotidian past,” yet like Campbell’s abstracted set for *Ghost Architecture*, she excuses the lack of material accuracy, like the presence of a Ford Double A (a car that was produced for only three years). As C. Carr writing for the *Village Voice* explained, “she isn’t creating period movie sets. Just evoking some ghosts.”¹⁷⁵ Ultimately, Carlson was staging tableaux vivants on location: a newsgirl on a sidewalk, “four priests leave church with their bags and briefcases in 1955,” a woman in a makeshift kitchen. The “dancing” in *Night Light* consisted of both the audience’s guided tours through the Chelsea neighborhood and of the “pitched” stillness of the performers, who held positions for over forty-five minutes. Imagining stillness resonating like a musical note, Carlson comments, “stillness becomes part of a continuum of life in a way.”¹⁷⁶ Particularly attracted to photographs that displayed “human resilience in the face of complete devastation,” Carlson clearly exercised a preference for humanist aesthetics and also sought to represent of the largest number of social groups possible.

Both *Ghost Architecture* and *Night Light* intervene in neighborhoods where gentrification has done its work, and both New York City’s Chelsea and the Market area of San Francisco have become upscale artistic neighborhoods. In order to reveal the layers of change that have hidden the human faces, bodies, and voices that once existed there, Haigood and Carlson de-familiarized

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁷⁵ C. Carr, “Ghost Muster: Between the Image and the Reality Lies Ann Carlson,” *Village Voice*, May 16, 2000.

¹⁷⁶ Jesse Hamlin, “History Comes to Life: Artist Stages Re-Enactments of Old Photos at Yerba Buena Gardens,” *San Francisco Gate*, Jul 7, 2002.

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their sites by altering their physical environments to create mixed contexts that would allow archived moments in time to resonate with traces of the present framing them. The recontextualization occurred in both cases as the audience moved in and around the site(s). The performers, doing either slow, mediated task-like movement (in the case of *Ghost Architecture*), or “pitching” stillness, altered the dominant sense of time and pulled audiences into an awareness of history’s presence “in the now.” These works showcased an awareness of the constant urban change that has erased particular social groups from certain neighborhoods.

Carlson’s project *Night Light*, also occupied a unique role in terms of its relationship to the local. Unlike many choreographers who have continued to make work and have a presence in one or two neighborhoods, Carlson became a traveling artist, setting *Night Light* in six different cities across the country over a several year period. At each location, Carlson did extensive research and picked photographs for her live dioramas from local archives, rooting herself in her sites, at least momentarily. The traveling artist model is one that can work with site-specific dance; it just means that the community activist role is diminished. What does it mean to roam from place to place while creating place-specific art? Perhaps it strengthens the choreographer or director’s craft to apply a certain framework and approach to wildly differing locations. Some may say moving a work from place to place weakens the art. Either way, the impact of mobility on artists and audiences, cannot be ignored in the attempt at making art that locates human beings, past or present.

Transient Identity

By the 1990s, mobility in America was no longer wholly dependent on highly accessible transportation. It expanded virtually through the use of the internet and personal computers. Rapid economic growth continued to create greater income disparity between the rich and the poor,

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giving affluent people higher disposable incomes to relocate nationally and internationally, and simultaneously leading to increased ghettoizing of the poor. The growth increased the likelihood of unjust urban displacement (if and when certain neighborhoods became sites of gentrification). Between 1949 and 1968, 425,000 units of low-income housing were demolished for redevelopment. During that period of time, only 125,000 new units had been constructed, and more than half were luxury apartments.¹⁷⁷ Lucy Lippard notes that “bars, cafes, and other commercial meeting grounds have been zoned out of many areas. The lack of common history and the habit of transience means that even well-meaning efforts at community can lack substance.” But on the other side of the spectrum she writes, “an excess of shared history can lead to feuds and cultural confinement.”¹⁷⁸ Lippard does not elaborate on what she means when she refers to the “habit of transience.” Essentially, it seems she is referring to the constant flux of people, culture, physical landscapes, and relative levels of “development” or “decline.” But the movement of people from place to place has an especially large impact on identity and feelings of belonging. Lippard postulates the large amount of recently amassed theory on “sense of place” is due to and related to a “sense of displacement,” whether voluntary, or not.

The production of difference, as noted earlier, not only relates to producing a sense of historical agency, but also to securing a sense of identity. Identity politics and the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s produced a surge of possible constitutions of sense of identity, but amid the growth of corporate chain stores and overall homogenization of the American landscape, possibilities for the articulation of community and local identities have suffered a loss. Darlene Clover identifies two ways of combating that sense of loss: reclaiming public space and taking risks. Clover identifies both of these aspects of art making as integral to “any

¹⁷⁷ Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 205.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

transformative or feminist social learning and community development practice.”¹⁷⁹ Few site-specific female choreographers speak or write publicly about the relationship of their work to feminist practice, but Jo Kreiter is one exception. In *Contact Quarterly* she relates her “reverence of intense physicality in improvisation and choreography” because she sees “movement characterized by a reliance on arm strength, speed, low-flying falls and catches” as “a direct expression of empowerment.”¹⁸⁰ A sizable number of site-specific dances pair movement down and focus more on gesture than virtuosity. The few who seek to feature a more dynamic physicality (for many choreographers this changes depending on the site), do so in the pursuit of both risk, and especially in Kreiter’s case, reclaiming a more powerful image of women’s bodies in public space.

Flying with the Community: Aerial Dance by Joanna Haigood and Jo Kreiter

Weightless, horizontally floating bodies cut the air forty feet above the city sidewalk. Dancers glide back in towards the wall and use their legs to bounce off and around a fire escape. Aerial, or apparatus-based dance achieves more virtuosic and thrilling feats than Trisha Brown’s 1970s “Equipment Pieces,” but is based on the use of similar, but evolved, technologies. Joanna Haigood was one of the first to fully develop the use of aerial dance in city sites in the 1990s. “I am drawn to aerial work because I am very interested in working the space more sculpturally, using lateral, diagonal, vertical, and horizontal lines as well as perspective and scale as primary choreography tools,” Haigood said in a 2004 interview.¹⁸¹ Kreiter danced with Haigood’s San Francisco company, Zaccho Dance Theater, over many years in what Kreiter called “a long-term company membership.” The two were close collaborators, and eventually, Kreiter started a

¹⁷⁹ Darlene Clover, “Feminist Aesthetic Practice of Community Development: The Case of Myths and Mirrors Community Arts” *Community Development Journal* 42, no. 4 (2007): 519.

¹⁸⁰ Jo Kreiter, “Parallels: Athletics, Power, and Feminism,” *Contact Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1996), 40.

¹⁸¹ Interview with Haigood, in *Site Dance*, eds. Kloetzel and Pavlik, 55.

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company of her own called Flyaway Productions. Kreiter's work tends to be motivated by political and feminist goals, while Haigood is more interested in investigating her concept of "place memory." Both choreographers have combined aerial work, community involvement, and reverence of the history of place on several occasions.

In 1997, Kreiter made her first major site-specific work *Sparrow's End* in a drug-infested alley of San Francisco's Mission. She published her choreographic journal of the two months in early autumn in which she and her dancers rehearsed five days a week on the site: in the alley, on, and in front of the Hotel Sunrise. Her first day on site, a man stopped to ask why they were dancing in an alley with "such dark energy." He described the Hotel Sunrise as "the source of this part of the Mission's ugliness, drugs, rampant violence," but he also admits he saw things differently when he saw them dancing there.¹⁸² In Kreiter's journal she describes a handful of other local encounters with PCP addicts, young children left unsupervised, homeless people, and residents of the hotel. Many of the encounters involved a mix of pain and enchantment. Her final reflection was brutally honest. She writes that at worst she had "been accused of cultural imperialism, of dumping my art in someone's backyard," but balances that admission with discussion of the relationships she developed with local social and church services and neighborhood children, who she taught. In the presence of their rehearsals, "(perhaps because of our presence)," Kreiter writes, "there were no drug deals, no one shot anyone, no one pulled a knife, no one fucked anyone in broad daylight."¹⁸³ *Sparrow's End* was not purposefully historically oriented, yet her personal record of the process and negotiations involved in creating site work chronicle a valuable history that for most dance pieces ends up being almost completely lost. Her journal reveals the (often indirect) conflict involved in making site work. Especially with

¹⁸² Jo Kreiter, "Making 'Sparrow's End'," in *Site Dance*, eds. Kloetzel and Pavlik, 247.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 252.

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aerial work, Kreiter and Haigood have both noticed the discomfort that surrounds debates around the use public space and especially the concept of private air space.

By 2002, Kreiter had continued to develop her skills and artistic methods, and she created what she believes is her signature work, *Mission Wall Dances*. This piece was inspired by a desire to give voice and visibility to residents of an area of the Mission who had been forcibly displaced by arson. In an interview with Carolyn Pavlik she said that *Mission Wall Dances* “spoke to a wound in the city’s history that is still festering...Many people were thrilled that their own history/pain was being reflected in such a spectacular piece of art.”¹⁸⁴ Several features enlarged the impact of *Mission Wall Dances*. First, Kreiter interviewed three individuals about their personal experience of arson and displacement and used their voices in the sound score. In the middle of operatic singing and Monk-like use of “extended vocal technique” in the sound score, different voices echoed:

The whole row of apartments was catching on fire,
The whole row of apartments was catching on fire.
(Nonverbal singing)
This is somebody’s home
(Nonverbal singing)
About being in the place you belong
Where is my home?
Home is where your mother is
Where your pillow is
My home, my home, my home
(Nonverbal singing)¹⁸⁵

The echoes of “home” in the score underscore the tragedy of displacement by arson. Hearing the words of the displaced makes them present again—acknowledging their hardships. Second, Kreiter commissioned a mural for the building wall on which they performed to provide a more lasting memorial to the displaced occupants. The dancers performed on fire escapes on top of the

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 243.

¹⁸⁵ *Mission Wall Dances 2002*, Video, *Mission Wall Dances 2002*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91aHbgWGkik&feature=channel_video_title, (You Tube: Flyaway Productions, 2009).

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mural as well as on the edges of the building's roof. They appeared to be jumping out of the mural's windows and leaping onto the walls. Third, Kreiter gives partial credit to the news coverage of *Mission Wall Dances*, a feature appearing in the main section of the paper, for drawing "huge audiences."¹⁸⁶ The element of oral history combined with controlled aerial spectacle and the minor tone vocal score created a hybrid effect of haunting mourning and transcendent hope. The mural captured the core duality with its bright colors and sense of peace and renewal on the adjacent face of a wall depicting rows of windows in flames. The mural remains as a reminder and a memory of the performances of *Mission Wall Dances*.

In the same year, 2002, Haigood traveled to New York City to work on a piece that would be sited at the twelve-story abandoned 1920s grain terminal in Red Hook, Brooklyn. The piece, entitled *Picture Red Hook*, was primarily an aerial work for seven dancers that called for them to soar 160 feet in the air and hundreds of feet in front of the 54 joined silos, over the heads of the audience. Haigood regarded the granary as "a symbol of abundance, loss, and revitalization." "In that context, the flying represents the will to transcend social challenges," Haigood stated to Wendy Perron, editor of *Dance Magazine*. The aerial choreography included gestures reminiscent of cutting grain and harvesting, a major theme in *Picture Red Hook*. As she rehearsed her dancers, Haigood was simultaneously harvesting community dialogue. The area near the granary includes the Red Hook Houses, a large public housing unit in a blue-collar neighborhood in transition. Over the course of a few years, Haigood and the video artist Mary Ellen Strom held creative workshops in the Red Hook schools. They trained students in interviewing residents and had them participate in multi-generational dance-swaps. Strom created a video of the faces of residents, dancers, and a portrait of residents from every sector of Red Hook that was projected on the large rounded faces

¹⁸⁶ Kreiter, "Making 'Sparrow's End'," in *Site Dance*, eds. Kloetzel and Pavlik, 243.

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of the fifty-four attached grain silos.¹⁸⁷ The title of Perron's *New York Times* review, "Way Up High, Soaring, Floating, Diving, Dancing," suggests the inspiring and diverse physicality of Haigood's choreography, while the title of *The Brooklyn Papers'* review, "Ingrained Hope," suggests the work's lasting and serious community impact. Suzanne Gallo, a member of Zaccho Dance Theater, noted to Perron: "You need a sense of ease being inverted. For Joanna, she does it all the time. When you're inverted, you look at the world differently; you respond differently; you have a heightened awareness."¹⁸⁸

This "heightened awareness" is a feeling Haigood constantly tries to reach for both the dancers and the audiences in her site works. In *Ghost Architecture*, for example, Haigood suspended time by slowing movement down and reducing it to minimal dance gestures. In *Picture Red Hook*, she "suspends viewers in a timeless world," according to Jennifer Dunning. Haigood's simultaneous attention to the present, the era of the granary's "hey day" (the 1920s), and the period of deterioration in between likely created that sense. Always focusing attention to "place memory," Haigood concluded the work with a tribute to the past. Dunning described:

The present was alive in the glowing red chimney tower and the full moon drifting into view from behind the terminal. But figures glimpsed through empty windows in small abandoned buildings seemed to inhabit several centuries, as did the misty distant industrial cityscape beyond the water... Ms. Haigood, seen at the end cooking and washing dishes and gazing out from a faraway ruined and empty room, embodied the everyday.¹⁸⁹

Picture Red Hook was highly praised by critics for its interdisciplinary, multi-media involvement in the site. Aerial dance may provide the secret ingredient that truly defamiliarizes audiences, kindling awe and a suspended sense of possibility as they contemplate a place and its history.

¹⁸⁷ Wendy Perron, "Way Up High, Soaring, Floating, Diving, Dancing," *New York Times*, Aug 18, 2002.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Jennifer Dunning, "A Little Night Magic for the Past," *New York Times*, Aug 27, 2002.

Progress and Our Place

Site-specific dance had become its own full-fledged genre by the turn of the twenty-first century, with a cohort of choreographers from all over the country with different backgrounds and interests. It is difficult to generalize or even categorize choreographers and subgenres.

Nevertheless, there exists a particular lineage of choreographers who extend their practice from Meredith Monk's human, yet haunting methods of layering in both time and space. From Monk to Carlson and Bowers; from Monk's influence on Haigood, to Haigood's tutelage of Kreiter, neighborhoods on the east and west coasts—focused in New York City and San Francisco—have been mapped archaeologically at the site between community and art time and time again.

Choosing to think about time and space archaeologically opens up narrative and social, economic, and political critique. Choreographers who have established an understanding or play within real-time understand that their movement can choose to participate in or resist certain manifestations of “progress.” I believe Monk, Haigood, Carlson, Kreiter, and Bowers share the hopes of progressing toward democracy, towards greater empowerment, and greater tolerance. They situate dance in the context of life and the environment, aspiring to reach people not usually touched by art and help enact change, at least in bodies and minds. Some see their forays into history as nostalgic yearnings, but mostly these artists use the past to draw a larger map of the range of human experience and help audiences find and appreciate their role in the larger narrative.

Conclusion

Artists as Historians: Modern Dance's Relationship to American Historical and Place Consciousness

The story of site-specific dance in the United States is one of simultaneous increasing interdisciplinarity and increasing emphasis on the particular, the discontinuous, and the unique. As a hybrid form, site dance holds a multitude of new methods, approaches, intentions, and technologies in its future, especially if it gains greater access to funding, press coverage, and academic analysis. Site choreographers need to find ways to transcribe their processes and make them available to the public so that a 500-word *New York Times* article does not bear the sole responsibility for interpreting and educating audiences about a particular work or the genre's aims and successes. Short essays of varying formats, like those found in *Site Dance*, the first book on the subject of place-based postmodern dance, should be made available more regularly. If anything can be garnered from the American historical pageantry movement in the present, it is that documentation and spirited discourse are essential for locally based art to receive the respect and support it deserves.

The academic discourse on site dance is still fairly "uncritical" and has failed to ask big questions about site dance and answer them from unbiased positions. It is also important that those theorizing about site-specific work not bury their productive analysis in overly experimental methods of scholarship. While interdisciplinarity does beg for new forms of expressing plurality in writing, artsy layouts and indulgent layering of personal anecdotes can muddle the message. Once site-specific dance is more widely understood, the kind of writing found in *Corporealities*, for example, may help enrich the dialogue and the possibilities for movement in new directions.

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Ultimately, site-specific dance should be felt, seen, and heard in its live performance context. With performance, and especially nonverbal performance, a lot of the value and pleasure gets lost in translation to language. I can imagine myself as a spectator or participant at a town pageant, a performance of Trisha Brown's "Equipment Pieces," one of Anna Halprin's workshops, Meredith Monk's *American Archaeology*, and Joanna Haigood's *Picture Red Hook*. The fragments of videos, photographs, interviews, essays, and clippings files have helped me reveal and rebuild a sense of the performances that have faded into invisibility and timelessness once they were finished. The ephemeral nature of site work is its strength. Its impermanence allows for future revisions, while still leaving its mark on people's minds in day-to-day life with increased consciousness of the environment, whether one conceives of that environment as physical, or human.

Modern dance has always been a progressive movement, and however idiosyncratic choreographic interpretations may be, public history as a whole benefits from alternative narratives and methodologies. Site dance poses new opportunities for activating audiences as well as new approaches to researching and revealing local histories. It activates civic awareness, empowering individuals to incite positive change. Site-specific dance events most importantly create open spaces for public informal dialogue about place, change, and identity. The show is just beginning: the plaza is open for dancing and conversation.

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