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The Mobile Body: Examining Perception through Choreography, Dance, and Performance

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Sarah Lawrence College

The Mobile Body

Examining Perception through Choreography, Dance, and Performance

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MFA Thesis in Dance

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Abstract

This study investigates the phenomenon of perception in choreography, dance, and performance focusing on the ambiguous position held by the performing body as both an aesthetic object and perceiving subject. Using the *Phenomenology of Perception* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a theoretical framework, critical choreographic analyses of Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*, Lucinda Childs' *Museum Piece*, and William Forsythe's choreographic installation *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time* demonstrate the body's dual existence as both physical object and container of subjective self, while revealing the body's role in shaping conscious experience. Practice-as-research in the form of choreography and performance, conducted by the author to contextualize the lived experience of understanding oneself as both an object within the world and a subjective internal self, has led to more specific explorations into perception, especially regarding the dynamics of the dancer-audience relationship during performance. The notion of mobile spectatorship is examined as a possible alternative to traditional proscenium seating models.

Key words: choreography, dance, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, practice-as-research, perception, performance.

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I. Introduction

Entering the art gallery space of The Kitchen in New York City at 6pm on April 2, 2016 to attend Maria Hassabi's *SOLO* (2009), I was confronted just beyond the entryway by two rows of black folding chairs oriented towards the opposite wall from where I was standing. The organization of the chairs immediately led me to make numerous assumptions about the work I was going to see. Firstly, the chairs were set up for members of the audience, myself included, to sit in and observe the performance. Secondly, the performance would happen in the space demarcated by the rows of chairs and the opposite facing wall. Thirdly, I assumed the chair configuration had been put in place because this stationary mode of frontal viewing was the most effective way for the audience to experience the specific choreography that Hassabi would perform. Being myself a performer, choreographer, and frequent attendee of dance performances, I was and still am quite familiar with the convention of viewing dance in this static, frontal manner—a convention heavily influenced by the Western tradition of viewing dance within the picture box frame of the proscenium stage. Therefore, the assumptions I made prior to viewing *SOLO* were the same assumptions I always make upon seeing rows of chairs set up for a dance performance, regardless of whether the actual performance goes on to confirm these assumptions or undermine them.

The sole detail making the chairs set up in The Kitchen stand out in my awareness was the fact that I had already, several hours earlier, spent time in the very same gallery, and during my initial experience the chairs had not been there. Hassabi's *SOLO* was being performed as part of The Kitchen's three-month long exhibition "From Minimalism into Algorithm", an event placing works of painting and sculpture in dialogue with live dance and music by presenting

performances in the gallery amidst the visual artwork.¹ In the forty-five minutes or so during which I explored the exhibition, I became accustomed to a level of autonomy in my movement around the space—viewing the artworks from chosen perspectives that I could alter and return to of my own accord. Having had this mobilized art-viewing experience prior to the evening performance, made me much more aware of the fact that for *SOLO* I was being asked to select a single point of view and then immobilize myself for, presumably, the duration of the work.

As *SOLO* began, my assumptions regarding the chairs appeared to be correct. Hassabi began her performance by lying on the floor in the space before the chairs, covered by a large Persian rug. Over the course of the next hour I watched her interact with rug, fluidly negotiating the stiff material of the carpet in tandem with the soft, flexible structures of her body. She rose from underneath the rug, moved on top of it, rolled it up, balanced with it, wore it around her body, crumpled it up, and carried it around. The rug's heavy material allowed it to retain the distorted shapes that resulted from Hassabi's tactile manipulations. Throughout the performance, the choreography was defined by a sustained duration. The slow pace at which Hassabi's positions shifted drew my attention to the formal aspects of the work and provided ample time to consider the visual images generated by each sculptural vision of body and carpet. Hassabi avoided direct eye contact with the audience and often concealed her head from view behind or underneath the rug. In doing so, her form became fragmentary and disembodied. As the piece developed, a strange visual reversal played out in which Hassabi's form became continually more object-like while the carpet eerily appeared more animate.

Up until this point I was engrossed in the shifting images of body and carpet, but about two-thirds the way through the piece an unexpected atmospheric shift abruptly returned my

¹ See for full exhibition details: Event: From Minimalism to Algorithm, The Kitchen, last modified 2018, <http://thekitchen.org/event/from-minimalism-into-algorithm>.

awareness to the conventional viewing structure that we as an audience had been placed in. The minimal soundscape of found sounds that had been playing throughout the piece suddenly dropped out. While Hassabi and the carpet did not acknowledge this auditory change, continuing their slow, exploratory movement trajectory, I felt my attention, which prior to that moment had been singularly focused on watching the performance, violently return to myself and the stillness of my seated position. As a viewer, the sudden silence made me alarmingly aware of my own body. I felt tensely restricted in my immobilized attitude, not wanting to move out of fear I would break the silence and draw attention to myself. With the silence came a wave of self-consciousness due to the anxiety that I would somehow inadvertently insert myself into the performative environment—and in doing so subject myself to the gaze of other audience members. This self-imposed paralysis felt even more extreme in relation to my memory of freely meandering through the very same space earlier that day, wholly unconcerned with the attention of the other art viewers. Only when the soundscape returned a few minutes later could I relax back into comfortable obscurity, pondering Hassabi and the rug.

Upon leaving The Kitchen after *SOLO* and waiting for a ride on the sidewalk of West 19th Street, my experience of the work was once more unhinged. I saw Hassabi near me on the street, engaged in a post-show chat within a small circle of individuals. She had changed out of the neutral-colored pants and t-shirt she wore while performing and was now dressed in jeans, a dark leather jacket, and a green scarf. Other than our relatively close spatial proximity I did not interact with Hassabi, yet even two years later I feel this casual moment was an integral continuation of the performance I had witnessed. Viewing Hassabi in this moment, not as an abstracted performing body but as a fellow pedestrian living and existing, suddenly unleashed within my mind questions regarding *her* experience performing the work I had just seen in

relation to my perceptions. How could I reconcile the abstracted body parts, half concealed beneath a distorted Persian rug with the relaxed, fashionable woman who stood next to me on the street? Were the two distinct portraits I now had of the same body connected by an overarching identity? Furthermore, I had a new awareness that my experience of the piece had been based on a particular spatial perspective. The stationary singularity of my point of view in relation to the performer had provided a frame for my viewing experience. What aspects of Hassabi's experience had this viewing configuration allowed to be captured, and transmitted to me as I silently sat and observed, and what aspects were concealed by the visual framing of the work?

Since viewing *SOLO* two years ago, the questions of viewership and performance that I drew from the experience have stayed with me and impacted my personal practices of making and performing dance and choreography. Most pressing has been an increased sense of ambiguity regarding the placement of the dancer in relation to the audience—an ambiguity that I feel is born out of a tension between the performing body as both artistic object on view for audience consumption and human subject experiencing internal thoughts and sensations. Dance performance, particularly performances employing conventional, frontal modes of spectatorship, positions the performer as the object of the audience's gaze. The role of the dancer is then to enact the choreography, potentially concealing or forfeiting portions of their subjectivity (their personality, style, unique desires, etc.) to adhere to the decisions of the choreographer.² When seated in the auditorium of a proscenium theater or some other configuration that facilitates immobile, frontal-viewing, spectators can remain spatially and mentally alienated from

² For further discussion on the role of the dancer and the dancer's subjectivity see Graham McFee, "'Admirable Legs', or the Dancer's Importance for the Dance," in *Thinking Through Dance*, ed. Jenny Bunker, Anna Pakes, and Bonnie Rowell (Great Britain: Dance Books Ltd., 2013), 22-45. And Virginia Spivey, "Sites of Subjectivity: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and Dance," *Dance Research Journal*, no. 35/36 (2003), 116, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30045072>.

performers due to the fact that dancers are generally involved with physical movement while viewers remain still.³ Furthermore, the anonymity of being one of many within an audience, and the knowledge that attention will be focused on the performers rather than those attending fosters a distinct separation and imbalance between the experience of performers versus that of audience members. However, as I discovered while feeling waves of self-consciousness in the abrupt silence midway through *SOLO*, scenarios can arise in which audience members also experience the ambiguity of seeing while being seen.

My attempts to understand the individual experiences of dancer and audience as well as the relationship between the two groups, has led me to pursue broader theories of perception. In using the term perception, I refer to the knowledge and understanding of oneself and the external world that is engendered through conscious experience. French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908-1961) influential theoretical text on the topics of embodiment and perception, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) has become the foundation of my exploration. His work argues for the foundational role perception plays in understanding and engaging with the world while notably emphasizing the body as the primary site of knowing within human experience.⁴ I found Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the body's central role in generating conscious experience a particularly useful theoretical framework with which to consider perception within the context of performance.⁵ Merleau-Ponty suggests that as living beings we are both in the world *through* our bodies, and perceive the world *with* our bodies.⁶ In other words, the body as a physical entity

³ Bojana Cvejić attributes the asymmetry of performer and audience to the difference between the movement performed and movement perceived. See Bojana Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in European Contemporary Dance and Performance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 71.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty's focus on the body stands in contrast to Cartesian philosophical traditions that place consciousness as the primary site of knowing.

⁵ This same line of reasoning has led numerous other dance scholars, including Ann Cooper Albright, Jane Carr, Mark Franko, and Maxine Sheets-Johnston, to use *The Phenomenology of Perception* as a foundation for their work.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 206.

grounds our existence as one of the many material objects within the world, yet simultaneously the body is a vehicle for the mind to understand the world via sensory stimuli. As I see it, an inherent duality emerges from this description: the body as object—a material thing that itself can be seen, touched, and otherwise sensed within the external world—and the body as the container of self—a vessel facilitating the internalized mental construction of individual, subjective identity in relation to the external world. The notion of this simultaneous existence of the body as both physical object and container of subjectivity raises critical questions when contextualized within lived conscious experience: If the body is considered one of the many material objects within the world, how does the body effect the interactions we have with the external world? What implications does the physical body hold for the formation of internal subjective experience?

To explore these questions, the first chapter of this study contextualizes the theories of perception proposed within *The Phenomenology of Perception* using as examples three works of choreography: Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* (1922), Lucinda Childs' *Museum Piece* (1965), and William Forsythe's *Everywhere and Nowhere at the Same Time* (2013). In addition to the dual existence of the body, two specific ideas regarding movement and vision, gleaned through my reading of Merleau-Ponty's theories of perception in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, guide the analysis— notions that I refer to as “the body as a mobile object” and “the perspectivism of conscious experience”.⁷ My discussion reveals and supports a theory of perception that begins with, ends with, and is based around the body. Not only does my choreographic analysis reinforce Merleau-Ponty's stance that the body provides the constitutive source of conscious experience, but I propose that the specific form of the physical body both

⁷ These phrases are my own distillations of the theories detailed in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

guides and limits all external interactions with the world as well as internally formed subjective conceptions.

The works of Schlemmer, Childs, and Forsythe may at first appear disparate and disconnected choices for successive discussion, created by vastly different artists in different locations, decades, and aesthetic contexts. However, these three works were specifically selected due to their relevance and influence within my own choreographic practice, which has served as an additional site of research for this study. Without conflating the works of Schlemmer, Childs, and Forsythe, I aim for chapter one to illuminate new and innovative through-lines between these works that would otherwise remain unconsidered. Furthermore, in advance of chapter two, which discloses knowledge produced in my own choreographic process, I hope for my discussion of Schlemmer, Childs, and Forsythe to provide some context regarding the various pre-existing choreographic lineages I considered while creating my own work.

The second chapter of this study, written from my own first-person perspective, documents and analyzes my choreographic investigations into the phenomenon of perception.⁸ During the fall of 2017 and the spring of 2018, I created and performed a diptych of works, *Transparent Objects* and *Enclosed and Between* at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, NY. The process of making and performing these two works has allowed me to contextualize the lived experience of understanding oneself as both an object within the world and a subjective internal self. My choreographic inquiries into perception have led me to specifically explore the poignant dynamics of dancer-audience relationships within the context of performance. Pursuing

⁸ In structuring my practice-as-research project I followed suggested strategies for practice-as-research methodologies as described by Robin Nelson. See Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 34. For an in-depth discussion on the productivity and ethics of self-reflexive research see John Freeman, *Blood, Sweat, and Theory* (Faringdon, England: Libri Publishing, 2009), 177-184.

questions such as: How can the subjective self be represented when the body is viewed as an object? If the dancer is a self who both sees and is seen, then where is their power and identity located in the act of performance? How might choreographically reconsidering the position of the audience effectively shift the power dynamics of the performer-audience relationship? Ultimately, my work has led me to propose that mobile viewing, as an alternative mode of spectatorship, has the potential to balance the experience of dancer and audience within a performance as well as to raise viewers' awareness of their own bodies in relation to the aesthetics of the choreography.

II. Chapter One: Perception as Revealed through Choreographic Thinking

1. The Body as a Mobile Object: Oskar Schlemmer's Sprial Dance from *Triadic Ballet*

If the body is considered one of the many material objects within the world, what implications does the physical body hold for our interactions with surrounding environments? Merleau-Ponty suggests that it is through the conception of oneself as a mobile object that one comes to understand the external world.⁹ That is, the body's ability to move, and the inherent understanding of mobility that each body develops, enables individuals to navigate their surrounding environment and identify objects that they encounter. Generally, the concept of the body as a mobile object is, to varying degrees, innately understood by the perceiving subject—individuals can identify objects and recognize aspects of their environment and without needing to always fully move around them.¹⁰ As I see it, the Spiral dance, appearing in the third act of Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* (1922) provides an abstract, visual representation of the body

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 203.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 204-205.

in space that expands upon the integrated relationship between the physical body and the external world proposed by Merleau-Ponty.

The mysteriously mesmerizing, yet whimsical scene of the Spiral dance, featuring a female soloist, presents a visual rumination on the form of the spiral in which all aspects of the choreography—costume, bodily movement, space, and even time—reiterate the spiral.¹¹ With a serene expression on her unmasked face, the soloist begins her movement from the center of the stage.¹² At a measured pace, she progresses clockwise along a two-dimensional spiral that appears in white against the black floor. The dancer's body rotates around itself in a revolving clockwise trajectory while tracing the corkscrew pathway, creating the hypnotic effect of a spiral within a spiral—an effect that is further amplified by the gentle, yet unrelenting rhythm of her soft footsteps as well as the striking sculptural garment adorned by the performer.

The dancer's elaborate three-dimensional costume features a black conical skirt worn over a black unitard. The narrow end of the cone encircles the soloist's waist while the wide end reaches the level of her knees. A narrow, flat plane—black that is outlined in white—protrudes from the cone and winds its way up and around the skirt base while extending away like a thin ledge.¹³ Interestingly, the materials used for the original costume included transparent celluloid and black leather.¹⁴ This juxtaposition of natural and synthetic fabrics must have imbued the dance with both a technological and archaic feel. Donning the constructed skirt, the dancer animates the three-dimensional form from her embedded position within the sculptural garment,

¹¹ For a comprehensive discussion on the form of the spiral and its implications within dance see Gabrielle Brandstetter, *Poetics of Dance: Body, Image, and Space in the Historical Avant-Gardes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 263-267.

¹² The following description utilizes a filmed reconstruction, *Das Triadische Ballett*, of the 1922 work directed by Helmut Ammann in 1970. See Paulo Henrique, "Triadisches Ballet | Triadic Ballet by Oskar Schlemmer," Mar 17, 2014, <https://youtu.be/rLiT80dqHE?t=18m21s>.

¹³ For reference image see Noam Elcott, *Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 178.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

provoking, in the words of Johannes Birringer: “a double (artificial) construction of a kinesthetic body and animated design.”¹⁵ As she performs, the rigid costume obscures the organic form of the human body. I would argue that this double construction of human performer within sculpted, artificial costume exacerbates the dancer’s dual experience as both human subject and artistic object.

The soloist’s upper body remains static throughout her rotations, with arms held out by the sides of the torso and elbows and wrists flexed in a doll-like attitude—an artificial performative affect that can arguably be attributed to Schlemmer’s background in the plastic arts.¹⁶ The tension between the static doll-like figure and the dynamic form of the spiral supplies a sustained energetic force that drives the dance forward. The scene resolves as the unwinding curve of the two-dimensional spiral pathway flattens out, leading the dancer out of the space. From beginning to end, the arc of the scene displays a continuously flowing, virtually endless progression of movement made more explicit by the soloist’s static bodily comportment and doll-like form. No moment of differentiated phrasing or interruption of the movement appears during the scene. The performer, with her evenly paced steps, propels herself through space, legs rotating inward and outward to execute her spiraling trajectory. This idea of propulsion is key to my analysis; does the spiral dancer have agency, or is she being moved from an outside force?

I would argue that though the body of the performer animates the skirt, the spiral costume specifically dictates and restricts the movement of the dancer. Birringer refers to Schlemmer’s performers as the puppeteers or operators of the costumes, yet I believe these descriptors imply a power dynamic and level of agency held by the performer to manipulate material form of the

¹⁵ Johannes Birringer, “Bauhaus, Constructivism, Performance,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, no. 35, vol. 2 (2013): 45, doi:10.1162/PAJJ. 45.

¹⁶ Bauhaus Book

costume that is not reflected in the movement of the costumed figure.¹⁷ The costume masks the body and overrides the body's intrinsic understanding of itself as a self-guided mobile object. If the constructed form of Schlemmer's costume, as the driving organizational force within the environment, provides such pervasive structural framework for the interaction of figure and space, can it then be inferred that the formal specificities of the body impose similarly extensive constraints on human interactions in space? Though less body-enveloping than other costumes in Schlemmer's ballet, I want to propose that the way the Spiral dancer's interaction with space is molded by the conical skirt, is not only in line with how Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests individuals move through and conceive of space and objects based on the mobility of their body, but presents an additional theory for how the specific form of the body gives shape to space as humans interact with the world. While demonstrated most clearly by the Spiral dance, this operating principle holds true for the entirety of the third section of *Triadic Ballet* and leads me to my argument that only through the physical experience of bodily movement can shape and direction can be attributed to space.

My proposal expands on discussions presented by Merleau-Ponty within the *Phenomenology of Perception*. As a means of exemplifying how bodily movement facilitates perception, Merleau-Ponty presents an example of the cube—a three-dimensional solid object bounded by six equal square faces.¹⁸ From any single point of view, the six sides of the cube can never be seen equally. Moving around the cube, however, and seeing the square of each face come in and out of view, will ultimately reveal the completed form of the cube with its six equal and simultaneous sides. Therefore, this example shows how the body's capacity to move enables us to understand elements of our external environments. However, what Merleau-Ponty's

¹⁷ Birringer, "Bauhaus, Constructivism, Performance," 45.

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 203-204.

example of the cube and subsequent description fail to mention in satisfactory detail, is how the specific movement abilities inherent within the anatomical structure of the human form shape these spatial interactions. However, Schlemmer's choreographic choices, particularly regarding costume design, provide the information missing from Merleau-Ponty's example of the cube. Central to *Triadic Ballet*, and the key aspect making the work relevant for this discussion, is the radical transformation of the human form Schlemmer achieved by placing performers in elaborately designed, body-enveloping costumes. Using a slightly different conceptual approach for each of the three sections of *Triadic Ballet*, Schlemmer designed a total of twenty costumes according to his personal theories regarding the human body's temporal and dynamic laws of movement and the abstract laws of the static space.¹⁹ Specifically, for the third act of the ballet, Schlemmer designed costumes that would transfer laws of bodily motion into space, and it is this transference that makes my argument that the specific form of the body gives shape to human interactions in the world explicit within Schlemmer's choreography.

Thus, the costumes of *Triadic Ballet's* third act, including the spiral skirt described above, appear as three-dimensional representations of different movement trajectories of the human body, becoming solidified imprints of paths drawn by movement through space. Gabrielle Brandstetter refers to these costumes as, "plastic manifestation[s] of [the dancer's] own movements, which have been reflected back on himself and in doing so been reintegrated into the dance space," a description which points to the way that negative space becomes materialized within the avant-garde *Triadic Ballet*.²⁰ Importantly, the reflection and reintegration of bodily movement into space, as articulated by Brandstetter, effectively moves the mobilizing force from

¹⁹ For elaboration on Schlemmer's theories of body and space, see Oskar Schlemmer, "Man and Art Figure," in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, ed. Walter Gropius and Arthur Wensinger (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961), 15-46.

²⁰ Brandstetter, *Poetics of Dance*, 292-293.

the internal space of the body into an external, formalized existence. Of the dances in the final act, the scene of the Spiral dance most clearly demonstrates this principle, taking as its point of reference the spiral rotation available within the internal structures of the human body. Thus, like a three-dimensional, living version of Schlemmer's drawings of the human figure within geometric representations of space, the Spiral dancer plays with the external amplification of the body's aptitude for spiral rotation in motion.²¹ The spiral pattern, infused within all aspects of the scene, maps a formal union of body and space that relies on the sculpted costume to visually represent the interface between the two as well as guide and shape the interaction.

In terms of *Triadic Ballet* as a performed event, the notion that all the dancer's movement possibilities and environmental interactions are altered, limited, and guided by the designs of the costumes raises questions of performer as well as audience perception. What do the costumes mean for dancer subjectivity and how do they effect viewer experience? As discussed above, Schlemmer's costumes placed performers such as the Spiral dancer in a position of being subject to the constraints of their garments. Dancers were forced to adjust and redistribute their centers of gravity to accommodate the cumbersome outfits, and in some cases the costumes repositioned and torqued their bodies in awkward angles.²² Though obviously active in their engagement with the costumes, performers committed to a somewhat passive role while encased within and directed by their garments. The bulbous, geometric shapes of the three-dimensional costumes and the mechanical movements of the dance obliterated the performer's human forms and impulses. Juliet Koss argues that the ambiguous visual presence of Schlemmer's figural dancers

²¹ See Schlemmer, "Man and Art Figure," 23-24.

²² Birringer, "Bauhaus, Constructivism, Performance," 45; and Juliet Koss, "Bauhaus Theater of Human Dolls," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 85, no. 4 (2003): 734, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3177367>.

elicited a correspondingly double-sided reaction on the part of the audience.²³ She proposes that the performer's masked bodies appeared simultaneously endearing and alienating, paradoxically encouraging emotional engagement on the part of the audience as well as the absence of feeling.²⁴ This proposition depends on a specific two-part perceptual reaction on the part of viewers. Koss describes, using the philosophical thinking of Robert Vischer and Walter Gropius, that the passive audience member might unconsciously project their own bodily form into the form of the figural performer, generating an aesthetically derived sense of empathy. However, shock and intrigue at the perceived differences between the performing bodies and the viewer's understanding of his or her own body could concurrently engender feelings of estrangement.²⁵

Noam Elcott puts forth a separate argument, specifically regarding the third act of the ballet, for how Schlemmer engaged the audience across the spatial divide between auditorium and stage. Elcott's explanation centers around the mutually-encompassing artificial darkness generated by set design. Throughout the third act, the performance space features a black backdrop and black stage, a stark contrast in tone to the bright yellow and rose-colored sets employed in the first two acts. Importantly, the black of the stage environment mirrored the darkness that immediately surrounded audience members seated within the theater. Elcott proposes that the darkness of stage and auditorium combines into an encompassing medium, a zone of unlit space shared by audience and performer alike. He states, "darkness was a medium through which choreographer, dancer, and spectator could jointly explore the spatial and bodily conditions of modern, technologized theater...darkness was not what separated spectators from

²³ *Triadic Ballet* premiered at the Wurttemberg Landestheater in Stuttgart, Germany and was viewed according to typical proscenium configurations.

²⁴ Koss, "Bauhaus Theater of Human Dolls," 735.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 735.

actors, auditorium from stage, but rather the very condition that they shared.”²⁶ Considering this claim in isolation, I would argue that darkness alone, though an artificial condition shared by each party during the third act, would not be enough to engage an audience in a joint exploration of body and space given the spatial divisions still in place, the alienating effect of the body-obscuring costumes, and the basic fact that performers were experiencing physical movement while the audience remained still. However, Elcott’s proposition is more compelling when considered in tandem with the suggestions of Koss. If Koss is correct that Schlemmer’s aesthetics and conceptual ideas regarding design could produce empathetic responses from audiences, then the encompassing artificial darkness certainly may have magnified this reaction. In this case, the mutual darkness likely infused a further layer of ambiguity within the viewing experience—audience and performers simultaneously connected by, yet separated within, the darkness.

Altogether, by way of elaborate costuming, Schlemmer enveloped and obscured the bodies of his performers in such a way as to interrogate and articulate the relationship between the human body and external space. Specifically, as my analysis has shown, Schlemmer’s *Spiral* dance, through abstract representation, presents a proposal for how movement of the human body molds and gives shape to surrounding space. However, by masking the actual bodily forms of his performers Schlemmer choreographically generates an environment of ambiguity that effected both the experience of the performers who became subject to their costumes and the audience who were potentially both drawn in and repelled by the alien appearance of the performing figures.

²⁶ Elcott, *Artificial Darkness*, 182.

2. The Perspectivism of Conscious Experience: Lucinda Childs' *Museum Piece*

If the mobile body provides both the guiding and limiting framework for spatial interactions in the world as has been shown by my discussion of Oskar Schlemmer's Spiral dance, then what implications does this construct hold for personal subjective experience? As Schlemmer's enveloping costumes complicated this issue in the above discussion, to delve deeper into questions of the subjectivity encapsulated within the body, I now turn towards a choreographic work in which the subjectivity of the choreographer/performer emerge as crucial content. Lucinda Childs' *Museum Piece* (1965) innovatively combines objects, text, and dance within a performative lecture/demonstration surrounding the topics of visual perspective and perception.²⁷ The work exposes the subjectivity that inevitably results from the limitations of the physical body, a notion that corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's position regarding the perspectivism of human experience. Philosophically, perspectivism refers to the theory that knowledge of a subject is inescapably partial and limited by the individual perspective from which it is viewed. Merleau-Ponty argues that humans are apt to forget the perspectivism of their perceptions, leading to posited concepts of an objective world that does not truly exist.²⁸ Childs' choreography contextualizes these theories of Merleau-Ponty and offers a playful reminder to viewers that every perception of the world is inescapably personal.

Childs derived *Museum Work* from the post-Impressionist, pointillist painting *Le Cirque* (1890-91) by French artist Georges Seurat. *Museum Piece* functionally deconstructs and

²⁷ Lucinda Childs, a choreographer whose career blossomed out of her early work with the Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s and 70s, is well known for creating work that challenges the visual perception of her audiences. For more on this trend see Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 133-148.

²⁸ On a related note, perspectivism as a term can also be defined as the practice of regarding and analyzing a situation or work of art from different points of view. *Museum Piece* sits perfectly at the intersection of these two definitions, because while ultimately demonstrating the inevitable subjectivity of perception, since through the piece Childs reconstitutes her encounter with the post-Impressionist, pointillist painting *Le Cirque* (1890-91) by French artist Georges Seurat.

repurposes Childs' viewing experience of this work of art. *Le Cirque* depicts a circus act in which five acrobats and an accompanying white horse perform before an array of spectators. The curving bodies of the nimble performers create a sense of swirling movement in the foreground of the painting, so when observing the image, the viewer finds himself placed directly within the midst of the spectacular action. Beyond the acrobats, audience members witness the spectacle from vertically stacked stadium seating, directing their observational attention towards not only the painted entertainers but also towards the individual viewing the painting. Throughout *Museum Piece*, Childs comments, quite literally through spoken text, on the pointillist technique of the painting, the color palette, as well as Seurat's figural forms. In doing so, she magnifies and embodies the painting as a means of investigating the phenomenon of visual perception.

Museum Piece begins with a soloist, casually dressed in jeans and a fitted long sleeve t-shirt with bare feet, placing flat colored circles on the floor in uneven rows.²⁹ She works her way from upstage to downstage. The differently-colored dots do not appear to be put down in any distinct pattern, but seem randomly situated. While still distributing the circles, the soloist begins to speak, alluding to the painting that inspired the work. She describes her activity of placing dots as an "offshoot" of pointillist painting techniques.³⁰ Hinting at the perceptual play of human vision invoked by pointillism, the soloist explains how small points of unmixed color are blended by the human eye into a fuller range of tones that reveal dimensional forms within the perceived graduations in color. This brief introduction to pointillism reveals an ironic play of

²⁹ This role was originally performed by Childs herself at the Judson Memorial Church in New York City, but in 2013 the piece was restaged at the University of the Arts, in Philadelphia, PA, and was alternatively performed by Annie Wilson and Megan Bridge. The filmed reconstruction featuring Wilson, in conjunction with Childs' original written documentation of the piece, provides the basis for my description and analysis. The costume description is specifically referring to the filmed reconstruction. See *Museum Piece, A Steady Pulse*, accessed March 7, 2018, http://danceworkbook.pcah.us/asteadypulse/dances/museum_piece.html.

³⁰ Text obtained from materials provided by *Museum Piece, A Steady Pulse*, accessed March 7, 2018, http://danceworkbook.pcah.us/asteadypulse/dances/museum_piece.html.

scale at work in Childs' performance. The text illuminates a painting technique dependent on the miniscule size of painted specks, but Childs' spots, magnified to such a great extent, produce nothing like the same visual effect. A spectacularly dramatic shift in perspective, to say the very least, would be necessary for the frontally-placed audience to perceive the large circles spread out across the floor in the same manner as a pointillist painting. The performer's serious, instructional demeanor heightens the irony of the situation, as she does not directly address this contradiction in scale. Similar hints of irony continue to color the piece as the work unfolds.

After placing down a total of twenty-one colored spots, the performer retreats upstage behind the field of circles and faces away from the audience. The soloist's audible commentary continues as she provides a live, in-the-moment account of her present state. Pulling out a small handheld mirror while still facing upstage, she attests matter-of-factly, "I think that I am now in a position where I can truthfully say that everything I have put down is behind me with the exception of this mirror which I am holding in my left hand."³¹ The combination of this spoken description and the visual image of the performer seen by viewers creates a double focus, requiring the audience to cross-reference and reconcile the two sources of information within their perception.³² By vocally articulating her position, the performer provides audience members the chance to compare her description with their own individual perceptions of the same moment in time. The soloist's rather long-winded statement, full of self-referential I's, me's, and my's, provides mainly redundant information in comparison to what is visually evident. The audience can plainly see that the performer is behind the dots, facing away from

³¹ Text obtained from materials provided by Museum Piece, A Steady Pulse, accessed March 7, 2018, http://danceworkbook.pcah.us/asteadypulse/dances/museum_piece.html.

³² This phenomenon of cross-referencing perception is also a tool used by Childs in *Street Dance* (1964)—a piece during which spectators watched from an upper story window two dancers blend into the activity on the street below while listening to a perfectly timed audio tract narrating the activities of the performers. See Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 146.

them, and holding a mirror. The phrases “I think” and “I can truthfully say” make the performer’s statement subjective in a way that might come across as unnecessary to viewers. The fact that the soloist qualifies visually obvious information in this personal manner even adds a tinge of absurdity to her as a figure. However, I suggest that by subjectively framing her perception of her own physical state aloud through spoken text, Childs’ begins building towards a broader message of the inevitable subjectivity within perception.

Using the mirror as a mode of rear vision, the soloist navigates backwards through the dots, shuffling her feet carefully between the circles to progress downstage while maintaining her upstage facing. More text accompanies this action and reveals even more explicitly the perceptual concerns underlying the work. Childs articulates the physical limitations that the body imposes on perception and challenges these limits through her use of the mirror:

The human biology is essentially equipped to enter things in front of itself and is relatively incapable of entering things from behind without the use of rear vision which is the reason for which I am using the mirror as I enter this body of material – and the reason why I am entering it in this backwards manner – is I suppose that I wanted to get a new angle on the material...³³

Once again, including a number of I’s, the spoken text is highly self-reflexive, and it continues to focus the performance directly around the personal exploration of the soloist: overtly disclosing her perceptions, actions, and desires. Childs rightly points out that human eyes continually see ahead, and only ahead. This structural facet of human vision dominates perceptual experiences of the world by creating a limiting framework through which visual information is received.

Humans’ forward-looking vision regularly influences how certain environments are constructed.

³³ Text obtained from materials provided by Museum Piece, A Steady Pulse, accessed March 7, 2018, http://danceworkbook.pcah.us/asteadypulse/dances/museum_piece.html.

Case-in-point, proscenium theaters have been designed and constructed to accommodate forward-facing audiences. However, to disrupt the patterns of her own forward-facing vision in an attempt to find a new perspective (i.e. “get a new angle on the material”), the soloist uses a mirror to see and approach the dots backwards. This choice allows her to change her mode of locomotion and she can now walk backwards and forwards through the space.

Gaining a new perspective, or point of view, as the soloist attempts to do in this moment, holds the promise of receiving new information. This can generate more advanced understandings of objects and aspects in the external world. Merleau-Ponty discloses how the visual perception of an object will always be informed and constrained by the specific positioning of the viewer, just as a building would appear differently from its opposite sides, from inside, and from a birds-eye-view above it. He argues that humans are bound to this perspectivism, since to truly see an object in its entirety, the object would need to be seen simultaneously from everywhere—a clear impossibility due to the limitations of the body.³⁴ However, when the performer speaks again, rather than offering some observed revelation gleaned from her new perspective, she instead discloses a flaw in the perspectival experiment: “...the only angle I have found here is not new – it is created by the line extending from that point at which my eye hits the mirror to a point on the floor which I see in the mirror...all I can safely say about this angle is that it is probably more than 45° and inevitably less than 90°.”³⁵ These words, continuing to exhibit the personal experience of the performer, directly reference the optical angles of humans’ visual field, providing a specific example for how the structures of the body functionally limit perception. Using a mirror to see backwards cannot produce a “new

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 69.

³⁵ Text obtained from materials provided by Museum Piece, A Steady Pulse, accessed March 7, 2018, http://danceworkbook.pcah.us/asteadypulse/dances/museum_piece.html.

angle” since the performer’s vision continues to be framed by the same operational parameters. Within this portion of the performance, Childs’ ultimately provides an abstract demonstration of how the structure of the body frames visual experience and limits the knowledge that can be extrapolated from the world.

However, following this point I would add that using the mirror for backwards navigation does in fact generate a distinctly different mode of perception than simply looking forward. Though not specifically addressed in Childs’ text, using a mirror allows the viewer to receive visual information from two directions in space while potentially enabling the viewer to see themselves in the act of seeing. The mirror creates a multidirectional and self-reflexive perceptual experience that enables the body to physically move through an environment (i.e. walk backwards) in a manner that under normal circumstances would be neither efficient nor safe.³⁶ By simply stating that the angle she has found is “not new” and not acknowledging the other radical experiential shifts produced by the use of the mirror, especially when viewers can clearly see the altering effect that rear vision has on her movement in space, the difference in what is said versus what is shown once again infuses subtle irony into the fabric of the performance.

Following her talk of angles, while still navigating backwards through the dots the soloist proceeds to make a series of statements which I believe are the most crucial for exposing Childs’ position on the subjectivity of conscious experience. In a final twist, the performer denies the presence of “the personal” in the event that has just transpired. The soloist declares:

John Cage favored the concept of working outside the realm of personal choice when making decisions in the creative process using chance methodology – but as you can see I

³⁶ The mirror, as a device with the potential to alter perception and frame new viewing experiences, is specifically explored by choreographer John Jasperse in his 2003 work, *Just Two Dancers*.

have not placed these dots randomly but rather in a very specific pattern...*[lists all the colors of the twenty-one dots in order]*...However, each step I'm taking is determined by the information I am receiving from my mirror, so there is nothing personal going on here at all.³⁷

It is at first difficult to discern an intended meaning from these contradictory lines of text that refer to chance methodologies and randomness as well as patterns and personal choice. However, based on my conclusions drawn from earlier sections of the piece regarding the highly self-reflexive nature of the text and the recurring ironic undertones, I suggest that this statement highlights the subjectivity of perception and challenges notions that our visually-driven experiences are anything but “personal”. Beginning with the first half of the statement, immediately following her allusion to the randomness and indeterminacy of chance methodologies used by John Cage, the performer calls into question her relationship with the dots on the floor. She asserts that rather than at random, they have been placed in a very specific pattern. The concept of a pattern would typically imply some intelligible repetition in the design, which is clearly not present in the arrangement of colored dots. Therefore, this lack of visual confirmation raises questions: is this another instance of irony in the text? Is there actually no predetermined pattern after all? Documentational sketches made by Childs that specifically map out the placement of each colored circle—sketches which match the placement of dots as they appear in the filmed reconstruction—reveal that the placement is in fact a prearranged design.³⁸ However, despite this being the case, the audience viewing the performance in the moment lacks anyway to know whether the positions of each dot or the color of each dot was predetermined.

³⁷ Text obtained from materials provided by Museum Piece, A Steady Pulse, accessed March 7, 2018, http://danceworkbook.pcah.us/asteadypulse/dances/museum_piece.html.

³⁸ Museum Piece, A Steady Pulse, accessed March 7, 2018, http://danceworkbook.pcah.us/asteadypulse/dances/museum_piece.html.

The next portion of text brings clarity to the confusion of the prior statement. The soloist concludes, since her movement is determined by the visual information from the mirror, that what is happening is not personal. I will assert that this sentiment, in keeping with prior contradictory elements within the work, is a definitive use of irony intended to reveal an alternative perspective regarding perceptive experience. When talking previously about visual angles, the performer illustrates how perception is subject to the functional limits of our own specific biological structures. She effectually demonstrates how the body filters and frames the information that is received from the external world, indicating that perceptions are always individual and specific to the perceiving body. Therefore, perception cannot be detached from personal experience, which means that encounters within the world cannot be categorized as anything other than personal. Returning to the confusing question of whether the dots were placed randomly or in a highly specific pattern, the ironic statement that follows indicates that this distinction has no bearing on Childs' piece. In either case, the choreography of *Museum Piece* demonstrates that perception will always be subjective, and that this subjectivity can be definitively traced to the specific biological structures that comprise each individual human body. Therefore, Childs' choreography functions as a reminder to viewers of what Merleau-Ponty claims humans tend to forget: there is subjectivity inherent within all perceived knowledge and conceived understandings of the world.

Museum Piece continues from here to conclude with a three-dimensional recreation of *Le Cirque*. Placing a stool under her stomach for balance, the performer takes on an aerial pose based on one of the painted acrobats. The live audience viewing the performance replaces the painted spectators watching the circus. Overall, the soloist's surreal performative tour through the field of dots illuminates Childs' deep understanding and curiosity regarding visual

perception, and more importantly exemplifies a desire to make audiences aware of how they are seeing and perceiving the world.³⁹ Using ironic text to directly address viewers and communicate information that will guide their experience of visual imagery, Childs masterfully allows her perspective to be revealed through perceived discrepancies in what is seen versus what is said. Pointillism, the painting technique explicated in the opening of *Museum Piece* can now be taken as an example of the distorting capabilities of human perception. Like the dots placed across the floor, pointillist paintings are merely horizontal fields of colored dots. However, the human body allows us to find form and meaning in these displays of—potentially highly specific but potentially random—colored dots. When used as a site to contextualize the perspectivism theories of Merleau-Ponty, *Museum Piece* reveals that through self-conscious awareness of the body, perception comes into view as a personal and highly subjective phenomenon.

3. Mobilizing Perception: William Forsythe's *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time*

Thus far, in analyzing Oskar Schlemmer's *Spiral* dance from *Triadic Ballet* and Lucinda Child's *Museum Piece*, I have only considered Merleau-Ponty's theories of perception in relation to choreographic works that place audiences in conventional viewing configurations as they are viewed live. Stationary, frontal viewing serves each of these works in specific ways and generates distinct experiences for audience members in relation to the choreography. The third act of *Triadic Ballet* provides an encompassing darkness in which viewers can imaginatively immerse themselves within the experience of the performing figures, while *Museum Piece* allows audiences to reflect on the subjectivity of perception by cross-referencing visual images with spoken text. Regardless of what frontal, static viewing offers audiences of *Triadic Ballet*

³⁹ For more on visual perception in Childs work see Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 133-148.

and *Museum Piece*, this mode of spectatorship invariably creates decidedly different experiences for the two groups (i.e. the performers and the audience) involved in the performances of each work. While the performers enact elements of the choreography through their physical movement, audience members perceive the choreography while remaining still. To this point I ask, if audiences, rather than remaining still, are invited into movement during choreographic performances, then what kind of informational content might this enable audiences to understand that is not perceivable when standing still? Is there choreographic content that cannot be perceived while remaining immobile?

To consider these questions and conclude this chapter, I will briefly turn to William Forsythe's installation *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time* as an example of a choreographic event that incites physical movement within the bodies of those attending.⁴⁰ The installation, comprised of hundreds of swinging pendulums (the specific number varies between different iterations of the piece) suspended from automated ceiling grids, presents audiences with a complex, rhythmical environment that they can move through and experience physically. Though originating as a choreographed piece performed by professional dancers which audiences would watch, later versions of *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time* (and the versions that will serve as the focus of this discussion) have eliminated predetermined, pre-rehearsed dancers. Instead, iterations No. 2 – 4 provide immersive and interactive spaces in which spectators usurp a performative role. The installation prompts those attending to spontaneously enact an improvisatory movement score according to the environmental stimuli. Thus, audiences are able to become physically as well as optically engaged with the work.

⁴⁰ This installation has existed in different iterations, no.2 (2013), no.3 (2015), and no.4 (2015) all are based around the same premise and are similarly relevant for my discussion. See *Artworks, William Forsythe Choreographic Objects*, accessed March 7, 2018, https://www.williamforsythe.com/installations.html?&no_cache=1&detail=1&uid=21.

Upon entering the jungle of pendulums, the one instruction is to avoid coming into contact with the swinging objects. This directive produces a light dance of evasion from all those who take on the challenge. Due to the ever-shifting motion of the individual pendulums, pathways through the swaying forest are neither linear nor straightforward. Successful navigation requires constant recalculation and instantaneous decision-making. Video footage of the installation reveals the participant's physical reactions: cautious walking, awkward shuffling feet, buoyant side steps, and fearless dashing.⁴¹ Though no two participants execute their dance in exactly the same manner, there is an overall aesthetic cohesion in the lightly-shifting movements used to locomote through the space. In particular, most of those who move through the installation exhibit a focused, downcast energy as they keep watch of the pendulums in relation to their bodies.

In terms of what experiences the installations can achieve for participants, Forsythe himself claims, "This work makes the state of one's body quite clear."⁴² While superficially appearing quite blatant, this statement actually reveals a complex proposal regarding self-perception in relation to one's external environment. Forsythe suggests that his work generates kinetic self-awareness through lived experience. Upon reflection, those attending may realize that despite having had no prior rehearsal, by simply moving through the installation they are simultaneously executing and perceiving a choreographic idea through their body's own physical movement. This kind of experience stands in stark contrast to the simulated or imagined experience derived from empathetic viewing in proscenium works such as *Triadic Ballet*. Participants understand *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time* through the physical

⁴¹ See video: Choreographic Objects. "NOWHERE AND EVERYWHERE AT THE SAME TIME, NO.2 - William Forsythe." Mar 31, 2017. https://youtu.be/as1bQ6Xl_fg.

⁴² William Forsythe, *The Fact of Matter* (New York: Kerber, 2016), 54.

movement the installation generates within their own bodies. I would argue that in terms of choreographic performance, this type of physical immersion is the mode of attending most likely to make audiences aware of the body's central role in generating perceptions and conceptions of the external world. Though my analysis in the chapter reveals how the choreography of Schlemmer's *Spiral* dance and Childs' *Museum Piece* exemplify the perceptive theories of perception put forth by Merleau-Ponty, attending performances of these two works offer aesthetic experiences that can only be embodied within the imaginations of the viewers. Forsythe's *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time*, however, provides an experience that is felt, perceived, and made tangible through and within physical movement of the body.

III: Chapter Two: Choreography in Practice: *Transparent Objects* and *Enclosed and Between*

4. *Transparent Objects*: Choreographing the Self

Turning to my own choreographic practice as a site of research for this study, has allowed me to continue my investigations of viewership and performance from the alternative perspective of lived context. *Transparent Objects*, a solo work combining the media of dance and sculpture, was the informative first stage of my choreographic research into perception and dance performance. Approximately twenty-minutes long, the piece was created during the fall of 2017 at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, NY with its premiere on December 9, 2017 at the Bessie Schönberg Dance Theater. Though I conceived the piece with clear intentions regarding what I wanted to achieve through the work, problems and new questions arose throughout the making and performing of the piece that altered my course of inquiry and eventually lead me to the questions that would prompt a second stage of choreographic research. My process for *Transparent Objects* began with a desire to generate a work as an examination of self (i.e. an

examination of what comprises a self and who I am as a self) in the hopes of then transmitting some portion of my internal experience, or my internal self, to the audience. Though these personal questions of selfhood may initially seem tangential to the focus of my discussion, the struggles that I encountered while attempting to achieve this original choreographic vision lead me to more pointed questions of perception within performance regarding the relationship between dancer and audience, particularly regarding the dancer's experience of simultaneously seeing while being seen during performance.

Work Description

As performed in December 2017, *Transparent Objects* begins with pale greenish light fading up to illuminate a striking landscape of suspended, intersecting diagonal lines, while sounds of isolated piano notes reverberate through the space. An installed sculpture, comprised of fourteen white wooden poles of various heights set up throughout the space and connected at specific points by taut lengths of string, creates this image.⁴³ The crystalline resonance of the score, combined with the gossamer tension of the strings, generates an atmosphere of delicate tension. Moments after this scene comes into view, I step out into the downstage right corner of the stage, taking several controlled steps forward in parallel *relevé*. My body echoes the extreme verticality of the fourteen poles that stand so unrelentingly upright around me. The seated audience watches my entrance from risers placed frontally before the performance space. Continuing to balance on straight legs in *relevé*, I rotate my body 180°, externally rotating my legs while the balls of my feet remain firmly rooted to the floor. Taking a single step forward, I repeat this rotation to complete a 360° revolution, and finally, bringing my feet together in

⁴³ Set design and construction completed in collaboration with visual artist Oriana Catton. Poles range in height from three to nine feet tall.

parallel, I lower my heels to the ground. Momentarily relieved from the precarious balance, I re-initiate the full body revolutions with flat feet. Slowly rotating around myself in place, I carefully replace my feet in and out of a relaxed fifth position. My arms slowly rise from my sides to form a horizontal line. Anticipation builds while this string of repeating rotations gives me time to survey the sculpture and the audience before embarking on the rest of my journey through the space.

As my rotations come to an end, I approach the entrance of a pathway demarcated by the poles and string. Unhurriedly, I ease my body through a supple, yet angular movement exploration, cautiously testing the geometry of my anatomical structure against the lines of the sculpture. My costume, a sleek neon green body suit with white mesh sleeves, allows audience members to compare my structural form against the form of the sculpture. This movement exploration propels me into the first horizontal corridor of a maze-like path that I will follow through the sculpture. This initial pass culminates with a return to careful forward steps in *relevé*, as I round a corner at the edge of the installation. Over the next five minutes, while following the corridors between the strings, I make seven passes through the space. Each pass either crosses horizontally between stage right and stage left or vertically between downstage and upstage. My dance transitions between cautious steps forward in *relevé* and fluidly angular movement sequences. Occasionally, I interject bursts of energy into the space in the form of up-tempo *relevé* walks. During this time, the space brightens. The backdrop, dark when the piece begins, now displays a soft blue tone, making the contrasting neon green of my costume stand out within the space. My continual return to *relevé* during this winding trek becomes more and more taxing as my leg muscles begin to tire and strain. Furthermore, while moving through the space, the landscape of the strings and poles continually shifts within my visual plane, forcing me to

reorient myself with each change in direction. The process of balancing while moving in straight lines grows more difficult as the performance goes on.

Eventually, the pathway of the sculpture delivers me into an open space in the upstage right quadrant of the stage. Arriving here, I execute a final balance in *relevé*, extending one leg off the ground in a low arabesque before sinking to the floor at the base of the sculpture's central pole. Moving to the floor at this point provides me a brief respite to recover from the intense exertion demanded by my journey through the maze. Crawling slowly backwards, I take a moment to press my cheek against the floor before rolling onto my back and placing my arms over my face. I enter into an extended floorwork phrase that reorients and renegotiates a number of the movements executed during my passes within the sculpture. Transitioning back to standing, I return to the flat-footed rotations with arms held out horizontally that appeared at the top of the piece. However, with this iteration of the rotations I incrementally increase my force, building my momentum into a durational spinning sequence that I sustain at top speed for a number of minutes. The minutes are both tense and freeing, as I am just on the edges of maintaining physical control over my body. I feel a sense of danger that I may actually lose control and crash into the sculpture that surrounds me, yet I also feel a strange sense of equilibrium. Losing the clarity of my visual perception, the space around me appears as a blurred vortex of color, and I maintain a sense of orientation solely by the sensation of gravitation forces rooting me to the earth.

Finally, my stamina depleted, I culminate the spinning with a jarring stop. I force myself into a parallel *relevé* position facing the audience and remain here catching my breath as I wait for the room to stop spinning. While holding my position here, the house manager appears before the audience to deliver the following message: "This concludes tonight's program. At this time,

the choreographer invites you to enter the space and explore the sculpture, please refrain from touching the sculpture.” Leaving their seats, the audience wanders into the space. Some retrace the spatial pathway that I took through the sculpture, others ignore the pathway and walk directly towards me, and a select few even enter their own improvisatory movement explorations. I revisit some of my previous movement material before softly walking back out through the sculpture, retracing the same pathway through which I came. As I do this, the energy of my performance gradually decrescendos while the audience filters through the space. Slipping away, I leave spectators alone to move and explore as they desire.

Process

As stated above, my original choreographic inquiry while making *Transparent Objects* centered around questions of self. An abstract I wrote on September 6, 2017 relaying my motivating questions and desires for the work documents this intention:

What component parts make up a ‘self’? What is the relationship between the internally understood ‘self’ of an individual and the ‘self’ perceived externally by others?...I feel ready to seriously examine myself as a ‘self’ and how I might construct or reconstruct some version of that ‘self’ through a work of choreography.⁴⁴

In retrospect, I now believe that my emphasis on the ‘self’ in these questions and statements of intention came from a desire to understand more thoroughly the relationship between my identity (i.e. gender, race, class etc.) to the artistic work I make. What I did not specifically foresee, was how central the creation of this solo would become to the formation of a larger project invested in the theoretical and practical research of the phenomenology of perception through dance.

⁴⁴ Alaina Wilson, Project Abstract, September 6, 2017.

Taking the ‘self’ as a point of entry into my choreographic exploration, I felt compelled to create and perform the dance as a solo. I cast myself as both choreographer and performer as a way of my maintaining ‘myself’ as the central subject of the work. I also hoped to gain different information about the work while making and performing the piece. John Freeman asserts, “By putting one’s own body and experience forward within a live (arts) space the artist becomes both object and subject within the frame of the work and, as a consequence this situation allows the artist to interrogate and articulate that relationship.”⁴⁵ What Freeman refers to as a “consequence” was the precise experience I wanted out of the creation and performance of my solo. I wanted to understand the content of my internal self in relation to external perceptions others might have of me in performance.

Upon starting rehearsals, I quickly found myself, perhaps for the first time, forced to seriously consider my own body as an aesthetic entity and the range of perceptions my particular body could elicit within the consciousness of an audience. I hoped to gain insight into the latter, through viewer feedback provided during biweekly work-in-progress showings. To remain consistent with my initial choreographic intention, I felt I had to confront the externally perceivable qualities of my body in order to choreographically shape how I as a self would be viewed while performing my work. As most of my dance training has been within the form of classical ballet, I felt that exploring my present relationship to this style of dance would be a rich entry point for initial movement explorations—particularly due to how I feel ballet has shaped and influenced my identity as a female performer. I began to generate phrase material by remembering and distorting my experiences performing ballet. The movement began to take on a softly graceful, yet languid quality. Once I solidified a few short movement phrases, I

⁴⁵ Freeman, *Blood, Sweat, and Theory*, 177.

experimented with reorienting them in space, for instance transposing standing material to be executed lying down—trying to understand the movement from multiple angles and perspectives. Additionally, I started working on a separate movement practice in which I would spin in place at top speed. Overtime, this became a durational exploration and I would challenge myself to spin for multiple minutes at a time. I was extremely curious about the altered state of being I could achieve for myself while immersed within the spinning. My ability to visually perceive the space and objects around me while spinning was obliterated, intensifying my experience of internal bodily sensation. Yet I did not know how my two branches of movement exploration would fit together within the final solo.

In mid-September I began to receive feedback from bi-weekly work-in-progress showings involving Sarah Lawrence faculty members John Jasperse and Dean Moss along with fellow MFA students and select undergraduates. Gender was quickly brought up as an unresolved focal point of my choreographic self-exploration. I received the general reaction that a highly feminine performance persona was emerging from my movement, sexualizing me as a figure within the dance, yet what I was showing presented no critique or articulated perspective surrounding this sexualization. The most promising site for a potential solution seemed to me to lie within the durational spinning material, yet what this solution could be was not yet clear. The perceptions being relayed to me were not my original intention nor how I wanted myself to be perceived in the work. My experience dancing the movement was highly introspective and entirely based on deconstructing sensation as experienced and remembered within my own body. I will not deny that concerns about perceptions imposed upon me as a female performer while dancing in the genre of ballet were certainly mentally present as I was conducting my movement explorations. However, the dance was coming across to viewers in a way that was confusing and

problematic to me. I was frustrated that in my attempts to explore selfhood through the manipulation of a movement style, my body was being perceived solely as an object. Throughout the rehearsal process, my attempts to reconcile these external perceptions with the perceptions I had of myself continually brought up questions that frankly destabilized the process and made me question and re-question what I was attempting to do: When does artwork function as a critique or comment upon a phenomenon and when does artwork function instead to reify the thing that it is seeking to critique? Can the artist remain definitively in control in regard to how viewers perceive a work?

I ruminated on such questions while attempting to move forward within my process, but my confusion about the piece only grew as time went on. I, as well as those providing me feedback, felt there was potential in my material, yet I continued to struggle to find a way to combat the reductive sexualization present in what I was showing. This led me to develop a deep sense of ambiguity surrounding the experience of being viewed while performing this dance. The movement I had created provided me a fulfilling sensory experience within my solo practice, yet in showings I found myself positioned as an object before viewers who were unable to understand the significance the dance held for my internal experience. I questioned what meaning my internal experience could hold when it was so in conflict with the visual information being received by viewers. Graham McFee suggests that the audience's experience is understood as visual, and that attempts to explore how the awareness of bodily sensations inform the understanding of dance prioritizes what the dancer experiences at the expense of the audience.⁴⁶ From inside my working process I felt the opposite phenomenon occurring. My exploration into

⁴⁶ Graham McFee, *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance: Identity, Performance, and Understanding* (Alton: Dance Books, 2011), 188.

bodily sensation was functioning at my expense, needless to say, I was becoming unhinged by the process.

Another problem I encountered that compounded the ambiguity of the objectified body versus a subjective self was my vision for an elaborate set design to accompany my movement. Largely influenced by the geometric design elements of the Spiral dance within the third act of Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*, and William Forsythe's choreographic installation *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time*, I hoped to utilize the set design as a means of reiterating my internal state through the aesthetics of the space around me.⁴⁷ Through a collaboration with visual artist Oriana Catton, a design for a large-scale sculpture based around the form of a labyrinth was developed. Early on in the process I became inspired by the labyrinth—a form well-known for its role in Greek mythology. Architecturally, the labyrinth is traditionally conceived as a complex maze-like structure. In Western culture, due to the alleged challenges and psychological pressures of navigating the labyrinth's twisting pathways, the structure has come to symbolize a space of self-confrontation and self-reflection. I felt the labyrinth could act as a geometric form that would both structure the space and choreographically direct my movement trajectory, while simultaneously reiterating symbolically the themes of self-reflection and self-confrontation I aimed to explore. I envisioned my dance traversing through the pathway of the labyrinth and culminating in some encounter within the central space of the maze. However, after designing the sculpture in mid-September, the actual construction took Catton about two months to complete. This meant I had to rehearse and develop my movement with only an imagined perception of the sculpture until receiving the finished structure. My strategies

⁴⁷ At this point in my process, I was contemplating these works and finding inspiration, yet I had not yet developed the analysis that is currently presented in Chapter One of this study.

for invoking something of the sculpture's presence included taping pathways along the floor, and procuring samples of the building materials that I could work with in rehearsals.

The solo fell into its final form after the sculpture's completion in mid-November. The carefully calculated angles of the structure created dramatically different visual images from different perspectives around the space. Having at this point begun my reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, a particular quote (the quote which incidentally came to inspire the title of the piece) came to mind as I acclimated myself to the environment of the installation: "The completed object is translucent, being shot through from all sides by an infinite number of present scrutinies which intersect in its depths leaving nothing hidden."⁴⁸ This quote refers to Merleau-Ponty's notion of perspectivism, which purports that to truly generate a holistic conception of an object one must see it simultaneously from all possible perspectives.⁴⁹ Otherwise, knowledge and understanding of the object will inevitably be partial and limited to the perspectives from which it has been seen. I drew an immediate aesthetic connection between the imagery conjured by Merleau-Ponty's words and my set design. The sculpture of poles and strings appeared as a transparent architecture within the space that revealed itself to me overtime as I moved through it and discovered new angles and perspectives. This experience increased my conceptual understanding of Merleau-Ponty's statement.

Now looking to my sculpture to find potential solutions for the still unresolved problems of my solo, I considered another quote from the *Phenomenology of Perception*, also in reference to visual perception: "[I] see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects..."⁵⁰ I understood this

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 69.

⁴⁹ For more on this theory see my discussion in Chapter One of this study.

⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 68.

statement to mean that the relationships between the objects we perceive help us to conceive of those specific objects as well our environment as a whole, and I began to ponder my body as an object in relation to the sculpture. Immersed within the structure, I imagined a reflective system between myself and the sculpture, allowing my body to be “seen” from all aspects of the constructed space around me. I myself became a transparent object within the space. Now conceiving of my solo in this way, I experienced a mimetic relationship with the structure that lead to important developments in my movement material and altered my performative presence.⁵¹ My extensive use of *relevé* throughout the piece arose from my consideration for the precarious verticality and light tension of the structure. Though I kept early phrase work in the dance, the quality of execution became more tensely controlled and more focused. My durational spinning was incorporated as the energetic culmination of the piece, as a final introverted move away from the visual world into my own internal sensation. In finalizing the choreographic arc of the piece, I determined that the first half of my performance would feature my movement along the pathway as indicated by the labyrinthian structure. Though nothing was precluding me from subverting the pathway of the structure and moving through the space in other ways, it felt important for this version of the piece to stay true to the original intentions behind the design of the set. Thus, during my journey through the maze I found myself to be a careful reflection of my environment.

⁵¹ This development in my process was certainly influenced by the integrated relationship of figure and space I was researching in relation to Oskar Schlemmer’s *Spiral* dance.

Performance

While performing, my commitment to an intensely constrained state of being became an invitation for the audience to become invested and engaged with my personal experience. My solo was both physically and mentally taxing. Not only did I push my body to its limits with each performance through my extensive use of *relevé* and the durational spinning at the end of the work, but while performing I continued to feel exposed, vulnerable, and highly *seen*, literally exhausting myself before the audience. I sensed the audience as being very much in the position of power since I felt I could not see them back. As a performative figure in *Transparent Objects*, I was unknowing, cautious, and restrained. I explored and traversed my environment in ambiguous isolation, pushing myself towards exhaustion and disorientation in order to understand the edges of my bodily experience. In witnessing the challenges of my journey through the labyrinth, I still felt the weight of my internal experience was largely unperceived by those observing me.

Much of this feeling was due to how I had positioned the audience in relation to the work. So much of my experience performing the solo was determined by constant states of disorientation and reorientation while moving through the installation, and continually reconceiving of the space as my perspective on the sculpture changed. However, by seating the viewers frontally, their perspective of the dance was flattened into a two-dimensional image that concealed much information regarding my internal experience from their perception. I hypothesized that the audience needed to perceive the structure from within to more deeply understand the environment and my experience performing within it. I therefore decided to, at the end of the piece, invite the audience into the performance space. This decision was influenced by my research into Forsythe's choreographic installation *Nowhere and Everywhere*

at the Same Time, I wondered if perhaps allowing the audience to move through the space themselves would shift and expand their perceptions regarding my performance. Though I still stand by this choice, I had an inkling that bringing audience in at the end of the work was not enough. I worried that moving at the end did not allow satisfactory time for audiences to understand my solo from the new perspective of mobile viewing. However, thinking ahead, I knew the place where the piece had left off, with audience members themselves actively moving through the space, was the place I wanted my choreographic research to continue from.

Reception and Reflection

Reflecting on the December performance, I believe I created a work very much about the bodily dilemma of simultaneously seeing and being seen. However, within this piece I did not gain definitive control over how I as a self would be perceived by others. I was subject to my environment and to the gaze of those viewing me. From a choreographic standpoint, the work I presented to the audience was cohesive in terms of aesthetics—a result of my explorations into the perceptual relationships between objects in the world. Faculty evaluations revealed that my advisors also perceived the work’s move towards aesthetic cohesion at the end of my process, which they framed as a critique. John Jasperse disclosed:

I have been heartened throughout the semester to hear you speak about trying to explore and unpack how you experience being perceived in life and in dance, particularly through gender, in your work. I don’t believe that you have yet completed this journey in your choreography. As we reached the end of the semester, I felt the loss of some material from earlier in the process. It is not that I felt like these ideas were fully resolved or developed in earlier versions, but rather there seemed to be potential in various prior

versions that had been abandoned in the service of creating an aesthetic cohesion with the environmental design and the musical composition. That contributed to a feeling of the work getting more restricted or restrained as time went by.

Reading this analysis in the weeks directly following the performance, I understood the comments as referring to a tendency within dance making to over-refine. I agreed that in finalizing the dance I had qualitatively altered material from early in the process, and I had made decisions that led to a more encompassing sense of aesthetic cohesion. It was certainly true that the work had become more constrained and restricted throughout the process. However, the comments felt reductive in a way I could not rationally articulate. Upon further reflection I came to understand the work I had done more deeply based on these evaluative remarks. For me, the restrained version of the final solo was an accurate representation of how I felt in the moment of performance, specifically at the end of the particular process I had gone through while making the work. Throughout my process, I had allowed myself to feel constrained and limited by the external perceptions placed upon me as I made the dance. Looking back at the trajectory of my process, I realized my process exemplified the very phenomenon I was trying to combat through my work. Rather than overcoming external perceptions to project and transmit a version of my internal self, I had allowed external perceptions to inform the version of myself that I was willing to show. I realized that it was not accurate to say that I had forsaken earlier iterations of the piece in the service of creating aesthetic cohesion. From my perspective, I had coincidentally found aesthetic cohesion while altering my dance as an act of externally induced self-censorship. In making this realization I had a new question regarding the choreographic possibilities of my work. Rather than generating a piece that in performance stifled the problems encountered in the

making process, could I create a work that in performance transmitted the problems of the choreographer/artist into the experience of the audience?

5. Enclosed and Between: Mobilizing the Audience

Transparent Objects left me with many questions regarding perception of self and others in relation to choreographic performance that became central to the next phase of my research: How can the subjective self be represented when the body is viewed as an object? If the dancer is a self who both sees and is seen, then where is their power and identity located in the act of performance? Most importantly for moving forward, I wondered how I could make the perceptual problems that I was facing as a choreographer/performer the problems of the audiences that would perceive my work. The creation and performance of a second piece, *Enclosed and Between*, became the next stage of my choreographic research project, and was very much a continuation of and response to my process of making *Transparent Objects*. I hoped to specifically address the questions generated in my first stage of working.

I continued to use the same set design for the new piece. Inspired by the audience's entry into the space at the end of my solo in December, I wanted to explore the choreographic potential of having viewers placed within the space of the installation for the duration of the dance. Though initially conceived as strictly a continuation of my solo practice, I added two other dancers, Nadia Hannan and Marie Zvosec, to my cast about a month and a half into the process.⁵² Now comprised of a duet between Hannan and Zvosec and a solo section featuring myself,

⁵² During the working period, both Hannan and Zvosec were in their first year of graduate studies in the Sarah Lawrence Dance Department. I had originally invited the two to be part of a separate piece I wanted to create that was not initially related to my practice-as-research project. However, approximately a month into the process I realized that the duet material we were developing was related to my research questions and decided to incorporate Hannan and Zvosec as participants in my practice-as-research.

Enclosed and Between, approximately twenty-five minutes long, premiered on April 13, 2018 in the same location as *Transparent Objects*, the Bessie Schönberg Dance Theater at Sarah Lawrence College.

Work Description

As performed in April 2018, *Enclosed and Between* begins with those attending entering directly into the environment of the sculptural installation, which in this iteration is illuminated by soft lavender light.⁵³ Replacing the wavering piano notes featured in *Transparent Objects*, high-pitched rhythmical beeping sounds, interspersed with low bass tones, repeat at un-even intervals. Performers Hannan and Zvosec are already visibly positioned when the audience enters. Placed in the open space of the sculpture, where my durational spinning had taken place in *Transparent Objects*, the two dancers, situated in a slight diagonal, lounge on their sides, left legs suspended in the air, and right arms draped over their heads. Corresponding with the tone of the lighting, the dancers wear form-fitting lavender costumes. This time there are no seats for the audience. A black scrim conceals the risers of chairs that typically seat viewers during performances in this theater.⁵⁴ A disembodied, slightly robotic, female voice provides instructions for those attending: “Please keep moving. Find pathways, look closely. Please move, continuously.”⁵⁵ The instructions are repeated multiple times as the audience filters in. The two

⁵³ To avoid the unsatisfying prelude of seeing the sculpture be set up in the space by stage crew before the piece began—as had unfortunately been the case in December 2017 due to logistical complications of having a shared program—audience members did not enter the performance space for *Enclosed and Between* until the sculpture was installed in the space. Though the performance was once again a shared program, the proceeding piece the *Enclosed and Between* took place in a separate, yet close by location, allowing time for *Enclosed and Between* to be set-up before the audience reentered the theater.

⁵⁴ For accessibility reasons, if an audience member could physically not stand, a chair would have been placed for them on the perimeter of the space. Also as the piece went on, audience members could sit on the ledge of the first row of the risers which protruded into the space under the lower edge of the hanging scrim.

⁵⁵ All text written by the author and voiced live from off-stage during performance by first-year MFA student Ingrid Dehler-Setzer.

performers soon begin their dance. Remaining on the floor, they let the weight of their legs guide them into a progression of movement. Their relationship with the floor is supple, even sensual at times, and every movement is executed with a calmly confident energy. They roll and arc through low geometric forms and subtly shift forwards and backwards across the floor. The power of the movement is drawn from the pelvis, creating a sense of dynamic tension in the dancers' lower bodies. Hannan and Zvosec perform every movement in tight unison. They seem tethered together by their imperturbable performative presence and provide perceptual anchors for the swirling mass of audience members. Other than small shifts and changes in facing, the duet maintains a stationary placement rather than locomoting through space—a choice which effectivity installs the dancers in the space as parts of the sculptural environment. While on the floor, watched by the standing audience, rather than appearing vulnerable or exposed in their low positions, the dancers project stoic confidence. They are knowing figures who are in control of the surrounding space rather than subject to it. Audience members comply with the announcer's polite, yet unwavering instructions uttered every few minutes. The text contains slight variations but consistently delivers a message for viewers to keep moving: "Please keep moving...Change your proximity...Change your location in the space..." Each reminder incites a new wave of motion from spectators, spurring those who had come to a stop into movement once again.

Eventually, the dancers rise from the floor and come to standing. The performers fall into moments of pause, embodying relaxed contrapposto stances. Taking time in these moments to slowly turn their heads, they let their gaze survey the space and take in the audience around them. Their demeanor in these moments has an edge of confrontational energy, communicating that though the audience is viewing them, Hannan and Zvosec are very much viewing the audience as well. A striking first break in unison occurs within the standing material. Beginning

from a turned out *relevé* balance in second position with right arms extended straight up from the shoulder and left forearms placed squarely over their heads, Hannan slowly descends from *relevé* into a second position *plié*. Her spine makes a forward curve as she twists her torso to the left, arms maintaining their position from the balance. Zvosec remains in her balance for a number of seconds before joining Hannan in the curved *plié* position. This same break in unison repeats twice more at later times in the duet and strengthens the controlling presence of the performers. These few clear breaks in the unison communicate that the two performers are not definitively constrained to unison, thereby empowering their identities as individuals.

A slight development in the sound score, which up until this point has been a repeating loop of high beeps and low tones, brings a change to the environment. A drone enters the sound score and the high pitch noises become more frequent and less predictable. Though unnoticed by many of the audience members, I enter the space as a third performer, dressed in the same costume as Hannan and Zvosec. Walking slowly around the perimeter of the space, I head towards the corner closest to the location of the other dancers. As I take my entrance, I mainly direct my focus towards Hannan and Zvosec, but I can see many audience members show slight surprise as they notice my presence, generally stepping cautiously out of the way as I calmly walk around the installation. Meanwhile, the movement of the two dancers comes to a close. Hannan signals an end to the duet by walking away from Zvosec to the edge of the installation. Soon after, Zvosec too leaves her position and heads in a different direction than Hannan. As this occurs, I infiltrate the space that the duet dancers just vacated. Sinking to the ground, I coolly scoot backwards across the space repeating patterns of the floor material featured in the opening of the duet. This movement passage prompts the announcer to supply a new directive: “Please move to the perimeter.” The audience obeys without hesitation, seemingly conditioned by this

point to follow the provided directives. Upon passing underneath a suspended string, I make my way up from the floor, and slowly rotated around myself twice in a clockwise trajectory. While rotating, another instruction is issued: “Circulate the edges.” Almost the entire audience responds by jointly entering a counter-clockwise walking pathway around the perimeter of the installation.

Now alone within the interior of the sculpture, I weave through the poles and cross below the diagonal lines of string. I have abandoned my reverence for the delineated corridors that determined my pathway in *Transparent Objects*. Generating a sense of excited tension within my body I move to different locations of sculpture, executing spiraling movement sequences littered with shaped moments of geometric form. Finally, I release my energy into a full-bodied movement sequence utilizing full extensions of my limbs and sharp directional changes. I challenge myself by continually sending different parts of my body in opposing directions in space. I find new movement pathways by energetically redirecting the tensions that result from my oppositional choices. During this burst of energy, the audience hears: “You have not reached your full potential. Circulate the edges.” This culminating message to the audience that they have not reached their full potential, further implicates their position within the event that has transpired. Like the performers, the movements of the audience are also being considered. From here the momentum of the piece decrescendos. A blackout finally signals a definitive end to the piece, and the audience is calmly instructed to “Please exit the space.” Myself, Hannan, and Zvosec remain in the space, maintaining our performative presence as the audience departs.

Process

My goal when beginning this new piece in late January 2018 was to retain the highly feminine performance persona tested out in *Transparent Objects* while somehow choreographically shifting the dancer-audience relationship in a way that would empower the performers and alleviate the ambiguity of seeing while being seen that I had felt in my solo. Throughout the choreographic process, I hypothesized that changing the mode of spectatorship from static frontal viewing to observing the dance from within the performance space was a potential solution for how I could achieve the desired shift. However, the way I would place the audience within the installation and curate their experience choreographically, was yet to be determined. In February, at this point having gotten deeper into my research regarding the perception, I was captivated by Merleau-Ponty's proposal that our innate understanding of the body's movement capabilities facilitates our conceptions of the world.⁵⁶ A particular quote from *The Phenomenology of Perception* stood out to me: "If the words 'enclose' and 'between' have a meaning for us, it is because they derive it from our experience as embodied subjects. In space *itself* independently of the presence of a psycho-physical subject, there is no direction, no inside and no outside."⁵⁷ In addition to obviously supplying the title for *Enclosed and Between*, this statement pushed me to further consider the connection between movement as experienced in the body and perception. If Merleau-Ponty's theoretical statement is taken as correct, and space is directionally constructed based on the body's experience moving within and through space, then how does perception of space and objects change when the body is in motion versus when stationary?

⁵⁶ See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 203, as well as my discussion in Chapter One of this study.

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 204.

Unsatisfied with stationary, frontal modes of viewing dance, and still inspired by the audiences' movement through the space at the end of *Transparent Objects*, I wondered how continual movement of the viewer might affect their perceptions of my dance. Working with Hannan and Zvosec, I developed a practice during rehearsals of continually moving around the two dancers as they repeated their movement material, changing my spatial proximity to their bodies as well as my speed while I moved.⁵⁸ This shift of my viewership from stationary to mobile changed my perception of the dance in a way I found very exciting. Within my perception, moving while watching ignited a newfound sense of dynamic three-dimensional space in relation to the dancers. Their unison movements were no longer flattened into a framed two-dimensional visual image. Instead, their movement seemed to radiate beyond their bodies and give shape to the surrounding space.⁵⁹ I continued to develop the dancers' movement material in ways that I thought would enhance the dimensionality of the work: incorporating subtle shifts in direction that I felt brought a circular energy to the piece that I hoped would encourage spectators to circulate around the performers. When viewed within the environment of the installation, the surrounding space became even more dynamic. The diagonal lines of string incited perceptions of dramatic linear motion while I moved through the space in relation to the dancers.

I must recognize that within this mode of viewing, especially when I began this practice, my attention was necessarily divided between my own body and the dancers. When standing still I could easily focus all attention on Hannan and Zvosec, but while moving I found I had to return

⁵⁸ This practice of mobile viewer was certainly influenced by mobile viewing involved in William Forsythe's *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time*.

⁵⁹ Once again must reference a connection I felt in my work at this moment and Schlemmer's Spiral dance. In the manner the spiral motion of the dance radiated into space in Schlemmer's work, I felt the movement of the duet gave shape to the surrounding space.

my attention to myself every so often to maintain my sense of orientation within the environment. This experience of divided attention decreased the more I practiced mobile viewing. However, problems arose as I began to show the piece in weekly work-in-progress showings when I would ask those watching to observe the work from in the space and while moving themselves.⁶⁰ Viewers were initially not keen to move and tended to select a position in the space and would just stand or sit to watch, later expressing to me they lacked desire and motivation to move. I found part of the problem was that at this point the choreography included much more locomotion through space which made viewers hesitant to approach the dancers because they could not predict where the performers would go next. Another aspect that deterred viewers from movement was the experience of divided attention which I had already experienced myself.

I took a number of steps to combat these issues within the work. I altered the duet material to remain much more stationary within the space, placing the dancers in the centralized open chamber of the sculpture. I hoped that installing the dancers within a specific zone of the space would make audience members more comfortable and more likely to approach and move around them. For my solo within the piece, during which I traveled through space quite a bit, I had the idea to somehow move the audience to the periphery of the space where they could circulate the perimeter of the installation. In early March, I finally realized that if I wanted the audience to keep moving as they experienced the dance I would need to clearly articulate this desire as an instruction for the audience. I decided to incorporate voiced instructions that would be delivered live during the performances.⁶¹ This solution would also enable me to direct the

⁶⁰ Throughout this portion of my process feedback was provided by Sarah Lawrence faculty members John Jasperse and Beth Gill along with fellow students.

⁶¹ The direct address of the audience through text in *Museum Piece* was influential in this decision.

audience to the edges of the space at the appropriate time for my solo. I began working on a written text of directives and invited first year MFA student Ingrid Dehler-Setter to join my project as the “announcer” for the performances.

The problem that I felt I could not necessarily generate a solution for was the problem of divided attention that accompanied mobile viewing. Faculty members had particular concerns regarding the density of people that would be in the space for the performance in relation to the number of objects already in the space due to the sculpture. Too many people might make the space congested and limit viewer’s ability to see the dancers. Suggestions to combat this problem included removing portions of the sculpture to widen movement avenues as well as taking away the instructions to keep moving and move continuously. Instead, they proposed only including carefully timed instructions for viewers to change their position in the space, or something along those lines, that would enable spectators to view the dance from different perspectives while limiting the problems of attention and distraction involved with continually movement. I seriously considered incorporating these suggestions up until the week before the show, especially contemplating the consequences of keeping the movement instructions intact versus omitting them. This deliberation brought me to the work of Vittorio Gallese. In term of immobile viewing, Gallese suggests:

I posit that when [viewing art and aesthetic images], the contextual bodily framing—our being still—additionally boosts our embodied simulation. Our being still simultaneously enables us to fully deploy our simulative resources at the service of the immersive relationship with the fictional world, thus generating an even greater feeling of body.

Being forced to inaction, we are more open to feelings and emotions.⁶²

⁶² Vittorio Gallese, “Visions of the Body: Embodied Simulation and Aesthetic Experience,” *Aisthesis*, vol. 1 (2017): 47, doi: 10.13128/Aisthesis-20902.

While considering Gallese's statement in relation to the experiences I wanted audience members to have viewing my work, the key word that stuck out to me was simulation—a word meaning an imitation of a situation or process. Gallese argues that viewing artwork while stationary allows spectators to focus their attention by imaginatively immersing themselves within the artwork.⁶³ Gallese goes further to pronounce that immobility allows viewers to be more open to the feelings and emotions embedded within the artwork itself. However, this statement made me realize that I was not looking for my audience to have a simulated experience of immersion when experiencing my piece. I was specifically interested in the perceptions that would emerge for viewers while undergoing the real experience of physical movement. The content of my choreography was not solely based in the perceived aesthetics of the performers' dance and the set design, but included the consciousness of self in relation to physical movement that I hoped audience members would experience. Therefore, I chose to keep the installation intact according to its original design and included the intermittent instructions for audience members to keep moving during the performance.

Performance

I conceived of the two April performances of *Enclosed and Between* as experiments. I had no way to predict how audience members, with no prior knowledge of the choreography, would react within the environment that I was presenting—whether they would follow the directives or disregard them. However, though each performance cultivated its own distinct energetic feel, I believe each show played out successfully. Both nights, audiences were

⁶³ Like the empathetic response Koss suggests audience members can have when viewing Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*, this argument is highly connected to broader discussions of the kinesthetic empathy experienced by viewers when watching dance.

amenable to the vocalized instructions and fulfilled my vision for how I wanted the work to be experienced. Guided by the spoken directives, the audience members jointly entered into an improvisational walking score that played out over the twenty-five minutes of the work. Though viewers would occasionally stop moving, as I had expected they might, there were enough moving spectators at any given time that the space never became static. Opening night had a much smaller audience and I sensed a cautious and contemplative energy from the viewers. Audience movement was slower and more careful. The larger audience for the second performance brought a much higher energy level, and viewers moved more quickly through and around the space.

My experience while performing this work stood in total contrast to my experience performing *Transparent Objects*. Performing *Enclosed and Between* provided me with what I can only express as a physical sensation of power. This feeling was particularly tangible in the moment that I was executing the clockwise rotations around myself and the audience was instructed to circulate the edges. On both nights viewers immediately began a counter-clockwise walking pathway around me, which gave me a profound experience of control. I felt that a gravitational energy connected me to the audience as they orbited around me, and at this moment I found myself the undeniable perceptual anchor of the space.

Remembering the irony imbued into *Museum Work* by Lucinda Childs' use of text, I also found myself drawing power from a sense of growing irony I experienced in Dehler-Seter's calm delivery of the instructions that culminated in the line: "You have not reached your full potential."⁶⁴ This powerful statement revealed that the audience members were not invisible in

⁶⁴ While rehearsing the voice work and developing a presence for this omnipresent voice that would guide the work, Dehler-Seter and I took time consulting the digitalized voices used by virtual assistant programs such as Siri. I felt this type of female-automaton presence was in keeping with the performative presence of the dancers. Therefore,

their viewing, but their movements, like the movements of the dancers, were being observed. Throughout the work, unlike *Transparent Objects* during which I had felt completely subject to all aspects of the environment, the gaze of the audience, the structure, and even the physical limitations of my body, I found a sense of choreographic and performative power over the space.

Reception and Reflection

I received mixed reactions from spectators regarding their experience of the mobile viewing. Some enjoyed the movement and felt that it indeed revealed the dimensionality of the dance in relation to the surrounding space in a new way. However, some felt distracted and annoyed by the presence of other moving bodies in the space, and many felt in one way or another resistant to the voiced instructions. These feelings of resistance seem to have remained internal for most viewers rather than leading to any physical displays of resistance other than people occasionally ceasing to move. When hearing these reactions, I would always point out that there were no consequences for not following instructions. Individuals would answer with sentiments such as they had been taking their lead from the behavior of others or that they had not wanted to ruin the piece for the choreographer or for the rest of the audience. This latter response was of particular interest to me, since it indicated a recognition on the part of these audience members that they themselves were integrated entities within the choreographic environment. Throughout each performance the audience held the power to potentially alter the energetics of the work quite dramatically based on their choices in relation to the instructions.

Based on the reactions of those who attended, I concluded that the work had been largely successful in generating an experience that led audience members to consider themselves, their

Dehler-Seter and I used particular patterns of rhythm and pronunciation, gleaned from programs like Siri, to achieve a similar affect in the line delivery.

bodies, and their positions in space, in relation to the other choreographic elements (i.e. performers and set design) while actively perceiving the work. I felt that by placing spectators within the space and spurring them into movement, without necessarily demanding that they themselves become performers, their function as witnesses of the choreographed performance shifted to something like accomplices of the choreographic event. *Enclosed and Between* did not allow audience members to simply observe the performance, but instead the work passed onto them a portion of responsibility for determining their own perceptive experiences.

IV. Conclusion

Over the course of this study, in examining conscious experience within the contexts of dance and choreography I have proposed that perception is dependent on and determined by the body. Insights gained through both critical choreographic analysis as well as practical research support this notion, and my work has expanded upon foundational theories of perception put forth by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The examples of Oskar Schlemmer's *Spiral Dance* and Lucinda Childs' *Museum Piece*, demonstrate the ways in which the structures and movements inherent within the human body mold spatial interactions while concurrently shaping internal conceptions of the world. My personal experience while making and performing my solo, *Transparent Objects*, revealed a similar simultaneity. I came to recognize my body as both an object forming structured relationships with the other objects in the world and a container for my subjective self. I believe what can now be drawn out from these analyses and personal experiences is that there exists an overarching inseparability between the materiality of the body, its physical form, composition, and structure, and the subjective content of perception. While creating *Transparent Objects* I struggled to reconcile external perceptions of my body with

internally derived perceptions of myself. I now see the constrained final product as an aesthetic reflection of the ambiguity I was experiencing during the choreographic process, a realization which launched me into a greater consideration of the viewer in relation to my work.

My work has placed the conventions of static, frontal viewing under scrutiny, and I have explored mobile spectatorship as an alternative mode for viewing dance. In considering William Forsythe's installation *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time*, I hypothesized that the lived experience of physically moving could potentially provide an effective way for audience members to become aware of their own bodies while simultaneously viewing a performance. Conducting the performances of *Enclosed and Between* as experiments to test this notion, indeed revealed mobile spectatorship as a potential choreographic solution for engendering a sense of bodily awareness in viewers regarding their position in relation to the performance.

I believe that in investigating mobile spectatorship, I have uncovered a choreographic mode of viewing that, if practiced, has the potential to reframe not only the experience of viewing dance, but the general experience of perceiving in the world. John Dewey states, "In order to understand the meaning of artistic products, we have to forget them for a time, to turn aside from them and have recourse to the ordinary forces and conditions of experience that we do not usually regard as aesthetic."⁶⁵ However, I think in the case of mobile spectatorship the opposite might in fact be true. To understand more thoroughly our perceptions of the world, what if we consider the external world choreographically? My research has led me to support the notion that the body is the constitutive source of our world experience, guiding and shaping our perceptions. Therefore, what is the external world if not a choreographic expression of our own body? What new knowledge might be found if we navigate the world while participating in

⁶⁵ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1934), 4.

mobile spectatorship? Perhaps the practice of mobile viewing will illuminate a deeper role that aesthetics play within our daily lives, while continuing to reveal the centrality of the body to our existence in the world.

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