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The Inconstancy of Bodies: Yvonne Meier's Works, 1985 – 2012

by

Lindsey Ann Drury

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2015

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**This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies satisfying the thesis
requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.**

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Abstract

The Inconstancy of Bodies: Yvonne Meier's Works, 1985 – 2012

Lindsey Ann Drury, MA

Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2015

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What is ability? And conversely, what is disability? This research on the dancer and choreographer Yvonne Meier theorizes that her more than 30-year career has challenged the oft perceived polarities between function and dysfunction, utility and futility through the physical actions of dance performances. As she developed as a dancer and choreographer, Meier engaged in forms of movement training that pledged to expand her ability by unearthing the hidden causes and effects of actions. And yet, she created works which foregrounded the very gaps in knowledge between acts, their intentions, and effects. The fundamental disability expressed through Meier's works is the condition of having a body. Bodies determine the limits of perspective, barring the living from ever really seeing much of any act, or its ramifications. As embodiment itself disables humans from understanding the true scope of the reasons and consequences of actions, all further arguments can only tentatively define apart 'ability' and 'disability.' And so, this thesis explores the deeply incomplete nature of perspective as the fundamental disability explored in Meier's works, and primarily does so by examining her incomplete records, many of which were damaged in a flood caused by Hurricane Sandy. In it, what

could be salvaged from Meier's personal archive of videos, written scores, and notes on pieces is cross-referenced with interviews the author conducted with Meier and her collaborators. A small quantity of published reviews, essays, and interviews have also been referenced. This research also draws, both directly and indirectly, from related works of theory that address the utility of action, embodiment, and artistic process. Researching Meier, like performing for her, is a process subjected to the disabled perspective of the body, which cannot take one back in time to witness all which here has been recorded from remnants and memories.

Dedication

For YM but also for YN: alphabetically separated by 1 letter, in sequence, and a single line which adds “down” at the end of the score I have heard one of you give to a child, saying “place your hand on the page, now go up, down, up.” Writing too is a physical act. This is from my body, then, to yours.

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Introduction

What is ability? And conversely, what is disability? In her more than 30-year career as a dancer and choreographer, Yvonne Meier has challenged the perceived polarities between function and dysfunction, utility and futility, through the physical actions of dance performances. Early in her development as a dancer and choreographer, Meier engaged in forms of movement training that pledged to expand her ability by unearthing the hidden causes and effects of actions. Yet she created works which foregrounded the very gaps between acts, their intentions, and effects. She saturated her works with the subtext that the training of dancers' abilities fails to acknowledge the basic reality of bodies—that causes and effects can never be fully exposed.

The fundamental disability expressed through Meier's works is the condition of having a body. She creates choreographies that consider ability entirely anew—not polarized from disability but as inextricably connected to it. In Meier's works, ability and disability equally compose a body's actions. Like the functions of positive and negative space in visual art, Meier wields the functional capacity of a body in her work through the meeting point between that which is within, and which is beyond, a body's scope of action. Her works have again and again sought to expose ability and disability as the two contributors that determine the contours of action.

Audiences and dancers also experience Meier's work equally from the abilities and disabilities of their senses. Meier's works explore that fact that bodies determine the limits of perspective, barring the living from ever really seeing the entirety of any act, its impetus, or its ramifications. Over the years, she has composed the disabilities of the senses into her work in many ways. Two notable examples of her experiments with the senses of audiences include plunging them into complete darkness so they couldn't see the dance happening all around them, while dances touched, pushed, and pulled them

through a maze (*The Shining*, 1992), or by staging three separate solos and their three musical accompaniments simultaneously, thus oversaturating the audience's eyes and ears so they were unable to see all the dancing or extract the sound of one song from another (*Pommes Fritz*, 1991).

Meier's incomplete records, many of which were damaged in a flood caused by Hurricane Sandy, are both a metaphor for the incomplete nature of perspective, and the primary sources for this research on her. In my research on Meier, I have sought what could be salvaged from her personal archive of videos, written scores, and notes on pieces, and then conducted a series of interviews with Meier and her collaborators. This research also references a small quantity of published reviews, essays, and interviews. Researching Meier, like performing for her, is subjected to the disabled perspective of the body, which cannot take one back in time to witness all which here has been recorded from remnants and memories.

Meier's approach to disability is profoundly different than that of other avant-garde choreographers who have tackled the subject. Jérôme Bel's *Disabled Theater* (2012), for example, shared with Meier's *Brother of Gogolorez* (2011) the structural element of live-spoken instructions spoken to performers, but contrasted greatly with Meier's work in identifying disability as a thing solely resident within the specific bodies of those with medical diagnosis. Bel's work confounded subject with subjects—calling something a 'disabled theater' didn't mean that the theater itself would be disabled. *Disabled Theater* instead displayed 11 performers from Switzerland's Theater Hora, all diagnosed with learning and mental disabilities.¹ Unlike Bel's *Disabled Theater*, Meier

¹ While Meier's *Brother of Gogolorez* exposed disabilities of choreographer, dancer, and audience members through linguistic instruction, the instructional texts read in Bel's work were given in the past-tense by a performer apparently unimpaired in any fashion resembling that of the other performers. The instructions included what Bel had asked the performers to do in rehearsals, who again performed them present time of the performance. Disability, as a term, was therefore not related to Bel, to the circumstances

treats disability not as a syndrome, but as a pervasive factor of having a body, which can therefore be subjected to play through the unwieldy and unexpected nature of performance acts. She implicates herself, her audience, and her works in the issue of disability. Meier pushes the notion of disability so far as to render it unanimously shared—we all have impairments, and the very means we have in relating to one another are impaired as well.

This thesis posits Meier's work *Mad Heidi* as a foundation for her explorations of disability, as within it, Meier sustained a severe injury to her knee and was never able to dance fully again. The work, created in 1996, was her only directly autobiographical dance.² Yet, through her injury, the piece created Meier's biography as it reflected it. Unable to dance, Meier became fascinated with her new vantage point, and identified the most profound change in ability not in what happened to her knee, but in what happened to her perspective. Meier began to see her disability within a whole network of disabilities: her work, her dancers, the audience, were all physically limited in perspective due to the conditions of their bodies. And because of this fact, depth of understanding between them was limited, and their limits in understanding caused failures of intimacy. Her vision of disability, in its most fundamental form, has explored the reasons we can't see into one another's inner worlds. Unable to truly connect, we move our bodies in the constant attempt to do so. Meier's works discovered in disability an underlying drive for movement.

By identifying Yvonne Meier's work with disability, this research frames disability neither as a product of a social construction or politics, nor as a medically

of the work, to the audience members—the work instead framed disability as something other than everything about the work save its certified presence within the performers.

² Snider, Suzanne. "Yvonne Meier by Suzanne Snider." BOMB Magazine. January 12, 2012. Accessed November 15, 2013.

diagnosed, official form of physical or mental impairment. To approach the issue of disability, this research considers the work of a particular artist through her engagement with a particular context—that of dance performance. Through dance, Yvonne Meier experienced her body as both abled and disabled in ways particular to her pursuits. In the context of dance, disability has been a shifting difference. Disability, conceived of in this way, is a gap that we feel within ourselves—between our imaginations and our realities, neither of which is ever truly stable or clear to us even as we conceptualize them.

Meier may have felt her disabilities from within her body perhaps at times as pain, perhaps other times as fragility, or awkwardness, or anxiety. In the simplest sense, extracted from all its negative connotations, disability is style. It is the style that arises from the unavoidable difference any particular body maintains from all others. It is not chosen, but symptomatic of one's choices. And as such, it has throughout history been a consistent, nagging reminder that being alive, and therefore embodied, means that we are neither completely in control of ourselves, nor completely able to understand the differences between ourselves and others. Disability is what we are subjected to by being bodies, and the reason that, by being bodies, we must move.

Chapter 1: The First Period

Yvonne Meier's works can be divided into two periods, 1984 – 1996, and 1997 – present. In the first period, Meier danced in all her own choreographies, culminating in her famous solo *Mad Heidi*. The second period began after she completely dislocated a knee in a performance of her solo. After this injury, her dancing body was almost completely absent from her own works. However, Meier's difficulty with her own body had already been a central component to her artistic process since her earliest works. Her most significant injury, which debilitated her from dancing, didn't change everything for her—instead, it served to more clearly expose how she understood the body in relationship to the creation and performance of dances.³ In her first period, Meier discovered and explored forms of disability, and created with each of her new works a new way to treat the various disabilities of the body as choreographic opportunities.

This chapter narrates Meier's passage through her first period, beginning when she moved to New York City from her home in Switzerland in 1979. At the time, she was not yet the virtuoso dancer and improviser she would come to be within the next few years. She arrived with a two-year grant from the Swiss government to study at the Cunningham School. But even then, the conditions of her body determined the course she would take in dance. She disliked the classes at Cunningham, and further, she began “having all these accidents” with her knees during classes.⁴ Seeking solutions for her joint problems, Meier followed the advice of classmates who encouraged her to study a form of improvisation-based dance training called Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT), which was known to help dancers with injuries. In a basic description of the form, its

³ In this, Meier is not alone. In the history of art, painters after loss of vision and composers after loss of hearing have served again and again to expose the nuance of possible relationship between the mental and physical in artistic practice. In the case of Meier, the moment when it was no longer possible to see her dance, it became more possible to see her think.

⁴ Meier, Yvonne. Interview with author. November 10, 2013.

founder Joan Skinner et al wrote that through SRT, students discover that, “the release of tension, of distorted alignment is, in effect, a release of perceptions, of preconceived ideas, of psychophysical habits which are manifested in alignment.”⁵ The concept of ‘release’ at the foundation of SRT was for Meier both exciting and perplexing, and served as an authoritative position on the body with which she would contend for years to come.

When Meier began her studies of SRT at the advent of the 1980s, she was exposed to the idea that injury, like all other problems in dancing, could be solved for dancers if they gain access to their natural bodies. SRT proposed to lead dancers on a journey toward that end. Through linguistic instruction, the facilitators of SRT classes would give various images to dancers, who were then to “flood” their bodies with these images.⁶ SRT employed images based solely in nature, and through them, dancers sought to experience their bodies as natural forms, related in shape, structure, and movement capacities to other natural forms. SRT focused on the passivity of the body as a necessary condition for its liberation from social construction, and deliverance into a natural state. To achieve this passivity, dancers were trained to release their bodies from the domination of consciousness that would block their body’s ability to be flooded with a suggested image. Joan Skinner wrote of the concept of “releasing,” the most important concept in the form, that “one releases the tyranny of conscious control, of the intellect and of preconceived ideas to experience the natural laws of movement as they apply to the human organism.”⁷ “Releasing” would, according to SRT, bring a harmony into one’s

⁵ Skinner, Joan & Bridget Davis, Robert Davidson, Kris Wheeler, Sally Metcalf. “Skinner Releasing Technique: Imagery and its Application to Movement Training.” in *Contact Quarterly*, volume V.1 Fall 1979.

⁶ Meier, Yvonne. Interview with the author. October 26, 2014.

⁷ Skinner, Joan & Bridget Davis, Robert Davidson, Kris Wheeler, Sally Metcalf, 1979.

dancing that could bring out the “true self.”⁸ But SRT’s notion of the “true self” was not the only one to which Meier would be exposed as she continued her dancing practice.

Through her studies of SRT, Meier further gained a passion for improvisational dance and began to build relationships to improvisational dancers of the emerging experimental dance scene that would give rise to PS122 in the next few years, and dominate New York City downtown dance for the next two decades. At the same time, New York City downtown experimental dance was beginning to experience the advent of AIDS. The “true self,” as expressed by dancers from Meier’s community, emerged throughout the 1980s not as the product of a harmonized body, but instead the rage and desperation of bodies in the fight against death.⁹ Many dancers and performers close with Meier passionately addressed AIDS through artworks and activism throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The theoretics of social constructivism developed by disabilities activists in the 1970s, largely from Foucault’s theories of biopolitics, provided the theoretical basis for AIDS activism in downtown dance, where the once virtuosic bodies of performers, without adequate healthcare in the face rampant homophobia, were now fighting for their lives.¹⁰ The slogan of ACT UP, “SILENCE = DEATH,” summed up the point of AIDS activists: the only way to fight the political apathy which fueled the AIDS epidemic was

⁸ Meier, Yvonne, 2014.

⁹ “I’m often thinking about that period in the 1980s and 1990s was a really intense time, I often think of it in terms of the AIDS epidemic, friends of ours were dying and people were protesting, it was this time where bodies really matters and lives were at stake, there was a kind of risk-taking was just demanded in that time. There was a very different physicality than now, we would dance as hard as we could, if we broke our bones, there was this extreme state that I was deeply interested in exploring and Yvonne was too, we were sharing that space together, there was this trance-like processing what was going on around us in this physicality.” Monson, Jennifer. Interview with the author. March 24, 2015.

See also: Gere, David. *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.

¹⁰ See: McRuer, Robert. “Disability and the NAMES Project.” From *The Public Historian* Vol. 27, No. 2 (Spring 2005) pp. 53-61; Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008; Tremain, Shelley. *Foucault and the Government of Disability*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005; Wilde, John W. “The Impact of AIDS.” In *The Disability Journey: A Bridge from Awareness to Action*, 89-91. New York: IUUniverse, 2004.

through *conscious* social and political action. Thus, the liberated body in the AIDS epidemic could only be obtained through the conscious demand for injustice to be seen and heard. All of these aspects in the experience of AIDS and AIDS activism became another important reference point for Meier's approach to the body as an expression of selfhood.

Skinner Releasing Technique's concept of "the released body" bears much resemblance to Foucault's conception of the "docile body" that has fueled Social Constructivist theories of Disability and AIDS activists. Foucault describes the 'docile body' as one that renders itself available to power, subjecting itself therefore to the instruction, training, or "molding" that yields it socially useful.¹¹ The "docile body" can be any body that renders itself available to use, for example, as a medical patient or a soldier. It undergoes change by being molded, by following commands, by subjecting itself to an external authority. Through Foucault's concept, just as people whom society deems disabled or ill are molded into their roles as such, dancers are trained into their roles as dancers. Each, in their own way, is subjected to authority and thereby molded into the likeness of their role. The difference between "the released body" and "the docile body," however, is in the relationship of each to liberation. The passivity of the 'released body' in SRT renders the body available to its natural state, in which it is liberated from social construction. The passivity of the "docile body" in Social Constructivism renders the body available, instead, to the domination of a society that will subjugate it through training into an operative role. Whereas SRT viewed its training of the body optimistically, as a means to liberation, Meier's works explored "the released body" attained through training as a subjected body that, like Foucault's docile body, was not

¹¹ Foucault, Michel. "Docile Bodies." In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 179-187. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

liberated through training, but constructed to suit a specific purpose.

Between her studies of SRT and her growing involvement in downtown dance, Meier experienced the theoretics of the liberation of the body and its relationship to passivity in two conflicting ways. On the one hand, dance training espoused passivity as the means to liberation. On the other, the AIDS activist movement framed passivity as the means by which bodies are subjugated. Meier gained much from SRT, and experienced a profound reduction of injuries as a result of her studies in the form, but was nonetheless critical of the conception of the natural body that remained SRT's primary goal. At the same time, she was active in downtown dance, and close with AIDS activists and dancers who contracted and died of the disease, but remained critical of the standpoint that liberation would come from the fight against the social construction of disability and disease. Meier composed a series of dances that critiqued *both* models for the liberation of the body. Of Skinner Releasing Technique, she rejected passivity as the route to the natural body. Of the social constructivist theories of disability and AIDS activists, she rejected the idea that the passivity of the body to social construction could be eradicated. Meier's choreographic work instead proposed the passivity of the body that is always *constructed, yet necessary*.

Liberated from social or political constraints, one is still bound to one's body. Released from one's own consciousness, one is still bound to an environment. The body in Meier's work, if released from any particular disabling construction, would discover in another kind of disabling condition instead. Meier's conception of the body as 'constructed' framed the body, like any other thing built within the world, as flawed and limited. Meier understood herself, like any creator, as also a thing within the world with limited perspective. Meier understood that she could only construct flawed, limited dances that would not reflect an ultimate truth, but a particular constructed way of seeing

and doing amongst many. Meier's dances abandoned the search for liberation, and instead took as their premise that all manifestations of the body are constructed, and that dance, as a construction, and employing constructed bodies, will always reflect this fact. Meier then treated the flaws and limits of the plurality of constructions as her choreographic opportunity.

In Meier's work, constant movement thus became the requirement—whether of a dancer in a piece, or of a choreographer from the creation of one dance to another. The body is only able to move from one constructed state to another, from one compromised position to another, from one form of sickness to another. The ability of the body lies in the possibility of moving from one disability to another. Throughout her first period, Meier's constant criticism wasn't aiming for progress, but for ongoing movement between different ideas and their manifestations in the body. From within any particular position, she began to see its limits, and thus sought to change her position. In other words, movement for Meier is critical and criticism is movement. Thrusting this assumption into existence, Meier contradicted the uncritical performance of 'the natural body' in movement training forms as SRT, and the progress toward liberation espoused in AIDS activism. Instead, she painted a picture through her dances of the body as something to which we are all bound, which in navigating between various disabled states, can move, but can never overcome the overarching fact of its disability.

Meier's coherent attitude toward the body constrained the trajectory of her works, as with each piece she developed, she looked for what has been left out by her previous works, or the works of colleagues, and sought to find a new way to approach the body-mind problem which included a previously forgotten factor. This appears, for example, in her use of objects, which dancers manipulated in her earliest works to achieve a certain result, but which seemed to take control of her dancers, manipulating them instead, by the

end of the 1980s and into the 1990s. For Meier every particular kind of ability—including those that lay at the basis of her individual works of choreography—was at the same time a particular kind of disability, and vice versa. This way of playing with the shifting borders between ability and disability even extended beyond her choreographic works to include how she has understood her work as a dancer, teacher, and visual artist throughout her career.

1.1 EARLY WORKS 1985 – 1988

One of the most important images from Yvonne Meier's earliest works in New York City comes from a 1986 performance at the Kitchen in Chelsea. Near the beginning of the work, four dancers wielded papier-mâché dogs into a dance. As the objects danced, the movement of the dancers was a secondary dance, emerging symptomatically. And yet, the secondary dance of the dancers still remained the center of focus. Through their role as manipulators, the dancers became at once an exposed choreographer's hand, and partners in a dance between manipulator and manipulated. Conversely, the papier-mâché dogs, though animated by the dancers, remained sub-real. The visible hands of the performers who manipulated them reduced their credibility as the primary performers. Within this work, called *Danceperformance* (1986), Meier introduced her audiences to a concept that would thread through all of her works: we do not dance purely as a form of free expression in self-determined acts. We dance under the firm hand of physical commands, we dance as crudely as the objects that we are, and when we dance, the forces that dominate over us are not truly invisible. We expose ourselves as beings operated upon by forces that compose yet another layer of dancing, which might even supersede us in primacy. These layers of dancing, in their co-creation, challenge both the humanistic notion of the dancing body as a self-determining and able body, and the social

constructivist notion that the forces of control are a stable factor by which bodies are shaped. In creating this work, Meier further challenged the medical model of disability, which has labeled disabled bodies as uniquely “dependent.” In Meier’s dances, dependency (or, contingency) stems from all sides.

Commissioned by the Kitchen, *Danceperformance* was Meier’s first major work. When she created the work she was heavily steeped in her training in Skinner Releasing Technique, was dancing for the choreographer Pooh Kaye, and engaged in almost daily practice in the studio alone or with dancer Jennifer Monson. In her early work with Monson, Meier worked primarily with linguistic metaphors that expanded upon the range of language used in Skinner Releasing Technique. The primary method Meier imported into her rehearsal process from Skinner Releasing was to completely ‘flood’ the body with a suggested image, thereby subjecting the body as completely as possible to the exterior force of an instructional prompt.¹² As described by Meier, the prompts used in Skinner Releasing, “could be for example these ‘Action Images.’” Action images could be “curving and uncurving of the bones,” and “spiraling and unspiraling of the bones,” and “action images” means that all parts of your skeleton get involved.”¹³ In her studio practice, Meier changed the images used in SRT dramatically. As described by Jennifer Monson, who experimented with Meier, “she was committed to using her own kind of imagery because Skinner was really got a particular aesthetic of images that are based on nature. So that kind of capacity of using imagery as a way of changing the energetic capacity of the body to be like a Mack truck or a bomb or to be anything, we pushed each other to find extremes.”¹⁴ By importing this imagistic method of SRT and expanding its

¹² Meier, Yvonne, 2014.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Monson, Jennifer. Interview by author. March 24, 2015.

language, Meier could develop dances in which the performers were always complicit in their own subjection. As expressed by Monson, in rehearsals, “there were these periods when we were working by just getting together and dancing, we weren’t working on any piece, and she started working on those scores and then we would work on them together. And she would make what she called contradictory scores and we would work on them together.”¹⁵ Meier began workshoping these contradictory scores in private rehearsals with Monson. Meier would later expose and critique these scores in her later works.¹⁶

Meier’s experience with Pooh Kaye influenced her interest in objects, and her work in Skinner Releasing greatly influenced the movement styles of the dancers, but Meier constructed *Danceperformance*, like her studio practice with Monson, as a critique of her influences by appropriating their methods for other means. Specifically, Meier pointed her criticism at the veiling of the choreographer (or trainer). In the work of Pooh Kaye or the methods of SRT, the choreographer or teacher, whose manipulation of dancers remained unaddressed in both forms, was not considered in their conceptions of ‘the natural body.’ The choreographer, as a result, had no body. *Danceperformance*, in response, used the methods of SRT and Pooh Kaye to *objectify choreography*, and show it as performance, and thus give it a body. This was possible for Meier in a way that it wasn’t for her influences. Meier conceived of the body as constructed, and so she could show the process of construction by including a ‘constructor of bodies’ in her work.

The dancers of *Danceperformance*, disabled from their usual role as the primary focus in a work of dance, instead became secondary figures who enabled the movements of the papier-mâché dogs. Like the visible puppet masters of Japanese Bunraku theater,

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ This includes the *Gogolorez* series, which emerged as a major choreographic project after she was injured and no longer dancing. In fact, many of the ideas central to her later works, which could not involve her as a dancer, depended on the private studio practice with Jennifer Monson.

the human performers of Meier's *Danceperformance* could be seen, and thus judged, for their ability to manipulate the objects into dancing. Already, Meier's dance had a level of complexity absent in Social Constructivist theories of disability that posited disability as subjugation and objectification by society to disempower people and render them useless.¹⁷ Instead, within her dance, one form of disability (for the living human performers) created another form of ability (for papier-mâché dogs). Seen in this way, even the title of the work gains a tongue-in-cheek humor, as *Danceperformance* is, in fact, a dance about dance performance, which exposes the choreographic act through its dancers, and in doing so, is able to shift the dance performance from human body to the object. In so doing, Meier further criticized SRT, by replacing the natural bodies of dancers with the artificial bodies of papier-mâché dogs.¹⁸

Meier's experimentation with exposing the choreographic act expanded into a self-conscious ironization of the choreographer/trainer in 1987, when she collaborated with Ishmael Houston-Jones to create *Tell Me*, a duet to the music of David Wojnarowicz's band 3 Teens Kill 4. The work involved (among much else), a section in which Meier attempted to instruct Houston-Jones' dancing in Swiss German, though he didn't speak the language. Specifically, Houston-Jones and Meier both recounted that she tried to give him "a Skinner Releasing class."¹⁹ In SRT, unconscious actions were

¹⁷ Shakespeare, Tom and Nicholas Watson. "The Social Model of Disability: An Outdated Ideology?" *Research in Social Science and Disability*. Volume 2, pp. 9-28 (2002).

¹⁸ *Danceperformance's* predecessor, *Wild Women of Wango* (1985), involved Yvonne Meier and Jennifer Monson, who interacted with two crude papier-mâché forms that looked like large boulders. The two women, in costumes reminiscent of the Flintstones, manipulated each other as deftly as they manipulated the boulders in their hands. As a study for *Danceperformance*, the piece focused on the interchangeability objects and bodies. Meier's play with the roles of bodies and objects in *Danceperformance* can be further connected to many of her later dances, in this period and the next. In almost every case, Meier's use of objects sought to shift traditional roles within works, in one way or another. By the late 1980s, Meier was experimenting with creating environments with objects, thus transforming objects not into performers, but into the actual venue for a work.

¹⁹ Houston-Jones, Ishmael. Interview with author March 23, 2015.

understood as the in-road to the natural body, which when directed by an instructor could lead the dancer through a process which “unfolds in accord with some kind of higher, or deeper order — both natural and primal — an order that intellect alone could not have conceived or planned.”²⁰ In opposition to SRT, Meier’s work with Houston-Jones showed a ‘primal’ order manifested through instructions in Houston-Jones’ confusion.

To critique this mystification of the unconscious process toward a “natural body,” Meier exposed that which is unconscious in the methods of SRT. Meier objectified the very tool with which the “release” of the body in SRT is enabled: language. By disabling this unconsidered and thus naturalized aspect of SRT, Meier sought to enable the body in different manners. *Tell Me* thus exposed the nuances of action that could arise through the attempt of a dancer to comprehend language. When Meier spoke her commands in Swiss German, Houston-Jones, with a rudimentary knowledge of the language, sought as best he could to understand her commands and perform them.²¹ His body, fixed on the task of understanding a language almost completely incomprehensible to him, expressed the telltale signs of his insecurity: his brow furrowed, he hesitated in his choices, swapping one inflated movement for another at the sound of her commands. *Tell Me* was a dance punctuated by Meier *telling* Houston-Jones what to do. In disabling the system of SRT, Meier had instigated a new kind of dance from Houston-Jones’ body, which expressed the symptoms of his disability in comprehending the words of his instructor.²²

²⁰ Metcalf, Sally. "What Is Process?" Skinner Releasing Online Archive of Articles and Videos. Accessed September 2, 2015. http://www.skinnerreleasing.com/articles/what_is_process.pdf.

²¹ *Tell Me*. Performed by Ishmael Houston-Jones and Yvonne Meier. Character Generators, 1987. VHS. Videotaped in performance at the Triplex, Manhattan Community College, New York, N.Y., on Apr. 9, 1987.

²² This small section from *Tell Me* foreshadowed the major theme of live-spoken instruction that would emerge as central to Meier’s work beginning in the late 1990s, specifically with the serial work *Gogolorez*. By the time Meier began presenting *Gogolorez*, she no longer felt it necessary to use a foreign language to display the schism between the words of the choreographer and the movements of dancers. Even if the dancers understood the words, the meaning as interpreted by various dancers was never reliable across the difference of bodies.

After exploring the nervous physicality of the performer interpreting an unknown language, Meier moved on to the fatigued physicalities of performers responding to preposterous choreographic demands. *The Bodysnatcher* (1988) involved four dancers in a choreography purposed to push the limitations of exhaustion. Named by Houston-Jones after a movie (as had become his habit for Meier's dances), *The Bodysnatcher* snatched the bodies of dancers by burdening them with a consistent barrage of objects: cheese graters, tires, ropes, water jugs, metal plates, a ladder, 2x4s, and a blow-up rhinoceros, among others. In this work, Meier catapulted her dancers through grueling phrases of repeating movement designed to push them past their physical limits. *The Bodysnatcher* dealt with movement itself as a disabling factor, its ability to bring dancers to the brink of collapse. In it, Meier experimented with dance movement as a disabler of dancers by weaving objects into every action. Dancers rolled and jumped over tires, teetered over cheese graters, and crawled across the floor with water jugs in their hands. Wielding the objects, the dancers descended into exhaustion, and were slowly disabled by their own efforts. The dance itself began have the ability to expose the symptoms of effort. This aspect of *The Bodysnatcher*, similarly to *Danceperformance* and *Tell Me*, unearthed an aspect of dancing which choreographers usually sought to conceal. In each of these dances, the dancers' struggle —with the choreographing of objects, with the instructions in a foreign language, with the exhaustion built into the choreography—and their resulting inability to dance *as usual*, thus exposed some other aspect of dance, making visible, and thus making a performance, out of something other than what dance choreographers seek to expose.

From her earliest recorded work *Wild Women of Wango* (also titled by Houston-Jones), to *Danceperformance*, and from *Tell Me* to *The Bodysnatcher*, Meier switched back and forth from duet to group, and again from duet to group. This switch between

cast sizes shows Meier's sensitivity to the number of dancers in her works. Meier's artistry emerged from her subjection of her own body to experiments, and new dancers were only brought into projects once she was confident with what she had discovered by working alone or with a partner. Between 1980 and 1985, Meier often rehearsed her ideas alone or with Jennifer Monson, who was from the beginning her most important collaborator. Of Meier's early dances, the two dances with larger casts, *Danceperformance* and later *The Bodysnatcher*, turned her focus toward the *inability* of a dancer's body to fully submit to the commands of a choreographer. Meier, who during this period was creating works of choreography by demonstrating what she wanted the other dancers to do and then dancing alongside them in her works, found that none could move exactly like her. Through this discovery, Meier began to discover the omnipresence of the particular disability of any body to be exactly like any other. This disability existed regardless as to a dancer's resistance or submission to domination. The group casts of *Danceperformance* and *The Bodysnatcher* exposed the inability of dancers to overcome the fact that they were not Meier. Even the objects used in her works responded differently in the hands of other dancers. Meier's struggle with difference was well articulated by both Jennifer Monson and Ishmael Houston-Jones. Monson described how Meier "developed all those solos and then taught them to us so I always felt like I couldn't be as good as she could be."²³ As Houston-Jones observed "it's so weird that she has this sort of strong and totally indefinable sense of right and wrong. She's always had that. I think she just has this vision in her head and it's the way she wants things. But what she really expected I had no idea."²⁴ As these quotes demonstrate, the gap between

²³ Monson, Jennifer. Interview by author. March 24, 2015.

²⁴ Houston-Jones, Ishmael. Email interview with the author. March 22, 2015.

Meier's bodily expression and its interpretation by her dancers spurred both negotiation and frustration that remained unacknowledged by her works in this period.

The diversity of Meier's early dances always emerged from the criteria Meier drew from her own body and its abilities. Her body thus became a meta-ability that conditioned and sustained the movement from one disability to another. Meier wasn't conceptually able to move beyond her own body in these early dances. Her body in this period became an impairment for her work because it limited her perspective. Like the choreographic demands underlying Pooh Kaye's work and the trainer's commands underlying SRT, both of which Meier critiqued, Meier's work depended on her own body and its abilities. Blindfolded by her dependence, Meier failed to challenge and expose the position of her body in her dances. Before Meier would tackle her work's dependence on her own body, however, she turned her choreographic eye to toward another element of dance—its audience. Rather than challenge the as-of-yet unquestioned superior position of her own body relative to her other performers, Meier instead created a relationship between audience members, who most commonly sit and watch, and performers, who usually perform on stage, by disabling the usual distance held between audience and dancer in performance works.

Meier's earliest works up until 1988, though less outwardly or aggressively irreverent than her later works, demonstrate in their own way the fundamental methods that Meier would carry through her subsequent investigations. As Meier's life and dancing changed after these early works, her experiments also changed, but she remained consistent in her methods. As time unfolded, Meier would show an increasing self-consciousness and boldness, intensifying her methods as she moved on to new works. In time, Meier would address the naturalization of her own body's role in her early works,

but first, she would turn to the habitual and thus naturalized position of audience as seated bystanders.

1.2 THE PROBLEM OF AUDIENCE, 1991 – 1992

With the works *Pommes Fritz* and *The Shining*, in 1991 and 1992 respectively, Yvonne Meier challenged the position of audiences. From her own account, however, these two works were the product of her increasing interest in perspective and its relationship to psychology. As she challenged the perspective of the audience, Meier didn't simply move them from their rows of seats. She focused her attack on their expectation to be comfortable while watching dance. And so, in 1991, she presented *Pommes Fritz* at PS122, a work composed of three simultaneous, separate solos Meier had created, with their three separate tracks of music played at once, performed side by side, creating a cacophony of movement and sound. Its title twisted the French term for "French fries," into something that, though phonetically exact, makes nonsense of French for French fries by swapping in a German men's name. Like its title, the action of *Pommes Fritz* paired disconnected things to create an unexpected, if twisted, coherence. Within the work, Meier threw plates and pulled beams out from a wall of shelves that held a thousand stacked dishes. The shards of plates flew everywhere, but in *Pommes Fritz*, Meier was aiming them as little, sharp invaders of the audience's seats. In 1992, she returned to PS122 to plunge the audiences of her dance *The Shining* into complete darkness for the entirety each performance. Like its horror-film namesake, *The Shining* was designed to create fear in its audience. The work was not staged in a proscenium, but as a maze of large, stacked boxes through which dancers herded the audience over the

course of the show. She created both *Pommes Fritz* and *The Shining* because they were “so crazy so you really couldn’t see anything anymore particularly” and therefore the two works couldn’t “be seen the way that the audience wants to see them.”²⁵ It became clear at this point that Meier’s interest in disability had grown in a new direction. Meier became even more proactive; she threatened her audience with injury, and then she turned off the lights.

Both *Pommes Fritz* and *The Shining* challenged the detachment between a performance and its audience. *Pommes Fritz* achieved this end by shooting projectiles into the audience, making booby-traps of their once safe seats. An audience member, for example, with feelings of obligation to stay seated during a performance, might struggle with the desire to instead flee. In *The Shining*, however, there were no seats. Meier organized 350 cardboard boxes meant for shipping refrigerators (each sized almost perfectly to fit a person inside) into a labyrinth in a completely darkened space. One by one, spectators were pushed into the space, where performers *shining* flashlights then physically pulled, pushed, and caressed them over the course of the performance into and out of boxes for a series of interactive dances. In these two works, Meier disabled the normal, *physical as well as psychological* distance that enables the audience to see the dance safely. Again, as with her earlier work *Tell Me*, Meier’s basic operation exposed and thus foregrounded what was considered “natural” and thus rendered unconscious in the common system of dances which isolate audience members from works, and place them in spectatorial positions. By placing audiences in a new position of fear at the risk

²⁵ Meier, Yvonne, 2014.

of pain or injury, Meier exposed their bodies as newly abled and disabled in different manners in relationship to the work. Disabled from their usual safety, they were able, like dancers, to be hurt. But so too were they able to be implicated in a dance, and to be, therefore, brought into the work “in a way that not only involves the spectators, but turns them into the piece itself.”²⁶

One of Meier’s favorite stories from a performance of *The Shining* provides an example of how she transformed audience into performers. A board member from the National Endowment for the Arts who attended the performance, “was in a corner dancing like crazy in the dark, with his back to us because he didn’t want anybody to approach and touch him.”²⁷ In this act of self-defense, “the NEA guy,” as Meier called him, joined into the frenzied movement behaviors of others dancers in *The Shining*. The man from the NEA became a part of the work through his very rejection of it, which he later called (according to Meier), “a really disturbing and dangerous piece,” thereby severely affecting her funding from the organization for some time.²⁸

Despite her intensely physical methods (and the physical experience of audience members groping through the dark), Meier did not intend the new position of risk for the audience, and its attached abilities and disabilities, as a merely physical imposition. As with the NEA man, Meier aimed at the psychological through the physical. The NEA man’s physical proximity to the dance caused his psychological discomfort, which

²⁶ Meier, Yvonne. “The Shining.” Footnotes: *Six Choreographers Inscribe the Page*. Amsterdam: G B Arts International, 1998. 137.

²⁷ Meier, Yvonne, 2013.

²⁸ Ibid.

instigated his own dancing. The only formal essay Meier has ever printed on her own work further confirms her goal to connect the physical and psychological. In this piece, written for a book called *Footnotes: Six Choreographers Inscribe the Page*, she describes *The Shining*, including its objectives, its approach to the element of audience, its sections, and its relationship to *Pommes Fritz*.²⁹ After first describing the plan by which performers moved audience members through the maze of *The Shining* in detail, Meier framed the mind itself, its dreams, and memories, in the terms of the dance. With all its physical push and pull, the dance was “a mirrored dramatization of our interior life,” and so exposed that interior as a space of self-conflict, and the self as “caught in a nightmare prison without light, without exit, caught in a claustrophobic coma.”³⁰ The interior life Meier described was a force that holds people hostage and then torments them within captive states. Describing the self as a “nightmare prison,” Meier expanded her investigation of disability and perspective beyond physicality. Or more accurately, by externalizing the drama of interior life in *The Shining*, Meier sought to eradicate the division between the physical and psychological. The maze of refrigerator boxes in *The Shining* provided the perfect context for Meier’s experiment in expanding the interior life of the mind into the physical space shared by the bodies of performers and audience. In this context, Meier could wage her physical and psychological assault on the ordinarily sedentary, psychologically secure position of the audience.

In her essay, Meier expressed that the goal of *The Shining* was to provide

²⁹ Meier, Yvonne, 1998.

³⁰ Meier, Yvonne, 1998, 137.

audiences a “cathartic experience.” To accomplish this catharsis, Meier’s choreography sought to transport each blinded audience member into a traumatic experience that would initiate a change in perspective. Describing the piece, Meier wrote in her essay that, “*The Shining* works with our fears and the tensions they create in our bodies, tensions invisible under most circumstances, unspoken fears. The piece grasps this potential and allows the audience to experience classic catharsis.”³¹ Originally an ancient Greek medical word for purgation, catharsis denotes a release, a cleansing, and a clearing of built-up tension.³² The process of *The Shining*, as Meier understood it, followed the process of purgation by first producing fear, and from that, physical tension, which would then be released in catharsis.

To accomplish this release in performance, Meier’s rehearsals for *The Shining* prepared dancers with explorations in which “common rituals of movement are examined for elements of dance: rough-housing between children, fights during soccer games, fits of anger and hysteria.”³³ As written in her essay, Meier’s goal in these rehearsals for *The Shining* was to deepen the psychic experience of the performers and “transfer this effect, during the performance, to the audience.”³⁴ Within her writing on *The Shining*, Meier thus connected three psychoanalytical ideas: catharsis, hysteria, and transference. These

³¹ Meier, Yvonne, 1998, 137.

³² Aristotle. *The Poetics of Aristotle*. trans. S. Halliwell, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 188. Many historians have written about Aristotle’s use of the term catharsis. An example: “Provided we do not identify the metaphorical with the non-physical, it should be uncontentious to recognize in these passages the extension of the language of *katharsis* to embrace a range of intellectual, psychological and spiritual phenomena—from the explicitly religious to the plainly metaphorical, and covering a number of varieties in between.”

³³ Meier, Yvonne, 1998, 137.

³⁴ Meier, Yvonne, 1998, 151.

three terms developed through the collaborative work of psychologist Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, the cathartic method Breuer developed for hysterical patients, and the Freudian concept of transference, which emerged in the book they wrote together of their case studies, *Studies in Hysteria*.

The Shining shared with Breuer's cathartic method in understanding the psyche as a physical system. Hysteria, which contemporary psychology has renamed Conversion Disorder, has since Breuer's theorizing of it been defined by the conversion of emotions and experiences from passive memory into active somatic expression.³⁵ In *Studies on Hysteria*, Breuer collaborated with Freud to document various manifestations of the disease, and their treatment of it. In this work, they described the somatization of hysteria, writing of the thoughts and emotions that produce the hysteria, "because its sums of psychical stimuli have been "converted" into somatic ones, it loses the clarity which would otherwise have marked it out in the stream of ideas."³⁶ In *The Shining*, Meier's interest turned exactly to that which Freud and Breuer labeled as the muddling of thoughts. If the conversation of an idea into somatic expression makes an idea unclear, it also marks its movement. Meier experimented with this kind of movement not only for the conversion of psychic energy from the unconscious mind to the body, but from one body to another, manipulating hysteria as if it were infectious.

In *Studies on Hysteria*, the only movement of psychic energy between bodies that

³⁵ Hales, Robert E. "Conversion Disorder: Definition and Clinical Description." In *The American Psychiatric Publishing Textbook of Clinical Psychiatry*, 624-630. 4th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Pub., 2003.

³⁶ Breuer, Josef, and Sigmund Freud. "Studies on Hysteria: (1893-1895)." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. II. London: Hogarth Press, 1955. 224.

Breuer and Freud documented was that of the patient and therapist. In the first psychoanalytic use of the term “transference,” the book describes the redirection of emotions toward the doctor that patients once attached to other people.³⁷ In what is considered the first use of the word “transference” as a psychoanalytical term, they wrote that “transference takes place as a false connection,” and in their work, it was not the hysteria that transferred, but its trigger, which was usually tied to some unsolved relationship from childhood the patient retained in memory.³⁸ The transference Freud and Breuer identified in their patients they therefore never thought would involve the expansion of their patients’ states beyond the borders of their bodies. This is because Freud and Breuer never considered themselves implicated in the actual hysteria of their patients. Meier’s work operated differently. She constructed *The Shining* on the basis that the heightened states of bodies in the work would breed heightened states in other bodies. Yet, in her stories of audience members, Meier would always highlight the differences in how the transfer manifested. While one audience member hid in a refrigerator box during the entirety of the performance and didn’t emerge until far after it had finished, another (Laurie Anderson) laid down on the floor and bluntly refused to leave, forcing performers to drag her out of the space.³⁹ Through *The Shining*, Meier discovered that heightened states, such as hysterical states, even if infectious, manifested differently in different people.

³⁷ Freud, Sigmund and Josef Breuer. *Studies on Hysteria*. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. 1955: Volume II. 302. In a footnote: “This is the first appearance of ‘transference’ (Übertragung) in the psycho-analytic sense, though it is being used much more narrowly here than in Freud’s later writings.”

³⁸ Freud, Sigmund and Josef Breuer, 1955, 302.

³⁹ Meier, Yvonne, 2013.

In *The Shining*, Meier, like Breuer, employed methods that required cathartic resolve to conclude the induced experience. Breuer's psychological technique and Meier's dance only finished, thus attaining cathartic release, in the ejection of the participant from them. In *The Shining* "the performance ends when the final audience is removed"⁴⁰ In Breuer's most famous case, a cathartic resolve happened when the hysterical patient "Anna O," who was for approximately six weeks unable to drink water despite her thirst, "woke from her hypnosis with the glass at her lips."⁴¹ Catharsis marked the end of the work, whether it is a performance work, or the work of a psychologist.⁴² Cathartic release provided the way out.

Turning to psychology in *The Shining*, Meier expanded her usual choreographic methods to include the psyche as a component in her task of rerouting the information of dances by blocking the habitual, naturalized channels. In so doing, her dance further critiqued Skinner Releasing Technique's conception of the unconscious. Meier sought a different means by which to connect to the unconscious, so coveted in SRT as the more natural half of the psyche and thus the in-road to the natural body. By tapping into her audience's unconscious by casting them into a state of fear, she directly defied Joan Skinner's idea of "the tyranny of consciousness," exploring instead the tyranny of the unconscious.⁴³ By choreographing *The Shining* using the psychoanalytical concept of the unconscious, Meier critiqued SRT's proposal that a dancer can 'release' into the natural

⁴⁰ Meier, Yvonne, 1998, 149.

⁴¹ Freud, Sigmund and Josef Breuer, 1955, 35.

⁴² And indeed, Aristotle defined theater as a thing with a beginning, middle, and end.

⁴³ Skinner, Joan, Bridget Davis, Robert Davidson, Kris Wheeler, and Sally Metcalf, 1979.

body, and thus attain ultimate catharsis. *The Shining* instead sought catharsis by moving bodies from one constructed, and thus disabled state, to another, in which they were fumbling around in the dark. Rather than “release” performers or audience into a natural body, Meier released them into the completion of the work—she released them into nothing more than the street outside the venue.

Meier began studying forms of somatic therapy that emerged from Freudian psychology in the early 1990s. In an interview she recollected, “at that point I found Authentic Movement, which was dealing with everything Skinner Releasing wasn’t dealing with.⁴⁴ Specifically, Authentic Movement reversed the relationship between language and movement. Whereas in SRT “you’re always directed from the outside which at one point drove me crazy,” in Authentic Movement, “you access the body without language and then you translate that out.” Meier’s research into somatic techniques became more intense, and she began studying Process Oriented Psychology, a form developed by an “ex-director of a Jungian psychology center in Switzerland.” As Meier described it, workshops focused on “dealing with all these negative images in the body and mind, and to dive into the negativity.” As her commentary shows, when Meier sought alternatives to SRT’s ways of thinking of the body, she discovered alternatives in somatic forms with deeper connections to psychology.⁴⁵ Through Authentic Movement and POP—both influenced by Jungian psychotherapy—Meier was able to explore

⁴⁴ Meier, Yvonne, 2014.

⁴⁵ Lovell, Suzanne. "Learning to Love: How Art Therapy and Authentic Movement Transform Being." In *Authentic Movement: Moving the Body, Moving the Self, Being Moved: A Collection of Essays, Volume Two*, edited by Patrizia Pallaro. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007, 326. Authentic movement has long identified itself as an offshoot of Jungian psychology. Mary Starks Whitehouse, who was a Jungian psychotherapist, developed it in the 1950s.

negative images and the expression of psychological trauma. At the same time, she was able to reverse the habitual process of SRT, which always began with instruction to move the body. In Authentic Movement especially, Meier was able to begin with the impulses of the body, moving from there to articulation in language.

Similarly to Authentic Movement Authentic Movement, the performance of *The Shining* took shape without words or instructions. Action directly transferred feeling-states between bodies in a way that discourses with Authentic Movement's investigation of "collective unconscious experiences, into the imagined world, into direct experiences of knowing."⁴⁶ Meier didn't imitate Authentic Movement's beliefs in *The Shining*, but critically engaged with them by amplifying fear and transferring it between bodies. Through transference, *The Shining*'s approach to catharsis further entered into dialogue with that of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which posited the theater as a space of cathartic transference that heightens and expands an emotional experience into an audience. Aristotle's *Poetics* provided one of the earliest theatrical theories by describing catharsis as the purgation of "pity and fear," in the audiences of Greek Tragedy.⁴⁷ Yet *The Shining* diverged from Aristotle's concept, which did not describe audience members as more than observers. As the audience fumbled through the maze of boxes, sensing but unable to truly see the dancers moving all about them in the dark, their feelings were not the empathetic projections which *Poetics* imagines for the audiences of theater, but were

⁴⁶ Lovell, Suzanne, 2007, 327.

⁴⁷ Aristotle. *The Poetics of Aristotle*. trans. S. Halliwell, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Chapter 6: 1449b21-28.

instead made of the stress and investment of involved players, surprised to find themselves wrapped up into the performance.

The Shining's manipulation of fear, tension, and catharsis made a unique statement regarding the relationship between the psyche and the physique. Meier's work acts as a critique which rejects first the ultimate catharsis of the release into the natural body proposed by SRT, second, the intactness of cathartic experience within the singular body of a patient as proposed by cathartic method, and third the safe distance allowed to the audience who attains catharsis through observation proposed in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Meier's catharsis is instead always constructed, and is attained through the transference of states between bodies themselves.

The Shining accomplished an exploration of how movement emerges in the passage of thoughts and emotions between the psychic and the somatic. As a choreographer, Meier foregrounded movement above all else, which is itself not a cure, nor a natural body, nor a solely observational being. Movement, as explored through *The Shining*, is a conversion, a transfer, through which one seeks change. Movement is therefore a constant critique, becoming different because there was something wrong, or something missing, in the previous state. The critique Meier makes through movement doesn't often pointedly articulate its critique, but simply makes it, by moving, and therefore changing.

1.3 THE BIOGRAPHY OF MAD HEIDI 1996 – 1997

After *Pommes Fritz* and *The Shining*, Yvonne Meier's exploration of the psychological culminated with *Mad Heidi* in 1996, which was the first of Meier's many solos that she would develop to stand on its own as a major work.⁴⁸ The title itself speaks to Meier's continued investigation of disability—madness, as the most recognizable disability of the mind, took hold as the new center of Meier's artistic research. Critics have long interpreted the work as a commentary on Swiss stereotypes and the inability of a culture to contain a person's identity.⁴⁹ As recounted by Meier's collaborator Jennifer Monson, the work grew more complex than these initial interpretations in 1997, when Meier began working with Anne Iobst of Dance Noise, who provided dramaturgical support as Meier's rehearsal director.⁵⁰ After its New York City premiere at the Swiss Institute in 1996, Meier continued to work on the piece with Iobst. Through their collaboration, *Mad Heidi* began to take shape as deeply biographical in nature.⁵¹

Mad Heidi followed an episodic form regulated by a series of traditional Swiss songs. To the music, performer engaged in a series of acts, rejecting and relishing, performing and not performing, surrendering and revolting against the dances she gave. All the while, as creator and performer, author and participant, Yvonne Meier, in becoming *Mad Heidi*, bared herself as a figure at once enabled and disabled by the

⁴⁸ Previous solos, such as *Bucket Piece*, Meier performed as solos in smaller showcases, but then incorporated into larger group works for more serious curations. Meier incorporated *Bucket Piece*, for example, into *Pommes Fritz*.

⁴⁹ Seibert, Brian. "Wayward Children of the '80s." *New York Times*, January 17, 2012, New York Edition ed., Arts sec. This provides one example of numerous such reviews.

⁵⁰ Monson, Jennifer, 2015. "I feel like the piece I saw at the Swiss Institute was beginning to point to that, some one could say the Swiss psyche, and you could say she was really pointing to that with all the specific references to Swiss culture, but in the version that Annie worked on, and I think Annie is central to that also, what was going on in her emotional life, having known her so well and seen her navigate these different emotional spaces, I felt there was something about this piece that was really excavating that."

⁵¹ Snider, Suzanne, 2012. Meier states in this interview, "I'm showing *Mad Heidi*. It's autobiographical, about being Swiss and coming from Switzerland—and all about my life."

frictions between her culture, her artistry, and her life. The resulting portrait was at once dark, dissonant, funny, and incredibly fruitful.

According to the account of Emily Wexler, the last dancer to perform *Mad Heidi* in 2010 and 2012, the actions of the dance had each had a particular emotional quality and followed a particular order.⁵² In part, these actions take as their premise the dress and manners traditionally expected of Swiss girls, and so Meier waltzes, sweeps, seduces, handles silverware, and jumps rope in a dress, boots, and three watches. In part, her performance employs a list of objects and actions through which Meier seeks to refer to the pastoral theme stereotypical to Switzerland, and so Meier climbs, herds, and gallops with ropes, and slithers through mounds of dirt. Between these facets of the work Meier addresses the issue of roles: being female, being of a culture, being native. At the same time, she addresses the states of her body: being human, being animal, being dancer. The madness Meier sought to portray in her portrait wasn't a particular characteristic of *Mad Heidi*, but the consequence of the amalgamation of fragments that compose her. The dance is episodic because the elements cannot be unified with one another. On the level of cultural stereotypes, disability in *Mad Heidi* thus takes shape as an incommensurable identity, disabled from coming into agreement with itself.

Stretching beyond the common notion of madness as disability, Meier's *Mad Heidi* investigated her own biography as a constructed disability. Like SRT's notion of the natural body, the concept of biography imposes a seeming nature upon a body. As with her previous works, Meier turned to biography and subjected it to her choreographic operation: She made visible and thus objectified the elements that are considered "natural" or unconscious in a system, which enables a "release" of "natural" movement,

⁵² Wexler, Emily. Email interview by author. April 8, 2015.

and disabled it, so that the body could be enabled in different manners. In other words, in her own biographical dance, Meier sought to disable the very factors usually considered natural in biography. Through *Mad Heidi* she finally challenged the privileged position her own body had taken as the meta-ability that enabled the movement from one disability to another throughout Meier's dances. Meier's most significant accomplishments in *Mad Heidi* were not so much due to her original intention, however, but to the what happened to her body, and therefore to her life, as a result of performing the dance. In the end, *Mad Heidi* would disable Meier, and in so doing, would provide her a more radical understanding of what dance and disability mean.

Mad Heidi stretched beyond the bounds of Meier's artistic intent, and changed her artistic process when she sustained a severe injury to her knee while dancing the work in Switzerland, in late 1996 or early 1997. Meier completely dislocated her knee in the performance. Rehearsing to perform the work again at St. Mark's Church in 1997, she re-injured the knee, this time tearing all the remaining ligaments.²⁶ Later describing the injury, Meier said that "the bones came fully apart, so I broke all my ligaments, they were all torn."⁵³ For the first time, Meier, whose work had conceptually dealt with disability in so many ways, had been disabled herself, in a way that could not be reversed or switched by her choreography. The very condition enabling her movement had been disabled. As a result, *Mad Heidi*, which Meier had developed to critique biography through dance, fulfilled its purpose in a way that stretched beyond the constraints of a work of art, by significantly changing her body, and thus her biography and choreography. Meier's disability was not a constructed event on stage, but the result of an event that would change the course of her body, and thus her biography.

⁵³ Meier, Yvonne, 2013.

Meier's fate at the hands of *Mad Heidi* was to become like the audience members that she had challenged in *Pommes Fritz* and *The Shining*—she inhabited the exterior of the dance, and was thus only able to experience it from the outside, rather than dance it from the inside. The injury was both physically and psychically traumatic for her. It reflected the experience that Meier had created for audiences in *Pommes Fritz* and *The Shining*, and so challenged what had become naturalized and thus invisible to Meier in her own creative process: the position of her own body. In the fear and trauma of her transformed body, Meier, unable to dance, began to examine what kind of other “releases” she could develop from an unalterable physical disability.

Meier began her artistic transformation by teaching *Mad Heidi* to others. In 1997 Annie Iobst and Jennifer Monson were the first to dance the work for Meier. As *Mad Heidi* was no longer a self-portrait performed by the person it depicted, the issues previously explored in the work provided a new means to investigate the transference of psychic energy between bodies that Meier began exploring in *The Shining*. Meier's interest in disability and identity therefore shifted to explore the perimeters of bodies, by which any person is limited from infiltrating the identity or biography of another.

Almost ironically, *Mad Heidi*, which expressed the fractured state of identity, healed Meier's most significant artistic relationship, which had been fractured a few years prior. As Monson described it, “One reason for our falling-out for me was the fact that she wouldn't talk to me about the works.”⁵⁴ Monson desired to work more collaboratively, and to develop as a choreographer in her own right.⁵⁵ Meier's connection to Monson reemerged through *Mad Heidi* after the two women hadn't spoken in a number of years, when Meier called Monson to ask her to perform the work after Meier

⁵⁴ Monson, Jennifer, 2015.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

had injured herself for the second time in a dress rehearsal. In one rehearsal of less than two hours, Monson found in *Mad Heidi* a way of understanding, and thus collaborating with Meier. “The feeling that I had was that this was the most psychic merging I had ever had.”⁵⁶ She had never before found such a depth of understanding for Meier in previous works. Monson’s forceful sensation of ‘psychic merging’ deepened how *Mad Heidi* investigated disability, and connected that investigation to how *The Shining* explored transference of emotional states. In *Mad Heidi*, Monson began to explore a deeper level of transference, one not merely of the emotions, but of the very self. Through how she performed *Mad Heidi*, Monson asked whether, through the emotion of empathy, she could enter into and take part in the interior landscape of Meier’s self.

Mad Heidi did not heal Monson’s relationship with Meier, however, through the transference of self. Instead, the dance simply reunited Monson and Meier because it showed Monson how much she contributed to Meier’s work even without the dialogue with Meier she felt she lacked. Within the performance of the work, it was not Meier’s ability to discuss or collaborate with Monson that allowed the two women to heal their relationship. Instead, Monson found in dancing Meier’s biographical piece an ability to do something Meier could not articulate nor perform: she could dance the biographical work of another person. The reconnection between Monson and Meier was thus possible because Monson’s understanding for Meier emerged through her task as a dancer, the unique, dancerly talent for empathy she had honed as a part of her craft, and the necessary contribution Monson could make to *Mad Heidi* as a result.

I could tell she was in an extreme amount of psychic pain that was in some way related to the knee injury, but in another way it wasn’t attached to some particular incident in her life. There were things in her life that were happening, that I think

⁵⁶ Monson, Jennifer, 2015.

were an opening into this psychic depth. I think I responded to seeing her in so much psychic pain, so for me the piece was both transcending and acknowledging that pain.⁵⁷

Monson's quote shows how perceptive she was of Meier's pain. With the powerful conviction that she understood and had thus channeled Meier through performing *Mad Heidi*, and was able to express Meier as a result, Monson believed she had for first time succeeded in performing one of Meier's works to its fullest. In an interview, she described this by saying that, "*Mad Heidi* was about how much I love Yvonne."⁵⁸ But Meier's body, disabled by her injury, immediately ceased to be the model for the other dancers of her work. Thus liberated from the relationship she once held to Meier's body as an authority, Monson found the resolution to her dispute with her friend in Meier's injury. Monson described dancing *Mad Heidi* as "one of the most powerful performance experiences I'd ever had," because through Meier's disability she discovered she had a unique ability crucial to Meier's work. For much of their collaboration before *Mad Heidi*, "mostly she [Meier] was making work because she was a little older and a little bit more established, so there was a kind of power relationship."⁵⁹ Monson's ability to dance *Mad Heidi* upended the power relationship between choreographer and dancer by dismantling the unchallenged authority of Meier's body in her work. Monson's performance showed what was possible but difficult in dancing for a choreographer: to move so close to someone else's vision that even the dancer wonders if she didn't become something other than herself through her performance.

During the course of Monson's first performance, Meier sat in view of the audience and watched her friend perform a portrait of herself. Jennifer Dunning's review places Meier with crutches, sitting "inconspicuously at the edge of the stage" during the

⁵⁷ Monson, Jennifer, 2015.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

course of the piece.³¹ In interviews, Monson and Meier agree that something profound happened for Monson as a performer of the work in 1997. *Mad Heidi*, which was once solely about the madness of personal identity, had become about the possibility of a friend's body as proxy. Meier's solo required Monson to attempt creating a porousness in herself, and to imagine that she could take Meier's life into her own body, where she could dance it. The solace of *Mad Heidi* was in the hope that it could be shared. In fact, Meier has only shared the work with dancers with whom she has a close personal connection. Annie Iobst, Ishmael Houston-Jones, and Emily Wexler are all in Meier's closest circle of friends. Emily Wexler described the work as "rooted in lots of different forms of anger and heartbreak and other things. I experience those things too in spades. In that way, it [*Mad Heidi*] became huge for me too."⁶⁰ Wexler's account corroborates that of Jennifer Monson. The dancers of *Mad Heidi* were at once performers and audience of the work, who through their ability to empathize with *Mad Heidi* as they danced her role, were able to bear witness to an aspect of the dance no mere spectator could grasp.

Like most of Meier's "full-length" works, *Mad Heidi* wasn't long enough to comprise a full evening performance. Meier rounded out the show by adding an improvisation as a second half. In the 1997 performance at Dancespace, Eduardo Alegria, Scott Heron, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Jennifer Monson, and Lucy Sexton performed an improvisation Meier called *Return of the Naked Lady*. Within this second part, in which Meier had originally planned to dance alongside the others, she instead continued to sit onstage and spoke directives, or "scores," to the dancers. Meier's words became yet another form of proxy for her injured body. Dance critic Jennifer Dunning wrote of this

⁶⁰ Wexler, Emily, 2015.

work that Meier “issued occasional instructions to her five dancers.”⁶¹ As casually as Dunning treated the work in her review, *Return of the Naked Lady*, as the first improvisation Meier would orchestrate with spoken commands, performed a mere day after Meier’s debilitating injury, testified to the fact that Meier was undergoing a metamorphosis. By 2004, Meier would relocate her choreographic impulse into the linguistic realm. *Mad Heidi*, which initiated this change in Meier, followed her through the transition, as she explored how to make dances without being able to dance.

In a radical shift in her approach to *Mad Heidi*, Meier cast Ishmael Houston-Jones within the role in the early 2000s. This new version of the dance brought together the two forms of proxy—the body of a friend, and Meier’s ability to speak—that Meier had already begun investigating. With this new version of the solo, Meier applied her choreographic method to the issue of biography yet again, but this time, with a much more critical stance regarding the idea of proxy. Meier disabled the dance *Mad Heidi* by challenging its use of physical identity, and thus exposed a difference between the perspective of the audience, and the perspective of Meier and Houston-Jones from within the piece. In a direct assault on her own artistry, Meier invited Houston-Jones, a renowned choreographer and a queer black man, to perform the part of a crazed, lovesick Swiss woman at Judson Church without knowing any of the choreography. In Meier’s lore, “he either didn’t come to rehearsal or fell asleep in rehearsal,” but as it ended up, he asked Yvonne to teach him the piece as the performance itself. Meier, standing in view of the audience, with a microphone in hand, instructed Houston-Jones through the series of actions, and Houston-Jones committed himself to performing her commands.”⁶² In a way,

⁶¹ Dunning, Jennifer. "A Self-Portrait That's Naked Literally and Figuratively." *New York Times*, February 18, 1997, Arts sec.

⁶² Meier, Yvonne, 2013.

Deconstruction of *Mad Heidi* was reminiscent of the Swiss German SRT class Meier taught to Houston-Jones in their 1987 work *Tell Me*, for which Meier also vocally instructed Houston-Jones' dancing from the side of the stage.

Deconstruction of Mad Heidi was a deliberate, radical, absurdist reimagining of the original, and a pulling-apart of the elements necessary for the work to attain its former interpretation, and as such, the work “deconstructed” in the theoretical sense by exploring how meaning emerges in its relationship to its audience.⁶³ The work pointed to its own dependence on a specifically Swiss-looking (or at least white), female performer, most embodied in Yvonne Meier, who could not dance it. *Deconstruction* answered the question ‘*who is Mad Heidi?*’ by displaying who she could not be for her audience, thereby exposing the vulnerability of the piece: *Mad Heidi's* irreverent identity depended on a performer's ability to physically read and thus reject the archetype of the Swiss maiden. All the while, Meier was there, telling Houston-Jones how to do it, while his body simply could not become the woman whose actions he was performing.

Meier's gaze of irreverence at her own piece provoked a huge response from audiences. They alternatively laughed and groaned at the distortion of its solo performer's gender and race. And yet, despite the continued audience perception that Houston-Jones's black male body did not belong in the role of the Swiss woman, *Deconstruction* expanded the definition of *Mad Heidi* and its portraiture. Meier had both been *Mad Heidi*, absorbed in the fight against the limitations of stereotype, and seen *Mad Heidi* for her own limits. And conversely, Houston-Jones could not be *Mad Heidi* even as he danced the part. He could not evade the palpable distance between his identity and that of his character. The surprising result was that Houston-Jones became a profound

⁶³ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. There is much discussion in deconstructivist discourse on how meaning emerges in relationship to its audience. Typically, this discourse is traced back to Derrida's seminal text.

performer of the work precisely because he was easy to deem unfit for the role. Houston-Jones couldn't recede into the piece; his efforts wouldn't plunge into the narrative of *Mad Heidi's* rage and suffering, but developed instead as the intense physical expression of his own willingness to engage with the complications of identity that arise between how one experiences oneself versus how one is experienced by others. The only reason Houston-Jones could not be *Mad Heidi* is because those in the audience, by privileging the visible, would too easily refuse to see him as such. But somehow, through his performance of the role, the requirement for a convincingly Swiss maiden seemed a bit hollow anyway. *Mad Heidi* had begun as an exploration of Meier's incompatibility with her own culture. Houston-Jones' further incompatibility with the role of the Swiss maiden provided, in its own way, another way of expressing that underlying discordancy of self and culture that originally compelled Meier to choreograph the piece.

By her own account, Monson channeled Meier not because of their shared identities as white females, but because of their intimacy. Within the private domains of Meier's life, Houston-Jones was one of few who was close with Meier as Monson was. Houston-Jones dated Meier in the 1980s, collaborated closely with her on many projects, named a number of her works, and was a part of what Monson called Meier's "large set of co-parents," when she had children.⁶⁴ He was one of Meier's greatest friends, and like Monson, therefore could produce his own interpretation of Meier in her autobiographical work through empathy and understanding. *Deconstruction of Mad Heidi* thus embarks on twin explorations, though one is veiled from sight while the other flaunted before our eyes. A schism arose in the piece between what the audience saw and what the artists knew. Audience had no knowledge of the internal workings of Meier's biography even

⁶⁴ Monson, Jennifer, 2015.

while it was narrated through her dance. *Deconstruction of Mad Heidi* dealt in the visible difference between the bodies of Meier and Houston-Jones as at odds with the non-visible closeness and history they shared—a history that was, in the end, a piece of the biography from which *Mad Heidi* was born.

Through its many iterations, *Mad Heidi* evolved in relationship to Meier's investigations of herself, and changed, therefore, as she changed. As Jennifer Monson observed, in creating works of choreography, Meier “subverts these dominant narratives, not in a clever way but through a psychic or energetic way that dance can physicalize or open up the instability, not so meaning can't be attached to anything, but so feeling or energy can move through it.”⁶⁵ In the end, the dominant narrative Meier subverted in *Mad Heidi* was her own. *Deconstruction of Mad Heidi* is a demonstration to the fact that, after all the navel-gazing in creating a portrait of herself, through injury and disability Meier turned the dance into something else, something far more magical: A dance which contained a kind of secret message for those she loved, that could only be seen by them if they danced it with love.

It is a strange thing to argue that an artist like Yvonne Meier, known for her irreverence, her bite, and her quick wit, really made something that touches on the weight of love. It may have been that she didn't intend it that way, and it may have been that she didn't presume the profound effect the dance would have when she began to teach it to her close collaborators. In fact, it's likely that her motivations, like those she sought to unearth in others through *The Shining*, were unconscious. In all likelihood, those who loved her didn't truly channel her through the dance or access her insides by dancing it. Instead, the history of *Mad Heidi* shows that through love, we begin to imagine we know

⁶⁵ Monson, Jennifer, 2015

each other, and that doing so doesn't make fools of us, but is instead entirely necessary. What matters, then, is how we respond to the disability of any human to enter into the body or experience of another. In the absence of ability, there is imagination, which has again and again shown itself as a fundamental component of Meier's choreography.

Through Meier's first period, she makes it clear that the ability to imagine and attempt from within a disabled position provides the only way to combat the unavoidable, if ever changing, disability of the body. Humans, in Meier's conception, are consistently disabled, and this fact renders humans inconsistent. After Meier's profound injury in *Mad Heidi*, she would continue to build an artistic legacy that speaks to the creation of art as the only possible response to our disabled bodies. By remaining steadfast in her work on the body, Meier would combat the inconstancy of bodies.

Chapter 2: The Second Period

Now that her knee was permanently damaged, Yvonne Meier continued her work as an artist but opted to explore various means by which she could transfer her dancing into other avenues that would allow her to dance even though her body was so changed by injury. By seeking change, Meier discovered that disability not only resided in the body, but further emerged in its need to move between states. While she had previously investigated the many different disabled states of the body, she did not previously consider what would happen if the disability of a body could not be changed. As she could not switch out of the injury to her knee, and therefore could not so effortlessly transition between disabled constructions, she began to instead change *how* she transferred the dance to other bodies and forms. She abandoned using her own body as a model for other performers. As Meier said, “I wanted to see things done, and I couldn’t do them myself, and it used to be that I could do it myself and then show it and then people could do it.”⁶⁶ Now that her body could no longer demonstrate, she had to find other methods to make the movement emerge. By becoming disabled, Meier’s body lost its authority.

Meier began working again as an artist after injury by first expanding her notion of movement. In interviews, she described dancing with her pen or in her head and framed the various means she discovered to transfer her dance as other ways of dancing.⁶⁷ After touring *Mad Heidi* in the late 1990s, and before her first new formal choreographic production in 2006, Meier turned away from choreography; making

⁶⁶ Meier, Yvonne, 2013.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

drawings she considered physical, improvisational acts like those of her dances. She began working with dancers again in 2004, and invented a method for making improvisational performances by imagining what she wanted to dance, and converting that into written instructions that she would read aloud in performances for other dancers to execute.

When Meier returned to making formal works of choreography in 2006 - 2009, however, she again considered the concepts of transference she had developed in the later works of her first period. Since *The Shining* in 1992, transference had been an important concept underlying Meier's work which drove her investigation of disability. Transference, for Meier, was the movement of feelings and ideas that could incite dance movement, and as such, manifested differently with each work. Whereas in *The Shining* Meier the transference of fear to produce movement in bodies, in *Mad Heidi*, Meier's collaborators explored transference by empathetically moving their own bodies into her self-portrait.

Meier created a series of new pieces, including *This is Not a Pink Pony*, *Area 51*, and *Stolen*. These works marked the first time since *Mad Heidi* that Meier's own physical disability ceased to drive how she transferred movement from one medium or one dancer to another. Looking in from the outside of the works, Meier focused instead on transference—the movement that incites movement—as an operation internal to each work, driving the dancers from within. In 2011, she changed her approach to transference again, and reinterpreted the concept of “the movement that incites movement” to include the movement of time to re-address her older works of choreography as historical. She re-staged a series of her earlier works, framing them as historical dances though she had created all of them less than 20 years prior.

In every one of the projects in her second period, Meier explored disability for how it requires transformation, whether that is from one body to another, one limb to another, from one form to another, from one type to another, one time to another.

The major methods Meier employed in her artistry— the use of movement as critique, of exposing and thus disabling naturalized patterns in dance— all these Meier kept operational in her work. She also chose to diversify how she used the motivational authorities in her work which were already producing movement in her dances; these included physical anatomy, instructional scores, motivation, and ideas or images. The basic argument expressed in the dances of this second period was that there is no absolute authority among the means for producing movement. Meier discovered she could transfer the authority her body once held into different, provisional authorities that could drive and instruct the dancers in her works. However, in switching authority between the various media that she chose to replace her body, Meier further discovered that transferring her authority between media didn't bring her closer to understanding the drives which cause movement. A greater disability appeared to Meier through her physical disability in that authority itself has no physicality. Only the movements symptomatically produced in response to authority can be seen. Meier's continued interest in transference had shifted from what it produces to how it produces. Meier discovered, however, that isn't possible to truly see the impulses that cause movement, but only the consequences produced in the particular form through which it is expressed.

2.1 COMPOSING THE BODY: LATE 1990s - 2004

After her injury, Meier took a break from dancing. Of this period, she said that, "I was drawing. I was making animals. I was making animals that move."⁶⁸ Though this

⁶⁸ Meier, Yvonne. Interview with the author. January 28th, 2012.

practice permeated Meier's career, it had particular resonance for her in the first years after injury. Unable to dance, Meier focused instead on the drawing and animation work that had long existed as a subtext to her choreographic projects. These drawings, which already covered the margins of her rehearsal and workshop notes since the 1980s, were for Meier "just like improvising, I just sit there and feel the line, basically. It's a physical experience."⁶⁹ So Meier improvised on the page, creating countless caricatures of imaginary animals whose bodies carried inherent movement possibilities portrayed simply by the lines that delineated their forms.

By creating animals, Meier sought to upend the power her injury held over her movement by switching from dancing to drawing, while understanding her switch as being from one form of dancing to another. She drew animal anatomies as physical, improvisational experiences, and so through drawing, switched from one construction of her body to another, despite her physical constraints. Meier began to overturn the authority of her changed anatomy after injury by composing other anatomies with her pen.

Animals that Meier drew on her notes from the 2011 work *Brother of Gogolorez*, for example [figure 1], show how her drawings outline the anatomical facts of the animals' imaginary bodies. Each animal seems to be mid-motion: while one opens the beak-like mouth of its head, which protrudes out of its left shoulder, another seems to grasp hold of the edge of its own head and shoulders, which billow like the sail of a boat, or loom like a ghost, from its pair of angular legs. The last wears its head like a grandiose helmet, tilting its gaze to the side to see the ground. Meier render each of these animals unique through its anatomy. The fantastical composition of their bodies made their

⁶⁹ Meier, Yvonne, 2013.

ordinary movements exceptional. Meier's drawings show how anatomy determines the expression of movement and thereby, characterization.

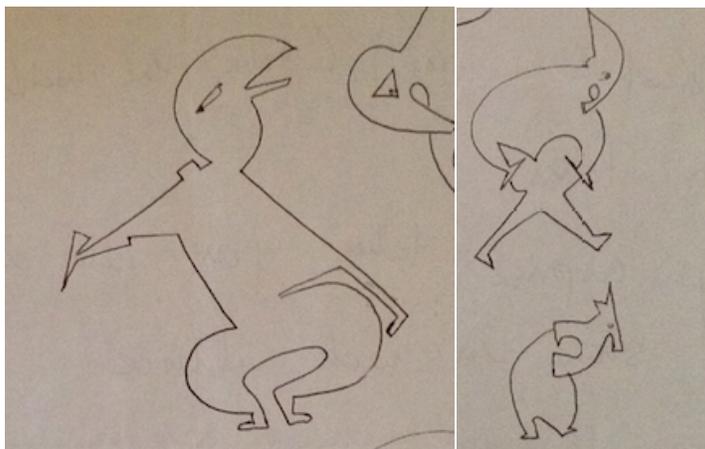


Figure 1: Animals drawn by Meier on her rehearsal notes for *Brother of Gogolorez*, circa 2010.

Like her animal drawings, Meier's ability to move was, since her injury, determined by the facts of her anatomy. Refocusing her attentions to her drawings after her injury, she therefore began to directly address the problem she had experienced in her own body. In her drawings, Meier began to tackle a question: If dancing is the ability to switch the body between various constructions, how can one challenge the determinism of anatomy? After injury, Meier needed to confront the supreme authority of her new physical disability over her body in order to continue on with her way of conceiving of the body, and thus the act of dancing. After drawing one animal body on a scrap of paper, or on the margins of her notes, Meier would simply draw another, different from the last. Meanwhile, Meier no longer used her body as a model. Meier became the authority who could compose bodies, rather than instruct them. When her drawings were done, her authority as creator of her drawings was only evidenced in her pen strokes. In her

drawings, Meier did not to switch any particular body into different states or actions (as had been the case with her previous dances), but switched between bodies themselves.

Meier tackled the choreographic idea of switching between bodies, for example, in one of the few recorded works of animation she made in the period. In the untitled, undated 22-second clip made in collaboration with the musician Leslie Ross, a series of fantastical creatures pass a ball between themselves. The first animal, with a foot perfectly shaped to the ball, smacks it into play. The ball then passes into the mouth and out a tube in the back of the next animal's head, which redirects the ball, spitting it out at an upward angle. Then, the ball rolls across the curved surface of one animal, toward another animal, who bounces it off of his belly. The ball then flies toward the legs of yet another animal, and is absorbed into one of its legs, and resurfaces, only to be absorbed by the next leg. The ball emerges from the second leg, and travels toward yet another animal whose vacuum-like head draws the ball upward and then casts it downward, toward a coil growing out of another animal's back. The ball drops into the coil, and then springs through the air and into the rear end of the final animal. The ball then travels through this animal's body, toward its mouth, and is shredded into bits as it ejects from its mouth and onto the floor.

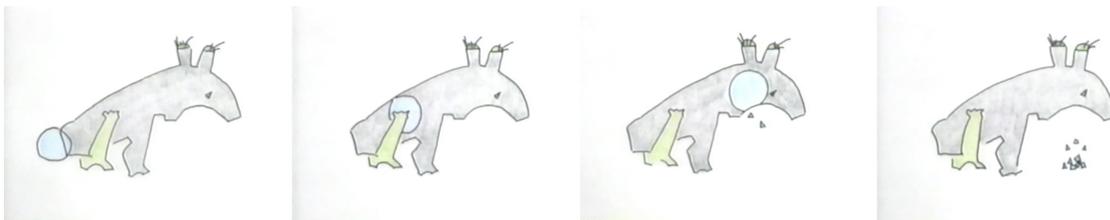


Figure 2: Stills of final animal depicted in Yvonne Meier and Leslie Ross' animation

In Meier's collaborative animation with Ross, each of the animals has an anatomy distinct from the others, which causes the movement of each with the ball to also be unique. Each animal interacts with the ball in a way that perfectly fits the design of its body. It is as if the animals were made for the ball. As if in a pinball machine, the ball bounces between the animals whose anatomies respond automatically to it. Meier and Ross produced in this work a series of causes and effects for the singular object of the ball, which in being passed, was therefore switched from one limited, and thus disabled, body to the next. The animation is an example of how Meier's drawings present the same beliefs about the body in a new way. All of Meier's animals had limited bodies, but Meier, with the limitlessness of imagination, could just keep drawing, creating endless variations using a simple set of methods. By drawing, Meier could skip over the instructions necessary to choreography with dancers, and aim her artistic hand directly at the composition of the body. While in her dances, she switched between one set of choreographic parameters to the next to move the bodies of dancers anew, in her drawings, Meier switched between one kind of body and the next to move a ball anew.

However, choreography did appear in Meier's animation. Meier's choreography, as with all her other works, framed the movement that mattered as that which could change. It wasn't that of the animals, but that of the ball. The animals were fixed in space and in their anatomies, while the ball flew between them, vacillating between options and creating a larger trajectory of movement. As a choreographer, Meier created an animation that focused on the subject that could really move. The ball, though it was the least complex form in all the animation, was therefore also both the most mobile and most central component. Meier's animation harkened back to *Danceperformance* in that its animals were like the human performers who became a choreographer's hand, focused intently on animating the primary action of the papier-mâché dogs. Meier's animation

showed animated animals animating a ball, thus making choreography of it. This solution also became the first she implemented in order to create dances again. If the bodies of dancers, like Meier's body, like animal drawings, were subjected to the power of anatomy, Meier would seek to subvert that authority by making the bodies in her works multiple. Meier would bounce her choreography between these multiple bodies, like a ball.

2.2 THE AUTHORITY OF SCORES, 2004 - 2006

When Meier's body lost its authority through disability, she moved to create dances that would never again depend on a singular, undisputed authority. She began with the improvisation project *Gogolorez*, which she began in 2004.⁷⁰ Prior to her injury, Meier's body had been the ultimate, uncontested authority in her works because it was the means by which she instructed other dancers. When she said (as earlier quoted), "it used to be that I could do it myself and then show it and then people could do it," she pointed to her body as an authority because with it she incited movement in her dancers through instruction.⁷¹ In other words, Meier's body had authority because it was the means by which she *transferred* the dance to the dancers. After Meier's body became disabled, and after she spent a number of years drawing animals, Meier began to find new ways to instruct her dancers without the use of her dancing body. Speaking of the inception of *Gogolorez*, Meier said in an interview with Rebecca Serrell that, "I didn't want to dance. So I merged my improv mind with their [the dancers'] improv skills and basically found myself dancing in my head, inventing scores."⁷² After her injury, Meier

⁷⁰ *Gogolorez* was the sole dance project that Meier developed after her injury until *This is Not a Pink Pony* in 2006. Meier, however, refused to consider *Gogolorez* a real work of choreography until she concluded the project with a seminal performance in 2011. Instead, at first she considered it an improvisation group.

⁷¹ Meier, Yvonne, 2013.

⁷² Meier, Yvonne, 2006.

discovered she could transfer her ability to dance into her imagination. All she had to do was communicate the dance that no one but her could see. To translate the dances in her head, Meier invented the word-based images with which she composed instructional prompts, or ‘scores’ for dancers.

Performances of *Gogolorez* spanned from 2004 to 2011. Though *Gogolorez* performances varied widely, almost all involved a group of improvisational dancers, sometimes in costumes, other times in sweatpants and tee-shirts, responding to instructions Meier gave over a microphone in her “Swiss accent, deadpan expression” while standing to the side of the performance space.⁷³ These dancers would attempt to fulfill Meier’s requests as fully as possible. Meier’s voice, as she read the various scores for dancers to perform, was always authoritative, gentle, and pedagogical, regardless as to the instruction. These instructions, or scores, were of a huge variety, including strange, often anthropomorphic descriptions of animals, requests for hysterical fits, colloquialisms, singular words, disciplinary phrases, judgments, simple staging instructions, and compositional demands. From a recording of a 2009 performance at Roulette in Brooklyn, instructions included, for example, “pinching each other mercilessly,” “turn into dogs,” “everybody turn obscene,” “mellow out,” “melancholy in the afternoon,” “become romantic but not stupid,” “hesitating into a beautiful flow,” “jubilation and frolicking,” “acrobatic turns including jumps with accidents,” “everyone crawl offstage like a lame dragon,” “Spring in Austria,” “bouncing turns hysterical,” “allow the bumping to overtake the dance,” and “a lame dog,” amongst others.⁷⁴ Her taste in words shows the degree to which Meier relished vivid, frank, and at times uncouth

⁷³ Asantewaa, Eva Yaa. "This Is Not a Dance Review." *Gay City News*, March 23, 2006, Volume 5, Number 12 ed., Dance sec. http://gaycitynews.nyc/gcn_512/thisisnotadancereview.html.

⁷⁴ "Yvonne Meier: Gogolorez." Roulette Online Archive. Accessed April 11, 2015. performed by musicians Christian Jaeger and Dave Gisler and dancers Gabi Glinz, Arturo Vidich, Aki Sasamoto and Christopher Williams. June 12, 2009.

language to communicate with her dancers. Contrasted with an example Meier gave as indicative of SRT images, “you sink into a body of water and you’re floating,” Meier’s language vacillated between casualness, suaveness, and absurdity, all with playful, biting wit.⁷⁵ Meier’s documented scores for *Gogolorez* pieces span almost 100 pages, but many she also invented on the spot, driven by her immediate response to what dancers were doing. For Meier, together “scores were like a training, an improvisation training.”⁷⁶ They instructed her dancers because Meier’s body could not.

Meier’s definition for ‘scores’ as training for improvisation clarifies the conceptual difference for Meier between *Gogolorez* and her animal drawings. Whereas she could draw animals with her pen, dancers needed to be trained, and to be trained, they needed scores. In Meier’s way of thinking, untrained animals “don’t have scores, they don’t have scores and I can tell. I’m like, *you’re scoreless, you’re a scoreless animal.*”⁷⁷ Through training the body, and giving it scores, “I’m thinking that a human can become an animal because you can dance, you can shift into an animal, all kinds of different animals.”⁷⁸ As Meier’s quote shows, Meier sought the movement of change through her dances, rather than reach any specific state arrived at through change. As her earlier works hypothesized, any state is itself constructed and disabled. However, though animals represented to Meier the inability to change, by changing into an animal and assuming its disabled state, a dancer would exhibit the one ability Meier most desired—the ability to change completely, again and again, thereby combatting the singularity of one’s anatomy with the multiplicity of bodies one could become. Meier discovered, however, that every dancer she worked with had a limited capacity for change. The

⁷⁵ Meier, Yvonne, 2014.

⁷⁶ Meier, Yvonne, 2013.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

authority of Meier's training through words again and again failed to produce a complete change in any performer. Meier used this too, by poking fun at it. She even did so in the title of the work—*Gogolorez* was a trained hamster who, despite all the training in the world, would remain a hamster nonetheless.

As is exemplified in the scores from Meier's 2009 performance at Roulette, *Gogolorez* performances were rife with references to animals. Meier accounted for *Gogolorez* as the title of the project, for example, in an interview, describing how years prior she had been given a pet hamster by her sister and, "I was trying to train the hamster." She wanted the hamster to touch her nose with its nose, "because they have these soft, wet noses." It was the only thing she could train the hamster to do. For a 2006 performance of *Gogolorez*, Meier elongated the title, calling the performance *Gogolorez or the Mystery of the Flying Cow*. In an interview after the performance, Meier said that the title came from a picture she took of a cow jumping over an equestrian obstacle. Of the cow, she recounted, "there is this man in Switzerland who has trained a cow. He picked the nicest one he had and started to train it. With croissants. It would eat the croissant crusts... Her trainer was wearing this monkey mask and she didn't mind. I think it was the voice. He would always talk to her. With his voice."⁷⁹ As this quote shows, by subtitling *Gogolorez* with *The Mystery of the Flying Cow*, Meier both emphasized her use of scores as a form of training dependent on the voice of the trainer, and her perspective on dancers, who were the subjects of her training, like animals. But the title also emphasized Meier's irreverent stance on training. A cow could jump equestrian obstacles, but it remained a cow. A dancer could attempt to become "a lame dragon," as from the 2009 Roulette performance, but remained, nonetheless, a dancer. Performances

⁷⁹ Meier, Yvonne, 2006.

of *Gogolorez* again and again expressed the limits of change for bodies, with which Meier both wrestled and laughed at from her directorial position.

By exposing the gap between the scores and the actions of dancers, Meier's live instruction of her performers in front of audiences was the most central factor of *Gogolorez* performances. Nothing else about *Gogolorez* remained completely consistent. Speaking as a proxy for dancing made sense for Meier, as she had been verbally instructing dancers for a number of years, while teaching classes in Skinner Releasing Technique. Speaking of SRT, Meier said that, "every image they deal with is so specifically designed to do something in the body...Through these specific images you learn access inside the body, and they move all through your body. This is really where I developed my scores from."⁸⁰ Appropriating the instruction methods of SRT, which focused on activating the imagination to access the inside of the body, Meier then wielded those methods in opposition to the aims of SRT. With scores like, "Grasshopper has a picnic gets poisoned and dies and awful death," Meier comically showcased instruction as construction.⁸¹ Through Meier's performance of scores, she showed how the pedagogical methods she appropriated from SRT, rather than unearth the "natural body," were instead dependent on the ability of the imagination to construct the body. Meier then 'performed' the instruction of an SRT teacher, just as she had for Ishmael Houston-Jones for *Tell Me* in 1987. Describing this choice, Meier said that,

I found out that if you improvise and you have a score, the score is in the way of communication between the audience and performer. So I figured out that if people [the audience] know the score and then they get to watch it, it makes much more sense. Its almost like here's the dancer, here's the score, it's like a wall between them and the audience. They get so involved with the score they forget to

⁸⁰ Meier, 2014.

⁸¹ Ibid.

communicate with the audience. So the score is in the way of the communication, that's why I started talking the scores.⁸²

In this statement, Meier assumed two things: first, that no audience member could extrapolate a score solely from the dance it produced, and second, that there is therefore an inherent gap between the words of instructions and the dance movements that result. Meier began to show that disability arises for dancers as they attempt to switch between scores. The dancers of *Gogolorez* had a power that Meier's animal drawings did not have—they could interpret, imagine, and attempt—faculties Meier would showcase for the disabilities that arose through them. In *Gogolorez*, Meier exposed the act of translating words into movement as a source of disability in dance because the words could not be translated back out again. This is why Meier needed to speak the scores in order to communicate with the audience. For the switch between words and movements, dance was a dead-end. Instead, the dancer could only attempt, and as Meier put it, “the attempt is really what interests and also includes the audience. Because they [the audience] know it's impossible to achieve, they really get into it.”⁸³ Meier sought to entertain and thereby communicate with audiences by allowing them to see the dancers struggle to interpret her scores. Meier thereby gave the audience the opportunity to critique the degree to which dancers were fulfilling her instructions.

By speaking her scores live in *Gogolorez*, Meier was able to make a further critique of the methods of SRT by exposing the types of scores she had been developing with Jennifer Monson since the 1980s, which specifically rejected SRT's naturalistic imagery.⁸⁴ These scores, Meier called “No-No Scores,” and “Contradictory Scores,” and

⁸² Meier, 2013.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Meier, Yvonne, 2013. “Jennifer and I used to have whole sessions of contradictory scores, it sort of rips you apart.”

they existed purely to show the struggle of dancers fumbling in the gap between how they have been commanded and how they can respond. Describing her use of “Contradictory Scores,” for example, Meier said, “I’m just devilish about it. I really like to see somebody be in trouble, trying to do these conflicted images.”⁸⁵ Through “No-No’ Scores,” and “Contradictory Scores,” *Gogolorez* relished in the gap between what could be said and what could be done, exposing words not as an in-road to the natural body, but as a playground through which dancers try and fail to conjure new bodies in themselves through imagination.

However, within *Gogolorez*, Meier never made up her mind as to whether the gap between her instructions and the dancers’ actions was totally desirable. Discussing the scores she used in *Gogolorez* in an interview, Meier said that the way dancers interpreted scores was “interesting to me because they’re not doing what I thought was going to happen. And sometimes that’s great, and sometimes that’s not good at all.”⁸⁶ As she had throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Meier continued to show intolerance for the movements she considered mistranslation. If Meier suspected that something was working, she would let it run, but if she saw something as failing, she would switch to another option. Within *Gogolorez*, a change in score, and thus a change in movement, became a critique of how the previous score was executed. Just as she had switched from disabling construction to disabling construction in earlier works, Meier switched between instructions inside *Gogolorez* performances to critique the dancers’ attempts to translate and thus transfer her score into their bodies. Within the frame of a single *Gogolorez* evening, Meier would navigate the gap between what was said and what was done to compose dances in real-time. She held authority over the dance with each passing moment, not with her body, but

⁸⁵ Meier, Yvonne, 2014.

⁸⁶ Meier, Yvonne, 2013.

with her ability to command the stops and starts within the dance. Microphone in hand, Meier could command a dance such as she had never been able while dancing alongside the performers in her works. As with her animal drawings, in *Gogolorez*, Meier could switch between the many bodies of dancers who she invited to do performances. Yet, for all her switching between bodies, she could not switch her own back to how it had been.

Meier struggled with a problem that remained unresolved in her transition from choreographing based on the example of her body to choreographing with scores. Despite her ability to switch from one constructed state to another, no particular state could perfectly replace or fulfill the abilities afforded in any other. Meier, even by switching to new media, first in drawings, then in words, could not communicate exactly as she had before. Her body, as it had been before, remained irrevocably lost to her. Meier's *Gogolorez*, stretching over seven years, and including an unknown number of shows, culminated in a final presentation at Danspace in 2011, *Brother of Gogolorez*. Yet after all her research into the issue of language and dance, Meier remained unsatisfied with the series. Standing in front of the crowd gathered for her award ceremony at the Brooklyn Arts Exchange in 2015, the choreographer reminisced how, years ago, after she had been injured dancing, she had instead created works without using her own body. She looked at the audience, and said blandly, "I hated those works."⁸⁷ Despite all the power Meier found in redefining herself through *Gogolorez*, she missed her own body's ability to dance. Though she could transfer her ability to dance into her ability to draw, and then to speak, her new media for producing artworks could not replace what her body had once done. Through *Gogolorez*, Meier discovered that despite all the changes she was capable of discovering, she could not find a true substitute for the abilities she had lost.

⁸⁷ 2015 Arts and Artists in Progress Awards Ceremony. March 28th, 2015.

2.3 PROBLEMS WITH AUTHORITY, 2006 - 2009

Between 2006 and 2009, Meier was working at her old pace, developing approximately one new major work per year. For these three works-- *This is Not a Pink Pony*, *Area 51*, and *Stolen*—she began working closely with a small group of younger dancers in whom she had taken interest. Aki Sasamoto, Arturo Vidich, and Osmani Tellez were the most prominent, each appearing in more than one of these new works. In the three pieces Meier developed during this time, she engaged virtuosic performers in acts of intense physicality, as she had become interested in dancers whose bodies could do not only what hers could not do now, but what hers had never done.⁸⁸ Tellez was a perfect example, as Meier had brought him into her dances because she wanted someone who could perform acrobatics.⁸⁹ In choosing dancers whose abilities varied from her own, Meier gave herself a meaningful challenge. She wanted to build a work of choreography that, like *Gogolorez*, used scores to showcase the struggle of dancers. But she didn't want to instruct the dancers through a microphone to achieve the effect. Whereas in *Gogolorez* she explored these issues through a pedagogical format in which the proposed tasks were shared with performers and audience alike, Meier began to return to the more shrouded mechanisms of her formal works with *This is not a Pink Pony*. With such virtuosic dancers, Meier chose to unearth a new struggle with disability.

Using the mechanisms already at work in the dancers, Meier was able in *This is not a Pink Pony* to construct a dance which itself contained all the misunderstandings and struggles of *Gogolorez*, without the spoken scores. Meier's animal references continued, and she placed depictions of deer all around the dance, which created an ominous presence of vulnerability. A tapestry with an image of two deer side by side was hung as

⁸⁸ Meier, Yvonne. Conversation with the author. April 12, 2015.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

a set-piece, and at the beginning of *This is not a Pink Pony*, in near darkness, a dancer placed a third mannequin deer on the stage, as if to watch them perform. It stood there in total stillness, its eyes opened wide, in a spotlight— a deer in headlights. Tellez then squatted in front of the deer, staring back at it, and a series of gun shots rang out, throwing the dancer backwards into the space into a complex tumble. The work thus began with an inversion of hunter and hunted. These three dancers, under the eyes of three deer, were prey.

The work moved to a long section of jump roping, in an obvious nod to Meier's last formal work *Mad Heidi*. Unlike the Swiss Maiden, however, the three dancers traded turns jumping the rope swung by the other two. The central dancer in this game was the focus of attention, but at the same time, completely subjected to the wills of the other two dancers wielding the rope. The tension between the dancers in this section expressed itself in their cantankerousness toward one another. It seemed nobody wanted anybody else to have a nice time jumping rope. Documentation of the work shows that the progression of the dance was determined by the failures of the central dancer to jump the rope, as each and every time the rope caught their feet, all three progressed into a different action within a series of acts performed with the rope. Through this, Meier composed the transitions of the dance into the inevitable mistakes of the dancers as they goaded each other past physical limits.

Dancer Arturo Vidich, costumed in a fur vest, didn't take the central role jumping rope during the first section, but began his term in that role later, after crossing the stage in a strange bird-like dance. He froze in the midst of his dance in a moment when the lights changed to a spot that shone down upon the jump rope held aloft between the hands of the other two dancers behind him: his time had come. The silence was then broken with the sound of gunfire, and the dancer Vidich, like Tellez before him, staggered and

fell under their imaginary spray of bullets. Pulling himself back to standing, and dodging bullets, he then dutifully completed his turn jumping rope. At his first mistake, the three dancers shifted, and he exited from the rope to reach his hand out to touch the head of the mannequin deer. Everything about his performance signaled that he was prey—his bird dance, his fur vest, his freeze in the lights, and his gentle, almost familial reach for the deer.

For *This is not a Pink Pony*, Meier did not merely construct a progression of actions, but looked for a motivating factor between the dancers that could drive them to perform in the absence of instruction. As written by Arturo Vidich in correspondence, working with Meier was “a very moody process. But she made us use that, rather than having us leave it at the door. We would fight, me and her, about schedules, or about the lack of clarity about what we were working on. Those fights became material, physical in the work.”⁹⁰ As Vidich’s quote shows, after injury Meier directed rehearsals not by modeling movements to dancers, but by noticing, and provoking them, through their quotidian struggles. In place of her body’s authority, she had begun working with ordinary stresses and problems as a motivational force. In *This is not a Pink Pony*, Meier discovered the most prominent quotidian struggle her performers wouldn’t ‘leave at the door,’ and thus the thing that would most drive them to move, in the budding tension between the dancers. Meier identified their tension as something sexual, called their connection to each other a “love triangle,” and used their connection as a motivating factor that would transfer energies between them, and get them to move. After working with the authority of anatomy in her drawn animals, and then the authority of the score in *Gogolorez*, Meier now turned to the authority of human connection in *This is not a Pink Pony*. The jump roping section from the dance provides a clear example as to how Meier

⁹⁰ Vidich, Arturo. E-mail interview by author. April 6, 2015.

transformed the connection between the dancers into the motivation to move. The dancers, physically interdependent as they performed a children's game, played with each other energetically, almost violently, expressing their emotional tension with one another through the swinging of the rope and the virtuosity of their jumps. Every choice in the game affected not just one of them, but all three.

Much like Meier's 1988 work *The Bodysnatcher*, *This is not a Pink Pony* highlighted the subjection of the dancers to the dance. Interestingly, Meier had danced only a solo at the beginning *The Bodysnatcher*, as she was 6 months pregnant at the time of the performance. For the most part, the two works are related in that Meier composed them to be danced by others. She also composed both works to augment the vulnerability of the dancers. Seeing a dance from the outside, Meier emphasized that vulnerability in which she was not a part.

However, Meier's conception of her own dances had gained complexity since *The Bodysnatcher*, as she no longer treated 'the dance' of *This is not a Pink Pony* merely as choreography that would subject the dancers to various taxing demands. The performers were subjected to a dance in *This is not a Pink Pony* that they instead manifested between themselves. The transitions based on their mistakes during jumping rope, for example, gave the physical relationship between the dancers control over the choreography. The love triangle Meier referenced emerged as the crux of her new piece: love, that most powerful of human connection, is a profound example of human co-reliance. And yet, despite our dependence on one another, humans remain notoriously undependable. Meier constructed a choreography in *This is not a Pink Pony* that assumed that the disability of its dancers would arise in part through their connections to each other, and so progressed through their interdependent fallibility.

In an interview with Rebecca Serrell, Meier refused to account for the title *This is not a Pink Pony*, merely explaining that it came from a restaurant in downtown Manhattan, and was connected in some way to ‘*The Mystery of the Flying Cow*’ title added to the performance of *Gogolorez* for the second half of the evening. Evading Serrell’s question, Meier said, “it’s a few images I can’t really talk about right now, but it’s a bit related to the cow.”⁹¹ The cow and its trainer served differently as a reference for *Gogolorez or The Mystery of the Flying Cow* and *This is Not a Pink Pony*. In *Gogolorez*, Meier behaved like the Swiss trainer in the monkey mask, commanding the execution of tasks with the familiarity of her voice. Yet, *This is not a Pink Pony* didn’t have a trainer. Instead, a reference to his monkey mask showed up at the end of the work, as Vidich and Tellez appeared newly dressed in gorilla suits, and dragged the third dancer, Marion Ramirez, from the stage. The trainer in a monkey mask, like the performers in gorilla suits dragging the last dancer off the stage, twisted authority, commanding the body of another, even though authority in a monkey mask or gorilla suit is a joke.⁹²

The performance in which Meier presented both *This is Not a Pink Pony* and *Gogolorez or The Mystery of the Flying Cow* showed two forms of authority that could drive a dance. In *This is Not a Pink Pony*, Meier worked with the dancers to compose the driving authority between them, which emerged through their own feelings for each other. *Gogolorez*, however, was much more simple. Meier exposed herself as the authority in the work, commanding the dancers like a teacher. But even while these two forms of authority drove Meier’s two works, Meier held a certain facetiousness toward them. When asked by Rebecca Serrell if she was “laughing, ridiculing,” Meier said that,

⁹¹ Meier, Yvonne. “Yvonne Meier in Conversation with Rebecca Serrell.” *Critical Correspondence*, March 3rd, 2006. <http://www.movementresearch.org/criticalcorrespondence/blog/?p=651>

⁹² In a conversation with the author, Meier mentioned that she couldn’t find a monkey mask, so decided to work with gorilla suits instead.

“I have an urge to produce some fashion of comedy in a good way, and I’m certainly not being mean. A lot of the time I laugh at the pretentious serious stuff.”⁹³ Nothing could be more pretentious or serious than authority, and Meier mocked her own authority consistently in *Gogolorez*. As described by dance reviewer Eva Yaa Asantewaa, in one interaction between Meier and one of the dancers of *Gogolorez*, “Jeremy Wade cheekily flipped a towel up into a turban and sashayed away like a bathing beauty before Meier had given her new orders. She quickly made him heel. ‘Now, don’t get excited, Jeremy. Don’t wander off.’”⁹⁴ In such moments, Meier played authority as a comedic role, which mocked the situation her authority produced in her dance. Wade’s ‘cheekiness,’ and Meier’s own condescending response highlighted the fact that with authority, trivial struggles over power inevitably arise. In *This is Not a Pink Pony*, however, Meier’s authority ceased to be a visible part of the dance by the time it was performed. In her interview with Serrell on the dance, Meier described her authority as double-edged, “I’m using incorrect things... I will use my dancers as very extreme stereotypes, amplifying to the max who they are and what they can do, and I don’t expect them to feel good about it.”⁹⁵ The performers of *This is not a Pink Pony* struggled to connect to one another and perform together in a dance composed to produce vulnerability in them.

As Meier moved from *This is not a Pink Pony*, to her next work, *Area 51*, her irreverence toward authority became her focus. Her attack was extremely specific, and began to point to the idea that all forms of authority are inevitably disabled in their attempts to control bodies, because no authority can account for the whole of any body. In *Area 51*, Meier invented bodies with multiple interiors. Since her earliest troubles with

⁹³ Meier, Yvonne, 2006.

⁹⁴ Asantewaa, Eva Yaa, 2006.

⁹⁵ Meier, Yvonne, 2006.

her knees in the early 1980s, she had been fascinated with the interior of the body. The work exposed the incongruity of the interior and exterior of the body.

Possibly one of the most important dance critics of the 1980s and 1990s, Deborah Jowitt, described the action in *Area 51* in her review for *The Village Voice*,

When we enter the church and throughout the chit-chatting minutes before *Area 51* begins, two heaps of large, dark-blue pillows sit on the floor. When Kathy Kaufmann's lighting turns the setting theatrical, small shifts occur in the piles. Yikes! There's something furry inside each. Out struggle two simian creatures, homelier than any gorilla. The larger one (male) has a red felt tongue lolling out of his mouth and is determined to mate with the smaller, more sinuous one; she's not having any. Initially pillows buried furry things, and now a furry thing eats the pillows; Sasamoto and Arturo Vidich drag out an immense fake-fur sack and stuff the cushions into it. Meanwhile the randy ape (Osmany Tellez) grooms himself nervously, pursues the feisty female (Elizabeth Ward), and attempts to climb among the spectators. New music comes on, and now there's a third monkey (Sasamoto, I think, but Vidich is soon suited up too). They have a fine time treading on the tidy fur bundle and pushing it around. Tellez gets stripped of his suit and stuffed into the sack along with the pillows. Try to picture this: a huge fur egg with a man's head sticking out of it being made to career around the church by monkeys.⁹⁶

Jowitt's description articulates *Area 51*'s underlying exploration of interiors as incommensurable with exteriors: dancers inside gorilla suits inside piles of pillows; pillows inside a ball of fur; a dancer inside ball of fur with pillows. Every interior Jowitt saw pulled to the exterior, and vice versa, deepened the absurdity of interiors and exteriors even as they became one another. In the midst of the absurdist re-anatomization of bodies and objects in *Area 51*, performers inside monkey suits acted out sexual behaviors, as if, when unable to submerge into the interior of a body, the performers are conversely compelled or repelled from doing so. Meier encased all the performers and objects alike in furry surfaces, rendering them all a slapstick reference to the primitive.

⁹⁶ Jowitt, Deborah. "Yvonne Meier: Monkey Do." *The Village Voice*. December 18th, 2007.

The interior of the body, with its raw, fleshy physicality, has also long been identified with the primal drives in humans—hunger and sex, for example, have long been typecast as primitive desires voiced directly from our animal urges, or our organs. Jowitt’s description testifies to how Meier’s *Area 51* ridiculed the stereotypes attached to the physical body, and its veiled interior. As Meier’s performers strutted in their fake fur and dove into pillows, they also expressed the alien space of our very insides.

Meier had long known the interior of the body for its complexity. In Skinner Releasing Technique, she learned to think of the interior of the body as a space that when accessed through language and imagination, could be reflected on the exterior of the body. She continued with that concept, even if facetiously, with her *Gogolorez* pieces. With props and costumes in *Area 51*, however, Meier constructed interiors of bodies that one could not account for by seeing the exterior. With the fell swoop of monkey suits and pillows, Meier adeptly critiqued the SRT notion that the interior of the body could be interpreted from what was happening on its surface. The incongruity between interior and exterior provided the authority that would direct the movement of *Area 51*. To create the piece, Meier worked with her inability to know the inside from her position on the exterior.

Meier’s work with garbage bags in *Area 51* supplies the best example of how her choreographic choices were determined by the inconsistency between interior and exterior. In an interview, Aki Sasamoto described the development of the material for this section, and how she and Meier in rehearsals discovered that the dancer, once inside the garbage bag, could not hear Meier’s instructions. In the earliest rehearsals for the piece, Sasamoto would take her cellphone into her bag with her, and Meier would call her. Meier and Sasamoto began to discover in this exercise a pair of disabilities: while Sasamoto couldn’t imagine how her actions within the bag appeared on the surface,

Meier couldn't imagine how the surface of the bag translated into what Sasamoto was doing on the interior. With this material, Meier choreographed a section into *Area 51* where she, sitting in the audience, would call a dancer who was inside one of the bags, and instruct her movement with a series of scores. In performances of this section, Meier further delighted in the consternated responses from the audience members around her who often thought she was an audience member who was simply audacious enough to take a call in the middle of a performance.

For the 2009 work *Stolen*, Meier began developing the dance by choosing a series of ideas and images she had heard from other artists. *Stolen* was so named because she appropriated these ideas for her own work, and processed them through her own rehearsals into a singular piece of choreography. In *Stolen*, Meier expanded her work to challenge the authority of ideas, for example, through which the economy of art operates. Meier approached the authority of ideas, like the other authorities she challenged in these new works, as a medium for transference that, despite all attempts at standardization, becomes fluid in meaning by being transferred, by being moved.

The performance of *Stolen* began as an infuriated Arturo Vidich tore through the stage space as shoes dropped from above. His dancing followed the score "pure aggression," which he directed at the uncomprehending shoes amassing on the floor around him. The two other dancers in the piece, Aki Sasamoto and Yvonne Meier herself, then walked up to him, and simply ripped off his clothes as he stood motionless. Sasamoto next descended into the same "pure aggression" score by appropriating the act she had just done to Vidich—ripping off her clothes and growling. Meanwhile, Meier kicked the shoes to the sides of the space, and then the action came to a standstill as a stream of cloth from above slowly poured over Sasamoto's head, slowly blanketing her in a great mound of fabric. Enveloped in this monstrous mound, and staggering under its

weight, Sasamoto walked toward the center of the space, fell over, and then slowly began an arduous process of wrapping her hands and feet with the cloth, while the other two performers, sitting next to each other, made a minimal dance of arm gestures that randomly resulted in slaps and whacks. Once Sasamoto's feet and hands were wrapped in giant balls of cloth, she began to crawl around confusedly, like a newborn animal.

These acts together composed merely the beginning of the work, but they express the non sequitur fashion in which *Stolen*, with its bits and pieces of ideas from numerous sources, came together as a singular dance. Devoid of the common sense of actions and responses, and devoid of narrative, *Stolen* wove unapologetically through one seemingly unmoored act into another, taking on neither the list-like quality of the ideas Meier gathered to create the piece, nor the semblance of psychological or physical cause-and-effect. Dancer Aki Sasamoto suggested that this is because “what she’s concerned with is not necessarily subject matter.”⁹⁷ In her 2006 interview with Rebecca Serrell, Meier articulated that what she looks for is instead “kinesthetic suspense.”⁹⁸ This suspense to which she refers is not merely a tactic for maintaining the interest of the audience, but the means by which Meier suspends her works between subjects. In its list-like appropriation from various sources, *Stolen* provides a perfect example of how her choreography employs action-based tactics (in this case, that of stealing) in order to remain in movement, to switch performers between states, never allowing them to settle. Stealing is not the subject of the piece, but the act through which the ideas of one choreographer are appropriated, and thus transferred, to another.

Aki Sasamoto articulated the slipperiness of subject matter in Meier's work as precisely the reason her artistry is so distinct within the dance field, and so often

⁹⁷ Sasamoto, Aki. Interview with the author. April 3rd, 2015.

⁹⁸ Meier, Yvonne, 2006.

misunderstood. “Modern dance has made its technique and its concerns separate... but in her case it’s different. What comes out as a story or as entertainment or as serious art it has its own appeal and the subject matter is in that narrative, but that’s not what she’s after.”⁹⁹ Sasamoto’s quote classifies modern dance, like ballet, as a form that has standardized technique, and therefore divorced the subject matter of choreography from the movements it involves. In contrast, Sasamoto frames Meier as a choreographer whose work does not even begin to pursue subject matter as it is pursued elsewhere in dance. Meier’s dances, as Sasamoto contends, were not situated in a subject, but moved through the situatedness of subjects, as Monson described, to “physicalize or open up the instability, not so meaning can’t be attached to anything, but so feeling or energy can move through it.”¹⁰⁰ With *Stolen*, it wasn’t the stealing of an idea that Meier was after, but the movement that stealing an idea could produce, and the way that movement then expands meaning beyond the authority of the ideas with which she began.

Stolen, like many of Meier’s other works, had great success in the experimental New York City dance scene, winning a New York City Dance and Performance “Bessie” Award that year, but remained a source of bafflement for dance critics. Surprised at her own acquiescence to the incomprehensible logic in *Stolen*, for example, Claudia La Rocco wrote in a review of the work, “you never stop to ask what on earth is happening during the show’s brisk 45 minutes because there is something undeniably true, and powerful, coursing through the absurd sketches.”¹⁰¹ La Rocco’s response shows the success with which *Stolen* presented a logical conundrum. La Rocco didn’t understand what she saw, but unaccountably lauded it for its authenticity. Considering the fact that Meier composed her dance as a collage of pilfered ideas, La Rocco’s testimony that

⁹⁹ Sasamoto, Aki, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Monson, Jennifer, 2015.

¹⁰¹ La Rocco, Claudia. “A Triangle in a Merry Tangle.” *The New York Times*. February 9th, 2009.

“there is something undeniably true” in *Stolen* rings as particularly surprising—as what could be more inauthentic, more untrue, than a copycat patchwork of dances strung together randomly? *Stolen*, which hinted at no narrative, and expertly evaded any theatrically reasonable process of causes and effects, couldn’t ring true for its logical progression. Meier, in stealing ideas, transferring them into her work, scrambled the separation between the form and content through the act of appropriation. Because each idea she used was stolen idea, Meier began working with each as a found object, its form and content merged into its suggestion of a singular, unknown source. However, Meier did not only arrange and rearrange her found ideas into collage. The act of collaging changed the ideas until, by the time Meier was ready to present the work publicly, she considered them unrecognizable.

In form and content, *Stolen* tackled instability of thought. In *Stolen*, Meier could not really “steal” ideas because the process of making a new work of choreography with stolen ideas altered their form and content so much as to reconstruct the stolen idea into something entirely new. Discussing the work, Meier noted that she was surprised to discover that not one choreographer she referenced recognized their idea within her work.

As with her other works from this second period of her artistry, Meier showed how transference disables. In *Gogolorez*, Meier showed the transfer between words and movements, in *This is Not a Pink Pony*, she showed the transfer of motivation between cohorts, and in *Area 51*, she showed the transfer between interiors and exteriors. This time, she showed the disabilities that arise in the transfer of an idea. Simply, an idea can’t stay the same. *Stolen* exposed the underlying instability of ideas by foregrounding it in place of a subject matter of her dance. Meier actively disabled logical progression, actively seeking an alternative, and found it in the makeshift pliability of collage.

2.4 THE TRANSFER OF REMAKES: *BROTHER OF GOGOLOREZ*, *MAD HEIDI*, *THE SHINING*

In 2011, Meier received an American Masterpiece award to re-stage her 1992 *The Shining* with New York Live Arts. She jumped at the opportunity, which dance critic Gia Kourlas noted was “amazingly, yet not undeservedly” offered to a downtown experimental choreographer for a piece just under 20 years old. Through this presentation, *The Shining* would join the ranks of dance history.¹⁰² For Meier, the opportunity overturned a long-standing problem she faced as an artist: “I used to make pieces that were so crazy that they could only be performed for one run... So all this energy was put into these crazy pieces and they were performed three times and that was it.”¹⁰³ Meier’s American Masterpiece award came at a time when she was already deeply invested in remounting older works. Within the span of two years, Meier would also present *Brother of Gogolorez* at Danspace and *Mad Heidi* at Abron’s Art Center. The three pieces, however, maintained vastly different relationships to their histories. While *The Shining* hadn’t been seen since 1992, *Mad Heidi* had been performed numerous times and toured with Jennifer Monson up until 2005, and *Brother of Gogolorez* comprised the formal culmination of a project that Meier had workshopped with various performers in her ‘improvisation group’ for live audiences since 2004. History, as Meier’s three re-staged works would show, would present a new disability to the scheme of Meier’s dances. This disability would not be rooted in pure corporeality, but in the body that moves through time. In this context, Meier would show disability not merely as an affliction of the body in any particular state, nor as an inability to move between states, but as a process that moves with us through time, positioning and repositioning us, limiting our perspectives at every step of the way.

¹⁰² Kourlas, Gia. “Audience Gets Pawed, but its all for Art’s Sake.” *The New York Times*. December 14th, 2011.

¹⁰³ Meier, Yvonne, 2012.

Despite the differences between the three works, the idea of re-staging them was, in each case, most interesting due to the absurdity in doing so. *The Shining*, performed in complete darkness, had almost no useable documentation, and most of what dancers actually did in the piece in 1992, Meier only knew through the accounts of her dancers. *Gogolorez* was not so much a work of choreography as it was pedagogical-method-as-art. There was no concrete material to be mined from the history of *Gogolorez*, but only the general design of the piece itself and its various habits to go by. Finally, *Mad Heidi* carried with it the baggage of Meier's injury, the subsequent casting of Monson in the role for many years, and Houston-Jones's deconstruction. Meier had thus already dissected *Mad Heidi* for its operations, and it had already stimulated huge shifts in her art-making. Through their differences, *The Shining*, *Brother of Gogolorez*, and *Mad Heidi* together provided Meier a spectrum through which she could dig into the problems in historicizing experimental, improvisational art, by reworking her own work before any historian had touched it. In other words, with these three pieces, Meier performed the disabilities of history. She used her usual methods of objectifying, disabling, and thus producing a new manner of dancing. In this case, she objectified the historicism in the three works, thereby showing improvisation as not merely born of momentary impulse. Meier produced an improvisation in another manner. Held between the historical and formal responsibilities of 'a work of choreography,' and the irrevocable difference recognized by improvisational artistry between one performance and any other, Meier's three historical works of 2011 to 2012 articulated the performing body as unable to surrender to either the pure, formal construct, or the pure, momentary impulse.

Meier's choreography up until this point, despite all its investigations of the constructions of the body and the authorities that transmit the body between its various constructions, had improvised the whole way, never completely stabilizing any work of

choreography. Even within the *Gogolorez* series, which ran for 7 years, Meier's instincts and choices within each performance were immediate, not bound to any longevity. Meier's more formal works, rehearsed for months, but performed over a few days, had never been constructed to account for how they might challenge their own dependence on this immediacy with which Meier had always worked. The re-stagings of these three works between 2011 and 2012 therefore served as a means to discover what in them was in fact "work," and thus should be transferred intact from the bodies of previous performers to the next generation. As she had with *Mad Heidi* and *Gogolorez* after her injury, Meier turned her attention back to the transfer the dance between bodies. This time, however, her investigation did not center on the problem of her own body. Instead, it centered on the problem of choreography, because, in order to transfer one of her works onto the bodies of new dancers, there must be something standardized and intact about the works of choreography to transfer. Meier began to treat these works, in re-staging, as authorities in their own right. Like the authorities of anatomy, scores, human connection, and ideas explored in her previous works of this period, Meier's works had to provide a stable basis for a transference of movement to occur.

In her 2006 interview with Rebecca Serrell, Meier expressed her attraction to improvisation on much different terms than those she would adopt for her historical works, describing how "All the little shifts of weight, this or that, you can't repeat it. When you repeat something it's supposed to look like the first time you are doing it, but it never is, so you are like lying."¹⁰⁴ As this quote shows, Meier's dedication to the complex nuances that emerge from the body caused her in 2006 to reject highly deterministic choreography as a form of deceit. Yet, by 2011, Meier had turned her critique-as-movement toward the task of tackling exactly the thing that, according to this

¹⁰⁴ Meier, Yvonne, 2006.

quote, she had previously avoided. She would sacrifice the uniqueness of ‘all the little shifts of weight,’ and explore how to make a piece look something like the first time she did it. The historical works Meier created as a result critiqued the former significance she attributed to unrepeatable complexity. Meier adjusted her stance in order to reoriented herself toward considering her own artistry not piece by piece, but as a whole.

Of the three works she was preparing, *Mad Heidi* was the most prepped, as it had already undergone the rehearsal processes which stabilized and refined its action for its transference from Meier to Monson in the late 90s. By the time Emily Wexler began learning the work, *Mad Heidi* was a highly structured work of choreography.¹⁰⁵ In Meier’s work on *Brother of Gogolorez*, however, she sought to refine and standardize the dance for the first time. Meier’s notes from rehearsals, which now comprise the largest section of her written documentation, show how she slowly experimented with scores over a long rehearsal process, trying various options, editing some out, refining her language, rethinking the progression of the piece. For all the differences in the performers’ choices each night, Meier’s scores were profoundly similar across the run of the show. Each dancer also had their own scores that they could depend on performing, as certain scores had been set aside as solos, such as “drunken [martial arts] master” for Aki Sasamoto, “horrible, wild flow” for Enrico Wey (credited as Dau Yang), “one accident after another” for Arturo Vidich, and “intricate nightmare ends in voguing” for Jennifer Monson.¹⁰⁶ Of these four solos, only Vidich’s changed profoundly night after night. The others dug into their scores, mining them for their depth. Cultivating this behavior in them through intensive rehearsals, Meier completely overturned her

¹⁰⁵ Wexler, Emily, 2015.

¹⁰⁶ See: Meier, Yvonne. "Brother of Gogolorez at Danspace." Vimeo. February 26, 2011. vimeo.com/22873823; Burke, Siobhan. "Obeying = Acting Out in Brother of Gogolorez." *The Brooklyn Rail*. April 5th, 2011; Kourlas, Gia. "At Danspace, Physicality Gets a New Dimension." *The New York Times*. February 25th, 2011.

Gogolorez philosophy, which tended to value the freshness of first tries over the refinement of rehearsed material. By striving toward consistency, Meier turned toward the very behavior in dance she had so long criticized as a form of self-deception. Despite her belief that 'setting the choreography,' as it is called in dance, would reduce the complexity of her work, Meier set the choreography anyway, because it was the only way she found to reinvestigate her previous dances. The viewpoint she articulated to Serrell in 2006, that doing so would reduce the complexity of movement, provided her no access toward thinking of her own work on a macro timescale. If movement was momentary, there could be no meaningful way to understand her works beyond the impression one could get while physically present at a performance. Certainly, a historical view on her works couldn't bear witness to all the nuances, all the complexities of each particular moment. But through a historical view, one could see the logics and methods that permeated each of these particular moments, and string them together.

The dance reviews and interviews that erupted from these three works never fully grasped the complexity of Meier's efforts to suspend her works between the conflicting statuses as historical forms and improvisations. The presentation of *Brother of Gogolorez*, for example, curated through a platform titled "*Body Madness*," by Judy Hussie-Taylor, provoked a misunderstanding as to how Meier's work related to time. Writing for Culturebot, Maura Donohue took a stance on the platform in which *Brother of Gogolorez* was curated, identifying "'liveness" as the value behind many of the works and working processes of the artists on the "Absurdity and Wit" roster."¹⁰⁷ This 'liveness' to which Donohue referred means that performance can not be reproduced. It closely follows the sentiment about 'all the little shifts of weight' that Meier uttered in 2006,

¹⁰⁷ Donohue, Maura. "Body Madness at Danspace Project: A Ruminantion." Culturebot. April 7th, 2011. <http://www.culturebot.org/2011/04/10074/body-madness-danspace-project-a-roundup/>

before Meier changed her mind and decided to tackle re-staging her own works as historical artifacts. The term is best expressed by a quote from Phelan's 1993 book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, in which she writes, "without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility—in a maniacally charged present—and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control."¹⁰⁸ Phelan wrote as if the present alone provides consciousness, while all else, once past, becomes but a dream. Her theory fails to recognize, however, the dreamlike status that would engulf the present if past occurrence were really so lost to us as she posits. Though the standpoint expressed in Meier's historical re-staged works concurs with Phelan that history is fraught with disability, Meier's interest in re-staging her works conflicts directly with the notion of performance as only visible, only in the now—whether that be on the surface of the body, or the apparent moment. Relating the visible to the present, Phelan further articulates a stance opposed to Meier's work, which so doggedly plunged not into the visible, or apparent, but into the invisible. Meier's choice to turn off the lights in *The Shining* provides the most physical example for how she made a statement that not all things that should be experienced in dance arise through immediate observation.

Explicating how she thought the choreographers on the platform shared their value for 'liveness,' Donahue wrote, "I'm sticking with Peggy Phelan's ontology of Performance [sic] for my view of Body Madness. Taking her position that performance exists only in the moment of its happening allows entry to an understanding [of the works]."¹⁰⁹ But how could Donohue reduce Meier, whose body bore the testament to her injury, who constructed *Brother of Gogolorez* as a way to engage in dance improvisation

¹⁰⁸ Phelan, Peggy. "The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction." In *Unmarked the Politics of Performance*, 148. London: Routledge, 1993.

¹⁰⁹ Donohue, Maura, 2011.

without the ability to dance for seven years, who was in this same period reconstructing two works from her artistic history, to the concern for ‘liveness?’ Even Donohue, after making her argument, framed Meier not for her ‘liveness,’ but for her history, “and, of course, Yvonne Meier anchored everything with another historic score-based evening – may *Brother of Gogolorez* go down in infamy.”¹¹⁰ For Donohue, Meier’s work rooted “Body Madness,” because it had history. And this history, which Meier was now herself addressing openly, was something she had constructed not from a momentary impulse, but through enduring investigation. *Brother of Gogolorez* depended on the duration of the Gogolorez performances, and the years of research Meier invested into the project. Meier’s presentation of *The Shining* only 1 month prior to *Brother of Gogolorez* had preemptively overturned Donahue’s analysis of “any documentation or reproduction thereafter as something other than performance” by presenting a work of art that doubled as the documentation of a performance that in 1992 couldn’t be documented, and therefore as documentation of the important, if obscured meaning of her own history.¹¹¹

Phelan’s argument about the liveness of performance works does connect to Meier’s work, however, by foregrounding the fact that no performance is ever the same. Since her injury, Meier’s works had specifically focused on that issue by showcasing how transference produces instabilities. Meier’s historical works showed her how the transfer of an old work onto new bodies changed the work profoundly. Meier responded to the instability of transference, however, not by more deeply valuing the irreproducible moment, but instead by valuing the change itself. Phelan’s concept of ‘liveness’ goes wrong by interpreting the instability faced by performance artists as something that would inexorably cause them to value the moment. Meier’s works have never explicitly

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

valued the moment so much as they have valued movement, and the way it changes things. Her draw to improvisation was not a byproduct of valuing the moment, but of seeking the change of movement. When a movement can't emerge through one means, through transference, it emerges through another.

Aki Sasamoto, Jennifer Monson, and Yvonne Meier herself have all sought to articulate Meier's artistic investigation as one of movement. Their attempts provide yet another way to conceive of Meier's investigation of disability and transference. Sasamoto articulated Meier's work by saying that "what she's concerned with is not necessarily subject matter."¹¹² Her sentiment connects to Monson's description of its energetic capacity to open up instability. Meier, calling her own work, "kinesthetic suspense," further clarifies the underlying importance of movement to her work. Movement is what happens between, before, or after the supposed 'moment,' when things crystalize into stable states. It isn't that "meaning can't be attached to anything," as Monson said, "but feeling and energy can move through it."¹¹³ This sense shared by Meier, Sasamoto, and Monson that Meier's work isn't so much about things, as showing the various powers and manifestations of movement, is an important aspect of Meier's work that is rooted in her investigations of disability. When Meier was disabled by physical injury in 1997, she sought to transfer her dancing into other forms, but discovered instead that disability did not only reside in the body and its various possible constructions, but in transference as well. No matter how Meier switched—between forms, bodies, media—she discovered that every transference of her dance transformed it. Meier discovered that disability not only resided in the body, but further emerged from the ways it seeks to move from one state to another.

¹¹² Sasamoto, Aki, 2015.

¹¹³ Monson, Jennifer, 2015.

In restaging her works, Meier pointed to her own choreography as something that could survive “all the little shifts of weight” which made each rendering of an action, each moment of dance different, and thus disabled, unable to truly connect with any other. Whether a shift was large, or small, it was nevertheless framed as part of the same body of choreography.¹¹⁴ By addressing the historical for her own works, Meier gave the most important clue, which then allowed this research to happen: she pointed to the disability of the body in relationship to time as an opportunity to historicize, rather than as a fact which derails the possibility. A work of writing such as this, blind to the minute differences and details buried in memories or otherwise lost to history, can nonetheless follow the traces that do remain, discovering in them a poetic stretched over the course of Meier’s career thus far. Such a poetic emerges through the body of her works, and speaks of something that can hold, despite the fact that no act can be repeated, that nothing is replaceable, that no one can become anyone else. Through all her experimentation with the many nuanced disabilities that arise through physical corporeality, Meier has shown one can make structures which are composed of the very shiftiness and fallibility that casts human bodies into motion.

¹¹⁴ Meier, Yvonne, 2006.

Conclusion

In all of her work, Meier looked for something miraculous to happen, she looked for exceptions. Disability, which has been the central theme of this thesis, is not often conceptually paired with the miraculous, though it is always a precondition—there must be some disability in place, which seems insurmountable, in order for the miraculous to happen. In the case of physical virtuosity, the precondition has always been implicit as the “normal” state of the body, presumed in dance to be the state of the audience who comes to observe the transcendence of the performers. Meier’s works instead incorporated disability into themselves, so that if the dancing of their performers were exceptional, it would not be through their transcendence of the implicitly average body, but of their own openly disabled bodies. Through all her critiques of Skinner Releasing Technique, the one thing Meier took wholeheartedly from the form was that the physical ability of the body depends to experience the miraculous upon imagination—or, more directly, is imagination. Meier’s works are rooted in the idea that imagination is a physical necessity, arising directly from disability—for who would imagine anything if their body, or perspective, did not first limit them?

In her explorations, Meier more than anything identified disability as a form of inconstancy resident in the body. We can never replicate anything we do, say, or think. From one moment to the next, we are different. Seeing the disability that arises in our bodies and bars us from exactly repeating or replicating, Meier’s artistry expressed in response a necessary, constant movement. She wove that constant movement through the dances she composed over the course of her career, transferring it between bodies, actions, drawings, emotions, and instructions. She critiqued former movements with

those that followed, not with an easy relativism but as if each attempt, made and lost, was imperative.

The inconstancy of the body is also the source of its suppleness, receptivity, and impressionability, attributes that Yvonne Meier, as an artist, has deeply investigated within her more than three decades as a choreographer. Her work has further challenged traditional determinants for style, progression, impetus, or purpose within the loose field of western dance. Meier's work, however, cannot be defined as a purely deconstructivist project. Meier's dances speak to movement as primarily composed of the excesses that fall outside the outlines of objectives; movement does what it has been put to work to do, but also always something else. Objects and instructions permeate her works and constantly provide apparent external impetus for the actions of dancers, while never accounting for the whole of what is performed. Disability surfaces and unfurls through time as the inconstancy of the body because movement yields consequences that can never be entirely accounted for. The body is inconstant because it is complex. Meier's dances show how we can see each other from within that complexity, not by halting our bodies to be observed, but by stirring our gazes to follow the movement.

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Autobiographical Statement

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