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Galvanizing Steel

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Date

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Date

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“I learned so much from listening to people. And all I knew was, the only thing I had was honesty and openness.”

-- **Audre Lorde**

Dance communicates without words, so when words are needed, I often find them missing. For these collaborators, to whom I am forever indebted, I will try.

Galvanizing Steel was developed in conversation with my generous and embracing community, whose support rippled throughout every facet of the building process. The entire evening of work could not have come to life without these five extremely talented and dedicated dancers: Aieyla Santaella, Jose Ozuna, Lynda Senisi, Oren Yaari, and Sophia Stefanopoulos. Not only did they contribute choreographically, but they brought a willingness and curiosity into the studio that shaped the entire landscape of our creative process. For that, I am eternally grateful.

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The Imperatives

We are living in a world where the mandates around physical distance have radically transformed how humans physically relate to one another, be it that we crave more contact or experience uneasiness in close proximities. The establishment of social distancing rules during the arrival of COVID-19 left dance as a ‘high-risk activity’ and the effects of imposed distance continue to ripple through contemporary life¹, and throughout spectatorial engagement. If life and art reciprocally imitate one another, my work aims to harness this collective tension around physical intimacy and draw the audience into a raw and tender world that reflects and evokes the human connection for which they yearn. My MFA thesis event, *Galvanizing Steel*, took the form of an hour-long performance followed by a reception at the Gibney: Agnes Varis Performing Arts Center on Thursday, March 31st, 2022.

Galvanizing Steel invited the audience to feel immersed inside a world that offered suggestive motifs saturated with meaning, while leaving enough ambiguity for individuals to derive their own stories and narratives, allowing space for each to vary radically from spectator to spectator. The work proposed that the container for the event does not separate the audience from the performer but unites these two binaries into one experience that begins the moment the spectator enters the theater. If the art is the experience, and the experience is founded in the reciprocal exchange between spectator and performer, then is it not just as much the choreographers’ job to curate the audience’s experience in the event space as it is to build a work of choreographic merit? As live performance theorist and scholar Peggy Phelan states in Unmarked: the Politics of Performance, “performance’s only life exists in the present” (147).

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>

This singular event aimed to encompass and integrate the corporeal experiences of the audience; to become something memorable that happens in life and not just another show that one passively attends and consumes. Each moment was curated to soften the audience to their surroundings and enable them to surrender to their own universe of imagination. Curator Ali Rosa-Salas noted during a public discussion that the “etymology of the word ‘curator’ includes an expected duty ‘to care,’ as it comes from the Latin ‘curare’, meaning to care for or attend to” (Donohue 1). *Galvanizing Steel* was a response to my desire to ‘curate’ the gap between the humanistic yearning for connection, and the insecurity that has arisen from our current pandemic times. Physical distancing influences the present, and *Galvanizing Steel* aimed to ask questions about the various boundaries that our world is creating at this time of the pandemic.

We now exist in a world where public spaces have an entirely new set of guidelines. We have become accustomed to distance requirements and regulations that suggest close proximity implies either a sense of trust or a sense of risk. We were also asked to toil in solitude, privately, gradually whittling away at our interpersonal proclivities. During the initial year and a half of this transition, I deepened my practice as a choreographer from behind the eye of a camera. Although not my ideal scenario, it was what pursuing my MFA amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic entailed. And so, I engaged fully with these new skills and perspectives making dances for the camera and taking courses in the Film and Media Department’s Integrated Media Arts MFA. What I most enjoyed about dance film work was the closeness and the shifting proximity that I could modulate between the dancer and the camera’s lens. Upon returning to live dance in a post-lockdown society, I was driven to apply this intimacy acquired with the close proximity of a camera to a live dance performance. Despite the distance inherent in a traditional theatrical structure, my curiosity aimed toward creating work that viscerally provoked the audience to

empathize with the kinesthetic experience of the dancer through an embodied awareness of their role as a witness.

The team of artists that joined me for this creative inquiry over the last two years has been the fertile soil through which this process burgeoned. Collaboration is essential to my vision, whether it be with the audience or other artists with whom I build the work. I maintain a specific interest in art that emerges across disciplines through working collaboratively with others. For my thesis project, I collaborated with a costume designer I have worked closely with in years past: a graduate of Womenswear at Central Saint Martins, London, Taya Louisa. *That Which Supports Us* was created with and performed by three Hunter undergraduate students: Jose Ozuna, Sophia Stefanopoulos, and Oren Yaari. The duet, *Just Look the Other Way* was a reiteration of a work choreographed last spring in collaboration with two dancers (Daniel Cho and Victoria Daylor), but this time it was collaboratively re-configured with and performed by Lynda Senisi and Aieyla Santaella. Through crowdfunding efforts via GoFundMe, another kind of collaboration, I was able to raise a total of \$3,500 that went directly towards reserving the theater and compensating my generous collaborators.

Content is Nothing Without Context

In organizing this paper I recognize my desire to curate the readers' experience through a chronological or linear acquaintance with my process. However, I must also honor that my writing echoes the cyclical and non-linear nature of my creative process. In claiming poetics as a defensible stance in my artistic practice, my writing aims to find a balance of logic while staying true to the circuitous nature of myself as an artist. In this paper, I will provide contextual supporting evidence, while embodying this deeply collaborative nature of the project as a whole.

This strategy is aligned with John Martin's concept of *metakinesis* and Julia M. Ritter's use of *kinesthetic empathy* in her book "Tandem Dances." Martin believed that modern dance, as a particular dance form, offered a kind of communication mode based on an audience-performer transfer of kinetic or movement sense that brought the psychic and physical together in a meta-kinesis. Ritter suggests that it is efficacious to understand "immersive productions as tandem dances, meaning they function as choreographic events requiring the bodies of both performers and spectators to enact parallel movement scores" (Ritter 6). In order to prime the audience for this experience of potentially enacting parallel scores of experiences, it became evident to me that I needed to craft a welcoming curtain speech that was in line with my vision of the show.

The show began with a highly curated curtain speech by collaborator and production dramaturg Portia Wells, which asked the audience to recognize that we were currently on the unceded and occupied lands of the Lenape People, and to acknowledge the ancestral and the indigenous caretakers of these lands and waters. We then invited the audience to close their eyes and feel their body in this space, understanding that the architecture and culture we frequent have been built with the labor of those who were taken against their will via the transatlantic slave trade. We then took a breath together, inhaling... and... exhaling... and invited the "audience to gently open their eyes, and take a look around, reminding them that they are in community here and we have a reciprocal responsibility to acknowledge where we are and how we take action." *Galvanizing Steel* aimed to go beyond presenting a performance and toward immersing the spectators into the same emotional landscape as the dancers by allowing an opportunity for the audience to relate more empathetically, or in tandem with, what the performers were experiencing.

This does not mean the audience danced the same dance, but that we (the incipient community of performers and audience) all participated in a singular event together that can never again be repeated; this unified experience represents a more significant experience than merely what appeared on the stage. As Phelan notes, in live performance “there are no leftovers, the gazing spectator must take everything in” (148), meaning no element of the show is arbitrary, once the witness enters the container of the theater, everything is contributing and affecting their interpretation. For this paper, I will elucidate the poetic meanings of what occurred in the fraught and shifting landscape built into *Galvanizing Steel* while recognizing that my “attempt to write about the undocumentable event of performance is to invoke the rules of the written documentation and thereby alter the event itself” (148). This strategy of detailing a process and contextualizing it within academic and theoretical discourse, echoes my continuing artistic voice as both a dance maker and a writer.

Active Participation

The in-progress showing of *That Which Supports Us* in December 2021 was my first experiment with a mobile audience in which they circulated around the stage space as the dancers performed. My interest in a mobile audience stemmed from my own observation that physical activity such as standing and walking heightens cognitive functions. In proscenium dance theater settings, the sedentary positioning of the audience inhibits their sympathetic response to the extreme physicality of the performers. Arizona State Professor of Exercise Physiology Glenn Gaesser, oversaw a study that aimed to prove “physical and mental arousal that occurs when people end their seated stillness and stroll or stand up, improves attention, memory and other cognitive skills” (Reynolds, G). This research spurred my curiosity to interrogate

whether a physically active (walking/standing) audience could be a more available to developing individualized interpretations because of their heightened cognitive state.

For the purpose of describing this showing experience, I will refer to the audience members as participants here because of the activated nature of their spectatorship. At the end of the showing I invited participants to free-write in response to these two questions: “What did you (the participant) discern or receive from the performers,” and “where did your experience land in relation to these descriptors; spectator, onlooker, participant?” For the first question, participants referred to the work as evoking feelings of pleasure, urgency, fatigue, and endlessness; I also received responses noting ideas of giving versus receiving support, both key themes that the dancers and I were interested in building into the choreography. Regarding the second question about the spectatorial experience, participants stated that they enjoyed the proximity to the performers and delighted in the experience of sensing the warmth of the light on the shared stage space. Participants also described a desire for more opportunities to participate, with more clarity on purpose and instructions for their involvement. This constructive feedback arrived at a midpoint in our creative process, where we were able to continue developing the work prioritizing audience participation.

Setback

For my MFA dance thesis, I initially intended to produce a live performance in the Hunter Black Box Theater 543 on April 1st, and 2nd, 2022. My creative process is often deeply invested in the physical landscape that surrounds the work. The show was to be an in-the-round performance experience specifically created for an immersive, non-traditional theater setting where the audience would be encouraged to journey through and around the Black Box theater as

the performers inhabited the space. In order for me to find my creative flow, I must work with a backdrop, environment, atmosphere, or setting with which I can collaborate and relate to. The unusually large size of the 543 black box space (2500 square feet) resonated with this interest in environment, and ignited a fire in me to choreograph a work where the audience was able to be mobile and therefore in tandem with the performers.

The conceptual seed of stimuli for the evening of work was a desire to explore and research architectural systems of support such as scaffolding and truss beams. With six large vertical steel truss beams strewn throughout the space, the dancers would usher themselves and the audience through shifting scenic environments created with the truss beams. The desire was to provide the audience with the opportunity and agency to shift their point of view and perspective in tandem with the moving performers. As it happened, the very inspiration for this show became the central factor for its demise. With one month left until opening night, it came to my attention that the parameters I had defined for my show would not be acceptable for an on-campus performance.

I arrived at my decision to create a live performance in September of 2021 and was explicit in my vision for the performers to be unmasked. My desire to display intimacy, vulnerability, and risk on the part of the performers was contingent on the dancers displaying their entire faces. All three works in the show were to incorporate elements of acting, facial animation, and task-based intentionality; covering the face was simply not possible for the show I envisioned. I found myself in a position where I was being asked to eliminate the facial expressions that were intricately threaded throughout every minute of the hour-long show. Though this decision would cost me the security of my theater and the capability of a mobile audience, in exchange it gave me an extremely clear understanding of my own values as an artist.

I was more than willing to sacrifice the venue of my dreams to maintain the integrity of my choreographic imperatives.

I remember distinctly a moment in the conversation where Director of Production, Burke Brown, and my Thesis Advisor, David Capps, suggested that mask-wearing was a costume adjustment to problem-solve. At that moment it was clear to me that my vision on this matter was non-negotiable. Because all of New York City at this point in time was allowing unmasked dancers in performance spaces and the lifting of mask mandates in public schools was impending, it became imperative to relinquish Hunter's 543 North theater space and their accompanying regulations, and locate an alternative space. In imagining the backdrop environment of the show over the past four months in the 543 theater, much of the research that grounded my thesis inquiry was focused on immersive theater and collective mentality. Even though I recognized that some of that research might not prove relevant to this new space that I would have to find, I also knew that none of it would matter if I was missing the unobstructed faces of my five performing artists. After a brief moment of grieving the show I had been envisioning since August, I embarked on a hunt to find an affordable theater space where my vision for the show could be realized. With two weeks left until my scheduled thesis premiere date, we finally locked in the theater at Gibney: Agnes Varis Performing Arts Center as the location for our show. In those two weeks, we quickly reoriented our work to adapt from an in-the-round performance setting to an intimate black box theater with traditional audience seating.

Shifting Gears

In an effort to adapt my research and performance work to the new space where the event would take place, I began to inquire into the term environmental theater as opposed to immersive theater. To better understand this evolution of spectatorship within the performance, I call upon the research of Richard Schechner who in the late 1960's coined the term "environmental theater" (Ritter 55). Environmental theater is considered the precursor to immersive theater, and does not imply audience interaction, but blurs the divide between audience and performer.

Once my intended architectural framework of the theater and the structural support system of the truss beams were lost with the original venue, I was forced to shift my attention entirely to the humanistic and emotional systems of support inside the choreography. I also wanted to focus on the compositional and curatorial structure of the gathering, such as how we welcomed our audience into the space and resolved from performance into post-show reception in a thoughtful and natural way. As we amplified our focus on interpersonal systems of support, I began to feel the collaborative relationship between the dancers and me ignite in a new way, and the dancers' physical and emotional experiences inside of the work began to take precedence in my decision-making. Without the architectural and conceptual systems of support provided by the trusses and the 543 black box space, I yielded to this change and altered the work to adapt to the new environment. Now that the show would be held in Gibney's small black box theater space with the audience seated in risers, I realized I could still amplify the elements at our disposal: our human and interpersonal systems of support.

The Body Knows

I seek to make work that functions as an activator for the audience's embodiment of the experience of the work. Scholar Ann Daly states that dance, while a visual and aesthetic experience, must be recognized as "fundamentally a kinesthetic art whose apperception is grounded not just in the eye but in the entire body" (2002). I situate my work within the continuum of contemporary incarnations of immersive, site-specific or "360-degree" dance experiences, like Punchdrunk & Emursive's Obie-award winning *Sleep No More*, Third Rail's Bessie-award winning *Then She Fell*, and the long-running *Fuerza Bruta* (Broadway World). In doing so, I hope to describe how I frame the container of the event as an entity that includes the viewers' physical experience. Immersive works of this nature entail carefully and considerately curating the viewing experience to begin the moment the patron enters the performance space, so as to transform attendees from passive witnesses into participatory observers. It is paramount to me that the audience feel thoughtfully welcomed into the space, and attended to especially in the moments immediately following the performance. In contrast, a traditional proscenium theater by nature suggests that the show commences when the dancers appear on the stage-side of the performer-audience binary. Striving for an immersive experience placed within a traditional concert setup forced me to inquire deeply into how I could physically activate the audience even while in a traditional theater seating arrangement.

My work engages kinesthetic empathy as an outgrowth of embodied cognition with the goal of amplifying an audience-performer relationship. The term, "kinesthetic empathy" has both art-based and neurology-based definitions and for the purposes of this paper I will be utilizing the term in how it pertains to art. Kinesthesia refers to "awareness of the body through sensations rather than through visual perception" (Reynolds, 30), and empathy describes the act of

“projecting oneself into the object or person of contemplation” (Reynolds, 19). Kinesthetic empathy became a cornerstone of the 1930s eruption of the modern dance canon, articulated by the writings of John Martin for *The New York Times* and in several book length studies.

Martin’s term “metakinesis” plays an integral role in how I have come to understand the spectator to performer relationship that is at the center of my work. In her article *Rejecting Artifice, Advancing Art*, dance writer Siobhan Burke parsed Martin’s belief that the process of “retrieving meaning from dance required two people, that is, two material bodies, each with a unique emotional past: the performer and the spectator” (Burke, 2), but Ritter’s activation of kinesthetic empathy better defines the relationship between dancer and spectator (Ritter 25) that I am actively seeking. Ritter claims that the “intention of immersive practitioners—to transform spectators into subjects of choreography—is precisely the transfiguration of spectators from the commonplace into art” (Ritter, 44). It is the intersection of these two theories that describes the integral role of the audience in shaping and assigning meaning to a live work of art.

Centralizing the Spectator

I am motivated by embodied cognition as a phenomenon to understand more acutely the live audience-performer relationship. As more research reveals our mind-body connection, we move towards a context where embodiment research can support and enhance the type of art we make, and how it effectively operates and communicates with the audience. My hope for this evening of work was to create more possibilities for the artist and the spectator to merge within a unified experience and to have elevated audience agency toward a heightened sense of connection and intimacy. I refer to Mable Elsworth Todd’s book, *The Thinking Body*, which describes “the various stimuli that prepare the muscles for their responses,” (Todd, 2) and my

research about embodiment helped me to understand the correlation between internal and external stimuli so that I can choreograph a work that draws out kinesthetic responses from a seated audience. Todd states that “for every thought supported by feeling, there is a muscle change”(Todd, 1). With this in mind, my work stems from an interest in both the physical and psychological experiences of the spectators. In an effort to research not only the “what” of art-making, but also the “how” I am curious to develop work that embraces and immerses the audience in the visceral sensations that the dancers are experiencing. In a world that can often devalue the intelligence of the body, I built my thesis around the belief that one might appeal to, or orchestrate an incitement of, the kinesthetic empathy of the audience.

My inclination towards an immersive theater experience arose out of my fascination with the notion of eliciting empathetic audience responses. As an artist, I do not believe it is realistic to create pieces with the goal of seeking specific reactions or responses from the audience, however, Martin’s metakinesis theory asserts that a viewer “engages in an ‘inner mimicry’ of the movement onstage” (Burke, 22). His premise was that “a passive absorption of spectacle and sound through the eyes and ears” would evolve into a feeling in the spectator’s body, essentially “internalizing the dance into his own neuromuscular system” (Burke, 2). Though I cannot, nor do I want to, dictate the experience the spectators undergo when viewing my work; the desire to ignite an inner mimicry drives many of my choreographic decisions inside the process.

Piece by Piece: That Which Supports Us

From this point forward, I will transition from the first person pronoun to the plural pronoun in order to underline the collaborative nature of the work in the studio. The opening trio entitled *That Which Supports Us* revolved around physical and interpersonal systems of support.

Scaffolding, as both a structural support system and a barrier, was a present theme within this trio. We self-scrutinized our relationship between ourselves and the internal scaffolding systems we create and contemplated how difficult it is to dismantle these systems once they are constructed. The dancers catch, carry, and uplift one another in an exploration of dismantling their own internal obstacles in relation to one another.

Throughout the piece, each dancer required the support of the others in order to persevere. The dancers' physicality gradually escalated from an exploration of subtlety, to a dynamic and intricate partnering section, to a powerfully repetitive movement phrase. Finally, the three dancers, exhausted but determined, emerged from their own performance, suddenly breaking the fourth wall, and pausing to look into the audience as they peel their worn-out, sweat-laden bodies off the floor with no attempt to hide their struggle. Along with a show program I asked attendees to answer a few questions in writing after the performance which centralized their experience as a viewer. One audience member anonymously wrote:

The trio's synchronized repetition at the end where each dancer fell at different times while the others continued on - this spoke to a sense of perseverance, or trial and error. As the dancers kept falling in the same place they embodied yearning, earth, tension, and harmony all at once. It felt like that struggle of trying to hold it together and show up for life.

This statement demonstrates the ability one audience member had to transpose the fraught experiences of the performers onto an experience in their own life. My hope was that watching these three dancers undergo twenty minutes of intensely physical movement might cause the audience to recognize their own yearning for support, encouragement, and connection. In this vein, one respondent noted in the questionnaire that "the entire first third of the trio I felt the body as a holder of memory, related to the traumas we inflict upon each other and how we help each other heal". The intention of *That Which Supports Us* was to display not only a need for

support and connection between dancers but to elicit from the audience a sense of kinesthetic empathy toward their own desire to support and heal the community around them.

As an artist, and moreover, as an individual, I realized I have an acute preoccupation and desire to alleviate discomfort for those around me. My work craves to challenge the audience's expectations, while hopefully welcoming them into this viscerally saturated experience in an accessible manner. In building my thesis show I came to realize that my desire to alleviate discomfort for others directly influences my goal as an artist to include audiences inside a performative experience in an accessible manner. I draw many similarities between my thesis project, and Sondra Fraleigh's writing on phenomenology in *Researching Dance: Evolving Modes of Inquiry*. Phenomenology, a concept integral to dance, is concerned with understanding the relationship between the act itself and the observation and interpretation of the act. The crux of this theory for me lives in the notion that the very act of interpretation requires the mind to take a jump from the realm of movement into the realm of language (193). Much of my creative inquiry revolves around interpretation and the idea that nothing stands alone as unrelated to its surrounding context. Interpretation can sometimes be misconstrued to mean finding something representational or symbolic, however interpretation, especially when applied to dance, requires a much broader definition that conveys signature and significance.

Piece by Piece: Just Look the Other Way

In the spring of 2021, I created a film, *Just Look the Other Way*, focusing on notions of dissonance and denial (Dominguez Vimeo). The film was restaged and reinvented in the spring of 2022 to be a live work with new performers, as part of *Galvanizing Steel*. This duet was concerned with witnessing people uncovering unusual and uncomfortable parts of themselves and interrogating the repercussions of denial. The intent of the work was to research the

complexities and nuances of the human tendency to willfully turn away from what we want to avoid. I felt an obligation, yet also apprehension, to make work about such grave matters. At the inception of this process, I released myself from any responsibility to explain, show, or teach through this piece, but rather prioritized our potential as collaborators to research, discover, and recognize matters of social tension that might be overwhelming and or uncomfortable.

While the trio culminated with an abrasive finale that included a pounding and heart-rate-elevating sound score, the second piece opened with two dancers running in place, side by side, eyes closed, then one extends her arms forward— described by dance writer and first-year MFA Thomas Ford as “a plea for connection”. Where the trio aimed to command the attention of the audience through often abrasive movement qualities and music, the second piece approached the audience with quiet and tender pleas for attention. One respondent wrote, “I loved the image in the duet of the women continuously stepping behind each other – concealing and exposing – but deeply aware of the other! It made me reflect on the complexity of how we use and abuse others to define ourselves”. In addressing the same moment, another responded “in the duet when the dancers switched spots, the space I had to take in what they were experiencing, combined with the build that led to that moment, brought me to the same emotional state that I imagined the dancers were experiencing...we became one”. As a choreographer I gleaned a great deal of wisdom from the realization that a simple moment of human connection without any large dynamic dancing, was in fact the moment most saturated with interpersonal connection for most spectators. It was a hopeful reminder to me that the audience is in the theater to feel connected and not just there to be impressed by physical virtuosity.

Choreographically, *Just Look the Other Way* was built on a recurring theme of becoming swept up in an overwhelming sensory experience and then snapping immediately out of it.

Sensations of yielding to a potently aromatic scent, or the soft tickling breath of a whisper, solidified in my mind a kinetic response that I worked to build into the movement tasks. As part of the development of the piece, I asked the dancers to improvise with the prompt of being overwhelmed with a sensory experience and then abruptly recanting its very existence. I watched as the dancers alternated between the two extremes of acquiescence and abnegation. As I constructed the piece, I began to see this internal struggle as a microcosm for the larger theme of disavowal that I was intent on elucidating. As our phrase work began to coalesce, the relationship between Aieyela and Lynda gradually became clear: that each dancer is a proxy for their partners' interactions with their own denial. Throughout this piece, we at times watched Lynda prioritize her own prerogative at the expense of Aieyela's affliction, while later, Aieyela became keen to silence Lynda and speak for her in defense of her own agenda.

Piece by Piece: Reaching Out From Underneath

The third piece, a solo entitled *Reaching out from Underneath*, was grounding for both myself as a movement artist and hopefully for the spectators of the hour-long performance. My initial intention was never to dance in my own thesis show. My reluctance to perform the solo myself was impassioned and came from an overwhelming fear of creating a spectacle of the ego. I felt that from the outside - as just a choreographer - I could tactfully craft something generous and sensitive, but perhaps from the inside, my ego would blur my intention for the work. With this rather cumbersome, self-imposed precept, I struggled to put the solo together until the very last minute. Though the solo had a conceptual incubation period of two months, but the physical work itself materialized in the eleventh hour as an improvisational score more than a choreographed sequence. Having only ever performed work by choreographers aside from myself, I was trained to, and familiar with, enacting the imagination of someone other than

myself. In assuming the role of creator and enactor of this solo, I deepened my understanding of performative presence. I found it particularly liberating to be at the nexus of both conceiving and physicalizing, because of the responsibility and empowerment inherent in this moment of complete self reliance.

The development of both my thesis research and my creative work has been an intuitive process. As Penelope Hanstein describes in her chapter, “Theory Making and the Creation of New Knowledge,” the theory is not attached to the outcome of a product, in fact, the theory is more aptly viewed as a process, analogous to choreography, rather than an endpoint or goal to achieve (Hanstein, 62). My creative process has always been a wandering journey and my research endeavors, and writing style has proven to be no different. As an emerging choreographer, I initially developed an internalized stigma toward my own creative process because I surmised that since my conceptual intentions were not concrete from the start, this process somehow lessened my work's validity. In hindsight, I’ve realized that this doubt or internalized stigma is actually a manifestation of the ego. Often when the ego becomes too involved, feelings of doubt come up because we focus on end-gaining rather than living and breathing inside the process. The reality is that true creativity is often not a matter of waiting for inspiration to come but actually of unblocking the obstacles to its natural flow. Some creative processes come flowing out with ease and little frustration, while others give rise to excessive doubt that make the work powerless. I repeatedly find myself tip-toeing this line between questioning the work enough to give it vitality and relevance, but also sufficiently following my absurd, nonsensical, gut instinct enough to ground the work in authenticity.

My choreographic choices and the questionnaire were motivated by the inquiry “can centering the corporeal experience of the audience enhance their overall ability to connect with

the performer and the work?” The audience's responses suggested that on some level I was able to include the viewer in the kinesthetic and perceptual experience of the performers. In response to a moment in the solo where “Dominguez thrusts her whole body into a wave goodbye, her knees buckling inward and face and blonde hair flying through the air” (Ford), many respondents expressed a physical urge to participate in the dance. One respondent confessed, in “the solo when [Francesca was] dancing I felt called to join [her]”, another noted an involuntary impulse to physically respond during “the final moment in solo when Francesca waved - I really wanted to wave back”. Answers such as these proved to me that the work transcended passive observation by stimulating in spectators an appetite for physical participation, condensing the gap of experience between ‘doer’ and ‘viewer’. In crafting the solo I leaned more heavily on socially relatable gestural motifs like waving or scribbling to guide the work, and as such, the questionnaire responses overwhelmingly described moments of connection to the simplest moments from the solo. Out of 118 questionnaires returned, 63 of them described either specific moments performed by the solo artist, or recalled their own experiences as a spectator spurred by witnessing the solo.

As a choreographer I often hear the soundscapes I imagine for the work, only after the movement is realized. For *Galvanizing Steel*, I built and mastered the hour-long sound score by splicing together small clips of songs and idiosyncratic noises. Some of the sonic elements that I used to create the score for the whole show were dungeon doors creaking open, breathing, wind, a pencil writing on paper, captured live or gathered from sound effect libraries. The dynamics of the music shifted from a calm, ambient environment through a repetitive pounding rhythmicity, and finally culminating into a settling cycle of inhales and exhales. In considering the feeling journey of the spectators throughout the show, my initial intent was to stimulate the neural

systems of the audience both through the increasing tempos and sudden contrasts of texture and overlay. Interludes between each dance section served as a kind of sonic glue for the evening as a whole. In crafting the sounds score after the movement was mostly specified, I could let the dance speak first and then adjust the sound to best serve the movement.

Exquisite is the Individual

Almost immediately after the show, a dearly respected dance artist approached and shared perhaps the most meaningful feedback I received on the event. He expressed deep admiration for the choreographic craft and vision but admitted that what truly set the evening apart for him was the safe and open environment that was crafted to allow each dancer to take risks and communicate something meaningful yet individual. He communicated that he had witnessed a level of risk and vulnerability that can only be achieved in both a very safe and an extraordinarily rigorous creative process. This comment struck a chord with me, because the care and tenderness we built as a team had always felt most important to me.

At the top of the hierarchy of my values is drawing out certain qualities that are seemingly hidden or obscured in each performer. Over the course of my embodied research thus far, there is nothing that inspires me more than the dancers in front of me in all their glorious individuality: what they are going through, how they see themselves with respect to others, how they see themselves outside of what others may perceive them to be. This is the fuel that guided my most critical decisions made throughout the creative process. In prioritizing the pedagogy of the creative process, we as a team were able to collectively unleash the politics of the personal, and shine a light on the private and personal intricacies of each dancer as a conduit to share the human condition. The term ‘politics of the personal’ emerged in the 1950’s as part of

second-wave feminism and the student movement, and shed light on the fact that the larger political structures which surround us, inherently underscore our personal experiences. It was during this epoch that modern dance began to re-write the dancer as a free and independent body with agency and identity. My pedagogical choice-making inside the creative process is situated in relation to this political progression.

In the choreographic process I maintain a specific interest in how the dancers are working, rather than what the dancers are doing. This manifests itself in an acute attention towards their minds, and how they are considering the movement rather than merely what shapes their bodies are making. My creative process is predominantly a learning space with an imperative to study and know the dancers in the room as people, not just performers. My work undoubtedly has a specific aesthetic, though it was clear to me I would need to train the dancers' minds in how to think and work inside a unified lexicon of movement and performance. This way of working reflects equity-based practices in education in which information is culturally relevant and student centered. I'm intrigued by the notion that performers and students alike are not empty vessels into which we pour information, nor simply pliant repeaters of movements crafted by a choreographer. Rather, they are each exquisite individuals who can be met where they are, and respect be respected for what they know. In this model we can forge something new together.

This notion of recognizing each performer as a multifaceted individual, and studying who they are as an integral part of the creative process, bears many similarities to the work of Pina Bausch. In an documentary produced by Kathryn Sullivan, one dancer recalled that Bausch made a "spectacle, of the many little worlds of everyday human existence" and painted a portrait of humanity in which human practices of mundanity, heroism, and agony all had a safe space to be

researched and recognized (Sullivan, 78). From the first day of rehearsals for *Galvanizing Steel*, I invited the dancers to share and bring in their personal experiences from the world outside, and when asked early on what the meaning of our work was, I was transparent in establishing that we could only uncover that answer through time and experience being interconnected with one another. Each performer was invested in the creation of the event in a truly remarkable way. Despite complicated schedules, I saw them bring a unique and vulnerable side of themselves to every rehearsal. Each one offered an indispensable quality to the process: Sophia Stephenopolous, a meticulously trained ballet dancer, eagerly pushed the boundaries of her comfort zone at any opportunity to try something new or potentially daunting. Oren Yari, a naturally gifted mover with no formal dance training in eurocentric dance forms, embodied an inspirational capacity for curiosity, and an indiscriminate passion for movement of all kinds. Jose Ozuna, a talented and established professional singer, dancer, actor, and teacher, was a natural-born leader with a humble yet piercingly captivating performance energy. Aieyla Santaella, an accomplished hip-hop dancer, who sponges up new information with a sublime curiosity, was never afraid to ask hard questions and stand up for what she believed in. Lynda Senisi, an highly experienced performer who naturally comes to life on stage, exuded a presence in rehearsal that instilled warmth and refuge to all who surrounded her. It is the qualities and experiences of these five dancers that enabled my intuitive choices throughout the creative process. This work at its core was about the significantly different, but equally powerful experiences that each dancer brought into the studio and how they navigated their differences to convey the sense of community shared amongst one another.

Explaining the Inexplicable

I am intrigued and awe-struck when a performance is slightly outside the range of linguistic description. Part of the innate beauty of dance is that in the act of interpretation we must traverse back and forth between the realm of physical experience and the realm of language. In my choreographic processes, I find myself trying to illustrate movement behaviors where I feel I don't have the right words to articulate what I'm looking for. According to Martin, this lack of verbal articulation is the very substance of which dance is made: "if the message of a dance could be communicated through mere words, Martin reasoned, what use was there for movement?" (Burke, 26). I revel in creating compelling choreographic instances that feel evocative of a particular feeling or interaction I have experienced, but one that I can't accurately put into words.

Phenomenology holds "that philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being" (Fraleigh, 11). Phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry is the theory whereby existing cannot be separated from interpreting, because they are fundamentally interconnected. Precognitive experience is inherent to what one brings into the studio and theater as an existing being in the world. Inside my creative process, I approach movement generation through suggesting, subverting, or alluding to an idea, without directly describing or pointing to the reference. I then assume that the viewers will complete the actual performance event in their process of responding.

In the realm of hermeneutic phenomenology, the term horizon refers to the meeting point where the interpretations intersect with lived time (Fraleigh, 172). It is often said that dance is fleeting because the moment it happens it disappears before our eyes. However, one could also say the same of life because every present moment when realized is already in the past. I value

the underpinnings of hermeneutics as a center of my work because I believe that the lived experience of the dancer and the viewer is intertwined within the art form itself. Through the use of hermeneutic phenomenology, my creative work can be acutely examined because ‘interpretation,’ in this system of thought, reaches beyond a stabilization of meaning, and encourages a more comprehensive engagement with a self-constructed meaning.

I realize that much of what leaves a lasting impression on me isn’t any one particular contained artwork but rather a subconscious archive of images and interactions. What most drives my creativity is a fascination with everyday mundanities that become realized inside of an art work. Art becomes a journey or effort to reveal to the world that even seemingly strange occurrences can be inspirational in their own idiosyncratic way. Intuition holds hands with inspiration and if we can accept that inspiration can come from the mundane then, we tap into a deepened world of beauty.

When Does the Art End?

The challenge of welcoming a live audience during an ongoing pandemic in the 21st century is not lost on me. In the days leading up to the show it became of paramount importance that I thoughtfully designed how the show would transition from performance into post-show reception. In the current interpersonal landscape where social anxiety may have been high due to almost two years of self-isolation, I wanted to provide support and guidance for the audience on how to maneuver socially in the moments following the show. I addressed this with the questionnaire, aiming to give them a sense of purpose in the moments following the performance. I also felt that the specific questions could provide a framework to inspire

conversation among patrons. The result of this post-show culling of responses resulted in most of the guests staying in the space to engage freely and socially in the reception.

My emphasis on creating space for dialogue after the performance was aligned with Phelan's analysis of artist Sophie Calle's research which suggests "that the descriptions and memories of the [work of art] constitute their continuing 'presence,' despite the absence of the [work of art] itself. Calle gestures toward a notion of the interactive exchange between the art object and the viewer" (Phelan, 1). Encouraging and offering space for post-show discussions is a mechanism to deepen the meaning and presence of the work itself. My agenda with these questions was to welcome the audience to the notion they could attribute their own meaning to the work independent of any preconceived significances. For some spectators, the very existence of a questionnaire was enough to spark their interest and participation, and they were able to describe moments that evoked a memory or a personal narrative within them. If the 'art' is in essence the interpretation of the work, and this interpretation percolates in the aftermath of the performance, then where is the boundary between the 'art' and life?

The Aesthetics of the Form

Upon encountering John Martin's book *Dance in Theory*, all of the seemingly unrelated facets of my creative process seemed to align. His writing and thinking changed the way I create and observe dance. "Martin [stood by] a desire to prevent a 'spectacular' art like ballet from blinding the audiences to the merits of the 'expressional' art of modern dance" (Martin, 50–Dance in Theory). Throughout my choreographic processes, I have always prioritized humanistic tasks as the impetus and initiation for the movement generation. I view ballet culture as striving to transcend human coordination and aiming to display a vocabulary and virtuosity

through trained affectation and focus on the physical capacities of the human body. I find that there is a level of effort displayed or exposed in contemporary work that contrasts the balletic aim to appear effortless, and oftentimes ethereal, and to mask the real physical efforts of the movement. In this view, contemporary dance and ballet serve as contrasting ways of constructing movement towards aesthetic ends. If modern dance aesthetic extrapolates toward effort, it assumes that there is a “familiar sympathetic muscular strain we feel when we watch someone lift a tremendous weight or carry a staggering burden. ‘It makes me ache to watch him!’ is the customary phrase” (Martin, 18–Dance in Theory). It is sometimes assumed that ballet is otherworldly and ethereal and therefore potentially less relatable, whereas contemporary dance is fixated on the effort and the grit of physical exertion. As a contemporary choreographer I aim to brandish physical exertion.

I understand ‘expressional’ dance as amplifying humanistic tasks as simple as trying to touch something just beyond reach. My choreographic choices aim to viscerally provoke my audience’s kinesthetic experience in relation to the work they are viewing. I long to share the corporeal sensations of the performers with the audience in order to draw the two binaries closer together. I believe that a task that is relatable or reminiscent of everyday life experiences, like scribbling with a pencil or waving hello, is more likely to evoke an internal kinesthetic response because it exists more closely within their realm of experience. At the same time, I engage the dancers in supremely challenging physical tasks. Martin describes that the audience’s “responses need not be and are often not, overt; instead the response may be entirely a matter of inner mimicry” (Martin, 22–Dance in Theory). My goal as a choreographer is to achieve a sense of inner mimicry from the audience rather than a perception of a narrative, and to encourage audience members to imagine the physical experience that the performers are undergoing. In

order to incite the audience into kinesthetic experience, alongside the performers, I employ emotionally relatable images steeped in feelings of loss, resilience, intimacy, and vulnerability. By challenging the performers to uncover these emotions, I strive to reconfigure the use of concepts in dance to encompass difficult but unifying commonalities of the human condition.

Embodied Conclusion

In a traditional concert dance setting, the two most essential actions are watching and doing, and they are divided in a distinct way that separates the stage and the audience. If we consider that our corporeal senses for input are heightened when our body is also in a more active state, then we can start to blend and blur the boundaries between audience and performers. In order to break from tradition and move forward in a new way, my thesis work created a landscape where the environment of the audience was an element that I considered with substantial weight. This work aimed to create a framework for how to offer performance experiences that give the audience a heightened corporeal sense of what transpires physically in the performers.

If our intention as choreographers is for the audience to connect cognitively or emotionally to the creative work, and if we consider embodied cognition and the fact that what is going on in the brain integrally depends on what is happening in the body, then we should also prioritize physically situating the audience as central within the choreography or design of the work. *Galvanizing Steel* invited the audience to share the space emotionally, cognitively, and physically with the performers because I do, indeed, believe the above. I propose that professional and emerging choreographers alike can transcend the traditional dance theater

paradigm in a way that elevates the empathy and intimacy we all crave as human beings in an uncertain world.

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Master of Fine Arts in Dance Hunter College

The City University of New York

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Appendices

I. Audience Questionnaire

Thank you for joining us tonight. We're grateful for your presence and would be honored if you could share some of your thoughts with us.

1. How would you describe your relationship to the experience of viewing dance?
2. Do any of the following reflect your experiences as a viewer? (please answer in percentages for each)
 - A. I watch and they perform (like the sun shining on a table) ____ %
 - B. I concentrate my intellectual and analytical powers to discern what it means (like reading for comprehension) ____ %
 - C. I view the work within the context of my unique experiences (like hiking a trail) ____ %
 - D. Other:
3. Can you recall a moment in the evening that resonated within you? If so, can you describe what was happening and how it made you feel?
4. Are there parts of your personal background that influence your individual relationship to this dance viewing experience?

II. Video Documents

Because this project was deeply invested in the liveness the videos are insufficient documentation. Passwords to these films are available upon request.

Trio: That Which Supports Us: <https://vimeo.com/700237331/a1e0065f05>

Duet: Just Look The Other Way: <https://vimeo.com/704987018/a1d04d2cb8>

Solo: Reaching Out From Underneath: <https://vimeo.com/704987018/a1d04d2cb8>