

Sarah Lawrence College

DigitalCommons@SarahLawrence

---

Dance Theses

Dance Graduate Program

---

5-2020

## The True Meaning Of Etiquette: The Choreography Of Idealized Womanhood

Amanda Hameline

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.slc.edu/dance\\_etd](https://digitalcommons.slc.edu/dance_etd)



Part of the [Dance Commons](#)

---

“THE TRUE MEANING OF ETIQUETTE”: THE CHOREOGRAPHY  
OF IDEALIZED WOMANHOOD

by

Amanda Hameline

May 2020

---

Presented to Graduate Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Dance  
Sarah Lawrence College

## ABSTRACT

In this MFA thesis, I use Emily Post's famous manual *Etiquette* (1940) as point of departure for my investigation of the implications of the various demanding, yet often unacknowledged, social requirements made of women. Rather than aspiring to one, consistent manner of comportment, there are social demands placed on women to perform a variety of roles depending on the situation. Of course, all people, regardless of gender, shift their behavior in some way depending on the context. Yet I propose that women in particular learn to choreograph their conduct in order to live up to the many contradictory, simultaneous requirements presented by Western patriarchal society. Dance, an artistic field rooted in nuanced physical performance, offers a valuable lens through which to understand the complications of idealized femininity. Like much concert dance, which seeks to hide the labor of choreography to present a slick, smooth creation, a woman must not reveal the labor that shapes her into a "beautiful" product. I am interested in cracking open this façade by investigating the work that goes into choreographing the ideal woman and displaying the consequences of this labor. I argue, using examples from sociology, neurology, dance studies and the work of Pina Bausch and Adrian Piper, that these consequences include: an essentialist conception of gender that incorrectly blames women for their own oppression; a sense of dissociation from the body; and a connection between women and blankness. Finally, I demonstrate the ways in which I incorporated these theories into my own performance work and website, *Refrain from Doing Things Badly*, and how I worked to both complicate and reclaim the relationship between performer and audience during the period of social distancing brought about by COVID-19 in 2020.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Thank you to my parents for their endless support, and to Emily Post for her endless inspiration.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
Introduction .....	page 1
Multiple Personality Order: The Requirements of Decentered Reality.....	page 5
Embodied Property: The Contested Ownership of Women’s Bodies.....	page 12
The Consequences of Decentered Reality: Blankness as Privilege and Prison.....	page 21
Watching a Woman’s Performance: The Role of the Viewer .....	page 32
Conclusion .....	page 37
Bibliography .....	page 40

## Introduction

Since buying the 1940 edition of Emily Post's *Etiquette* at a street sale, I have amassed a collection of prescriptive literature ranging from 1970s diet books, to a guide for teenage girls from the 1950s, to a British manual from the early 1900s. My initial questions for this research project were: Why did I do that? And why does this antiquated advice still feel strangely relevant? To answer these questions, I decided to focus on *Etiquette*, which remains the Ur-text for rules of social comportment. Post's thesis is that one should fit in rather than stand out. The ideal Postian devotee was inoffensive, not exceptional, and a generalist, not an expert. As Emily Post puts it herself, "[i]t is not even so necessary to do something well as to refrain from doing things badly" (Post 1940, 336).<sup>1</sup>

No one is likely surprised that an etiquette manual would prioritize conforming, but the implied breadth of the task is shocking. The "things" that Post mentions could more accurately be described as "everything," from how to eat asparagus, to how to behave in the office, to what to bring to a fraternity party. In short, nothing should be done badly. The severity of this requirement demonstrates that *Etiquette* describes an aspirational world. The genre of the manual exists to provide the reader with the correct way to do something and therefore presents an abstracted ideal. Assembling Ikea furniture never *looks* difficult in the instruction booklet. It is only when human imperfection enters into the equation that we get a slanted table and a bad attitude.

---

<sup>1</sup> This and all future quotes from *Etiquette* come from the sixth edition published in 1940. Post updated her books approximately twice a decade from the first edition in 1922 until her death in 1960.

The goal of *Etiquette* is to perfect social interaction for a targeted audience of middle to upper class white American women. Without mentioning race or class, the book describes a world of debutant balls, suburban cocktail parties, and fancy restaurants. These settings imply that the intended audience is people who have access to such spaces, and, in 1940, most of those people were white.<sup>2</sup> Post's elision of race in her presentation of idealized feminine social identity demonstrates how whiteness was (and is) the assumed norm and a part of the rubric by which others were (and are) judged. Whiteness alone was, of course, not enough to achieve Post's ideal. While *Etiquette* is well over 800 pages, Post is a clear and pithy writer. Her more-than-two-inch-thick book presents a minefield of possible social errors along with specific, yet at times inconsistent, rules for navigating each landscape. The length and variety of the manual implies that the ideal woman was both nimble and vigilant. She was able to flip effortlessly between contexts without ever furrowing her smooth, white brow. In my thesis, Emily Post offers a point of departure for my investigation of the implications of the various demanding and contradictory, yet often unacknowledged, social requirements made of women.

Gender roles have changed greatly throughout the twentieth century, yet the womanly ideal Emily Post described eighty years ago still holds great power. The feminist movements of the past hundred years brought women the right to vote, participate in the workforce, and hold increased, if tempered and contingent, control over reproductive choice. In spite of these developments, there is more work to be done. The twenty-first century has seen increased focus on lasting gender inequality in the workplace and the impossibility of women "having it all." In addition, despite the radical shift in our understanding of gender pioneered by the queer and trans

---

<sup>2</sup> Emily Post does include sections for women who do not have a maid, men who cannot afford to pay for an expensive dinner date, and couples who need to host an inexpensive wedding. Yet the majority of the book is directed towards people with ample disposable income.

community, essentialist conceptions of gender are still integral to the structure of U.S. society in 2020. The day-to-day experience of women has improved, yet the idealized woman—able to navigate multiple demanding social, familial and professional requirements while still presenting a calm and beautiful exterior—has remained remarkably stable.

Dance, an artistic field rooted in nuanced physical performance, offers a valuable lens through which to understand the complications of idealized femininity. Returning to Post's advice, it is certainly unnatural to fit in at all times and never do anything badly, so success in this area must come through a performance of learned techniques and nuanced physical performance; in other words, a dance. Like much concert dance, which seeks to hide the labor of choreography to present a slick, smooth creation, a woman must not reveal the labor that shapes her into a "beautiful" product. I am interested in cracking open this façade by investigating the work that goes into choreographing the ideal woman and, in doing so, displaying the consequences of this labor.

In this thesis, I divide the choreography of womanhood into four sections. The first, "Multiple Personality Order: The Consequences of Decentered Reality," lays out the capitalist underpinnings of Emily Post's *Etiquette* in order to demonstrate that the rules she describes relate directly to the oppressive gendered and racialized requirements of Western society. Using examples from Post, sociological theory, and current events, I explain the danger of framing a woman's need to embody many roles simultaneously as a natural feminine quality rather than a learned behavior. Section two, "Embodied Property: The Contested Ownership of Women's Bodies," demonstrates how the socially correct performance of self can lead women to lose a sense of ownership of the body. I relate this to a dancer's need to both share and control the body, and employ examples from neurology, sociology, my own personal history, and Pina



Bausch's choreography *Palermo, Palermo* (1989). Section three, "The Consequences of Decentered Reality: Blankness as Privilege and Prison," introduces a key concept within both my academic study and performance research. I argue that women's frequent shifting between roles can create an interstitial space of blankness. This blankness is also a construct of idealized Western femininity, one that is not as accessible to people of color, who are therefore less able to access this ideal. This chapter relies greatly on the work of African American conceptual artist Adrian Piper and her performance art series *Catalysis* (1971-1973), investigating her uses of objectivity and uncertainty to question patriarchy. The final section, "Watching a Woman's Performance: The Role of the Viewer," addresses the previously unmentioned spectator who plays a silent, yet important, role in the first part of this thesis. This final section also addresses current events that have affected the form of my performance thesis and the ways I plan to move forward with my research.

Examples from my performance thesis, *Refrain from Doing Things Badly* (2020), are woven throughout this paper, reflecting the interrelated process of artistic and academic research that defines an MFA degree. I began creating the work in September 2019, along with my collaborator and dancer Jace Weyant, and many of the questions I have pondered alone at my computer have become topics of conversation in the rehearsal room. Similarly, physical research around repetition, crescendo, the role of the audience, and the performance of performance have greatly impacted my writing. The challenge of combining academic study with artistic creation never dissipated. Yet it was a challenge that forced me to remain malleable and quick on my metaphorical and actual toes, just as a woman should be.

## Multiple Personality Order: The Requirements of Decentered Reality

In 2004, Ludacris rapped the timeless line, “We want a lady in the street, but a freak in the bed” in the most popular Usher song of the early 2000s, *Yeah!* As Emily Post demands, Ludacris requests, and many “ladies” learn through experience, women are required to have different personalities in different contexts. Rather than aspiring to one, consistent manner of comportment, there are social demands placed on women to perform a variety of roles depending on the situation. Of course, all people, regardless of gender, shift their comportment in some way depending on the context. Yet I propose that women in particular learn to choreograph their behavior in order to live up to the many contradictory, simultaneous requirements presented by Western patriarchal society.

It is important to recognize that shifting between behaviors is a *learned* practice. The trope of the inconsistent woman, who can quickly switch from ingénue to seductress, comes not from an inherent feminine quality, but rather from a patriarchal society that teaches women to continuously shape shift in order to, as Post puts it, “make the social machinery run more smoothly” (Post, 1). Post’s metaphor points to the increasingly mechanical view of twentieth-century interpersonal relations. In an efficient, market-focused culture, the malleability of a woman’s social identity serves as a lubricant for the ease and comfort of others, and, by extension, the productivity of society as a whole. Sociologist Erving Goffman argues that the very need for gender distinction is based in our desire for efficient social interactions. He writes that gendered etiquette smooths our physical experience of the world by dictating “who is to give way, who is to step forward, who to lead, so that turns, stops, and moving about can be coordinated and beginnings and endings synchronized” (Goffman 1976, 8). The choreography of

social intercourse helps us to not bump into each other, which in turn allows us to get on with our day and not worry over every interaction. Society has changed since 1976, when Goffman wrote *Gender Display*, and many women now open doors or pull out chairs for themselves. Yet one only has to think of the reactionary panic, caused by changing the rules of men's and women's bathrooms the United States to include trans people, to realize how ingrained our conception of gendered movement remains. The idea that unisex bathrooms would be an abomination is based on the conception of segregated gender as a purely natural, rather than social, construct. This conflation of gender and sex demonstrates how the constructed nature of social intercourse serves to hide underlying power structures. Goffman explains that our lack of awareness around the social construction of gender comes from parents who teach their children how to behave in a gendered manner with a surprising amount of "sociological sophistication," if maintaining the status quo is their goal (Goffman, 6). We have learned the dance so well that we forget that we did not, in fact, choreograph it.

The "sociological sophistication" of everyday people would seem to imply that there is no need for etiquette manuals. We learn from our parents how we should behave and, in turn, pass this information on to our own children. This is how cultures have transmitted social customs and norms for millennia. Yet the increasing complexity of twentieth-century society created an opportunity for Post and her book. The development in the West brought about by the Industrial Revolution (late eighteenth to mid nineteenth century) and capitalism created a more mobile society (both physically and socially) that needed information about how to navigate the world.<sup>3</sup> Post demonstrates the connection between industry and comportment by weaving in

---

<sup>3</sup> This is, of course, a simplification of the complex societal and economic changes that occurred during this period. The point being, overall, that the transfer of wealth became less dependent on aristocratic and family heritage, and more (white) people had increased access to the possibility of social mobility (a.k.a. "The American Dream").

capitalist references, making a direct connection between the market economy and how to behave in the dining room. In her introduction, “The True Meaning of Etiquette,” she argues that even the most “superficial” manners contribute to one’s “charm,” which is “the greatest asset that a man or woman or even a child can have” (Post, 1). Every person should put these assets to use in order to maximize the efficiency of society. Just as a factory relies on each individual worker to complete their assigned task, “it is also essential to ease of living that certain mechanical conventions be observed” (Post, 2). By emphasizing the practical purpose of etiquette using market-based terms, Post makes a case for the value of her book for all people living in a capitalist economy.

As sociologist Jorge Ardití explains in his own study of manners books, etiquette manuals explain the infrastructure of idealized social relations according to the dominant group. Although they address the upper classes, the knowledge remains applicable to lower class citizens seeking the American dream of social mobility (Arditi 2014, 27). Post claims that one cannot buy social graces and that we should not “mistake a rich man for a gentleman,” further demonstrating the necessity of her manual to navigate the social order: money alone is not enough to succeed (Post, 2). Though she tempers the potentially crass economic practicality of her book by claiming that etiquette is a tool for kindness and social ease, her entire argument for the importance of etiquette is based on the economic value of smooth social relations.

If etiquette manuals exist, at least on some level, to perpetuate the class structure of Western capitalism, it may seem unusual that they are predominantly addressed to women, who are traditionally excluded from the market economy situated within the public sphere. Sociologist and historian Cas Wouters explains the “gentler sex’s” role in maintaining class order through his study of nineteenth and twentieth-century etiquette manuals. He argues that the

modern etiquette manual developed in the nineteenth century, when class structures began to break from the traditional order of aristocracy or familial heritage, and instead became reorganized around financial success. In order to maintain rules of propriety in a rapidly changing world and economy, “high society” took on the job of enforcing class distinctions. Women became the gatekeepers of the “private domain of society” by issuing the invitations to balls, teas, luncheons, and other events that dictated whether one was “in” or “out” (Wouters 1995, 326). This responsibility precariously balanced women between the public and private spheres. Although upper-class women remained firmly bound to the Victorian image of the pure, clean, weak woman of leisure, they were also tasked with policing an increasingly fluid world brought on by the developments of the Industrial Revolution.

So how does a woman create a comfortable, kind environment in a rapidly changing world? When she was bound to the home, ruling over her domestic empire, the white Western woman’s job was relatively straightforward. As women moved into the public sphere, the race and background of women given access to (or being forced to follow) middle-class American social values diversified, and the story became more complex. Sociologist Jorge Ardití studies this social complexity by analyzing rhetorical changes in etiquette manuals over four centuries. Etiquette and manners books from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century were written in a narrative form and communicated one central principle, such as the importance of embodying “grace” at all times. Modern, twentieth-century etiquette manuals moved to a reference-style construction, more like a dictionary than a novel. Ardití argues that this historical shift demonstrates the development of a “decentered reality” in which behaviors can, and in fact must, be inconsistent across different contexts. In this reality, descriptions of how people should behave could not conform to linear structures, like a narrative (Arditi, 36). Although Ardití

studies the effect of decentered reality on all genders, I argue that the multiple contradictory requirements of contemporary life fall predominantly on women because of their prescribed role in maintaining social and domestic order.

In spite of the work of many feminists, the connection between women and domesticity has been a difficult one to break. For purely biological reasons, women have been inextricably connected to reproduction and rearing, both of which are associated with the home. As women gained more rights in the workplace, the decentered reality of domestic versus professional life has become a difficult balancing act. Media theorist Elizabeth Nathanson explains that the separate temporal logics of the domestic and professional spheres contributed to the complexity of this task. Through an in-depth reading of the popular Food Network show, *30 Minute Meals with Rachel Ray*, she argues that the program depicts a mixture of commercial and domestic time. The repetitive rhythms of Ray's chopping, mixing, sautéing, and chatting signal the domestic, while the strict time limit that defines the narrative of the show itself is distinctly commercial. She calls this clash of responsibilities "postfeminist temporality" (Nathanson 2009, 313). Nathanson proposes that contemporary women have subconsciously come to master this bipolar temporal structure in order to survive in a society that requires women to operate in both the private domestic sphere and public professional world simultaneously. Women have become so skilled at this choreography of switching that it appears to be an innate skill.

When we combine the pervasive power of decentered reality for women in the twentieth century and the practical, capitalist underpinnings of *Etiquette*, it is clear that flexibility is a key requirement of Western womanhood. Consistency of identity, as seen in American male tropes such as the unwavering lone cowboy or the maverick cop, is not an option for women. Women instead fall into the stereotypes of the flighty bimbo, the incompetent damsel in distress, shrew,

or, if she takes decentered reality into her own hands, the manipulative femme fatale. In these examples, a malleable personality becomes reframed not as a societal requirement, but as a female flaw. This essentialist view portrays women's inconsistent behaviors as inherent rather than learned. One would hope that as we move farther away from mid-twentieth-century gendered tropes such a limited view of women would fade.

Yet still today, the performances required of women in order to navigate a sexist world are often viewed as signs of true character flaws, rather than attempts to navigate the impossible demands of decentered reality. The main argument of sexual predator Harvey Weinstein's defense team is that the relationships between Weinstein and his alleged victims were consensual because the women were involved in "transactional relationships meant to advance their own careers" (Ransom and Feuer, A25).<sup>4</sup> According to this logic, a woman succumbing to a sexual assailant is reframed as making a self-serving choice. It reveals a marked absence of reflection on, or even acknowledgement of, the structural conditions that give rise to such a choice. The defense cites friendly texts and emails sent by women after they had been assaulted as proof that the women had consented to Weinstein's sexual advances. Such behavior is clearly a woman's attempt to *perform* proper professional etiquette and appease a powerful man in order to save her career. Yet, when viewed differently, from the lens of assumed consistency of comportment, the woman's actions become duplicitous: she was using her sex appeal to get ahead, not performing the best she can in order to salvage her life and career. These are the stakes of (willfully) misreading women's behaviors in alignment with historical tropes of femininity. If we cannot see

---

<sup>4</sup> In October 2018 *The New York Times* and *New Yorker* reported accusations of rape and sexual assault against the famed film producer Harvey Weinstein by dozens of women over thirty years. On May 25, 2018 Weinstein was charged by the New York County District Attorney's Office with rape, criminal sex act, sex abuse and sexual misconduct. In March 2020 Weinstein was sentenced to twenty-three years in prison.

the performative contortions demanded of women in a patriarchal society, women will continue to bear the brunt of the blame for their own oppression.



## **Embodied Property: The Contested Ownership of Women's Bodies**

I am proposing that women actively or subconsciously choreograph their movements and actions in order to navigate conflicting responsibilities in patriarchy. This proposition implies that physical comportment plays an important role in the construction of self. Neurologist Oliver Sacks similarly argues for the relationship between physicality and individuality through his study of a variety of extreme neurological disorders. In the eponymous chapter of his popular book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, Sachs focuses on the importance of proprioception—the unconscious sensory flow of information that comes from muscles, tendons, and joints by which physical position, tone, and motion is monitored and adjusted—in constructing identity. When this ability to quickly and unconsciously adapt one's movement to one's environment is disrupted, it is not simply physical ability that is affected, but one's entire sense of self. Or, as Sacks puts it, “[W]hat is more important for us, on an elemental level, than the control, the owning and operation of our own physical selves?” (Sachs 1985, 47). Ownership of the body is a powerful concept, and one which bears a secondary meaning for women, whose bodies have historically (and currently) been contested sites of ownership because of the intimately related areas of marriage, reproductive rights, sexual violence, and labor. The idea has an even more problematic history for African and Native American peoples of all genders who experienced the most extreme violations of ownership over the body through generations of enslavement by white Europeans and Americans. The physical way in which we access control over our bodies, and therefore are given or denied access to freely navigate the world, is a powerful, yet often unrecognized, source of identity.

Sacks' emphasis on movement's role in the creation of subjectivity helps explain the embodied nature of identity, but it seems to imply that the unconscious control of one's body is only compelled by biological, organic forces. Yet, while treating patients, Sacks also trained them to regain their previously "natural" ways of being. This demonstrates that physical comportment can also be taught. Decades before Sacks, in 1934 (around the peak in the popularity of etiquette manuals), Marcel Mauss also questioned the purely organic nature of movement. Although it seems that there should be nothing more personal than one's *habitus*—the ways in which individuals walk, move, and gesticulate—Mauss argues for the "social nature of habitus," that through these behaviors "we should see the techniques and work of collective and individual practical reason rather than, in the ordinary way, merely the soul and its repetitive faculties" (Mauss 1934, 73). Mauss does not completely deny the role of the individual psyche in producing movement, but he argues that such movement is created by a combination of the social, psychological, and biological. In other words, every action is influenced by a person's education, the society she is in, and her place in that society.

Combining Sacks' description of the personal nature of physical comportment and Mauss' explication of the social education and practice needed to execute everyday activities, demonstrates that physical comportment and behavior are created through a complex relationship between the personal and the socially constructed. Movements are inextricably tied to an individual's identity, yet they are also a reflection of the society in which she exists. Decentered reality further obscures the origin of a given movement (whether biological, social, or psychological, etc.) because it forces people to master a variety of forms of behavior based on a given context. An understanding of the complex role bodily comportment plays in presenting the

self helps explain how women can actively manipulate their social identities in order to live up to the requirements of an inaccessible ideal.

The aforementioned descriptions of proper learned movement—from Goffman’s explanation of men and women turning, stopping, and stepping forward with smooth coordinated movements; to Mauss’ contemplation of the technical prowess required for everyday life; to Emily Post’s explication of the mechanical execution of social rules—sounds, out of context, like a treatise on dance training and performance. This is understandable, for dance has historically been central to the construction of social hierarchies. Ballet gained prominence during the reign of Louis XIV in France, when his performance in court ballets functioned as an idealized embodiment of grace for the aristocracy. Dance has also served as its own form of etiquette training. The quadrille and the cotillion dances developed out of fifteenth century English country dances and “evolved not only to allow men and women to interact within a safely contained space, but also to teach them to do so elegantly” (Richardson, 2020, 48). Only members of the upper classes had the resources necessary to learn such dances, and so one’s ability to execute them properly demonstrated membership in elite society and trained the aristocratic young in proper courtship behaviors. In their own dance-like treatises Goffman writes of the “turns, stops and moving about” that “can be coordinated” so “beginnings and endings are synchronized”; Mauss of the need for training to acquire efficiency of movement; and Post of rules that should be “so thoroughly ingrained as to make their observance a matter of instinct rather than of conscious obedience” (Goffman, 8; Mauss, 77; Post, 3). Similarly, a dancer trains to turn coordination and efficiency into instinctual practices. She must learn complicated, effortful movements and make them appear smooth and natural. Through their necessary training, etiquette and dance shape the body to move in a prescribed manner.

If the etiquette manual is a training ground for everyday life, the corollary in dance would be the studio. Here, the dancer, in both class and rehearsal, works through awkwardness to achieve grace with the goal that it appears natural. Dance forms, across genres, contain certain aesthetic priorities that define distinct conceptions of the graceful, be it the quick, rhythmic isolations of hip-hop or the released body of post-modern dance. I am specifically using the word grace to include its Judeo-Christian connotations—the state of being in God’s good favor. This term, in both its everyday and religious usages, helps highlight the combined moral and aesthetic importance of correct movement for dancers. The smooth curve of an arm in ballet may turn into a straight line in Cunningham, but both techniques prescribe a shape of the arm that, when achieved, is called “good.” A professional dancer dedicates an incredible amount of time to practicing and perfecting movement, so much so that correctness can take on a moral dimension. One’s artistic and economic value is wrapped up in the ability to “properly” move in a particular form, and hence the ability to do so expands beyond the realm of the aesthetic.

Susan Foster’s seminal essay on dance training and techniques, “Dancing Bodies” describes the work and emotional investment that goes into shaping the body in dance. She explains that the experience of training is one of loss. Even a professional dancer at the top of her career constantly contends with failure, either the inability to execute new choreography or the body’s decline with aging (Foster, 1997, 237). This struggle creates two separate bodies: the perceived and the ideal. The ideal is the image of what your body *should* do, and the perceived is what is actually reflected in the mirror. The relationship between these two bodies can change by the day, and the two can approach each other, but never meet. Dance therefore, like etiquette, lives in the realm of the aspirational: one is always striving for the smoother transition, the higher leg, the sharper turn, or, in other words, grace.

Any art form has to reckon with this tension between the real and the ideal. An author's words on the page never truly live up to the imagined novel in her head, and the wash of color that appears in a painter's dream does not equal the reality on a flat canvas. Yet with dance, this battle between imagination and the cold hard truth is waged on and with the human body. Throughout a career, a dancer deals with the failure of her body on a daily basis. The accumulation of requirements—strength, flexibility, performance quality, emoting through the body—creates a dancerly version of decentered reality. One must constantly balance one requirement against another, and shift priorities in a moment's notice. This brings us back to the question of ownership of the body. If a dancer is constantly working to conform her body to the needs of a technique or particular choreography or audience, does she lose some sense of personal control? This is a central question in my choreographic and dance practice. How do I combine physical autonomy with artistic expression?

In my own creative work this issue is complicated by my history of disordered eating. Shaping my body, a certain kind of necessity for a dance, can sometimes conflict with the work I have done to accept my body as it is. Striving for an ideal body in dance can feel eerily similar to the unhealthy ways in which I strived for an ideal body when sick. All eating disorders are distinct, but mine was tightly wound up with issues of control. I craved the ability to control a life and world that felt chaotic and unruly, and one way to do this was to control what went into my body. I associated thinness—bone and muscle, rather than flesh and fat—with cleanliness and order. My recovery meant not only accepting weight gain, but also embracing the inevitable chaos of living a full, emotional life. In my choreographic work, I frequently address the tension between chaos and order by leaning into mess and disorder and striving to create, rather than shy away from, a chaotic environment.

During the first semester of my performance thesis creation, my choreographic advisors, John Jasperse and Dean Moss, encouraged me to push my chaotic efforts further. For, although I relish in cacophony on-stage—often generated by multiple layers of looping my voice and yelling over it—the structure of my work still felt tightly wound and controlled. My desire for control outweighed my aesthetic attraction to chaos. I found this direction difficult to follow because I still wanted the piece to be “good” above all else. I had defined my own conception of grace, one that was wacky and absurd and loud, but nonetheless with tightly defined rules of correctness. Jace and I recited lines from Rachel Ray’s *30 Minute Meals* or flailed about wildly to an aggressive sound score we had created on the loop pedal, but regardless of how strange or chaotic these actions seemed to be in my head, they were still tightly constructed and rehearsed. The presence of this control was palpable to the audience.

Returning to rehearsals in the second semester, I decided to loosen my grip on, and even sense of ownership over the piece. I started by giving Jace more agency. I always strive to provide my dancers with personal agency within my creative process, and I believe strongly in the need for performers to find a personal connection with a piece. However, I decided that in order to achieve the choreographic goals of this particular work I needed to provide Jace with freer rein than the previous structure allowed. We experimented with very open improvisational practices. I gave him a loop pedal, speaker, cassette recorder, and the question, “How do you respond to chaos?” I audio recorded his improvisation and transcribed this recording, which he then re-edited into a new text. We continued on this path. I provided edits and small changes, but the work followed his own impulses. Through this process, I found that his reaction to chaos is quieter than mine. A question that causes me to make quick, jolting shifts and yell into my microphone inspires Jace to move less. He responds by repeatedly shifting his head before his

body, as if looking to see if anyone is watching him, as he says, “hello? ... hello?” And finally, “Everything feels more chaotic now that I have nothing to say.” Following Jace’s responses to the prompts rather than simply my own helped to deepen and diversify the work.

Jace’s solo section now introduces the central conflict of *Refrain from Doing Things Badly*: how the performance of self and desire to please the audience can leave you blank, alone, and confused. Although quieter than I would have imagined, the section lives in a truer space of chaos, because it came from questions and uncertainty, rather than unrelenting compositional control. Both Jace and I now share ownership of the work, because we moved away from traditional hierarchical relationship between choreographer and dancer. While this marked a moment of compositional success, within the work it functions narratively as a moment of failure. Jace and I beg the audience throughout the duet to adore us. We are inevitably disappointed, as the appreciation is never enough. Seeking outside approval—of technical prowess in dance, the perfection of the body, compositional purity, or the proper performance of womanhood—will always end in failure.

The twentieth-century German choreographer Pina Bausch has grappled with a woman’s relationship with failure and gender norms across the span of her significant repertoire. As Bausch scholar Royd Climenhaga describes, she “makes explicit the abuse and repression that each woman carries implicitly within her body” (Climenhaga 2009, 89). Her pieces can appear rambling and disjointed, yet an unexpected associative logic undergirds the entire construction, creating an almost dreamlike, or nightmarish, experience for the audience. Her 1989 work *Palermo, Palermo* begins with a massive cinder block wall crashing to the ground. The rest of the piece occurs in this wrecked landscape; the destruction of the physical space allows for the social upheaval and aberrant behavior that follows.

After the wall falls, a woman in heels stomps through the rubble to the front of the stage. She then verbally demands that two men take her hand or hug her, yet she physically rejects their attempts to follow her commands. Instead, she dumps dirt that is handed to her by one of the men on her head and orders both of them to throw tomatoes at her face and body. In a stunning display of emotional complexity presented through limited pedestrian movement, she simultaneously summons and repels male physical affection and objectification, blurring the line between intimacy and violence. The brief scene ends as quickly as it began with the woman demanding that the men take her away. As she stands up, broken tomatoes fall from her crotch and she winces, appearing ashamed at the sound of the gooey, blood-like mess that slops to the floor. In this moment she is as broken as the wall behind her.

This powerful scene highlights the near inevitability of failure within a society that places conflicting requirements on women, as well as how that failure can often appear to be self-inflicted. Bausch stages this conflict within one woman, who, having internalized the violence and trauma of her environment, acts as both victim and oppressor. Does she still maintain complete ownership of her body as she yells commands at the men in the scene? The tone would imply that she does, yet her requests point towards a more conflicted relationship. This poignant ambiguity is a part of what makes Bausch's work so strong and emotionally impactful. One scene contains multiple interpretations—or even multiple, co-existent realities. Therefore, her characters are never flat or obvious. Instead, they are real people who are complex, often inconsistent, and resist any single interpretation. Bausch is able to create this complexity by pulling from the experiences of her own dancers. She famously posed open questions in rehearsal rather than simply telling her dancers what to do. In adopting some of Bausch's



techniques in rehearsal, I have hoped to gain a similar form of complexity: one that is achieved by loosening choreographic control and approaching the decentered experience of everyday life.

## **The Consequences of Decentered Reality: Blankness as Privilege and Prison**

No one would describe Pina Bausch's work as an example of proper social manners. Throughout her oeuvre she breaks almost every one of Emily Post's rules. Bausch presents the cracks, stumbles and stutters of society, rather than smoothly running social machinery. She presents characters who appear to have lost the ability to behave, but no one is there to correct them. Yet the aesthetic of *Palermo, Palermo* is not completely uncivilized. Indeed, it is replete with the trappings of Western "civilization": the women wear long dresses and heels and the men are in suits. There are café tables, coffee cups, pearls, sugar, spaghetti, apples, a television, church bells, and even a trained dog, eating food off a plate. This world contains the markers of Western civilization, but every object is used in the wrong way. It is as if the inhabitants of this fantastical Palermo have forgotten how to use the objects of everyday life, and all that is left is a façade: people running around pretending to be regular humans, reenacting a nonsensical choreography.

This performance of the "normal" presented in *Palermo, Palermo* has greatly influenced my own work. As demonstrated by the very topic of this thesis, I am interested in the performance of everyday life, especially what might happen, or what is revealed, when that performance goes awry. One way I have addressed this question is by leaning into the performance of performance. As Foster and Mauss argue, technical prowess, in both dance and everyday life, comes from repeated practice that makes learned behavior appear natural. In my choreographic work I try to reveal the labor of learning. Rather than presenting a slick, "natural" ballet that moves smoothly between scenes, *Refrain from Doing Things Badly* shows two people trying, yet failing, to appear normal. A central choreographic impulse of the piece came from

recognizing that almost all performances are in some way an attempt to make the audience to like you. Even if a work is aggressive or intentionally repulsive, the performers try to elicit an emotional reaction or some level of interest.

Throughout *Refrain from Doing Things Badly*, Jace and I show the work of repeatedly attempting to please and entertain by employing a vaudevillian entertainment aesthetic. Sections of the piece are overwhelmingly frontal. For example, during one scene, we face the audience and repeat versions of the word “yeah” (yes, ok, sure, definitely, amen, absolutely, etc.) in a performance of agreeability. In an early draft of this section, we started casually and accelerated into a furious pace and volume, frustrated by the lack of response. Our attempts to appear likeable and easygoing were thwarted by the inevitable silence from an audience trained in the behaviors of appropriate Western theatrical viewership: seated, politely watching, with hands in laps. They are therefore unable to provide the verbal approval that we seek to acquire. As I further considered the purpose of this scene—to highlight the strangeness and difficulty of the performance of everyday life—I decided an emotional crescendo did not accurately depict my interest. Instead, Jace and I fall into a rhythmically and tonally deadpan chant of vocal affirmations while pacing upstage and downstage. We have fallen so deeply into the mechanics of our effort to please that the action no longer has purpose. We have become blank. This is its own form of crescendo, yet one connected more to the absurd logic I am so drawn to in Bausch’s work, rather than a demonstration of emotional excess.

The experimentation with ways of being, both in my own work and Bausch’s, presents an exaggerated depiction of the performances that women must give in everyday life. If one follows the prescriptions of Post and continues to shift costume depending on the scene—if you truly publicly are a lady in the street and privately transform into a freak—what are you as you are

walking through the door to the bedroom? A complication of decentered reality is the question of what occurs for the performer during the switch from reality to reality. The ability to change based on context seems to imply a sort of blankness of personality. The exaggeration in Bausch's work, and my own, creates an amplified depiction of this blankness. Time slows, so that we can see the consequences of this switch, or the blank liminal space that exists between multiple realities.

In *Refrain from Doing Things Badly*, I present this blankness as a dissociation from identity. After performing multiple different personalities in an attempt to gain the audience's favor, Jace and I begin to forget who we are. The piece, which has been quickly switching between different scenes, begins to slow, and we become stuck in the blank space between. The ability to switch between personalities, which should be an asset, becomes a trap as we become lost in a void of confusion, dissociated from the smooth clarity of "civilized" social order.

Of course, the blank body—a human body with no socially coded signifiers—is an impossibility. As described in the previous section of this paper, the technical histories of our bodies—in everyday life, as described by Mauss, or in dance, as described by Foster—permanently shape our current embodied experience. Feminist scholar Judith Butler also questions the idea of the body as clean slate in her essay "Body Inscriptions, Performative Subversions." She argues that even before questioning gender, one should question why the body, conceived as separate from the mind, could ever be perceived as a blank frame without meaning in and of itself. Butler claims that this idea of the blank body devoid of significance comes largely from Christian thought and the concept of Cartesian dualism, which starkly divided the body from the mind (Butler 1990, 130). Furthering Butler's argument, I believe that women's bodies are more likely to be perceived as blank because of their close connection to

nature in Western philosophical constructions. Female bodies, as receptacles of reproduction, are traditionally connected to natural biological processes and hence even more divided from the mind than their male counterparts in a Cartesian paradigm. In this construction women hold meaning rather than make meaning. They are a canvas to be painted on by the artist.

Film theorist Laura Mulvey makes a similar argument in her study of the role of the male gaze in classical Hollywood cinema. Employing Freudian theory, she states that women exist in patriarchal culture as a “signifier for the male other” through which man can “live out his fantasies and obsessions ... by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 1975, 58). In dance, this traditional male/female relationship exists particularly in classical ballet, where the ethereal, female body is shaped by the male choreographer to be put on display as, counterintuitively, both an erotic object and a signifier of pure innocence. As Susan Foster explains in “The Ballerina’s Phallic Pointe”: “*She* is attraction itself which *he* presents for all the world to see” (Foster 2004, 2). The blank woman is a creation of patriarchal culture, perpetuating gendered power structures which position man as a creator and woman as muse, or even simply blank paper.

Although this patriarchal construct intentionally strips women of power, women have always found ways to reclaim agency within oppressive systems. For example, the rigid marital structures and lack of economic opportunities for women in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to the development of trope of the Gold Digger in popular entertainment, the simultaneously tricky yet silly woman who preys off of an unwitting man’s money.<sup>5</sup> In the

---

<sup>5</sup> Popularized in movies such as *Gold Diggers of 1933* and its various offshoots, the term first appeared in a play *The Gold Diggers* by Avery Hopwood in 1919. Although largely used to describe fictional characters, the idea of the maniacal, social climbing beautiful woman presented a true threat to members of the upper classes in the first half of the twentieth century, as social mixing between classes became more common.

1920s, painter Georgia O’Keeffe started as a muse to, and then wife of, master photographer Alfred Stieglitz but went on to become an even more successful artist than her patron. Feminized blankness allows for the shape-shifting necessary to successfully navigate conflicting responsibilities and constrictions of decentered reality. Simultaneously, these examples—from blank paper, to Gold Diggers, to O’Keeffe—are all decidedly white.

The re-appropriation and manipulation of feminized blankness is more accessible to white women, whose racial identities are not over-prescribed by society. As W.E.B. Du Bois famously describes in *The Souls of Black Folk*, white identity is often perceived as unmarked, while people of color live through an experience of “double-consciousness,” which he defines as “a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 1903, 11). The white body, on the other hand, as the normative prism through which Othered racial identities are viewed and evaluated, never experiences this detachment of looking at oneself through a racialized social prism.

Richard Dyer elaborates on this concept through his own studies on whiteness, “[a]s long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as the human norm” (Dyer 2005, 10). Being the norm is incredibly powerful; it allows white people to speak for humanity because they/we are seen as simply human, while people of other races are only able to speak to specific and particular experiences of those groups. Dyer calls this the “invisibility of whiteness,” arguing that this invisibility provides authority, power, and privilege through its unmarked status. He acknowledges that many white people do not wield this power maliciously or even consciously, but this only serves to perpetuate the problem. As long as white is seen as “normal,” and white

people are able to define what is the norm, all other races will be judged against this implicit standard and will inevitably fall short. The blank nature of whiteness is fundamental to, yet unacknowledged in, etiquette manuals. It provides access to the freedom of movement and flexibility of the role necessitated by a decentered reality.

Adrian Piper, an African American conceptual artist, plays with both a feminized blankness of identity and white invisibility in her performance series *Catalysis* (1970-1973). During these performances she acted out offensive, disgusting, or just wildly strange behavior in a public context—such as dousing herself in smelly substances and walking through the streets of New York City, or covering herself in feathers and attending a gallery opening—to see how strangers would respond. She titled her work after the scientific term “catalysis”: the chemical reaction caused in a given substance by a catalytic agent that is not itself changed in the encounter. In the same way, Piper used her performances to gauge her own identity through the reaction that her strange behavior would bring out in the audience, a process which she called “rational self-definition.” The focus of the work itself was not the performance, but the viewers’ reaction to it. Or as she describes it, “[t]he work is a catalytic agent, in that it promotes a change in another entity (the viewer) without undergoing any permanent change itself” (Piper 1973, 7). Viewers would show something about themselves by how they responded. “The society’s treatment of me shows me what I am, and in the products of my labor reveal the nature of society” (Piper, 13). Her performance of self is an extreme, burlesqued example of both the existence of multiple, outward facing female roles in a decentered reality and of the possibility of constructing personality through movement.

In *Catalysis VII* (1971), Piper went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City to the “Before Cortés: The Sculpture of Middle America” show (1970-1971) while chewing a

large wad of bubble gum. As she walked through the museum, she blew bubbles and let the sticky mess pop on her face without removing it. This iteration of *Catalysis* highlighted that black female artists did not (and really still do not) have a place at the Metropolitan Museum (Bowles 2011, 164). Furthering the irony of her act, Piper intentionally set her sticky actions within the context of an exhibit about art in the Americas before European conquest. Although the largest visual arts institution in New York City professed interest in the history and objects of pre-colonial America, Piper, as a black female artist, was not welcome as a creator in this same space. So instead she transformed herself into an artwork and unofficially displayed herself within the museum. Piper takes control of the inevitability that she will be perceived as Other. By actively highlighting how much her racialized body is undervalued within the context of the Metropolitan Museum, Piper demonstrates the power of white invisibility. Although the Museum expresses interest in the *history* of native peoples, Piper's performance demonstrates the strangeness of her presence as a living person of color within a Eurocentric, elite institution. Piper refuses to reshape her own performance of self to fit in, and thereby reveals the invisible structural forms of exclusion that exist within the Museum and the art world as a whole.

Much of my own work similarly engages with this idea of not belonging, although not along lines of racial exclusion, as I am a white artist. Also, unlike Piper, my performance does not fully reject conforming, but instead plays with attempting to fit in, yet failing to live up to the required standard. An etiquette manual promotes the idea that behavior can, and should, be standardized. It encourages one to strive to always fit in. In *Refrain from Doing Things Badly*, I attempt to demonstrate that such standardization is not only impossible, but also that conformity is itself strange.



For example, during the piece, Jace and I wear the exact same beige and green loose-fitting jumpers. From the beginning, I was clear that we should be in identical outfits—in some sort of androgynous uniform that was unusual enough that it could not possibly be perceived as everyday clothing. I was also interested in an ensemble that could not be placed historically. I took the inspiration for the design from 1920s male bathing suits, with striped trim and a dropped waist, but, in consultation with costume designer Amy Page, settled on a loose-fitting cut that breaks from this direct, historical connection. The final product is specific, so demonstrates that we put effort into our appearance, yet does not quite look like any other recognizable article of clothing. We succeed in matching our outfits perfectly, yet our strange appearance makes this initial goal appear in some way misguided.

This fine line between striving for conformity and landing in the realm of the strange, brings up the concept of the uncanny. Without getting too deeply into Freud's dated theories of the uncanny (which are still useful, at least for art and aesthetics), the overall concept is that "the uncanny is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (Freud 1919, 1). In other words, that which was familiar (*heimlich* as Freud explains in German) becomes *unheimlich*, which translates to both uncanny and unfamiliar. Applying the theory of the uncanny to Piper's work helps to explain its effects. The initial description of her actions, chewing gum in a museum, is not *technically* allowed, but is still fairly common. Yet, as she proceeds to blow repeated bubbles on her face, her actions become increasingly stranger. In this case, the duration and scale of her activity tip it into the realm of the uncanny. The viewer (who, importantly in this case does not know she is performing) begins to question if Piper is maybe insane for behaving so strangely, and therefore possibly dangerous. An initially normal or funny action transforms into something slightly terrifying, or at the very least unsettling.

My use of text and speaking in *Refrain from Doing Things Badly* similarly plays with the uncanniness that, in the context of my work, comes from conformity. From the beginning, I wanted to depict the blankness that can come from decentered reality through speaking, yet Jace and I struggled to find an effective way of performing blankness in that mode. We tried deadpan delivery, using in-ear headphones to repeat recordings, and a variety of different characters, but each of these felt contrived rather than blank. Eventually I realized that we needed to focus on subject matter rather than vocal tone. We worked for a long time on how to talk about nothing, which ultimately meant resorting to clichéd statements, or other generalizations commonly used in small talk. When this lasts longer than twenty seconds, it begins to sound uncanny. All of the content that we are saying is relatively familiar, but, as it goes on, it seems clear that something is off. The uncanny is often used to describe things that appear nearly human but are not—such as robots, automatons, and video simulations—and by maintaining our regular vocal qualities, yet mechanically repeating the same trite statements while ultimately saying nothing, Jace and I were able to evoke this unsettling quality. My aim in this is to defamiliarize the normal, and to point out the strangeness that can come from striving to conform.

Piper's and my own questioning of conformity also serve to complicate a patriarchal conception of objectivity and certainty—both qualities that Post employs in her defense of etiquette. Post argues that all rules of etiquette ultimately boil down to one simple tenet: making others feel comfortable. By claiming this overarching, clear rule, she conveniently obfuscates that etiquette actually serves to maintain hierarchies by marking, through appropriate behavior, who is “in” and “out.” Her seemingly objective standard does not stand up to scrutiny. Instead it is revealed as an argument constructed to uphold invisible, yet powerful, hierarchical structures of class, race and gender. Piper demonstrates the paradoxical nature of many objective

arguments by frequently employing the language of objectivity, while using her performances to question the underlying uncertainty behind these purported truths. As Piper scholar John Bowles explains, Piper employs the “Modernist discourse of disembodied objectivity in order to refute it” (Bowles 2011, 168). For example, although she works to objectify herself through *Catalysis*, the very construction of her performance experiments is decidedly uncertain. Each iteration of *Catalysis* is a score, not a set piece. The work itself is not her actions, or costumes, or behaviors but the very slippery, liminal space of the interaction between the performer and viewer: the exact variables that she herself cannot control. Although her goal is self-objectification, she refutes the ideal of disembodied objectivity.

This mixture of certainty and uncertainty also exists in her performance and photographic series, *Mythic Being*. *Mythic Being: I/You (Her)*, 1 (1974) depicts a young boy in the lower left corner, with Piper’s smiling face slightly overlapping his [see: Fig. 1]. Her curly black hair blends into the all black background and a speech bubble floats above her claiming:

It is only because of the defects in my personality that I can finally say this to you. I am protected and strengthened by my inadequacy. I am secure, smugly secure, for my personal flaws will constitute a more than adequate defense against whatever your response might be to what I have to say to you. (Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I/You (Her)*, 1, 1974).

Here we see a decidedly womanly claim for self-assurance. One that asserts power while accepting uncertainty and proclaims one’s flaws while defending their value. Piper complicates objectivity and strict patriarchal order by defending the value of uncertainty in a starkly certain manner. By both actively objectifying herself and finding a way to exist confidently within uncertainty, Piper demonstrates an opportunity to learn from the construct of feminine blankness.

There is a mystery and power within the unknown, one that cannot be located with the construct of patriarchal certainty.

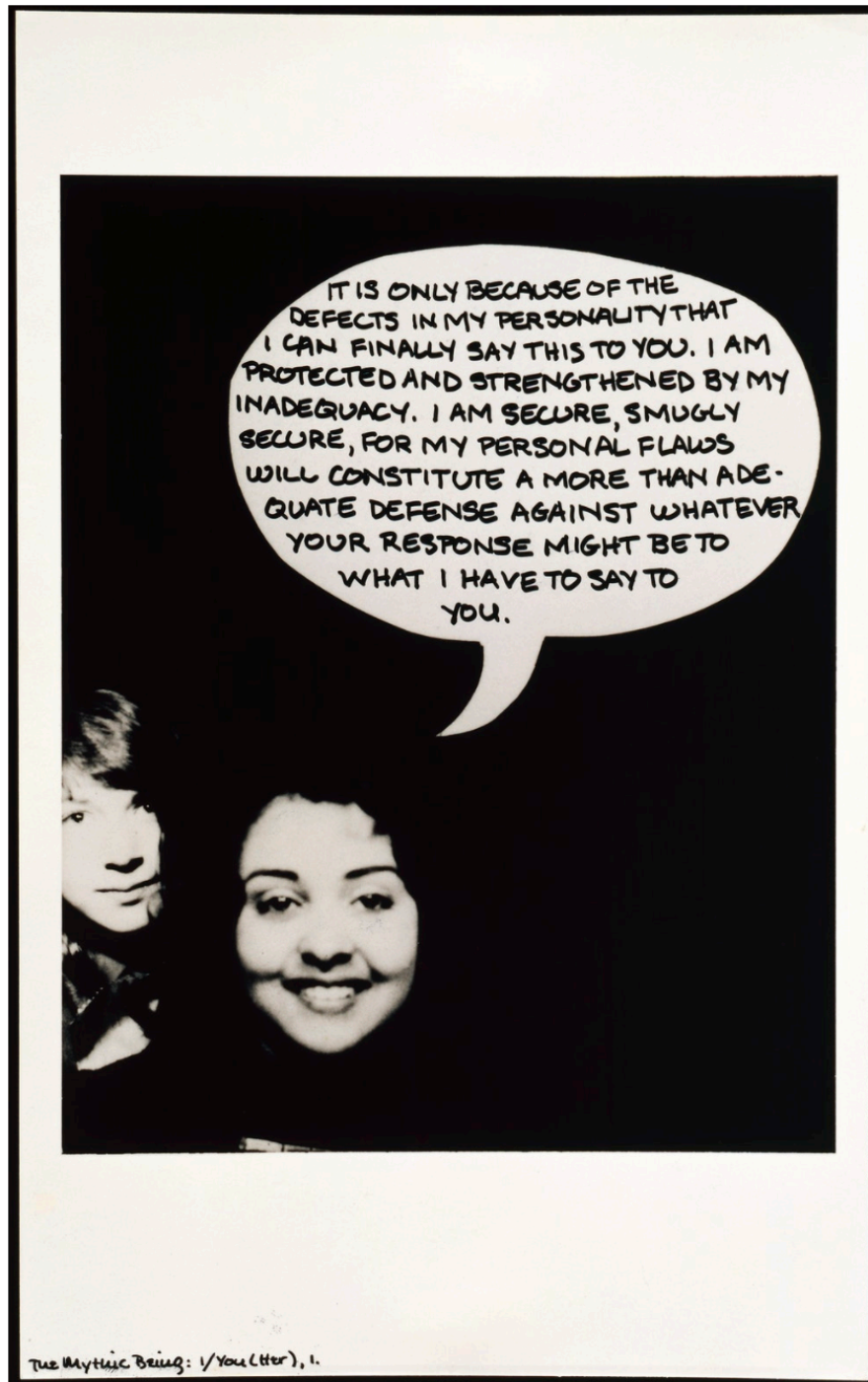


Fig. 1. Piper, Adrian (1974) *The Mythic Being: I/You (Her)* [black and white photograph, ink]. Retrieved May 6, 2020 from Walker Art Center website: <http://www.walkerart.org>

## Watching a Woman's Performance: The Role of the Viewer

All performance work is in some way about the relationship between the performer and the viewer. Piper attempts to control this relationship by questioning the etiquette, rituals and architecture of traditional theater and performance. She believes that in order to have the greatest impact—for the artist to act as catalytic agent and effect change in the audience—the artist and viewer need to exist in the same time and space without the “artificial environment” of the stage (Piper, 8-9). By prioritizing a level relationship between herself and the audience, Piper's absurdist acts become a form of realist performance art. Although she is not behaving as she normally would, she attempts to trick the viewer into believing that her actions *could* be something that she might do on a regular basis. So she surprises the audience in everyday situations by, for example, filling a purse with ketchup and searching for her keys within the goopy, red mess in the ladies' room of a Manhattan Macy's (Piper, 15). This confusion between whether she is performing or being herself creates the tension in the work which can, in Piper's opinion, create change in the viewer. She argues that if she were to perform the same act within an art venue, it would “prepare the viewer to be catalyzed, thus making actual catalysis impossible” (Piper, 15).

By performing for an audience that is completely unaware of her role as a performer, we can also view Piper's work as an experiment that tests the effects of the hidden performances that women need give on an everyday basis. Even while she disregards Emily Post's goals to fit in and to smooth social interactions, Piper nevertheless performs expressly *for* the viewer rather than for herself. As a result of her extreme performances, she experienced a “complete and intense alienation from my audience. At the same time that I existed in and for that audience, I

became aware of the extreme disparity between my inner self image and the one they had of me” (Piper, 17). Here we see another risk of performed identity. Conforming to the needs of her audience (even if in this case that need is to confuse and surprise them) caused Piper to disconnect with her sense of self. Like other women who perform to fit in, Piper lost a sense of ownership over her body.

In response to this sense of dissociation, Piper completely removed the audience from her work. Instead, she performed alone in her apartment, describing how she came to “substitute my own self-consciousness of me as an object for that same reflexive consciousness formerly supplied by the audience. I have assimilated an <other> into my sense of self ... I perform, and simultaneously perceive myself as the performing object” (Piper, 19). Having practiced the performance of self, she no longer needed the presence of the audience to feel watched. She had internalized the viewer.

Adrian Piper’s focus on, and eventual removal of, the audience has been particularly on my mind as I write this thesis and develop my thesis performance during the global pandemic COVID-19, which has caused everyday life in the spring of 2020 to screech to a halt. I am very lucky to be healthy, housed, and financially secure. I am fully aware that it is a very small price to pay to have my MFA thesis in dance disrupted. Yet in spite of how relatively minor this disruption might be to me, it has still radically changed the realities of the project. Every description of my piece in this paper thus far has been of the work as it was originally created while the Sarah Lawrence campus was open. That rehearsed version of *Refrain from Doing Things Badly* will premiere someday, but it will not be the work that I submit as my MFA performance thesis. Now my performance must be online. My collaborator and dancer, Jace, is in a different state, hundreds of miles away. The final result will be radically different from what

would have been performed in the Sarah Lawrence theater. Different does not mean worse. I believe that limitations frequently lead to creative breakthroughs, and I am excited by how distance, technology, and current events have affected the work. I am particularly interested in the new questions of viewership that this situation evokes. Since much of *Refrain from Doing Things Badly* centered around the relationship between Jace and myself with the audience—seeking their approval and appreciation and performing *for* them—the absence of a physical audience in this new iteration poses a new challenge. Piper’s intentional removal of the audience from her work now serves as an even more relevant point of inspiration. How can Jace and I also internalize the presence of the audience?

One way to approach this is to reframe what we learned in the rehearsal room. Throughout this process, as with most dance rehearsals, the goal has been the live performance. Although Jace and I frequently discussed the relationship with the audience, we never actually had one in the studio. Instead, we served as both performers and audience. As choreographer, sound designer, and performer, I frequently physically stepped out of the action to observe or change sound cues. In addition to this physical toggling, I also often mentally removed myself from the experience of performance. Dancing, and any kind of performance, requires focused mental presence in the current action, while composing needs a wider lens. You need to think not only of what is happening in the moment but also how it could change and how it relates to what comes before and after. There is a mental toggling that goes along with the physical. I also frequently asked Jace to watch and comment on the work. This communal witnessing never made it into our performed version of the piece, yet it existed in every rehearsal. We extensively rehearsed the role of viewer without ever acknowledging it.

In the new iteration of *Refrain from Doing Things Badly*, questions about the relationship between the performer and viewer are at the forefront. The piece is now a website that serves as an online etiquette manual. The site opens with a pop-up in which Jace and I welcome the viewer and thank them for coming to our site. The structure of this welcome will be inefficient and its content rambling, ideally eliciting a sense of confusion about what is to come.

Once the viewer has entered, the site includes a written introduction, which then links to “The Manual.” The Manual is a series of quiz-like questions that takes the viewer through a series of videos that are each titled after one of Emily Post’s chapters from *Etiquette*. Each “Chapter” includes Jace and I performing in a way that loosely relates to the chapter title, yet presents a strange, illogical interpretation of the subject matter. It is a manual, so we are supposed to be telling you what to do, yet our advice is ambiguous and inscrutable.

This new format of a website introduces opportunities to question the relationship of agency between the performer and viewer, and the power structures that exist in an etiquette manual. An etiquette manual is supposed to tell the reader how to act. Therefore, the author, as the authority figure relaying these rules, holds the agency. By creating a nonsensical manual with no actual advice in it, I seek to give agency back to the reader/viewer. They are able to interpret our strange actions as they wish. In addition, unlike in a traditional performance, the audience members will now be able to control the structure and order of the work. They can click on the videos in any order. Yet the labyrinthian structure of the quiz will sometimes thwart their desires. In this way, Jace and I regain control over their experience and keep the audience more actively engaged than we would be able to if they were simply watching a video. The effort involved in navigating the website is necessary to the understanding of the work itself, so we are, in this



virtual context, reclaiming the relationship that can exist between audience and performer during a live event.

The considerations around how to shift my work to a new platform during this time helped me to recognize what was most essential about the piece. Although the live iteration of the performance had started to relate less directly to Emily Post, in reframing the piece I realized that my ideas about etiquette and behavior were still closely tied to *Etiquette* the book itself. Furthermore, the research that I had done for this paper dictated how I structured the artistic piece online. Arditì's concept of decentered reality became a key framing device. I wanted to create a structure that elicited a feeling of needing to be many things at once. By keeping the entire manual on one webpage, with crossing arrows and questions connecting each short video, I hope to create a feeling of chaos within excessive structure.

Overall, moving to an online format gave me the opportunity to design the complete frame of the work. Typically, when in a theater, I cannot change the actual architecture of the space. There are existing walls, with their own color or materials, a curtain, wings or no wings and on and on. Set and lighting design can change the environment, but I do not have the set design budget of Tanztheater Wuppertal (Bausch's well-funded company). With a website, I was able to design the full frame of the screen, from the look and color and structure of the page, to the setting of each video on that page. The comparative ease of this design process—selecting a color on a screen, versus moving a large prop onto a stage and editing two shots together rather than rechoreographing and relearning a section of a piece—gave me the opportunity to take more risks. Moving forward I hope to hold on to this ambitious artistic choice making and continue to more deeply consider the relationship between the performer and the viewer.

## Conclusion

Emily Post broke quite a few rules in her time. In fact, I believe that it was her skill at bending the rule book that helped her to successfully write her own. Emily Post was born in 1872 into wealth and privilege as the daughter of successful architect Bruce Price and socialite Josephine (Lee) Price. As a child she dreamed of following in her father's footsteps and becoming an architect herself, but when it came time for her to switch from children's frocks to long dresses, she was informed that fine ladies do not work. Demonstrating her lifelong ability to adapt, Emily quickly shifted course and became a successful debutante. Unfortunately, she married the wrong man. Edwin Main Post was a prominent but unskilled banker and prodigious philanderer. He lost much of her money and caused a scandal when news of his affairs leaked to the press. The Posts divorced in 1905 and once again Emily, now a single mother with a reputation marred by scandal, changed course. She regained her social standing first by becoming a popular novelist and then, at age 50, wrote her first etiquette manual. She went on to host a radio show, write a newspaper column and even serve as advisor to the White House on proper social protocol. She was a successful businesswoman before she even added the chapter on working women to her own manual.

Of course, her story is one of great privilege. It is also one of flexibility and adaptability. Emily Post navigated her life successfully because she was able to change when necessary, and she imbued her manual with this same lesson. She does not tell you to behave the same way on page two as she does on two hundred and twenty-two, because that is not how she lived her own life. As I have argued, constant adaptability can be a trap. It is only truly accessible to the economically and racially privileged and creates unachievable expectations for women of all

backgrounds. Yet, in spite of my many aforementioned critiques of Post's work, I also greatly respect her practicality and success, both of which were based on her resourceful flexibility during a time when women had very little choice over how to live their lives.

Choreographers also break quite a lot of rules. The traditional story of dance history (and really most art history) is one of daring risk-takers who burn the rule book and start anew. This narrative of Martha Graham rejecting ballet, and Merce Cunningham rejecting Martha, and Judson Church rejecting everything, and so-forth, has been questioned by many dance scholars. Brenda Dixon Gottschild's study of the invisibilized presence of African diasporic forms in American dance brings up just one of the many ways that the rejectionist theory of dance history prioritizes only the famous, white, few, while leaving out the much more diverse majority.<sup>6</sup> As a choreographer, I have also fallen into this obsession with transgression and the seduction of trying to be radically original. This project, and the study of dance history during graduate school as a whole, has helped to both temper and deepen this previously opaque desire. First of all, it has helped me to recognize the importance of citation—that artistic development comes not through isolated, divine inspiration, but through the study of the work of others, and a frank recognition of what they have given you. My study of Adrian Piper and Pina Bausch, for example, has served to strengthen my understanding of my own work and how it can improve, while properly crediting the ways in which I was inspired by them.

In addition, I have learned that what I am interested in is not breaking the rules, but in understanding the rules themselves. For, ultimately, like Mrs. Post, I love rules. I am genuinely interested in exactly how women were expected to serve coffee after dinner in 1940. I care about

---

<sup>6</sup> Gottschild focuses on the Africanist influences in George Balanchine's style of ballet, modern and post-modern dance, and black-face minstrelsy in *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance* (1996).

these seemingly minor facts, because, as I have demonstrated in this thesis, small rules of behavior can reveal much about life in society as a whole. Although we may feel ourselves to be far from the rigid social rules that dictated how and when to serve bouillon at a formal supper, ask anyone in 2020 their opinion on the most recent wedding they attended, and you will see complexities of etiquette are alive and well. By paying close attention to everyday behaviors, we learn more about what is tacitly expected of us, and the ways that we, both positively and negatively, subconsciously self-police our actions in order to conform to the society in which we exist.

One of my thesis performance advisors, Juliana May would often say in our composition class, “What you are doing is already there—you just have to find it.” By pursuing my own interests within the context of knowledge produced by other artists and academics, I have begun to find it. It has something to do with the strangeness in the small, domestic, and quotidian aspects of life. It relates to that which is already there, every day, and revealing the structures that make us blind to its presence.

In the future I hope to further this research by engaging more deeply with the formal choreographic elements of labor traditionally designated as women’s work. How can I apply choreographic tools of rhythm, pacing, scale, and repetition to analyze both historical and current domestic work, such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, and child-rearing? How can this physical and artistic analysis help us to understand how traditional domestic labor undergirds and supports existing power structures, as well as how it might question or transcend them?

## Bibliography

- Abrutyn, Seth and Michael J. Carter. "The Decline in Shared Collective Conscience as Found in the Shifting Norms and Values of Etiquette Manuals." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2014, 352-376.
- Agamben, Giorgio. "Notes on Gesture." *Means without End: Notes on Politics*. Translated by Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti. University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 49-61.
- Arditi, Jorge. "Etiquette Books, Discourse and the Deployment of an Order of Things." *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1999, 25-48.
- Belek, Ben. "Autism and the Proficiency of Social Ineptitude: Probing the Rules of 'Appropriate' Behavior." *Ethos*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2018, 161-179.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "Physical Space, Social Space and Habitus." *The Vilhelm Aubert Memorial Lecture organized by the Department of Sociology, University of Oslo and the Institute for Social Research, Oslo*, May 15, 1995
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Bowles, John P. *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender and Embodiment*. Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Butler, Judith. "Body Inscriptions, Performative Subversions." *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990. 128-134.
- Climenhaga, Royd. "Kontakthof in Context." *Pina Bausch*. New York: Routledge, 2009. 69-94.
- Deyer, Richard. "The Matter of Whiteness." *White Privilege: Essential Readings and the Other Side of Racism*. Edited by Paula Rothenberg. Worth Publishing, 2005, 9-14.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903. In *W.E.B. Du Bois The Souls of Black Folk*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.
- Foster Wallace, David. "Authority and American Usage." *Consider the Lobster*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005.
- Foster, Susan Leigh. "The ballerina's phallic pointe." In *Corporealities: Dancing knowledge, culture and power*. Edited by Susan Leigh Foster. New York: Routledge, 1995, 1-26.
- Foster, Susan. "Dancing Bodies." *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, edited by Jane C. Desmond, Duke University Press, 1997, 235-257.

- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." *In The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*. Translated by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955, 217-256.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.
- Goffman, Erving. "Gender Display." *Gender Advertisements*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979, 1-9.
- Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- Lepecki, Andre. "Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, the task of the dancer." *TDR*, vol 57, no. 4, Winter 2013, 13-27.
- Mauss, Marcel. "Techniques of the Body." *Societe de Psychologie*, May 17th, 1934. [https://monoskop.org/images/c/c4/Mauss\\_Marcel\\_1935\\_1973\\_Techniques\\_of\\_the\\_Body.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/c/c4/Mauss_Marcel_1935_1973_Techniques_of_the_Body.pdf).
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol 12, no. 3, Autumn 1975, 6-18.
- Nathanson, Elizabeth. "Easy as Pie: Cooking Shows, Domestic Efficiency and Postfeminist Temporality." *Television and New Media*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2009, 311-330.
- Noland, Carrie. "Introduction." *Migrations of Gesture* edited by Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, IX-XXVI.
- Piper, Adrian. *Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object*. Hamburg: Hossmann: 1974.
- Ransom, Jan and Alan Feuer. "Weinstein Trial Begins with Vivid Descriptions of Several Sexual Attacks." *The New York Times*. January 22, 2020, p. A25.
- Richardson, Kristen. *The Season: A Social History of the Debutante*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020.
- Sacks, Oliver. *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*. New York: Summit Books, 1985.

Van Schaik, Eva. "The Mistrust of Life - Relations in Dance: Connections Between Butoh, Austruckstanz, and Dance Theater in Contemporary Experimental Dance." *The Pina Bausch Sourcebook: The Making of Tanztheater*, edited by Royd Climenhaga, Routledge, 2013.

Wouters, Cass. "Etiquette Books and Emotion Management in the 20th Century: Part Two: The integration of the sexes." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 29, no. 2, Winter 1995, 325-339.