

Between Precarity and Vitality: Downtown Dance in the 1990s

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines experimental dance in New York City in the 1990s. Earlier periods of American concert dance have received significant scholarly attention to the historical, political, and aesthetic aspects of dance practice. Moreover, certain periods of modern dance — especially the 1930s and the 1960s — have been analyzed as moments of significant change, and the artists that emerged from the Judson Dance Theater in particular have held a significant place in the theorizing and historicizing of dance in the United States. However, experimental dance practices of the early 21st century demonstrate dramatically different aesthetics, approaches, and circumstances of production than those of earlier periods, including their Judson forebears. This project argues for understanding the 1990s as a period of significant change for dance, one with continuing resonance for the decades that follow.

This project uses the term "downtown dance" to situate experimental dance in New York City as a community of practitioners, rather than as a particular set of aesthetic or artistic practices. Each of the four chapters focuses on an aspect in this period that would define how dance looked, how dancers practiced, and what shaped the artistic values and priorities of this community.

The first chapter presents a history of the dance-service organization Movement Research. Tracing the history of the organization from its founding in 1978 through the establishment of its most influential programs in the 1990s — including the *Movement Research Performance Journal* and the performance series Movement Research at the Judson Church — the chapter locates Movement Research as a central entity in building the community and shaping the

aesthetics of downtown dance. The second chapter examines the effects of the AIDS crisis on dance in the 1990s. As AIDS entered its second decade, it collided with and magnified downtown dance's complex relationship with emotion. This chapter draws on scholarship of AIDS' relationship to visual art, theater, and activism, as well as close readings of several works — by artists including Donna Uchizono, Neil Greenberg, John Jasperse, RoseAnne Spradlin, Jennifer Monson, and DD Dorvillier — most not generally understood as "AIDS dances," to argue that AIDS' impact generated a fundamental shift in the role of emotion in downtown dance.

The third chapter examines how shifts in arts funding in the 1990s connected to a major restructuring in production models for dance. This chapter connects the history of the modern dance company with both aesthetic and economic developments over the course of the 20th century, arguing that the company should be understood as a combined economic-aesthetic system. Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates the new model for dance production that began to take hold in the 1990s in the wake of widespread funding and economic shifts: the project model. Teasing out the complex web of funding for dance, this chapter makes extensive use of dance periodicals; several funding trend analyses from organizations including Dance/USA, National Endowment for the Arts, Dance/NYC, and private corporate and foundation reports; and the archives of the presenting institution Danspace Project. The final chapter looks at how the shifts in economic models for dance discussed in the previous chapter connected to changes in training and bodily technique of dancers and performers. Specifically investigating the history of "release technique," this chapter examines how attitudes toward technique and training in downtown dance in the 1990s shifted the connection between movement practices and creative output, reconceiving the role of the dancer in the dancer-choreographer relationship.

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Introduction

MINING THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF DANCE

Most Monday nights throughout the 1990s, on the south side of New York’s Washington Square Park, around 200 people filled the sanctuary of Judson Memorial Church to view a dance performance. This weekly event was titled “Movement Research at the Judson Church,” a free series put on by Movement Research, a twelve-year-old yet still scrappy service organization that ran a variety of programs around dance. Movement Research at the Judson Church was not a typical dance show. In addition to being free, performances were low-tech, generally works-in-progress, and programmed without an eye toward artistic coherence among an evening’s offerings. Though the bar was explicitly set low, the events were exceptionally well attended — with a 200-person capacity, the sanctuary was almost always filled ahead of time via reservation, with long lines around the block ready to take the spot of any no-shows.

The Judson series would be an essential component of the downtown dance landscape. Following its debut in the fall of 1991, it quickly gained recognition as a place to see new ideas and new works, with a mix of revered experimental choreographers and exciting newcomers. It was the most likely place to encounter the leading edge of dance experimentation, in the bodily techniques of dancers and the formalist structures of choreographers. It was a testing ground for topical content in dance, presenting ideas of the moment to a well-informed audience. It would also be a site of continuity over the course of a decade that saw widespread change. Toward the end of the first season, Movement Research’s co-directors, Cathy Edwards and Guy Yarden, noted the significance of the series as building in part on the church’s relationship to earlier dance history, writing, “Movement Research at the Judson Church happily exploited the

collective dance memory” through its performances in the space.¹ As the site of the earlier Judson Dance Theater, the church held special meaning for both Movement Research as an organization and for the artistic community it served. Judson Dance Theater, the name for both a collective of dancers and a series of performances that took place between 1962 and 1964, was a formative landmark for many in the dance field circa 1990. That group of dancers opened a period of radical experimentation and exploration in dance practice widely acknowledged as reshaping the dance field. Dance historian Sally Banes wrote of the Judson Dance Theater:

It was the seedbed for post-modern dance, the first avant-garde movement in dance theater since the modern dance of the 1930s and 1940s. The choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater radically questioned dance aesthetics, both in their dances and in their weekly discussions. They rejected the codification of both ballet and modern dance. They questioned the traditional dance concert format and explored the nature of dance performance.... Attracting a grassroots audience of Greenwich Village artists and intellectuals, the Judson Dance Theater affected the entire community and flourished as a popular center of experimentation.²

Judson was also the point of origin of a community of dancers who linked their aesthetic ideas and artistic practices to the 1960s. Though financial success rarely materialized for any of them, many of the artists who comprised the loose collective of Judson Dance Theater — as well as many contemporaries who did not technically perform at its concerts — had carved out influential careers as choreographers, performers, and teachers. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, these dancers gained widespread recognition, and toured nationally and internationally. Moreover, they were often sought out by their fellow dancers as much for the practices and approaches they had to teach as for their particular artistic creations. Many of the founders of Movement Research identified Judson Dance Theater as their direct artistic forebear, and in the

¹ Cathy Edwards and Guy Yarden, “From the MR Co-Directors,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Winter/Spring 1992, p.1

² Sally Banes, *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 1993), p. xi

1990s, two artists who had taken part in the Judson Dance Theater concerts in the 1960s, Simone Forti and Steve Paxton, sat on Movement Research’s Artist Advisory Board. The history of the space gave those Monday night performances a direct relationship to a tradition almost 30 years old.

This is the “collective dance memory” that Movement Research engaged through the Monday nights at Judson. The dance memory: the performances of 1962-1964, the artists who took part in them, and the subsequent tradition that extended from those years, a tradition of which the early 1990s dancers who performed at and attended the Judson series were very much a living part. The collective: the series brought together a community of dancers. Rather than emphasizing individual achievement, Movement Research at the Judson Church placed dancers in conversation with other dancers, emphasizing the community as the center of artistic creation.

DOWNTOWN DANCE

Throughout the pages of this project, I refer to this tradition — this form, its community, its history — as “downtown dance.” The various neighborhoods of downtown Manhattan — Chelsea, Greenwich Village, Soho, the Lower East Side — were for much of the latter part of the 20th century the center of avant-garde art production in New York, dance included. From the 1960s to the 1990s, many dance artists lived, rehearsed, and performed in these various neighborhoods, and by the 1990s, almost all the major presenting venues of avant-garde dance were located in downtown Manhattan.

The term “downtown dance” is ubiquitous. It appears in reviews of performances, in the titles of documentary films and panel discussions, and even as the subject of articles seeking to

define it.³ Though there is neither critical nor artistic consensus about what downtown dance is, it does have a traceable history that illuminates some of the ways it differs from other terms used to describe dance. With regard to art practices, “downtown” — music, literature, art, etc. — referred to New York City artists making work in the downtown neighborhoods. But the etymology of the word is rooted in even further back in the history and geography of New York City. The word first enters the English language in the early 19th century, with New Yorkers using it to refer to the southern end of Manhattan.⁴ A geographical coincidence of the island being aligned roughly along a north-south axis, “up” was north and “down” was south. But Manhattan’s southern end also had particular social and cultural characteristics. Already by the early 1800s, the “down” town of Manhattan contained a high density of shops, businesses, and manufacturing, whereas the more northern parts of the island remained primarily residential (and for much of the 19th century, agricultural). These social and cultural associations grew more significant than geography, and “downtown” came to be used all across the United States to refer to the economic center of a city or town, sometimes referred to as the central business district. In taking on the general meaning it has now, the word became a metonym, a stand-in for something else, rather than a description of it.

When used to describe art and performance, “downtown” has likewise operated primarily as a metonym, denoting social and aesthetic characteristics as much as geographic ones. The alignment of the aesthetic, social, and economic characteristics of downtown performance

³ See, for example: panel discussion at New York Live Arts: “When was the downtown established?”, March 9, 2014. Documentary Film: *Downtown Dance*, directed by Kathryn Sullivan (2007). Articles: “Inside Downtown Dance,” *Dance Spirit* (2008).

⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary etymology gives 1835 as the earliest usage; see also Robert M Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 9-12 for a more thorough etymology.

culture was analyzed in a 1987 article by sociologist Samuel Gilmore. Analyzing a period from the mid-1970s through 1983, Gilmore divided the concert music world into three subworlds: uptown, midtown, and downtown.⁵ Through an analysis of concert music’s “coordination problem” — the complexity required to coordinate resources distributed among individuals and institutions to produce a concert — Gilmore shows that the economic, social, and aesthetic characteristics of each subworld are markedly different. Furthermore, these characteristics (economic, social, and aesthetic) do not vary independently; in the concert world, for instance, “they appear to hang together empirically,” so that specific aesthetic practices always appears alongside a specific social organization and economic mode of production.⁶ Thus, “downtown” music was not just its aesthetic practices, but the social and economic practices that aligned with those practices.

Similarly, downtown dance refers broadly to a tradition of experimental dance that was associated with a particular Manhattan geographic area. But downtown dance was always about the tradition, not the geography — it would be downtown dance whether it was happening on the Upper West Side, or in Houston, Texas, for that matter. (And, like other applications of “downtown,” downtown dance does appear in other cities across the US, in communities with the combination of a sizable dance community and a broader arts audience necessary to sustain the form.) The metonymic character of “downtown dance” has made it frustrating to some, who argue that because downtown dance does not happen only downtown, the term is meaningless,

⁵ Samuel Gilmore, “Coordination and Convention: The Organization of the Concert World,” *Symbolic Interaction* 10, no. 2 (November 1, 1987): 209–27

⁶ Gilmore, “Coordination and Convention,” p. 215. Some of the “social” dimensions Gilmore analyzes include “division of labor...; the scale, or number of potential participants who might be involved in collaboration; the organization of interaction, or the processes through which composers and performers make contact in establishing concert coalitions.”

and fails to describe any coherent artistic platform. But it is this same metonymic aspect that I find so useful. “Downtown” does not describe a practice, it *is* the practice. Rather than an aesthetic category, downtown dance is an attitude and, more importantly, a community of people who share this attitude and practice this form.

As a term, “downtown dance” is not specific to the 1990s; references to it appear at least as far back as the 1970s, and the term continues to be used today. However, I think it helps us to see how the practice of dance in the 1990s operated. It captures the idea that dance is first and foremost a field of practitioners, defined by dancers’ connection to other dancers, rather than to a set of aesthetics.

Certainly, there were common features to be found across much of downtown dance during the 1990s. A preoccupation with experimentation over tradition was central, and by dint of it being a community, there are trends and shared features across much work, even as the aesthetic characteristics were messy and contradictory — it was not ballet, it was not jazz or tap, and it was not modern dance, though a downtown dancer could potentially employ any of these forms, or be separately involved in those practices. Improvisation was a core component of training and composition, yet many works were densely choreographed with movement determined solely by the choreographer. Explorations of personal stories and identity politics were favored topics, but so were abstract explorations of form in the body and space. In other words, the presence or absence of any particular aesthetic did not make something “downtown.” Both as an idea and as an artform, downtown dance was grounded in a community of practice. As a term, it referred first and foremost to this community, to the commitment of its practitioners to the development of the field and the artform, rather than referring to a set of aesthetic criteria. And it is precisely

this idea of an artform defined by its emphasis on connection that dance in the 1990s engendered.

PROFESSIONALIZATION AND A GROWING FIELD

By 1990 a full three generations of experimental dance artists were working side by side, giving direct access to a history of experimental practice. For the first time downtown dance had reached a kind of “critical mass” that allowed for the existence of a collective social memory that artists were able to access.

Previous generations of dancers had, to various degrees, defined themselves as working against what had come before them. Modern dancers such as Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey had set themselves philosophically against ballet, popular theater, and Denishawn with its collection of techniques and styles, while postmodern dancers had set themselves against those same modern predecessors. Downtown dancers of the 1990s, on the other hand, worked alongside dancers of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, building on and working within the artistic practices these earlier generations had developed. This meant that downtown dancers of the 1990s were negotiating how to practice dance in relation to the possibilities opened by previous generations. For this new generation, artistic ideas did not have to originate from rejection, but could arise from critical reflection on already established artistic choices.

In addition to the presence of a sizable community of practicing artists, downtown dance had reached a degree of relative professionalization that would have been nearly unimaginable in the 1960s. There were multiple theaters dedicated to showing experimental dance and performance, and even organizations whose entire mission was to support them administratively and financially. Even if these spaces and organizations were low-budget compared to the institutions

that housed, for example, ballet, that they existed at all was a significant difference from the decades prior. And outside the immediate downtown arts community, city, state, and national infrastructures had developed both to fund dance and bring it to audiences around the country. Even more, there had been an enormous growth in college and university programs that trained dancers throughout the country to join the ranks of professional dancers upon graduation. Whereas in earlier years, the field of dance had been widely regarded as in functional disarray,⁷ by the 1990s even experimental dance had the trappings of a true professional infrastructure.

Along with this professionalization of the field, downtown dance had achieved the stability that permitted a reflection on the means of the practice. Dancers saw dance as a career because models for such a trajectory existed in both artistic and economic senses — some of their Judson predecessors were now regularly performing internationally, had their own studios, and even owned buildings. Because it was now possible to imagine dance as a career, and to understand oneself as part of a stable, continuous history, it was also possible to critically reflect on the form itself. The questions were not “how can I keep dancing,” but “what do I want dance to be?” Dancers of the 1990s, rather than rejecting the practices of previous generations, were still working with, building on, and pushing forward those practices, in addition to developing their own. Any artistic approach was valid, making for a rich tapestry of possibilities, opening experimentation to move beyond rejecting perceived restrictions on dance toward simply considering what dance could create with all of this possibility.

⁷ Angela Graham’s dissertation, a history of the early years of the NEA Dance Program, has reports and interviews with program administrators repeatedly mentioning the disorganization of the dance field mid-century, examples including “chaotic,” (p.59) “little financial or institutional organization,” “No planning. Not a budget in the country for a dance company.” (p. 195). Angela Helen Graham, “The National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program, 1965-1971: A Social and Cultural History” (Ed.D., Temple University, 1996)

It was this expansion, both artistic and economic, that set up the downtown field for a particularly hard fall. Following this long period of growth, the 1990s registered a number of structural shocks that would fundamentally destabilize the field of downtown dance. From a broad financial shake-up in how arts funding circulated, to political attacks that pitted artists against society, to the AIDS epidemic decimating a generation of dancers, downtown dance saw much of the stable footing it had gained over the previous decades evaporate in just a few years. The collective expectations of dancers for their artistic practice, possible now only because of the growth and stabilization of the field, were challenged by shocks to the structural systems that had facilitated that growth, and also by changing artistic desires.

At the same time, the 1990s saw downtown dancers critically reflecting on their practice ways that went beyond simply imagining survival. Concert dance broadly speaking — including ballet, Broadway, and other performance forms — was still small relative to embedded cultural institutions such as museums and orchestras, but it was now an established part of the American cultural landscape. And downtown dance, the experimental edge of concert dance, had garnered its own foothold in that landscape. A stable economic horizon had engendered expansive imaginative thinking in what dance could do, not only how one might sustain a career as a dance artist.

PROCESS

A close examination of the 1990s reveals a field in an active process of redefining its values and practices. Not every time period can be (or need be) revolutionary. In the 1960s and 1970s, modern dance underwent many fundamental changes in practice and aesthetics as it gradually became what we now call postmodern dance. The explorations of the Judson Dance Theater and

its contemporaries were a significant departure from the dance that came before it. The 1990s was not such a break; the downtown field in this period had largely continued the work of previous generations, and at the start of the decade, was aiming to build on rather than disavow it. What did happen in the 1990s was a shift in what dancers prioritized in their practice — and it was *practice* that they would prioritize.

The shifts were more subtle than overt changes in practice. In looking at the impact of AIDS on 1990s dance, for example, there are many direct and obvious ways that dancers responded to the disease in their art; these have been and continue to be well documented.⁸ However, the pervasiveness of the disease also affected how dancers conceived of emotion and its place in dance. Ironic distance, a frequent feature of postmodern dance, was unsustainable in response to the overwhelming grief and fear of those living through the AIDS crisis. The display of emotion in relation to the disease was especially clear in the work of queer men, but extended far beyond that work. Expression represented an open field of exploration in dance at the end of the century. These kinds of changes are much harder to see, because few outright claimed to be doing anything unusual; they simply did things differently because they could not do them any other way.

These subtle but pervasive internal changes proceeded while the outward appearance of downtown dance remained largely the same, and this is one of the things that makes the 1990s so important to understand. The tradition of downtown dance over much of the 20th century was concerned, in various ways, with questions of aesthetics, of defining dance, what dance could look like and how one should do it. In the 1990s, the downtown field seemed less concerned with

⁸ See Chapter 2 for fuller discussion of existing literature on AIDS and performance.

aesthetics than with reconsidering why one should dance at all — less with the *what* or *how* than with the *why*. Aesthetically, anything was fair game in the 1990s. Everything was allowed, the boundaries of dance had already been broken down, and now there was even a system in place to make a career possible. But what was that “career” privileging? Were there other ways of being in dance that could be meaningful? These questions *were* active in the 1990s. They were not posed as manifesto-like challenges to the order, but they were the outcome of a field acting as a community, reflecting on its own practice.

These values also appear in the institutions that served as sites of gathering for the field. Theaters and studios, places of performance and creation, began to hold space for the intellectual and social experiences of dancers. Even while these institutions grew increasingly professional in certain senses, the wide variety of services they provided to artists — the many different ways they interacted with artists — meant they always felt more like community institutions than efficient corporate offices. More importantly, these institutions not only reflected what artists practiced, but themselves helped to push forward the practice. Wendell Beavers, one of the founding members of Movement Research, wrote that “Movement Research was one of the first organizations to think and act like an artist.”⁹ In acting “like an artist,” Movement Research and other downtown organizations shaped the practices of the field in the 1990s. Creativity was not just what artists did on stage, but how they thought about what they did, and how they negotiated those ideas among others in the community.

As a result of the challenges of the 1990s, downtown dance in that decade existed in a state of precarity and vitality. The precarity of the 1990s was arguably no worse than in earlier periods

⁹ Wendell Beavers, “On Movement Research,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, 1993.

— an infrastructure existed, even if it was in trouble, and was better than no infrastructure at all. The experience of precarity of the 1990s — the funding upheavals, the political attacks, the AIDS crisis — was in no small part a reflection of the relatively new possibility of considering dance a viable career. But the loss threatened by this precarity also brought a significant vitality to dance in the 1990s. Dancers felt entitled to dance, and anything that challenged that was met with extreme resistance. Dancing felt important. It felt important to dance in response to the political challenges of the era, and it felt important to build on the stability the form had so far achieved.

METHOD, FOCUS, SCOPE

The history of this period in dance has yet to be written. When I began this project, there was nothing I could turn to for a general overview of the period or its dance practices.¹⁰ The absence of such a history has led to a persistent misunderstanding around dance of the 1990s, primarily based in outdated conceptions of how dance should be working and what it should be doing. One example appeared in a widely circulated article by longtime arts administrator Michael Kaiser in 2009, titled, “Why I Worry about Modern Dance.”¹¹ In the article, Kaiser described his “fear” regarding what he saw as the imminent decline of modern dance, because of

¹⁰ In the time since I started, a few dissertations have been completed — especially Duncan G. Gilbert, “A Conceit of the Natural Body: The Universal-Individual in Somatic Dance Training” (Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, 2014) and Sarah Marie Wilbur, “U.S. Dancemakers: A Declaration of Interdependence” (Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, 2016) — which add helpful detail to my discussions of technique and funding, respectively. However, neither focus on the 1990s, nor specifically on the downtown dance community. Some scholarship on dance institutions — Susan Leigh Foster, *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2002) and Sally Banes, “Choreographing Community: Dancing in the Kitchen,” *Dance Chronicle* 25, no. 1 (June 27, 2002): 143–61 — was helpful, but these likewise end their discussion with the late 1980s or very early 1990s, leaving largely untouched the major events of the decade of my examination.

¹¹ Michael Kaiser, “Why I Worry About Modern Dance,” Huffington Post, August 17, 2009.

the absence of large, well-known dance companies. Kaiser's article was roundly critiqued in downtown circles, but the perspective he articulated was characteristic of a broader misunderstanding of the state of contemporary dance. Kaiser's central concern — that “virtually every great modern dance company was founded more than 40 years ago” — emphasized the dance *company* as the central vehicle of dance creation, and with the lack of new companies, suggested a decline in artistic viability for dance.

However, Kaiser seemed to have missed that, while large companies had stopped forming, there had also been a major change in artistic priorities among dancers. The choreographer Miguel Gutierrez, describing his reaction to Kaiser's article, said, “I thought, ‘Why are you looking for Mommy and Daddy? What is your attachment to modernism and the great white hero? Why are you incapable of seeing multiplicity and diversity in the field?’ So many people are addressing these questions and in so many different ways — that's what it's about now.”¹² Kaiser emphasized the need for large, famous companies, but such companies pursued a particular kind of artistic project, which Gutierrez saw as outdated. The artistic qualities that Kaiser was looking for were no longer prioritized by artists themselves.

One reason we historicize is to clarify our understanding of the past. Because of the absence of scholarship for this period, reflective perspectives, such as Kaiser's, tend to miss both important details and the broader picture, while diminishing the agency of artists. To place the concerns of artists at the center of my research, I focused on materials generated during the period. These materials — publications, videos, programs, reviews — were, by and large, produced by the artistic community, and they captured in the moment what was happening in

¹² David Velasco, “Miguel Gutierrez,” September 15, 2009.

downtown dance. This archival approach fundamentally shaped the ideas I developed. For one, the materials from the period documented a far more complex story than I had previously heard. Since no wide-ranging histories had been written, most summaries or overviews of the period were offered in conversations or in short articles devoted to another topic, such as a review of a particular performance or a profile of an artist. Naturally, these summaries oversimplified events, but more significantly, they often conflated outcome and significance, mistaking certain circumstances, such as a dearth of companies or a stylistic eclecticism in dance technique, as signifying a decline in artistic quality — fewer companies and lack of distinctive movement styles in choreography *must* mean dance was not what it used to be. My research caused some of my previous understandings of cause and effect to flip. For example: I found many artists describing how companies had stopped serving them creatively, rather than only discussing how they were unable to make those companies work financially or economically. In other words, the decline of companies was, in part, motivated by artists, rather than imposed on them.

This archival approach also allowed me to see the concerns that occupied artists' attention. The themes that this project would eventually coalesce around emerged from identifying topics that recurred continually over the decade, or that prompted significant changes in attitude or practice at crucial junctures. Financing dance, a perennial issue relevant to consider in any period, took on special significance in the 1990s as money was tied both to political ideologies and to modes of dance production. The AIDS crisis, similarly, was not unique to the 1990s, but shaped the experience of dancemaking in the 1990s in particular ways. And it was near impossible to look at any dance in the decade without dealing with the role of institutions whose entire mission was the support of experimental dance.

To start, I immersed myself in the records from the period itself. My approach was to follow the 1990s as it happened, to try and approximate the experience of going through the period, with its ups and downs, backs and forths. Along the way, I naturally came across many touchstones of the period: AIDS, economic instability, political volatility. But I also saw many things that I had not heard before, and came to understand the degree to which these lesser known events shaped the daily and long-term experience of dancers living through the 1990s. Everyone knows about the “decency clause” of 1990 and the role it played in the culture wars.¹³ But who remembers the many pages in *Dance/USA* tracking potential changes to the subsidization of non-profit postal rates during these same years?¹⁴ The postal-rate subsidization concern was tied up with broader tax policies, and had nothing to do with the furor over arts legislation; still, in the era before widespread use of email, changes in these rates would have had a significant impact on the bottom lines of many arts institutions and individual artists. Such divergent issues — postal rates and artistic censorship — hardly have the same political valence, but they both related to the experience of being an artist in the period. This atmosphere of constantly having to put out small fires like budget recalculations due to postal rate changes contributed to making events such as the decency clause politically unbearable for artists: the tediousness of our regular concerns was difficult enough, and now they are coming after us directly?

¹³ The NEA introduced legislation to ban funding of “obscene or indecent art” (1989 H.R. 2788 — codified at 20 U.S.C.A. § 953 et seq. (1989)). Called the Helms Amendment, adopted in October 1989, it gave the NEA great power and latitude to define obscenity. This applied to 1990 grants, requiring artists who accepted grants to sign that they would not make obscene work, and was referred to as the “obscenity pledge.” A year later, the NEA got rid of the pledge, but instituted a “decency clause,” (1990 Amendments, Pub. L. No. 101-512, § 103(b), 104 Stat. 1963 — codified at 20 U.S.C.A. § 954(d)(1990)), which required grant recipients to ensure their artwork met standards of decency. The so called “NEA Four” case, officially *Finley v. NEA*, was in response to this decency clause.

¹⁴ Legislation around changing postal rates is discussed in nearly every issue of *Dance/USA* from January 1991 through Spring 1994, and then intermittently until Summer 1996.

So to “experience” the 1990s, I read through several publications produced from within the dance field, to see what artists were saying during this period.¹⁵ I looked at every issue of *Dance/USA*, *Movement Research Performance Journal*, *Dance Magazine*, and *Contact Quarterly* published during the 1990s.¹⁶ This gave me a way to look at what artists were talking about and seeing others talk about, and get a sense of how events and ideas progressed over the decade. The 1990s was also a period of increasingly accessible video recording of performances as well as artists talking about their work and about the field — from post-performance discussions, to Movement Research’s frequent Studies Projects, oral histories recorded by the New York Public Library’s Dance Oral History Project, to weekend-long retreats sponsored by Dance Theater Workshop (DTW), among others. I watched dozens of hours of discussions on broad-ranging topics from how dancers could create an economically sustainable art practice, how trends in performance connected to current political and social issues, to specialized considerations of how choreographers use somatic techniques in rehearsal.¹⁷ This archive gives us access to what dancers talked about when they were in the room with one another, which was crucial to recognizing what was important to them, and why.

The questions that directed my archival work were largely informed by conversations I had with many artists about their work and their experiences during the 1990s. Many of the artists whose choreography I viewed, whose dancing I watched, and whose words from long ago I listened to and read, are still active in downtown dance. I have been a dancer in this field since

¹⁵ There is an argument to be made for the 1990s being a “golden age” of downtown dance print publishing: with the start of personal computers and home-design software, even a “postage-stamp sized” (Cynthia Hedstrom, quoted in Laurel George, “Artists Incorporating,” p. 326) organization like Movement Research could start a publication.

¹⁶ I looked at other publications as well, but these emerge most directly from the dance community itself — *Dance Magazine* perhaps less so, but it was the most frequently published.

¹⁷ See, for example: *Confronting the Model: A Retreat for Mid-Career Artists*, 1995; *Blood in Performance*, Studies Project, 1994; *The Mind Is an Organ: Choreographic Structure, Focus, Feeling*, Studies Project, 1993.

the late 'aughts, performing, choreographing, and writing and editing for artist-run publications (including *Movement Research Performance Journal*, the American Realness catalog *Reading*, and the online publication *Culturebot*), and many of the artists I came across in the archives I also know through my work in the current field. Though I have done some formal interviews with these artists over the years, most of the conversations have been casual, in theater lobbies before and after performances, on the subway, or at some of the very same panel discussion series that I saw on video from the 1990s. The experiences, events, and ideas that came up in these casual conversations often directed the questions I asked as I made my way through the archival material.

The things that came up over and over again in these informal settings suggested what experiences had stayed with dancers and shaped the dance field. People would often say that Movement Research was the first place they took a class when they came to New York; or that they tried to have a company in the 1990s but that there was no infrastructure; nearly everyone who mentioned release technique did so with an eye-roll or a question mark in their voice. And though everyone always mentioned AIDS at some point, it was often as an afterthought rather than the central topic. This was not because it was unimportant — I came to realize the tone of “afterthought” was a result of the experience of AIDS being so ubiquitous that they would not have had to mention it to someone who had been there. These kinds of signals, about not just *what* was important, but *how to recognize what was important*, led me to follow the sources on which this project is built.

My research and perspective on the period has also been shaped by my viewing of well over a hundred performances from the period. Almost any performance that took place at PS122, DTW, Danspace Project, or The Kitchen (among other spaces that have since closed) was

recorded. In particular, I looked at the *Alive and Kicking* series (which documented performances at PS 122), videos of *Movement Research at the Judson Church*, and both DTW's and Danspace Project's video archives that are now in the collection of NYPL's Jerome Robbins Dance Division. I was also given access to the personal video collections of John Jasperse, Donna Uchizono, and Roseanne Spradlin, which contained several of these artists' works that have not yet been preserved in a public archive.¹⁸ Just as I had started by following artist's words, so the direction of my research — the questions I asked and how I looked for answers — was heavily informed by what I was seeing in recordings of dances from the 1990s.

Nevertheless, the following pages engage in only a limited way with either specific artists or works. The reasons for this are twofold. One, the story I want to tell is not one that emphasizes the individual achievement of singular “great artists” or of particular works as breaking aesthetic molds. The story is of subtle changes in attitude and in practice, changes that might be fundamental and of great importance, but are not necessarily manifested in specific products. It is, again, this sense of different values that emerge in the period; the product itself changes only a little, but what matters in that product changes a lot. Second, the values that start to matter revolve around contributing to the field — essentially a collective endeavor rather than an individualistic one. In the 1990s, one was valued as a dancer not because of what one produced, but on the basis of how one conducted one's practice. The story that I see in the 1990s emphasizes the contribution of individuals to sustaining a community of practice, rather than personal artistic creation as something separate or outstanding from that community. The story I

¹⁸ Though video recording was widespread in the 1990s, one issue that arises from this for historical research is format proliferation, which has led to numerous obsolete formats. Some of Spradlin's works, for example, existed only on Hi-8 format, which required me to personally acquire a used recorder in order to digitize them before viewing. I was then able to provide Spradlin these digitized versions.

tell about the 1990s is not one that revolves around individual artists or particular choreographies or aesthetics. Rather, it is a story of collective experience that put less emphasis on aesthetics or products than on process. It is a story of being a dancer in the downtown community of the 1990s.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

To give the reader a sense of what the field is, Chapter 1 takes as its subject the service organization Movement Research. Tracing the history of the organization from its founding in 1978 through the establishment of its most influential programs in the 1990s, the chapter examines the role of institutions in shaping downtown dance. In particular, Movement Research in the 1990s emphasized “process over product,” with their resources going toward several aspects of dance other than producing individual choreographic works. The organization’s focus on the process of dance — the multifaceted act of making dance, rather than only the delimited performance of it — was reflective of the field more broadly in the 1990s. Moreover, the organization cultivated process as a fundamentally communal activity. Movement Research’s programs only rarely focused on individual artists, but rather articulated dance as something that happens in dialog among many, that was constantly changing and being developed, questioned, and reiterated. Its emphasis on “process over product” helped foster an idea of dance as something to take part in, to be in, and to do — and not just something to produce. The chapter also considers what the downtown “community” was in the 1990s. Rather than an idea of community as something unified, communal, or harmonious, Movement Research exemplified community as something that continually transformed and was contested throughout the decade,

displaying both the challenges downtown encountered, as well as the unifying and supportive functions it encouraged.

Chapter 2 looks at how to be dancing downtown in the 1990s was to be inescapably reminded of AIDS. As the epidemic entered its second decade, it was one of the defining features of life for many in the dance community, so ubiquitous as to sometimes be simply assumed and unremarked. While there are many ways that dancers directly responded to AIDS, this chapter looks at AIDS as something that thoroughly shifted the consciousness of the dance community and influenced it in ways that were not always directly about AIDS. Specifically, this chapter looks at the place of *emotion* in downtown dance. Downtown had a conflicted relationship with emotion after postmodern dance positioned it as largely suspect. But downtown's relationship with emotion was changing in the late 1980s and the 1990s, as it took on new relevance and motivated the development of new approaches to form. This chapter examines how these aesthetic changes are deeply entwined with the AIDS crisis, infusing downtown dance in the 1990s with an emotional core, both directly, through dances that were explicitly inspired by AIDS, and indirectly, through shifting the field's relationship to emotion.

Chapter 3 examines the intersection of artistic and infrastructural *changes in dance production*. The collapse of funding structures in the 1990s called into question the status of the dance company as a viable economic structure. However, most discussion of the arts funding crisis in the 1990s focuses exclusively on the NEA; this chapter addresses the role of the NEA in the shifting dance funding landscape, while also looking beyond it to consider several other funding sources. It also looks at how the clear economic destabilization of the dance company in the early 1990s happened less-obviously alongside changes in the artistic practices of downtown choreographers. It continues themes from Chapter 1 in considering the role of institutions in

downtown dance, and how funding changes affected artists' relationship not only with companies, but with theaters.

Leading up to the 1990s, a sustainable career trajectory had been established for both choreographers and dancers, provided these roles maintained a certain relationship to one another: choreographers establishing companies that paid dancers to work for them more-or-less exclusively, until a dancer moved on to become a choreographer, created their own company, and hired others to dance for them. But the sharp distinction between choreographer and performer did not align with how these roles were actually practiced them in downtown, particularly as the company model dissolved. This is the focus of chapter 4, which examines how *the practice of dancers* — particularly performers, distinct from choreographers — changed in the era. This coincided with another major development of downtown in the 1990s, the reformulation of technique, in its general practice and its role in dancemaking. Looking specifically at the contested phenomenon of “release technique,” this chapter considers what it means for a community to take responsibility for what had previously been the domain of an individual.

That dance changed in the 1990s is a given. A theme throughout these chapters is a tension between different motivations for that change. One example is the intersection of forces external versus internal to the dance community — a sweeping cultural phenomenon like the AIDS crisis that affected society broadly versus the very particular history of emotion in postmodern dance. The tension between the intersection of such varying circumstances is at the heart of many of the events that move throughout this project. These tensions pose a deep question: did dance change as a response to these events, manipulated by forces out of its control? or did it motivate its own

change, driven by artists inventing visionary practices in unstable times? Of course, none of the events discussed are the result of a single force, purely external or purely internal, but in all cases, some interaction of the two. But between these forces, these tensions, emerges the state of dance in the 1990s, one suspended between the precarity of an experimental form and the vitality of an inventive community.

Chapter 1 —

Movement Research and the Community of Downtown

SEPTEMBER 16, 1991: OPENING OF AN ERA

It was not supposed to be a big deal. Certainly, they wanted to provoke thought, but they did not intend to provoke a governmental outcry. But on September 16, 1991, it turned out this was not merely an attack from the outside, but a revolt from within.

Just a few months on the job as the new Co-Directors of Movement Research, Cathy Edwards and Guy Yarden were facing down what was possibly the most significant threat the organization had ever experienced. The week before, The National Endowment for the Arts had charged it with misuse of funds, on account of their recent publication, “Gender Performance,” the third issue of the *Movement Research Performance Journal*. Edited by Tom Kalin, a writer and filmmaker, “Gender Performance” featured articles that addressed gender and sexuality, in society and in performance, ranging from an essay by Jill Johnston exhorting dance critics to address gender, to a short story portraying a gay relationship between Jesus and Lazarus, while a portrait series of transexuals flowed throughout the issue. In the NEA’s assessment, “much of the material contained in this issue of the journal does not appear to speak to the dance community on issues specific to dance or performance art.”¹ Most problematic, according to the NEA’s letter, was a piece contributed by the lesbian and gay activist-artist collective GANG, which consisted of a half-page photograph of a vagina, with text underneath that read, “READ MY

¹ Laurence Baden, “Re: Movement Research Inc. Grant No. 91-3354-0093,” Letter, September 9, 1991

LIPS BEFORE THEY'RE SEALED," followed by an appeal to readers to call their Senators to protest, among other things, laws limiting information on abortion clinics. This piece, the NEA concluded, was political action, and was thus prohibited use of grant funds.

As a small artist-run organization dedicated to experimental dance, Movement Research had never attracted much attention outside its artistic community. That year they had received only \$4,400 from the Endowment, hardly noteworthy. In considering how they should respond to the NEA's decision — Return the money so as not to cause further trouble? Fight it on principle? If so, how to go about this fight? — the Movement Research board decided to discuss the situation with the community of artists they served, at a performance already scheduled for the following week.²

Given the outcries of censorship in artistic circles over what would become known as the "NEA Four," Edwards and Yarden expected the dance community to respond with similar outrage to this latest round in the culture wars. But the reaction was hardly what they expected. Performance artist Holly Hughes, who was present that evening (and one of the "NEA Four" herself) wrote of the discussion,

There was no lack of passion in that crowd. But the outrage was not directed at the NEA who had just demanded Movement Research return part of their funding. What I thought was going to be one-part pep rally to two-parts strategy session turned out to be a forum for 400 downtown types, most of whom seemed to have had the same response to the Journal's assorted (and sordid) queers and gender benders as did Jesse Helms: disgust.³

While many expressed support for addressing gender and identity politics in the *Performance Journal*, there was also a significant backlash against the organization getting

² *Minutes of Movement Research Board Meeting*, September 11, 1991.

³ Holly Hughes, "Downtown Sex Panic and Missed Connections," *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Issue 7, p. 2, Fall/Winter 1993/1994.

involved in what was seen as controversial political activity. Topics of gender and sexual identity, some contended, were ultimately personal and not artistic concerns.⁴ The backlash revealed tensions within the community that made up Movement Research, which was itself undergoing serious change.

The public forum on September 16 was hardly the end of the firestorm regarding “Gender Performance.” Movement Research initially refused to return the grant funds, and both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* reported multiple times on the organization’s fight with the NEA.⁵ On October 31, Senator Jesse Helms — the main force in Congress behind the conservative attacks on the NEA and the author of the decency amendments — held up the GANG image on the Senate floor, describing it as “a blown-up picture of a woman’s vagina followed by some of the crudest language I have even seen.”⁶ Helms then offered to distribute copies of the issue to all members of the Senate, warning them “to be sure that the ladies employed by the Senate, and particularly the young people employed as pages, are not exposed to it.”⁷

⁴ Cathy Edwards recalled, “At that time, it was a big deal to say that the personal was political. It is such a given now. Back then it was a really radical idea.” Kathy Westwater and Cathy Edwards, “Kathy Westwater Cathy Edwards Part II,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Spring 2012 p. 29. However, given that the expression was coined by feminists in the late 1960s, this suggests how apolitical many downtown dancers actually were in the early 1990s.

⁵ Phil McCombs, “Is It Art or Is It Broccoli?” *Washington Post: Style*, November 1, 1991, Todd Allan Yasui, “NEA WANTS GRANT MONEY BACK,” *Washington Post*, September 30, 1991, Todd Allan Yasui and Gigi Anders, “NEA TO SUE FOR REFUND,” *Washington Post*, December 2, 1991, masters_kennedy_1991, William H. Honan, “Dance Group Refuses to Return U.S. Arts Funds,” *The New York Times: Arts*, September 23, 1991

⁶ p. 29495. See also a video of the proceedings at *Funding for National Endowment for the Arts | C-SPAN.Org*, 1991

⁷ Ibid.

While the “Gender Performance” controversy with the NEA would continue to play out over the next two years,⁸ people at the event where the community discussion took place had initially gathered to watch a performance. Monday, September 16, was the first evening of a series of performances that Movement Research would host that fall at the Judson Church in Greenwich Village. The series, Movement Research at the Judson Church, would be free, announced the program, with “barebones presenting evenings [that] will provide a new alternative for showing performance, in a process-oriented context.”⁹ There was a great deal of anticipation around the series, in part because Judson Church had a special relevance to the downtown dance community. In the early 1960s, the church was the site of the Judson Dance Theater, which served for many as the starting point for a lineage of postmodern dance. Holding a performance series in this space was a way for Movement Research to connect downtown dancers to that history.

The atmosphere of the first evening may have been overshadowed by the heated discussion of the *Performance Journal* and the NEA, but the Judson series itself, as Yarden recalls, had “a good vibe.”¹⁰ The weekly showings drew nearly 200 people, and the series quickly generated a great deal of excitement. Within the first month, *New York Times* critic Jennifer Dunning would write that the series “is fast becoming one of the season’s most enjoyable and important events.”¹¹ Of course, no one knew it in that first season, but the series would continue throughout

⁸ Following Clinton’s election in 1992, which prompted an administration that was somewhat more favorable to the arts, Movement Research would eventually settle with the NEA in 1993, returning \$225 of the original grant that was determined to have paid for the cost of printing that page of the *Performance Journal*.

⁹ “Programs,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Autumn 1991

¹⁰ Guy Yarden, “Movement Research at the Judson Church: A Portfolio of Process,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Autumn 2017. p. xiii

¹¹ Jennifer Dunning, “Vicky Shick and Dana Reitz: Movement Research Judson Memorial Church 55 Washington Square South Manhattan,” *New York Times: The Arts*, October 14, 1991

the decade, and would remain extremely popular, becoming a fixture of the downtown dance world and Movement Research's best-known project.

The tension between these two situations — a political firestorm that stirred up underlying divisions within an evolving dance community and the start of a series that was widely celebrated and regarded as solidifying that same community — is at the heart of Movement Research's significance in the 1990s. To explore that tension, this chapter traces the history of Movement Research from its founding in 1978 through the 1990s. Founded as a collective of eight dancer-choreographer-teachers, Movement Research emerged as a leading downtown dance institution in the 1990s, shaping the practice of downtown dance in ways both overt and subtle.

Movement Research was one of a number of organizations serving the downtown dance community in the 1990s. Dance Theater Workshop (DTW), founded in 1965, was probably the oldest. The 1970s saw the establishment of a number of artist-run spaces welcoming to experimental dance, including Danspace Project at St. Marks Church, PS122, and The Kitchen, in addition to Movement Research. The 1980s would see even more, including The Field, and DTW's subsidiary program, the National Performance Network. Such organizations played a crucial role in shaping downtown dance in the 1990s. Laurel George, writing about the rise of these "alternative spaces" for dance, describes how their ethos distinguished them in important ways from earlier centers of modern dance: "they construed themselves as an alternative to traditional modern dance organizations with one leader and technique and organized themselves around the ideals of opportunity and access; possibility and experimentation; and service to a

community.”¹² Whereas dance companies, the artistic centers of modern dance, were organized primarily around a single choreographer’s artistic vision,¹³ the downtown landscape of the 1990s was organized around institutions dedicated to serving a field of practitioners and the ecosystems they existed in. This shift in what constituted the artistic home in the field reflected and encouraged a shift from emphasizing the artist as an independent creative genius toward seeing the artist as a member of an active community of practitioners.

Downtown dance in the 1990s prioritized a view of creativity that existed in a broader context than that of the individual artist. In 2000, David White, DTW’s Executive Director since 1975, reflected that his approach to supporting artists was rooted in his view of how creativity operated:

“I feel strongly,” Mr. White says, “that communities create work, that it isn’t just about the individual. Martha Graham was promoted the way the Abstract Expressionists were — as manifestations of the American ideal; she was as much a pioneer as anybody. But the idea of this larger-than-life individualism makes you think that there’s a counterpart.”¹⁴

White’s perspective — that communities create work, not just individuals — was shared by many downtown dance organizations. Writing about The Kitchen, a multi-media and performance space that included dance since its founding in 1971, Sally Banes argues for seeing how The Kitchen’s dance programming “worked not only to provide services for individual artists but, especially for the younger choreographers, to function as a service and networking

¹² Laurel George, “Organizing Bodies: Creating and Funding Experimental Dance in the United States, 1965-2000” (Ph.D., Rice University, 2002), p. 101.

¹³ There are important exceptions to this, most notably Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which had for decades been a lauded repertory company.

¹⁴ Deborah Jowitt, “Building a Home for a Fragile, Fiery Community,” *New York Times: Arts & Leisure*, April 16, 2000.

center for an emergent professional community of artists — to help form, as well as to serve, that community.”¹⁵ Further expanding on this idea of a community in downtown dance, Banes writes,

Although this was not necessarily a warm and fuzzy communal, commensal, or collective 1960s-style group — certainly there were professional rivalries and conflicting artistic styles among its members — it was nevertheless a community both in the geographical sense (many of the choreographers, dancers, and critics lived or worked in SoHo or nearby, though some were from other parts of the country or abroad) and the professional sense.¹⁶

Movement Research is part of this institutional landscape while also being unique in important ways. Perhaps most crucially, it originated not as a performance space but as an umbrella for a group of artists to form a school. Though it would present concerts and performances in various formats over the years, relatively few of Movement Research’s activities in the 1990s involved presenting finished choreographies. Instead, the organization’s efforts were in the service of everything that, in a sense, surrounded and supported the performance: classes, workshops, residencies, work-in-progress showings, discussion series, and publications. Movement Research was never the largest organization among its peers in terms of operating budget, but simply through the broad range of activities it facilitated in the 1990s, it managed to engage a wide swath of the downtown field on a near-weekly basis. Because it was a center for artists at various stages of their careers, Movement Research helped define the ethos that characterized downtown dance in this decade.

The community served by Movement Research was not uniform, but changed over time, reflecting what the organization itself was at different points in its history. From a group of eight artists looking to bring visibility to their classes, it had developed by the late 1990s into an

¹⁵ Sally Banes, “Choreographing Community: Dancing at the Kitchen,” in *Before, Between, and Beyond: Three Decades of Dance Writing* (Madison, Wis. [u.a.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 281–302, p. 293.

¹⁶ Banes, “Choreographing Community.”, p. 292.

institution that hosted programs serving hundreds of artists; that Movement Research experienced growing pains is to be expected. It is the shape of those tensions that tell the story of the organization.

ADMINISTRATORS AS ARTISTS

In this chapter, the administrators of Movement Research appear as the most prominent characters in its story. In part, this is a practical function of what the archive holds: the most consistent figures in the paper record are not particular artists (of whom there were hundreds), but the small number of individuals performing the daily administration that served those myriad artists.¹⁷ Their work and their creativity appear as fingerprints — sometimes literally — in the work the organization produced. However, the reason for this narrative is not purely practical. Though these people were administrators first in their relationship to Movement Research, nearly all¹⁸ were also artists, at least part of the time. Each of Movement Research’s directors naturally had differing approaches to their role, but almost all have expressed their discomfort with the traditional idea of a director’s role. Guy Yarden put his approach explicitly in contrast to his experience at another institution, “I was coming out of PS122 and having a lot of issues with

¹⁷ Much of the following narrative is pieced together from my research in Movement Research’s institutional archives. The Executive Director of Movement Research, Barbara Bryan, graciously permitted me full access to these archives, which I spent several months exploring in 2017, and have come back to intermittently since. The largely unorganized boxes sit in a cabinet in a corner of their office, and contain a vast range of materials, including attendance sheets at classes and other events, written correspondence, press clippings, internal planning documents, minutes from board meetings, grant applications, financial documents, and much more. Existing interviews with many figures in Movement Research’s history provided helpful guidance, while archival findings clarified, filled gaps in the narrative, and revealed the many things that do not necessarily get remembered when narrativizing one’s own history. Beyond Movement Research’s privately held archives, some of the organization’s videos — including recordings of many early Studies Projects — have already been donated to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and are available there.

¹⁸ Though not all — Cathy Edwards and Catherine Levine are the primary exceptions, both drawn to experimental dance, but identifying primarily as administrators, without an active performance practice.

hierarchy, and organization structure,” and not wanting to repeat that,¹⁹ while Carol Swann wrote simply, “I did not want to adopt an old paradigm of executive director role models; I believed there was another model.”²⁰ Cathy Edwards put it most directly in terms of seeing her role in relation to the artists she worked with, “if I’m going to stay and do this, I need to create an exciting administrative and professional infrastructure for myself, as well, that in some way is modeled on the way the artists we work with are creating their work.”²¹

Movement Research largely sought to distribute, rather than concentrate power. For most programs, administrators were seldom the only ones making decisions: panels of artists were convened to select Judson performers and Artist-in-Residence recipients; the Artist Advisory Board would contribute to selecting teaching artists and curating performances; faculty meetings with teaching artists ensured the staff were aware of interests and concerns; Studies Projects could be proposed and organized by anyone. And unlike its peer institutions, none of Movement Research’s directors became, themselves, an institution. Where PS122’s Mark Russell held his position for 21 years (1983-2004), and DTW’s David White 28 (1975-2003), until 2013, no director stayed at the helm of Movement Research for more than five years. This frequent change of leadership contributed to the sense that the organization was responsive to artists, and that the administrator was never the sole director.²² As Simone Forti described the role in 1984, “Our

¹⁹ Cathy Edwards, Guy Yarden, and Clarinda MacLow, “Conversation with Cathy Edwards and Guy Yarden,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Spring 2004 p. A35

²⁰ Carol Swann, “1981-1984: Transition Years,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, 1998

²¹ Edwards, Yarden, and MacLow, “Conversation with Cathy Edwards and Guy Yarden.” p. A35

²² Though it was also somewhat problematic for the organization, as consistent leadership is a sign of stability to funders; but Yarden felt the organization’s resistance to conformity has helped it stay true to its mission. Edwards, Yarden, and MacLow, “Conversation with Cathy Edwards and Guy Yarden.” p. A35.

administrator does most of the work and most of the decision making, but we can have a board meeting and tell her off.”²³

Movement Research viewed dance expansively, and in that expansiveness, its administrators should be seen as shaping dance; not by authoring it, but by creating the means for its existence. Audrey Kindred has reflected on her time at Movement Research explicitly in these terms, “Though I was a dance maker, I found myself choreographing something much larger at MR. I stayed close to MR’s mission, while opening the doors to essential changes. I kept my finger on the pulse of the yearning quests of the dance world, aiming to guide them towards their expressive edges.”²⁴ In focusing on the work of administrators in creating dance, this story emphasizes something that Movement Research would itself emphasize: process over product.

FOUNDING A SCHOOL

As Mary Overlie recalled it, she was “standing [with a group of dancers] on Canal St...in between two parked cars,” when she causally suggested they start an organization to support one another’s classes.²⁵ This informal beginning would lead to a loose collective including Overlie and the dancers Beth Goren, Cynthia Hedstrom, Daniel Lepkoff, Christina Svane, and the lighting and set designer Richard Kerry.²⁶ These members of The School for Movement Research

²³ Burt Supree, “Keep Movin’ On,” *Village Voice*, December 18, 1984, p. 119. The Board of Directors at that time was composed entirely of artists.

²⁴ Audrey Kindred, “Researching Movement with Judson’s Angels,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Autumn 2017

²⁵ Mary Overlie, quoted in George, “Organizing Bodies.”, p. 108.

²⁶ The 1981 brochure includes Wendell Beavers and Terry O’Reilly as part of that founding collective, and May 1978 as the start date. However, neither are listed as teaching workshops in the inaugural season of Movement Research, which began in October of that year; they first appeared in its second season of classes. Hedstrom, in an interview with Laurel George in 1995, also lists just the six members as the collective (George, *Organizing Bodies*, p. 118). Beavers was married to Overlie at the time, and O’Reilly was familiar with all of them as well, but it is unclear at this point when they joined the “collective.”

and Construction, as they originally named their organization, pooled information about their classes and advertised them together. It was, at first, less an institution than a group flyer. Yet much about how the organization developed over the next two decades would be grounded in its initial vision: “to create a centralized place where one could come and see what workshops were going on in new movement techniques and body research.”²⁷

When The School announced its first offerings, it might have looked like a semester schedule in a college dance department: eight different classes that each met for two hours, twice a week for 12 weeks. Though these classes covered a range of different practices, they had a shared sensibility, described in the first brochure as “we all work directly with the experience of physical sensation, and with improvisation as both exploration and as performance.” Five of the eight classes either focused on developing improvisational skills, or used improvisation as a generative tool towards other means. Other topics included a class on anatomy, and a class on “Design for Performance.”

Evident in its first offerings, Movement Research was envisioned as a training center for new techniques and choreographic practices in downtown dance. For the founders of Movement Research, the Judson Dance Theater was an important influence and historical reference point. Many of these artists had trained with and been heavily influenced by the members of Judson, and were reaching a point in their own artistic trajectories where they were themselves teaching and further developing their own practices. They felt there was no reliable way for students to access these practices or for artists to share their research with their peers. Outside the ballet idiom, the two main structures for concert dance training were college dance departments and

²⁷ Cynthia Hedstrom, Anja Pryor, and Yoshiko Chuma, “Cynthia Hedstrom Talks with Yoshiko Chuma and Anya Pryor,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, 1998, p. 4.

studio schools associated with companies. College dance departments tended to support only the long-established modern dance practices, such as those of Martha Graham, José Limón, or Merce Cunningham, and studio schools tended to be limited to a single artistic style (the Ailey School was a notable exception). Other training modes certainly existed, including summer festivals held at colleges, the most prominent being the American Dance Festival; individual instructors could rent studios to teach; and professional artists would meet to collectively study movement investigations, such as at the Vermont Movement Workshop.²⁸ And outside of New York, Anna Halprin had been teaching on the West Coast since 1946 (and would also come to New York to teach).²⁹ But the wide range of approaches developed by Judson's artists were not yet being taught as reproducible techniques and methods, aside from irregular workshops when the artists toured for performances (often to the same colleges that had dance departments). In 1978, there was no centralized or consistent place, in New York City or elsewhere, for interested students to study the new practices that sprung up following the Judson era.

It was in this climate that Movement Research's founders generated the idea for a school, one which would serve as a site for these new practices in dance. As Hedstrom recalled, "my generation came up in a time when Cunningham and Graham and Limon were established schools. We were trying to figure out what's our school? As a way to define what the aesthetic was. And our school included everything, anything that we were attracted to and could use to inform us."³⁰ The school's offerings were formatted as "workshops," rather than as "classes": these workshops offered an extended-engagement format in which students would explore ideas

²⁸ The Vermont Movement Workshop (which went by different names, and was not always held in Vermont) met in the summers from the mid-1970s until 1985, and was an important place for the study contact improvisation and early release technique; Chapter 4 discusses the origins of release technique in greater detail.

²⁹ Janice Ross, *Anna Halprin : Experience as Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 81

³⁰ Hedstrom, Pryor, and Chuma, "Cynthia Hedstrom Talks with Yoshiko Chuma and Anya Pryor.", p. 4.

alongside the artist leading the session. The teacher benefitted from the workshop as a space to develop ideas in an exploratory context, rather than as a space to transmit fixed ideas from teacher to student. Movement Research's founders saw this idea as a legacy of the Judson workshops, and took up the idea out of familiarity, but also with the intention of embedding it into the ethos of the organization itself. Reflecting on the founding of the organization fifteen years into its operation, Beavers connected the format of the workshop with how the organization itself would be run: as an art-making project. He wrote, "So this school was art-making — not teaching how to dance or how to make dances, but actually making art.... I think Movement Research was one of the first organizations to actually think and act like an artist."³¹ He considered the workshops a shared space for exploration, rather than a hierarchical relationship of those with knowledge and those without, and also saw this inclusive approach as embedded in the organization itself.

After a successful first season of workshops, the group continued to offer a series of workshops in both the spring and fall seasons the following year. Finding itself in the position to continue indefinitely, the group quickly made the move to become an official, legally recognized non-profit organization, to be eligible for grants to support its programs.³² As part of this process, the legal name of the organization was shortened to simply "Movement Research, Inc.," — schools were not eligible for grants — with the brochure for the fall 1979 season of workshops situating the workshops as just one part of the organization, "The School for Movement Research is a project of Movement Research Inc., a not for profit, tax exempt corporation."

³¹ Wendell Beavers, "On Movement Research," *Movement Research Performance Journal*, 1993, p. 2.

³² Hedstrom describes the decision to incorporate as primarily motivated by the ability to allow the organization to apply for grants, see George, "Organizing Bodies.", p. 118-119.

Along with the workshops, in its first season Movement Research held a series of performances in which students and faculty of the workshops could show dances they had made. Called “Open Performance,” these were informal showings with no technical production of projects still in progress. As an accompaniment to the workshops, Open Performance served as an outlet for students to test out ideas and to do this with an audience. It was also explicitly a space for dialog: the performances were followed by discussions of the work with the audience, which included the other artists performing that evening. Aside from the requirement that performers be a workshop participant, there was no curation, ensuring the events functioned as an extension of the “school” atmosphere — a place to learn and experiment.³³

Movement Research’s offerings turned out to be as popular as its founders had hoped — perhaps even more so. Within just a few years, Movement Research’s workshop series had become an established place to study this new kind of dance. In 1980, Beavers opined that, rather than being an alternative institution, Movement Research was “the central institution for this kind of work.”³⁴ This was borne out by the level of international visibility Movement Research had reached by the mid-1980s; in 1984, “Foreign dancers...[made] up about a third of workshop participants.”³⁵ And while initially the reputation of the teachers drew students to Movement Research, after a few years, the situation began to reverse. Simone Forti, a frequent instructor on Movement Research’s roster (and member of the board of directors during the 1980s), noted the difference being included on its calendar made, “This last time I was thrown out on my own

³³ In its first year, it seems Open Performance was just for workshop participants; by 1981, it was open to audiences. Admission in 1981 was a \$1 donation; later on, Open Performance would become free. Movement Research still runs Open Performance, though like many of its programs, the format has changed over the years.

³⁴ Beavers in Elizabeth Zimmer, “Heirs to a Revolution,” *The Soho News*, November 5, 1980, p. 47

³⁵ Supree, “Keep Movin’ On.”

again.... I taught my own workshop because I always teach my workshop, but I had my own little mailing list and I had to put in my own little ad, and I got many fewer students.”³⁶

By the mid-1980s, the workshops had firmly established that Movement Research as serving a clear need. Its model provided a much-needed avenue for students to locate this kind of teaching, as well as for instructors to explore movement in a shared environment. Yet as it achieved some kind of stable visibility as an educational center, the inquisitive ethos instilled by the workshops made visible a need to “study” dance in more explicitly reflective contexts. In 1982, Movement Research put on a four-evening series, over two consecutive weekends, called “The Studies Project.” This event, initially conceived by Mary Overlie, was composed of performances and discussions. Each evening featured two artists, who gave a short presentation of their work — a verbal explanation preceding a brief performance — followed by a discussion that included the two artists, two moderators, and the audience. The artists were paired to highlight shared themes in their works, themes that were then taken up in the discussion portion of the program.

The Studies Project would become one of Movement Research’s signature events, filling an unexpected need in the downtown community. In its press release announcing The Studies Project, Movement Research characterized it as a tool for audience education, “The Studies Project has grown out of a concern to clarify critical vocabulary, to bring an audience closer to the process, intention, and working vocabulary — both conceptual and physical — of working choreographers.”³⁷ The significance is perhaps best illustrated in the second studies project,

³⁶ Simone Forti, in Supree, “Keep Movin’ On.”

³⁷ Movement Research, Inc, “Press Release: ‘The Studies Project: Four Evenings of Presentation and Discussion’,” February 10, 1982

which featured a performance and discussion between Steve Paxton and Bill T. Jones.³⁸ Reviewing the series, Elizabeth Zimmer described the Paxton-Jones exchange as “one of the most illuminating discussions I’ve ever been privileged to witness,” writing that “the two artists took each other on, in a bracing departure from the deadly politesse which usually characterizes” such post-performance discussions.³⁹ The debate ranged from the role of public funding for experimental art, the artists’ differing relationships to the audience, the role of history and tradition in each of the artist’s works, and even touched on the two artist’s opinions of each other’s performances. Highlighting disagreement about the purpose of dance, the Paxton-Jones exchange positioned downtown dance as up for debate. In facilitating this, Movement Research situated itself as asking questions rather than offering answers.⁴⁰

The Studies Project points to an important development in the history of Movement Research. The organization’s initial vision took the form of a “school” for training in dance; the Studies Project pushed beyond that vision into quite a different direction. As Movement Research was becoming a major institution for the study of new dance, it was also broadening what it considered the “study” of dance to be. While the workshop series remained central to Movement Research’s orientation as an institution, the technical training the classes provided would become but one manifestation of Movement Research’s larger project: the study of dance, with both terms defined broadly. It also put artists at the center of defining the terms of dance.

³⁸ This particular exchange would become a major reference point for perspectives on the relationship of downtown dance to its audience. For further examination, see a partial transcript of the event in Mary Overlie, Steve Paxton, and Bill T. Jones, “The Studies Project,” *Contact Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1984): 30–37, as well as an analysis in Danielle Goldman, “Bodies on the Line: Contact Improvisation and Techniques of Nonviolent Protest,” in *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 107-109.

³⁹ Elizabeth Zimmer, “Working the Room,” *Village Voice*, December 27, 1983

⁴⁰ The significance of the series was recognized in 1984, when Movement Research won a Downtown Dance and Performance Award (dubbed “The Bessies,” after noted dance teacher Bessie Schoenberg) for The Studies Project. The award described the series as “enlightening inquiries and arguments on the how and why of dance.”

Though framed as educating audiences and critics, the Studies Project had dancers and choreographers as the ones doing this educating, pushing artists to articulate their methods, practice, and perspectives on the significance of what they did.

The administrative labor that went into finding spaces for classes to be taught, instructors to teach, printing and distributing the brochures — all of this was, at first, performed largely as contributions to support the community of artists teaching through the organization. Initially, the organization was run as a collective, with the founding artists deciding everything together and sharing the administrative workload. Soon, though, people began to take on more defined roles, and Hedstrom took on the main role of administrator from 1978-1980, followed by Beavers until 1982. While receiving a nominal amount of money for their work,⁴¹ Hedstrom and Beavers saw their efforts as done primarily in the spirit of serving the collective, as they also taught through the organization. However, after several years of workshops, Movement Research was outgrowing its volunteer labor model. It had gone from supporting its founding collective of six artists to being a center for a range of artists to teach: from eight classes by six teachers in 1978, to 19 workshops by 12 teachers in 1982, along with monthly Open Performance showings, and two weekends of performances and events annually through the Studies Project.⁴² Now that it was serving a much broader community, the volume of routine labor became too much for the largely volunteer efforts of practicing artists.

In 1983, the organization hired its first paid administrator, Carol Swann. Swann was the first person to direct the organization who was not part of the original collective, or in her words, “the

⁴¹ George, “Organizing Bodies,” p. 119.

⁴² A list of all teachers from 1978 through Winter/Spring 1985 includes 75 different instructors.

first outsider.”⁴³ At 28 years old, with a background in political organizing, Swann took on the administrative role as someone excited to participate in the “center of a small but obviously ground-breaking and revolutionary group of artists.”⁴⁴ Though her position was paid, the payment was low; as partial compensation, Swann could take any of the workshops for free, and she acquired an inexpensive room in a building owned by Daniel Lepkoff (by then on the board of directors). As the administrative director, Swann acted largely as a steward for the vision of the board of directors, now composed of the original members of the collective as well as other artists who had joined later.

Nevertheless, Swann left a mark on the organization, and perhaps her most significant contribution would be establishing Movement Research’s first physical home. When Hedstrom left the organization in 1981 to become the director of Danspace Project, her apartment continued to serve as the administrative center of Movement Research. After more than five years of nomadic classes and an “office” squeezed into the kitchen of someone who no longer worked there, the flexibility that had been a hallmark of the organization became a strain. As Swann recalled, “Working out of Cynthia Hedstrom’s kitchen and renting various studios quickly became burdensome. As much as I enjoyed Cynthia and her daughter’s appearances after their day and the smell of dinner cooking (I often sat in front of the kitchen stove), it was time to establish Movement Research’s ‘place.’”⁴⁵ Swann had previously worked for the directors of the Ethnic Folk Arts Center (EFAC), located on Varick Street just south of Houston Street. She now facilitated a partnership between the two organizations. Starting in the spring of 1984, in exchange for managing the bookings of EFAC’s studio, Movement Research received free use

⁴³ Swann, “1981-1984.”

⁴⁴ Swann, “1981-1984.”

⁴⁵ Swann, “1981-1984.”

the office space at EFAC, and perhaps more importantly, use of the studio for its own programs. The move to EFAC would facilitate many important developments for Movement Research over the coming years. For the first time it had a stable base of operation; there was now a physical place where people could look for information on Movement Research's activities, and a regular location to hold its programs. Though its workshops continued to be held in a number of studios, EFAC became, for several years, Movement Research's home base and, by the end of the 1980s, the main location for the majority of its classes and other programs.

Unlike many of the studios that Movement Research was using for its classes, EFAC's studios doubled as a theater and could be used for performances. In the fall of 1984, this led Swann to initiate a new program, the Presenting Series. Movement Research programs prior to this had focused on teaching; when performance was involved, as with the Studies Project or Open Performance, the event still emphasized discussion. The Presenting Series was Movement Research's first foray into more traditional presenting: a weekend run of two nights of finished dance works, with lighting and technical production.

Each bill was split between two choreographers and envisioned as an opportunity for choreographers who did not have enough material or were uninterested in presenting an evening-long program. The concerts were often more of a grab-bag than a satisfying whole; Elizabeth Zimmer, reviewing a performance for the *Village Voice* in 1986, appreciated the approach even as she noted its potential for failure, "It's a smart and beneficent policy, if a bit risky: two diverging aesthetics may not set each other off."⁴⁶ But this risky approach was very much in line with the ethos Movement Research had developed in its "school" activities. Though the

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Zimmer, "Presenting Series," *Village Voice*, May 20, 1986.

Presenting Series introduced finished choreographies to the organizations's roster, Movement Research did not become simply another presenter, but intentionally cultivated an atmosphere with lower stakes than a performance at a (relatively speaking) more formal venue like Danspace Project or DTW.⁴⁷ When programming the Presenting Series, Swann did not invite press, and if critics did come, they were not given free tickets.⁴⁸ Like Movement Research generally, the Presenting Series was a place for experiments. This was true for audiences as well. Deborah Jowitt, reviewing another Presenting Series evening, noted that it offered a different kind of viewing: "Performances like this one by [Simone] Forti and [David] Zambrano are a vital complement to the larger, showier, more elaborate dance events around town. They not only show you dancing bodies different from the uptown bodies or the trendy downtown ones, they show you a different sort of dance mind and make your dance mind different."⁴⁹ If the concept of a school — a place where dance is studied, where it questioned and analyzed — was essential to Movement Research's workshops and Studies Projects, the Presenting Series extended this concept to performance as well. Performance, even in a more polished form, could still be an investigation.

At the end of 1986, Swann decided to leave the organization, and Movement Research hired a new director, Richard Elovich, who would initiate sweeping changes.⁵⁰ A performance artist and playwright, Elovich brought to his tenure an expanded vision of how Movement Research

⁴⁷ Though all of these institutions were still fringe, even by 1984, the institutions that functioned primarily as presenters were part of the gateway to greater funding (see chapter 3) in a way that Movement Research was not.

⁴⁸ Swann, "1981-1984."

⁴⁹ Deborah Jowitt, "Simone Forti and David Zambrano," *The Village Voice*, November 11, 1986.

⁵⁰ There is one other person — Shauna O'Donnell — who served as an administrator for Movement Research in 1987, after Swann left and before Elovich was hired. It seems she held the position less than one year. There is not much information for her in the archives, though a bio included on an NEA application indicates previous work as a technical director at PS122 and Danspace Project. She is never mentioned by anyone discussing Movement Research's history (in published interviews), so my best guess is that she was hired explicitly as an interim person, and did not maintain a significant connection with the organization afterward.

could serve its community. Rather than assuming the title of Administrator, as his predecessors had done, Elovich called himself the Administrative Director (and later, simply “Director”). Cathy Edwards, Movement Research’s co-director from 1991-1995, recounted the change in Movement Research that accompanied Elovich’s hiring, “Richard came on in 1987 and he was the first person to go in and say, ‘I am the director of this organization. You, the board, work for me and my vision, as opposed to me being there to do your mailings.’ He embarked on a really ambitious re-envisioning of the organization.”⁵¹ Elovich wanted to increase the administrative resources of the organization and thereby also increase the services Movement Research offered the dance community.

Elovich’s tenure saw a significant increase in the volume of Movement Research’s activities. He made the Presenting Series a permanent aspect of Movement Research’s program, rather than a recurring but irregular event; he made the Studies Project a monthly event, rather than a twice-yearly one; and he increased the number and frequency of the workshops Movement Research offered. Previously, it had programmed two 12-week seasons of workshops annually, leaving many months quiet. Elovich increased the length of each regular season, running workshops from late September through early June.

Elovich would also be responsible for initiating several new programs. In 1989, he established an Artist-in-Residency program, which gave artists free rehearsal space, performance opportunities, and administrative assistance. A festival, Ear to the Ground, was co-sponsored by Movement Research and the performance space Roulette. And what would become two of Movement Research’s most iconic activities, the *Performance Journal* and Movement Research

⁵¹ George, “Organizing Bodies,” p. 135.

at the Judson Church, were initiated by Elovich in 1990 and 1991 respectively (though he would step down as Director before the Judson program took full shape).

Perhaps most significantly, Elovich brought in new teachers, and along with them, a new set of artistic priorities. In addition to being a playwright and performer, Elovich was also deeply involved in AIDS activism, in particular with the organization ACT UP. He brought this background to what he felt Movement Research should be doing and the kind of art it should be supporting. He invited performance artists known for their politically charged work, such as the duo DANCENOISE (Lucy Sexton and Annie Iobst) and Alien Comic (Tom Murrin), to teach workshops and perform through Movement Research. During his tenure, the Studies Project also became more explicitly political. From 1982-1986, the Studies Project took as its title the artists who performed; the discussion stemmed from the artists and their particular work. Beginning in 1987, each Studies Project was programmed around a topic, a lens through which the participating artists' work would be seen and discussed — topics included making dance with marginalized populations and the effects of AIDS on choreography.⁵²

Elovich's years at Movement Research left an important mark on the organization and significantly shifted the direction it would take in the coming years. His tenure indicated the start of a much longer, broader shift, pointing to the directions that Movement Research would take in the 1990s. In 1990, Elovich hired Cathy Edwards as Managing Director, and when Elovich left the organization in 1991 to focus on AIDS activism, Edwards was joined by Guy Yarden, and the two became Co-Directors. Together they would shepherd Movement Research through the first half of the 1990s.

⁵² "Resident Alien," April 18, 1989; "Bearing Witness: Surviving Love and Death," May 1, 1989. Both are available at the NYPL's Dance Division.

THE 1990S: BECOMING POLITICAL, SHAPING COMMUNITY

For roughly its first dozen years, Movement Research had a relatively focused mission. It offered classes in new dance practices and organized formats to consider those practices in action. For this generation of Movement Research, the studio was where dance was researched, and dance's value lay in the meaning generated by the moving body. They did not necessarily consider themselves revolutionary (or feel that was needed); as Overlie explained her relationship to the experimentalism of the earlier Judson dancers, "When there's a revolution, some people take the locks off the doors and tear down the walls.... Then there's another generation that comes along and tries to systematize. I'm taking the premises that were exposed by those people and following them through."⁵³

But 1990 was a very different year from 1978. In 1989, Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibition *The Perfect Moment* and Andres Serrano's photograph *Piss Christ* generated major controversies, starting what would be the first of many battles around the federal funding of art. AIDS had grown into a full-blown crisis, and in March 1987, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was founded, the most visible of many such direct-action protest groups addressing AIDS and queer issues. Organizations that had started as "alternative" spaces in the 1960s and 1970s were now well on their way to becoming institutions.

In the 1990s, Movement Research took on an increasingly political profile, viewing contemporary politics as inherently connected to the experimental dance practices it supported. In a letter to Arlene Carmen at Judson Church in 1993, Edwards and Yarden wrote of the organization, "Movement Research represents a new generation of choreographers, an important

⁵³ Zimmer, "Heirs to a Revolution." p. 22.

blend of performers and social activists.”⁵⁴ This “blend” was a newly developing characteristic of Movement Research, manifested in many aspects of its programming. From the classes it scheduled to the kinds of dialog it fostered, Movement Research reflected the values of a new generation.

Importantly, this “new generation” was also a new *community*, in the sense of holding a different idea of the dance community. It was not just that the classes had a different bent or that the choreography being explored in the 1990s had a more explicit political edge; the changes were the result of much deeper shifts in artists’ values. This community was still a practice community, centered around dance and dancers, but as dance itself was changing, Movement Research saw itself as serving a different kind of community.

The changes in Movement Research in the 1990s had two major consequences: they reflected the organization’s changing face with respect to social and political engagement, and they deepened Movement Research’s role as a place of gathering and interaction for the dance community. Together, these added up to a new idea of community.

MOVING BEYOND THE STUDIO

Beginning with Elovich, Movement Research greatly expanded in both scale and scope. In 1978, Movement Research’s operating budget was just \$8,811;⁵⁵ by 1986, this had grown to \$36,477.⁵⁶ But under the direction of Elovich, the budget nearly tripled, from \$49,916 in 1987 to \$149,153 in 1991. This rapid pace of growth continued during the early 1990s, with the budget

⁵⁴ Edwards, Cathy, and Guy Yarden. Letter to Arlene Carmen, February 5, 1993.

⁵⁵ Movement Research Timeline, Leadership and Initiation of Programs, Movement Research, Inc, “Movement Research Strategic Plan, Fy08-10,” 2008, pp. 71-75

⁵⁶ This and all following budget amounts taken from NEA applications. Years refer to fiscal years, ending either May 31 or June 30 of respective years.

reaching \$284,107 in 1995, where it mostly stabilized for the rest of the decade. In terms of budget alone, the organization more than quintupled in size over the eight years spanning 1987 to 1995.

The growing budget enabled Movement Research to expand the number and scope of its activities. In early 1989, the organization's activities were essentially comprised of the workshops, the Studies Project, the Presenting Series, Open Performance, and the occasional co-sponsored festival. By 2001, Movement Research's regular, recurring programs included the Artist-in-Residency Project, Movement Research at the Judson Church, the *Performance Journal*, Improvisation Festival/NY, MRX/Movement Research Exchange, and DanceMakers in the Schools — all this in addition to maintaining its previous programs and, in most cases, augmenting them. In particular, the teaching program expanded in 1991 to include daily classes. While continuing the workshop format as well, the daily classes — mornings, Monday through Friday — nearly doubled the amount of instruction offered.

These various programs reached different scales of artists. The best known programs, which included the Judson series and the *Performance Journal*, naturally reached the most people. Other programs directly served only a few artists. The Artist in Residency program, for example, served only between six and twelve artists per year, while Movement Research Exchange (MRX) served around five,⁵⁷ and both were limited, curated programs — in other words, not generally for people brand new to the field. The daily classes, on the other hand, were an entry point for younger dancers and those new to New York. The range of activities Movement Research

⁵⁷ MRX, described in greater detail below, sent New York City artists to other cities (sometimes internationally), and brought artists from outside New York to the city. It varied considerably every year in size and scope, but was always small.

pursued reveals how it attempted to navigate and serve different populations, considering all of them parts of an experimental dance community.

The organization also saw dancers as part of a broader social and cultural community. As Movement Research pursued new directions in the 1990s, it pushed beyond the original idea of the organization, broadening its founders' intention "to create an environment that will allow students and faculty to focus deeply on their study and develop their own resources through consistent feedback and exchange."⁵⁸ Movement Research sought to change and grow in order to meet the evolving needs of its community. Some programs that arose from these efforts connected Movement Research with communities at least one concentric circle outside the dance field. Dancemakers in the Schools (originally called "Village Green Project"), for example, placed Movement Research teaching artists in public schools, and was framed as an opportunity for artists to adapt their teaching practice for a broader community.⁵⁹ Artists selected for the program taught after-school classes for school-age children (often middle school, but sometimes younger), which sometimes culminated in a performance — usually at the school itself, but on one occasion, on a Judson Monday night.⁶⁰

Another such program was Move to Heal, initiated by the dancer and choreographer Jaime Ortega, begun in 1991 as Releasing for People with AIDS. These were movement classes offered to people with AIDS and their support groups, free of charge, and held at Judson Church. In its first years, many of the teachers came from the Movement Research faculty, and utilized some of the training practices that had long been at the center of the organization's approach to dance and

⁵⁸ "Statement" (of purpose), from the original class brochure, 1978.

⁵⁹ This program was funded by different grants over the years; artists were paid \$20/hr by Movement Research, and schools provided empty rooms as rehearsal space for artists during off-hours.

⁶⁰ May 5, 1997.

technique, but adapted as gentle movement classes for non-dancers with an “emphasis on the healing aspects of the work and the empowerment of the physical experience.”⁶¹ The class would broaden its audience beyond specifically people with AIDS and lose the focus on release technique (hence changing its name to “Move to Heal”), but the vision remained one that sought to bring the specific skills of downtown dancers to a community at least one circle beyond those experimental artists.

Other programs connected Movement Research’s downtown artists with adjacent dance communities. Movement Research Exchange (MRX), begun in 1993, sponsored partnerships with venues in other parts of the country (and sometimes internationally), including Philadelphia, Houston, Bennington, and San Francisco, among others. Artists connected with Movement Research in New York would travel to one of these venues for residencies that included teaching and informal performance; likewise, artists from these venues would do the same in New York. Focused on independent choreographers (i.e., not for artists to tour with their companies), MRX provided economic support for artists who did not have access to company funding, while also facilitating the interaction of artists and exposure of ideas beyond the immediate locale of downtown.

In 1992, the dancers Julie Carr and Sandra Loring founded the Improvisation Festival/NY, a two-week series of classes, performances, and open jams, focused on contemporary improvisation practices. At the time, Loring was an Artist-in-Residence at Movement Research, and the two used its administrative network to arrange for spaces and to advertise the festival. Some Movement Research programs — including the Judson series, Open Performance, and the

⁶¹ Description from first flyer, 1991. See chapter 4 for further discussion of release technique and its relationship to healing/therapeutic practices.

Studies Project — were also incorporated into the festival. The first festival was billed as “Curated by Julie Carr and Sondra Loring, with assistance by Movement Research.” Though begun as something partially distinct from Movement Research, the Improvisation Festival had a strong ideological overlap with the organization. By 1994, the festival was operating essentially as a Movement Research program directed by independent artists.⁶² Carr and Loring continued to curate and direct the Festival until 1998, after which it was fully taken over by Movement Research staff.⁶³

PERFORMANCE JOURNAL: POLITICAL GENERATIONS

Movement Research Performance Journal was first announced in the organization’s 1990 spring calendar, and described as an expansion of the Studies Project: “We are expanding the **Studies Project** [...] to include a pilot program touring five cities across the U.S. and a new performance publication, laying the foundation for a national network of artist generated discussion and criticism.”⁶⁴ That the *Performance Journal* was initially conceived through the Studies Project is telling within the logic of the organization. When Movement Research described the impetus for the first Studies Project as having “grown out of a concern to clarify critical vocabulary,” it was arguing that dancers needed to engage with language and discourse, and to address not just the work and practices of downtown dance, but how they were discussed; the Studies Project was a reflexive endeavor. As the organization entered a new era, what it

⁶² In 1994, the Festival began being billed as a “Project of Movement Research, curated by Julie Carr and Sondra Loring”

⁶³ The Improvisation Festival/NY continued until 2002, when it was replaced by the MR Winter Festival, which continues today.

⁶⁴ Movement Research Spring 1990 calendar.

meant to be reflexive about dance was also shifting. The *Performance Journal* can be understood as an outgrowth of that shift.

When the *Performance Journal* was first released in the fall of 1990,⁶⁵ it was conceived as a forum for dancers and performance makers to insert themselves into broader cultural conversations through written discourse. The first issue, edited by Elovich, opened with a statement in which he linked cultural relevance to expression through language. With an epigraph by the dance critic Jill Johnston which exhorted dancers to write about their art,⁶⁶ Elovich's note challenged dancers to communicate the relevance of their work in modes beyond the purely kinesthetic:

With this first issue of *Movement Research*, we open a new public space for the New York performance community: a textual space in which artists can develop a critical relationship to the work being produced around us. If we want to further the forms of dance and performance, we need to be prepared to analyze and contextualize our own work, as well as the work of our predecessors and contemporaries. American dance has brought itself to a heightened kinetic intelligence, but we have had much more difficulty articulating our relationship to philosophic and social concerns. Recognizing a real lack of opportunity for choreographers, dancers, writers, musicians, and performers to engage in each others' work analytically, we have created *Movement Research* as a slightly anarchic forum in which opposing ideas and aesthetics can be seriously developed and debated.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *Performance Journal*'s were released seasonally (e.g., Fall 1990, Winter/Spring 1995), without exact dates of publication. Publication did not follow a strict timeline, and an issue remained in circulation — distributed at Judson performances, at dance studios and theaters, and other locations throughout the city — until the next one came out. Though it is probably possible to determine when they were printed, these dates likely wouldn't indicate much. Produced over half a year, the *Performance Journal* was not intended to be responsive to immediate happenings, but to larger conversations.

⁶⁶ "And speaking of artists, why is it that more dancers don't practice the art of writing about their work? There's a long tradition of literacy among painters, composers, etc., and I see practically nothing on dance by dancers in public places." (Jill Johnston, *Marmalade Me.*, [1st ed.] (New York, Dutton, 1971), p. 101)

⁶⁷ Richard Elovich, "Editor's Note," *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Autumn 1990 With the first issue of the publication, it seems the intent was simply for the publication to bear the name of the organization, i.e., *Movement Research*; "Performance Journal" was used as a description, not a title. By the second issue, it was being called the *Movement Research Performance Journal*, showing what was likely the realization that the publication and the organization sharing the same name would lead to confusion. However, I also interpret this to suggest that

Explicit in Elovich's statement is the belief that dance has a "relationship to philosophic and social concerns," that it is not only relevant to contemporary issues but should be in conversation with them. The *Performance Journal* would aim to be a means of drawing dance into those conversations.

The *Performance Journal* was launched at a charged political moment. In March of 1990, the NEA introduced what became known as the "obscenity clause," restricting the use of federal arts funding for anything the NEA "considered obscene, including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts."⁶⁸ In this atmosphere, many artists felt under attack by politicians and the culture at large. While many in the country's art communities argued that the crucial issue was freedom of expression, there was also a general sense that more needed to be done to articulate the values of avant-garde and experimental art practice. As Sarah Schulman would write in the second issue of the *Performance Journal*, "We know we are opposed to Helms, but what do we stand for?"⁶⁹ Elovich saw the *Performance Journal* as a way to articulate exactly that: "In a time when the arts and artists are seriously under attack, a dialogue among artists develops both the rigorous introspection and the larger commitment of a community, creating a vision necessary for survival."⁷⁰

Movement Research fully intended the *Performance Journal* to be a direct expression of the organization's views, not simply a program sponsored by it, as I discuss below.

⁶⁸ 1990 Amendments, Pub. L. No. 101-512, § 103(b), 104 Stat. 1963 — codified at 20 U.S.C.A. § 954(d)(1990)

⁶⁹ Sarah Schulman, "What Ideals Guide Our Actions?" *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Winter/Spring 1991

⁷⁰ Elovich, "Editor's Note."

The publication of “Gender Performance” in the fall of 1991⁷¹ this atmosphere brought to the fore the political divisions within Movement Research’s community. Edwards and Yarden met heated resistance not only from the community at large but also from within the organization itself. Board members Steve Paxton and Simone Forti⁷² expressed discomfort over the organization’s involvement in political issues and, according to Edwards, felt that it compromised the institution’s ability to engage in what should be the focus of a dance organization: “active research in the physical craft of dance making.”⁷³ This tension manifested itself in a surprisingly material form. Prior to the 1990s, Movement Research’s class calendar had been distributed as an independent brochure, but with the start of the *Performance Journal*, the calendar began to be included as its centerfold, using the publication as a means to generate broader awareness of the organization’s activities. According to Edwards, Paxton and Forti felt that the calendar should be separate from the *Performance Journal*, as they did not want their classes associated with the contents of the issue. By contrast, Edwards and Yarden “felt it was really important to keep the two [the calendar and the *Performance Journal*] integrated and to both provide increasingly political workshops to match a more political profile of the organization.”⁷⁴ Rather than back away from the controversy, Edwards and Yarden — representing the new guard of Movement Research’s community — felt the organization should express their politics not only in words, but also in the dance it supported. Of course, it was not

⁷¹ Because of the controversy around this issue, the archive has a more precise timeline for its publication and distribution, which occurred within the first two weeks of August; the NEA was reviewing Movement Research’s accounting books by late August.

⁷² Paxton were on the Artist Advisory board at this time, not the Board of Directors.

⁷³ Cathy Edwards in Westwater and Edwards, “Kathy Westwater Cathy Edwards Part II.”, p. 31.

⁷⁴ Cathy Edwards, quoted in Laurel George, “Artists Incorporating: Business Savvy Meets Creative Experimentation,” in *Corporate Futures: The Diffusion of the Culturally Sensitive Corporate Form*, ed. George E. Marcus, 1 edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998), 311–35, p. 331. Emphasis in original.

really a question of Movement Research being political or not, but what politics looked like to artists of different generations.⁷⁵ The internal fight over “Gender Performance” laid bare a community in transition, and with sometimes tense divisions.

Though the third issue generated controversy outside and inside the downtown dance world, the *Performance Journal* would go on to be more than a source of controversy. Led by various people, the *Performance Journal* did not have a single perspective or agenda that persisted across the decade. Over the 1990s, it was primarily edited by whoever was the organization’s director (or co-directors), though with the help of an advisory committee and with frequent guest editors.⁷⁶ The vast majority of the contributors to the *Performance Journal* were dancers and performance artists, from established older voices such as Steve Paxton and Simone Forti, to younger dancers displaying the strong opinions of fresh arrivals to New York. Other contributors included artists working in different media, writers, dance critics, and activists.

With contributions ranging from dancers writing about their general practice or a specific piece, to discussions of broad trends in contemporary performance, the articles in the *Performance Journal* presented artists as deeply engaged in thinking about performance and articulating their place in it. While many articles discussed technical practices (such as certain approaches to improvisation) and other dance specific concerns, many also brought attention to matters outside the studio, with entire issues themed around broad topics: issue ten (winter/spring 1995) addressed protest and activism; issue thirteen (fall/winter 1996/1997) belief and

⁷⁵ Laurel George analyzes this point further in a discussion with Cathy Edwards, in “Artists Incorporating,” pp. 331-333, and p. 335, footnote 8.

⁷⁶ Guest editors included: Tom Kalin, Issue 3 “Gender Performance”; Ester Kaplan, Issue 4 “Speaking Ethnicity”; Annie Rachelle Lanzillo & Alice Naude, Issue 12 “Dollars and Sensibility”; Wendy Perron, Issue 14 “The Legacy of Robert Ellis Dunn”; Joan T. Hockey and George Emilio Sanchez, Issue 15 “Moving Communities” (Sanchez was also MR’s Board President at the time).

spirituality; issue sixteen (spring 1998) fame. Some issues were responses to specific contemporary events. Issue five, “Environments” (fall/winter 1992), came about “in the wake of the Los Angeles riots and the hype surrounding the Earth Summit in Brazil.”⁷⁷ Issue twelve, “Dollars and Sensibility” (Mid-Winter to Summer 1996), addressing the relationship of dance to money, did not make explicit reference to the NEA budget cuts that began to take effect in late 1995, but it is impossible not to see the *Performance Journal*’s concern with money in that context.

Another recurring theme was the *Performance Journal*’s role as a site exploring the memory and history of downtown dance itself. Three issues (1993, 1997, and 1998) were devoted entirely to this topic.⁷⁸ They included interviews with elder figures as well as narratives reflecting on the significance of certain people, places, or events for contemporary practitioners. These issues also featured significant recounting of Movement Research’s own history, with interviews with and articles by members of the founding collective, later administrators, and artists heavily involved at different stages of the organization’s time. The *Performance Journal* was thus a major tool in defining the organization’s own history — as its frequent citation in this chapter demonstrates.

Part of what made the *Performance Journal* so important was that it served to articulate the philosophical and ideological standpoint of Movement Research itself. This was different from most of the organization’s programs, which were firstly platforms to support the work of artists in the community. Each issue opened with a letter or note from the directors, which would provide updates on changes in the organization, comment on current matters both national and hyperlocal, and generally situate the perspective of the organization within an ongoing dialog

⁷⁷ Cathy Edwards, Guy Yarden, and Kate Ramsey, “From the Editors,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Issue 5, Fall/Winter 1992.

⁷⁸ “Hereos[sic] & History,” Issue 6; “The Legacy of Robert Ellis Dunn,” Issue 14; and “Memory/Place,” Issue 17

with the world around it. While editorializing was not unusual in print media, none of Movement Research's peer organizations was regularly articulating its ideology in such a public, documentary format; most avoided this through the ephemeral nature of performance.

Each issue of the *Performance Journal* was mailed to around 10,000 people, twice a year⁷⁹ — this in a period when *Dance Magazine*, covering mainstream dance with a much broader appeal, had about 55,000 subscribers.⁸⁰ This was far beyond the scope almost any live performance of experimental dance could hope to achieve. Jim Eigo, a theater artist, AIDS activist, and frequent contributor to the *Performance Journal* in the early 1990s, described its importance in a letter to Audrey Kindred, Movement Research's associate director, in 1993, "I think the journal & studies projects have shown that words can help performers clarify aims, issue challenges, suggest opportunities & do battle with those who would censor & defund them. Beyond that, they're important for the dissemination of the art. Words travel places performers never will &, unlike live performance, remain."⁸¹ These words traveled not only far, but also spread close to home: the community read and actively discussed what was presented in the *Performance Journal*, and as Kindred wrote in her director's note at the end of issue 12, "The performance journal has become Movement Research's vast community center."⁸² Articles would sometimes refer to concerns brought up in a prior issue, and occasionally generate conversations through letters to the editor that spanned multiple issues. Starting in 1993 with the seventh issue,

⁷⁹ Exact circulation numbers varied throughout the 1990s; one year, 9500 copies were mailed; another 12,000. Printing ran from 10,000-15,000 for each issue throughout the 1990s, with many copies being distributed locally.

⁸⁰ Gale Research Inc., *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media.*, vol. 131 (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research, 1997) p. 1548, entry on *Dance Magazine*. Of course, the *Performance Journal* was distributed free, and only twice a year, compared to *Dance Magazine*'s monthly circulation; it is not an apples-to-apples comparison, but does give some relative indication of how widely the publication was able to reach into the dance world.

⁸¹ Jim Eigo, Letter to Audrey Kindred, September 16, 1993

⁸² Audrey Kindred, "Dollars and Sensibility," Issue 12, p. 28.

a Studies Project would be held following the release of each issue to discuss the theme and contents.

The *Performance Journal* is the program that, more than any other, illuminated the shift in the organization toward explicit political engagement as essential to its identity, and demonstrated that Movement Research in the 1990s was serving a new generation of artists with an evolving set of concerns. It brought discussions of artistic history, technical explorations, and practical advice into conversation with the cultural and social issues of the day. In doing so, the *Performance Journal* presented downtown dance as having not only a present, but a past, and by implication, engaged in articulating and developing a future within its society.

MOVEMENT RESEARCH AT THE JUDSON CHURCH: HISTORY, IDENTITY, COMMUNITY

Movement Research's most notable program began as a result of an all-too-common New York City experience: the organization was losing their space. In early 1991, the space below the EFAC studio on Varick Street was leased to a nightclub, and the music and noise from the club rendered the studio unusable for performances at night.

In search of a new location for the Presenting Series that fall, Elovich contacted Arlene Carmen, Administrator and Program Associate at Judson Memorial Church, about the possibility of Judson hosting the series.⁸³ This initial letter, which originally only requested "three weekends in the fall, and three in the winter or spring," opened a conversation with the Church. Elovich would step down as Executive Director shortly after initiating this contact, and Edwards and Yarden took over negotiations with the Church to develop what became Movement Research at

⁸³ Richard Elovich, Letter to Arlene Carmen, April 19, 1991. It is unlikely that the first communication happened in the form of this letter, given that Carmen was already familiar with the organization, and that Elovich interacted with Carmen as part of Judson's support of AIDS activism. More likely is that this was the official request that followed an informal conversation.

The Judson Church. The initial idea — to do the Presenting Series at Judson — would not work out for a few reasons. For one, even though Movement Research’s Presenting Series was relatively low-cost, Judson had a policy which required events held in the space to have free admission; otherwise a rental fee would be assessed. And while the Presenting Series had taken place on weekends, the Church preferred to keep the sanctuary free on weekends for their services and suggested Monday night for the series.⁸⁴ With the move to a weeknight and free admission, the program developed into a weekly event (rather than occurring “three times over the fall”), with minimal technical requirements, and showing works-in-progress, rather than concerts of finished works as the Presenting Series had done. What resulted was a performance series that would have a radical impact on what it meant to make and perform dance in the coming decade.

The inaugural season, running every Monday night from September 16 to December 15, included 31 different choreographers and groups. Each week, two (though sometimes three or four) different artists would present their work, showing whatever they wanted, at whatever stage. Performers could only access the space for a one-time run-through earlier in the evening on the day of their showing, and there was no theatrical lighting, only the built-in lights used in the sanctuary. Other than the grandeur of the space itself — its tall ceilings, stained-glass, and sculptures built into the architecture — these were utterly bare-bones performance events, with only the excitement of the unknown encouraging attendance.

Yet, despite the scrappy nature of the series, almost immediately Movement Research at the Judson Church became one of the most popular downtown dance events, a weekly must-see

⁸⁴ Judson Church Board Minutes, June 13, 1991, in “Movement Research at the Judson Church,” p. vii.

performance. As *New York Times* critic Jennifer Dunning noted, the series “has become in its first season one of the most enjoyable ways to spend a Monday night seeing New York Dance.”⁸⁵ The Church limited the audience to 200 people, and the event would always fill to capacity, with people being turned away every week; by the spring season, Movement Research began taking reservations by phone to accommodate the high demand.

Monday nights had an essential atmosphere of participation for the audience, one that was composed largely of fellow practitioners. It is not that the performances themselves were participatory (they were in some cases, but not most), but rather that the evenings were framed as events to take part in. Dance scholar Randy Martin wrote about how the atmosphere of Movement Research at the Judson Church highlighted the significance of the audience. Describing his own experience performing in Movement Research’s first Judson season (in the choreographer Peggy Peloquin’s work), he argued that the audience had a crucial role in how the performances were experienced.⁸⁶ He observed how several elements of the stage setup at Judson meant that the performers shared the same physical space with the audience, resulting in an experience of being part of a shared event. He noted that the layout of the space — the audience sat in chairs around the edges of the stage floor — meant that the lights illuminated the audience and performance equally, rather than creating distinct visual spaces. This meant that watching performances at Judson also involved watching the audience in attendance.

⁸⁵ Jennifer Dunning, “Judson Troupe Extends Series Of Free Shows,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1991. Other mentions throughout the decade include “a staple of the New York dance scene,” Jennifer Dunning, “Unscientific Research,” *New York Times: Arts*, January 28, 1994; Rose Anne Thom, “Movement Research at the Judson Church,” *Dance Magazine*, April 1997.

⁸⁶ Randy Martin, “Dancing the Dialectic of Agency and History,” in *Critical Moves : Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 29–54.

Martin further observed that some aspects of the performance created somewhat fluid boundaries between the audience and the performers; he mentions having to walk through the audience to get to the stage, and that, while waiting to perform, he also watched the work of the other artist on the shared evening program, becoming an audience member himself.⁸⁷ Moreover, through many seemingly small signals, such as Movement Research staff asking the audience “to stack the chairs in racks before leaving,” the audience had a shared stake in the event.⁸⁸ These and other aspects of the performance led Martin to view the audience and the performance as mutually constitutive, and the audience as actually created by the performance, “The audience is the occasion for the performance but is also transformed into a collective body, having been moved together by means of performance.”⁸⁹ That these performances comprised works-in-progress, presented as experiments rather than definitive statements, shaped how they were experienced as well: seeing dance at Movement Research at the Judson Church was an *active* experience.

The tone established by the first season of performances would continue to hold throughout the decade: Monday nights were a grab bag with unexpected performances. Though artists had to apply to perform at Judson, individual evenings were not curated: they could be, and generally were, a true hodgepodge of ideas and aesthetics. A mid-career artist might show a work-in-progress of something that would have a full premiere later that year, alongside someone for whom the evening was the first time showing work to a New York audience: reviews often noted how the performances on any given night were quite different from one another. This was similar

⁸⁷ Martin, “Dancing the Dialectic of Agency and History,” p. 49.

⁸⁸ Martin, “Dancing the Dialectic of Agency and History,” p. 50.

⁸⁹ Randy Martin, “Introduction,” in *Critical Moves : Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 1–28, p. 16.

to the atmosphere that other had noted at the Presenting Series, but to a greater degree: it was not just that the performances “may not set each other off,”⁹⁰ it was almost expected the aesthetics would collide — and that was part of their excitement.

The series’ success sometimes challenged its intended focus on experiment over finished product. The series was regularly reviewed in the press — almost every week during its first season — reflecting the attention the series was receiving.⁹¹ This also raised the stakes of the performances, especially for those whose work was not otherwise likely to be reviewed. But the most pervasive sentiment from artists is that the series was a place for experimentation, where a dance did not need to be “finished” to be shown to an audience and that brought the audience into the process earlier than might otherwise have happened.

As the site of the Judson Dance Theater, Judson Church had special meaning for the artists associated with Movement Research. Most of the organization’s founders had originally identified the Judson Dance Theater as their direct artistic ancestors, and two of Movement Research’s board members at the time the series was initiated, Simone Forti and Steve Paxton, had been members of the Judson Dance Theater. These connections to the history of Judson were not just practically helpful in acquiring use of the space (though they were that, too). That legacy was also something that Movement Research could build on in defining its own artistic identity, as Edwards and Yarden slyly indicated in their introductory note to *Performance Journal #4*,

⁹⁰ Zimmer, “Presenting Series.”

⁹¹ Jack Anderson, “Battlefield of Squabbling, Pelting and Scampering,” *New York Times*: October 24, 1991; Anderson, “Charting Passages in Time and Space,” *New York Times*, November 3, 1991; Anderson, “Program of Choreographic Showcases,” *New York Times*, October 19, 1991; Anderson, “Sounds of Saxophones Set Scenes of Enigma,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1991; Anderson, “With Unfinished Works, Hinting of Things to Come,” *New York Times*, November 7, 1991; Dunning, “Vicky Shick and Dana Reitz,” *New York Times*, October 14, 1991; Dunning, “Having Fun with Life, Even When Life Is Hard,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1991; Dunning, “Performers Step Out to Raise Money for Free Shows,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 1991.

writing, “Movement Research at the Judson Church happily exploited the collective dance memory.”⁹² The Church’s historical connection to this lineage of dance continued to influence how the series was received throughout the decade, as Lisa Kovalich wrote in the *Village Voice*, “Dance in Judson Church is almost a religious experience — not because of the space itself, but because of the break-the-canon history it’s seen in the past 30 years.”⁹³ And as perhaps the most visible activity of the organization, the association of the historical Judson Dance Theater with the Monday night series extended to the organization as a whole.

Beginning with the Monday night series, Movement Research’s relationship with Judson Church deepened over the 1990s. Move to Heal, Open Performance, Open Movement (an improvisation jam), and Studies Projects would all take place at Judson during the decade. Although significant, the relationship with the Church was not necessarily harmonious. Howard Moody and Arlene Carmen, who helped establish the Monday night series, were largely supportive of the organization and the dance it brought to the Church; Moody even donated the cash award from his 1992 Bessie award to Movement Research in appreciation of its work.⁹⁴ But Moody retired in 1992, and after Carmen passed away in 1994, the subsequent Church ministers and administrators were less welcoming.⁹⁵ A rewarding relationship between the two organizations was not a fixed accomplishment, but something that required continual negotiation and accommodation with a community whose interests differed from Movement Research’s own.

⁹² Cathy Edwards and Guy Yarden, “From the MR Co-Directors,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Issue 4, Winter/Spring 1992.

⁹³ Lisa Kovalich, “Footnotes: Dance in Judson Church,” *The Village Voice*, New York, February 22, 1994.

⁹⁴ Howard Moody, Letter to Cathy Edwards, Undated 1992.

⁹⁵ Karen Sherman discusses several examples of tension between Judson staff and Movement Research in “Movement Research at the Judson Church.”

One of the most important aspects of the Monday night series was its role as a site of community building for Movement Research. In requesting the continuation of the program after its first season, Cathy Edwards wrote to Judson Church, “Not only has the press been positive, but we are particularly excited by the strong sense of community that the evenings have actively fostered. The series has evolved into a kind of informal gathering place for the discussion of work, and has attracted a large group of people interested in new and emerging work.”⁹⁶ Reflecting on the significance of the series, many artists have echoed this sentiment, often in terms of how it shaped the very idea of what it was to make dance in the 1990s. Audrey Kindred, who was with the organization from 1992-1997, wrote that “Artists were asked to share their work as evidence of their artistic processes. We sought people’s experiments instead of their accomplishments,” and that through these “process-oriented values, MR supported dancers who were...literally reinventing dance.”⁹⁷

Critics also noted how the mood of the gatherings went hand-in-hand with its experimental nature, “Okay, so it’s free, but the popularity of Movement Research’s ongoing Monday-night performance series at Judson Church also has to do with the *gemütlich* atmosphere and the promise of discovering new Downtown talent.”⁹⁸ This atmosphere had an important place in downtown dance. As Lynn Garafola wrote in a *Dance Magazine* review of the series in 1993, “Most important, like Judson events of the sixties, the Monday night concerts are community gatherings — both for the dancers performing and for those in the audience.”⁹⁹ For downtown dancers, feeling that Movement Research was connected with Judson Dance Theater was also

⁹⁶ Cathy Edwards, Letter to Arlene Carmen, October 22, 1991.

⁹⁷ Kindred, “Researching Movement with Judson’s Angels.”

⁹⁸ Deborah Jowitt, “Umm, Delicious!” *The Village Voice*, New York. March 31, 1998.

⁹⁹ Lynn Garafola, “Blowin’ in the Wind, Again,” *Dance Magazine*, June 1993, p. 46.

about feeling that they were part of a history, a tradition — and yes, a community. In the 1990s, Movement Research at the Judson Church was a site in which community was built through the regular experience of coming together to see and perform dance.

CONCLUSION

But what did “community” mean now? The community of Movement Research was a clear continuation of its founding group of artists, but it was also growing and changing in ways that made it a very different community than in 1978. This idea was perhaps captured most succinctly by Cynthia Hedstrom in 2004, “When we used the word community in the late ’70s, we were talking about the artistic community: our colleagues.... Now when we say community it generally means people who are not involved in the professional arts.”¹⁰⁰ This tension between ideas of the community as a professional artistic circle and a geographic community of people was also brought up by Joan T. Hocky, co-editor of *Performance Journal* #15, titled “Moving Communities,” dedicated to addressing this question of what community meant for dancers in that moment. Hocky wrote, “I’ve often experienced ‘arts communities’ as homogeneous and insular, finding it disorienting to be in a theatre or performance space where everyone is of a similar age, class, and race when right outside the door beats this amazingly diverse, pluralistic city. But some of our contributors have felt nurtured and supported by an ‘arts community;’ for them, expanding into a broader arena is uncomfortable and even scary.”¹⁰¹ As open and inclusive as the Monday night Judson series felt for many who attended, Movement Research struggled even here to diversify beyond its historically white demographic. In a questionnaire distributed to

¹⁰⁰ Hedstrom, Cynthia, and Clarinda MacLow. “Conversation with Cythina Hedstrom,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Issue 27/28, Spring 2004, p. A8.

¹⁰¹ Joan T. Hocky, “Living the Question,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Issue 15, Autumn 1997.

audiences over several performances during the Spring 1992 season, one question asked, “What do you think of the variety with our performance programs?”, and while many respondents addressed aesthetic variety (e.g., “More performance arty work”), several noted the cultural homogeneity of the series: one wrote “More outreach to NY’s diverse cultures”; another, “No complaints about the gender balance, perhaps more racial integration/representation.” In response to a different question, another asked simply for more “Non-white artists.”¹⁰²

The expansion of Movement Research’s operations in the 1990s reflected its developing mission and outlook. While somewhat increasing the scale of its existing programs, the organization grew mostly by adding to its mission, taking on activities and modes of operation that went far beyond its founding activity of being a place to take classes in and experience new forms of dance practice. This expansion increased Movement Research’s significance to downtown dance, as it became a central hub for almost every activity involved in the practice of dance, from offering training and rehearsal space, to publishing and presenting works-in-progress. But while this was still in line with the organization’s original mission to be “a center for new ideas in movement training and composition,” what it meant to be a center had changed — as had dance.

The range of activities that Movement Research embarked upon involved several populations while serving a variety of communities. However, it is unclear to what extent these various communities were brought together with each other or deepened their affiliation with the organization. DanceMakers, for example, sent professional artists into public schools, both employing dancers and providing local schools with additional resources. While the program

¹⁰² Questionnaire distributed on March 9, 16, and 30, 1992.

was always advertised in Movement Research calendars alongside the organization's other activities, there is nothing in the archive that suggests, for example, that any of these students went on to become involved in experimental dance or that parents became involved in other Movement Research program or in dance activities more generally. The Judson Church community is another, perhaps more significant example. Movement Research benefitted tremendously in the 1990s from the use of the Church space, with Edwards and Yarden acknowledging in 1993, "Our audience and [constituency] has become our primary asset, and that constituency has grown directly related to our involvement with Judson."¹⁰³ There seemed to be relatively few members of Judson Church's congregation who attended even the occasional Movement Research event over the years, and even fewer from the Movement Research community who had anything to do with Judson outside of dance events.¹⁰⁴

For those with a more serious involvement with dance, Movement Research could still be a connector. As a major hub for activities in downtown dance, it also became a resource for people outside the immediate sphere of downtown. Mobility Junction, a dance company for mixed-physical ability people, was founded in part through Movement Research connections. As company director Teri Carter wrote about the company's founding, "In the Fall of 1993 a disabled actor called Movement Research about mixed abilities dance classes in New York City.

There were none at that time. He was referred to me, a Contact teacher in New York, because I

¹⁰³ Edwards, Cathy, and Guy Yarden. Letter to Arlene Carmen, February 5, 1993. Karen Sherman, a dancer who was also the Church's Technical Director from 1994-2000, also suggests that the Church benefitted from having Movement Research run its programs there, as supporting art was part of its mission, "In those years, Judson did great work in other areas but was neglectful of the arts in general and dance in particular. Every time they tried to oust MR I'd point out that if they did, there'd be no other dance and pretty much no other art there. MR was doing all the heavy lifting in terms of carrying the Judson dance legacy—and creating a new one." Karen Sherman, "Movement Research at the Judson Church." p. viii.

¹⁰⁴ "Most of the Judson ministry, staff, and congregation did not interact with MR all that much. Similarly, virtually no MR people had much to do with Judson outside of Monday nights or random other political things they might have been involved with outside of dance." Karen Sherman, "Movement Research at the Judson Church," p. vi.

had worked on the West coast with Alito Alessi, Karen Nelson and others in this new dance genre. To my surprise, I found myself leading a Contact Improvisation workshop for people of various physical abilities.”¹⁰⁵ That workshop then led to the group starting a company as well as an eponymous festival that piggybacked on the Improvisation Festival from 1993 through 1996.¹⁰⁶

There are also many small, harder to define ways that Movement Research developed community. Its internship program integrated students into the organization’s activities in ways that are important but very difficult to measure. For example, an intern was required to attend every Studies Project, take notes, and write an assessment of the event afterward. How does being asked to insert one’s own perspectives on the most active questions in the field, discussed by seasoned practitioners, influence how an individual enters into that field? And there are sometimes humorous things that institutions can foster — such as organizing enough people to qualify for a group discount to see the Great Moscow Circus at Madison Square Garden.¹⁰⁷

At times, Movement Research literally connected members of the community. One of the most telling demonstrations of this appears not in any official program, but readily stands out in its archives. In one of the many uncatalogued boxes, there is an uncatalogued folder with dozens of letters written to the organization, from dancers all across the country and world, seeking information about dance in New York City. Many simply asked for Movement Research’s class calendar, so they would know where to go while they were in town. But many also asked for

¹⁰⁵ Teri Carter, “Dance Paths Crossing: An Experimental Look at Integration,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Issue 15, Autumn 1997, p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ See reviews of Mobility Junction in *Contact Quarterly*: Katherine Marx, “Mobility Junction: 1st Annual Festival, 1994,” *Contact Quarterly*, 1995, pp. 51–52 and Rebecca Lepkoff, “What Is a Dancer? Thoughts on Mobility Junction,” *Contact Quarterly*, 1997, p. 16.

¹⁰⁷ The archives contain the correspondence documenting staff informally organizing enough students from Movement Research classes to get this group discount in 1994.

more information: where *else* they could go to take class, to see performances — one even asked for information on housing. These letters were answered, largely, by Audrey Kindred, the organization's Assistant Director from 1992-1995, then Co-Director from 1995-1997. Kindred, in addition to her many official responsibilities, sent detailed replies to many of these letters. These replies were not form letters, but answered the specific questions of each writer, often with activities tailored to the dates the person would be in town. They also included the office phone number, with an encouragement to call Kindred herself once the person was in town. In one letter, a dancer from Buenos Aires writes to Movement Research looking for information on dance *in San Francisco*.¹⁰⁸ Kindred responds, as usual, with detailed information on activities and contacts in the city.¹⁰⁹

Movement Research was a striving, idealistic organization. Particularly for the administrative staff who ran the organization, there was a sometimes utopian vision about what dance was and could do and how the organization could support this. While Movement Research is not unique in terms of being an institution that connected members of a community, this role is perhaps its most important legacy and its most influential contribution to shaping downtown dance in the 1990s: through Movement Research, dance became a means of connecting people. And whatever the community of downtown dance was, Movement Research was effectively the face of it.

¹⁰⁸ Barbara Godoy, Letter to Movement Research, April 6, 1995.

¹⁰⁹ Audrey Kindred, Letter to Barbara Godoy, (Undated) 1995.

Chapter 2 —

Forms of Emotion: AIDS and Downtown Dance

DRINKING IVY

In 1994, Donna Uchizono's *Drinking Ivy* premiered on a program of her works at the Joyce Theater's Altogether Different Festival. The dance, a 20-minute duet for Uchizono and close collaborator Nikki Castro, was something of a departure for Uchizono. Previously, her choreography had been characterized by an interest in speed and complexity, her movement focused on fast combinations and intricate patterns among groups. Her 1990 work *San Andreas*, which opened the evening's performance, featured long sections where the five dancers alternately run across the stage, catch one another in backward falls, frantically shake their heads, hands, and shoulders, all while employing precise footwork and arm and leg swings in fugue patterns. Even in the quieter sections, where the dancers tilt and stumble somewhat softly, the work has a frenetic energy that persists throughout its 30 minutes. *Drinking Ivy*, however, opens with Uchizono and Castro standing upstage, facing the audience, but with heads looking at the floor, their faces hidden; Castro's left hand is stretched out high to her side, and Uchizono's right arm is bent upward to grasp it. For the first several minutes of the dance, the two performers remain rooted in their original stances, the only movement being the slow lowering of the grasped hands as Uchizono slowly bends her knees.

The music features sparse, screeching sounds from a trumpet and intermittent drumming. At one point Uchizono wraps herself around Castro's waist, hanging, while Castro supports her with

her arms. When Uchizono stands up again, she is biting down on one of Castro's hands, while Castro hangs forward suspended by that same hand. Much of the dance proceeds in this fashion, with the two performers often grasping one another with stretched limbs, wrapping tightly around each other's torsos, settling into the nooks and crevices in each other's bodies. Throughout, the impression created is that Uchizono and Castro seem to grapple back and forth for control over each other, slowly but insistently aiming to dominate the other. In the end, it's not clear who has won, or if both have lost, the lights dimming as they take halting steps backward.

Though the work has a subdued quality throughout, it also captures a kind of heightened restlessness in the opposition between a force seeking to extend outward and the resistance of a mutually restraining force. The work is affecting, and engrossing, leaving behind a somewhat unsettling feeling by the end, the ambiguity of the battle between the two women — were they intentionally suppressing each other? or was the relationship less antagonistic than accidental? — lacking a simple resolution. From the title, the metaphor of “ivy” suggests a potentially parasitic relationship, where each might have been seeking to use the other to gain footing, a basis for support, but in an almost incidental way, not so much attacking as merely growing off of. The ambiguity is perhaps the aspect that creates the greatest impression; while nothing in this dance is over-the-top, the constant in-between state fills the atmosphere with a palpable tension, an emotional vibrancy that is the strongest element of the work.

The central role that emotion played in the dance was characteristic of Uchizono's work. For example, the work that opened the program, *San Andreas* — the title a reference the San Andreas Fault in Uchizono's native California, where a major earthquake had recently occurred in 1989 — contained numerous quick falls, jerking motions, and disruptions in the movement of groups

throughout the piece. It did not feature any narrative references or symbols of earthquakes, instead emphasizing feelings of instability and chaotic uncertainty. *Drinking Ivy*, while offering a very different emotional register, still centers emotion within the work.

Reviewing the dance during a performance in Washington, D.C. in 1996, critic Pamela Squires wrote that the program of Uchizono's works "explores such serious themes as time, aging and being a woman," and that *Drinking Ivy* "was inspired by watching ivy growing, slowly and defiantly. As the dancers' breathing slowed, their concentration deepened. The audience, at close range, was sucked in."¹ The metaphor of ivy — a plant that uses another organism to support itself, and can sometimes end up killing that same source of support — feels present in the work, in the ambiguity of the slow, indirect conflict between the two women. The focus and intensity of the movement, along with the composition that frames it, is highly evocative, even without an explicit narrative reference.

Yet while the work may have been "inspired by ivy growing," this work is also about AIDS. There is little that would indicate this directly, as Uchizono never included this information in the program note, and no reviews of the piece ever mention it. The title does suggest it, but the reference is relatively oblique. But in 2008, reflecting on how the AIDS crisis affected downtown dance in general, Uchizono acknowledged, "I explored the ideas of how the virus, without malice, kills its very support in *Drinking Ivy*. I used the metaphor of ivy's strangle hold on the object that supports it to explore meaning and possible beauty amidst struggle and death."² Considering the time in which it was made — 1994, more than a dozen years into the AIDS epidemic — the idea that a choreographer, deeply immersed in a community in which the effects

¹ Pamela Squires, "Donna Uchizono Company," *The Washington Post*, Washington, D.C., October 30, 1996.

² Donna Uchizono, "Hybrid Bastards" (M.F.A., Long Island University, The Brooklyn Center, 2008), p. 6.

of the epidemic were especially evident, would make a dance in which the aesthetic was impacted by that epidemic should hardly be surprising.

THE LIMITS AND USES OF ART

The AIDS crisis was a disaster. Resulting in thousands of deaths in the dance community over multiple decades, AIDS ravaged an entire generation of dancers. By 1991, more than 100,000 people had died from AIDS in the United States.³ From the time the Center for Disease Control first acknowledged the disease in 1981, the epidemic had only continued to grow — in rate of infection, in manifesting new symptoms, and in the number of deaths. As the epidemic entered its second decade, with only limited medical options available (which would themselves soon be proven ineffective),⁴ and no cure in sight, AIDS was a constant shadow over downtown dance.

All aspects of life were affected by it. Gay men feared contracting HIV through sex. Healthy people arranged their schedules to take care of sick friends. Many continued performing through various stages of health and illness. And everyone adjusted to the dreadful rhythm of frequent funerals, sometimes several a week.

AIDS had a deep and lasting impact on the era's dance practice, and the extent to which this crisis permeated the daily consciousness of the downtown community cannot be overstated. There was hardly a corner of the community that was not touched by this phenomenon on a near daily basis.

³ 100,777 deaths from AIDS were reported to CDC from 1981-1990. 31,196 of these were in 1990 alone. "Mortality Attributable to HIV Infection/AIDS – United States, 1981–1990," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 40, no. 3 (1991): 41–44.

⁴ AZT, the most promising drug available in the early 1990s, was shown in the 1993 Concorde trial not to reduce mortality or disease progression.

Though dancers were among those most associated with AIDS in the popular conscious, art and AIDS did not always make easy bedfellows. One of the most pointed criticisms of art in relation to AIDS was forcefully articulated by the art critic and theorist Douglas Crimp. In an issue of the journal *October* focusing on AIDS and cultural activism, Crimp notes an observation by another commentator that AIDS was inspiring a broad range of artistic developments. To this Crimp responded, “It would appear from such a statement that what is at stake is not the survival of people with AIDS and those who might now be or eventually become infected with HIV, but rather the survival, even flourishing, of art.”⁵ Crimp pointed to one of the central struggles that faced the arts during the AIDS epidemic: what is the role of art when people are dying? Crimp’s answer was that art and artists had a responsibility not to be neutral cultural practitioners, but cultural activists, and to use art to advocate for practical change that would save lives, “We don’t need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don’t need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it.”⁶

While Crimp seemed to only consider art that was explicitly activist as relevant to addressing AIDS, downtown dance did not exhibit such clear limitations between its artmaking and its activism. For the downtown dance organization Movement Research, for example, AIDS was inherently of concern to dance. The organization’s executive director from 1987-1991, Richard Elovich, was extremely active in ACT UP, and its semi-annual publication (begun in 1990) often contained ads for the group, as well as essays devoted to AIDS activism. In the same calendar as its regular technique and improvisation classes, Movement Research would offer movement classes specifically for people living with AIDS, and many artists teaching through

⁵ Douglas Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, 1st MIT Press ed (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1988), p. 5.

⁶ Crimp, “AIDS,” p. 7.

the organization were also active members in ACT UP and other direct action groups such as Women's Health Action Mobilization (WHAM!) and The Lesbian Avengers.

Certainly not all art coming out of downtown dance was explicitly activist, but many artists who made up the community were thoroughly integrated into both worlds. Moreover, something AIDS activism and downtown dance in the 1990s shared was a deep connection to emotion. In her history of direct-action AIDS protest in the 1980s and 1990s focused on the organization ACT UP, sociologist Deborah Gould argues that emotion was central in shaping activism in the AIDS movement. Insisting on a connection between emotion and worldview, Gould argues that emotions influence what *feels* possible in a given political situation, thereby affecting what actions people take, "By directly affecting what people feel, a collectivity's emotional habitus can decisively influence political action, in part because feelings play an important role in generating and foreclosing political horizons, senses of what is to be done and how to do it."⁷ Her observations are relevant beyond political action. Particularly noting that "members' embodied, axiomatic inclinations toward certain feelings and ways of emoting" are not limited to the times when they are engaged in politics, artists' emotions in the overlapping worlds of downtown dance and AIDS activism thoroughly influenced one another.⁸

Some choreographers have made the connection between AIDS activism and downtown dance explicit. Jennifer Monson arrived in New York in the early 1980s, performing and improvising with other dancers, particularly those involved in Open Movement at P.S. 122, and began presenting her own work in 1983. In the 1990s, Monson was never characterized as

⁷ Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics : Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 32. Gould defines emotional habitus as follows: "With the term *emotional habitus*, I mean to reference a social grouping's collective and only partly conscious emotional dispositions, that is, members' embodied, axiomatic inclinations toward certain feelings and ways of emoting" (p. 32).

⁸ Gould, *Moving Politics*, p. 32.

making “AIDS dances,” but she would later describe her entire approach to dance as having been shaped by living through AIDS:

I would say that one of the most important influences on how I live as an artist has to do with being in NYC in the late '80s and early '90s during the AIDS epidemic.

I was part of a community that was extremely activist. We were at political meetings or on the streets demonstrating at least once a week with ACT UP or the Lesbian Avengers or WHAM or Queer Nation. We lost so many of our close friends and colleagues; and our activism made a difference. We changed the government's AIDS policies and made “queer” a household word. That kind of urgency invaded the work we were making and heightened our passion.⁹

And what did that urgency look like in the work? Much of Monson's choreography in the early 1990s imagines the body as a rough, tough tool that can withstand extreme force, yet still remain articulate and assume a subtle grace. Her work *Finn's Shed* (1991) features the performers leaping and falling onto one another with decidedly un-graceful impact. In one duet, between Monson and fellow downtown choreographer John Jasperse, Monson leaps through the air with her body near-parallel to the ground, and lands on Jasperse's back, who is on all fours, with an impact that looks not so different from a body slam — this repeats multiple times during the duet. In between moments of flight, Monson and Jasperse carry each other on their shoulders, flip over one another, and collapse with exhaustion only to spring back up. Describing the performance, scholar Ann Cooper Albright noted one of the standout elements of the work was that “their physical strength can express vulnerability as well as invincibility,” continuing,

⁹ Jennifer Monson, “Cover Artist Portfolio: Jennifer Monson,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Issue 30, Fall 2006, p. 20. Monson is not the only choreographer who recalled the significance of AIDS as shaping their outlook in the 1990s. In very similar language, RoseAnne Spradlin, another choreographer of the same generation as Monson, also points to the experience of living through the AIDS epidemic as a major, if indirect, influence on her art: “RoseAnne Spradlin arrived in New York in 1983; the city's art scene, stunned by the growing AIDS crisis, explored the body from a raw, graphic perspective. Housing was prohibitively expensive; artists were pushed to the outer boroughs. Dance classes and rehearsal studios were beginning to disappear. Silence = Death = Sex = Risk = Dance = Real Estate. Witnessing and participating in the downtown dance/art scene of this era left an indelible imprint on Spradlin's esthetic.” — (RoseAnne Spradlin, program note, *X*, Joyce Theater, Oct 2016).

“strong explosive movement does not preclude a softer, more tender dancing.”¹⁰ Emotion framed this work even as it remained non-literal.

This chapter will address two distinct but overlapping histories and their relationship in downtown dance of the 1990s: the AIDS crisis and emotion in experimental dance. The source of often intense emotions for many in downtown dance, AIDS was often referred to as a cloud that hung over every aspect of life during the “plague years” of 1981-1996. During this same period, downtown dance displayed a new embrace of emotion. Emotion could be found embedded in every element of movement and choreography, assuming a kind of pervasive atmosphere — not unlike the cloud of AIDS. The intersection of these histories pushed downtown dance in new aesthetic directions and reshaped where meaning and value was to be found.

The impact of AIDS appeared in downtown dance beyond works that explicitly or implicitly signaled the disease. This point, on its own, is not especially new. A number of prominent dances that scholars and critics have discussed in relation to AIDS do not mention the disease explicitly, or do so only in a veiled way — what David Gere has referred to as “silent communication” in AIDS choreography: “Because the word AIDS carries the stigmas both of transgressive sexuality and of transgressive grief, we in American culture have already learned to speak of it without words.”¹¹ But AIDS’s impact is greater than even this silence. As Monson put it, by “invading” the worldview of downtown dance, AIDS shaped how an entire community related to emotion, whether or not those emotions were specifically about AIDS. Or as choreographer Neil

¹⁰ Ann Cooper Albright, “Techno Bodies,” in *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (1997), 29–55, p. 52, 54. See also Jack Anderson, “Chaos Yields to Harmony with an International Cast,” *The New York Times: Arts*, September 18, 1991, for another review of the performance.

¹¹ David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic : Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), pp. 23-24.

Greenberg wrote in 1995, quite simply, “AIDS is very much and inescapably a part of life for me, for us, at this time.”¹²

There are innumerable, finely graded ways that AIDS changed the lives of individuals in the 1990s, and this chapter will not be exhaustive or even a survey of the phenomenon. Instead, it will illuminate the relationship between AIDS and a particular aesthetic characteristic of the 1990s: a resurgent emotional expressiveness that appeared in formally abstract, experimental work. Just as AIDS had a wide range of impacts on dance, this aesthetic had influences beyond AIDS. But by seeking to illuminate the connection between the two, this chapter reveals some of the aesthetic characteristics of downtown dance in the 1990s that have yet to be analyzed as well as expanding how we can understand the effects of AIDS on dance, and performance and art practice more broadly.

SIGNIFYING AIDS

Previous work by dance and performance scholars has looked at some of the characteristics of AIDS dances in particular and AIDS performances generally. David Román wrote the earliest scholarly monograph on AIDS and theater, as well as later articles on dance in the “post-AIDS” era.¹³ In *Acts of Intervention* (1998), he argues that the wide range of AIDS performances draw our attention to how theater history and mainstream AIDS discourse both rely on totalizing narratives that reveal ideological assumptions about American culture and performance, “The definitions that govern our understanding of the theatre, like the definitions that govern our

¹² Neil Greenberg, “Unbearable and Inescapable,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Issue 10, Winter/Spring 1995.

¹³ David Román, *Acts of Intervention : Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); David Román, “Not About AIDS,” in *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts* (Duke University Press, 2005), 49–77.

understanding of AIDS, are neither neutral nor inevitable. Both systems are political and arbitrary.”¹⁴ Román’s work emphasized how AIDS performances had value and meaning outside “officializing rhetorical tendencies” of what theater could or should be, establishing that context — political, social, cultural — was crucial to understanding how AIDS performance worked.¹⁵

The most significant discussion of AIDS and dance is David Gere’s *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Choreography in the Age of AIDS*.¹⁶ Gere’s study, the first book-length project to analyze the impact of AIDS on choreography, traces the appearance of AIDS in dances as far back as 1981, with John Bernd and Tim Miller’s *Live Boys*.¹⁷ Gere’s project analyzes a number of AIDS dances, mainstream as well as experimental, and also looks at other “choreographies and corporeal events” that manifest a response to AIDS, such as the Names Project AIDS Quilt and gay memorials for people who died of AIDS.¹⁸ Focusing on how audiences “read” — that is, identify the presence of — AIDS in dance, Gere analyzes what that identification tells us about what AIDS meant and how people understood its significance. He proposes a set of criteria that are required to be present “in order for a dance to be perceived as having to do with AIDS.” These criteria are 1) “The dance must depict gayness,” which he refers to as the “*abjection factor*”; 2) the dance must depict homosexual desire; and 3) the dance must depict “some form of mourning, ranging from the anticipation of loss to unabashed grieving.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Román, *Acts of Intervention*, p. 148.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xx.

¹⁶ Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*

¹⁷ Premiering in early 1981, even before the first official reported cases of AIDS that July, *Live Boys* explores Bernd and Miller’s relationship, at one point bringing up some of Bernd’s health issues, including a variety of skin problems — an eerie presaging of an illness that hadn’t even been identified yet, but would soon become one of the most significant factors affecting gay life. Bernd would eventually die of AIDS in 1988, and his work traced the development of the disease, both directly in works such as *Surviving Love and Death*, and indirectly as his physical abilities changed as the disease progressed.

¹⁸ Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, p. 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Gere's criteria highlight something that is important to recognize with regard to historicizing AIDS generally, and especially with respect to dance: along with being an infectious disease, AIDS had very specific social and political connotations. However, what AIDS signified in the popular consciousness, and what AIDS actually was — the mainstream, politically coded representations of AIDS, versus the medical facts and the experiences of those living with the disease — never fully aligned; as Paula Treichler writes, AIDS was “simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification.”²⁰ This “epidemic of signification” meant that understanding what the disease signified (and what signified the disease) is an essential component to tracing AIDS' impact on dance. Gere's approach emphasizes these significations, and he identifies a number of themes that arise from them in AIDS choreography, ranging from mourning to the stigmatization of bodily fluids, from a preoccupation with ghosts to ecstasy and eroticism.

Still, Gere's approach has its limits. His third criteria, that requires the dance to depict “some form of mourning,” suggests that — despite what he himself demonstrates throughout the book — mourning was the only emotion associated with AIDS, and that the wide range of work that does not display this is precluded from signifying AIDS. Also limiting is his first criteria, which requires “gayness,” by which he specifically means male-male homosexuality.²¹ Gere is not the only scholar to limit his analysis of AIDS and performance to works by gay men — the

²⁰ Paula A. Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” *October* 43 (24AD–1987): 31, p. 32.

²¹ Others have critiqued the limits of Gere's criteria (Jaime Shearn Coan described them as “somewhat baffling” Jaime Shearn Coan, “I Don't Know What Made This “Private” in the First Place.: Neil Greenberg's Not-About-AIDS Dance and the Disco Project,” *Drain Magazine* 13, no. 2, “AIDS and Memory” (2016), fn. 24.). I acknowledge that Gere seems to be focusing on what *reads* as an AIDS dance — that is, what has to happen for an audience to see a dance as being about AIDS — rather than strictly defining what *is* an AIDS dance. Still, he seems to assume a relatively uninformed audience, which I think limits the use of his criteria for dance scholarship, especially scholarship focused on experimental dance, where audiences tend to be highly knowledgeable and familiar with artist's approaches.

scholarly literature on AIDS and performance has tended to focus primarily, and often exclusively, on the work of gay men.²² Many have shown how gay men were uniquely affected by AIDS, both in infection rates and in terms of social stigmatization — from calls to quarantine anyone with AIDS, to branding the buttocks of every gay man with AIDS, to welcoming the disease as God’s punishment on gay people.²³ For many years, the association between AIDS and gay men was so strong as to make each term unthinkable without the other: AIDS is what affected gay men, gay men are those affected by AIDS. With respect to dance, Gere observed, “As a result of popularly held conceptions that are reinforced in dance and choreography, it appears, then, that only gay men — or men who appear to be gay — signify as having HIV or AIDS in dance.”²⁴ As such, understanding how AIDS impacted the lives and artistic work of gay men is of central importance to understanding its implications generally. But a through-line in many discussions of AIDS in performance is a recognition that it was more than just a disease and affected more than just those who were infected. An approach that looks only at works that “read” as AIDS — much less that looks only at work by gay men — would pass over many of the ways the disease impacted the lives and work of artists. This approach leaves out a discussion of how AIDS might have affected work that did not “signify” the disease, but was nevertheless directly touched by it.

²² Several gay male writers positioned their focus as arising from personal familiarity with the specific issues of gay male culture. See Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, p. 24; Román, *Acts of Intervention*, p. xiii; and Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” *October* 51 (1989): 3–18, p. 6. While each of these authors acknowledge the limitations of writing exclusively about gay men in relation to AIDS, the pattern itself has consequences — as Sarah Schulman writes regarding the erasure of lesbian literature, “How can we be equal citizens if our stories are not allowed to be part of our nation’s story?” (Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*, 2013, p. 151). Deborah Gould also outlines how lesbianism was specifically relevant in regards to developing AIDS activism (Gould, *Moving Politics*, pp. 66–67). The limitations of this approach are especially significant when examining dance, which has historically been practiced predominantly by women; a study that excludes the majority of the form’s artists clearly limits what can be gained from it.

²³ Crimp, “AIDS,” p. 8.

²⁴ Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, p. 14.

What makes a dance an “AIDS dance”? In the 1990s, this question loses relevance. Downtown dance was so permeated by AIDS that the entire culture was affected by AIDS, however indirectly. To get beyond signification, one must look at how general trends in dance were affected by AIDS, not just works that stand out as “AIDS dances.” Emotion is one way to do this.

THE RESURGENCE OF EMOTION IN DOWNTOWN DANCE

Emotion held a complicated position in downtown dance in the years following the Judson Dance Theater. The postmodern era challenged some of the central tenets of modern dance, including the significance of individual expression. Some observers noted a particular emphasis on the intellectual component of postmodern dance. Michael Kirby, writing in 1975 in a special issue of *The Drama Review* dedicated to dance, argued that for postmodernists in dance, there was no direct connection between movement and meaning: “movement is not pre-selected for its characteristics but results from certain decisions, goals, plans, schemes, rules, concepts, or problems. Whatever actual movement occurs during the performance is acceptable as long as the limiting and controlling principles are adhered to.”²⁵ Dance historian Sally Banes similarly described the perspective of postmodern dance, “Their program was to make dance as such the locus of audience attention by making dances in which all the audience was given to see was structure and movement per se, i.e., movement without overtly expressive or illusionistic effects

²⁵ Michael Kirby, “Post-Modern Dance Issue: An Introduction,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 19, no. 1 (1975): 3–4, p. 3.

or reference.”²⁶ In this view of postmodern dance, a conceptual framework that was visible to the viewer was a core component — and everything else, emotion included, was incidental.

But emotion was not entirely absent from postmodern dance. Of the Judson period itself, dance critic and historian Jack Anderson referred to two such approaches as “Judson-plain” and “Judson-fancy,” the latter including artists such as James Waring and Fred Herko, who embraced artifice, idiosyncrasy, and extravagance.²⁷ Banes, also, described multiple approaches to postmodern dance in the years following Judson. “Analytic” postmodernism, described above, emphasized “structure and movement,” whereas “metaphoric” postmodernism put expression front and center, even as it differed in crucial ways from historical modern dance.²⁸ And many African-American postmodern choreographers, influenced by the Black Arts Movement, never made a distinction between abstraction and emotional expressivity, including overtly political work.

Still, the analytic approach, with its radical clarity, was so identified with postmodern dance that its specific practices, particularly the rejection of expression, became synonymous with the values of a postmodern approach to dance. But by the mid-1980s, choreographers were experimenting with a variety of expressive approaches to dance, in tension with the practices and expectations established over the previous decades by postmodern dancers. For some viewers, these new approaches recalled the modern dance ethos that postmodern dancers had repudiated. In 1992, critic and historian Ann Daly summarized this tension, noting that in the 1980s, “tanztheater, Reagan, and megamarketing intervened, and dance in America underwent

²⁶ Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown, Conn.; Scranton, Pa.: Wesleyan University Press ; Distributed by Harper and Row, 1987), p xxi. Banes in fact described multiple strands of postmodern dance, of which this approach, which she termed “analytic,” was but one.

²⁷ Jack Anderson, “How the Judson Theater Changed American Dance,” *New York Times*, January 31, 1982.

²⁸ Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, pp. xxii-xxiv.

significant changes. The post-modern aesthetic was diffused and, in some cases, willfully transgressed. Some of the most satisfying dance today has more in common with Doris Humphrey than Yvonne Rainer.”²⁹ In 1986, *New York Times* dance critic Anna Kisselgoff similarly observed, “Emotion is the new word among American choreographers. I can tell you that American choreographers of the ’30s and ’40s are laughing their heads off.”³⁰ There was a general sense among critics that dance of the 1980s had eschewed the ideologies at the base of postmodern dance, particularly around emotion.

This tension was noted by artists as well. In 1990, Movement Research held a Studies Project titled “Conceptual Inspiration from Left Field,” that aimed to “discuss the language of the choreography” at use by the current generation of downtown choreographers.³¹ The event featured short performances by six early-career choreographers — Clarinda MacLow, Jennifer Monson, John Jasperse, Donna Uchizono, Koosil-ja Hwang,³² and Susan Braham — who then discussed their work on a panel moderated by two later-career artists, Nina Martin and Mary Overlie. At one point, the discussion turned toward whether the works that had just been performed were postmodern or not; Overlie, seeming to hold the analytic definition of postmodern dance, described postmodern dance as requiring “an intellectual stimulus in the viewer, a conceptual idea that directed the dance,” and further opined regarding the group of performances she had just seen, “I wouldn’t categorize it as postmodern dance. I’d categorize it

²⁹ Ann Daly et al. “What Has Become of Postmodern Dance? Answers and Other Questions by Marcia B. Siegel, Anna Halprin, Janice Ross, Cynthia J. Novack, Deborah Hay, Sally Banes, Senta Driver, Roger Copeland, and Susan L. Foster.” *TDR (1988-)* 36, no. 1 (April 1, 1992): 48–69., p. 48

³⁰ Ann Daly, “Tanztheater: The Thrill of the Lynch Mob or the Rage of a Woman?” *The Drama Review: TDR* 30, no. 2 (1986): 46–56, p.49. {Note that Daly is writing, not Kisselgoff}

³¹ *Conceptual Inspiration from Left Field: What Does Making New Dance Demand?*, Movement Research Studies Project, 1990.

³² At that time, Hwang went by the name Kumiko Kimoto.

as modern dance.”³³ For Overlie and others of her generation, just as important as the thought-based approach was a requirement to disavow what has traditionally been presented as opposed to thought: emotion. But not everyone viewed the expressive content of new work as a return to earlier practices or values. Jasperse, recalling Overlie’s comment in an interview with Uchizono in 2008, said, “she was talking about a relationship back to perhaps [a] dramatic or emotional or performative state content that [was] emotionally engaged that her generation had eschewed. And I feel the only way she could understand that was in terms of regression.... In some way that connection back to emotionalism must be an historical connection.”³⁴ In 1986, the postmodern choreographer Nina Wiener described her own changing attitude toward emotion over the years as a shift in “public” versus “private” concerns:

What’s happening now, and I can only speak for myself, is that I’m starting to move into exploring emotional expression in a more public arena. In my early work my private concerns were my emotions, which I wasn’t willing or interested in sharing; my public concerns were my form and my structure, which came out of the postmodern tradition and were interlinked through different kinds of material manipulations — which goes back to “We can move a box, and that’s O.K.”

Now I feel so secure in my structural and formal concerns that they are becoming very private for me. Today I don’t care if the audience sees these concerns or that they are recognized. I am currently more into sharing my emotional concerns.³⁵

For some, emotional content was invariably tied to a “modern dance” approach, a return to practices of a bygone era. For others, the display of emotion was fertile ground for new exploration.

This changing attitude toward emotion and expressive content in 1980s downtown dance reflected influences from several directions. One was European Tanzteater, particularly the work

³³ *Conceptual Inspiration from Left Field: What Does Making New Dance Demand?*, 1990.

³⁴ Uchizono, “Hybrid Bastards,” p. 73.

³⁵ Daly, “Tanztheater,” p. 49.

of German choreographer Pina Bausch.³⁶ Bausch's company, Tanzteater Wuppertal, first performed in New York at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1984, and the response in critical circles to the choreographer's approach — which featured sophisticated scenography and expressive movements, often with depictions of violent encounters between men and women — was intense, if divided.³⁷ Similarly, Bausch's work left a strong impression on the downtown community. The sophisticated theatricality of her stagings and emotionally evocative choreography presented dance in ways that had been missing from much experimental dance in the 1960s and 1970s. Though “tanzteater” as such would remain a European phenomenon, Bausch's emphasis on the staging of emotion in her works would prove highly influential to choreographers moving away from the distanced formalism of the previous decades. Reflecting on Bausch's influence in 2002, critic Joan Acocella went so far as to write, “In New York's ‘downtown’ dance scene of the late eighties, dancing was largely replaced by a violent sort of drama, in which, very often, someone was dying and the audience was to blame. If I had to name the reasons for that, the first would be AIDS and the second would be the 1984 American debut of Bausch's company, the Tanztheater Wuppertal.”³⁸

Other genres and mediums of performance were also important influences on the emotional turn in dance. Many downtown dance venues featured a variety of performance forms, and performance art of the 1980s, increasingly in the form of solo performance, emphasized

³⁶ Though she had lived in New York in the early 1960s while studying at the Juilliard School, and had continued to visit the city for the next ten years, Bausch was seen as heir to a tradition of German expressionist dance, one that traced its roots to Mary Wigman and Kurt Jooss.

³⁷ Many critics, while they found Bausch's scenography stunning and her compositional skill impressive, found the depictions of violence untenable. Arlene Croce famously described it as “the pornography of pain,” writing, “In Bausch theatre, men brutalize women and women humiliate men; the savage round goes on endlessly....She keeps referring us to the *act* of brutalization or humiliation — to the pornography of pain. It's what we came for, isn't it?” Arlene Croce, “Bad Smells,” *The New Yorker*, July 16, 1984, p. 83.

³⁸ Joan Acocella, “Play It Again,” *The New Yorker*, January 14, 2002, p. 80.

autobiography and individual expression. Many choreographers recall the downtown club scene, with its emphasis on camp, irreverent atmosphere, and the intimacy of the venues, as influencing dancers attitudes to performance more broadly.

Entering the 1990s, emotion and expression took on a new valence in downtown dance, offering avenues for artistic exploration that the preceding decades had often avoided. The confluence of an emotional turn in dance and the AIDS crisis, and its attendant emotions, continuing into its second decade, emotion would become a central force in life and art in downtown dance.

GENERATIONS OF AESTHETIC APPROACHES TO AIDS

Amid this broader reevaluation of emotion in downtown dance, AIDS would have a particularly strong impact. There are scores of dances (Gere says hundreds) made in the 1980s and 1990s that refer specifically to AIDS.³⁹ Even from the earliest dances of this period, emotional expression is a near-ubiquitous feature, with expressions ranging from anger and rage to grief and mourning. The dances suggest a need to work through the intense emotions created by the sickness and death that result from the epidemic, as well as responses to the political climate that stigmatized and demonized those who suffered from the disease.

Two very different dances from the mid-1980s illustrate how emotion stemming from the epidemic generated a wide range of responses. Lar Lubovitch's *Concerto Six Twenty-Two* (1985) is a duet for two men, exploring themes of tenderness and caring. The dance features no explicit elements of homosexuality or AIDS, but that did not stop it from being readily viewed by gay

³⁹ Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, p. 265.

audiences and critics as an exploration of homoerotic desire between the two men. Indeed, Lubovitch said of the work, “What I was intending was something nonhomoerotic, something on a very high spiritual level.”⁴⁰ Yet in the context of a rising societal acknowledgment of gay life, the mere presence of two men dancing tenderly with one another was read by many as reflecting the AIDS crisis.⁴¹ As a work that addressed neither AIDS nor homosexuality explicitly, *Concerto Six Twenty-Two* was a very different reflection of the disease than Ishmael Houston-Jones’s *THEM* (1986). This dance, for six men (including Houston-Jones), explored themes of desire and homoeroticism, but also anger, violence, and rejection. A scored improvisation, *THEM* placed the men in shifting relationships to one another, sometimes as young friends, sometimes as combatants, sometimes as lovers. Throughout, as writer-poet Dennis Cooper read stories written for the performance, a mood of anxious uncertainty prevails. In one infamous scene, Houston-Jones, with a pillowcase covering his head, wrestles a dead goat on a mattress, leaving behind a literal trail of blood. Though the terms “AIDS” or “HIV” are never said, the emotional tautness and physical violence enacted in the dance create unmistakable references to the feelings of fear and dread that permeated the gay community at this time. As the critic Burt Supree wrote of the dance in 1986, “*THEM* isn’t a piece about AIDS, but AIDS constricts its view and casts a considerable pall.”⁴²

Though there are many differences between these works — anger versus mourning, explicit queerness versus closeted homoeroticism — these works do have a common approach to emotion. In both, there is an overtness to the emotional content; emotion is in some ways the

⁴⁰ Lubovitch quoted in Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, p.19.

⁴¹ The piece was performed at in 1987 Dancing For Life, a benefit for AIDS organizations, cementing it as a gay work and effectively one of the most widely performed AIDS dances.

⁴² Burt Supree, “Men with Men,” *The Village Voice*; *New York*, December 22, 1986.

central character. This kind of dance, where AIDS is a clear (even if not explicit) backdrop and the emotional content is overt, has been well-recognized as an aesthetic generated by AIDS.⁴³ However, this would be only one way art and dance reflected the effects of AIDS over the years. In downtown dance in the 1990s, AIDS generated various kinds of artistic response, and the character of these responses changed over time. The 1990s were a different political, social, and affective situation than the 1980s with respect to AIDS, and the ways that AIDS inflected dance of this decade was a combination of the changing circumstances.

In 1989, art historian Jan Zita Grover described what she saw as already two distinct “generations” of response to AIDS. The first generation, Grover wrote, was primarily “memorial” in nature, its works attempting to show, “‘Here was a life; this life is missed; here are its mourners’.”⁴⁴ Grover defined the second generation as characterized by its political awareness and relationship to activism, by work that was intended to “make the social connections, touch the anger and harness it to social purposes.”⁴⁵ Reflecting on Grover’s periodization, art critic David Deitcher observed that there were also important aesthetic differences between the generations. He noted that first generation works were “dominated by the traditional genre of portraiture, be it in painting, photography, video, or, for that matter, in the individual panels of the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt.”⁴⁶ Deitcher observed that the

⁴³ Though it takes many forms in different media and at different points in time, many critics and theorists establish the connection between emotion and explicit AIDS representation in art: Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*; Therese Jones, ed., *Sharing the Delirium: Second Generation AIDS Plays and Performances* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994); M. Elizabeth Osborn, ed., *The Way We Live Now: American Plays & the AIDS Crisis*, 1st ed (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990); David Deitcher, “What Does Silence Equal Now?” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Jan Zita Grover, “Introduction to AIDS: The Artists’ Response,” in *AIDS: The Artists’ Response*, 1989, 2–7.

⁴⁴ Grover, “AIDS,” p. 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Deitcher, “What Does Silence Equal Now?” p. 97.

second generation tended toward collectivist creations, a prime example being the activist collective Gran Fury, which aimed to “bear witness to people living with AIDS and to provide the potentially life-saving educational information that the government and the media failed to supply.”⁴⁷

Extending Grover’s periodization, Deitcher then identifies a third generation of artistic response to AIDS developing in the 1990s, work that did not necessarily engage in the directly political, activist stance of the earlier period. “In the more measured work typical of this ‘generation,’” he writes, “reflection and metaphor predominate.”⁴⁸ This work less directly engaged with the images and effects of AIDS itself, rather embracing more abstract references and symbols. Deitcher presents a work of Felix Gonzales-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1989), as an example of this mode: two identical battery-operated clocks set to the same time slowly fall out of sync, and eventually stop as the battery fails, “imply[ing] the sameness in same-sex love, and the end that awaits even perfect couples as the health of one or the other fails.”⁴⁹ The mood of this generation was in part a reflection of the affective exhaustion brought on by what seemed like an epidemic with no end in sight. Deitcher then makes a crucial observation regarding manifestations of AIDS in artwork:

the extreme discretion of the third-generation artists’ responses to AIDS suggests the extent to which a still broader range of works might be understood in terms of the epidemic. Indeed, to those whose lives have been unalterably transformed by AIDS, the range of cultural experiences that can bring the epidemic to mind can seem as limitless as encounters with it are unpredictable.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 98.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 114.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 116.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 117.

Though reminiscent of Gere's "silent communication," Deitcher's point is not the same. He is suggesting not that artworks refer to AIDS in increasingly obtuse or indirect ways, but that by the early 1990s, so much had been affected by AIDS that even things that *were not* referencing it could evoke it. Art no longer had to "speak AIDS," because AIDS was a part of life.

Theater historian Therese Jones offers her own periodization on AIDS in theater. In her introduction to an anthology of AIDS theater, *Sharing the Delirium: Second Generation AIDS Plays and Performances*, Jones describes early AIDS theater as serving a few very pragmatic purposes. For one, these plays were often a source of information on AIDS in a time of widespread confusion on the subject, with dialogs containing discussions of safe sex practices, medications, and scientific findings.⁵¹ More broadly, these plays focused on depicting the lives of gay men, portraying them in roles that went beyond, and often against, the mainstream stereotypes of the sex-driven, effeminate, morally deviant queer. Plays of this generation — most famously Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, and others including William Hoffman's *As Is*, Harvey Fierstein's *Safe Sex*, Terrence McNally's *Andre's Mother*, and Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz* — aim to normalize gay life, humanize gay men, and by extension, generate empathy for those affected by AIDS. Jones argues that these "first generation works are traditional in form, sentimental in tone and assimilationist in aim."⁵² We can understand these characteristics as, in part, interdependent, in that the traditional form and sentimental tone are in

⁵¹ In her introduction, Jones writes, "The theater of AIDS begins in 1985, with Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, written because the artist/activist said he felt an obligation to become a message queen, to inform the gay community about AIDS and the straight community about the gay community." (Jones, *Sharing the Delirium*, p. ix-x) Román challenges this history, writing "the dominant historiographic narrative that positions *The Normal Heart* and *As Is* — both produced in 1985 — as the earliest responses to AIDS in the theatre is not only inaccurate, it also does a grievous disservice" to earlier work, and that "an AIDS theatre historian should construct a model of analysis that cautions against the officializing rhetorical tendencies and totalizing narratives of theatre history in general." (Román 2008, p. xx). Still, I find Jones' observations on the common features of this generation of AIDS plays are relevant towards distinguishing some of the approaches from later AIDS theater.

⁵² Jones, *Sharing the Delirium*, p. x.

service of the assimilationist aim — if influencing a mainstream audience is the goal, then mainstream forms and techniques have a clear utility here. The assimilationist aim thus has the purpose of challenging the stereotypes and misconceptions that allowed mainstream American culture to perceive gay people as “other,” and those dying of AIDS as beyond their concern, creating the opposite portrait: these men, boys, sons, are just like those you know, and are.

What Jones identifies as second-generation AIDS plays mark an important shift in perspective on the meaning and significance of the epidemic, with AIDS “no longer an event to be comprehended but a reality to be accommodated.”⁵³ These works shift the emphasis from understanding the disease of AIDS to depicting the people living with AIDS. While AIDS is still a major theme of these works, it is no longer the center around which everything else revolves — it now has to fit in with all the other elements of the characters’s lives. In some of these plays, such as *What Are Tuesdays Like?* — a fourth-wall play that observes the interactions of AIDS patients in a hospital waiting room — AIDS can even appear as an unspoken, background element rather than the central focus. Though AIDS may be the motivating cause for bringing the characters into contact, neither the characters nor the play are concerned with figuring out anything about AIDS. In other plays, such as *AIDS! The Musical!*, rather than a dreadful disease that has to be feared, mourned, and processed, AIDS is a marker of identity that can be claimed and celebrated. And as the tongue-in-cheek title suggests, it is also a thing that can be joked about and mocked, laughed at in the theater as much as anything overly-serious in real life could be.

⁵³ Ibid.

What all of these critics seem to agree on is that responses to AIDS changed over time, and that in the 1990s, the responses to AIDS moved beyond explicit reference to include more subtle and abstract responses. However, Deitcher goes even further, adding that the limitations imposed on acceptable art practice by contemporary aesthetic theories (e.g., postmodernism) became invalidated by the exigencies of AIDS. He notes that in response to AIDS activism, artists moved beyond questions of isolated or “pure” artistic theorization to consider the practical use of various aesthetics, “Clearly the emergence of AIDS activism established a context in which cultural practitioners found themselves deploying creative means that were once regarded as off-limits; for example, to construct a counternarrative of AIDS, or to communicate urgent public messages regarding the activist response to the epidemic and its neglect by the American government.”⁵⁴ Deitcher shows that as a direct result of AIDS, visual artists reconsidered techniques and ideas previously dismissed or considered “off-limits.” This displays a similarity to the trajectory of expressive content in downtown dance of the 1980s and 1990s. As discussed, the reemergence of expressive content in downtown dance was critiqued by some as representing a regression to older techniques and practices of dance’s history (i.e., historical modern dance), while others defended it as a progression in the form, representing new ideas with new logics. In other words, modes of artistic practice that, in the context of recent history of the form, might have been considered out of bounds because they did not address the questions brought up by postmodern theories, were found to be relevant again due to the exigencies of the moment — in particular, AIDS.

⁵⁴ Deitcher, “What Does Silence Equal Now?” p. 98-99.

In contrast to some of the dance critics mentioned earlier, Sally Banes argued against the idea of seeing the return of expression as a return to the style of modern dance,

The views and practices of the current generation are not simply a return to an older style or method.... The shift is an obvious reaction by a new generation of choreographers to the concerns of their elders; by the end of the 1970s, the clarity and simplicity of analytic post-modern dance had served its purpose and threatened to become an exercise in empty formalism. Dance had become so shorn of meaning (other than reflexive) that for a younger generation of choreographers and spectators it was beginning to be regarded as almost meaningless. The response was to look for ways to reinstall meaning in dance.⁵⁵

What Banes describes as dance having become “almost meaningless” must be understood not only as a response to the reductionism of analytic postmodern dance, but also in the context of *why* meaning was newly desired. It is necessary also to see it in light of the questions around the meaning and value of artistic practice in the age of AIDS. When artists were creating activist pieces that proclaimed “Art Is Not Enough,” a dance that claimed to have no meaning beyond its enactment may very well have felt like not enough.⁵⁶ Political activism was one important motivation for this, but the desire for meaning extended beyond explicitly political action. To “reinstall meaning in dance” meant to no longer imagine the bodies moving on stage existed apart from their lives off the stage. With AIDS requiring any and all methods to address its seriousness, dance in the 1990s would likewise make use of any and all approaches to make sense of the world it found itself in.

⁵⁵ Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, p. xxiv. It is worth remembering that in this description Banes is referring almost exclusively to white choreographers; few African-American choreographers, especially, ever thoroughly embraced what Banes calls analytic post-modern dance. Bill T. Jones articulates this perspective in Mary Overlie, Steve Paxton, and Bill T. Jones, “The Studies Project,” *Contact Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1984): 30–37.

⁵⁶ Gran Fury, *Art Is Not Enough*, 1988.

MEANING AND EMOTION: DANCES IN CONTEXT

There was a distinct difference in the affective tenor of AIDS in the 1990s compared to the 1980s. In the 1980s, AIDS was a mystery, and one of the throughlines of AIDS discourse in this decade is how *unknown* it was.⁵⁷ This uncertainty generated feelings of anger and outrage, and the passion to do something about it. By the early 1990s, much more was understood about the disease, though this understanding generated its own range of emotions, including exhaustion and despair. Many note 1993 as a low point, when the Concorde study — a long-term trial studying the effectiveness of AZT, at that time considered the most promising AIDS treatment — effectively demonstrated no long-term benefit from the drug. This coincided with the Ninth International Conference on AIDS, held in Berlin that year, which presented “new medical evidence indicating that HIV’s attack on the immune system was so complex that any hope that AIDS would soon be treated...was wholly smashed.”⁵⁸

With the emotions associated with AIDS so different in the 1990s than before, the relationship of AIDS to dance was likewise different. Death was a fact, a constant presence. AIDS was not less urgent, it was simply a precondition, a backdrop for life and dancemaking in the 1990s, in contrast to the uncertain, growing, shocking epidemic that emerged over the course of the 1980s. In the 1980s, AIDS was viewed as an enemy to defeat; for much of the 1990s, it was a ghost to live with.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Misinformation was rampant, and misunderstanding was significant enough even among the “authoritative” sources to warrant several analysis of how AIDS was being discussed — see Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse.” and Susan Sontag, *Aids and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), among others.

⁵⁸ Gould, *Moving Politics*, p. 419.

⁵⁹ In 2016, during a post-performance discussion at a revival of the work of John Bernd, who died of AIDS in 1986, Jennifer Monson, who danced with Bernd, recalled, “I thought he [Bernd] was going to get better, I didn’t think he

Thus understanding the influence of AIDS in dances of the 1990s is largely not a question of identifying references, because AIDS no longer required a reference to affect experience in art or life. Rather, AIDS shaped how dance works created meaning, and influenced what meanings dance aimed to create. While there continued to be numerous dances made “about” AIDS, the more pervasive influence was the emotional core that infused so much work of the 1990s.

THE BODY IN CONTEXT

One aspect of meaning-making in downtown dance in the 1990s relied on the charged political atmosphere of the time and the constant specter of AIDS that weighed on these dances. To be sure, the period required a certain level of direct engagement with political realities, yet as Deichter suggests regarding “third-generation” AIDS art, those realities were ever-present, and need not always be explicit to have power and be used in performance.

In this period, the body was one particularly fraught battleground, especially in light of AIDS, where the stigmas around the disease meant that mainstream culture associated gay men with death. Some downtown choreographers found this tension generative, and articulated a sense of political viability in engaging with the very aspects that mainstream culture found problematic. John Jasperse, speaking in 1994, said that “at this point in time there’s something inherently radical about practicing an art form that doesn’t exist in a tangible way.... That seems to me so against current ideas that I think it *is* a big social statement.”⁶⁰ In the time of AIDS, such a sentiment was more than a counter-cultural impulse. Exploring meaning and value outside the

was going to die.” By the time Neil Greenberg made his *Not About AIDS Dance* in 1994, the assumption had inverted: Greenberg assumed he *would* die from AIDS (See Daly, “Finding the Logic of Difference.”).

⁶⁰ Laurel George, “Artists Incorporating: Business Savvy Meets Creative Experimentation,” in *Corporate Futures: The Diffusion of the Culturally Sensitive Corporate Form*, ed. George E. Marcus, 1 edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998), 311–35, p. 321.

range of what was considered acceptable in mainstream culture was a way of rejecting those meanings, refusing to allow them to become controlling ideologies. Jennifer Monson further articulated how the open oppression of the era necessitated and generated a more explicitly political response in her work: “I am a lesbian, and my sexuality has never been a part of my work, but now I may need to articulate my sexuality, to make it clear, to clarify my individuality and that of my dancers. Dance is often so abstract that it’s hard to include political content, but in order to survive we need to pull together as an artistic community, to be more visible.”⁶¹

Two dances, one by Jasperse, and another co-choreographed by Monson and DD Dorvillier, are not only aware of their social and political context, but rely on that context as a way of structuring meaning. Emotion does not appear as familiar modes of psychological expression, as earlier modern dance works did. These works tend not to focus on the emotions of an individual, but rather on the fact of emotions themselves. Emotion, when apparent, was *presented* rather than *represented*,⁶² depicted as the result of circumstance, not something confined to an individual experience. Dances by these two choreographers illustrate that politics entered dance in ways not always explicit.

EXCESSORIES

In *Excessories* (1995), Jasperse investigates how meaning attaches to the body, and how those meanings can be manipulated through it. This theme is explored in a variety of formal aspects of the work, including the costumes that hide, constrain, reveal, and present the body in

⁶¹ Robert Sandla, “Downtown: Freedom of Expression,” *Dance Magazine*, February 1990, p. 66.

⁶² I’m playing off Banes’ phrasing and ideas, when she discusses expression in 1980s dance: “These dances are different from modern dance, however, because in important ways they *present* the nondance information (i.e., plot, character, situation), rather than *represent* it.” Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, p. xxxi.

various configurations, and also in how various parts of the body parts are manipulated, utilizing surfaces, limbs, and orifices in unexpected ways.

The hourlong work is performed by five dancers and accompanied largely by an original score by the composer James Lo. The most striking section comes early, about twenty minutes in, in a sequence that reveals the minimum exposure required for a body to imply obscenity — and then focuses entirely on that exposure. The five dancers, costumed in black formal attire, form a line facing the audience, and a Finnish folk tune begins to play. Shortly into the track, the dancers turn away, and with their backs to the audience, adjust their clothing. Turning again to face the audience, they are now revealing exactly one body part each: the men have their penises out, the women their breasts.

In what follows, these parts are manipulated to accentuate beats and other effects in the music. The women lift their breasts singularly, alternately, and then rub in counter- and clockwise motions, following a rhythmic pattern of one of the instruments; the men swipe, flick, point, and pluck their penises like a string, and cup and drop their testicles, following the pattern of a different instrument. When the song has a brief instrumental break between verses, the dancers perform a short march up and downstage, continuing to use motions that accentuate particular aspects of the music (breasts jiggling, penises swinging); during another instrumental break, the women kneel so that breasts and penises are on the same level, and the dancers perform a short “wave” across the line, each part rising then falling in sequence. In the final section of the song, each dancer reaches across their body to manipulate the exposed part of the adjacent dancer, creating a weave of arms and hands, then proceeds to perform the same swiping, bouncing, flicking, or rubbing manipulations on each other that they had been doing on themselves.

This section could be described (perhaps with pun intended on Jasperse's part) as a "perversion" of a classic music visualization: motions of the body used to make visible certain characteristics of the music being danced to. On a purely formal level, that is what happens during this section, as the dancers use specific body parts to follow rhythms and patterns in the music, and these movements are arranged spatially to create visual interest. But the choice of body parts used to compose this "visualization" is hardly neutral; so charged are the parts themselves that their formal role of visualizing the music hardly seems to matter. There is a stark feeling of confrontation to the section, with the performers facing directly into the audience while manipulating their genitals, and this resists what could be an easy effect of the section: over-the-top humor. While the section is certainly humorous — it is difficult not to laugh at the ridiculousness of the setup — it is not a joke, and it is not played merely for laughs. Nor, however, is it a disinterested exploration of the body-as-fact, which might present the genitals as equally valid to manipulate as any other body part. This section, and the dance as a whole, is not only aware of the implications of obscenity suggested by the dancers revealing and manipulating their genitals, but also relies upon and works through those implications. It is understood that this will be "obscene" according to mainstream values, and that is exactly what this section asks its audience to consider.

The sequence immediately following further contextualizes the "obscenity dance" as more than a prank. As the song ends, the lights dim, and the five dancers turn away from the audience, refastening their clothing and covering themselves, and then walk behind an upstage panel. Four dancers reemerge, and begin manipulating one another's bodies, using unconventional points of initiation: in one sequence, two people throw one person's arm over the fourth's shoulder, another's chin gets lifted toward an odd angle by a hand that is quickly pulled away by someone

else, who then immediately collapses and hangs over another person's back. In other moments, a gripped earlobe is used to direct the attached head toward the ground; this earlobe pull recurs several times in this section, foregrounding a part of the body that is an awkward choice for directing another person's movement — while also being reminiscent of a parent disciplining a child. These potential references are not emphasized, but their presence does indicate the way these manipulations — awkward, unconventional, complexly arranged and interdependent — seem to have dual layers of meaning at every moment. One person falling backward into another's arms occurs as a structural result of their knee being bumped and losing the support of their weight-bearing leg, but it also results in an evocative pose, back and neck arched, while the supporting person looks down. Which aspect, the functional or the suggestive, should we be focusing on? Are both inherent, or are both excessive?

Excessories demonstrates how no movement, no part of the body, can have a single layer of meaning: there is always a context around a movement that complicates how it will be received. The work relies on that context to generate a cultural critique of ideas around obscenity, one which relies on a contextual awareness, while also being much more than an intellectual exercise: the critique reflects not just what we *think* about obscenity, but what we *feel* about it.

RMW

Another instance of the semi-abstraction of highly charged bodily moments is found in *RMW* (1993), a fifteen-minute dance, co-choreographed and performed by DD Dorvillier and Jennifer Monson. Commissioned by Jaime Ortega for Movement Research's Sexual I.D. series, *RMW* is an exploration of lesbian sexual identity. The two dancers begin wearing jeans, white t-

shirts, and leather jackets, a recognizable “ACT UP uniform,” cultivating an intentional dyke image.⁶³ For the first few minutes, Monson and Dorvillier grab, push, and throw each other around the stage in what are both brutish, violent motions, and simultaneously a choreographic exploration of the possibilities for leveraging another person’s weight. After a break in intensity in which the two roll around each other on the floor in a decidedly softer manner, they stand, and kiss. In what follows, the two again perform high-energy movement, lifting, catching, and carrying each other, or jumping with limbs splayed and landing full-bodied on the other. Yet the movement in this section is organized around the specific goal of keeping their lips touching as much as possible. In one sequence, Dorvillier jumps through the air, landing on Monson in what resembles a body-slam, and immediately wraps her arms around Monson’s neck and kisses her while the two log-roll across the stage. Rising from their floor-bound embrace, Monson stands and circles Dorvillier, who remains kneeling, while the two keep their lips in contact — a sly revision of a ballet promenade.

This section is something between an aggressive, acrobatic make-out and a tongue-in-cheek intellectual experiment. It *is* funny, but it is not merely that; they *are* kissing, but they are also exploring physical intensity through the formal constraint of keeping their lips touching. There is a significant tension between the surface meaning of the action — lips locked equals kissing — and the formal properties of the movements the duo execute: a kiss is not typically portrayed as an aggressive, acrobatic gesture. On a formal level, this duet also seems to ask if every instance of lips touching is a kiss, whether the lips are more limited than other parts of the body, less

⁶³ Jennifer Monson, “RMW (A) & RMW from the Inside Out,” in *Queer Dance : Meanings and Makings*, ed. Clare Croft (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 225. My analysis of the dance is based on a reconstruction performed and filmed in 2014, for Clare Croft, ed., *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), “File 14.2” and “File 15.2.”

available for dancing. The highly physical staging of an intimate gesture pushes against limiting conceptions of physicality and sexuality, and by extension, of the lesbian identity the piece explores.

The connection between the emotional charge of the movements is inseparable from the nature of the work as a queer dance. Recalling Gere's criteria for how to identify AIDS dances, *RMW* depicts queerness (though not strictly "gayness") and homosexual desire, but certainly not mourning, and identifying any explicit AIDS references would be a stretch. Yet would this work have been made if not for AIDS? Though the piece reads as primarily an exploration of erotics and sexuality, for Monson, these emotions were specifically tied to events of the era:

Due to the AIDS epidemic, the early 1990s were a time that demanded an eruption of sexual liberation. Gay sex was defined as a death sentence, lesbian sex was barely visible, any kind of sex was dangerous and immoral, abortion rights were at stake as well as access to sex education. DD and I were exploring our sexualities with different partners and configurations and the energy of the erotics of that time fueled the choreography of *RMW*.⁶⁴

RMW seems to address the difficulty Monson had earlier observed of reconciling dance's abstraction with politics. The abstraction in *RMW* engages with politics through the emotional registers that surround the movements employed in the choreography. Monson has also reflected on *RMW* as what she calls a "queer object." Noting that the dance draws explicitly on queer and lesbian imagery to build some of its meaning, it also relies on the social context, and importantly, the movement practices they employ in the performance, "An object has a structure that reproduces a shape of erotics. It is a physical relationship that depends on being in the right place at the right time. The technical articulation that DD and I create is precise and we shape each

⁶⁴ Monson, "RMW (A) & RMW from the Inside Out," p. 223.

other's bodies through touch.”⁶⁵ Shaping one another's bodies, physically reconstructing how they both negotiate physicality and eroticism, requires “being in the right place at the right time,” a physical manifestation of the same contextual awareness that shapes the social and cultural meanings of the work.

NOT-ABOUT-AIDS-DANCE

Both *RMW* and *Excessories* came about in a social and political climate that was in no small part generated by how the dance community responded to AIDS. Living with AIDS, in these works by Jasperse, Monson and Dorvillier, meant renegotiating one's perception. While choreographers like Jasperse and Monson explicitly considered their work in relation to contemporary politics even as the dancing itself remained abstract, for Neil Greenberg, the politics of his work was less intentional than simply inescapable. Writing in 1995, in response to a call to consider protest in dance, Greenberg noted that, “I have never seen my work to be especially political, a concept I immediately, though perhaps inappropriately, associate with protest.” Yet, with regard to his most recent work, *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* (1994), he continued, “It would be coy of me to claim that I had no conscious political motives. It was important to me to ‘come out’ as being gay and being HIV+ in the text that is a part of the work, and to make clear that the deaths of my friends mentioned in the piece were from AIDS. There is political motive there. But more than political motive, there was personal need.”⁶⁶

Greenberg's *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* featured five dancers (including Greenberg), who perform sequences of formally abstract movement, mostly solo, though occasionally in unison groups. The movement itself is Cunningham-esque, featuring unconventional limb sequencing;

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 225.

⁶⁶ Neil Greenberg, “Unbearable and Inescapable.”

long lines in the legs, arm, and spine; sometimes combined with the loose “swing” characteristic of release technique.⁶⁷ The movement sequences are non-referential, and do not build on each other in a narrative or developmental sense, each sequence in the dance standing on its own. The sense of freestanding parts is further reinforced by the work containing movement sequences excerpted from previous dances by Greenberg (performed by the same dancers who were in those previous works) interspersed among new sequences unique to this dance. Rather than conveying a sense of progression, the dance feels episodic: the theme is layered and deepened with each sequence, yet does not suggest there is anywhere to go, nowhere that the dance will arrive.

Intermittently throughout the dance, text projected on the upstage wall announces a variety of information: biographical about the dancers (“Justine is 23”), events that occurred while making the dance (“Jo had work choreographing an opera in Sydney. She went back to Australia.”), feelings the dancers have about their relationship to dance (“Christopher wants his dancing to speak for itself”). These announcements are woven throughout the work, projected behind the dancing on the upstage wall. Reflecting on the work in 2012, Greenberg wrote, “I also can see this idea of giving the audience information about the performers as another of my strategies toward providing a door for the viewer into the more abstract potencies of the dancing.... I think with *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* I was using the self-revelations of the performers as a tactic, thinking that maybe if the audience knew something about the *dancers*, they’d be able to connect to the *dancing*, and all the particular kinds of meaningfulness that

⁶⁷ See Chapter 4 for further description and discussion of release technique.

dance can provide.”⁶⁸ For Greenberg, dance is deeply meaningful, even the abstract compositions he was known for creating. The text was not a way of adding meaning to the movement, but of helping to reveal its inherent meaning to audiences, specifically through an emotional connection to the dancers.

The title is, of course, an intentional misdirection. The dance is clearly, explicitly even, “about” AIDS, which is brought up again and again, announcing deaths that occurred throughout the work’s creation: “I went away in August. When I came back, I learned Ed Hartmann and John Falabella had died”; “At this point in making the dance my friend Danny Jacobs died”; “At this point in making the dance my friend Ron Vawter died.” AIDS is a constant presence in the work, and looms over the dancing. But while the work is clearly permeated by AIDS, the emphasis in the title, for Greenberg, is not on the word “AIDS,” but on the word “About.” That is, this dance is not “about” — it is not-about-AIDS, but it is also not “about” anything else either.⁶⁹ While it seems easy to accept that this dance is not about certain humorous details of a dancer’s life (e.g., “Ellen was a big pothead in high school”), it seems impossibly difficult to ignore the frequent notes of friends dying in considering what this dance is “about.” Yet this disconnect is exactly what Greenberg asks us to consider: here is a dance that is no more “about AIDS” than about any other aspect of these dancers’s lives, yet all of these elements occur together, in dance and in life.

The disconnect between movement and text was embedded also in Greenberg’s choice to use written rather than spoken text:

⁶⁸ Neil Greenberg in Juliette Mapp et al., “Writing & Performance,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, no. 1 (January 2012): 119–40, p. 137.

⁶⁹ Greenberg tells of visiting his brother Jon in the hospital, and a sign that read “this-is-not-about-you” having partially fallen off the wall, so that it only read “this-is-not-about.” Coan, ““I Don’t Know What Made This “Private” in the First Place.””

I've experimented with the use of spoken text, but became discouraged because the words could be so easily tied to a specific movement, so easily misconstrued as having too direct a relationship to the particular event(s) occurring at the time of hearing. With written text there's sufficient disconnect from the dancer(s) and stage-picture, in both time and space. The viewer is therefore challenged to hold these two different media together simultaneously — the dancing and the written text — and negotiate the poetics of perhaps not being able to connect them or separate them, but nevertheless to experience them. These are the poetics that interest me, far more than any “about.”⁷⁰

Everything communicated in the text is in a sense a precondition, background information, facts and events that have an indelible impact on the dancing. But the dancing itself makes no comment on this information, is not seeking to narrativize it, and there is no search for concrete meaning. The dance creates an emotional weight in the tension between the formal sophistication of the dance and material significance of life outside the studio. The tension between these elements — the abstract, non-narrative movement sequences, the heavy significance of the AIDS deaths, and the mundane reality of relationships and personal histories — is central to the impact the dance creates.

Though AIDS is frequently present in the text, there are no references to AIDS in the movement itself, with one crucial exception. About halfway through the performance, Greenberg has a solo where he portrays his brother's coma, posing the way his brother lay in the hospital bed. Though as a literal rather than depiction, this moment is an outlier, Greenberg wrote, “I can see the whole dance as an expression of my need to find a context for this moment.”⁷¹ In reviewing *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* in 1997, dance critic and scholar Ann Daly described Greenberg's solo, emphasizing how certain formal elements of the work's structure “literally embodies” emotional states:

⁷⁰ Mapp et al., “Writing & Performance.”, p. 137.

⁷¹ Greenberg, “Unbearable and Inescapable.”

a fitful internal monologue of remembrance, longing, and confusion, concerned with loss and survival. By contrasting abstract movement with verbal commentary (projected on slides, like the intertitles in silent movies) and silence with music, the solo's subtle, sophisticated choreographic structure literally embodies the condition of absence, void, and especially interruption.⁷²

Daly's comment on the solo could apply to the dance as a whole. *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* generates a deep pathos, but its emotions manifest through juxtapositions of mostly abstract elements, rather than performances of directly expressive states. This dance, in which emotion lies in choreographic structure rather than personal expression, presents emotion as more of a communal than individualized experience. The structure of the choreography conveys a wide range of emotions, from uncertainty to joy, and suggests that even when events do not make sense, meaning can be found in the familiarity of identification.

BODY AS SOURCE

RoseAnne Spradlin's work especially demonstrates the invisible but pervasive impact of AIDS on the formal aspects of downtown dance. Spradlin's choreography in the 1990s was known for its emotional intensity, "raw" a word frequently used in describing the affect of her dances, which had titles like *Empathy* (1999), *Desire* (1995), and *Ends of Mercy* (1997).⁷³ In her work, emotion could be sourced from physical body — the workings of the muscles, the organs, and the memories embedded in one's blood. The body was a vehicle of abstract meaning, and choreography was a tool to generate that meaning.

Like many of the other works discussed, Spradlin's do not present explicit references to AIDS, but they would not have been made outside the conditions generated by the epidemic.

⁷² Ann Daly, "Finding the Logic of Difference," in *Critical Gestures : Writings on Dance and Culture* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 197–203, p. 201.

⁷³ A postcard for *Immunity/Desire/Last Day of Summer* used the language, "Heightened emotional intensity is the heart of Spradlin's choreography, which is deeply concerned with the body's relationship to the soul."

There is a consistent emotional intensity to Spradlin's works of the 1990s, and Spradlin attributes it, in large part, to the influence of her peers. Working in the downtown dance community in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Spradlin described seeing artists including Jim Self, Annie Sprinkle, Byron Suber, and Karen Finley, and how these artists brought out a great expressiveness by pushing the body to extremes. For Spradlin, this led to an investigation of the potential for the body to explore and reveal trauma:

I mean, that's the thing about bodies, is bodies hold history. That's what they do. Whether we like it or not, you can't erase it. You can repress it, but you can't erase it. So it's always there. And I just think in this particular time period, people started letting it bubble up to the surface. And then when things that are really traumatic happen, like the AIDS crisis, it's like somebody poking at you all the time. It's like, things start to come up out of the bodies, and they just come up, and they just come out. So I just felt like as an artist, I just want to be part of this somehow, because this feels like what's really meant to happen right now.⁷⁴

This pushed Spradlin to pursue the same kind of self-revelation in her own work, what she described as a desire to be "brave."⁷⁵ In thinking about the tenor of the period, Spradlin described an awareness that events were not affecting her in the same way, but that they nevertheless had an impact on her:

There was a lot of volatility and a lot of fear, and a lot of anger during that period of time, and I think I felt it in the community. So I tried to understand it, but not intellectually, I tried to understand it energetically. And to somehow, as a straight white woman, dialogue with it.... I felt something resonating in my body, my history. Even though my body was not the same as that body [queer, or male, or with AIDS], I felt something resonating with me that I felt was very important somehow.⁷⁶

The results of this approach appear in several of Spradlin's works in the 1990s. In these works, an emotion does not require a narrative or portray a psychological type (the way it might

⁷⁴ RoseAnne Spradlin, interview with Buck Wanner, March 22, 2017.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

in the work of Martha Graham, for example). Rather, emotion is an element to be manipulated, originating from the physical body as much as from the psyche. This appears in Spradlin's 1995 work *Immunity*, a duet for two women (Vera Orlock and Paige Martin), with music by Shostakovich, that builds emotion through juxtapositions of the two dancers' energetic states. A press release describes the work, "Diversity, tolerance of self and memory — traits considered hallmarks of the human immune system — are explored in *Immunity*, a driving, mostly-abstract work structured as a series of succinct situations, encounters, and experiences."⁷⁷ Throughout the roughly twenty-minute work, the dancers sometimes interact directly, but mostly move independently, their movements set in relief against each other — moving in the same world, but mostly seeming alone. In one sequence, one of the dancers performs a series of repeated high kicks — like very plain-looking grand battements — while the other jumps in place, counting each leap out loud. The structure of this sequence fairly straightforward, and does not progress toward variations or formal patterning. The simplicity of the structure allows the focus to be on the effect of the movements themselves. The repetition appears tiring, if not exhausting, and though the movements are simple, efficiency is not the aim, for the force both dancers put into their movements far exceeds what is necessary to execute. Both dancers are topless — one wears a long plaid skirt, the other simple black underwear — and though this fact is not explicitly sexualized, it nevertheless colors the effect of the work. The dancer counting and leaping holds her breasts to keep them from bouncing, a largely functional gesture, but also adding to the subtle difficulty the section suggests, an undercurrent of striving against discomfort.

⁷⁷ The Kitchen, "Press Release for *Immunity* / *Desire* / *Last Day of Summer*," March 10, 1996.

Such juxtaposition of energetic states appears in more complex forms in *Empathy*, a trio performed by the dancers Tasha Taylor, Athena Malloy, and Walter Dunderville.⁷⁸ The groupwork here is much fuller, even if not dense. The opening section of the work has Taylor and Malloy directly interacting, facing off as a vocal track by Diamanda Galás shrieks around them, first mirroring one another's movements with arms outstretched and fingers splayed, then counterbalancing each other while holding hands only to violently swing out of the balance. In a trio section later in the work, Taylor partners with Dunderville, pushing and pulling him across the stage, resting her leg on his hip, then shoulder, then head. Malloy copies Taylor's movements, but performing them without a partner, she appears lost and aimless, a sharp contrast to the aggressive exchange between the duo.

The choreography does not aim for smooth and seamless veneer, but still conveys control and complexity in the manipulation and interaction of limbs, shapes, and connections among the three dancers. Spradlin has described her work as seeking “a non-idealized movement technique.”⁷⁹ Though the dancers display clear skill, they are not aiming for beauty. As they attempt technically complex and difficult tasks, the stress and strain they display — or the restraint as they try not to reveal their exhaustion — seems to matter more than the particular movements themselves.

In one sequence, Dunderville and Malloy fall to the ground, one lying on top of the other. Rolling back and forth, they continue to alternate who is on top, pausing momentarily after each exchange. Though each pause only lasts a few moments, they have their arms wrapped around

⁷⁸ *Empathy* premiered in December 1999 with the dancers Trisha Bauman, Walter Dunderville, and Tasha Taylor. The performance I viewed was recorded in October of 2000, and Athena Malloy had replaced Bauman; I thus refer to Malloy in my descriptions.

⁷⁹ Artist's Statement, in RoseAnne Spradlin, “RoseAnne Spradlin :: Foundation for Contemporary Arts,” 2007.

each other, such that they appear to be embracing, the gesture suggesting affection. Many moments like this appear over the course of the dance — a slight turn of the head to make eye contact, a soft placement of a hand on a shoulder — but no specific character is built between the performers, so each instance slides away as easily as it comes. In another moment, Dunderville holds Taylor’s legs while she walks on her hands — the dress she is wearing falls over her head, and when she stands up, Dunderville helps her to put it back on. Even as the exchange is functional, it evokes a certain tenderness — the dancers, wrapped in vinyl costumes, are sweating thoroughly at this point in the dance — and the palpable heat coming off their bodies generates as much meaning as the gesture itself. As Deborah Jowitt wrote in her review of the work, “[Spradlin’s] choreography and the demeanor of her wonderful performers suggest a troubling discrepancy between inner sensations and the outside world. Shudder though I may, I *feel* the performers’ dislocations and can’t wrench my eyes away.”⁸⁰

The exploration of the body’s inner sensations is particularly on display in Spradlin’s solo *Ends of Mercy* (1997), a tour-de-force in presenting the body as a transparent vehicle of emotional history. In this work, Spradlin does not choreograph movement so much as states of being. Over the course of fifty minutes, Spradlin works through sequences inspired by her examination of the central nervous system. As she described the work, “*Ends of Mercy* started originally from some body feelings that I truly did have, way under the surface. And I kept trying to let that come out and see what it was. And then finally to see what I could form around that.”⁸¹ Though the work was a product of self-exploration, Spradlin was careful to distinguish what she performed from her own feelings, saying “I identify more with [being] the creator of it rather

⁸⁰ Deborah Jowitt, “Coming Through the Skin,” *The Village Voice*, New York, December 7, 1999.

⁸¹ Michal Sapir, “Hidden, Secret, Unpresentable Things,” *Dance Theatre Journal* 15, no. 1 (1999): 24–27, p. 27.

than being the subject of it.”⁸² Though it originated from things she herself felt, the work was not *about* her individual experiences or emotions, but an exploration of emotion as such.

The structure of the work is episodic, rather than developmental, with its various sections lacking obvious connections, yet still feeling to be part of one whole. Often, Spradlin will repeat a small motion several times, and the repetition builds in energy, such as one section where Spradlin’s use of small hand gestures around her abdomen, plucking and throwing — it eventually looks like she is pulling out her organs and tossing them away. But movements can sometimes simply persist without much obvious change, their impact developing through duration. In one such sequence, Spradlin sits on the floor with her costume — a simple shift dress — pulled above her head, her back to the audience, while the music blares around her. She barely moves in this section — just holds the dress steady above her head — but she seems somehow to be both exposed and hidden, and the tension continues to build over several minutes. Like crashing waves, the sections follow one another in a way that suggests the work could repeat endlessly.

In these works, Spradlin’s emotional intensity feels clearly aligned with the intensity of the era itself. Her dances reveal how the collective experience of the community shaped the aesthetic of everyone in that community. In one section of *Ends of Mercy*, Spradlin kneels on the floor, clasping her hands and sobbing, while quietly repeating, “Please don’t kill me.” While this may not be a direct reference to AIDS, it evokes the emotions around fear and death that permeated downtown dance. Spradlin’s work may not be about specific, particular events, but it is clearly

⁸² Ibid.

and forcefully about human experience, and uses physicalized emotion to explore that experience.

EMOTION, COMMUNITY, DANCE

Undoubtedly the biggest shift around AIDS during the 1990s was the development of protease inhibitors in late 1995, the first drugs proven to significantly reduce mortality rates for people with HIV. Almost immediately, the perception of AIDS shifted from a near-certain death sentence to a manageable illness, and just as quickly, the national discussion around AIDS (to the extent that it existed) shifted to what was most notoriously captured in a phrase from the journalist Andrew Sullivan, “The End of AIDS.”⁸³ In downtown dance, the reality was, of course, far more complicated, for whatever the status of the disease with respect to mortality after 1996, one thing did not change: the downtown community had undergone a major trauma, and the effects of so many deaths did not disappear because people were no longer dying on a weekly basis.⁸⁴ And though the discussion around AIDS changed significantly in 1996, it did not end, for as David Román argues, “Claims for the end of AIDS and a post-AIDS discourse might be best understood not as markers of a definitive and identifiable moment of closure, but as the next development in the discursive history of AIDS.”⁸⁵

Understanding the effects of this devastation requires attending to the exceptional state that AIDS created in the downtown community. Rebecca Solnit, in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*,

⁸³ Andrew Sullivan, “When Plagues End,” *The New York Times: Magazine*, November 10, 1996,

⁸⁴ In *The Gentrification of the Mind*, novelist and AIDS historian Sarah Schulman discusses at length the trauma that remains in queer communities as a result of the AIDS crisis, particularly the “consequences of AIDS on the living,” (p. 11) and the results of these consequences remaining unaddressed. Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*.

⁸⁵ Román, “Not About AIDS,” p. 53.

looks at the exceptional states that arise in disasters.⁸⁶ One of the main revelations of disasters, writes Solnit, is an upending of entrenched social systems that define people as individualistic and separate from each other, “When all the ordinary divides and patterns are shattered, people step up—not all, but the great preponderance—to become their brothers’ keepers. And that purposefulness and connectedness bring joy even amid death, chaos, fear, and loss.”⁸⁷ While disasters are not to be celebrated, she continues, we can still learn from them, “Horrible in itself, disaster is sometimes a door back into paradise, the paradise at least in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister’s and brother’s keeper.”⁸⁸ Solnit presents disasters as moments which provide access to a deep humanity and which generate unexpected community. Solnit also notes that disasters unearth a particular kind of emotion. Solnit writes, “The positive emotions that arise in those unpromising circumstances demonstrate that social ties and meaningful work are deeply desired, readily improvised, and intensely rewarding.”⁸⁹ People find a clarity of purpose and value to their immediate actions in taking care of one another.

There are important ideas we can take from Solnit’s writings in considering downtown dance in the 1990s. The AIDS crisis was, undoubtedly, a disaster. As Solnit shows, while we do not celebrate disaster, we would be unwise to ignore the things that appear in disaster and that reveal to us fundamental realities about ourselves and the societies we build. In the sense that Solnit discusses it, disaster is inherently a communal experience. It is not a personal crisis, something unique to an individual, however significant. In downtown dance, the AIDS epidemic

⁸⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disasters* (New York: Viking, 2009).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, p. 13.

was intensely personal for many, but it was also fundamentally a communal experience. The numerous individual experiences of AIDS within the community shaped, to use Gould's term, the emotional habitus of downtown dance broadly.

Solnit's view of disaster and the emotional and social illuminations it produces expands, also, how we view the success of movements that follow disaster. What was the change in dance following the crisis years? Some have noted the exhaustion that followed many years of political activism and describe this exhaustion as leading to feelings of defeat.⁹⁰ Especially given the many lives that can never be recovered, it is difficult to understand what success around AIDS would have looked like in the 1990s, and there is the temptation to look for big, obvious signs of something changing in dance. However, the change in attitude that Solnit observes arising in disaster can also persist at a more subtle level, even after things return to normal, "What begins as opposition coalesces again and again into social invention, a revolution of everyday life rather than a revolt against the system."⁹¹ In other words, changes may not occur at the level of broad society or government, but can instead be found at the level of individual connection.

This we do see in 1990s dance. Even as so-called "AIDS dances" became fewer and farther between after 1996, the shifts in the dance community's practices were fundamental. Even if the discourse on AIDS entered a new phase in 1996, what did not change was the emotion released over the previous 15 years. Writing in 2004, Gere notes how the perception of AIDS in choreography had shifted, "these days choreography need not specifically refer to AIDS for an audience member to sense its reverberations. David Roussève, for example, whose *Love Songs* (1998) toured widely, did not set out to make a work about AIDS, though he has in the past. Still,

⁹⁰ Both Gould, *Moving Politics* and Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind* reflect on the decline of political action in the AIDS movement in the mid-to-late 1990s, attributing it, in part, to exhaustion and despair.

⁹¹ Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, p. 285.

he says, ‘I have been so altered, changed by the AIDS crisis — particularly emotionally — that AIDS is very much reflected in this piece.’”⁹² Gere then goes on to describe a section of *Love Songs* in which one of the dancers in the work, Julie Tolentino, drew on the experience of changing the clothes of a friend who had died from AIDS. The dance was not concerned with AIDS, but rather built around “the narrative of two African American slaves who fall in love and are brutally separated,” and the section was conceived to be “as intimate as possible without being directly sexual.”⁹³ Yet like so many dancers in the 1990s, Tolentino’s experiences with AIDS had affected the associations she had with a number of emotions, including intimacy. So while neither the dance nor the section in particular is about AIDS, Roussève still observed, “The emotional core that’s feeding that scene is certainly the AIDS crisis.”⁹⁴

The “emotional core” that Roussève describes in his work is something that permeated downtown dance throughout the 1990s. Gere’s observation needs to be taken even one step further: it is not merely that AIDS can be recognized in a dance without being mentioned, but that AIDS played a crucial role in shifting the way the entire downtown dance field operated. AIDS infused the aesthetics of downtown dance in the 1990s with an emotional core. It did this both directly, through dances that were explicitly inspired by AIDS, and indirectly, through shifting the field’s relationship to emotion. Whether or not dancers, choreographers, or spectators identify specific elements in any particular dance as related to AIDS, the shift in practice is inseparable from the pervasive effects of AIDS.

One risk in writing about AIDS is to overemphasize the suffering of those affected by HIV and AIDS, to see people as defined by the disease — the converse of Crimp’s critique of

⁹² Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, p. 265.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 267

emphasizing the flourishing of art in response to AIDS. Dancers did not merely “respond” to the events of the 1990s, AIDS included. The developments in dance occurring around AIDS revealed qualities already latent in the community, and were not mere “opposition,” but primarily “invention.” The community of downtown dance was not engendered by the AIDS epidemic, but many aspects of how it worked were revealed by the conditions of the epidemic. Emotion had been for some time suspect in postmodern dance, and AIDS helped to reveal what emotion offered this community of dance. It could be both a source for formal expression, a way to avoid explicit political signification, as well as a means to do the opposite: make central experiences that had before been only implied.

Emotion, community, dance. The disaster that was the AIDS crisis revealed how emotion was a shared exploration of and a structuring force in the community of downtown dance. The dance community’s relationship to emotion was changing for many reasons, not only due to AIDS. But the particular kinds and degrees of emotion that arose from AIDS, like in any disaster, revealed a particular role for emotion in dance. And this new role defined the aesthetic character of downtown dance in the 1990s.

Chapter 3 —

Production Values: Shifting Infrastructures and Dance

Funding

In 1995, the downtown choreographer Ralph Lemon disbanded his 10-year-old modern dance company. From the outside, this decision was not an obvious one. Lemon, only 43 years old at the time, was a relatively successful choreographer and far from the end of his career. His work was critically well-received, and his company performed and toured regularly. Over the previous 10 years, he had created 18 dances for his company, and was often sought after as a choreographer for other companies as well. In other words, there were no obvious signs that the company was in immediate trouble. However, when interviewed by the *New York Times* critic Jennifer Dunning about his decision, he cited the financial “roller coaster” of the recent years as putting significant stress on the company, noting that when he discussed the decision with his dancers, “I told them that I was frustrated, that I felt this was becoming a little abusive,” and his dancers agreed.¹ Financially, Lemon considered himself “one of the fortunate ones” among his peers, but his company was still struggling to continue in a way that he and his dancers felt was both sustainable and artistically satisfying.²

Although Lemon’s decision to disband his company may have appeared unusual, the modern dance company as an institution experienced a crisis in the 1990s. Several companies

¹ Ralph Lemon, quoted in Jennifer Dunning, “When Disbanding Is the Only Logical Step,” *New York Times*, August 6, 1995.

² *Ibid.*

had closed, ranging from small post-modern dance troupes to large, established entities; several more would shut down by the end of the decade.

The “company” as an institution has a long history in modern dance. Dancers coalescing around a particular choreographer, learning that choreographer’s technique and performing solely that person’s work, was a tradition that extended as far back as Isadora Duncan in the first decade of the twentieth century. Reflecting on his decision to form a company in the 1980s, Lemon told Dunning, “Everyone I danced with had a company.... It seemed to me I was following a tradition. That was the way it worked in modern dance.”³ But the company represented something much broader and more significant than simply an efficient vehicle to present choreography: it was a model for how dance could work not only artistically but also economically. Wrapped up in the idea of a dance company were assumptions about how dance was produced and how a career should progress — that is, what defined success. There was an understood trajectory that one went from being a dancer in someone else’s company, to choreographing one’s own work independently, to eventually forming a company, and that company serving as the base of one’s artistic development and career. It was, as Lemon had described to Dunning, “the way it worked.”

At the start of the 1990s, many younger choreographers still viewed forming a company as a step in the natural progression of their artistic careers: thus the closing of so many companies was a cause for great concern. A common narrative of the 1990s tells of widespread closing of dance companies as a direct result of a collapse in the financial structures of arts funding.⁴ The

³ Ibid.

⁴ As Dunning wrote in her article on the closing of Lemon’s company, “Some have decided that they can no longer continue creating dances while faced with the burden of trying to keep even a small organization afloat in a difficult economy and an atmosphere of seeming antipathy toward the arts in America. The specter of the demise of the

actual narrative, though, is far more ambiguous. Companies did not simply disband, fall apart, and stop forming. By the end of the 1990s, there were in fact *more*, not fewer, companies than at the beginning of the decade.⁵ However, the role of the company was fundamentally transformed as the dance field changed. As an institution, the dance company still existed, but the landscape around it had altered.

Similarly, a common narrative of the arts economy in the 1990s describes widespread retrenchment and a precipitous decline in dance funding as a result of changes at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).⁶ While the tumult in arts funding in the decade was undeniable, the story of dance funding is, likewise, far more complex than a simple decline or a single source. From the late 1980s through the mid 1990s, the so-called “culture wars” would eventually lead to a fundamental restructuring of the NEA, and prompt broad national conversations on the place of the arts in American society and the government’s role in funding them. And while NEA’s budget was cut by nearly 40 percent in 1996, the NEA was a relatively small part of the dance field’s funding. Overall, the significant changes in dance funding had less to do with how much money was available, but where the money went and how it was accessed. Mirroring the status of the dance company, funding for dance was actually higher at the end of

National Endowment for the Arts hangs over dance these days, symbolizing for many a despair about the future.” Dunning, “When Disbanding Is the Only Logical Step.”

⁵ The report “Raising the Barre,” citing statistics from the Unified Database of Arts Organizations (UDAO), shows 278 dance companies in 1990, and 356 in 1999. Thomas M. Smith et al., *Raising the Barre: The Geographic, Financial, and Economic Trends of Nonprofit Dance Companies: A Study*, Research Division Report, #44 (Washington, D.C: National Endowment for the Arts, 2003), Table 5, p. 25.

⁶ As just a few examples, see André Lepecki, “Caught in the Timetrap: How Tradition Paralyzes American Dance,” *Ballett International* 15, no. 2 (April 1999): 30–33; C. Carr, “The Land of Less,” *The Village Voice; New York, N. Y.* (New York, N. Y., United States, New York, N. Y.: Village Voice Media, Inc, September 28, 1999); and Frank Werner, “Diverging Aesthetics as Fertile Ground (A Response to Andre Lepecki’s Perspective on the Present Situation of Dance in the USA),” *Dance Theatre Journal* 15, no. 3 (1999): 16–21.

the decade than the beginning, but where it went created a very different story about how dance worked.⁷

The collapse of funding structures in the 1990s called into question the status of the dance company as a viable economic structure. But shifts in the goals and structure of the NEA and broader public and private funding entities, *coincided* with shifts in the function and modus operandi of the small modern-dance company already underway, rather than being the sole cause of those changes. The creative pursuits of choreographers in the 1990s had already started to reveal the artistic limitations of the company, prompting many to search for different approaches.

Lemon was one of the choreographers who abandoned the company structure in search of alternate artistic pathways. Perhaps more than others, he did so intentionally, and the resulting changes in his work are illuminating. Referring to the focus on financial difficulties, Lemon later characterized the *New York Times* article as:

a missed opportunity in that my decision to work in another way was not about being forced out of the traditional form. It was a choice somewhat mitigated by the difficulties of funding sources in society and support of the art form in this society, but it was also a shared experience with my own need to expand how I was pursuing my creative process.⁸

Two years after disbanding his company, Lemon premiered *Geography* (1997), the first in what would become a trilogy of works over ten years dealing with African diasporic dance. Compared to the work he had made with his company, nearly every aspect of *Geography* was different. Rather than a work to add to the repertory of a continuing company, the work had been

⁷ Summarizing the data in its study, the report *Raising the Barre* writes, “The dance industry’s finances (as measured by income and expenses) weakened during the early and mid 1990s, then sharply increased in the latter part of the decade.” The recovery was especially strong in modern dance: “income reported by modern dance companies generally grew throughout the 1990s, showing only a small decline of 4.3 percent in 1992, and then jumping by 19.5 percent in 1995.” Smith et al., *Raising the Barre*, p. 27.

⁸ Lemon, quoted in Christina Knight, “Starve,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Issue 12, Mid-Winter to Summer 1996: 11.

commissioned as a standalone project. With joint funding from multiple theaters and foundations, the economic model of *Geography* was entirely different from how Lemon had run his company. Moreover, the performance itself was markedly different from anything Lemon had made previously. Working with a group of performers assembled specifically for the project, he created a full-evening work with an independent aesthetic universe, and after touring the work for just two months, ceased performing it altogether — this work would enter no repertory.⁹ While most transitions from the company model were not necessarily so clear cut and did not exhibit so dramatically a new way of working, Lemon's example was nevertheless representative, rather than exceptional of the new way of working.

In this chapter, I examine how changes in dance production in the 1990s fundamentally altered the field of downtown dance. To do so, I first situate the modern dance company as a model for dance production that developed slowly over the course of the twentieth century, in close connection with developments in public arts funding structures. Turning to the arts funding crisis of the 1990s and the resulting collapse of the economic model that supported the dance company, I look at how shifts in dance practice were influenced in part by economic factors but also motivated by dancers searching for artistic possibilities beyond the company model. Downtown dance artists were seeking alternatives well before the funding crisis, and for reasons that were primarily artistic. Yet, in discussions about the closing of companies in the 1990s, this trend has been almost entirely ignored.

As choreographers dissolved their companies in the 1990s, they simultaneously abandoned the notions that went along with the company: that one moved from dancing with someone else

⁹ See Ralph Lemon, *Geography: Art, Race, Exile* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press : University Press of New England, 2000) for the choreographer's reflections on the work.

to leading one's own company, that an artistic identity was tied to the development of a unique aesthetic signature embodied by that company, that growing as an artistic meant working on an ever-increasing scale. The 1990s saw the start of a different model for producing dance: the project. While the "project" approach was not new, it would become the primary mode for producing downtown dance. The "project model," as both an economic and artistic approach, defined the direction that downtown dance would take as the 1990s closed. However, the shift from the company model to the project model is about much more than the material circumstances of dance production. Rather, the shift indexes subtle but important changes in the creative values of downtown dance. Recognizing the turn to the project model is crucial to seeing artists not as products of their circumstances but as agents defining new value systems in changing times.

"THE WAY IT WORKED": A HISTORY OF THE COMPANY MODEL

"Now post-modern choreographers have companies—for instance, the David Gordon Pick-Up Company, the Trisha Brown Company, the Lucinda Childs Dance Company, Kenneth King and Dancers—and their companies perform works from the repertory. I suspect that this is partly a response to economic demands set down by touring commitments, producers, and granting agencies; but certainly it is also part of the process of becoming an established choreographer."¹⁰

While many choreographers may have seen forming a dance company as intrinsic to the tradition of modern dance, the reality is that the dance company as it existed at the start of the 1990s was a relatively new development. Though the modern dance company has a long history, extending at least as far back as Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn's Denishawn Dancers in the

¹⁰ Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown, Conn.; Scranton, Pa.: Wesleyan University Press ; Distributed by Harper and Row, 1987) p. xxvii.

1910s, that history is distinguished by continual development and change. Following Denishawn, the 1930s saw the establishment of many concert troupes (or “groups,” as they were usually called) founded most iconically by Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Hanya Holm. These groups crystallized around a single pre-eminent dancer-choreographer,¹¹ who was the artistic center and de facto leader of the group. In addition to performing choreography, these groups often fulfilled additional artistic functions for their central artist, generally serving as vehicles for the development of a technique, and sometimes a school, that codified particular ways of moving. The dancers in the group also provided implicit financial support for the choreographer through receiving minimal compensation for performance and nothing for rehearsal, save for a barter system of free classes.

During the 1930s and 1940s, such dance groups gained increasing definition through modest developments in the artistic infrastructure for modern dance. One such development was the emergence of summer training programs hosted by college dance departments, such as the Bennington Summer School of Dance. At Bennington, choreographers would be brought in to offer classes and to develop new works on the students attending the summer sessions. Students in these programs would be introduced to the techniques of various choreographers and take them back to their respective home institutions, where they would both train a new generation of dancers and develop new audiences for the work. In addition to providing essential income for artists, these summer programs established a close relationship between modern dance and higher education, helping to establish what was called the “gymnasium circuit” in the mid- to

¹¹ With the important exception of Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman’s shared company, the Humphrey-Weidman Group.

late-1930s, referring to the college gymnasiums where early modern dance companies would perform on some of the earliest tours these companies undertook.¹²

Still, in the 1930s and 1940s, there was little economic infrastructure for dance. The Works Progress Administration (WPA), which had provided employment for many dancers and choreographers during the Great Depression ended in 1939,¹³ and private foundations had yet to offer any meaningful support for dance.¹⁴ In the 1950s and 1960s the State Department funded some American companies to perform and tour abroad as part of its Cold-War cultural policy. This funding provided critical stability for the handful of companies it supported but did not provide any support for dance artists or companies to create or perform work nationally. The companies that did maintain a long lifespan relied primarily on personal relationships with wealthy individuals or an association with an established institution.¹⁵

While a general infrastructure for supporting dance was lacking, having a dance company was still viewed as the first step toward developing the kind of public recognition that would garner support. The artists who were selected for the State Department tours and able to develop individual or institutional support were those whose work exhibited a unique aesthetic, consisted

¹² For more information on Bennington, see Sali Ann Kriegsman, *Modern Dance in America — the Bennington Years* (Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall, 1981), Elizabeth M. McPherson, *The Bennington School of the Dance : A History in Writings and Interviews* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2013), and Janet Mansfield Soares, *Martha Hill and the Making of American Dance* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2009).

¹³ For further discussion of the WPA, as well as specifically the Federal Theater Project and Federal Dance Project, see Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left : Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

¹⁴ For a discussion of the Ford Foundation's relationship to ballet and modern dance, see Julia L. Foulkes, "'The Weakest Point in Our Record' : Philanthropic Support of Dance and the Arts," in *Patronizing the Public: American Philanthropy's Transformation of Culture, Communication, and the Humanities*, ed. William J Buxton (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 309–24.

¹⁵ Among the most notable is Batsheva de Rothschild, who long supported Martha Graham's company in numerous ways; also, José Limón's long relationship with the Juilliard Dance Division, which employed him as a teacher and was a de facto home base for his company.

of a deep repertory, and the means for performing both — in other words, a company.¹⁶ In this way, dance companies were essential not only to the artistic development of choreographers but to their ability to access economic support, however piecemeal.

The most crucial development in establishing an infrastructure for dance was the founding of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965. The NEA would have a profound impact on dance over the next three decades, being directly responsible for the long-term growth and stabilization of dance across the country as well as the development of an economic model for how dance could support itself.

Part of the problem the NEA identified early on was the dance field's haphazard approach to money. A Rockefeller Foundation report on the state of dance in 1964 summarized the field as "So chronically depressed and chaotic...that it is impossible to obtain a set of figures to provide a reliable statistical analysis of the economics of dance."¹⁷ June Arey, the first director of the NEA's Dance Program, similarly observed the dysfunctional financial practices of dance during the NEA's first years, "No planning. Not a budget in the country for a dance company."¹⁸ To address this, some of the NEA's early program priorities involved standardizing how dance approached its finances, which was achieved, in part, by most grant categories requiring the entities that received them to be registered as non-profit organizations. The NEA thus had a

¹⁶ In selecting the companies that were to go on State Department tours, Prevots observes, "All members of the Dance Panel were comfortable with their early decisions to send the Limón and Graham companies abroad as cultural ambassadors. They knew the work of both artists intimately and regarded their innovations in technique and choreography as acceptable." Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export : Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War*, vol. s (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998) p. 51.

¹⁷ Richard Schickel, *Dance in America* (February 10, 1964), p. 9. Quoted in Angela Helen Graham, "The National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program, 1965-1971: A Social and Cultural History" (Ed.D., Temple University, 1996) p. 59.

¹⁸ June Arey, quoted in Graham, "The National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program, 1965-1971." p. 195.

central role in transforming the perception of dance from disorganized silos of starving artists to a disciplined field of creative production.¹⁹

Arguably the most effective programs developed by the NEA were its touring programs, the two earliest being the “Dance Touring Program for Large Companies” (DTP) and the “Coordinated Residency Touring Program” (CRTP). The DTP provided funds both to presenters to support the administrative costs of bringing companies to their institutions and to large companies to support the creation of works for touring. The CRTP provided grants to State Arts Agencies that organized tours and residencies for at least two dance companies per year. Both programs leveraged “matching funds,” which required recipients to acquire non-federal funding sources — including state and local, but also private foundation and corporate sources — in proportion to those received from the NEA.²⁰ The effect of these touring programs (as well as others that leveraged matching grants) was to create funding agencies and networks across the country, both public and private, to receive the funds that NEA was distributing.²¹

Following the creation of these NEA programs, American dance experienced a growth that has often been described as an “explosion,” leading many to refer to the period of the late 1960s through 1970s as the “dance boom.” In the fifteen years following the establishment of NEA, a number of metrics about dance — the size of audiences, the regional distribution of dance companies, the number of people identifying as professional dancers — saw marked expansion.

¹⁹ However, the issue of dance’s problems with budgeting would continue to vex the NEA for several years, and were in part a result of dancer’s resourcefulness, as an internal memo from Nancy Hanks revealed, “We have had considerable problems with cash flow, particularly in dance. Apparently the dance companies just perform, money or not!” Quoted in Graham, “The National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program, 1965-1971.” p. 271

²⁰ In the early years, the matching amounts were often 1-1, but would later grow to 1-2 and even 1-3 (two and three times non-federal sources for every NEA dollar).

²¹ Sarah Wilbur has insightfully described the coalition of entities generated by NEA funding the “infrastructural triad,” consisting of “funders, presenters, and nonprofit dance companies.” Sarah Marie Wilbur, “U.S. Dancemakers: A Declaration of Interdependence” (Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, 2016) p. 57 and *in passim*.

Yet the one that most clearly illustrates the growth of the field in this period was the significant increase in the number of modern dance companies from 72 in 1965 to 182 in 1975, and to 289 in 1980.²²

These figures demonstrate the impact of the dance boom on both dance companies and the company model itself. Over the 1960s and 1970s, various developments in funding infrastructures, many prompted by NEA policies, established an economy that was capable of supporting choreographers and their companies, partly through direct grants and partly through a national touring network. Perhaps more importantly, these funding sources privileged the formation of a company.²³ Though the NEA had since its founding given individual fellowships directly to choreographers, individuals were always funded at lower levels than companies. Companies offered the chance for larger-scale explorations of choreography, and the system presented a model by which choreographers could imagine “moving up.”

While company funding allowed for larger-scale artistic exploration, it also offered the prospect of long-term financial stability. Companies were eligible for various types of funding, including funding spread over multiple years, for executive and administrative expenses, and for general operating expenses — in other words, companies could apply for funding that would maintain their existence *as companies*. In this model, companies not only supported artistic creation, but also perpetuated their own existence. Though this did not make it possible for most

²² Leila Sussmann, “Anatomy of the Dance Company Boom, 1958-1980,” *Dance Research Journal* 16, no. 2 (1984): 23–28 Table 2, p. 25. I focus on modern dance because ballet, although also heavily influenced by NEA policies, has a different relationship to the company structure.

²³ Don Anderson, Dance Program Director 1971-1973, describing an expansion of the “list” of approved artists for CRTP in the mid-1970s, observed “to get on The List, it was a series of things—you had to be in existence for two years, you had to have a certain number of bookings under your belt, you had to have professional management.... What people started doing, and we knew this was going to happen, and it’s not a good thing to have happen, is that companies begin to behave in order to meet the criteria.” Quoted in Graham, “The National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program, 1965-1971.” p. 315-316.

dancers performing in a company to make this their sole or even primary source of income — even the most successful modern dance companies often did not earn enough to pay their dancers year-round, and instead aimed for reaching enough weeks of work to qualify their dancers for unemployment insurance — still, the funding networks created a model in which it was possible for artists to acquire financial and administrative support, allowing greater focus on the art form than would have been possible without a company.

For choreographers entering the 1990s, having a dance company meant being part of an artistic history and lineage, one that referenced the tradition of single-choreographer centered groups and the forms of artistic creation supported by those groups. However, the dance company as a twofold artistic-economic entity had a shorter history, being largely a product of the dance boom and the funding structures that spurred its growth starting in the late 1960s, a system that arguably only solidified in the mid-1980s. If a dance company was a creative endeavor, it was also increasingly one that required pursuing funding and working within financial structures that dictated the maintenance of the company itself. The idea that one created a company because “that was the way it worked” is a reflection of this corporate imperative. The company was how a choreographer got access to funding, as well as how they established themselves as an artist. It may have been an artistic tradition, but the dance company was also a model for dance production, a complex infrastructure that developed piecemeal in close connection with arts funding. The “dance company” should be understood as this “company model,” a partly financial entity that privileged certain forms of artistic creation over others.

COLLAPSE OF THE COMPANY: DISMANTLING THE ARTISTIC-ECONOMIC MODEL

Though the company model seemed to have developed a stable working infrastructure in the 1980s, by the late 1990s that model appeared to have become inviable. As a dual artistic and economic model, it experienced changes in both practice and funding that contributed to the apparently swift collapse of something that had developed gradually over more than half a century. This section addresses some of the economic shifts of the 1990s that affected the funding of dance companies, followed by an examination of how developments in artistic practice of downtown dance pushed against the company model itself.

DANCE IN THE CULTURE WARS

Starting in the late 1980s, wide-ranging societal debates entered the public discourse in the United States and became known as the “culture wars.” Mainly, they are recognized as part of a conservative backlash against the increasing liberalization of society. The turmoil around the NEA was but one aspect of the culture wars, yet its battles were perhaps the most visible manifestation of this broader debate because they had a direct connection to policy and law.²⁴ The culture wars first touched the NEA in 1989, in relation to visual arts. An exhibition partially funded by the NEA featured a photograph by the artist Andrés Serrano, which depicted a crucifix submerged in urine and titled *Piss Christ*. A few months later, an exhibit of works by the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, whose work often depicted homosexual and sadomasochistic images, was scheduled to appear at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C.

²⁴ The term “culture wars” entered the popular lexicon in the early 1990s as a result of James Davison Hunter, in James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars : The Struggle to Define America* (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1991). Hunter argued that cultural conflict had always defined America, but that the lines of that conflict had shifted in recent years, and revolved around “spheres of symbolic activity.” (p. 53) The political battles at the NEA were but one of these “spheres” of the culture wars, but also one of the most nationally visible manifestations of it.

The exhibit was cancelled prior to its opening, but the cancellation itself sparked national attention. The public attention these works and events received led to ongoing debates in Congress about NEA practices, from outcries in artistic circles about censorship, to debates on the role of public funding for controversial art.

While the visual arts had been the first instances of trouble for the NEA, dance would figure into these battles as well. Following the Serrano and Mapplethorpe events, the NEA, aiming to avoid controversy, started including a new requirement for grant recipients, that became known as the “obscenity clause,” and alternately the “obscenity pledge.”²⁵ In June 1990, four performance artists would have their grants revoked by the NEA Chair John Frohnmayer on the basis of this clause (these performance artists would challenge the revocation of their grants all the way the Supreme Court, becoming known as the “NEA 4”). That same year, modern dance choreographer Bella Lewitzky would reject her NEA grant and sue the NEA, refusing to sign the obscenity pledge; her case would lead to the clause being struck down in court in January of 1991. Downtown dance also entered these NEA battles as a result of Movement Research’s publication of “Gender Performance,” the third issue of its *Performance Journal* in the fall of 1991. Addressing topics of gender as it related to contemporary performance, the issue contained photographs of drag and transexual performers. Movement Research had its NEA grant recalled because one of the artworks included in the *Journal* was deemed “political action;” ultimately, the organization would settle with the NEA, but not before the publication itself was discussed on the Senate floor (and broadcast on CSPAN).²⁶

²⁵ Public Law 101-121.

²⁶ This episode between the NEA and Movement Research is discussed in chapter 1.

While at times the battles in the culture wars seemed to revolve around particular works of art, all sides acknowledged that the debate was about more than the particular art in question or even how the government spent money.²⁷ At stake was the question of who got to define American identity. The arguments for funding art one way or another seem insignificant when the amounts of money were so low regardless of the mode. But the changes that the NEA, and arts funding more broadly, underwent as a result of these battles would actually reflect different ideologies about the role of art in society, and in certain respects these ideological challenges had just as great an impact as the economic ones.

By the time the NEA restructured in 1996, the furor over “controversial” art had largely died down. In fact, the NEA was largely back to where it had been in the mid-1980s: distributing relatively small amounts of money for largely uncontroversial art programs throughout the country. Indeed, Joseph Zeigler’s *Arts in Crisis: The National Endowment of the Arts Versus America*, published in 1994 and one of the first books to analyze the NEA during the culture wars, described the NEA crisis as past.²⁸ Mark Bauerlein, NEA Director of Research, similarly characterized the timeline of the culture wars, “In 1993 the Arts Endowment’s budget was largely intact. The scars of the previous four years were civic and political, but in financial terms NEA had remained unaffected.”²⁹ NEA programming had largely escaped these battles. The

²⁷ As Helms himself put it, “We are today engaged in more than a debate about the allocation of \$170-plus million. The Federal Government spends more than that every hour. What is at stake is a matter of principle — a question as to whether we will allow the cultural high ground in this Nation to be slowly subsumed by a minority of people who are out to destroy the Judeo-Christian foundation of this Republic.” (Congressional Record, p. 29497).

²⁸ See “Introduction,” p. xvii, in Joseph Wesley Zeigler, *Arts in Crisis : The National Endowment for the Arts Versus America* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 1994).

²⁹ Mark Bauerlein, Ellen Grantham, and National Endowment for the Arts, eds., *National Endowment for the Arts: A History, 1965-2008* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), p. 111.

moment of high-profile controversies had passed, and despite some minor shifts in policies and practices, financially the NEA was in the same position it had occupied before the controversies.

Yet much had changed. The culture wars had reset the terms of the conversation on the relationship between art and government support. The NEA's years in the spotlight had prompted a national conversation that called into question the role of public funding for the arts, and the response to that conversation had hardly died down. After the 1994 elections left Republicans in control of both houses of Congress, the old attacks against the NEA were revived and used to justify a significant diminishing of the NEA.

In 1996, the agency's total budget dropped to \$99 million from \$162 million the year before. This severe budget decrease prompted a major restructuring at the NEA, and two outcomes of this restructuring directly affected dance companies in particular. The first of these was a stipulation by Congress eliminating individual fellowships, except in the Jazz Masters and Literature categories. This meant that choreographers without companies (defined as 501(c)(3) organizations) could no longer apply directly to the NEA for support. Individual fellowships had been a critical means of support for artists aiming to move toward founding a company. Many younger downtown dancers received NEA fellowships in the early 1990s, and these unrestricted fellowships — i.e., not tied to any product — were often what allowed artists to focus on creating work, and thus were crucial in developing a profile to attract the broader base of funding necessary to establish a company. But the elimination of individual fellowships also meant that even artists *with* companies had lost an important means of support: many choreographers who were awarded individual fellowships also had companies and essentially used these grants to fund their companies.

The second major result was the elimination of the seventeen discipline-specific grant programs (such dance, music, etc.), and their replacement by four thematic divisions: Heritage and Preservation, Education and Access, Creation and Presentation, and Planning and Stabilization. While this change did not itself reduce the amount of funds available to dance, it meant that dance applications were no longer being evaluated only against applicants from their field but against all applicants in one of the four new categories. Moreover, as their titles suggest, the categories themselves were now even less focused on directly producing new art: only one was explicitly devoted to funding the artistic process.

The response to this news in the dance world was gloomy. “‘Devastating’ is how several dance professionals described the impact of both funding cutbacks and policy changes,” wrote Mindy Levine in *Dance/USA*.³⁰ The combined effect on dance companies from the reduction in funds and elimination of individual fellowships was immediate and unambiguous: after 1996, fewer dance companies received NEA funding, and those that continued to received less.³¹ Following the 1996 budget cut, the total NEA grants to dance companies went from an average of \$5.5 million per year over the first half of the 1990s, to less than half of that from 1996 to 2000.³² Moreover, the relative amount of the agency’s budget that went to dance companies fell as well, from 3.5 percent in 1990 to 2.2 percent in 2000.³³

The cuts hit modern dance particularly hard. NEA funds tended to make up a much more significant amount of the overall budget of modern dance companies than ballet companies. In

³⁰ Mindy N. Levine, “Local Issues, National Trends,” *Dance/USA Journal*, Autumn 1998–Winter 1999, p. 16.

³¹ John Munger, “Dancing with Dollars in the Millennium,” *Dance Magazine*, April 2001, p.10; Smith et al., *Raising the Barre*, p. 14-15.

³² Smith et al., *Raising the Barre*, Table 6, p. 33.

³³ *Ibid.*

1988, NEA grants made up roughly 8% of the average ballet company's unearned income,³⁴ while for modern companies this figure was nearly 30%.³⁵ This figure continued to fall throughout the 1990s, and in 2000 NEA grants averaged less than 5% of a modern dance company's unearned income.³⁶ So while the NEA would have a much smaller role in supporting the arts across the board, the effect on small experimental dance companies was particularly severe. Not only had the total amount of NEA funding for dance plummeted, but choreographer-led companies were no longer the primary recipient of NEA dance funds.

Still, with respect to the broader funding picture of the dance field, and the company model in particular, the NEA battles are but one part of the total picture. From the attention that NEA and the culture wars received, one would think their influence on dance in the period was all pervasive; as the dance critic Robert Atwood wrote in 1999, "In the last decade, no single issue has been of greater concern to the dance community in America, or has been more often discussed by the members of that community, than the weakening and threatened demise of the National Endowment for the Arts."³⁷ Yet while the NEA was undoubtedly the most visible funding entity, it was never the only one. Federal funding for dance was but one part, with foundation, corporate, and local public funding all affecting the economic situation of dance. Over the period of the NEA battles, there was indeed significant turmoil in dance funding on a year-to-year basis. These overlapping narratives left the widespread impression that dance

³⁴ "Unearned Income" or "contributed income" is defined as all grants, donations, and gifts to the company, as opposed to "earned income," which would come from activities such as ticket sales and teaching classes.

³⁵ Smith et al., *Raising the Barre*, Table 8, p. 34. The significance in the disparity in these figures, already large, is actually understated, as "unearned income" tended to be a smaller portion of the overall budget for ballet companies than for modern companies.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Robert Atwood, "America's Changing Political Environment and the Defense of the NEA," *Attitude - the Dancer's Magazine*, Winter 1999, p. 4.

funding fell as a direct result of the culture wars. However, the relationship between the NEA battles and the broader story of funding turmoil in the 1990s is far more complicated. Teasing out the various forces that changed the decade's economic landscape will help illuminate how downtown dance was changing and how these changes contributed to the decline of the company model.

COMPLICATED FUNDS

Various studies of dance and arts funding over the 1990s share a similar, if surprising, conclusion: overall funding for dance was higher by the end of the decade than at its start.³⁸ Before the 1996 restructuring, NEA funding remained remarkably steadfast despite the political atmosphere. Even at the height of the culture wars, overall funding levels remained steady — in 1992, the NEA had its highest budget ever, \$172 million. Moreover, even downtown dance organizations that expressed the greatest fear of losing their NEA funding³⁹ did not actually do so during the politically volatile period of 1990-1995.⁴⁰ While a handful of high-profile recipients — most notably, the NEA 4 and Movement Research — did lose NEA funding, these appear as isolated cases rather than a broad trend. These studies suggest a narrative in direct conflict with

³⁸ Each report offers somewhat different figures, as they look at different datasets, but the consensus is clear and unambiguous that total funding for dance was higher by the decade's end. For the most comprehensive summaries, see Smith et al., *Raising the Barre*; Munger, "Dancing with Dollars in the Millennium"; and Kerry McCarthy and Michael J. Gary, "Where Does the Money Go? : Dance Funding in New York City," August 2003, 25.

³⁹ Mark Russell had commented that for P.S. 122, "the federal money went away completely in the mid-'90s. Down to zero for several years. I used to call P.S. 122 'the NEA-free zone.'" However, P.S. 122 lost its funding in 1997 and 1998, after the restructuring; its particular loss had nothing to do with culture wars battles. Beth Kurkjian, "Causing More Trouble Out There: Mark Russell on P.S. 122," *TDR/the Drama Review* 51, no. 3 (September 2007): 46–79 p. 55.

⁴⁰ There are two exceptions (with caveats). Danspace Project did not receive funding in 1990, but this was unrelated to any culture wars events (this is discussed later in the chapter). In 1992, Movement Research *did* lose its funding, as a result of its ongoing fight regarding *Performance Journal* #3, but only for that one year.

prevailing conceptions about dance funding in the period: rather than precipitous decline, dance funding appears relatively stable.

However, the situation was more complicated than the overall levels suggest. What made the funding crisis in dance particularly complex was that, while funding came from a wide range of sources, the conversation was almost entirely dominated by the political battles around the NEA and the culture wars. This focus on the ramifications of federal funding and free speech effectively overshadowed many other trends that shaped dance funding in the decade. Unlike the battles around the NEA, some of these other economic trends would have a far greater impact on the actual monies available for dance. For example, while the amount of funding was relatively steady across a span of several years, the yearly change was far more volatile, particularly in the early part of the decade. Moreover, while overall levels had some consistency, sources of funding could vary dramatically from year to year, meaning that the pathways along which funding flowed to dancers were anything but consistent.

As the face of the nation's idea of the role of art in public life, the NEA dominated public attention during the funding crisis. However, the actual amount of funds that NEA provided to dance was fairly small relative to other funding sources. Across all dance in New York City, NEA grants amounted to only 5% of all contributed income. In terms of public entities, city and state funds, totaling 27%, were far more important. Corporate funding amounted to 14%, while by far the largest contributors to dance were foundations, at 47%.⁴¹ In the overall picture of dance funding, the NEA was a relatively small part.

⁴¹ These levels are for 2000-2001, in McCarthy and Gary, "Where Does the Money Go?" They clearly indicate that state and city funding was much more significant than the NEA, as was corporate and foundation. I have not yet been able to access a source for comparable numbers for the early 1990s, though I believe that the Foundation Center Reports would have this information for corporate and foundation amounts: Loren Renz and Nathan Weber,

While each of these other systems — state, local, corporate, and foundation — operated independently of one another, all were affected when the national economy went into recession in 1990-91. State arts budgets fell dramatically in 1991, with an average decrease of 21 percent, amounting to a total decrease of nearly \$60 million nationally.⁴² In New York, the impact was twice as severe, as both the state and city provided significant support for the arts, and the budget cuts affected both. Cuts to dance started in 1990, with a mid-year cut at the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) resulting in a loss of \$350,000 to the Dance Program, which was roughly 9 percent of the Program’s FY90-91 budget.⁴³ NYSCA’s 1992 budget was reduced by nearly half, from over 50 million in 1991 to less than 33 million in 1992.⁴⁴ Similarly, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) cut its budget mid-year in 1990, resulting in a loss of \$821,000 to the DCA’s Program Development Fund, which supported a range of arts organizations.⁴⁵ Another cut in 1991 reduced the overall DCA budget by \$24 million, or 28 percent.⁴⁶ Funding from private sources for dance was even more significantly affected by the recession; according to a report by the Business Committee for the Arts, corporate funding to all arts declined, from \$50million to \$30million, but so did the portion given to dance, “Corporate funding for dance declined about 60 percent between 1988 and 1991, from approximately 8 percent to around 4 percent of the total corporate dollar amount contributed to the arts.”⁴⁷

Arts Funding: A Report on Foundation and Corporate Grantmaking Trends (New York, NY: Foundation Center in cooperation with Grantmakers in the Arts, 1993).

⁴² Anne Pierce, “Coping with State Arts Agency Cuts.” *Dance/USA Journal*, Fall 1991, p.14.

⁴³ “NYSCA Dance Program Faces 8.9 Percent Cut,” *Dance/USA Journal*, January/February 1991, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Pierce, “Coping.”

⁴⁵ Letter from Mary Schmidt Cambell, DCA Comissioner, to Terry Fox, interim director of Danspace Project, dated January 5, 1990. Box 33, folder DCA 1990.

⁴⁶ Glenn Collins, “Fiscal Woe Takes Toll on the Arts,” *The New York Times: N.Y. / Region*, July 12, 1991.

⁴⁷ These statistics from the BCA are quoted in Dick Netzer and Ellen Parker, “Dancemakers : A Study Report on Choreographers in Four American Cities.” 1993, 99 p. 73. It should be noted, however, that these figures are not consistent. Another report from 1996 summarized the conflicting data from various sources: “Data for 1991 is quite

These unpredictable budget cuts often left artists reeling. When NYSCA cut its budget mid-year in 1990, many of the artists who had been promised grant money were told they would no longer receive it, causing a scramble — often unsuccessful — for alternative funding sources to cover costs already incurred. Donna Uchizono, one artist whose grant was retracted due to budget cuts, described how she had already completed the piece she was working on, based on the expectation that the grant would be coming later, “I exhausted my financial resources before the concert. There is no way I can undo money that has already been spent.”⁴⁸ Some choreographers, unable to find alternate funding sources, even tried to delay already scheduled performances at Danspace Project in the hopes that grants would become available at a later date.⁴⁹

Looking at the NEA battles alongside the disruption in other funding sources in the 1990s reveals how political and economic circumstances came together to shape changes in dance. While the political turmoil around the NEA may not have had an immediate impact on dance funding, that turmoil colored the larger funding conversation. The changes in state, local, and private funding resulted from events largely unrelated to NEA politics,⁵⁰ but the timing of these changes meant they were experienced together. For dance artists, these distinct circumstances cumulatively told a single coherent story about dance in the 1990s: broad public conversations suggested that art was not serving the public interest, and funding for dance in particular was

contradictory; the Conference Board’s annual survey of corporate support to the arts showed corporate giving at an all-time high of 12%, while the Business Committee for the Arts noted a sharp decline among the companies it surveyed.” Nina Kressner Cobb, *Looking Ahead : Private Sector Giving to the Arts and the Humanities* (Washington, D.C: President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 1996), p. 13.

⁴⁸ Donna Uchizono, quoted in, “NYSCA Dance Program Faces 8.9 Percent Cut,” *Dance/USA Journal*, January/February 1991, p. 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ There is no evidence that New York State or City funding practices were significantly influenced by culture wars politics, though certainly much anecdotal evidence exists that corporate giving reacted to heightened political controversy, if not to the NEA battles specifically.

plunging. Clearly, dance appeared to no longer be a priority, and thus the rationale for its reduced funding seemed self-fulfilling.

This more complicated story helps explain the seeming paradox of the increase in the number of companies in the 1990s while the company model itself collapsed. When people spoke of the dance company as falling apart in the 1990s, what that really meant was this collapse of the infrastructure supporting the company model. The requirements for funding eligibility did not change, so artists still needed to have a 501(c)(3) non-profit designation in order to apply for many grants. Thus many artists continued to have dance companies in the late 1990s, but these behaved nothing like the companies of the dance boom era: a board of directors in name only, no administrative staff, no full-time dancers, and certainly no school or even a studio associated with the company. As dancers in the 1990s came to grips with a different infrastructure and the changing priorities of funders, one result was that the small experimental dance company as a model for career longevity largely came to an end.

RESHAPING THE MODEL

In 1990, Danspace Project's application for NEA funding was rejected for the first time in the organization's twelve-year history. The rejection was met with concern not only by the organization but by the downtown dance community at large. Danspace sent letters to all the artists who had performed at the space in recent years as well everyone on their current mailing list, asking them to appeal to the NEA to reverse its decision and reinstate Danspace's funding.⁵¹

⁵¹ Danspace Archives, Box 34, Folder "NEA Protest."

Dozens responded to this call. Artists, fellow administrative organizations, and community members wrote to the NEA, arguing for the major role that Danspace played in the dance community. Writers stressed the importance of Danspace as the only one of its peer organizations to focus entirely on dance; that it offered performance opportunities to experienced and neophyte choreographers alike; and that it promoted experimentation by supporting projects that had little commercial or touring value, such as a dance-music improvisation series.⁵² This was in the spring of 1990, just before rejection of the grant applications of the NEA 4 the “decency clause” debate, so the culture wars had not yet hit fever pitch and few of the letter writers saw the decision as censorship.⁵³ But many still spoke to the feeling of political disparagement the arts were beginning to experience, and particularly of the symbolic significance of the NEA continuing to support Danspace as a home for avant-garde and experimental art.

The campaign did not succeed in reinstating Danspace’s funding for that year,⁵⁴ but it did prompt a letter from the chair of the Dance Panel, Sali Ann Kriegsman, explaining the panel’s decision. Indicating how Danspace could move forward, Kriegsman emphasized the need for stronger administrative direction:

[The panel] felt, however, that the programming and vision of Danspace was unfocussed [sic], and that there was a lack of a coherent identity in the application they had before them.... The quality of the artists was viewed by [the panel] as viable; they understood that Danspace offered opportunities for developing artists. At the same time, they didn’t see strong evidence of creative leadership in programming, in audience building, or in the enhancement of presentation for the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ John Frohnmeyer, the head of the NEA at the time, would revoke the applications of Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes in June 1990; Danspace’s letter writing campaign took place mostly in April.

⁵⁴ Danspace did not end up filing a formal appeal regarding the decision, which would have been required for an official reconsideration of the decision.

artists and audiences you are serving...this year the panel felt that this beautiful space that serves its community needed some vital leadership.⁵⁵

Danspace's director, Amy Lamphere, thanked Kriegsman for the letter, noting particularly that her feedback "has helped us shape our program, and our organization in an important new way. What could have been a serious blow to the future of the Danspace Project has ended up being a source of unification and new direction for us and the community we serve."⁵⁶ The NEA seemed less concerned with the quality of artistic work Danspace presented, instead wanting "vital leadership" from the organization. The emphasis on administrative rather than artistic concerns as a central factor in receiving grants would reshape the funding landscape of downtown dance over the following decade.

CENTRALIZING THE FIELD

While Danspace underwent many changes in the 1990s, some illustrate how presenting organizations were specifically affected by the period's changing funding landscape. As the infrastructure supporting the company model steadily weakened during the 1990s, some feared that dance might entirely stop being made; of course, that did not happen. But the company model had always depended on the theaters and presenting institutions where dance was performed. As companies changed in the 1990s, so did theaters. As spaces, theaters were always important to downtown dance, while their role as centers of creation had increased with the numerous developments in granting, funding, and professionalization that occurred in the 1970s

⁵⁵ Letter from Sali Ann Kriegsman to Amy Lamphere, June 29, 1990. Danspace Archives, Box 34, Folder "NEA Protest."

⁵⁶ Letter from Amy Lamphere to Sali Ann Kriegsman, July 13, 1990. Danspace Archives, Box 34, Folder "NEA Protest."

and 1980s. In the 1990s, theaters would become even more significant as the field centralized around them.

Like most aspects of dance infrastructure, the balance of economic power between artists and theaters changed over the history of the company model. David White, writing in 1993, noted that presenting organizations used to be somewhat dependent on successful artists to get funds, as the organizations only received money from the NEA (as well as the state and regional entities they partnered with) after they brought those artists in on tour.⁵⁷ Presenters throughout the U.S. received public grants when touring artists performed for them — not before.⁵⁸ This balance seems to have been sustained until 1982, the first year the NEA distributed more money directly to presenters than to either companies or artists, with state and regional entities following suit.⁵⁹ Moreover, grant categories no longer required presenters to book artists before applying; during the 1980s, the NEA introduced the categories Grants to Dance Presenters, General Services to the Field, Dance/Film/Video (which supported the recording and documenting of performances), and Special Projects. Presenters could receive any of these grants regardless of the artists they worked with — and given that most NEA grants required at least one-to-one matching, non-federal funding sources likewise moved in this direction. While dance companies continued to

⁵⁷ “There never was a true dance marketplace, no more then than now. There was only a substantial subsidy tied to an approved list of artists, and an appetite to absorb it, strings and all, among presenting organizations who, at the time, had very little access to NEA funds, and even less at the state and regional troughs.” David R. White, “The Gravy Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore: Notes from the NPN’s Margins,” *Dance/USA Journal*, Fall 1993, p.13.

⁵⁸ This situation was a result of the NEA’s CRTP, which matched federal funds with funding from state arts agencies (and sometimes private funding as well). This “leveraging” of NEA funding meant that presenters received significant funding when they booked dance companies for tours.

⁵⁹ See Susan Leigh Foster, *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), footnote 22 on pp. 312-313 for a breakdown of NEA funds distributed to artists versus institutions from the 1960s through the 1990s.

receive the greatest share of NEA dance funds, the balance that went to presenting and other institutions, rather than directly to artists, would continue to grow during the 1980s.⁶⁰

The increasing money available to arts institutions reflected a long-running corporatization of performance spaces. In the 1970s, the spaces devoted to downtown dance — including Dance Theater Workshop (DTW), The Kitchen, Danspace Project, and PS122 — were artist-run collectives, created to explore experimental art. Far from being businesses, in most cases they were little more than rooms. In *Dances that Describe Themselves*, dance theorist Susan Foster discusses this corporatization of dance presentation, showing how several of the developments in funding practices from the 1960s through the 1980s — the same ones that privileged the creation of dance companies — helped to establish and stabilize these performance spaces.⁶¹ One of the most significant changes over this period, Foster argues, was the “transition from artist- to administrator-run spaces.”⁶² Using DTW’s David White as an example, Foster illustrates how White’s administrative leadership “gave to new dance an extraordinary level of visibility and popularity,” while also noting that “his strong directorial role in programming displaced artists from involvement with the presentation of their own work.”⁶³ The move away from artist-led performance spaces that valorized experimentation in artistic practices resulted in a model that prioritized the continued existence of the organization, “the emphasis on experimentation became institutionalized as support for the space itself and for the artist’s career. What mattered

⁶⁰ Though the bulk of NEA grant money still went to companies, rather than institutions, by the end of the decade, more would go towards presenters than directly to choreographers. In 1989, the NEA’s Grants to Dance Presenters was \$1,049,100; Choreographer’s Fellowships were \$814,000; and Dance Company Grants were \$5,535,00.

⁶¹ See Foster, *Dances That Describe Themselves*, especially pp. 119-141.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

was the promotion of artists deemed to be successful in their experimental inquiry,” rather than the act of experimentation itself.⁶⁴

This shift in the power dynamic between presenters and artists would be thorough. In 1990, the Trisha Brown Dance Company received a Challenge Grant from the NEA to “undertake long-term residencies.” The company used these funds “to become general partners with presenters in the design and execution of residencies and touring engagements.”⁶⁵ Susan Fait-Meyers and Cathy Einhorn — the company’s Executive Director and Company Manager, respectively — wrote in 1994, “Having our own financial capital allowed us to come to the bargaining table on equal terms with presenting partners.”⁶⁶ It is telling that by the 1990s this idea — that a large, critically acclaimed company could be equal partner to a presenter — was noteworthy, rather than a default assumption. Given their greater financial capacity, presenters, rather than artists or even dance companies, had become the prime directors of how dance would be shown to the public.

In the 1990s, theaters and presenting institutions would increasingly take on roles that had previously been distributed among different entities. One of these roles — that of a funder of dance — can be illustrated through the policy changes of the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation. In 1992, the Foundation began restricting applications to organizations with budgets above \$75,000 in order to limit the number of applications they received. Previously, it had accepted applications from artists with or without a company, and with no lower-limit on budget; the change was necessitated, they said, by being a small organization with a staff of just three people. To make money available for independent artists with smaller operating budgets, the

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 137.

⁶⁵ Susan Fait-Meyers and Cathy Einhorn, “The Right Mix,” *Dance/USA Journal*, Autumn 1993, p. 14.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Foundation developed a regranting program, giving large grants to presenting institutions — including PS122 and Danspace Project — which then redistributed smaller grants to the artists they presented in the Foundation’s name.⁶⁷

As one of the administrative changes instituted to address the NEA’s call for “vital leadership,” Danspace Project used this funding from the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation to establish its new Commissioning Initiative. Prior to this, Danspace presented performances under two categories: “Danspace Presents” and “Events.” Events were essentially rentals, where the artist/company would pay \$1000 for a three-night run at Danspace, and then the artist and Danspace would do a 50/50 split of the box office returns. Danspace Presents artists, however, would not have to rent the theater and received a guaranteed minimum of \$1000, or 50% of the box office, whichever was greater.⁶⁸ With the development of the Commissioning Initiative, a further category was added: artists “commissioned” by Danspace would receive \$1500 upfront (the amount rose to \$2000 the following year), in addition to half the box office.⁶⁹ When the NEA eliminated its Individual Choreographer Fellowships in 1996, Danspace expanded the Commissioning Initiative, justifying this expansion as explicitly addressing a need to support individual artists.⁷⁰ In its initial year (1993-1994), the Initiative distributed \$15,000 to eight

⁶⁷ The choreographer Donna Uchizono discusses her role in facilitating the start of this program in Laurel George, “Artists Incorporating: Business Savvy Meets Creative Experimentation,” in *Corporate Futures: The Diffusion of the Culturally Sensitive Corporate Form*, ed. George E. Marcus, 1 edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998), 311–35 p. 316.

⁶⁸ Performances in the early 1990s frequently cleared more than \$2000 for the weekend, often leaving the artist with a fee slightly higher than the guaranteed \$1000 minimum.

⁶⁹ Some artists received only \$1000 in the initial year, and these were for shorter-run performances, but the most common was \$1500. In following years, artists received between \$1000-\$2000, with \$2000 being the most common, with the smaller amounts going towards smaller productions.

⁷⁰ Danspace’s NEA Final Report for the 1996-1997 grant articulated, “The total commissioning pool of \$42,500 was a significant increase over 1995-1996 and, with the loss of NEA Choreographers Fellowships and the general trend away from the support of individual artists, such funding is ever more critical to the creation of new work.” (Box 36, folder 1994-1997 NEA Presenting).

artists;⁷¹ by 1996-1997, the funds and number of artists commissioned had nearly tripled, to \$42,500 split among 23 artists.⁷²

Thus, while the NEA was turning away from unrestricted artist fellowships, the money available to downtown artists was growing in other areas; as some NEA critics had predicted, the loss of federal funding led other sources to step in and fill the gaps. However, these new sources of money did not go to the same kinds of dance that government funding had. John Munger, the data analyst of Dance/USA's annual economic reports, summarized the trends in funding practices of the 1990s by noting that "large companies, both ballet and modern, have had success and more than success" in finding private support to make up for the loss in government funding.⁷³ The same was not true for smaller companies, which on the whole were not able to replace lost government funding. Moreover, for the large companies, the biggest growth in individual support was from "a limited number of sources...only a few more people gave donations, but the donations were much, much larger."⁷⁴ Munger went on to observe the "ironies" of the resultant shifts in funding practices:

The right-wing attack on the arts accused artists of "elitism." This argument was offered as one reason for getting government out of supporting the arts. What we see as a result is that, yes, individual people began stepping forward to make up — and more than make up — the lost revenue. But the biggest, most visible, most institutionalized companies benefited the most and the money came increasingly

⁷¹ Danspace Project Operating Budget 1993-1994, Dated November 1994. Box 18, Folder Year-End Danspace 93-94.

⁷² The 1996-1997 budget reported \$57,000 in artist commissions, however, this included a "special grant of \$15,000 toward a special U.S./French collaboration." (Box 21, Audit Folder?) Hence, Danspace's funds for its own commissions were \$42,000. The 1997-1998 budget for commissions was the same, though the year-end budget reports only distributing \$38,000 of it. (Box 22, Folder 4th 1/4 Budget Status Report FY98.)

⁷³ Munger, "Dancing with Dollars in the Millennium." p. 12. Munger noted that Large Modern companies (those with operating budgets greater than \$860,000) "lost an average of \$103,200 per company in government funding since 1991, but has seen an increase of \$1,310,600 in private support."

⁷⁴ Munger, "Dancing with Dollars in the Millennium." p. 12.

from committed dance enthusiasts who could afford big donations, rather than from a broadening grass-roots constituency.⁷⁵

Although serving downtown dance and thus almost exclusively the “small” end of companies, Danspace Project followed a trajectory that was much closer to the “Large” companies Munger describes, using its size to attract greater funds over the decade. Even well before the restructuring in 1996, NEA funding was a relatively small part of Danspace’s budget. In the mid-1980s, Danspace consistently received about \$10,000 a year from NEA, which on average accounted for around 10% of the institution’s total budget. The loss of funding in 1990 was thus significant, but not unmanageable. But in the 1990s, while NEA grants remained fairly steady at \$7000-\$10,000 annually, Danspace’s operating budget ballooned from roughly \$110,000 in 1990 to over \$560,000 in 1997.⁷⁶ Essentially, Danspace had worked to diversify its funding sources. In addition to major increases in state, local, and foundation support, increases in individual contributions more than made up for the relatively small decline in NEA funding: Danspace’s individual contributions grew from roughly \$18,000 in 1990 to over \$77,000 in 1997.

As Danspace expanded its presenting and commissioning activities and saw its budget grow dramatically, it illustrated the paradox of dance funding in the 1990s. Funding available to dancers seemed to be disappearing, but on paper, overall levels of dance funding remained even. The crucial distinction lies in what entities the money went to: institutions like Danspace were not companies. Relative to the major uptown ballet institutions, Danspace (and its downtown peers) was quite tiny. Yet however small and financially fragile it remained, by the 1990s Danspace had become a large, stable organization relative to the artists it presented. As

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ 1990 budget taken from NEA application; 1997 number taken from FY98 budget status report.

downtown artists struggled in the changing funding environment, a small number of presenting institutions and service organizations experienced exponential budgetary growth and a corresponding expansion of their programs. So while many long-running companies closed in the 1990s (even as others continued to spring up), funding for dance as a whole did not decline, but actually increased. In other words, as funding for *companies* declined, funding for *presenting institutions* rose dramatically. With funding becoming more centralized, the collapse of the company model in the 1990s had its mirror image in the increasing stability and budgetary expansion of performance spaces.

CREATIVE PROJECTS

*“My question is, how can all of this evolve? And what’s going to come out of it? You know, will I be able to maintain a dance company in the future? Given that there are other possibilities, is that what I want?”*⁷⁷

In 1992, three years before Ralph Lemon closed his company, he mused on the possibility of working in some other way. He was concerned about practical aspects of maintaining a company but implied there might be options that were *artistically* preferable to it. He was hardly alone in this; in addition to the administrative burdens, many choreographers felt restricted by the creative demands of running a company. Molissa Fenley, who disbanded her company in 1987, described the sense of always needing to do something with it just because it was there, “The whole situation — walking into the studio every day and seeing dancers, and being, you know, under a two-hour, three-hour time frame for rehearsal. And this whole feeling of well, if you didn’t have anything new to create, you know, just rehearse what you have. This sort of anxiety and extreme

⁷⁷ Ralph Lemon, *Choreography and Company*, Movement Research Studies Project, 1992.

compulsion to keep something afloat.”⁷⁸ According to Fenley, she did not want to be tied to “this hysteria of ‘make work make work.’”

Independent of the era’s economic turmoil, downtown dancers were seeking alternatives to the artistic limitations imposed by the company. Some of these limitations stemmed from the administrative burdens of running a company. During the dance boom, forming a company was a step to greater funding opportunities and thus a way to expand artistic options. However, maintaining a company became an experience of feeding the beast. David Gordon, a postmodern choreographer and member of the Judson Dance Theater, reflected on his own long career, “As an artist, I have been led down the garden path by federal and funding agencies toward institutionalization, and given to believe that all the components of an institution were key to doing my work.... In fact, they’ve been detrimental, and difficult to maintain in the long run.”⁷⁹ And perhaps the best-known instance of this dissatisfaction with the company model was Twyla Tharp, who in the late 1980s noted of her company, “We were a tradition in the dance world. Twenty-three years of successful management, an unparalleled record of sixteen dancers on year-round employment.”⁸⁰ Nevertheless, she closed her company in 1988 in response to what she described as a “Sisyphean treadmill,” the continuing need to find new funding sources to maintain that company.⁸¹

The administrative headaches of running a company were among the most common themes of artists describing the state of dancemaking in the early 1990s. While many companies did have at least part-time administrators, except for the handful of modern dance companies that

⁷⁸ Molissa Fenley, *Choreography and Company*.

⁷⁹ David Gordon, quoted in Dianne Brace, “Dance Overview Panel Meets in Washington,” *Dance/USA Journal* 8, no. 6 (June 1991): 14–15.

⁸⁰ Twyla Tharp, *Push Comes to Shove* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992) p. 312.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

could afford full-time administrative staff, the choreographer generally performed a great deal of administrative work, from writing grant applications to scheduling rehearsals and sending out press releases. The burden of administrative labor in the daily workload often led choreographers to feel as if they were spending more time in the office than in the studio making dances; a 1993 NEA research report characterized the early 1990s choreographer thus: “Today’s choreographer, the synergistic sum of her/his myriad roles, is best described, as one survey respondent explained, as: ‘A dance maker, director, dancer, teacher, business manager, press agent, grant writer, fund raiser, psychiatrist, secretary and a...quick study in anything else that has to get done!’”⁸² As Susan Foster succinctly characterized it, “The choreographer had become a manager of a career and of projects, a person engaged in artistic and wealth management,” rather than primarily a creator of movement.⁸³

In addition to the vast amount of non-creative labor involved in maintaining a company, the “tradition” of the company also carried aesthetic ideas about what dance was. By training a company of dancers, a choreographer developed a unique approach to movement as well as a repertory of dances that embodied that approach. Of course, these and other aspects of the company-centered approach to dance had been challenged well before the 1990s. The Judson Dance Theater, whose members often experimented with approaches to choreography that did not emphasize a particular kind of technical training, eliminated in their works the need for a cohesive group with a specific skillset. And improvisatory performance had always pushed against the company structure. The Grand Union (many of whom were Judson alums), although a specific group, was an improvisational collective; since there was no repertory that needed to

⁸² Netzer and Parker, “Dancemakers.” p. 77.

⁸³ Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy : Kinesthesia in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2011) p. 69.

be learned and repeated, there was no need for a “company” approach. But as long as funding practices privileged the formation of a company, the artistic practices associated with it were likewise privileged.

But the work that choreographers were producing by the early 1990s began to draw funders’ notice. NEA recognized early in the decade that choreographers were working in ways the company did not support. At a meeting of the NEA’s Dance Overview Panel on March 27-28, 1991, “panelists proposed redefining the dance company and choreographer fellowships categories and their funding levels, offering artists the opportunity to work on a project-by-project basis by applying for support in the context that best suits them: as an individual within a company, or within an organization.”⁸⁴ What the “project-by-project basis” meant was not necessarily defined or clear at that point, but it acknowledged that the ongoing maintenance of the company did not fit with what some artists were doing.

Both the administrative frustrations and the artistic limitations of the company model encouraged artists who had companies to discard them, and those who never had them to avoid starting them. While the funding infrastructure of dance changed drastically in the early 1990s, making the company model economically impossible for most, the impetus for changing the company model did not solely originate with funders; artists themselves initiated some of these funding changes as well. Artists, challenged by the artistic limitations of working in a company model, were looking for something else.

In *Dance/USA Journal* in 1992, the writer and former presenter Jordan Levin observed that many dance artists were taking alternative approaches to sustaining a creative practice in light of

⁸⁴ Brace, “Dance Overview Panel Meets in Washington.”

the harsh economic climate. However, she cautioned against viewing that adaptive approach as merely a response to economic difficulties, “It would be a mistake to attribute the flowering of alternative organizational structures for artists to the difficulties currently facing the field. That starving artists make better art is a myth we can all do without. We might say, for some artists, difficult economic times have liberated them from an organizational structure that did not meet their artistic needs, and freed them to build alternative sources of income and artistic inspiration.”⁸⁵ Levin, like many of the artists and organizations she discussed — ranging from Urban Bush Women’s Community Engagement Project to Elizabeth Streb’s intentional pivot to commercial work and The Field’s malleable choreographic labs — viewed the company model as one possibility among many.

Like the company, the project is best understood as a dual artistic-economic entity: a model encompassing many interconnected parts, rather than a self-contained artistic approach. Working project by project was not a new development of the 1990s, but the amalgamation of forces that would make it a system arose to a sufficient degree only as the company model dissolved. Some of the economic aspects of the project model have been noted: the centralization of grantmaking around institutions, particularly presenting organizations, reshaped how funding was distributed to artists. The aesthetic part of this model, though, is just as important to consider. As already mentioned, while many companies closed in the 1990s, more continued to be founded throughout the decade; even many downtown artists formed official 501(c)3 companies late in

⁸⁵ Jordan Levin, “Trying New Steps: Alternative Organizational Structures for Dance Companies,” *Dance/USA Journal*, Fall 1992, p. 28.

the 1990s and after.⁸⁶ But the presence or absence of non-profit status does not necessarily imply a company *model*. A better indicator would be the choreographer's aesthetic tendencies.

One such indicator was the prevalence of “full-evening” performances — single works that made up the entirety of a program — that became increasingly common over the 1990s. While this trend could partly be attributed to the way funding was starting to work — specifically, with theaters rather than granting bodies commissioning new works — it was also motivated by shifting aesthetic priorities among downtown choreographers. Choreographer Donna Uchizono, who presented her first full-evening work in 1990, wrote of her own tendency toward longer works as “generated by my desire to investigate a concept over a longer time-arc.”⁸⁷ Jennifer Monson moved towards creating full-evening performances “in order to have complete influence over the aesthetic of the evening and...to make something that had a completeness.”⁸⁸ Producing a full-evening work was not only about the length of the work or even necessarily about it being the only thing on a program; works that premiered as full-evening might, later, be paired with a second shorter work or excerpted to be performed in a shared bill. The shift was about the work's relationship to the concept being explored: a full-evening project had, as Monson put it, a “completeness” to it.

Another way this sense of completeness could be manifested was taking control of the environment of the theater. Yvonne Meier's *The Shining*, first mounted at P.S. 122 in 1992, was a dance for eight performers and limited to only ten audience members. A work that dealt “with

⁸⁶ All of the following well-known choreographers formed their non-profits in 1998 or later: Tere O'Connor (2002), Donna Uchizono (2001), John Jasperse (1998), Reggie Wilson (2004), Dean Moss (2002), Jennifer Monson (2005).

⁸⁷ Donna Uchizono, “Hybrid Bastards” (M.F.A., Long Island University, The Brooklyn Center, 2008) p. 18.

⁸⁸ Jennifer Monson, quoted in Uchizono, “Hybrid Bastards.” p. 18.

the world of fearful anxiety and thrill,”⁸⁹ *The Shining* immersed the audience in a set of 350 giant cardboard boxes, unlit save for handheld flashlights, while the performers alternately guided and accosted audience members. Sometimes the performers would hide behind boxes, then jump out and scare the audience; at other times they performed what Jennifer Dunning described as “knockabout tussles, some of them acrobatic contact improvisations and others mildly sadomasochistic.”⁹⁰ Creating such a performance naturally involved a complete reimagining of the theater itself. Meier wrote of the significance of altering the space and immersing the audience within it:

Completely filling the room with objects changes the sense of space. Through a tiny entrance the audience slips into a “subterranean city.” Flashlights in the hands of the performers provide the only source of light. As a result, the audience is, at times, literally left in the dark, disoriented. Using their hands to guide them, the spectators begin to find their way through tight tunnels, knowing neither where they are going nor what is going on. Instead of a purely visual experience the performance turns into a kinesthetic one.⁹¹

Despite the work receiving high praise in year-end reviews⁹² and a Bessie award in 1993, the specificity of the work — particularly the immersive set and the limited number of audience members — prevented the work from touring. It was remounted once more, in 1993 at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center,⁹³ and not again until 2011.⁹⁴

While certainly not every project would entail such radical rethinking of the performance space, it would become an increasingly prominent element for downtown dance over the next

⁸⁹ Elena Alexander et al., *Footnotes : Six Choreographers Inscribe the Page* (Routledge, 2013) p. 129.

⁹⁰ Jennifer Dunning, “Dance in Review,” *The New York Times: Arts*, November 9, 1992.

⁹¹ Yvonne Meier, “The Shining” in Alexander et al., *Footnotes*, p. 130.

⁹² Jennifer Dunning, “A Year of Schubert for Snoozing and Saxophones for Sighing,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1992.

⁹³ Now MoMA P.S. 1.

⁹⁴ At New York Live Arts (formerly Dance Theater Workshop). Meier said that for the eight-night run of the show in 2011, the boxes alone cost nearly \$10,000.

decade. In 2003, *New York Times* critic Gia Kourlas reflected on several dances of the previous season that pushed against the structure of the theatrical stage:

Consider some of the captivating dances presented outside of Dance Theater Workshop over the past months. They were all quite different, except that few were presented on black-box stages; if they were, the choreographers remade the spaces into something surreal and wonderfully unrecognizable.

Most choreographers, for example, turn St. Mark's Church in the East Village (home of the Danspace Project) into a proscenium stage, placing the audience in front of the altar. But in *Dressed for Floating*, DD Dorvillier shrank the performance space to an intimate and intense square. In neat symmetry, audience members surrounded the four performers along four edges. In *Shuffle*, Yasuko Yokoshi converted the small theater at P.S. 122, another East Village space, into an otherworldly shipwreck. Sarah Michelson, in her remarkable two-part *Shadowmann*, dramatically flipped the Kitchen in Chelsea around, so that the audience faced the street. Noemie Lafrance's *Descent* took place in a 12-story stairwell of the Clock Tower building in Lower Manhattan.⁹⁵

Kourlas' recounting of these works demonstrates the prevalence with which choreographers were reconfiguring the spaces of performance to fit the kind of performance they imagined. That this shift was tied to a project mentality was clear, as Kourlas also observed, "Aside from their innovation, such reconfigurations are brave. Touring is the only way choreographers make money, and it also factors into who is eligible for grants. But try taking any of these pieces on the road."⁹⁶

The economic limitations imposed on the project approach reflected the struggles dancers faced in the new political and social atmosphere. However, projects also reflected a development in artistic perspective, with many emphasizing a sense of uniqueness. In a 1999 article published in *Dance/USA*, the arts administrators Nello McDaniel and George Thorn discussed "non-

⁹⁵ Gia Kourlas, "Where Dance Is Moving: Off the Stage," *The New York Times*, July 27, 2003.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

institutional arts entities,” analyzing some of their unique approaches.⁹⁷ Though the authors betray a rather rosy corporate perspective on the flexibility that projects afford — they imagine that, with projects, “artists make the work in a style, space, and way they want, rather than investing energies running a small undercapitalized business,” implying that resources are simply available for the taking, in sharp contrast to the described experience of every artist in the period — they nevertheless identify many artistic benefits to a project approach.⁹⁸ In describing the “project entity,” McDaniel and Thorn write:

Artists working in a project entity format do not think in terms of performance seasons as much as topic-specific, time-specific, site-specific, sometime audience-specific events. There is no general subscription audience for this type of work. But there *are* various groups of people who may want to attend a performance or engage in a performance activity depending on the work, its relationship to their interests, and its location.⁹⁹

While many of the economic factors that contributed to the project model had corporate origins and offered little in the way of long-term stability, this does not negate that many (though certainly not all) dancers embraced the project approach for the artistic possibilities it offered. A project approach implied that change, rather than consistent reproduction, was the hallmark of artistic practice. It recentered the idea that the choreographer’s main job was to make dances, to create new work, rather than run a company whose purpose was, at least partly, to maintain older work. And one theme of the project approach stands out in McDaniel and Thorn’s description: specificity.

There is a trend towards specificity in the works of this period as the company structure receded: an awareness of the political moment of the work, the space of the performance, and the

⁹⁷ Nello McDaniel and George Thorn, “An Arts Paradox: The Arts Community Branches Out,” *Dance/USA Journal* 16, no. 4 (Spring 1999), p. 14.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

audience. As projects, works were often not entering a repertory; choreographers were not necessarily thinking about creating works bound by their specific moment, but the nature of the production made them that. The project structure, in which a work would be performed for one weekend in New York — and if lucky, toured to a few theaters over the following year — pushed artists to imagine the audience of their work more clearly. Such imagining of the audience is explicitly on display in Neil Greenberg’s *Part Three* (1998), the third in a trilogy of dances he made about AIDS. In the first work, *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* (1994),¹⁰⁰ Greenberg revealed his status as HIV+, and “implicitly asked the audience to imagine [him] dying of AIDS.”¹⁰¹ Four years later, now on anti-retrovirals, Greenberg had a very different perspective on his mortality and felt compelled to inform his audience of this as well, “I feel I have to tell the audience. If I’ve asked an audience to get involved with me, I have a responsibility not to just leave them dangling.”¹⁰² This kind of relationship with an audience, spanning multiple pieces and several years, suggests a very different idea about what the work is doing for its audience.

AFTER THE COMPANY

The move from the company to the project model was anything but clear-cut, and the conflation of outside economic circumstances and internal artistic influences is part of the difficulty in discussing the collapse of the company in the 1990s. There *were* funding issues, and there *were* limitations on what dancers could do in ways that had not existed before. But at the same time, dancers were creating new ways of working generated by social, political, and aesthetic impulses. And in the same way that the modern dance company of the late-1980s was a

¹⁰⁰ *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* is discussed in Chapter 2.

¹⁰¹ Ann Daly, “A Chronicle Faces Death and Celebrates Life,” *The New York Times: Arts*, March 29, 1998.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

decades-long development that only appeared to be a longstanding tradition, the “project model” did not fully take shape until after the 1990s. Only in the first two decades of the twenty-first century would the project model become the primary mode through which artists develop a career, visible in their artistic and aesthetic choices, and in the business of how their work gets made.

JUST TWO DANCERS

This shift is clearly on display in a 2003 work by John Jasperse. In most ways, Jasperse had a functional company during the late 1990s: he worked in each of his pieces with the same three dancers — Miguel Gutierrez, Rebecca Hilton, and Parker Lutz — and his works toured nationally.¹⁰³ In 2001, he made his last work for this company of dancers he had been working with consistently for six years. In response to a commission for the opening season of the newly renovated Dance Theater Workshop, Jasperse created a piece that illustrates many of the convergent themes of the project model.

just two dancers, begins in the lobby of Dance Theater Workshop. Here, before the show, two videos, each on a loop about four minutes long, played on separate monitors as the audience gathered before the performance. In the video, Jasperse and fellow performer Juliette Mapp are seen in various locations around the new building, their dialog unscripted, and their conversation wanders with a lightness that suggests the audience need not take it too seriously. But under the playful dialog, the videos set up a serious interrogation of space and structure. The production value of the videos is low, shot on a home-video camera, with no set or lighting, and minimal apparent editing. In one exchange, the two discuss the production of a fictional film:

¹⁰³ While Jasperse’s company, under the name Thin Man Dance, didn’t officially incorporate as a non-profit until 1998, it operated artistically as such for years before that, since at least 1995.

Mapp: It was really weird because he had already picked out all his actors and actresses to be in it, and he had even come up with a whole set idea, and a location, but when it came time to film, he had no plot, he had no characters, he had no idea what to do with the set. So he made a movie about not knowing what to do with all the actors and actresses, not knowing what to do with the set, not knowing what to do about a plot! The plot became about not having a plot.

[...]

Jasperse: But, you know, I could understand that at least for a while they would be invested in the fantasy of it happening. Especially if there's this elaborate set, there's this amazing set that makes you really feel like something must be going to happen because why else would they be spending so much money!?

Hinting at being stuck with a structure lacking an actual concept, one might imagine this exchange might be ironically referring to the dance about to be performed, perhaps a *mea culpa* that explains how the piece came about. But the “fantastic set” was likely referring less to the performance and more to the physical structure it was about to be performed in. While DTW had long been an important institution and supporter of experimental dance, many expressed critiques of the renovation, most revolving around the large expenditure — close to \$14 million for an institution that operated on a roughly \$3 million annual budget — that resulted in an unimaginative and inflexible space, and more specifically, one that did not serve the work its community was making. Jasperse himself shared this reaction upon first seeing the newly designed space, “They have a poured concrete seating unit with theater seats that are bolted into the poured concrete.... Here's this space that's supposed to be for the future and I'm not even convinced that it's addressing the present.”¹⁰⁴

After viewing the pre-show videos in the lobby, the audience entered the theater, and each person was handed a small mirror as they walk in. Distributed throughout the raked seating of

¹⁰⁴ John Jasperse, “John Jasperse,” in *Speaking of Dance : Twelve Contemporary Choreographers on Their Craft*, 187–204. ed Joyce Morgenroth, New York: Routledge (2004). p. 195.

the theater were fourteen white platforms, installed on top of the theater seats — house right and left had four platforms each, and the center section an additional six. When the performance began, Mapp and Jasperse entered from the wings of the stage, and immediately ascended to the platforms. For most of the roughly hourlong performance, the two dancers moved among the various platforms, performing structured improvised duets, sometimes on shared or neighboring platforms, sometimes on completely opposite sides of the theater. Most of the audience could only rarely see both dancers at the same time, and sometimes — if the performers were on platforms in the rear of the house — they could see neither. Audience members were forced to adapt either by twisting their bodies or by making use of the provided hand mirror, often by a combination of both. Over the course of the performance, Jasperse and Mapp used the stage only twice.

just two dancers was both an aesthetic experiment and an institutional critique, and represented an important turning point in Jasperse's work. The work fundamentally reconstructed the theatrical space, both in terms of physical architecture, and in terms of the affective experience of viewing. Jasperse further described his motivation in *just two dancers*:

[DTW's] renovation started a long process of thinking about physical architecture in relationship to mental and social architecture. I started thinking about design as a manner of focusing attention. And I really started for the first time to think critically about the design of theaters in a much deeper way — how there was a presumed important space of the stage where any stimuli from other areas (someone opening a candy wrapper, coughing, getting something out of their bag, etc.) was an impingement on the sensory information coming from the stage. The parallels with media which focuses our attention seemed obvious, especially given the time which was at the beginning of the second war in Iraq and the war in Afghanistan. So it seemed interesting to try and make a show for a theater where the seats were bolted into concrete facing a stage that was prepared to receive your focus where very little actually happened. That you would be facing

a void that only twice gets activated in an hour and that you would have to twist yourself away from that void to have an experience.¹⁰⁵

Following *just two dancers*, Jasperse would return to making works for groups of dancers, and many characteristics of his work from the 1990s — his distinct movement style, formal rigor, the extensive use of design elements — reappeared in his work. Yet important elements of a project approach started to become more prominent, including political directness, manipulation of the theatrical space, and a more explicit relationship between artist and institution.

Dance practice in the 1990s shifted toward emphasizing process, and in some important ways, projects supported this. Though project-model funding came less and less in the form of general operating support or unrestricted fellowships based on an artist's body of work, the field adapted project-specific funding practices to create room for process, as exemplified by Danspace's expansion of its commissioning initiative in 1996. These commissions were technically funding a specific performance: a product. But in practice a commission came well before the product was delivered — effectively funding the process, regardless of the success of the resulting work.

The rise of institutions has also offered a stable connection to the community's history. Even before the company crash of the 1990s, most dance companies had a short lifespan.¹⁰⁶ When they close down, institutional memory disappears. Danspace Project, DTW, Movement Research, P.S.

¹⁰⁵ John Jasperse, "Talk About Design," E-mail to Buck Wanner, December 5, 2014.

¹⁰⁶ Sussman's analysis shows that the average modern dance company lasted less than five years. Sussmann, "Anatomy of the Dance Company Boom, 1958-1980," p. 25. This was as of 1980, so the figure could have been somewhat different in the 1990s. However, based on similar (though less comprehensive) surveys in *Dance/USA* throughout the decade, and birth-termination data in Smith (2003) (pp. 23-25), it is unlikely to have been dramatically different.

122, and The Kitchen have all survived longer than the vast majority of dance companies, and with that survival comes a historical memory that, despite its corporate implications, links downtown dance to its past. During the 1990s, institutions began effectively replacing the company as centers of artistic community and memory.¹⁰⁷ These theaters-turned-producing organizations, despite acquiring a greater role in distributing funding, were viewed as a part of the downtown community in ways that funding agencies such as the NEA or the various foundations that gave regular support to dance never were. Though the power imbalance between theaters and artists was undeniable, Jasperse's explicit critique of DTW in *just two dancers* suggests that at least some artists felt a degree of freedom to critique the very theaters that commissioned them. These spaces were viewed as common property of the field, not just an entity higher up the food chain.

Downtown dance in the 1990s required many to sacrifice their artistic goals. These sacrifices could not be avoided, and they were painful: much was lost in this decade. However, through the many sacrifices, the downtown dance field mined the conditions of its production to excavate new possibilities for artistry. Dancers did not merely despair at the situation they found themselves in; they elevated the sacrifices they were often forced to make into virtues they elected to investigate. And what they found in their investigations opened a new system in dancemaking: a focus on how the choreographer developed a practice and created an identity through making work, rather than through codifying an aesthetic. Making — a practice, an activity — rather than a company identity became one of the key markers of artistic value.

¹⁰⁷ The role of these spaces as bearers of memory is also being recognized in the acquisition of their institutional files by performance archives, such as the NYPL's Dance Collection (Danspace Project, Movement Research, DTW, PS122), and the Getty Research Institute (The Kitchen).

Chapter 4 —

From One to Many: Creativity and Dancing

At a 1992 Movement Research Studies Project titled “Choreography and Company,” Kevin Schroeder, a longtime downtown dancer, spoke about his reasons for no longer wanting to dance for a company:

I'll be very blunt, and say that in my view, the traditional model of the company does not work, from the dancer's point of view, if you're talking about developing artistically.... The classical model, is that you join a dance company, and essentially for a dancer, that comprises the majority of your career.... Now, if you're going to commit that amount of time to one choreographer, that assumes that your artistic concerns and their artistic concerns are going to run a parallel path. Come on! You know, ten years, nine years? For some people, it does happen. But I think that's by far the minority."¹

Schroeder was a very successful dancer, having performed over the previous ten years in the companies of Stephen Petronio, Merce Cunningham, and Lar Lubovitch. His was not a story of being unable to find a job; he left each company of his own volition and was still a highly sought-after performer. At the time of this panel, however, he was only dancing freelance with choreographers of his choosing. Schroeder was confirming what many were starting to recognize — that the company model was no longer viable. However, what concerned Schroeder was not the economic viability of the company model, but the artistic life of the *dancer* in a traditional choreographer-centered company.

Belonging to a company determined a great deal of a dancer's artistic practice. Given the repertory nature of most dance companies, works continued to be performed even when the dancers who performed them changed; this determined not only the style of choreography that

¹ *Choreography and Company*, Movement Research Studies Project, 1992

the dancers would perform, but also how they trained, and even how success was defined. Dancers could be identified as belonging to or having worked with a certain company based on their movement styles. Dancers absorbed the style of what they performed and became certain “types” of dancers: a Cunningham-dancer, a Tharp-dancer, a Trisha Brown-dancer. Certain dancers could be noted as important because they originated a role or because of what they brought to a preexisting one. But the work was the reference point, the mark of what was achieved, missed, surpassed, or simply altered. What the dancer achieved was always in relation to the work, which always remained the primary focus.

The dissolution of the company model in the 1990s dramatically reshaped how choreographers went about making dance; it also reshaped what a career trajectory looked like for dancers. And while the infrastructure of the company model determined a great deal of how dance worked, the economic and professional structures of dance were not only what concerned dancers. As Schroeder indicated when discussing his dissatisfaction with the company model, dancers qua dancers had their own artistic concerns. As the company infrastructure dissolved in the 1990s and choreographers experimented with new aesthetic approaches outside that model, dancers were likewise reshaping the contours of their artistic practice.

DANCING FREELANCE

For some, the company and project infrastructures could create complications. While a dancer in a company had some economic stability, many would continue to work on projects with other choreographers, out of both economic necessity and interest. Working as a self-described “independent choreographer” in 1992, Donna Uchizono described one of the limitations the project model imposed on her relationship with dancers, “As an independent choreographer, I’m not able to tour, because the dancers I work with are also working with other

people, and with companies even. And I knew going into a situation, especially if I was using a dancer from a company, the company had total priority over me. If there was some scheduling conflict, they're gone, and I accepted that and understood that.”²

Indeed, it was not unusual for dancers to have ongoing creative relationships with multiple choreographers. Yet aside from the economic factors that required dancers to have multiple jobs, this dynamic produced a fundamentally different relationship between dancer and choreographer in the rehearsal process. DD Dorvillier, who danced with the choreographer Jennifer Monson in the late 1980s and early 1990s before turning to choreography herself, understood her association with Monson as a largely collaborative endeavor. In an interview from 2014, Dorvillier reflected, “I say ‘I danced in Jennifer’s work,’ but that *was* my creative work.... It wasn’t Jennifer being like ‘And now you jump like this and like this.’ It was a lot of building together, whatever the power structures were.”³ Though acknowledging they had different roles in the creative process — that there was still a distinction between dancer and choreographer — Dorvillier nevertheless articulates her role as performer as an explicitly creative one and expresses a clear sense of ownership over both the process and the outcome of the work.

What Dorvillier described as a sense of creative participation, even ownership, in the process would come to shape how dancers perceived their role in dancemaking. Dancers in the 1990s would increasingly see themselves as creative artists who could pursue their own artistic trajectories, not simply tools, instruments, or vessels for the explorations of choreographers. Veronica Dittman, a freelance dancer in New York in the 1990s, echoed this sentiment in reflecting on how her attitude toward freelance dancing changed over the years:

² Donna Uchizono, *Choreography and Company*.

³ Clare Croft, “In Conversation with DD Dorvillier and Jennifer Monson,” in *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings*, ed. Clare Croft, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

The rehearsals that I used to see in terms of their unprofessionalism — the lack of pay, the lack of ongoing commitment, the exploratory nature of the process — now have spoiled me for more “professional” situations in that I’ve come to expect a certain egalitarianism in rehearsal. I’ve become so used to rehearsals in which I am valued for my particular Veronica-ness that it’s become difficult to work for choreographers who I perceive to be dictating my role too narrowly rather than engaging me in a dialogue.⁴

Dittman’s description points to how the change in material circumstances that accompanied the breakdown of the company model — “the lack of pay, the lack of ongoing commitment, the exploratory nature of the process” in freelance projects — indirectly facilitated a different dynamic in rehearsals, and different expectations both for and on the part of dancers. And despite the economic drawbacks and general instability that defined freelancing, many dancers ultimately found this relationship more artistically satisfying.

This shift was more than a changing dynamic between individual choreographers and dancers in the studio, but reflected a general reconception of what it meant to be a dancer — specifically a dancer as performer, rather than choreographer — in the 1990s. Part of what facilitated this new relationship and the general reconception had to do with how dancers were training in this era. The company model shaped not just to how dancers moved through the professional world, but how they moved on a bodily level: that is, their technique. While the company model was struggling for economic reasons and choreographers were exploring alternative aesthetic possibilities, dancers were developing their craft in ways that rubbed against the traditional modes of training that had supported the company approach.

One particular way technique would change in the 1990s had to do with where ownership of it lay. In a pair of letters to Movement Research published in the Fall/Winter 1998/1999 issue of

⁴ Veronica Dittman, “A New York Dancer,” in *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*, ed. Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettle-Fiol (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 26.

the *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Susan Klein and Barbara Mahler — the teachers and developers of the movement education practice known as Klein Technique — wrote to complain about a t-shirt. In celebration of its 20th anniversary that year, Movement Research had released a commemorative shirt with various images and expressions, including the phrase “sitz bones to heels.” This phrase, referring to a mental connection dancers sought to achieve between certain bony structures of their hips and feet, was such a common expression in the dance classes Movement Research offered that it had become essentially identifiable with the organization itself. Klein and Mahler, however, wanted to clarify that this phrase, though having worked its way throughout Movement Research’s classes, was in fact a specific component of Klein Technique, and asserted that the organization should have credited it as such on their t-shirt. Movement Research’s Executive Director, Catherine Levine, responded by acknowledging “the significant contribution Susan Klein through her teachings has made to the dance community and especially to those who teach and study at Movement Research.”⁵ With that, the matter was seemingly brought to a close.

However, in the following issue of the *Performance Journal*, a letter from the board of the Laban/Bartenieff Institute responded to Klein and Mahler’s claims of ownership of the expression:

We were intrigued to read the letters from Susan Klein and Barbara Mahler regarding the origins of the term “sitz bones to heels”. While Susan Klein has indeed made excellent use of the term in her technique classes, she most certainly first heard the term used in her classes with Irmgard Bartenieff... [I]n the interest of preserving the historical integrity of dance, Susan and Barbara’s claims to be the sole source of terminology in use by many needs to be corrected.

⁵ Catherine Levine, “Letters to the Editor,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no 17, Fall/Winter 1998/1999.

Susan Klein may rightfully claim the use of the term “Klein Technique”, but neither she nor anyone else has the right to appropriate terms in common use by many practitioners.⁶

Though the developers of Klein Technique, Klein and Mahler, were both dancers, and its principles indeed permeated many downtown dance classes, it was not specifically a dance technique in the way that modern dance techniques such as Cunningham or Graham were — Klein Technique did not prepare the dancer for a particular style of dancing, nor did any choreography specifically require the technique. Indeed, this exchange highlights how technical practices in downtown dance had changed in purpose. The conflict arose out of a desire to claim individual ownership of a particular idea, one which was in fact “in common use by many practitioners.” But as the relationship between choreography and the company had shifted, so had the relationship between technique and creativity. Downtown in the 1990s, dance technique was a particularly vital area of inquiry that placed dancers on an equal level with those who had more commonly been considered to perform the creative role in dancemaking: choreographers.

TECHNIQUE, TRAINING, AND CHOREOGRAPHY

In much early modern dance, the development of a unique technique was central to a choreographer’s practice, serving as one of the choreographer’s fundamental aesthetic containers. Many of the most prominent choreographers from the 1930s through the 1950s devised a technique that now bears their name — examples including Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Lester Horton, José Limón, Katherine Dunham, and Erick Hawkins. Like the repertory they created, the dance technique that choreographers

⁶ Board of Directors of the Laban/Bartenieff Institute, “Letter to the Editors,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no. 18, Winter/Spring 1999.

developed was not only an artistic product but also an embodiment of the philosophical perspective they aimed to communicate. The weighted, dualistic techniques of early modern choreographers, such as Graham's "contraction and release" and Humphrey's "fall and recovery," reflected their experience of and perspective on contemporary life.⁷ Similarly, Cunningham's technique trained the independent use of the limbs and quick changes in focus and direction, coinciding with his use of chance operations and de-prioritizing of stage space. Developing a new approach to movement was not merely a sign of individual creativity, but proposed an idea about what *movement itself* could (or should) embody: it put forward a worldview.

Of course, a technique generally developed as an outgrowth of making dances: movements specific to particular dances required skills that could be generalized and repeated across a choreographer's works. A technique supported the creation of choreography by reducing the need to invent everything new for each work and, by embodying a movement philosophy, could shape the kind of dances that would be created with that technique. Choreographers with techniques developed over many years (sometimes decades) generally stopped inventing new movement vocabularies for each dance, instead turning their choreographic attention elsewhere, such as formal structure or movement expression.⁸ Having a technique all the dancers shared was an efficient mechanism to create new dances and also promoted a capacity for unified expression among the company's dancers.

⁷ Julia L. Foulkes, *Modern Bodies : Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 16-17.

⁸ Henrietta Bannerman discusses this progression — from movement invention to an emphasis on other aspects of performance — in Graham's work in great detail: Henrietta Bannerman, "An Overview of the Development of Martha Graham's Movement System (1926-1991)," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 17, no. 2 (1999): 9-46

If in the 1930s and 1940s, choreographers needed to directly train their dancers themselves, by the 1950s and 1960s, the relative growth of modern dance created not only an audience for viewing the dance, but for learning it as well. Broad training infrastructures developed that would contribute to preparing dancers in the techniques required to perform the choreography they watched. The official schools attached to companies (such as Graham's or Cunningham's) were part of this, but the training infrastructure went far beyond company schools. During the years of the NEA's Dance Touring Program (1967-1983), in addition to performing the touring companies would give lecture-demonstrations and hold master classes as part of their residency, introducing the training practices of the artists to new areas of the country. Dance Departments also grew tremendously in colleges across the country in the 1960s and 1970s.⁹ Modern dancers of the latter half of the 20th century thus enjoyed a relative breadth of training opportunities. For those more intensely focused on dancing, conservatories and summer festival programs (such as the Bennington Summer School of Dance, later, the American Dance Festival) offered more specialized training. While the availability and quality of instruction varied widely in different parts of the country, particularly in less urban areas, those interested in pursuing dance had a growing range and depth of training available to them.

Thus the development of modern dance technique was also tied to the company model. Choreography, in the form of repertory works, dictated the necessity of techniques, which shaped modern dance training across the field. The persistence of a company led by its artistic director, performing that person's works across decades, established a repertory that required the

⁹ One metric of growth is the number of degrees awarded in dance; in 1971, colleges awarded 297 BFA's, while in 1978, they awarded 886. Robert E. Roemer, "Vocationalism in Higher Education: Explanations from Social Theory," *The Review of Higher Education* 4, no. 2 (1981): 23-46, Table 3, p. 32. Hagood also discusses the "dance boom" as it applied to higher education in Thomas K. Hagood, *A History of Dance in American Higher Education: Dance and the American University* (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 2000), Chapter 10, pp. 217-243.

technique to be performed. The associated schools, as well as the decentralized training programs located in studios and dance departments across the country, were a means toward a career represented by the company itself.

But simply having a longstanding company did not in itself lead to the creation of a dance technique — relatively few eponymously named techniques emerged after the 1960s. Like so much else about modern dance, the Judson Dance Theater pushed against this connection between technique and choreography. As the Judson group and its surrounding milieu explored the use of pedestrian and “non-dance” movement in choreography, the presence of traditional dance technique became a question rather than an assumption. Dance scholar Melanie Bales argues that the Judson Dance Theater led directly to the subsequent broadening of investigations in dance training, writing, “One part of the inquiry [of Judson] dance effected a disruption of flow between dance vocabulary and dance making and...relieved training from its role as direct feeder to, or repository for choreography.”¹⁰ The purpose of training was called into question — though perhaps not its necessity. Post-Judson choreographers did not necessarily rely on traditional dance-like movement, but dancers were still called on to do strenuous and sometimes extraordinary tasks with their bodies, and thus still needed to train; many of the Judson artists, even as they pursued pedestrian movement in their choreography, would continue to regularly take classes at the Cunningham studio. But the broadening of choreographic explorations meant that training was not necessarily directed towards skills needed to perform specific choreographies.

¹⁰ Melanie Bales, “Training as the Medium Through Which,” in *The Body Eclectic*, p. 30-31.

TRAINING FREELANCE

The distinction between technique and choreography would be fundamental to the landscape of downtown dance practice in the 1990s, as training would not be oriented around acquiring a set of skills linked to a specific choreographic tradition. With the dissolving company infrastructure, and the increase in the project approach, training with the intention to prepare for a job in a company appeared increasingly unrealistic. Moreover, the trend in choreographic approaches toward specificity of individual works¹¹ meant that there was not a pre-determined idea of what the movement for a particular dance should be. Choreographers employed movement languages that were rarely strictly pedestrian in the Judson sense. Of course, choreographers sought dancers with specific skills, but those skills were seldom technically codified. In part, choreographers were not generally developing a technical practice across a body of work. Works of this period often contained movement vocabularies particular to a piece; even works by the same choreographer could have significantly different movement languages. Reflecting on her own work, the choreographer Donna Uchizono noted, “What I think is important to know about my process is that I never come in with a set vocabulary. I really have been dedicated to creating a new physical language that is borne forth by the concept of the piece. So each piece I make is vastly different from another.”¹² While dancers had to have a certain facility before working with a choreographer, the movement language could be specific to the individual project and thus developed as part of a creative process.

The eclectic training emblematic of the freelance dancer was on display in the roster of classes offered by Movement Research. Beginning from a collective of six artists offering eight

¹¹ Discussed in the previous chapter.

¹² Donna Uchizono, “Hybrid Bastards,” M.F.A., Long Island University, The Brooklyn Center, 2008, p. 91.

workshops in 1978, by the mid-1980s Movement Research had grown into one of the most significant training centers in downtown dance. As the first cohesive school of new dance practices following the Judson era, Movement Research was a center for the exchange of ideas and practices among downtown dancers. In addition to organizing panel discussions, informal performance events, and an occasional festival, the focus of the organization in the 1980s was its teaching, which included classes in choreography, improvisation, and body education modalities. Throughout most of the 1980s, there were few classes that presented themselves as a traditional dance class — one that begins with stylized warm-up exercises and progresses to learning set phrases or repertory. Even when such formats began to enter the roster in the late 1980s, Movement Research’s offerings emphasized individual creativity and exploration even in the context of learning repertory.

In 1991, Movement Research began offering daily drop-in classes. While teaching and training had been the foundation of its programming for more than a decade, the format of classes in the 1980s consisted almost exclusively of extended-study formats they termed “workshops,” which could range from a weekend intensive to a class that met twice a week for 12 weeks. In contrast with the workshops, these new drop-in classes required no pre-registration, nor was there an expectation of regular attendance. The content of these drop-in classes was quite different from the workshops that had dominated Movement Research’s offerings in the 1980s. In contrast to the workshops that were almost entirely organized around “creative” practice — i.e., choreography, improvisation, or at least a reflective body modality — the daily classes were structured much more like a traditional dance class, organized around learning specific technical skills followed by employing those skills in a choreographed phrase. In part, this was a functional requirement of drop-in classes. While a drop-in class required no long-term

commitment, it also could not build a body of knowledge common to all students in the same way that an extended-format course could.

With the addition of daily classes to its programs, Movement Research reflected both economic and artistic changes at work in downtown dance. The increasingly freelance nature of dancing meant that schedules could be inconsistent and unpredictable; drop-in classes afforded the flexibility that freelance dancers required. And more than flexibility in commitment, the daily classes offered flexibility in training styles and approaches. In the spring of 1989, the organization offered 21 workshops, averaging roughly five class sessions per week. The addition of daily drop-in classes effectively doubled the number of classes offered and thus, also, the variety. More than indicating Movement Research's role as an important training center, this growth in the variety of classes available to the 1990s dancer reflected a new approach to training that centered individual choice over stylistic progression. One dancer's characteristic collection of classes went as follows:

Ballet class currently underpins my schedule, augmented by Contact Improvisation when I can get it. In other phases, I seek out favorite modern (which I mean to include "postmodern" here) teachers when they are available. When I have access to studio space, I will gladly forego class in favor of working by myself: honing technical skills, improvising, composing little phrases, doing whatever feels good.¹³

For some viewers, this freelance training approach created a certain degree of aesthetic flattening among downtown dancers. Laurel George, a dance scholar and sociologist, wrote that her experience of watching and documenting the 1997-1998 season of performances at Danspace Project revealed that, while the performances displayed a wide range of approaches to form,

¹³ Dittman, "A New York Dancer.", p. 22. To be clear, Dittman is not explicitly describing taking class at Movement Research; however, the range of classes she describes is characteristic of what the organization offered in the late 1990s (even ballet — Janet Panetta taught classes through the organization).

“Paradoxically, in the midst of this visual and thematic variety, there was a subtle but persistent kind of orthodoxy that crept into the movement itself. While the dancers were not doing the same steps from dance to dance, nor could they even be said to be performing using the same ‘technique,’ there was a certain, hard-to-pin-down sameness to much of the dancing.”¹⁴ George went on to note that the movement style she observed was likely due to the shared training practices of dancers; everyone, it seemed, was taking the same classes and following the same training regimens. For observers like George, there was little to distinguish the movement qualities of dancers in various choreographies.

What George described as a “hard-to-pin-down sameness” could be compared with dance theorist Susan Foster’s description of the “hired body.” In her article “Dancing Bodies,” written in 1988, Foster observed a broad trend that she would characterize as “a regressive narrowing of options and a resulting uniformity of appearance among dancers performing in different kinds of works.”¹⁵ Linking changes in dance technique with the emergence of “independent choreographers,” Foster observed that these choreographers “have not developed new dance techniques to support their choreographic goals, but instead encourage dancers to train in several existing techniques without adopting the aesthetic vision of any. They require a new kind of body, competent at many styles.”¹⁶ While astutely identifying the eclecticism that characterized freelance training practices, Foster argues that the body that resulted from this training lacked artistic depth, comparing it unfavorably to training in one specific technique such as Cunningham or ballet: “It does not display its skills as a collage of discrete styles but, rather,

¹⁴ Laurel George, “Organizing Bodies: Creating and Funding Experimental Dance in the United States, 1965-2000” (Ph.D., Rice University, 2002), pp. 203-204.

¹⁵ Susan Leigh Foster, “Dancing Bodies: An Addendum, 2009,” *Theater* 40, no. 1 (February 1, 2010), p. 25.

¹⁶ Susan Leigh Foster, “Dancing Bodies,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Duke University Press, 1997), p. 253.

homogenizes all styles and vocabularies beneath a sleek, impenetrable surface. Uncommitted to any specific aesthetic vision, it is a body for hire: it trains in order to make a living at dancing.”¹⁷

While the notion that only in the late 20th century did dancers seek to “make a living” through dancing is highly questionable, more significant for understanding the 1990s is how this reading reveals what had been previously valued in dance training. In reading a dancer trained in a variety of approaches as a “hired body,” one “[u]ncommitted to any specific aesthetic vision,” Foster links aesthetic vision with a uniquely defined technique. In the company model, this link between choreography and technique was indeed well established. But while the practices of the 1980s and 1990s may have indeed de-prioritized the significance of choreographers developing an individualized technique, reading this as “[u]ncommitted to any specific aesthetic vision” mistakes the role of dance technique in those decades. Establishing a technique was not a requirement for a choreographer, nor was mastering a particular one a requirement for the performer. In downtown dance of the 1990s, technique was not restricted to serving as an aesthetic signature, and it was not meant to convey the ideological standpoint of a choreographer. Technique, rather than a differentiating feature between dancers, would be something that tied them together in a shared inquiry.

RELEASE IN THE 1990S

Recalling a conversation with Nancy Topf, a prominent teacher in New York City in the 1970s and 1980s, dancer and improvisation historian Melinda Buckwalter described how release permeated the period,

¹⁷ Foster, “Dancing Bodies,” p. 255.

One day, while walking down the street together after her class at Eden's Expressway in New York City, Nancy Topf remarked to me, "You know, this work I am teaching is the original Release Technique." I was surprised; she never referred to her work as Release. It was the early 1990s, and Release was ubiquitous in New York. The term had come to refer to a movement style — after the fashion of choreographer Trisha Brown, characterized by loose-jointed, relaxed movement. Where limbs had once moved as a whole, they were now made of pieces — wrist, knee, elbow, shoulder, hip — and could initiate movement as easily as the torso once had.¹⁸

Release technique was everywhere in the 1990s. The term was used by dancers to describe their classes, and it was used by critics to describe the dances they watched. Popular performer and teacher Mia Lawrence described her dance class in 1998 as "A basic warm-up incorporates a variety of disciplines including release work and yoga. The goal is to increase the range of motion through the joints, the spine and to extend and connect into space in preparation for full-out dancing."¹⁹ In reviewing a performance of Trisha Brown in 1992, Alastair Macaulay wrote of the movement style, "Brown's release technique makes it lyrical and connected. Arm-pull; shrug; wriggle; dip; leg-swing; fall. The sequence of a phrase, as impulse passes through the body, is unpredictable in shape, in dynamics, in rhythm."²⁰ When people discussed release technique, several common features appeared: as exemplified in Macaulay's and Buckwalter's description of Brown, the style of release technique emphasized a relaxed carriage, flowing movements in the limbs, and a frequently off-balance center of gravity that propelled the body through space or across the floor; momentum was generally prioritized over static shape, with dancers swinging arms, legs, and torso into full extensions only to melt out of the positions as smoothly as they were arrived at. Efficiency of energy was a central principle, whether that manifested in small, gentle movements of the hands, or in spinning leaps that ended in careful

¹⁸ Melinda Buckwalter, "Release — A Mystery," *Contact Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2012), p. 36.

¹⁹ Class calendar, *Movement Research Performance Journal*, vol. 17 (Fall/Winter 1998/1999), p. 15.

²⁰ Alastair Macaulay, "Live from the Sixties," *Dance Theatre Journal* 9, no. 3 (1992), p. 16.

landings. Release technique was also often positioned as an antidote to the restrictions of traditional dance techniques. Dance theorist Randy Martin, writing in 1998, positioned release technique specifically in opposition to earlier approaches to dance, “In contrast to the defiance of gravity through muscular exertion associated with earlier modern techniques, release technique purports to assimilate gravitational flows in the body’s interior space to its exteriority. Rather than accumulating muscular resistance in the service of a coherent shaping of the body, release technique yields an emphasis on motional qualities as such.”²¹

Though the term “release technique” was widely used, it also generated disagreement and debate. As one characteristic example, despite being one of the most regularly cited exponents of release technique, Brown herself never used the term to describe her dancing, going so far as to claim, “I have no idea what release technique is.”²² Speaking to both its widespread presence and its confusion, choreographer Trajal Harrell wrote in 1999, “In my immediate vicinity, everyone seemed to be about ‘release,’ yet there was no consolidated body of information on what seemed to me to be the most prevalent concept in contemporary dance.”²³

Part of this confusion seemed to stem from the dual application of the term. Buckwalter observes that in addition to describing a style of movement, “Release Technique also referred to a new type of dance technique class — usually a Klein Technique-inspired warm-up, followed by Trisha Brown-like repertory.”²⁴ In an earlier period, the connection between a class and a performance style — between technique and choreography — would have been obvious, and

²¹ Randy Martin, *Critical Moves : Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 172. Martin also deploys the vague application the term held at the time he was writing: he described the technique as including practically everything developed from Judson onward.

²² Trajal Harrell, DD Dorvillier, and Sarah Michelson, eds., *Movement Research Performance Journal*, vol. 19 (Fall/Winter 1999), p. 17.

²³ Trajal Harrell, “Editor’s Note,” *Movement Research Performance Journal*, vol 19.

²⁴ Buckwalter, “Release — A Mystery,” p. 36.

hardly problematic. But for many in the 1990s, and especially around release technique, these were not necessarily linked.

If Judson artists broke the link between training and choreography, the following decades saw a further twist in this relationship: rather than choreographic needs dictating training, shifts in training practices would begin to shape choreography. Reflecting in 1995 on the deep influence of “a number of practices which have crossed from a therapeutic to an artistic arena,” scholar Elizabeth Dempster described this influence as inverting the traditional relationship between training and choreography, “In a reversal of traditional dance practice where training is determined by and serves the performance form, here, it would seem, changes in training have precipitated thoroughgoing changes in dancing. New therapeutic practices and methods, and what could be termed new ‘philosophies of the body’, have given rise to new ways of dancing.”²⁵

Release technique was perhaps the most concrete example of these “new ways of dancing” that shaped downtown dance in the 1990s, and it indeed had a deep connection with what Dempster referred to as “therapeutic practices,” and what has more generally become known as “somatics.” Coined by Thomas Hanna in 1970, the term came to refer to a wide range of body awareness practices that prioritized internal over external perception, or as Hanna wrote in 1985, “the body as perceived from within by first-person perception.”²⁶ The term has since been applied to a range of practices, from Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method, to yoga and even certain martial arts practices, such as Aikido and Tai Chi.²⁷

²⁵ Elizabeth Dempster, “Preface,” *Writings on Dance*, no. 14 (Summer 1996): 2–3.

²⁶ Thomas Hanna, “What Is Somatics?” Somatic Systems Institute, 1985; Hanna first introduced the term in Thomas Hanna, *Bodies in Revolt ; a Primer in Somatic Thinking* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970).

²⁷ My use of the term “somatics” in discussing downtown dance practices of the 1990s is somewhat anachronistic. Though the term was established by then, and used academically and in the circles that centered these practices (as opposed to dance circles, where somatic practices were auxiliary techniques), its use in downtown dance was, as far

Covering such a broad array of methods, somatic practices tended to share an attitude and an approach rather than a specific set of techniques, and these approaches were often informed by the therapeutic origins of the practice. F.M. Alexander, for example, developed his technique to address his frequent voice loss, while Moshe Feldenkrais's approach emerged through his efforts to heal a chronic knee injury; Mabel Todd's self-directed recovery from a paralyzing accident inspired her lifetime study of anatomy and mental imagery.²⁸ This focus on developing a healthy body, rather than a set of skills or stylistic abilities, also rendered the result of the practice to be the development of one's individuality. Martha Eddy, a longtime somatic practitioner and historian, writes, "Perhaps the most striking feature of the historical emergence of each of these somatic movement disciplines is that they defined, and now share, a theme that there are many possibilities, no one truth, and always the option to make choices if one chooses to take responsibility for one's body and living process."²⁹

Another common feature among many somatic approaches was the use of mental imagery. Mabel Todd, regarded as a pioneer of somatics, developed methods to train individuals in "postural adjustment" using mental imagery as a tool. When she began working in the 1920s, there was no scientific research to support the idea that mental imagery had any impact on body

as I can tell, *not* widespread in the 1990s. It is essentially absent from the *Performance Journal*, for example, appearing only in a few ads for studio spaces, not in any articles throughout the decade — not even in the issues "All About Release," #18 and #19. In Movement Research Studies Projects, the term "Body Work" is used to refer to these practices. I use "somatics" here because it has now become the common term to refer to these practices, even in dance circles — arguably as a result of the debates around the appropriateness of "release." (The term does appear, however, in *Dance Theatre Journal* in the 1990s. I have not examined this publication thoroughly, but it suggests that the term may have been more popular in European dance circles — where somatic practices were explicitly integrated into university training programs much earlier — and migrated here with the increasing exchange of teachers in the late 1990s and after.)

²⁸ Martha Eddy, "A Brief History of Somatic Practices and Dance," *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 2009), p. 12-13. Eddy's article is an excellent overview and concise history of somatics, particularly in its relationship to dance.

²⁹ Eddy, "A Brief History of Somatic Practices and Dance," p. 19.

mechanics; instead, her methods were developed empirically through experimentation.³⁰ It was such a novel and unconventional approach that even Todd herself at times expressed surprise at its effectiveness, “By thinking continuously of a familiar motivating picture we produce a change in remote parts.... With this idea as a central factor, results have been produced in the mechanism which have amazed even those of us who so thoroughly believe in its principles.”³¹ One of Todd’s students, Lulu Sweigard, would develop a technique she named Ideokinesis, which utilized “imagined movement” as the primary facilitator of learning.³² The use of imagery was also a central feature of Skinner Releasing, which makes heavy use of poetic images to generate a particular mindset toward movement.

Many of these approaches also had similar features to their classroom structure. In Feldenkrais classes, students spend most of the class lying on the floor, performing gentle movements directed by the instructor; the first half of a Klein Technique class is spent gradually rolling the spine from an upright standing position to one completely folded over at the hips. Skinner Releasing also had a significant floor component, and further used mental imagery to guide the movements. While each method articulated a somewhat different philosophy, they share an emphasis on slow movement, which, according to the various methods’ teachers, allows the student to direct their attention “inward” and leads to greater bodily awareness.

Part of the reason various somatic approaches shared so many features was that many also shared a lineage, and moreover, some of these lineages developed in a dance or dance-adjacent environment. Of particular significance was one that traces back to Joan Skinner, the creator of

³⁰ Lulu E. Sweigard, *Human Movement Potential : Its Ideokinetic Facilitation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 6.

³¹ Mabel Elsworth Todd, “The Balancing of Forces in the Human Being: Its Application to Postural Patterns,” in *Early Writings, 1920-1934* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1977), p. 50.

³² Sweigard, *Human Movement Potential*, p. 6.

Skinner Releasing Technique (who herself considered the Alexander Technique a major influence on her method). At the University of Illinois dance program in 1967, Marsha Paludan, Mary Fulkerson, and John Rolland all participated in an image-based approach to a dance class that Skinner was first experimenting with. Paludan, Fulkerson, and Rolland would introduce some of the ideas they explored in Skinner’s class to Nancy Topf, and these four would also independently study with Barbara Clark, a student of Todd. While Fulkerson would work primarily in the UK at Dartington College in the 1970s, the other three would continue to collaborate regularly until 1985, in summer gatherings that became known as the Vermont Movement Workshop, where they and others would teach classes that resulted from their shared explorations.³³ This group explicitly referred to their work as “Anatomical Release Technique,” and it was also this group that was perhaps most directly responsible for introducing release — both the term and the practice — into downtown dance. Daniel Lepkoff and Christina Svane, two of the founding artists of the downtown dance organization Movement Research, were among the other teachers at Vermont Movement Workshop; Topf would also establish a studio in New York City and teach at Movement Research throughout the 1980s.

SHAPING TECHNIQUE

RELEASE AND MOVEMENT RESEARCH

While the introduction and proliferation of release technique to downtown dance did not have a single source, the organization Movement Research would largely come to define what

³³ Melinda Buckwalter, “Release — A History,” *Contact Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Summer/Fall2012): 3–8. Fulkerson also regularly brought Topf, Paludan, and Rolland to the UK as guest teachers, continuing the exchange of ideas among the four.

release was in the 1990s. Release and somatics had played a role in Movement Research's classes from its founding. In the first season of workshops, Beth Goren, who studied BodyMind Centering, taught a class in "Functional Anatomy and Technique" based on this study. In the spring of 1979, as part of Movement Research's second season, Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen (the founder of BodyMind Centering) taught a one-day seminar, and by Spring 1981, Nancy Topf was teaching "Release Technique" as part of the roster.

Throughout the 1980s, a variety of somatic modalities appeared alongside classes in improvisation and composition. The combination of these different somatic approaches in close proximity to modes of performance likely emphasized their similarities more than it drew attention to their distinctions. By 1990, "release work" had become a catch-all term so pervasive that originators of specific techniques (including Joan Skinner and Nancy Topf) felt the need to distinguish themselves from it.³⁴ And while offering "pure" somatic classes, many artists at Movement Research would incorporate the ideas and approaches of those somatic practices into their dance classes.

The introduction of daily classes at Movement Research also may have contributed to shaping the understanding of release technique in the 1990s. In increasing both the number and relative proportion of technique classes (in contrast to improvisation or composition focused classes), Movement Research created more opportunities for teachers and students to integrate what they were learning in somatic practices directly into their dancing. Donna Uchizono, who was both a choreographer and a student of Klein Technique, recalled, "Many of my Klein Technique classmates, myself included, were regular teachers at Movement Research. Jeremy

³⁴ See Stephanie Skura, "Releasing Dance: Interview with Joan Skinner," *Contact Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1990): 11–17, and Buckwalter, "Release — A Mystery." Both Skinner and Topf are described as creating more specific names for their practices in light of the emergence of general terms.

Nelson, Becky Hilton, Mia Lawrence were extremely popular teachers during the 1990's and all were studying Klein technique. We were all interested in designing a dance technique class that would incorporate the principles that we were learning.”³⁵ Movement Research class descriptions throughout the 1990s feature abundant reference to Klein, Alexander, and Skinner techniques, as well as to “release work,” “release technique,” and simply “release,” as warm-ups and preparation for the dancing later in class.³⁶ The dancer Eva Karczag, who had studied release with Mary Fulkerson and was an instructor of Alexander Technique, was an occasional teacher at Movement Research (as well as at the Trisha Brown studio), and described her teaching approach, which is worth reading at length:

Beginning class sitting around in a circle, talking. So much to talk about. In the beginning, so many questions. Often they're questions that can't even, as yet, be formulated — the students don't yet know the words — it's useful to hear others ask and tell. Concepts like, learning through unlearning, allowing, non-doing, doing less, waiting, receptivity, softness and strength can at first be filled with confusions, hesitancy and anger as well as with trust, recognition, relief and fully abandoned motivation towards movement. This talking feels essential, good.

This is a time where I will introduce the part of the body we will focus on — head, shoulder blade, heart, hip-socket, psoas, pineal — bone, organ, joint, muscle, gland — making connections in any way that feels right, within systems, between systems — floating skull plates, shoulder blades and pelvic wings opening in flight, heart rocked in hammock of thoracic spine curve, the ‘back and up’ of psoas and sterno-cleido-mastoid, joint spaciousness, glands as energy centres....we look at many pictures and a 3-dimensional skeleton. We talk, bringing up any information that anyone has relating to this body part. People love getting scientific, esoteric, specific, diffuse, universal, personal — the images surrounding the area expand.

[...]

Moving on to simply walking, then running — sensing the touch of foot on floor, spreading toes, weight passing downward through the bones — the bony

³⁵ Uchizono, “Hybrid Bastards,” p. 20.

³⁶ Class descriptions throughout the 1990s can be found in the *Movement Research Performance Journal*, in which they were included.

framework; organ content — weight within the body; lengthening, sleek muscles — an animal-like muscularity. I will introduce game structures that get students heated and excited, blood flowing through veins, feeling their own and others' weight, (body weight to balance the Alexander lightness), exploring balance, bodies moving, sweating, breathing fast, breath supporting movement, energy streaming, a sense of play, forgetting to be careful. Simply enjoying moving. Getting tired. Too tired to hold on. Welcoming rest.

All of this information is carried into improvisation via a time of stillness where each individual can drop deep within themselves, where imagery and the previously perceived sensory information expands understanding and experience.³⁷

The influence of somatic practices on Karczag's class is abundant: the anatomical focus, the use of imagery, and the emphasis on developing knowledge and awareness of the body over learning a particular skill or style are all common features of somatic approaches. As is also apparent in her description, Karczag did not necessarily distinguish between the somatic material and dance learning, but integrated the various modalities into a single class.

Recognizing the significant influence of as well as the swirling debate around release technique, in 1999 the *Movement Research Performance Journal* devoted two consecutive issues (#18 and #19) to addressing release technique and its manifestation in downtown dance practice, titled, "All About Release." These two issues — the publication's entire annual output — reveal the extent to which the concept had permeated the community, as well as the breadth of viewpoints and ideas around the concept. While the publication collected a great deal of information on the subject, perhaps what was on greatest display was the debate and disagreement about what release technique was, and even the appropriateness of the term itself. While "release technique" was a widely used term, with many applying it to both their own and

³⁷ Elizabeth Dempster and Eva Karczag, "Explorations within the New Dance Aesthetic: Eva Karczag Interview," *Writings on Dance*, no. 14 (Summer 1995 1996): 39–52.

others' practices, it was also a term that many shied away from, resisted, delimited, or outright rejected. Opening the second of the two issues of "All About Release" was a dialog between two of the editors, Trajal Harrell and DD Dorvillier, in which the two stake out opposing positions on the usage of the word:

DD: It sucks! Lumping a whole community under one concept...

T: I respect the fact that DD is limiting or not using this word

DD: Well certainly not to address a community or a large body of work.

T: I on the other hand want to offer the possibility that this word is constantly indeterminate, that the word is totally decentering and that can be a possibility for it's [sic] empowering usage.

[...]

DD: No, I don't think so, the word is so loaded and creates confusion. I don't think it's healthy appropriation of the word[...] I think that if we create an umbrella we are in trouble.

T: The commonality of the usage of the word "release" is what is powerful about it...it is a way people can refer to a broad concept and be understood.

DD: I don't accept that! Instead of them saying they know what it is, I want them to say that they don't know what it is!

T: You have lost that battle.

DD: No way. Go ahead and use the word but don't expect that I know what you're talking about.³⁸

In their disagreement, the two essentially stand in for opposing camps of the dance community: one arguing for release as a useful grouping of various concepts, another arguing against the term because this same grouping creates imprecision and vagueness. Though they espouse different viewpoints, both agree that the term refers not to a single thing, but to a variety of practices. Despite the relatively clear origin of the term "release technique" — stemming from Joan Skinner's use of "releasing," and following from the explorations of Fulkerson, Topf, Rolland, and Paludin — and the fact that several of these practices' founders were present and

³⁸ DD Dorvillier and Trajal Harrell, "An Editorial Conversation," *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no. 19 (1999): 2.

active in downtown throughout the 1980s and 1990s, what these two issues of the *Performance Journal* demonstrate is that, by 1999, release technique had become something much different from the set of practices and philosophies developed by its originators.

Demonstrating the malleability of the term, both issues feature individuals offering their understanding of release, which were stylistically depicted as a cross between a dictionary definition and an epigraph: “re•lease:” followed by a description and attributed to the person providing the definition. The “definitions” range from relatively kinesthetic descriptions such as “Not working muscularly” (Helena Franzen); “When you think your muscles into a relaxed position” (Jennifer Miller); “A way of using the body in movement from a deep internal musculature...in order that the external muscles are not overly tense or engaged” (Laurie Uprichard); to self-effacing reflections and satirical takes on contemporary politics: “The total opposite of my current state of being” (Barbara Bryan); “When you take a shit” (David White); “In the age of Monica Lewinsky?...sex on/off stage” (Juliette Map).³⁹ Miguel Gutierrez summarized the conundrum presented by release as “The way that everyone dances now but no one can define.”⁴⁰

Though most contributors displayed a general comfort working with “release technique” as an umbrella term for a related group of practices, there were also several who pushed against this usage. Some of these read primarily as conservative perspectives on language. Daniel Lepkoff insisted that “Release Technique” should refer only to that work stemming from the explorations of Fulkerson, Topf, Rolland, and Paludin, and any other usage would “misrepresent or diffuse

³⁹ From Harrell, Dorvillier, and Michelson, *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no. 18 (1999): Helena Franzen, p. 3; Jennifer Miller, p.17; Laurie Uprichard, p. 3; Barbara Bryan, p. 13; David White, p. 9; Juliette Mapp, p. 6 (ellipsis in original).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

the clarity of these artists' work";⁴¹ Susan Klein argued that her eponymous Klein Technique "is not a release technique," because, essentially, it did other things in addition to releasing the muscles.⁴² Other arguments articulated a deeper discomfort with the ambiguity inherent in an umbrella term. The dancer Diane Moss wrote, "So what if 'release technique' is or isn't a meaningful term, a valid term, a useful term. Does it make any difference to my main priority which is making good dances? My response to myself is that it does matter. Because I think using blanket terms indiscriminately and in ignorance of more precise language breeds confusion and vagueness. And eventually, lack of clarity in the words I use and the concepts in my mind translates to lack of clarity in the images I make with my body."⁴³ Here, the position espoused by Dorvillier in the declaration that people can "Go ahead and use the word but don't expect that I know what you're talking about" gets fuller articulation. The arguments against release as an umbrella term emphasize that dance develops complicated, nuanced understandings of the body, and each of the distinct modalities that were grouped under "release work" added something particular to this understanding, however related to other similar practices. Relying too heavily on catch-all terms flattens the very thing that dance seeks to make nuanced: the specificity of body practices.

BEING RELEASED: THE POLITICS OF BODILY TECHNIQUE

Even as release technique was in many ways a novel approach to dance, in one way at least, it was like every other form of dance: more than simply training the body, it represented an

⁴¹ Daniel Lepkoff, "Letters to the Editors," *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no. 19 (1999), p. 2.

⁴² Susan Klein, "A Movement Technique — A Healing Technique," *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no. 19 (1999).

⁴³ Diane Moss, "Coming to Terms with the Release Technique," *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no. 18 (1999).

ideology of the body in the world. Going back to one of the earliest of the “alternative” modalities influencing release, Mabel Todd’s ideokinetic technique quickly defines itself as dealing with more than pure movement through its focus on “posture.” Rather than preparing the body towards a particular task or skill — the way training for a sport, to perform a musical instrument, or dance might operate — Todd’s goal was to develop the body’s posture: a general, rather than specific result. However, for Todd, posture was itself by no means neutral: “In the past, postural ideas have been influenced by moral notions. Through military posture, response to religious stimuli and other psychological factors, we have become conscious of the manner in which we hold ourselves.”⁴⁴ Todd then stressed the physiological origin of her own notions of posture, concluding that the moral and cultural ideas of posture should be discarded in favor of such mechanically-informed notions, “We must first have an intelligent understanding of the mechanical functioning of the body, not allowing old postural ideas, based on moral notions, to influence that understanding.”⁴⁵ Of course, seeing the body in mechanical terms was also not neutral, but reflected the scientific and rationalist thinking of Todd’s day. Such perspectives that viewed the body in anatomical terms (as opposed to cultural or social) pervaded somatic practices throughout the 20th century, and release technique as well.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Todd, “Balancing Forces,” p. 48.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50, 58.

⁴⁶ Artist-scholar Doran George thoroughly demonstrated that though somatic practitioners tended to present their conception of the body as inherently “natural,” they in fact articulated a universalizing concept of the body that obscured both the sources of their ideology and its implications: “Dancers applied the combination of ideas put forward by Alexander, H’Doubler and Todd as if they were restoring pre-culture psychophysical function by accessing anatomical structure and mechanics, with sensory exercises that combined rational capacity and inherent bodily knowledge. Yet the conceit that consciousness was benign and universal, and the experience of anatomical knowledge was scientifically grounded, concealed how the pioneers constructed lower and higher forms of action and sensation through values within a sociosymbolic field.” Duncan G. Gilbert, “A Conceit of the Natural Body: The Universal-Individual in Somatic Dance Training” (Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, 2014), p. 70.

An oft-repeated emphasis in release training was “unlearning” — bad habits, ideas about the body, previous dance training. Such implicit (and sometimes explicit) critiques were common, and suggest some of the tribalism that release engendered as it positioned itself as a “natural” approach to the body. But in practice, release technique was widely incorporated into everything from the most experimental dance practices to the most traditional of ballet. As one instance of the range of applications toward which downtown dancers applied release technique, the performer Diane Torr used it to inform her teaching of drag king workshops. In release technique, which she also taught through Movement Research, Torr connected interior visualization with external performance, “Using anatomical images that enable a visualization of the interior structure of the body, we will each develop an individual movement vocabulary going from stillness to dynamic action.... Through developing skills of the imagination and easy action in the body, the images become part of physical thought.”⁴⁷ In her “Man for A Day” workshops,⁴⁸ Torr taught specific skills to assume a male persona, seeing gender as similar to movement skills that could be trained through coordination of mental image and physical embodiment. Explicitly connecting release technique and drag performance, Torr wrote:

Through the years of doing Release work, I have developed a sense of the body in terms of the neuro-muscular-skeletal system. Visualizing those systems within my own corpus, I have been able to extract the body from its acculturated gender. In other words, by utilizing anatomical imagery to look into the body, I have been able to ‘see through’ it, so to speak. The internal focus that is required in doing Release, has led me to a sense of transparency, where I can see many structural layers to my body. [...] Release Technique has enabled me to look at identity in terms of where we come from—ontogenic evolution—and to claim that as part of who we are. Gender is immaterial—it is another construct and changes with the

⁴⁷ Class Calendar, p. 12, Diane Torr “Release Technique” class description. *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no. 7 (Fall/Winter 1993/1994).

⁴⁸ These workshops were billed variously throughout the decade as “Sexual Transformation Workshop,” “Drag King for a Day,” and “Step, Step, Drag, Change.”

fashion from age to age. It is a strategy. Knowing this, it is possible to experiment with gender, to play with identity, as society plays with us, as men, as women.⁴⁹

Release technique was certainly shaped by the ideologies that originated it. Still, though its ideology of could be critical of other movement approaches, its development and practice was broadly inclusive: dancers in the 1990s were more invested in actively developing new methods than in critiquing or breaking down established ones.

Proponents of release saw the technique as offering a kind of access to their body that more traditional techniques did not. As a training method, the focus in release technique on internal perception generated new ideas of how dancing could create meaning through movement. For some, this appeared in how the technique shaped a performer's attitude while dancing.

Describing the well-known dancer Shelly Senter, one writer observed, "When performing she is not invested in the outcome; she is without agenda.... The alternative to doing and forcing movement is simply allowing the movement to unfold."⁵⁰ Others saw this focus as influencing

dance on an even deeper level, extending through to choreography. Choreographer and improviser Andrew Marcus considered release training to alter the way dancers considered the role of visual perception, writing, "the assertion of internal experience challenges the primacy of appearance, and brings into balance the internal and external worlds as sources of expression.

This 'wholistic' approach to performance requires different strategies toward space as the medium in which dance is created."⁵¹ In particular, Marcus saw this emphasis on internal experience to offer fundamentally different choreographic conceptions of time and space, with

⁴⁹ Diane Torr, "Release, Aikido, Drag King, Aikido, Release," *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no 19 (Fall/Winter 1999), p. 5.

⁵⁰ Christy Harris, "The Influence of the Alexander Technique on Modern Dance Aesthetics," *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no. 19 (Fall/Winter 1999), p. 19.

⁵¹ Andrew Marcus, "Releasing and Line," *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no. 19 (Fall/Winter 1999).

release technique suggesting that “line in dance is not only a matter of skeletal alignment and the achievement of shape in relation to the space that surrounds the body. Line can also be thought of as a result of an accumulation of actions.”⁵²

By prioritizing internal experience, the ideology of release technique went hand-in-hand with downtown dance’s tendency in the 1990s to see the political in the personal. The emphasis on internal perception effectively shifted the authority for what was happening in movement from the perceiver to the experiencer — that is, to the performer from the audience, teacher, and even the choreographer. This shift in authority came from more than a focus on internal perception; it was also a result of the heterogenous training environment of the 1990s, which release technique especially demonstrated. Randy Martin, observing how dancers negotiate multiple training regimens, argued that this heterogeneity also contributed to the dancer’s autonomy:

The prospect that contending principles of movement reside within the same body suggests that part of the effort entailed in learning a technique has to do with the dancer’s ability to generate terms of mediation among different demands on the body. In this process of self-governance, a technique for regulating techniques, the dancer must generate her own authority. The dancer’s ultimate training as the amalgamation of all these technical presences in her body is what emerges as this broadening field of mediations.⁵³

Beyond the ways that release physically developed dancers’ bodies, this shift in authority changed dancers relationship with technique itself. Release placed the dancer in charge of their own development, placed the metric for success with the dancer’s own creativity. Choreographers and teachers could be resources, but dancers were ultimately responsible for their own validation.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Martin, *Critical Moves*, p. 175.

In addition to the ways release offered new conceptions of the body and technique, it also brought a different set of concerns to the world outside the dance studio. At Movement Research, release technique was even sometimes literally framed by politics. The organization's class calendar, distributed as a centerfold pull-out in its *Performance Journal*, was often physically between articles discussing contemporary social and cultural concerns. The 1992 winter/spring class calendar, for example, distributed as part of issue #4 "Speaking Ethnicity," was bookended by the transcription of Adrian Piper's video installation "Cornered" (a work interrogating concepts of race and the ethical dimensions of identifying as black) and an essay by the poet Ed Morales contextualizing the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in the contemporary political climate of the early 1990s culture wars. Finding Movement Research's class schedule meant encountering ideas that brought training into conversation with broader cultural events, connecting what happened inside the studio with the outside world before a dancer even stepped into class.

The dance field saw release technique as a practice that offered a necessary counterpoint to the stressors of life, whether physical, emotional, or social. The choreographer Pat Cremins, for example, wrote, "Hatred and fear of sexuality, we know, are highly political. As an obverse, can release technique, with its freeing and amplification of the body's energies, be a political practice? Such exploration, when not directed towards attaining merely an attractive movement style, is inherently subversive."⁵⁴ The dancer Valerie Norman described her experience of release classes offering a different sociality than her typical experience in the city, "There is someone on the subway looking at me. I try not to look at them, but then find myself looking at someone else. I then look at the floor, to stay out of trouble.... Sometimes in release classes, I find myself with

⁵⁴ Pat Cremins, "Untitled," *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no. 19 (Fall/Winter 1999), p. 18.

many others circling a room. We are all fluidly passing each other, making patterns while looking at each other in the eye. It is a refreshing contrast, an idyllic moment of escape from my closed off city self.”⁵⁵ Such examples made explicit that release, though primarily a way for dancers to train their bodies, was never entirely divorced from how one moved through the world on a social, cultural, or political level.

In these descriptions of dancers who are “without agenda,” or who experience release technique as “freeing...the body’s energies,” there is certainly a suggestion of empowerment in what release offers. Yet such attitudes also read, in part, as coping mechanisms for the lack of control that dancers experienced in many other aspects of life: political upheaval in the culture wars, the AIDS crisis, disruptions in arts funding. Release technique, as an approach to the body, also implied a way of being in the world. Thus even as release technique was a shared aesthetic currency in the 1990s, it was also a shared political currency, reflecting both a critical perspective on and necessary adaptation to contemporary life.

THE COMMUNITY OF RELEASE

Through serving as a home (both physical and spiritual) for the study of experimental dance in the 1980s and 1990s, Movement Research established a community of teaching artists. Donna Uchizono, reflecting on the influence of her study of Klein Technique in her teaching, described how working through these ideas together with other artists fostered a community of teaching at Movement Research:

We would take each other’s classes to compare notes and to improve our own teaching. The casual planning of conversations through coffee after class, dinner

⁵⁵ Valerie Norman, *Movement Research Performance Journal*, no. 19 (Fall/Winter 1999), p. 3.

and occasional teacher's meetings at Movement Research did not undermine how seriously we took the incorporation of these ideas into the orthodox structure of a modern dance class.⁵⁶

As Uchizono describes it, Movement Research's teachers were a community of practitioners, who shared ideas and techniques with each other, as well as teaching methods and practices. The same was true for its students. Though each class operated independently, students would frequently take class from several teachers at the same time.⁵⁷ More than just reflecting the ambiguity of release, Movement Research's wide range of class offerings and community of instructors was actually a central influence on the understanding — or misunderstanding, depending on the perspective — of what release technique was: an eclectic but interrelated set of practices encompassing both so-called "traditional" approaches to dance and newer body modalities. As the artists teaching at Movement Research shared methods and discussed ideas, its training practices came to be practically synonymous with that of release technique. But as an artist-run organization, the significance of Movement Research's impact was not about the organization itself, but about the community of artists the organization engendered. Movement Research was not a single entity, but a gathering of various voices and visions — as was release technique.

Perhaps the most significant feature of release technique was that it developed in this communal context. Technique in modern dance had previously been the product of a single aesthetic vision, developed by a single artist (or was at least represented that way). With release, the development of technique shifted from individual artists to the community as a whole, from representing a consolidated aesthetic to being itself an artistic process for choreographers and

⁵⁶ Uchizono, "Hybrid Bastards," p. 20.

⁵⁷ Movement Research's archives contain attendance sheets for many of their classes, which reveal a large number of students attending the classes of multiple teachers.

performers alike. Release technique had no single author, did not carry the stamp of a particular artistic identity. While the original development of “releasing” and “anatomical release technique” had founding figures and teachers with clear lineages to those figures, release technique as understood in the 1990s had no such central figure precisely because it was a fluid practice. What Trajal Harrell had felt to be “the most prevalent concept in contemporary dance” was not the development of a single artist, but was specifically the development of a community, and as such, represented the kind of dancing a community was capable of creating.

What had seemed an unsolvable dilemma around release technique in the 1990s would in later years consolidate into a clearer understanding of the reason for the confusion. Writing in 2010, Buckwalter could reasonably define release technique as “an umbrella term for an approach to teaching dance and movement...[that] culls from a variety of **movement education** approaches,” and was simultaneously “a style of dancing...characterized especially by a few particular qualities of movement: sequential movement through the joints (as opposed to simultaneous initiation) and a preference for flowing, less effortful movement.”⁵⁸ The dual nature of release as both training method and style is apparent in the issues of the *Performance Journal*, but release technique arguably only became these things over the course of the 1990s. The conservative perspective, such as that which saw release as only what could be traced back to Skinner or to Anatomical Release, might have rejected entirely the idea that release could be a style. In discussing how students could apply what she taught in her classes, Eva Karczag articulated a perspective common in release, that “one of the things that I hope to do is to give

⁵⁸ Bold in original. Melinda Buckwalter, *Composing While Dancing: An Improviser's Companion* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), pp. 198-199.

people a deeper understanding of their bodies and a way of working with themselves; and they can use that within whatever aesthetic they choose to take it into.”⁵⁹

Part of what makes release technique significant for understanding dance of the 1990s is that it was highly debated. Dance scholar Judith Hamera has noted that dance techniques always shape the interactions of the communities who practice them, writing, “Technical protocols make intimacy possible by offering shared vernaculars and interpretive strategies; these, in turn, support the interpersonal and communal exchanges that make dancing communities go.”⁶⁰ Moreover, she argues that “Dance technique is relational infrastructure. It offers templates for sociality in the classroom and in the performance space.... At its most basic level, technique births new templates for sociality by rendering bodies readable, and by organizing the relationships in which these readings can occur.”⁶¹ Release technique’s development is reflective of the sociality of downtown that saw the entire practice of dance as up for debate. Recalling Miguel Gutierrez definition of release technique in the *Performance Journal* — “The way that everyone dances now but no one can define” — the observation suggests more than is apparent at first glance. The attribution of release to “everyone” recognizes this distributed ownership of release. It was because it was the way everyone danced that no one could define it: one person’s definition would describe only their own relationship to release, while the significance of release was that it was owned by the community at large. The two issues of the *Performance Journal* provide the only possible definition of release: a contested, conflicting, but ultimately collective definition.

⁵⁹ Dempster and Karczag, “Explorations Within the New Dance Aesthetic.”

⁶⁰ Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities : Performance, Difference, and Connection in the Global City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2007), p. 18.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 19.

That technique was something developed by the community at large was reflective of the more general distribution of creativity occurring in the 1990s. This attitude toward creativity was connected to the broad restructuring the dance field underwent as it moved away from the company model. The freelance, project-based environment that coincided with the development of release was also connected to how the role of the dancer was imagined in this period. There was not always a material difference between dancing for a company and dancing freelance. The usual markers of stable employment — such as health insurance, consistent income, needing only a single job — rarely materialized for dancers in companies, who might also move between several companies over a period of time in an effort to find economic stability or aesthetic suitability. Conversely, despite the inherently transitory nature of freelancing, dancers could manage to find consistent employment, financial stability, and maintain years-long relationships with choreographers. The difference between the two modes lay less in how any specific marker manifested than in the conceptual distinction of the dancer’s role in each model. A freelance dancer was an independent artist, not someone else’s. Though the economic limitations facing choreographers contributed to instability for dancers as well, the dancer Veronica Dittman saw this as ultimately beneficial:

That a dancer’s devotion to and hard work for a particular choreographer can seldom be returned in kind — either with reasonable compensation or an ongoing, long-term artistic relationship — contributes in large part to dancers’ free rein in shaping their artistic identities rather than defining themselves by their work for a single person. There is no longer the question of which choreographer I want to dance for, with an appropriate course of training to achieve that goal. Instead, the question becomes, which choreographers do I want to dance for? Or more broadly still, what do I want to do with my dancing?⁶²

⁶² Dittman, “A New York Dancer,” pp. 23-24.

While a freelance, project approach could result both in extreme adaptability and in extreme individualism on the part of the dancer, in either case, their artistic identity was not dictated by the work they performed. Instead, they were called on to bring their own creative input to both the creation and performance of a work. And as Dittman concluded, this brought a fundamentally different focus to the goal of dancing, “Rather than trying to become a particular type of dancer for Choreographer X, I’m trying to become my best self: wholly unique.”⁶³

Of course, these relationships were not exclusive to the 1990s. There have always been dancers who have identified what they did as creative work, and choreographers have always worked collaboratively with their dancers; dancers have always worked with multiple and even very different kinds of choreographers. What distinguished the 1990s is how these aspects shifted from being incidental qualities to defining traits of what it meant to be a dancer. It is not merely that dancers were collaboratively involved in the creation of dances to a greater degree than previous periods. As with release technique, dancers had an active role in developing some of the central aspects of dance as a field of activity. Rather than choreography being the only center of value in dance, that value was distributed across the entire process and field of dancemaking — choreography, yes, but also rehearsal, class, discussion, improvisation, viewing. As a community navigating tumultuous times while inventing new ways of working, preserving creativity was best accomplished through its broad distribution rather than its consolidation. This distribution of creativity is perhaps what most defines downtown dance in the 1990s.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 24.

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