

Absurding the Absurd:
Use and Transformation as Resistance in Performance

by

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A B S T R A C T

As someone who has sought intellectual shelter in academia during the lockdown period of a global pandemic, I have used this experience of physical, geographical, and at times emotional distance from my life as a contemporary dance artist to reevaluate and question the art form's use. Central to my research is Sara Ahmed's book, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (2019), which offers a critical framework, particularly her proposal of queer use, which I apply to my own specific artistic inquiries as I follow the often complicated yet potentially useful idea of the absurd. I problematize the absurd's largely white and male-dominated past; however, I focus on adding discourse to methods and manifestations of the absurd beyond theatre-centric canons, to works of dance where use of the absurd can generate ways of being against the dominant sense as forms of resistance capable of transformative action and meaning-making. In this way I apply queer use to the absurd itself. I weave through *This Bridge Called My Ass* (2019) by Miguel Gutierrez, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) by Maya Deren, *fantasylover* (2018) by Alyssa Martin, *Sisyphus / Trans / Form* (2019) by Dimitris Papaioannou, and *Café Müller* (1978) by Pina Bausch. Through a feminist lens and Ahmed's queer use, I explore what it is about these works that engage in some form of repetition, of queer use of objects, spaces, and bodies, and of the absurd as both a feeling and a verb that subverts expectations and seeks a transformation of perception.

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INTRODUCTION

It has been well over a year since I last moved with other people in a rehearsal studio. I sit somewhat uncomfortably in a now vastly more stationary body that has weathered its longest period of inactivity during this global pandemic, confined to a city undergoing yet another needed lockdown. As I stare frontally at my screen with a slight hunch in my far-from-ergonomic chair, I consider my future as a Canadian dancer and choreographer (practicing within the field of what can broadly be considered contemporary dance), and I often catch myself leaning into the existential dread of the moment, wondering “what’s the use?!” Sara Ahmed’s book, *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use* (2019), highlights this very question as expressed by some of Virginia Woolf’s female characters: “The question ‘what’s the use?’ allows Woolf to throw life up as a question, to ask about the point of *anything* by asking about the point of *something*” (3). Feeling out of touch with my body and being out of work, I might really be asking what is *my* use. In this state of being an unused dancer, the use of my art form and the use of my body and its societal value are jeopardized. When you are lacking use, and “when the world is not used to you, when you appear as unusual, use becomes what you question” (Ahmed 3). Following Ahmed’s lead, questioning use quickly extends to the matter of “Who gets to use what?” (7). Having distance from an art form can offer perspective to consider the spaces the art form exists within; to many, the distance experienced from these privileged, elitist spaces existed long before the pandemic, be it overtly or covertly.¹ The question of use also extends beyond the physicality of spaces, from the where to the how, to question the very ontology of the work: what it is we do, how we do it, and how can we make it better. While my research is far from

¹ Many artists, especially Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour, and folks with disabilities, have been exposing and highlighting systemic barriers (not limited to) physical and financial accessibility issues, the power held by presenters and the granting systems, inherent structural racism in the arts, etc.

presenting these answers, what I did, to borrow Ahmed's metaphor, is walk along the path Ahmed carved out before me to question use, and then apply these offerings to my own artistic inquiries as I followed the often dark yet potentially useful idea of the absurd.

I aim to question the absurd and problematize how its use has gradually become dominated by an existentialism grounded in the Theatre of the Absurd to express the meaninglessness of the human condition.² I will follow instead the absurd's lesser trod path, away from this categorization of the theatre-centric canon, towards a performative context in which its use could render assumptions meaningless to carve space for new meaning-making. Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* (1949), "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301), and it is this series of repetitive performative acts of becoming, generating logics of being, that I will explore and challenge in the context of the environments we live in and how they too come with learned ways of being, designating how we are to exist relationally within these constructs. I will consider environments as having the potential to define and be redefined by performative encounters engaging with the absurd.

Central to my research has been Ahmed's notion of queer use, which she explains as "how things can be used in ways other than how they were intended to be used or by those other than for whom they were intended" (44). In other words, "To queer use is... to bring to the front what ordinarily recedes to the background... to make use strange" (Ahmed 198).³ Ahmed offers examples, like a mailbox that now houses a nest of birds, acting as a reminder of subversion: "Just because something comes to exist for a purpose, we should not confuse what it was intended for with what it is or can be" (35). We are sculpted by the spaces we inhabit and the

² See Esslin.

³ Ahmed notes, and I too do not want to overlook the significance, that "Queer use has also been used to refer to how those who identify as queer make use of space" (200). She is using the word queer not exclusionary of identity, but primarily as indicating difference.

objects within them, and Ahmed presents the framework of queer use as an alternative way of thinking, living, and being.

In this paper, I will look to the roots of the absurd; I will delve into its largely white and male-dominated past; and I will consider the absurdity of the absurd as it relates to contemporary dance. I will question how rules and logics of spaces and objects are established, how people are coded to exist differently in physical relation to space, and how these spaces are coded for specific outcomes. I will weave through a collection of works by Miguel Gutierrez, Maya Deren, Alyssa Martin, Dimitris Papaioannou, and Pina Bausch. Through a feminist lens and Ahmed's queer use, I will contemplate what it is about their select works that engage in some form of repetition, of queer use of objects, spaces, and bodies, and of the absurd that seeks a transformation of perception.

The repetition of use, as Ahmed explains, has the potential to work transformatively to weaken or strengthen what it is that is being used. An email with an abundance of exclamation marks is an example of "how the overuse of emphasis can stop an emphasis from working" (Ahmed 17), and, similarly, "Using a knife affects the knife; it can make the knife less sharp" (Ahmed 22). When we dance a particular movement, we are practicing and patterning through repetition, which either results in a strengthening of the body and a more organic embodiment of the movement, or in a wearing down of the muscles and joints, exposing our bodies to injury through overuse. A dancer in extreme use is susceptible to burnout and injury; however, this extreme use could also lead them from one experience of artistic growth to another, opening more and more doors, snowballing the dancer into high demand, a commodity, an object of use, while other lesser-used dancers fade. I use the phrase *used* dancer deliberately, in part sarcastically, and in part with extreme seriousness. The repetition of use also carries the potential

for creating problematic dominants, which often bring forms of exclusion, of added labor to exist differently and find use in other ways. However, as I look to the case studies, I will explore how the repetition of the incongruous can destabilize the “neutral,” and how the use of the absurd can generate ways of being against the dominant sense. I will note how the body changes the perception or assumptions of its environment or how these spaces change the perception or functions of the body to subvert expectations and find redefinition in a performative context. I hope to add discourse to methods and manifestations of the absurd beyond theatre-centric canons, but rather to works of dance. In this way I propose to apply queer use to the absurd itself.

A B S U R D I S T , A B S U R D I S M , A B S U R D

To say that something is absurd is not uncommon in everyday speech. I’ve used the word comfortably to describe many moments in works of contemporary dance; however, when it comes down to pinpointing what this word truly means in the context of this artistic milieu, it seems far more complex a notion: “it is only when we start to wonder and to question it *again*, what ‘it’ really is, that the absurd becomes interesting, fascinating and indeed a very frustrating notion” (Rinhaug 44). So, what is the absurd? When I bring this question to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is clear how much Martin Esslin’s idea of the Theatre of the Absurd has infiltrated its definition, which makes a detached use of the word in other performance contexts a challenge.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides two definitions for absurdism: “An illogical, incongruous, or ridiculous thing” (“absurdism,” *n.* 1.), and “The philosophy, first propounded by Albert Camus, that human beings exist in a purposeless, chaotic universe in which attempts to find meaning are futile. Cf. *Theatre of the Absurd*” (“absurdism,” *n.* 2.). The noun absurdist has

two definitions: “A person who behaves in an illogical or absurd manner” (“absurdist,” *n.* A.1.), and “A writer, performer, etc. whose work presents an audience... with absurdities, typically in portraying the futility of human struggle in a senseless and inexplicable world; *esp.* a writer or proponent of absurdist drama” (“absurdist,” *n.* A.2.). There is one adjective: “Relating to the perceived futility and senselessness of human life; (also) of, relating to, or characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd” (“absurdist,” *adj.* B.). When it comes to the word absurd, the etymology, which is dated to the late fourteenth century, is interesting: “unreasonable, contrary to common sense” (“absurd,” *adj.* and *n.* Etymology). I will return to the etymology and the significance of “unreasonable” placed next to “contrary to common sense,” but first, the noun has three definitions: “That which is absurd” (“absurd,” *n.* B.1.a.), “The chaotic and purposeless nature of the universe, and the futility of human attempts to make sense of it. Cf. *Theatre of the Absurd*” (“absurd,” *n.* B.1.b.), and “An unreasonable thing, act, or statement” (“absurd,” *n.* B.2.). There are several adjective definitions: “Causing amusement or derision; ridiculous, silly” (“absurd,” *adj.* A.3.), a musical reference, “Inharmonious, jarring, out of tune” (“absurd,” *adj.* 2.), and “Of a person: acting in an incongruous, unreasonable, or illogical manner” (“absurd,” *adj.* 1.b.). The one I would particularly like to foreground is “Of a thing: against or without reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical” (“absurd,” *adj.* A.1.a.). As propriety is an adherence to socially acceptable or conventional rules of behaviour, the absurd can be considered as being *against* propriety, *against* conforming to conventional behaviours, *against* common sense, which brings us back once more to the etymology: *contrary* to common sense. This does not make the absurd necessarily illogical, or *without* reason. The absurd can be the intentional resistance *against* the dominant sense, reason, or logic of behaviour and way of being.

A resistance of the dominant logic, of the assumptions we carry, of what is coded into uses and spaces, is central to my interest in the absurd. Esslin's book does acknowledge the same dictionary definitions, as well as what he deems the absurd's "common" usage to "simply mean 'ridiculous'... this is not the sense in which Camus uses the word, and in which it is used when we speak of the Theatre of the Absurd" (23). For context, in comparison with the fourteenth-century etymology, Albert Camus's use of the word only came into effect in 1942 in his work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It could, however, be argued that Esslin's chosen plays do also engage with the absurd in keeping with the definition I am highlighting in that there are logics at play, though rarely what could be considered common logics. For example, in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*:

ESTRAGON Let's go.

VLADIMIR We can't.

ESTRAGON Why not?

VLADIMIR We're waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON Ah! (61).

That's a logic. The dominant logic would be to acknowledge Godot is not coming, and to leave, but their argument operates on an alternative logic, ultimately in resistance to common sense; Beckett's works "seem to be insisting on this nonsensical sense" (Rinhaug 51). Alternatively, in my own workshopped piece, *themselves*, we developed something we called logic lies, which were truths on the inside operating against the dominant logic. For example, one dancer would stare at a metal doorknob for an extended period of time and might say, "I did it!" (Kerson *themselves* 00:37:42-00:39:02) but the door would remain closed. The dancer was working on

remembering earlier when she allowed the metal to permeate her flesh with cold, which is not the primary use of the door.

Esslin continued to follow the path he felt Camus walked, and his canonization and classification of the works increased the frequency of this path being travelled until other pathways faded in comparison; he made a thing out of near nothing from use. As Ahmed reminds us, “when things are used repeatedly in a certain way it becomes harder for things to be used in other ways. Those for whom use is harder are trying to use things in other ways” (204). To queer dominant use is hard, but to do so has potential “to inherit a feminist and queer project of living differently” (Ahmed 223), one that I feel is particularly important with the absurd: to relinquish its nihilism and unleash its powers for transformative meaning-making. Yet before I venture into the absurd’s potential queer use, I will take another page from Ahmed: “Before you dismantle a house, you need to know how it is built, which means learning about use, learning from how the tools have been used” (19). With that in mind, I will look at how this word became dominated predominantly by white men.

THE WHITE MALE NEUTRAL

Martin Esslin’s 1961 published study labelled a group of artists under his coined terminology, the Theatre of the Absurd.⁴ While Esslin believes a “sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition is, broadly speaking, the theme of the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, and the other writers” (23-24), it is not just this shared thematic sensibility that intrigues Esslin. He places emphasis on the form in which the ideas are

⁴ Esslin’s grouping was of his own making, rather than a deliberate choice of the artists being labelled. One such artist, Edward Albee, states that “unless it is understood that the playwrights... represent a group only in the sense that they seem to be doing something of the same thing in vaguely similar ways at approximately the same time... then the labeling itself will be more absurd than the label.”

expressed: “the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought” (24) and by means of “a method that is essentially polyphonic; they confront their audience with an organized structure of statements and images that interpenetrate each other and that must be apprehended in their totality” (45). Aino Rinhaug is one of the many voices questioning Esslin’s all-male group, and she extends her questioning of the absurd’s male domination to a broader terrain of writers: the “scene was and is dominated by men as different as Camus, Sartre, Ionesco, Adamov, Genet and Beckett, or by Kafka, Joyce, Celan, Borges, Havel, Brecht, Pinter, Eliot and Pound, to name only a few” (45).

Susan Hennessy is another scholar problematizing the absurd’s white male domination, particularly in terms of whose theoretical writings we read these works through. Hennessy argues, “if we revisit Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* we can gain fresh insight into Beckett’s construction of his female characters (who, like Beauvoir, tend to be overlooked)... her theories can be applied to Beckett just as readily as those of her male existentialist counterparts” (65). Beauvoir was often overshadowed by her partner Jean-Paul Sartre with “the sexist assumption that she was merely Sartre’s philosophical disciple” (qtd. in Hennessy 66). Through a reading of Beckett’s *Happy Days* (1961) and using Beauvoir’s insights, Hennessy focuses “on phenomenological modes of being unique to Beckett’s women; particularly as the aforementioned male existentialists have a tendency to write about the human experience from their own (male) perspectives and, broadly speaking, the history of Beckett criticism is... directed by philosophical movements dominated by men” (66). The central character, Winnie, trapped to her waist in Act I and to her neck in Act II by a mound of earth, “attempts to transcend herself as object... and demonstrates what it means, for her, to ‘become’ a woman” (Hennessy

65). Hennessy makes clear that while it may be a refreshing change to read female characters in the Theatre of the Absurd canon through a feminist lens, she in no way views Beckett as a feminist writer, noting Winnie is a mere “mouthpiece for Beckett, a male writer, and she moves and speaks as a marionette who animates *his* preconceived notions of femininity” (71).

With a list of male playwrights and theorists attached to the Theatre of the Absurd, one might almost begin to wonder, “is there something in the nature of the absurd experience that attracts *men* to write about it, whilst women do not seem to have the same urge” (Rinhaug 45). I don’t think so. The very nature of canons creates use and more use, and “becoming used can refer to how an activity has become customary. A history of use is a history of becoming natural” (Ahmed 41), and this is dangerous, as it often generates incredibly *white* male canons. Who feels they have the right to fix a label and to canonize? As my research delved into the works of influential choreographer Pina Bausch and her methodologies working with the company Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, I was struck by the amount of scholarship tying her to Beckett, as well as to Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud.⁵ Beckettian parallels drawn by scholars include a compositional strategy that “repeatedly dislodges ontological certainty” (Cody 125), and an “Illogicality, non-linearity and a lack of resolution... the viewer is continually met with ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning.... [with an] overarching sense of futility” (Weir 68) and plenty of “Obsessive iterations of meaningless behaviour” (Weir 81). The connections linking Bausch to Brecht primarily highlight use of “montage, V-effect [Verfremdungseffekt], and separation of music and literary concept in order to jar their audiences” (Arendell 41), while those from Bausch to Artaud focus on “the use of violence to make critical social commentary”

⁵ See Arendell, Climenhaga Introduction, Cody, Price, and Weir, though this is most likely an incomplete list. The degree to which each scholar associates or emphasizes the necessity of said association from Bausch to Beckett, Brecht, or Artaud is varied.

(Arendell 60). But perhaps most troubling for me are the connections linking Bausch to Artaud for her devaluation of text: her work engages “the body as the nexus of the nonlogocentric imaginary” (Price 323). This particular article by David W. Price goes as far as to state that “an understanding of *Tanztheater* [is] situated between the writing of Brecht and Artaud, and any further examination of Bausch should acknowledge these contending elements in her work” (331). Of course, there are parallels one could draw between Bausch and these men, but if arguing for a “nonlogocentric imaginary” as situating Bausch’s work in the context of Artaud, where is the cry for Artaud’s work to be situated in the context of any or all (nonlogocentric) dance works that existed long before him?⁶ To Price’s proposal, I am extending a hearty no thank you.

Rinhaug proposes to consider the male-dominated canonization of the Theatre of the Absurd concretely: “If we can accept the *facticity* of the absurd, then we are also able to move on to a mapping of that fact in terms of space, site or terrain” (44). She goes on to question “What exactly does it entail to dominate the absurd, that is, dominate a terrain which does not make sense?” (Rinhaug 51). This insistence “on naming that which cannot be named” (Rinhaug 51) carries particular resonance for me, a dancer. Rinhaug defines the human condition through the absurd “as emptied of meaning and abandoned, given that the relation between those involved... has become disrupted, out of tune, or even a tiny bit silly” (44). This argument is something I would like to push back on, as I believe it assumes that the normative, before the use of the absurd, was working. I question, in a broken world, can the absurd, the “disharmonious silliness” (Rinhaug 44), be used to shake up what isn’t working, to repair and offer agency and meaning for humanity through performance?

⁶ See Savarese and Fowler for a look into the influence of Balinese dance on Artaud.

In one final foray into the canonization dominating the sense of the word absurd, I look again to Ahmed for guidance: “Usability can thus be reframed as a question of accessibility: it is not just *whether* an object or environment can be used but *who* can use an object or environment *given* how it has been designed and who cannot” (59). In my previous research into Beckett and the Beckett Estate’s wildly inconsistent stance on objecting to stagings of his works,⁷ as well as the varied outcomes from court cases, I quickly learned that there is no one way the Estate’s disapproval is disseminated: legal action, threat of legal action, mediation, public condemnation, mandatory program disclaimers such as “Samuel Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* for five male characters and has never approved otherwise” (Bordewijk 151), mandatory pre-show verbal disclaimers, cancelled productions, cancelled future productions, and bans for life (that often aren’t upheld). However, I found one particular example of policing how his works “should” be done especially revealing. Despite some inaccuracies documenting the legal circumstances surrounding one particular production of *Waiting for Godot*, which was directed by Joy Zinoman in 1998 at Studio Theatre in Washington, D.C. and staged with Black lead actors,⁸ the Beckett Estate seemed to object to there being “an ‘injection of race’ into the play, according to George Borchardt” (Hartley 142). In reference to the production’s contested improvised dialogue, Zinoman calls upon the actual stage directions which state, “the characters should ‘turn toward the auditorium’ ... or that ‘Vladimir and Estragon protest violently’” (qtd. in Hartley 143). Zinoman offers a critically important point: any interpretation of generic stage directions is certainly as valid as any other in this universal play. With stage directions like “*Vladimir and*

⁷ See Kerson “The Absurdist’s Myth” for Beckett and the Beckett Estate’s history policing his works, particularly the legal scruffles concerning his ban on women in *Waiting for Godot*.

⁸ Peter Marks’s review in *The New York Times* brought legal attention to Zinoman, yet he says the production “performed a vital service, liberating ‘Waiting for Godot’ from the airlessness and pretension that often afflict productions of Beckett. The Studio Theater revival is an enthusiastic vote in favor of a great playwright’s lasting relevance.” See Ruble for more on Zinoman’s production and the legal conflict.

Estragon protest violently” (Beckett 35) or “*General outcry*” (Beckett 35), Zinoman clearly has a point. In addition to myths learned through performance memories that silently police how Beckett “should” be done, there is an unspoken “right” way to perform stage directions that looks suspiciously white and male. Playing into the larger pattern of Beckett’s works being diligently “prescriptive about which bodies appeared and how they behaved in his work” (O’Gorman 83), this example demonstrates that “When it comes to race in casting, there is a history of the interventions’ assuming that race is a characteristic only nonwhite people possess” (Hartley 142). To be devoid of any injection of meaning, to keep the play at its most neutral, to be viewed with a clean slate, what the Beckett Estate is indirectly saying is that the body needs to be a white cisgender male. That is Western society’s neutral. A refusal to accept any other body acting in the roles of *Waiting for Godot* is an admission and adherence to this viewpoint.

Ahmed’s mailbox that housed a nest of birds “is a queer teacher. It teaches us that it is possible for those deemed strangers or foreigners to take up residence in spaces that have been assumed as belonging to others, as being for others to use” (228). It should be noted that my research into the absurd involves an embodied engagement with this divisive notion. I, as a white, cisgender, non-disabled woman live a privileged existence. My body’s engagement with the absurd only minimally disrupts its white male dominance. My body does not carry the weight of a preconceived gaze to the extent that the bodies of many Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour experience. It is my wish and commitment that if further research were to be conducted over a longer time period and under circumstances outside of the pandemic’s restrictions, this work would extend well beyond myself to a diverse population engaging in conversations and

physical explorations.⁹ I acknowledge that my ability to venture into the terrain of the absurd is vastly less contextually complicated than for others. I am not prescribing such a venture, but hope that my offering can be of use. For now, I'd like to turn away from the dominant, and towards those leading the path to challenge the problems of the white male neutral.

DISRUPTING NEUTRALITY

American choreographer Miguel Gutierrez wrote a 2018 article in *BOMB Magazine* titled, "Does Abstraction Belong to White People?" in which he critiques abstraction as a privileged domain, as enumerated by poignant anecdotes from his personal experience navigating the contemporary dance scene. Though separate ideas, both abstraction and the absurd (perhaps indirectly yet fundamentally) rely upon a problematic normative from which they diverge. At a roundtable event hosted by Wexner Center for the Arts in 2020, Gutierrez spoke further on abstraction: "coming up in the world of dance, there were these kind of binaries... abstraction, which is like this thing, this expression of pure form... and then if an artist of colour does a performance it is inherently imbued with a content about identity" ("Does Abstraction" 01:03:04-01:03:27). This is a central crux in the ongoing conversations about abstraction in dance, that "the white artist can somehow be not accountable to whiteness as an identity, because it is held as either neutral... or universal" ("Does Abstraction" 01:03:29-01:03:47). The idea of neutral, as this paper has emphasized, is a problem and a mere construct built by whatever the dominant force may be, the path most explored that gets perpetuated and prioritized as other paths fade.

⁹ Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson emphasizes the need to amplify the knowledge from Black female movers and scholars: "surely black women in choreographic motion would invite a different set of questions around enactment.... A black feminist dance reading would also reserve the head of the analytical table for the black woman in motion" (167).

Dance terminology itself often employs a sense of neutral (for example, neutral stance, neutral gaze, neutral pelvis), to which Gutierrez notes, “everything is a construction, that sort of notion of the walk as being like this neutral, efficiency, you know, it’s like an idea of itself” (“Does Abstraction” 01:08:22-01:08:36). I spent many of my adult years searching for my neutral pelvis not knowing the one I had was working just fine. This sense of estranging parts of our bodies from our selves is unnecessarily prevalent. The notion of a neutral body has unacceptable connotations. In response to seeing a William Eggleston exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gutierrez found the intentional refusal of the plaques to directly address the photographs they corresponded to as provocative: “Who has the right not to explain themselves? The people who don’t have to. The ones whose subjectivities have been naturalized” (Gutierrez “Does Abstraction”).

Obviously Gutierrez does not believe abstraction can *belong* to someone: “I was sort of contending with the ways I had aligned myself with a predominantly white avant-garde, and thinking about the ways in which I had absorbed and ‘naturalized’ even literally embodied within myself those values.... Where does Latinidad begin and end in relationship to these questions?” (“Does Abstraction” 01:05:29-01:05:58). Gutierrez’s queer use for abstraction challenges who is regularly able to engage with the idea, and he brings relevant questions of the white gaze forward: “if you are a Black body or a body of colour... more often than not you are going to be read through the lens of race or ethnicity... if you choose to speak, you’ll probably be expected to speak from a place of testimony” (“Does Abstraction” 01:04:00-01:04:24). He sympathizes that being a minority in an environment compels people to make work directly addressing identity; however, the complexity he feels is that “now you’re owning content, politicized,

racialized content, and the white artist is somehow owning this universal, neutral, abstract space” (“Does Abstraction” 01:04:54-01:05:05).

As Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson states, “black feminism has long taught us that how we are trained to see a black woman is rarely her actual image” (167). Canadian artist Dana Michel engages in useful conversations about her experience as a Black woman in performance, and how she has felt repeated and unwanted collisions with a white gaze throughout her career. Reflecting on her work *Yellow Towel* (2013), Michel recalls that up until that point she “had actually specifically been avoiding dealing with race, very specifically” (“Dana”). She describes experiencing the weight of a patronizing dominance, almost a Beckettian policing: “it was a kind of constant hand on the shoulder no matter what you do, no matter how far you run, that hand is going to be on your shoulder telling you that you’re making Black dance” (“AFTERTALK” 00:56:42-00:56:49). She recalls just wanting to do her work and disliked “being put in any kind of particular box” (“Dana”). Michel jokes she finally decided to say, “Ok, you want black? I’ll give you black” (“Dana”). Michel’s award-winning work can be seen as travelling many paths simultaneously. While it is a direct yet fluid exploration of Black culture, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko enthuses about the questions he was left considering, feeling they were directly addressed in *Yellow Towel*: “Is there such a thing as a black abstractionist aesthetic in live performance? Can the black body exist in live performance without the concern of euro-centric or westernized legibility?” (“Dana”). For Kosoko, the piece was “giving such a clear strong performative proposal to the landscape... to the entire canon” (“Dana”), and he champions the work as poignantly functioning against propriety: it was “dealing with ideals of behavior and what is proper, what is improper, how one should behave in the public space, and more

specifically, how one should *behave* in front of those who are other, or of another nationality” (“Dana”).

To have one’s body read as incongruous within the genre of art you might be engaging is both a troubling and fascinating thought for Gutierrez. He recalls an experience where in preparation for a commissioned work, he gathered a diverse group of artists to research some ideas before taking this research to his commission on dancers in Stockholm, where, in his own words: “I was like, ‘oh shit, everybody’s white’.... I suddenly was faced with this realization that... I had been thinking about something having to do with abstraction and the particular people who are in the rooms and what it was for artists of colour... to be engaging abstract ideas together” (“Does Abstraction” 00:04:25-00:05:09). Even the spaces that house these works have a sense of being steeped in context, and, as Gutierrez says, “this thing about representation in the avant-garde, or the idea of being Latinx within the tradition of the predominantly white avant-garde... is to contend with this kind of sense of being surrounded by whiteness.... It’s a strange thing to feel fringe within a fringe” (“Miguel” 00:08:07-00:08:39). Gutierrez has carved space for himself without compromise in a terrain riddled with notions of whiteness. “Those who are not quite at home — in a body, a discipline, a world — have much to teach us about how things are built, that is to say, have much to teach us about the uses of use” (Ahmed 19). This queer use of the terrain sparked Guisela Latorre to note how Gutierrez and “Latinx artists as well as other artists of colour have breathed new life into the idea of abstraction. What we see in them is a decolonization of abstraction, an understanding that the concept and practice never truly belonged solely to white people and that it was never disconnected from social realities” (“Does Abstraction” 00:38:54-00:39:14). If we can find queer use for what is dominant, the notions of what is dominant or neutral might change, and it is this fluidity of the tool of the absurd as

always having some potential for subversion that I find fascinating. If we use the absurd like a tool, it carries the potential for transformative action not disconnected from identity and meaning-making; like a verb, I propose to consider absurding. With the potential of being used by all, Latorre similarly states of abstraction that it “is not a unitary concept, instead it is a constellation of malleable and situated knowledges that is adaptable to our individual and collective subjectivities” (“Does Abstraction” 00:39:17-00:39:29).

INCONGRUOUS TERRAINS

Miguel Gutierrez’s work *This Bridge Called My Ass* premiered in New York City at the American Realness festival in 2019.¹⁰ It’s titled as “a play on *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, a seminal 1981 anthology of third wave feminist essays... that explores identity and... calls for intersectional awareness” (“Program note” 5). With a cast of six Latinx artists, the work questions the very idea of identity, with “an elusive choreography of obsessive and perverse action within an unstable terrain of bodies, materials, and sound. A formal logic binds the group and propels them to create an ever-transforming world” (“Program note” 5). The work for Gutierrez fluctuates “between specificity, which is to say the undeniable positions we occupy or are thrust into (one way of thinking about identity) and a pull... towards blowing that whole idea open” (“Why Identify”). The piece inhabits the terrain often dominated by the white male avant-garde, while bringing queerness and Latinidad to the forefront.

As the piece begins, there is a logic in operation. The larger first section of the work engages in preparing the space (Gutierrez *This Bridge* 00:00:00-00:52:30). The performers are working on simultaneous tasks that involve clamping bright fabrics to the walls, to the other

¹⁰ To request access to watch Gutierrez’s *This Bridge Called My Ass*, please follow the instructions: chocolatefactorytheater.org/miguel-gutierrez-this-bridge-called-my.

fabrics, and to themselves, while the audience files into the room. There is an immediate use of repetition as the performers use a call and response format to recite traditional *trabalenguas* (tongue twisters); at times they say them in unison, at times as a round (Gutierrez *This Bridge* 00:00:00-00:09:05). Just as factually and methodologically as other logics are at play, they are bringing Latinidad into the work as a task; they are normalizing *trabalenguas* in this space through repeated use. In a reflection on the performance, Latinx artist Taja Will writes, “I watch the audience watch the work. I’m considering the hypervisibility, assumptions, essentializing, and categorizing that might be happening. I wonder through what lens They... saw” (Will). There is power in the destabilization between audiences knowing and not knowing. This destabilization of the gaze is reflected within the work as well, as the performers work mostly with an internal-to-their-actions focus, and it felt as though the audience, placed along the walls of the room, were more like objects or obstacles in the way of the performers, deeply invested in their task (Gutierrez *This Bridge* 00:17:50-00:18:07). However, this is muddied as performers occasionally include an awareness of the audience in their practice of preparing (Gutierrez *This Bridge* 00:12:58-00:13:06). Included or acknowledged perhaps, but to what end? To what use?

Similar shifts of perspective that challenge the gaze are reflected in the costuming, which is in constant flux. Some performers begin partially nude, others wear various forms of lingerie. As they continue the preparing of space, the clothing they wear is in as equal a state of flux as the space they are reconfiguring. We are constantly allowed to see them, their bodies, their flesh, but then once we may be on the verge of subconsciously “knowing,” we are asked to see them anew. Our perception of the performative body is kept in a precarious place, refused a solidified gaze.

The objects amidst the fabrics that are being set up and re-set up differently throughout the space further add to the unstable terrain being constructed. The performers find queer use for the objects in the sense that Ahmed introduced the concept, and queer use in the sense that “queerness is present... as a result of [Gutierrez] being invested in these aspects of his identity. Even with those who didn’t necessarily identify as queer, the other performers’ abilities to understand the codes in the space and the different ethics and possibilities proposed became evident and welcomed” (Huang). The work plays on the stereotype of the hyper-sexualization of Latinx people; it’s “cunning, it’s perhaps messy, a vulgar reclamation of the historical sexualization of Latinx bodies” (Will). One performer suggestively rubs a laptop over their body, employing queer use (Gutierrez *This Bridge* 00:18:20-00:19:07); someone else uses an extension cord to whip a stool held suggestively by another performer (Gutierrez *This Bridge* 00:23:14-00:23:22). Objects like stools and extension cords are equally tethered to the space as are the fabrics and their bodies. Space, objects, clothing, and bodies are formed and reformed, intertwined in the task as they build their unstable world. While the first section may appear chaotic, it isn’t fully. There is a logic in operation. They are in a process of doing, of preparing. The whole work concludes with one very clear transformation of objects, as the small clips used in the first section to tether the fabrics to the walls clip together to form the shape of a small dog, pulled along the floor and lit from underneath with an accompanying voiceover telling us authoritatively, “I am Dog” (Gutierrez *This Bridge* 01:25:18-01:25:19). This godlike figure declares to be all things, even proclaiming “I am god’s Dog, I am god’s Dog’s Dog” (Gutierrez *This Bridge* 01:24:16-01:24:20). These objects are Dog, Dog is everything. Everything is unstable.

However, before we are introduced to Dog, the preparing takes a turn as the performers, operating on a logic internal to the choreography, begin laying out the fabrics onto the floor of the space before beginning a lip-synced telenovela, created and adapted by Gutierrez from existing telenovelas (*This Bridge* 00:52:30-01:21:30). Gutierrez is first of all playing with a form of repetition by quoting these telenovelas and using again what already exists. In bringing this melodramatic genre into a small theatre space, the telenovela is taken out of its context and rendered incongruous. In leaning into the heightened nature of the telenovela's drama, scale is also used to amplify this incongruity between art object and the space it occupies. The audience, after having just seen the first fifty-some minutes of the piece, may not be expecting this tonal shift and the heightened performances. These tropes are "exploited to show how familiar structures contain absurdities that both reveal and celebrate difference" ("Program note" 5).

Gutierrez strongly feels the looming presence of the white avant-garde within which he works. If the terrain of the abstract — and, as I have shown, the terrain of the absurd — have in some way been dominated by the white male "neutral," then Gutierrez generating an "unstable terrain" ("Program note" 5) is the result of an absurding — of objects, of bodies and identity constructs, of space, and of an entire genre. It is as much a critique of the avant-garde as it is a total subversion of its dominance. Gutierrez's queer use of this domain generates a new kind of space: the terrain they have generated is both for their bodies and of their bodies. Coming from the field of contemporary human geography, Derek P. McCormack believes that in moving in "different ways, bodies can 'produce' or generate spaces... the quality of moving bodies contributes to the qualities of the spaces in which these bodies move" (1823). There are "ways in which encounters with dance can work to supplement and extend the spaces of geographical thinking" (McCormack 1825), as moving bodies are spaces unto themselves. For Gutierrez, with

the coded space of both the physical room and the genre, “it felt interesting and important to sort of dive into this kind of a space.... By connecting to the room, by the taking of fabric and clamping it to the wall and then pulling it across the space, we’re sort of like saying, ‘look at all the ways in which we are negotiating space, all the time’” (“Miguel” 00:08:40-00:09:25). With the tethering of colourful fabrics to the literal and figurative white walls, it is a significant moment in the work when these tethered fabrics then become the floor on which they walk, the groundwork to plant their feet and claim the terrain to bring the telenovela into the space.

Filmmaker Maya Deren is another artist whose works and very presence as a creator within a genre destabilizes expectations and perceptions. Her film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), loosely inhabits the terrain of the avant-garde, and though critics would commonly label “the film according to Freudian, surrealist, and other interpretations” (Keller 79-80), Deren herself sought to destabilize these forms of categorization. Even “the film resisted fixity in its meaning” (Keller 80). Working in the intersection of a “male-dominated cinema, [where] woman is presented as what she represents for man” (qtd. in Geller 147) and “in an otherwise masculinist avant-garde art world.... dominant representations of women were met with vehement resistance” (Geller 140) by Deren’s films. Absurding the male gaze, her methods for engaging in the avant-garde “were explicitly gendered” (Geller 141) and against the dominant notions of how to do one’s gender properly: “The representation of the sexual self is specific to Deren’s film experiments because of her own heightened awareness of cinema’s dominant portrayal of Woman, and her unique position as a woman filmmaker” (Geller 156). However, to find queer use, to use differently, can often be more work. As Lauren Rabinovitz explains, “women filmmakers were contained and categorized because the films that they made consistently articulated positions for a *refusal* of the male gaze” (qtd. in Geller 148). Filmmaker

and critic Jonas Mekas dismissed Deren's work "because it cannot evoke universal sympathy" (Geller 148), which is a clear admission to the male neutral. He claimed it lacked "a deeper insight into the human soul, emotions, experiences, as related to the whole rather than abnormal exceptionalities" (qtd. in Geller 148). Beyond just dismissing women from the idea of neutral, these statements challenge any acceptance of female subjectivity within the male-dominated terrain. Standing in clear rejection of such perceptions, "Deren's opposition to cinematic sexual objectification troubles the smooth integration of her work into the canon of either the American avant-garde or European postwar modernism" (Geller 149). Dismissing "Deren to the discursive margins because of the way she complicated categorization is deeply troubling" (Geller 154), and her perceived incongruity to the genre is evident in a deliberate resistance within her work, generating an absurding of time, space, and female subjectivity.

In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Deren herself appears as the central character that we follow (for ease I will refer to her as the Woman). The Woman is returning home to a domestic space, and, particularly for the 1940s, there is nothing incongruous in a woman at home; however, "the domestic space is cinematographically framed to destabilize it. Objects are fetishized" (Geller 143). A stationary knife falls out of a loaf of bread; a phone sits off the hook on the stairs (Deren 00:02:07-00:02:22). Everything "belongs" in this space, but the objects are not behaving proprietously. The Woman is not incongruous to the domestic space, so the domestic space was made incongruous to itself. This exists initially as more of a feeling which we can sense is shared by the Woman as she investigates her surroundings. In absurding the domestic, Deren the filmmaker is absurding the relationship of the domestic space to the female body: "As with the idea of a 'malevolent vitality [brought] to inanimate objects,' which is how she described the energies animating *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Deren is here invested in the seemingly magical

power of the cinema to transform time and space into a new reality” (Keller 82). Deren works to destabilize the domestic terrain by working on a logic that resists conventional rules; “By highlighting fragments and joining incongruous spaces and times” (Keller 81), she subverts expected linearity. Deren “also deliberately builds on... narrative tropes without fulfilling their usual functions” (Keller 84); in other words, there is queer use. When the Woman seems to be undergoing “an endless climbing upstairs” (Keller 84), the logics of the scale of the actual staircase and its physics are subverted. The film slows her run up each step, suspending her action, resisting time (Deren 00:05:05-00:05:30). Through the use of movement,¹¹ Deren is able to make it appear as though the logic of gravity has changed: the camera spins upside-down then rights itself, while the Woman clings to the staircase, her terrain completely unstable (Deren 00:06:02-00:06:31). There is even a moment where we see the Woman’s foot walking from the sand on a beach, to the muddy earth, to a field, to the concrete sidewalk, to the carpeted living room floor (Deren 00:10:49-00:10:59). The terrain is in flux.

Deren takes advantage of the agency of her medium. She edits the Woman’s images, splicing her onto different stairs one after another as though she teleports to different locations (Deren 00:08:44-00:08:55). This reflects a previous moment when “she drops the house key and it ‘bounces’ along the stairs. Deren too on the stairs ‘bounces,’ becoming an object among objects” (Geller 145). Body and objects are conflated. If the terrain and the objects within them are unstable, either lacking or resisting definition — for example, the flower becomes the knife (Deren 00:12:30-00:12:52) — then the perception of the body becomes so as well as it merges into objecthood. What is real, what is fake, what is subject, and what is object? Initially,

¹¹ Deren, though primarily known as a filmmaker, is also a dancer and choreographer. She worked and toured as an assistant and publicist for influential American choreographer, Katherine Dunham. Though some may not perceive this film to be dance, the movement is choreographed and considered, and merits discussion through this lens.

“Deren’s character appears fragmented, with arms, legs, and hands intermittently occupying her, and our, field of vision.... Deren is filmed in such a way as to appear to be lacking a unified, cohesive body” (Geller 143). The film begins with “a mannequin’s arm, which descends into the frame” (Keller 83), followed by the Woman’s real arm which picks up the fake flower: the body as object (Deren 00:00:53-00:00:57). Alternatively, at one point the Woman opens her mouth and retrieves the key: the object as body (Deren 00:07:18-00:07:22). The two are intertwined, and this remains an explicitly gendered choice, which is reinforced by the different portrayal of the Man. When he enters the house, “Deren is fully framed in a reverse shot, her passivity as object marked by his position above her, pulling her limp body up from the chair” (Geller 146). The Man “looks into the mirror and sees a full, clear reflection.... and is given a complete subjectivity” (Geller 146), while “for the woman, ‘the coherent image’ afforded by the ‘stade du miroir’ is unavailable, for she is the ground upon which the male’s coherent image is established” (Geller 143). She *is* the unstable terrain, and the mirror’s primary logic, to reflect, is not in operation. Everything but Man is rendered absurd, perhaps asking men to open their focus to anything beyond their centrality and “normativity.” Repetition — a patterning of use — is at play: each time the Woman finds herself back at the house and with “each refusal of the mirror to cast back a reflection, the female character becomes more and more infantilized, presenting a regression of subjectivity” (Geller 144). Repetition breaks the logics of time and space, as the Woman’s body accumulates with each cycle until multiples of her exist and sit around the table simultaneously (Deren 00:09:52-00:09:57). With each cycle of repetition, the Woman walks the same path (to throwback to Ahmed) around the block, but walks it differently as a different repetition of herself. “In its utilization of avant-garde aesthetics, *Meshes* retools [queer use] cinematic devices to interrogate, and ultimately to challenge, the psychoanalytic structures upon

which gendered subjectivity, and by implication spectatorial subjectivity, are founded” (Geller 148). Deren’s use of repetition works to amplify this world’s strangeness and make more and more solidified a feeling of the ever destabilized and absurd terrain, objects, and Woman.

THE POLITICS OF SPACES

It is an interesting time to be a near-out-of-work choreographer. The global pandemic has greatly restricted the mobility of bodies — stay six feet apart, sanitize your hands before entering, follow the floor arrows in the grocery store, no non-essential gatherings, stay-at-home orders in effect, limit visits to your household bubble, no indoor gatherings — and governments have laid out what is essential work and what isn’t, challenging ideas of identity and self-worth. There has been a rapid shift in how we are to exist in our spaces. With a lifetime of cultural coding and learned behaviours shaping how we move through the world, this quick pivot has been met with some resistance, from the casual slip-up, to feeling the exception to the rule, to blatant defiance and excessive rage from anti-mask and anti-vaxxers.¹² “Physical and social landscapes are both shaped by use” (Ahmed 64), and our use, or who is currently allowed to use what, has been drastically altered. Most people are successfully learning new ways of being, of existing in our new world relationally with the objects we use, with our spaces, and with each other. Ahmed believes the “phenomenology of usefulness would attend to how use involves a way of arranging worlds as well as ourselves.... to inhabit a world is to be inhabited by use” (26). I like to consider, therefore, that rearranging (queer use) carries the potential for queer world-making; if there is one thing this pandemic has demonstrated, it’s that our ways of being in space and with each other had the capacity for drastic change, despite this previously seeming

¹² See Ibrahim.

(and still to those resisting) like an impossibility. Through repetitive use, we encountered an act of becoming in this new way. We have the capacity to change the world.

Our spaces are hyper designated for specific outcomes, and any deviation attracts suspicion. Spaces are coded either socially or by law. “Something becomes queer, odd, noticeable, or curious when it reverses how things exist usually or by challenging how things are expected to be. When something has become unusual, the unusual is striking” (Ahmed 75). For example, I performed a dance work in which I rolled in and out of a tarp in slow motion and nude, while the audience, perhaps not expecting this particular incongruity of flesh meeting tarp, had come to the theatre space expecting the experimental, the potentially incongruous. Though within the artwork there is something against propriety in my actions, as a performer I am not against propriety because the space has been coded to allow for this outcome. Were I to do the same thing in the middle of a grocery store, who knows, I could be arrested.

Spaces and how they are used reveal a lot about how we are expected be, and “to queer use might reside somewhere between our bodies and our worlds. Queer use might require a certain willingness to be perverse, to deviate from the straight path, the right path. The word *perversion* can refer not only to deviations from what is true or right but to *the improper use of something*” (Ahmed 201). Patrick Anderson details a small series of events which challenged rules encoded into space through use of the body. In 2008 at the Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., “eighteen people gathered.... Playing music through their individual headphones” (591). These people “danced silently and alone. Within minutes, organizer Mary Brooke Oberwetter had been restrained, silenced, and arrested” (Anderson 591-592). Oberwetter’s federal lawsuit claimed “expressive dancing is protected by the First Amendment” (qtd. in Anderson 592). The claim “pivoted on her insistence that movement can be

‘expressive’.... [and] when properly understood as a communicative act, dance is a constitutionally protected civil right” (Anderson 592). The case was dismissed. In response, a man named Adam Kokesh “organized a dance protest at the Jefferson Memorial on May 28, 2011” (Anderson 594) and was arrested.¹³ While both Oberwetter and Kokesh are white, Anderson reflects that “racialization operates choreographically not only in who is permitted to dance — and where — but also who is permitted to *be* physically and subjectively in the commons” (591). Anderson refers to this notion of policed movement as a “choreographic imperative” (597) and asks us to consider what might occur “when the bodies toward which it is aimed are not white dancers who have chosen to move... at the site of a memorial, but Black and Brown pedestrians on a public street” (597).

We have only to look to the very recent past for glaring examples of racially based discrepancies in the policing of bodies as they exist in space. We can consider the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the United States Capitol building, where white criminals (supporting the now twice-impeached, former President Trump) were responsible for many things, including chanting to hang the Vice President, killing a police officer, and breaching the Senate floor while lawmakers fled to safety. They have retroactively being painted by a concerning number of Republicans as non-threatening compared to Black Lives Matter protestors.¹⁴ Meanwhile in direct response to the largely peaceful Black Lives Matter protests (in the United States specifically), in which there have been multiple instances of people and police driving their cars into crowds of protestors, Republicans have been seeking and successfully implementing new laws introduced to make such actions legal.¹⁵ One could even look to Ontario Premier Doug

¹³ See “RT’s Adam.”

¹⁴ See Leonard.

¹⁵ See Peters.

Ford's short-lived attempt at implementing randomized police stops during the stay-at-home order, which carried deep concerns for racial profiling given the province's track record for randomized police stops.¹⁶ As Anderson insists, we must "consider which bodies and subjects are enabled, in the first place, to demand such a right to dance, and which bodies and subjects are so challenged in their ability to exist at all in public space, so that dance is not even a question" (600). Black Lives Matter Toronto co-founder Rodney Diverlus reflects on André Lepecki's notion of "'choreopolicing,' wherein 'the police determines the space of circulation for protesters and ensures that everyone is in their permissible place'" (qtd. in Diverlus 67). As a means for galvanizing power and presence, through deeply considered unity balanced with room for improvisation, Diverlus explains "that at the centre of Black liberation movements is a mastery of politichoreography and a Black reoccupation of public space" (66). In Diverlus's words: "We will move our bodies to disrupt anti-Blackness" (67) and "With our bodies, we challenge not only ownership of public space, but also the control of those same sites" (67-68). Using the choreographed body to subvert and redefine space is a massive undertaking.¹⁷ As Ahmed states, "it takes work to rearrange our bodies, to rearrange ourselves" (209), and, of course, to rearrange our worlds.

We must also always consider that our public spaces are "defined as much by those who are absent as it is by those who are there" (Anderson 600). This assessment of public spaces applies to privileged arts spaces as well. It is not uncommon to experience in dance training a far less diverse student body than that of the general public.¹⁸ Gutierrez recalls "going to dance

¹⁶ See Gerster.

¹⁷ See Diverlus for insight into Black Lives Matter Toronto's use of Black-centric politichoreography and its historical connections.

¹⁸ Causes for the lack of diversity in dance training are by no means limited to socio-economic barriers, curricular offerings (centralizing Western-dominant forms that problematically and incorrectly value ballet as the root of dance), colonial institutions fostering a culture of micro-aggressions, etc.

classes and concerts, looking around the room or the audience, seeing that the majority of folks are white, and thinking, ‘Who is not here?’” (Gutierrez “Does Abstraction”). As Ahmed teaches us, use creates barriers, because often “When spaces become more comfortable by being repeatedly used by some, they can also become less receptive to others” (44). Gutierrez offers the observation that when you are not considered “normalized” or a “neutral” body, “when you’re a marginalized identity, you see the world from a particular perspective, you maybe see it as it actually is as opposed to the people who are sort of trapped in normativity, and you also see instability as a kind of ground floor” (“Does Abstraction” 00:07:55-00:08:21). Though many have neutralized our ideas of spaces, our environments are in fact largely riddled with instability and injustice. If we can reflect on a white male dominance of space, could the absurd be used to highlight a way of being against this reason? By operating on different logics, subtle or bold logics of resistance, could bringing an incongruity into the “normative” awaken perspectives, annihilate the dormancy that generates assumptions, dismantle the common sense of expectations, and create space for new forms of embodiment?

SOLID / FANTASY

Unlike Gutierrez and Deren, whose very presence in their field activates a force against the dominant, director of Rock Bottom Movement Alyssa Martin (like myself) works in Canada’s contemporary dance scene, and as white women in this terrain, we carry a certain amount of privilege. Martin’s piece *fantasylover* premiered in Toronto in 2018. Martin is “Known for colourful and absurd works that straddle theatre and dance” (Edwards), and, with an exceptional power for repurposing the past, Martin’s “2016 *MANICPIXIEDREAMGIRLS* was inspired by the romantic comedy film, *Garden State*. In 2017, *Dolphin* centred around the TV

teen drama *Gossip Girl*, and for a section of *fantasylover*, she repurposed Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir's... 2018 Olympic gold medal ice-dance routine" (Edwards). Repurposing, reimagining, and reclaiming — all of these forms of repetition — are employed by Martin, but all in the spirit of queer use. *fantasylover* exists as "an unusual utopia. And in this surreal land... each individual [is] active in the retelling of their liberation" (Groening). An unusual repetition of forms of familiarity, these retellings of the not-too-distant-past by millennial-ish artists are an absurding of the cultural landscapes that helped sculpt our state of being during our transformations into adulthood. *fantasylover* engages with "themes of unattainable ideals, territorial pissing and engorged toxic masculinity, commodification of romance, the feminization of environmental politics and the generational struggles of women encountering independence" (Groening). In "skating towards world domination one Nivea commercial at a time" (Groening), Canadian figure-skating icon Tessa Virtue, played by Drew Berry, sets out on a solo path selling lotion without her well-known skating partner, Scott Moir: "'I'm always connected to someone else. What am I? A rope?' Berry as Tessa Virtue yells.... The line resonates.... Threads of women bound to their partners, their fathers, their jobs, due to financial stability, social capital, survival" (Groening). The reference to the body as literal object throws into question the gaze Canadians placed on Virtue, our rope to get the gold; "*fantasylover*, picks through the polished veneer of heteronormative fairy-tale romance sold to eager young women by rich old men. From the capitalist machines behind every beloved Hollywood romcom and lotion-endorsing Olympic athlete" (Groening). Martin revisits the formative and the familiar, romcoms and icons, and through absurding them she explores the potential for feminist world-making. In revisiting these old terrains, these "locations of gendered disillusionment" (Groening), Martin "breaks free from the stereotypes of fetishized female bodies in media and pop culture by embracing, consuming

and vomiting up destructive tropes” (Groening). Much like Deren, Martin resists the dominant by “manipulating a history constructed by the male gaze. Her reclaiming is an empowered crotch shot to the face of patriarchy” (Groening).

Martin’s works, though always inviting deeper meanings, are simultaneously filled with the ridiculous and the silly, which takes us back to another definition of the absurd. I will focus on *fantasylover*, and in particular, on the section in which Berry as Virtue, and Samantha Grist as Scott Moir perform their 2018 Olympic gold-winning number, *Roxanne* (Martin 00:17:43-00:22:00). Much like Gutierrez’s transposition of the telenovela, Martin’s translation of an ice dancing routine to a theatre space brings back the idea that spaces are hyper-designated for specific ways of being, and any deviation creates incongruity. The choreography, although abbreviated, remains strikingly similar to the original,¹⁹ yet in this terrain of the theatre typically designated for works of choreography, the figure-skating choreography suddenly looks juvenile or cheap, a deliberate absurding of the original on Martin’s behalf. The change in scale of venue without a change in scale of performance renders the routine incongruous and silly in its new home, as it was originally built to play to crowds in large skating arenas and for judges of the stylized art form. Plucked from an ice rink where the logic is to propel people in skates through space, here in the theatre the Marley floors refuse to act with the same logic. With the performers’ intention to skate, are their bodies incongruous to the space or the space to their bodies? Their logic is to stick with the choreography despite the floor’s refusal to provide them with momentum and help them travel through the space. As I watch this section of *fantasylover*, I do subconsciously see the original routine in my mind, having seen it previously. Also, having figure skated before, my gaze was filled with an awareness of absence: every arabesque Berry

¹⁹ See “Tessa Virtue.”

and Grist held on the spot, my eyes simultaneously could see them gliding across the rink (Martin 00:18:14-00:18:16); every partnered balance I could register as a spin (Martin 00:19:46-00:19:49); the iconic movement they recreated, I could see Virtue and Moir performing (Martin 00:21:43-00:21:48). The work invites us to see what isn't present, to see the fantasy, and in clinging to an imagined terrain so vehemently, the work is absurding moments from our past we thought we knew, we thought were stable, but we are now asked to see afresh.

While Martin's *fantasylover* is absurding the fantasy to get to something very real, Greek artist Dimitris Papaioannou, through queer use of the concrete and tangible, transforms perceptions of the body into the magical and mysterious. His work *Sisyphus / Trans / Form* debuted in Italy in 2019 as a site-specific work located in the Collezione Maramotti, a private art collection. This piece engages in repetition, in the use of something familiar brought into a new context, much like Gutierrez's telenovela and Martin's figure skating. Papaioannou explores the myth of Sisyphus, which offers a direct link to the idea of the absurd that Camus proposed and Esslin followed; however, reading the work through this specific lens of the absurd would be reductive to all that it has to offer. To begin simply, we can read Papaioannou's work as being absurd in that it is against the common logic, as the common logic in Sisyphus's physical situation would be to stop carrying the boulder. Papaioannou muses on the familiarity of the repetition of this myth, noting "Sisyphus of course is a symbol, is an archetype. He's probably the working class hero" (Collezione 00:02:33-00:02:39). Rather than going full Esslin in representing the futility of human attempts to find meaning, Papaioannou was interested in exploring a "hint of creating meaning through working, and the hint of accepting the cross of existence, and this being the only way for a meaningful life" (Collezione 00:02:53-00:03:08). Highlighting struggle and labour as meaning, the work also delves into "our complex

relationship with the material world” (Hayes-Westall). Much like Deren’s piece, in *Sisyphus / Trans / Form*, objects, the space, and the body become intertwined through transformations that challenge the dominant sense of their respective logics of how to behave. For Papaioannou, it is this play with tangible objects that allows him to develop the fantastic: “It’s very difficult for me to conceive of interesting human movement if it’s not interacting with an object: creating sound, testing its flexibility, durability, and its form, and moving its form around the space” (Collezione 00:03:16-00:03:30). By exploring objects and their fullest potential for queer use, Papaioannou weaves his complex world that keeps our perceptions on unstable terrain.

Sisyphus / Trans / Form begins with audience members filing into the gallery space, where the “collection is shrouded in industrial plastic, rendering the museum quality works of one of the world’s most interesting private collections... obscured” (Hayes-Westall). This decision to cover these perhaps known objects of the gallery indicates that the space is undergoing transformation, as if renovating or painting. Transformation is highlighted by a light that “comes from an industrial floor lamp, one of those used by builders, moved around by a smartly dressed gentleman [Papaioannou himself] who appears to control the performers” (Hayes-Westall). Another man carries a thick, dust-filled rock wall through the space on his back, referencing Sisyphus’s boulder. In an interview, Papaioannou reveals the illusion: the rock wall “has a hard plaster coating that breaks during the show and it looks like a wall that is soft. It’s a metaphor of the flesh and the bones, the hard parts that can break and the soft parts that can tolerate” (Collezione 00:03:48-00:04:03). It becomes clear that we are witnessing the transformation of more than the space; as the work progresses, parts of the man’s body disappear into the rock wall while limbs reappear at odd, impossible angles (Collezione 00:03:03-00:03:08). At another moment, the body of a woman becomes part of the man’s body and he of

hers (Papaioannou 00:02:57-00:02:59). Bodies are in a state of transformation, the logic of how the body functions and how joints bend is not the common sense, and the body is rendered incongruous to its own self. The rock wall (object) transforms properties of the body, while the bodies allow us to discover logics of the rock wall and see it differently as well: it is not solid; it's opening to let people in and out; it's not what we thought it was. Logics, incongruities, and transformations are all interconnected. We can also consider the rock wall as either an object or a space; though transported as an object, it is in fact a wall, and walls are typically used to physically define spaces. Here, the people are permeating the wall and transforming our understanding of how the space works. The space / object becomes the body as people emerge from the rock wall. Alternatively, when the bodies partially disappear into the rock wall, their bodies become the object and the space. Similarly, bodies transform other bodies to become objects, as when it appears that the man who is holding the rock wall has his penis exposed, and the other man walks over and rips it out (Papaioannou 00:02:40-00:02:48). The image transforms from something we might perceive as real to relief in the fictional (a man holding a balloon), and offers the glaring impropriety of ripping someone's dick off.

Sisyphus / Trans / Form's absurding of the common logics and behaviours of bodies, objects, and spaces leads to a transformation of perception and encourages us to question what is real. Everything is in the state of transition and transformation, up until the end of the work, when the woman carries the rock wall away on her back, and stripping away all illusions, the man presses his body against a series of wood boards against a real wall: the body, the objects, the space. This time, however, the objects and the space declare themselves as solid and as fixed forms and do not let him through. In a beautiful lingering image we see that the objects and the space have not become dormant, but remain active agents; it is in fact the objects that appear to

be doing the most eye-catching dancing (Papaioannou 00:04:01-00:04:47). The space and the objects work to transform this man through their unchangeability, highlighting the body's continuous transformation as the body begins to sweat profusely from this extreme labour.

DANCE IS ABSURD, NO?

I think you feel the absurd. It is perhaps a feeling experienced relationally to people, objects, and spaces. When you see something against propriety, something incongruous, it strikes you because, though to a large degree we do not deeply analyze each and every thing we do, we have learned and embodied common behaviours and ways of being, unspoken or written laws of existing together in society, and deviations from this are noticeable. Our personal thresholds for what we consider normal are in some ways sculpted by our individual experiences, our circumstances, and our knowledge and acceptance of the variety of ways of being in this world. These thresholds expand and contract fluidly throughout our lives. We normalize our own perceptions of normal.

As a contemporary dancer, I have seen my fair share of performances I'd deem as engaging with the absurd, but through my initial research I found myself spiralling into my own self-generated Theatre of the Absurd scenario: witnessing myself and other dancers trying to pinpoint works engaging with the absurd.²⁰ Where it once seemed apparent, the absurd became elusive, and my initial search felt futile. (What's the use!?) I now believe this was in part because of the Theatre of the Absurd's dominance of the word's usage. Knowing the word as a feeling (in the sense I have been using it) is one thing, but this quickly shrivels up when the feeling is asked

²⁰ I have spoken with a colleague who self describes their contemporary dance work as absurd, and they told me the more they had looked into the word, the darker it had felt, so they had simply chosen to use the word on their own terms as their own qualifier.

to be put into language, and when the terrain of the language has been dominated in the name of Esslin, Beckett, Camus. It harkens back, as Rinhaug noted, to an insistence “on naming that which cannot be named” (51). Dance scholarship runs into these hurdles; “How does one describe something that describes itself through its own enactment?” (McCormack 1830).²¹ Gutierrez also seems to sense the intangibility that I had been experiencing in putting the absurd to words rather than allowing it to exist as a feeling — a feeling that throws normativity into question: “things... within my purview as an artist are the unnameable, the irresolute, and the absurd.... part of my job is to traffic in liminal spaces and unearth feelings that are both underneath and beyond the proprieties that just barely hold the seams of normativity together” (“Why Identify”). I want to champion and unearth unnameable feelings too. That’s just the issue with putting to words that which lives most fully without them. Words are stable. We write them so they don’t escape us. We write them to lay down paths. We give names to the unnameable. We canonize. We noun. But feelings are unstable, subject to change, subject to transform. The absurd is unstable. The absurd is a verb.

Rather than searching for the absurd in contemporary dance and feeling like I have found nothing simply because it doesn’t feel right to pinpoint it with a narrow word, what if this absence is in fact everything? Is it all in some way absurd or in some way ripe with great potential for absurding? The nature of what we do as dancers, the way we move, it’s absurd, no? From a movement perspective, dance’s logic can often be against common sense (how does my leg get above my head?) and the body is made incongruous to an idea of its own self by moving

²¹ How does one put words to the wordless? I had a professor passionately dismiss embodied knowledge as having any historical value. When I presented the argument that words can (at times) devalue or at the very least lose something in the process of describing the wordless, I was told to not put it to words then, as though his privilege had left him with no concept of value imbalances related to the problematic centralization of text in the arts, in the academy, in life. In time his ship will sink. In the meantime, for some additional reading, see Murphy.

in a manner against reason. Is all performance occurring in a theatre absurd too? Spaces are coded with meaning, and a theatre is an environment specifically designated to house ways of being against propriety: “The stage is the stage because it offers the opportunity to assume behavior outside of cultural and personal norms, and to test those norms” (Fraleigh 549). Dance and opera for example, both undeniably extraordinary when one thinks of the abilities of the human body in these practices, become normalized uses of the body if housed in a space socially recognized as being designated for them.²² The arts present possibilities for “thinking and acting beyond habitual uses of the will.... playing with edges and boundaries, disrupting habit and cultural constructions” (Fraleigh 554). However, if spaces normalize what might not otherwise be considered common sense behaviours, how are there still works that feel absurd? How is absurd art housed in spaces designated for absurd art still absurd?

For possible answers, I think about the works of Pina Bausch. Someone familiar with Bausch’s work may come to a theatre that presents absurd work to see one of her shows, but they would not be able to predict the details. For example, they may go see Bausch’s *Arien* (1979), expecting the absurd, and yet still experience it as an unexpected feeling when dancers are gathered in formalwear at a table on a flooded stage, and a giant hippopotamus “saunters across the space enjoying the water.... Classical music playing behind all of this” (Arendell 77-78). Macro expectations, micro surprises.

I TRY AGAIN

Absurding through extreme persistence is a key component of Pina Bausch’s works with Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch. Before delving into a closer study of one of Bausch’s

²² Spaces designated for opera and dance, and the broader performing arts, are not limited to theatres, but exist in communities globally where these practices are embedded in the social fabrics of daily life.

seminal works, *Café Müller* (1978), I will first consider her particular use of the incongruous in terms of her sets and the objects within them, then look to her use of logics of feeling, then to her trademark use of repetition and gender coding, and finally to her play with an ever-unstable portrayal of body subjectivity. Bausch is a fantastic example of a choreographer working with objects and spaces and exploring how they relate to the body through queer use. “In no longer presenting non-humans as subjected to the human but... as equally participating elements in a complex ecosystem of unfolding relations... Bausch invited her audience to look at her performers — humans, animals, peat, water, rocks, furniture... in a different way” (Florêncio 57). It is through this different sense of being with objects and environments that Bausch reveals that they “are conditioned by their enmeshment in one another, therefore foregrounding the strangeness that lies beyond the contingency of their familiarity.... bodies, human and non-human, cannot be exhausted by their appearances” (Florêncio 57). There is potential for queer use.

Although Bausch does create many movement sequences that engage the body alone, she does have an interest, like Papaioannou, in exploring the material world, and it is this that João Florêncio deems the “object-oriented ecology of Pina Bausch’s works” (59). Using incongruities by transporting objects from their typical environment to the theatre, her set designer Peter Pabst explains, “many things gain life there from the contradiction that an inappropriate object was placed in the space” (qtd. in Trencsényi 18). When you do so, Bausch maintains it “opens people’s eyes. Suddenly they see things they thought they knew in a new way, as if for the first time.... These things preoccupy their senses and mean that they stop thinking and begin to feel” (qtd. in Arendell 74). Challenging the perceptions of real and fake, Bausch often worked with objects from nature: dancer Julie Shanahan describes in *1980 - A Piece by Pina Bausch* (1980),

“with the grass on stage, there’s a quietness.... And the beauty of the green comes out - you see it on stage and suddenly grass looks completely amazing.... she made you look at simple everyday things and realize that they are beautiful” (qtd. in Trencsényi 17). Mechthild Großmann remembers one moment on stage when someone eats a tulip, and “many audience members were convinced the flower was a fake. Yet again, the real thing is the most improbable” (qtd. in Hoghe “Rehearsal” 83). Bodies and objects, whether fake or real, are thrown into question, particularly if the objects relate to the natural world and are incongruous in their new environments. From live rodents, chickens, and dogs, to a fake hippopotamus, to giant fake cacti dominating the stage, or even to the “crocodile eating a ballerina in *Keuschheitslegende* (1979)” (Trencsényi 18), absurdities are found in Bausch’s spaces where the dancers are “always thrown into an environment populated with other bodies that affect their movement” (Florêncio 59). Beyond animals and objects alone, the spaces Bausch created alongside her set designers amplified feelings of the incongruous; “Nothing stood in her way, whereas she often put natural elements as contenders in her work” (Arendell 74), bringing “the outside into the theater: dirt on the floors, water they dance through, whole trees carted in to create a sort of hyper-naturalistic space” (Arendell 61). In creating incongruous spaces, “Bausch’s non-human bodies are there to face the challenge of encountering other bodies, never being allowed to become background to a main narrative that, in any case, is never present in her work” (Florêncio 57). Simultaneously the sets and objects were there to “impassion her dancers, who would perform under any design circumstances.... these performers give themselves so fully and wholly to the stage environments in which they play” (Arendell 40). This endless pursuit of the possible interactions of bodies, objects, and spaces is a search for forms of use against dominant expectations, setting her stage for the absurd.

Much like Gutierrez and Martin, Bausch played with scale to bring a sense of the incongruous, though in her case, quite literally: “Sometimes surprising proportions achieved this feeling of the absurd, for instance the way the walls of the ballroom for the tea dance in *Kontakthof* (1978) dwarfed the dancers, or the giant cactii forest Pabst created for *Ahnen* (1987)” (Trencsényi 18). The same idea was applied by Bausch’s costume designer, Marion Cito, who “deliberately constructed costumes for female dancers that appear as if their inhabitants pulled dresses from stock that were slightly too big for them on purpose; we get to see both the dancer and the costume as two separate subject objects or beings” (Arendell 45-46). In this way, what would typically read as the body reads as the body and the object, both slightly incongruous to the other. Even the music, which fills an environment, was often kept incongruous with the events on stage. As observed “in *Walzer* [1982], the music is largely disconnected from the events onstage” (Weir 86), but also, the music generally was kept by Bausch on unstable terrain for the performers themselves: “Bausch builds her pieces using gestures and movements of her dancers, rehearses these movements with music of some sort, then often changes that music almost at the last moment before performance so that the dancers don’t meld motion to music while they perform” (Arendell 40). Similar to the spontaneity needed to navigate the instability of the sets and the objects within them, so too did they navigate new rhythms and atmospheric changes from the last-minute musical decisions, offering new colours to their performative experience.

Bausch’s choreographed ways of being in the space are often at odds with the environment, as Marianne Goldberg explains is the case in *On the Mountain a Cry was Heard* (1984), where “the stage is covered with the dirt from a mountainside... the gestures are derived from swimming, rowing, or canoeing.... This incongruity creates a friction between stage action

and scenography that indicates fantasy.... the displacement... estranges even the most mundane action” (qtd. in Cody 126). Destabilizing how one is expected to be in the space, or in bringing what belonged in one place into another like Gutierrez and Martin, “Bausch takes elements of dance practice, daily activity, pedestrian movement and the mechanics of the theatre, and situates them in unfamiliar territory. She devises productions lacking narrative that occur in liminal spaces and run according to their own internal logic” (Weir 74). This internal logic is almost always at odds with the dominant logic, moving to solidify alternative ways of being relationally in space, and destabilizing her “environments which become increasingly intangible” (Weir 67). These environments can be read as both physical and emotional landscapes; “she staged haunting, often absurd, spectacles of emotional life” (Fraleigh 570). When looking at Bausch’s works, we can consider both her use of the absurd as a feeling and how she engages in absurding feelings.

Bausch very much “seeks a logic coming from intuition instead of intellect” (qtd. in Trencsényi 40); she does not label or solidify her logics, but rather lets them live and breathe as feelings. In efforts to avoid “the obvious in her dramaturgy.... The structure of Bausch’s choreographies demonstrates her artistic refusal to impose (or acknowledge) a universal order or a viewpoint from which one can overlook and comprehend the whole.... Bausch often leaves a door open to the unknown” (Trencsényi 20). This persistence in keeping her works unstable speaks to the liminal feelings she explores that we do not yet have adequate words for, and, as such, she avoids shaping the experience from known or assumed definitions. Renate Klett describes one of Bausch’s methodological approaches to blurring the micro events on stage into one felt macro impression: “She wants a total impression, from which the audience can choose the events it wishes to follow. Therefore she doubles scenes, complicates their structure by

interweaving them. Many scenes run parallel, commenting on and overlapping each other” (qtd. in Trencsényi 39). This use of simultaneity and multiplicity is even reminiscent of Deren’s work with several figures of the Woman sitting around the table. In challenging the nature of how we might be expecting to see events in the theatre, Bausch is subverting the audience’s gaze to that which cannot be fixed and is encouraging our needing-to-define tendencies to relax and rely instead on instinctual feeling to absorb what we are seeing: “Bausch very consciously meant to open symbolic space rather than lead her audience to any predetermined conclusions in order for them to find their own ways into her possible meanings” (Arendell 44). Of course, inhabiting liminal terrain can lead to contention.²³ I think back to Gutierrez questioning who has the right not to explain themselves. I also simultaneously consider that explaining oneself does not have to be with words. I think about performance works needing to exist with a sense of meaning, but I simultaneously consider that personal yet resonant meaning can be found from incongruities, subtle logics of resistance, and unnamable feelings. And here I am again, back in my own Esslinian absurdist spiral. I don’t have the answers, but I will keep searching.

I believe Bausch engaged with the absurd as a feeling. I believe she had a desire to communicate by making conventions unstable and by throwing our perceptions into question. She “became known as a master of surrealist tactics. Her dances don’t make sense; rather they grow out of the senses, especially taste, touch, and kinesthesia” (Fraleigh 572). She also played with absurding feelings themselves as a means to access less certain emotional terrain. In one example of her rehearsal process for *Bandoneon* (1980), Bausch asked her dancers to express

²³ Fraleigh notes that “Bausch, never didactic, isn’t going to solve the problem, but she does display it” (570), which begs the question as to “whether she exposes violence toward women... or exploits the problem” (569). There are people who believe Bausch’s work to be anti-feminist. The question for me is the extent to which we need to clean up the messes we present in order to care for audiences, and how much space we can responsibly leave. See Wyver for a brief insight on the trauma Adam Lazarus’s work *Daughter* leaves in the wake of its accolades.

how they responded to physical pain. She began by watching the “women’s reactions, then the men’s, and finally they all do it together in a slow motion” (Hoghe “Rehearsal” 90). She then instructs they “now do the same again, equally slow, but smiling” (qtd. in Hoghe “Rehearsal” 90) so that “now the same movements... tell another story” (Hoghe “Rehearsal” 90). The emotions are incongruous to themselves. But something larger is also happening. She is circling that feeling which we cannot quite put our finger on, and in so doing, she is using emotions differently, exploring their queer use relationally with incongruities to offer something more. There is a moment in *Palermo, Palermo* (1989), where dancer Julie Shanahan directly instructs two men to interact with her physically in various ways, saying things like “pick me up” (Bausch *Palermo* 00:03:58), or “take my hand” (Bausch *Palermo* 00:04:24-00:04:25), or “hug me” (Bausch *Palermo* 00:04:33), which the men do instantly on command. However, most of their attempts to perform these instructions are met by Shanahan with the physicality of someone wanting anything but these actions. “Take my hand” is refuted by Shanahan swatting the men away each time they oblige her. She voices this directive over and over, becoming more and more distressed at not getting what she needs, despite her physical resolve not to let this interaction occur, while the scene escalates. She is clearly operating against common reason or logic, but on a steady alternate logic nonetheless, where her words are in a state of friction with her emotional self. It is this absurdity of her feelings, of her circumstance, and the incongruity of the event, that is circling a larger, unnameable sense.

Repetition is a basic tool in much of contemporary dance training. One of its primary uses, as in life, is to promote patterning and ways of learning how to be:²⁴ “human existence and

²⁴ Patterning in dance education is something many of us contemporary dancers grew up integrating into our bodies, and while there still is use for such training, much of this patterning is something many dancers, including myself, have subsequently spent much of our careers unlearning.

learning in particular have everything to do with repetitious gesture. It is simply how we go about routines in order to maintain regularity of all kinds” (Arendell 72). Visible in some form in all of the case studies, repetition features heavily in Bausch’s works. I think of the quote likely misattributed to Einstein: “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results,” but when it comes to the physical, I don’t believe that doing the same thing over and over again is actually ever possible. This idea of repetition as a marker for being *without* sense is something I offer in conversation with Bausch, famous for her use of repetition, as the idea negates embodied knowledge through experience. Dancer and rehearsal director Daphnis Kokkinos explains perfectly how once “Someone asked [Bausch], ‘Why do you repeat on the stage?’ She said, ‘I don’t repeat, I try again’” (qtd. in Arendell 128). This is exactly how I too choose to look at repetition, and will be implying a sense of change and transformation inherent in each repetitive act.

Finding queer use for repetition, Bausch both explores how to solidify the strange, and defamiliarize the stable. Much like Martin who revisits influences from their upbringing, “Bausch is often noted for her use of nursery rhymes and children’s games as the most direct way to comment on gender training” (Arendell 61). Johannes Birringer describes how in viewing Bausch’s works “we are confronted directly with gestures of conventions and internalized norms we no longer see” (qtd. in Price 325). Many of these “norms” that Bausch explores are gender-related (and I believe she too would have placed the word in quotations; after all, she was deliberately quoting through physical repetition in order to bring about the absurd). With a career of creating works with Tanztheater Wuppertal lasting over four decades, Bausch’s most well-known pieces were generally created in the late seventies and throughout the eighties, at which point she tackled her time and place’s gender constructs with vigour. Royd Climenhaga, in

speaking about Bausch, invokes Judith Butler's idea that "one is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body" (qtd. in Climenhaga 221), and "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (qtd. in Climenhaga 221). Bausch highlights in many of her works "repeated failures of her dancers to embrace binary logic and perform gender 'successfully'" (Cody 126), but of course "if gender roles are socially constructed, those roles can be changed" (Climenhaga 222) through using or performing gender differently. As we can see (and again, I'm speaking from a white and privileged body surrounded by a left-leaning community in Canada), ways of meeting expectations for performing one's gender have changed drastically since the seventies. (We have the capacity to change the world.)

In placing gender training and cultural coding ideas into an absurd situation, the resulting destabilization allows us to reevaluate and open our perspectives to perhaps see our biases more clearly for what they are. Bausch uses this destabilization of the environment housing ways of being to bring about the incongruous, and here "repetition takes on new meaning each time a gesture is repeated in a different context, so her pieces tend only to repeat phrases in order to decontextualize them and create new meaning with each reiteration" (Arendell 72). Bausch also engages in the overuse of gestures with extreme repetition (trying), which "fragments ordinary social behaviours" (Weir 95); through bringing the familiar into a state of extreme overuse, the use of these gestures gradually becomes strange to perceive. However, it is not just "the familiar gestures of the human performers that are alienated through repetition, so do the non-human bodies appear increasingly strange due to the myriad of contingent roles they are forced to play in each iteration of their encounter with the other bodies on stage" (Florêncio 58-59). The initial familiarity of objects, spaces, and bodies can become strange through repetition transforming

perceptions, “estranging the viewer from the events on stage and reinforcing the artificiality of the action and surrounding set. Equally it defies audience expectations” (Weir 73).

As with Papaioannou, the absurdizing transforms the audience’s perceptions, gradually revealing truths and logics against the common sense, and in Bausch’s works this often exists as a feeling. Bausch does not shy away from addressing the audience or featuring the presentational manner of being on stage, where “The dancer’s body becomes a performative construct within a social situation.... We create a distinct subjectivity out of the raw material of our bodies in situation, and that process of creation is necessarily performative” (Climenhaga 230). In Bausch’s works, the subjectivity of the performers as people reckoning with and navigating her landscapes is at the forefront. Bausch “implicates the subjectivity of her actors as real people, whose experience counts.... her actors show themselves; the split they enact between body and social role is experienced and enacted on their own bodies” (qtd. in Arendell 45). We perceive her dancers’ subjectivity either clearly as resulting from their circumstances, or more often, as with Deren’s piece, subjectivity (for the women in particular) is brought up in a circumstance we may not question, but the event gradually reveals itself to be in complete oppression of subjecthood. In *Kontakthof*, the audience’s gaze is rendered complicit as the dancers reflect “a knowledge of being judged by two audiences: one is that which watches them perform on stage, the other is obviously the larger social audience who they perform rehearsed social gestures for on a daily basis” (Arendell 47). With full awareness, even capitalizing perhaps on “representation, which, as Peggy Phelan reminds us, ‘is almost always on the side of the one who looks, and almost never on the side of the one who is seen’” (Cody 122), Bausch uses the “messy, inherently unequal, and costly business of representation” (Cody 122) to absurd assumed subjecthood that may not always feel tangible under certain circumstances.

As Sondra Horton Fraleigh poignantly notes, “The show is the façade; the showing is more” (574), and Bausch’s understanding of this, of destabilizing body subjectivity on the micro level of her scenes, offers volumes of meaning on the matter as a whole. Thinking back to the scene from *Palermo Palermo* with Shanahan and the two men she instructs, “she is in terror.... The scene is comic in a way, but the presence of her body is tragic and her body is where the battle is being fought” (Climenhaga 224). While “Her attempts to run the show, only leave her more vulnerable” (Climenhaga 224), the event is additionally complicated by the gaze, both Shanahan’s which stares directly out to the audience as she addresses the men, and the audience’s back at her, unable to give her what it is she is after. Who is she really addressing, what is it she wants, and can we perceive her (Shanahan’s) subjectivity amidst the “façade”? “Ultimately, her bodily presence prevails as we recognize the assault this woman is enduring and her horror at the event” (Climenhaga 224). Using the absurd to get to the painfully real, “Bausch had created a space where the subject might emerge” (Climenhaga 221).

On a somewhat similar note, there is a moment in *Kontakthof* where one woman stands frontally to the audience and gazes slightly downward and inward, as a series of men approach her with caresses, pokes, prods, pinches, kisses, and other small gestures that individually *could* be argued to range from gentle to quite out of place, yet on the whole amount to a deeply disturbing act of violence in which “we recognize the incongruence of gentle touch repeated with such fast disregard for personal boundaries” (Arendell 66). The body is treated as object. Without glorifying the violence in this scene (as I feel some scholarship on this moment does), there is clear “disarticulation of the female form. None of this woman’s body parts are ones she seems to own” (Arendell 66). The scene deliberately engages in persistent overuse of these gestures for several minutes (Akerman 00:20:23-00:23:42), until audiences feel a complicity:

“We can no longer bracket out our subjective tie to our bodies and view the dancer’s body as pure object” (Climenthaga 219). Our perception of ourselves is destabilized, transforming from mere performance onlookers to silent and complicit participants. By cruel necessity resulting from the situation, this real woman’s subjectivity emerges; the act of showing supersedes the show. The work engages with sexual violence and can be triggering.²⁵ This section uses the absurd as a feeling and gives “voice” to an incongruence between gestures of affection and violence. Any one of those individual gestures could have and likely would have in 1978 been argued by a large population of men as harmless, yet through absurdizing them, through queer use and overuse, Bausch presents them as undeniably harmful. *Kontakthof* was created before many women might have had the words to voice these felt truths, before something like the Me Too movement put to language what many had experienced,²⁶ so for Bausch to be exploring and solidifying this concept as a potent and undeniable feeling is a powerful use of the absurd.

I would like to take a closer look at perhaps Bausch’s most well-known work, *Café Müller*. For those familiar with the piece, this may seem like an odd choice when thinking of the absurd; however, *Café Müller* had a profound impact on me growing up, and each time I revisit the work, I am still struck with the subconscious ways my work as a choreographer is reckoning with this piece. I am obsessed with finding queer use for doors both as objects and as spaces in my works, and this lineage has made me compelled to speak about *Café Müller* within the context of the absurd as an unexpected but potentially useful case study. Staged as a café, the environment is filled with black chairs, tables, and several doors including one revolving door at

²⁵ There are some constructive conversations about how sexual violence is portrayed in films, television, and on stage. Such conversations highlight the problematic nature of rape culture used specifically as instant-gratification entertainment, and almost always used thoughtlessly and excessively to depict violence against women. This conversation is still needed. See Gilbert for more on televised rape culture as entertainment.

²⁶ See Burke for more on the Me Too movement’s history.

the back of the stage. Two barefoot women dressed in what look to be nightgowns move with eyes closed through the space — one, danced in the film by Bausch herself, remains isolated from the others and trapped in this interior space, while the other woman is at times in relation to a barefoot man. Other men in footwear enter and exit the café and can see the space around them. A red-haired woman in heels and a coat races in and out of the space. There is an immediate play between the interiority and exteriority of both the physical space, and of the self: “the red-haired woman, who can see her surroundings and avoid bumping into the furniture... is nonetheless unable to grasp the interiority from within which the women in the white petticoats draw their movements” (Florêncio 58). There is something incongruous in the singular physical space these people are all sharing, as the ways they are behaving within it are at odds. The women moving eyes closed through space are acting against propriety for a café setting, taking off a nightgown to lay bare chested on a café table (Bausch *Café* 00:16:51-00:17:02), or ploughing through the space, only spared from knocking into tables and chairs by one of the fully dressed men, whose primary function appears to be to clear the way (Bausch *Café* 00:05:42-00:05:49). Each character is operating on their own particular track, following an individual micro logic in relation to the space, objects, and bodies; as a whole, this café is a macrocosm of many alternate logics at play.

The objects and the space generate logics of their own against assumptions and common forms of use. We quickly understand that Bausch cannot leave the space: “Windows... hint at an outside world, a possible escape route, that does not even exist within the piece’s internal logic. The revolving doors of *Café Müller* similarly lead nowhere, but hint at a void, an expanse of nothingness beyond the limits of the stage” (Weir 82). We see Bausch’s open palmed searching lead her to those revolving doors, but instead of bringing her to the outside space, she loops around and around, before eventually being ejected back into the café (Bausch *Café* 00:24:54-

00:29:24). This queer use of the revolving door, this non-dominant logic for how it operates throws expectations into question, as the same door throughout also “meets everybody’s expectations and delivers a woman who arrives from the ungraspable outside” (Florêncio 55). The absurding of the relationship between people, objects, and the space makes noticeable each entrance which ordinarily may have appeared common; we are now made to question the logics of the space, and why use is available to some and not to others. The impossibility of finding an understanding of objects is an interesting concept João Florêncio brings to his reading of *Café Müller*. Florêncio’s approach focuses primarily on the work of Graham Hartman, who is a central figure in “what has come to be known as Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO)” (54), which is a philosophy that, controversially,²⁷ equalizes everything, “Humans, trees, dreams, unicorns, otters, stock markets, viruses” (54) onto the same ontological footing as objects. Though not a subscriber to this philosophy myself, it does provide an interesting framework to consider the work, as OOO believes that “when two entities encounter one another, they never really overcome the distance that separates them. When encountering one another, neither entity is able to experience the other in full” (Florêncio 55). The women with their eyes closed find themselves bumping into the wall and nearly bumping into chairs. The body and the object and the space are incongruous with each other; distance exists between them in their inability to find an ontological understanding of one another. As Florêncio explains, “Objects are irreducible to relations because the primary relationship one establishes with them lies not in knowing but in using them” (54). Likewise, with abundant queer use, the objects remain unknowable. The way the chairs are scattered about the stage presents a kind of map, a shifting, unknowable landscape both in terms of where the chairs will be scattered on any particular night, and in terms of the

²⁷ See Kerr for a quick guide to OOO in the arts and ethical problems innate in the philosophy.

unknowable divide between them and the performers. With this unknowability, this incongruous ontological divide, the objects in *Café Müller* present an unstable terrain.

While *Café Müller* might leave some viewers with a lingering impression of human futility from the repetitive loops of character patterns, I believe such a reading loses all sense of subtlety and hope that is present in the work. As noted earlier, there is scholarship drawing parallels between Bausch and Beckett, or to be more accurate, tying Bausch *to* Beckett (what is she, a rope!), and such readings typically point to Esslinian, Theatre of the Absurd notions of the meaninglessness of the human condition. In his reading of the *Café Müller* section in which a man and woman slam one another repeatedly into a wall (Bausch *Café* 00:38:56-00:40:50), Price suggests “that certain conditions cannot be changed” (330) and that *Café Müller* exists “as a representation of inevitability” (330). I believe such readings totally negate the piece’s ending, in which the red-haired woman removes her coat and her wig, places them on Bausch’s character, removes her shoes, and exits (Bausch *Café* 00:45:30-00:46:00). She has achieved a complete energy transformation, and this removal of her exterior possessions allows us to read the work as acknowledging a potential for change and hope, sensing that “interior and exterior worlds are not such separate realities. Rather, they are always somewhat permeable to one another” (Florêncio 59). There are actually some significant energy transformations throughout, including one where one of the men begins to flutter with his feet, in an uplifted, frantic, scattered, and slightly clumsy manner we had come to identify with the red-haired woman (Bausch *Café* 00:42:02-00:42:57). Also, this woman had made an attempt at removing her shoes and slowing down before the piece’s end (Bausch *Café* 00:31:25-00:34:01), which is much more a transformation into the energy of the bare-footed people in the café. People in a sense transform into other people through these energy shifts: bodies as other bodies. Much as in the work of Papaioannou,

the body also becomes object, as we get the surprising reveal when the red-haired woman removes what we hadn't up until then known to be a wig. Transformation and change are beautiful features of this work and are not entirely compatible with ideas of futility. This is the most glaring example of transformation within the work, but my reading (or to use less literative language, sensing) of the piece wouldn't feel complete without acknowledging the multiple micro transformations present throughout through repetition / trying.

There is no such thing as pure repetition in Bausch's works. She has told us so. They try again, and as they do so, they transform, as hopefully do audiences: "We've seen it all before, but have we grasped it?" (Florêncio 55). In one scene in *Café Müller*, the red-haired woman leans forward towards a man, and closes her eyes for a kiss. Slowly, the man leans forward and kisses her, before he dashes to a new area of the space. Eyes open in a panic, she races to this new place, leans forward, closes her eyes, and he kisses her again. Quickly he dashes off, and she chases. Over and over. Re-contextualizing. Bringing "repetition" into a new context. Eventually he travels too quickly for a kiss and escapes altogether, leaving her lost and frantically stepping; we uncover how this identifiable movement of hers came to be (Bausch *Café* 00:36:36-00:38:09). In this scene I see transformation. There is no true repetition, only an escalation in trying again; embodied knowledge resulting from experience. I also experience the transformation of my assumptions or expectations of time. I feel the presence of time evaporating or losing its sense of common logic. In this scene I sense a large timespan, as though I were witnessing the lifespan of a relationship budding and fading. The red-haired woman's frantic footsteps are themselves a form of repetition. It is a repeated motif in a sense. Of course, if you counted her steps and directions and exact rhythms, you could pinpoint how they are not an exact physical repetition; however, it is this semblance of sameness, the overuse of this state

of being that transforms her situation into one of tragedy. The longer it persists, the more tragic it feels. This is heightened by her attempts throughout the piece to slow down that are eventually superseded with the nervous stepping as she falls back into her rut. With each new step, punctuated by the sound of the heel hitting the floor, the overuse transforms our perceptions of her character deeper into tragedy.

Through repetition there is transformation where Bausch invites us to see the people. Subjectivity emerges through each micro transformation. This is seen, again, in moments of violence. We can consider the woman barreling, eyes closed, into the sea of chairs and tables: though often saved from collision by one of the men who clears her path, there is a “very real danger the dancer appears to be in as she risks her body in the dramatic action amid the chairs. We are forced to consider the scene from the compelling interaction of the real event... and... its metaphoric meaning, both of which take place through the dancer’s body” (Climenhaga 213-214). In the moments when the man and woman are slamming each other into the wall, which get progressively more forceful, the part of myself with insider’s knowledge knows this has been rehearsed for the best technical way to make impact and amplify sound, and that the downstage right wall is padded; however, the other part of myself whose disbelief has been suspended, begins not only caring for them as characters, but begins to feel alarmed for them as individual people. These moments leave us to “consider the relationship between the performer as represented presence and real person” (Climenhaga 214).

One of the most well-known scenes in *Café Müller* engages directly with repetition, embracing Bausch’s belief in change. We see a woman and man in a tight hug. A tall man (to be referred to as the manipulator) in a clear sequence of events lowers the woman’s right arm, the man’s right arm, the man’s left arm, the woman’s left arm, uprights the man’s head, brings the

woman's head upright so their lips meet in a kiss, bends the man's left arm to ninety degrees at the elbow palm up, bends the man's right arm, wraps the woman's left arm around the man's shoulders, lifts the woman up as her body falls limp in the manipulator's arms, and places her in the man's upturned arms. The manipulator walks away, she slides lifelessly out of the man's arms to the floor, and she springs back up into the embrace (Bausch *Café* 00:11:02-00:12:41). This sequence is repeated over and over at escalating speeds until eventually the manipulator does not return (Bausch *Café* 00:12:41-00:15:08). The couple continue to escalate the movement on their own (Bausch *Café* 00:15:08-00:15:44). The same bodies are engaged in the process of translation, recreation, repetition, but the same bodies in another sense they are not. Bausch is playing with change through repetition. The bodies from one sequence to the next are beginning each repetition with an accumulating vibrancy of experience. They are more and more out of breath, and in a greater state of emotional, physical, and psychological pain and distress. In each cycle, their heightened state escalates. We are watching the transformation of subjecthood. Beginning like objects being placed without any agency by the manipulator, they transform into people who can't help but let sounds from their experience lived in the body escape them. The dancer's body is not one "of an object expressing through developed movement" but rather "that of a subject involved in the unfolding of dramatic action" (Climenhaga 215). Through absurding situations, Bausch challenges our sense of perception of what and how we are seeing, inviting us to consider the real people, always present amidst any façade on stage and in life.

WHAT'S THE USE

You may be wondering why any of this matters. What's the use? This question I return to often when tasked with putting to words what I know from a feeling. I think of my work

themselves in its workshopped phase. It was presented in a dance studio in 2019, and, despite this being a space designated for dance, dance comes with its extreme codings and baggage; the body is literally choreographed into ways of being. With over thirty years of dance experience behind me in these environments, I have seen some things I wish I hadn't, and that as a teacher, I continue to see.²⁸ For an arguably progressive field, our environments — the spaces we generate from repetitive ways of use — can at times be far from so. Somehow doing *themselves* in this insider's understanding of a charged environment highlighted the work's feminist collectivized agreements and ways of being in space that subtly challenged the micro-norms through deliberate othered existences, foregrounding agency and transformation, where women take the time they need. It hit home for me the question of who sets the rules in our spaces and how we can choose to exist in a logic of our own as resistance. These were small acts of subtle subversion for the spaces in which I work and live. I am not changing the world or performing an overtly radical act, but these acts of redefinition matter to me.

My privileged body only generates a certain degree of resistance to the dominance in most of the environments I inhabit. Ahmed states, “You have a fit when an environment is built to accommodate you. You are a misfit when there is an incongruous relation of your body to thing or body to world” (60), and on the whole, my body “fits.” I can only speak in this specific way to the experience lived in my body, particular to me, and therefore, areas where my body can address wrongs are subtle and insubstantial as compared with the more glaring injustices of

²⁸ I have taught in places where the boys are conditioned to approach me after class to shake my hand, while the girls, eyes downturned, mumble a quiet “thank you” as they scurry away, obstructed from view by the boys whose hands I am shaking. And we wonder why there are fewer female choreographers than there should be. Coding starts early. Who gets to be comfortable in the space? Who gets to ask questions and engage in meaningful conversations with their teachers? Who becomes comfortable speaking with those in positions of power? This practice was immediately addressed and stopped in my class, but I can't un-see it. I can't un-feel it.

our times, for which I try to find more direct and immediate ways of working towards allyship. I recall once more my proposal of the absurd as a flexible verb, absurding, as carrying the potential to enter environments with any body and work against that which is dominant. I by no means express my thoughts prescriptively, because I do not presume to know the experience of existing as an IBPOC artist navigating dance or life in Canada.

As I have been conducting this research, I've been thinking about and feeling deeply what I both miss and do not miss about my relationship with dance. I am so far removed physically, emotionally, even geographically from my life as a dance artist, and it is a strange thing to sense the impending shift back into our careers as the country gradually recovers from the pandemic. I, personally, was anxious to *use* my body again. I had intended for a physical component to this research. As such, I was cautious of appropriating from cultures beyond my own as I looked to find a collection of case studies which would inform the building of a dramaturgical structure. This proved a conundrum for me, and I acknowledge because of this, I have in fact aided a canon less inclusive than it should be.²⁹ However, as I was faced with the immediacy of bringing my body into my research, and with most spaces still just out of reach in current pandemic restrictions, I began to feel as though my body and my art were being *used* by the academy. As we reenter society and the world of art making, we cannot let our ideas of self, of our bodies, of our worth, of our use, of others' use become stable, become solid, become fixed

²⁹ When a path is well used, Ahmed reminds us, its use only grows with future travellers. Independent and small-scale dance works often do not have the resources to document their works and have them hosted online. Video documentation of dance that is sought after by university libraries is extremely slim, and often turns to ballet and the few large-scale companies worldwide. During this pandemic, the accessibility of works of performance has been critical, though it is also important to consider who has the resources to make their works accessible in the first place. In these times of social isolation and dependence on what is online, I am guilty of citing what is available, and as such, of carving out the travelled paths further with some of my case studies. If this research were to be extended beyond the pandemic, I would push to stray further from the dominant path.

nouns. We must always re-consider, keep the gaze upon us unfixed, challenge expectations and perceptions, even our own. We cannot normalize. We cannot become dormant. We cannot repeat. Absurding can be found everywhere. It can be found in performance, but also in ways of doing scholarship and performance historiography (just because the Theatre of the Absurd and abstraction, for example, fit more readily in the academy does not give them dominance over my research; it is they who are the case studies, and my case studies, the actual theory being studied). Whether we sit and type, whether we move, our knowledge is embodied. We cannot repeat. We *must* try again. I will try again when I'm ready on a logic of my own as resistance.

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