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I Saw a Thing: Welcoming Performance into Our Everyday Lives

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I Saw a Thing: Welcoming Performance into Our Everyday Lives

In my hometown of Chattanooga, TN, there has been a surge of money and interest invested into the creation and display of public sculpture across the city. The effect of that investment is palpable. Not only does the art beautify the city, but it engages the public. Chattanooga's public art project allows all types of populations to be exposed to the visual arts, engage in conversations about the work, and take pride in the artistic community in which they live. ¹As I have watched this public art movement unfold I feel incredibly excited and energized, but I also feel a sense of envy towards the visual arts. Programs like Chattanooga's public art initiative make it possible for visual art to be seen and appreciated by populations that may not go out of their way to visit a gallery or museum. These sculptures shape the places in which they are displayed and the hundreds of people, who walk by them daily, rain and shine, night and day. My project began because I wondered if dance could engage the public in a similar manner. Could dance become an everyday feature in our lives? This question is ultimately what inspired me to take on the ambitious project of creating a dance that is performed in the same place, at the same time, every single day of my final semester at Connecticut College.

The result of my choreographic exploration is a performance entitled *I Saw A Thing* (ISaT). This twenty minute performance happens everyday, including weekends, at 4:07pm . By the end of this project's run it will have been performed 88 times by 20 different dancers. "The thing" has survived through superstorm Nemo, rainstorms, and exhausting tech weeks. *ISaT* features five dancers dressed in hot pink and bright yellow; it begins when one performer holding 5 yellow balloons walks from the student center towards Shain library. Daily this performer serves

¹ "HISTORY & PUBLIC ART PLAN." *Public Art Chattanooga*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Sept. 2012.
<<http://www.publicartchattanooga.com/about.htm>>

as an usher welcoming her campus into the event that is “I Saw A Thing”. What follows is a quirky unfolding of events inspired by the songs and games of children and a general sense of play. Dancers race, roll, play hop-scotch, leapfrog, storytell, and sing their way through a performance that has been described by my peers as both a “happy brigade”² and a “quirky and charming way to brighten people’s days”³. The performance utilizes set choreography, tasked based directives, partnering, improvisation, and audience participation as its movement and theatrical vocabulary. Each performance comes to a close after the full cast sings a weather related song to their community, escorts an individual into the library by carrying them to the front door, and finally boogies through a minute long silent dance party.

By exploring the effect this type of project has on our campus community's understanding of and interaction with dance, it is my hope to broaden my understanding of what dance can be and what it can do. I want this project to be more than just another opportunity for students to see dance. I am interested in whether or not performance of this nature is something students can take pride in, question, and ultimately take ownership of. All too often, modern dance gets pushed aside because people don’t have the experience of seeing it. They may feel alienated by the ambiguity or simply have no idea what it is. Grant Jacoby, a senior dance major and good friend of mine, described his own experience illustrating this problem. Before his sophomore year of college Jacoby “didn't even know what modern dance was.” It was a mandatory performance and an intro level dance class that opened him up to what modern dance

² Anonymous. Feedback Card: "I Saw A Thing" 27 Apr. 2013. Raw data. Connecticut College, New London.

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³ Halpert, Zoe. "I Saw a Thing (Outside the Library)." *The College Voice* [New London] 18 Feb. 2013, Arts sec.: n. pag. 18 Feb. 2013. Web. 18 Apr. 2013.

was and exposed him to the art form that would eventually become a major part of his life. He claims that he:

“knew ballet, jazz, tap, and hip hop, but that was about it. For all I knew modern dance was a bunch of people rolling around on the floor making weird noises. I never thought of dance as being an art form, one that could make you think, act, and react. It has been a joy to discover how wrong I was.”⁴

I wonder how many other unknown dance fans and potential artists like Grant are out there. How would that change if communities, campuses, cities, and towns all had their own public dance or performance pieces? Could these works become tools that cultivate an appreciation of movement, discussions on dance, or even just the basic exposure to the art form?

Extending the run of this performance over the entirety of the semester is an essential component of this project. It was my hope that the repetition and consistency of *ISaT* would counteract some of the issues that come along with the ephemeral nature of dance in contrast to some other art forms like sculpture. Merce Cunningham spoke to this problem in one of his most famous quotes. He said, "you have to love dancing to stick to it. It gives you nothing back, no manuscripts to store away, no paintings to show on walls and maybe hang in museums, no poems to be printed and sold, nothing but that single fleeting moment when you feel alive.”⁵ But I want this experience to be just as much for the audience as it is the performers. I want the project to seep into the community’s perception of the space. It is my hope that consistency in time and place creates its own semi- permanent structural reality in the consciousness of viewers who have seen this work ten, twenty, maybe eighty times. I hope that pink and yellow people are now accepted as the reality, at least for the present, of 4:07 outside the library. My frustrations

⁴ Jacoby, Grant. "Before Modern Dance." Message to the author. 2 May 2013. E-mail.

⁵ Zimmer, Elizabeth. "Merce Cunningham's "Fleeting Moment When You Feel Alive"" *Merce Cunningham's Fleeting Moment When You Feel Alive*. Obit Magazine, n.d. Web. 03 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.obit-mag.com/articles/merce-cunninghams-fleeting-moment-when-you-feel-alive>>.

with ephemerality is what inspired this project, and the reason I wanted the work to be like sculpture. But I also want to recognize the ways dance, and its ephemeral nature, can be celebrated as a unique artistic form. This work differs from sculpture because it will never look the same twice. The weather, the cast, the audience, elements of audience participation, and the humanity of the performers makes this piece a unique performance every single day. That changeability helps to keep *ISaT* fresh, and is ultimately what differentiates it from other mediums of public art. Furthermore, *ISaT* is able to interact with people in way sculpture never could. Performers, unlike clay or steel, are able to converse with to their audience, respond to their viewers, and even include people by lifting them off the ground. This project was my attempt to bring the unique aspects of dance, performance, and participation outside of the studio, and into the Connecticut College's conscious understanding of their landscape.

Another goal of my thesis project is to determine how extended performance affects the experience of the performer in this challenging and unique task. If this could possibly be a future frontier for our art form it will be necessary to examine how this process affects the performers involved. Throughout the run of the project, keeping the work fresh and alive has proven to be a real challenge for the dancers. I have found that commonly trained dancers really rely on either the fear of the complete unknown or the presence of an actively engaged audience in order to reach a peak level of performance. The nature of this site-specific dance removed both of those inspirational conditions, making it all the more difficult to sustain a high level of motivated physical performance day in and day out. Throughout the project, I worked on developing strategies as both a performer and as a director to combat the inherent obstacles in presenting a work for such an extended period of time.

SECTION ONE: Research and Inspiration

In order to begin the process of creating and choreographing the work itself, I wanted to contextualize the project within dance history. I looked to various choreographers working in the realm of site-specific performance for inspiration and as varying points of reference. Site-specific work has an extensive history in both the visual and performing art worlds. Since this project was my first endeavor creating work outside and intended for a specific place, I needed to explore how choreographers before me managed outdoor conditions, scale, the public, and the creation of truly site-specific work. Nick Kaye explains site-specific work as art that “defines itself through properties, qualities, or meanings produced in specific relationships between an ‘object’ or ‘event’ and the position it occupies.”⁶ This definition is important because it qualifies the necessity of the space to the art created, without the “event” - “position” relationship the work no longer has a sense of “definition” or an artistic identity. For this particular project, I wanted directly define site-specific choreography in relation to my artistic process and research as the creation of movement and performance structures in a particular non-theatrical place, specifically for that space including its architecture and its community.

In the end, I decided to focus on 4 choreographers in particular. The work of these artists demonstrates the utilization of a variety of compositional tools uniquely tailored to site-specific choreography. Their repertory also serves as the compositional and thematic inspiration for *ISaT*. The artists I selected were Trisha Brown, Meredith Monk, Clarinda Mac Low, and Noémie Lafrance. Trisha Brown is one of the founders of modern site-specific choreography. Her interest in unique spaces developed out of her study with Ana Halprin on the West Coast, and her involvement with the experimental Judson Dance Theater (JDT) in Greenwich Village, which I will discuss further below. Her dances, “*Man Walking Down the Side of a Building*” (1969) and

⁶ Kaye, Nick. *Site-specific Art: Performance, Place, and Documentation*. London: Routledge, 2000. 1. Print.

Roof Piece (1971) revolutionized the way dances were created and defined. I found these works particularly relevant to my process in the way that they utilized primarily unused space, their simplicity, and the abilities of the works to stay true to task. I was interested in Monk's repertory from the 1970's because she deals with ideas of scale, time, and existence within daily life. Monk, another artist from JDT, created work in New York and throughout the Northeast that pushed boundaries of performance and the definition of dance during the revolutionary Judson era. Clarinda Mac Low, a contemporary New York based artist and self-proclaimed "creator of situations and environments"⁷, interested me because her work is an excellent example of participatory site-specific work, an aspect of performance I knew I wanted to work with early on. Mac Low's work physically and emotionally involves the audience, a tool that I think is vital in the creation of a project that hopes to insert itself into the daily life of its viewers. Finally, I chose to study the contemporary choreography of Noémie LaFrance, a young Canadian living in New York and choreographing around the world. Her work speaks to me and my own investigations, because she has an excellent eye for the transformation of spaces, while maintaining a sense of audience accessibility and play. LaFrance seamlessly integrates the joy and freedom of movement into her compositions, while maintaining a clear relationship to the space and the participation of the audience. These four choreographers are at the forefront of site-specific dance in both a historical and contemporary context. Their work has shaped the way performance is viewed both outside of theaters and in the public consciousness. By studying their process and repertory, I am able to choreograph and direct my own work *ISaT* with an understanding of how dance has entered into the public historically and today.

Trish Brown: Historical Grounding, Task, and Specificity

⁷ Mac Low, Clarinda. "About." *Clarinda Mac Low Art Performance and Ideas*. WordPress, n.d. Web. 23 Feb. 2013. <<http://clarindamaclow.com/about/>>.

I initially chose to research Trisha Brown to gain a better understanding of the origins of and the role of site-specific choreography in modern American theatrical dance history. Coincidentally, it has proven to be an incredibly important time to honor and understand Brown's legacy. In an article discussing the future of the Trisha Brown Dance Company, Lou Fancher claimed "immortality, if it is possible, will come from the rigor of Brown's vision as it lives on in site-specific re-mountings of the repertoire..."⁸. Less than a month ago, Trisha Brown officially retired from her position as the Artistic Director and Founding Choreographer of her 50 year-old company, and it is already being speculated that the lifeblood for the future of the company will be the recreation of Brown's innovative site-specific works. Reading this statement, prompted me to ask, "What is it that makes Brown's site-specific works timeless?" and "Why is it important that the company keep those particular works alive?"

Trisha Brown was able to successfully bring site-specific dance to the East Coast by presenting live performance that challenged common expectations of where dance should be performed. In order to have a grasp on the influence of Trisha Brown it is necessary to give a brief history of the birth of performative site-specific dance. Obviously, human beings were dancing long before the existence of traditional theaters. For centuries people have been dancing in unique spaces, outside, in the streets, in their homes, and out on the fields. So what was revolutionary about taking dance out of the theatrical space in the mid-late 20th century? Early modern dance pioneers, Isadora Duncan, Doris Humphrey and Ruth St. Denis all performed outdoors as well as in theaters, but it wasn't until the 1950's and 1960's that concert dancers really began to question the use of the proscenium stage as the primary venue for performance.

⁸ Fancher, Lou. "Dancemaker Trisha Brown Retires Her Choreographic Cap." *Berkeleyside*. N.p., 19 Mar. 2013. Web. 22 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.berkeleyside.com/2013/03/19/114044/>>.

During this time, artists on both coasts of the United States began to view non- theatrical spaces as inspirational and integral components at the core of movement and artistic exploration.

Some of the first compositional experiments that took place outside of the dance studio or stage were referred to by their creators as "happenings". These "happenings" began at Black Mountain College in NC- an experimental institution that fostered the creativity of artists such as composer John Cage, choreographer, Merce Cunningham, and painter, William De Kooning.

⁹These "happenings", which consisted of visual artists, musicians, poets, and dancers were based on improvisational structures and attempted to subvert traditional notions of performance. The first of which, entitled Theatre Piece No. 1, was constructed by John Cage and based on chance events. In a large open loft space an audience crowded into the center of the room, Merce Cunningham danced through the viewers, while MC Richards recited poetry, Robert Rauschenberg exhibited his paintings, and David Tudor played the piano. The artists had no plan of what they would do, they were simply instructed to do what they wanted in the midst of their other peers. Lou Harrison, a composer, faculty member and good friend of John Cage, admitted that at the first happening "he spent a good deal of time laughing". He knew Cage had designed a time based score but as a viewer he found "there to be no rhyme or reason to it, and nothing much to follow."¹⁰ This was the introduction of a dramatically different understanding of performance, that audiences had yet to understand or interpret. Eventually these happenings, which were conscious rejections of theatrical conventions including set choreography, medium delineations, dramatic narrative structures, and the use of a proscenium stage, relocated to New York City. The collective performed their events in lofts, storefronts, and eventually Judson

⁹Kloetzel, Melanie, and Carolyn Pavlik. *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces*. Gainesville: University of Florida, 2009. 8-9. Print.

¹⁰ *Fully Awake: Black Mountain College*. Dir. Cathryn Davis Zommer and Neeley House. Perf. John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller. Documentary Educational Resources, 2007. DVD.

Church in Greenwich Village. It wasn't long before choreographers like Brown, Lucinda Childs, Monk, and Robert Dunn moved these events out from under the roofs and constrictions of indoor spaces.

Meanwhile on the West Coast, Anna Halprin was hosting workshops on her outdoor dance deck in the San Francisco Bay area from 1950-1972. Halprin trained dancers, including Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, and Meredith Monk improvisational techniques centered on body knowledge and the environment. Halprin had dancers interact with each other and their natural surroundings in order to gain a stronger sense of their own bodies. With Halprin, dancers would perform physical tasks that would encourage them to adapt to the environment and acknowledge the functional mechanics of their bodies. For example, she would ask her students to carry driftwood, build structures, or interact with an airplane hangar.¹¹ It was during these workshops that Trisha Brown and her contemporaries learned the fundamental components of site-specific performance and the seeds of what would become post-modern dance. Halprin explained her workshops and the philosophies as a place where she was “redefining performance and also redefining who performed and what you performed about.” She taught dancers to question convention stating: “ We don't have to be in a proscenium arch. We don't have to go barefoot, and look like modern dancers that wear tights and leotards. We don't have to be silent when we dance. We can use our voices, we are human beings.”¹² Halprin's guidance and influence was a tremendous force in the development of postmodern dance and consequently modern site-specific choreography and exploration.

¹¹ Stone, Joan. "Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance." *American Studies* 48.2 (2007): 93. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 3 May 2013.

¹² *Artists in Exile: A Story of Modern Dance in San Francisco*. Dir. Austin Forbord. Perf. Remy Charlip, Della Davidson, Anna Halprin. Domestic Theatrical Distributor, 2010. Videocassette.

When a number of Halprin's students, including those listed above, returned to New York, many of them joined forces with people who had worked under Cunningham and Cage. These artists went on to collectively form the Judson Dance Theater (JDT). Members of JDT group aimed to reject traditional notions of dance and performance. It is important to acknowledge that during this time period, shifts away from the tradition were happening in almost every artistic discipline. In fact the term, "site-specific" was originally used to describe the work of visual earth artists¹³ like Robert Smithson, a sculptor who used naturally occurring materials to build a series of "earthworks", or large scale non- permanent natural outdoor structures.¹⁴ Various members of the Judson Theater, including Paxton and Lucida Childs, performed experiments that took them into the public sphere where they interacted with the environment. For example in Child's, *Street Dance* (1964) she took to the streets of New York, while her audience watched from the window of Robert Dunn's performance loft space.¹⁵ After viewing the work of her peers, Brown began to experiment with her own site-specific "equipment pieces". The goal of these performances was to inhabit space that otherwise has been left vacant. In order to occupy those spaces, Trisha Brown designed various apparatuses or "equipment pieces" that would allow her or her dancers to use the space as needed. This experimentation led to one of Brown's most easily identifiable works, *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1969). During which, a man attached to a harness walks down the side of a building as if he was simply walking on the ground. ¹⁶Shortly after, Brown created another work utilizing the architecture of New York City. Her work *Roof Piece* (1971) was performed by 12 dancers on rooftops around the city. These dancers passed gestural movements along from

¹³ Kloetzel and Pavlik,10

¹⁴ Goldberg, Elyse. "Robert Smithson." *Robert Smithson*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.robertsmithson.com/introduction/introduction.htm>>.

¹⁵ Kloetzel and Pavlik, 12

¹⁶ Sommer, Sally. "Equipment Dances: Trisha Brown." *The Drama Review: TDR* 16.3 (1972): 135-41. Print.

dancer to dancer, building to building like a game of telephone. The viewers were able to see all the dancers from afar, and thus the distortion of the movement as it passed from one dancer to another.¹⁷

These two works are Trisha's seminal site-specific projects, and they work so well because of their simplicity and task-based structures. Both pieces intrigue because they function on a grand scale, yet are governed by a simple task. Up until this point, people had never seen a man walk down a building as simply as he walks down the street, or a grand game of metropolis movement telephone. Yet Brown allows the viewer to experience the performance for what it is, a man walking down a building, nothing more, nothing less. Similarly, the practice of dancers trying to imitate one another from a long distance is not complex, but through the framing and presentation Brown created a work that was clear and captivating. The balance between grandiosity and simplicity amidst proper framing is what makes Brown's work timeless and effective. The reason these works are considered to be some of the first truly site-specific pieces is because they can not possibly function anywhere else in the same way. *Man Walking Down a Side of a Building* would cease to exist without a building. Brown creates work that is completely dependant on the site itself, making every component of the performance necessary. In the scope of my own project, I hoped that the library, the pedestrian traffic around the library, and the use of the architecture and landscape remained integral to the movement and the overall performance. By using the windows, ledges, slats, ramps, benches, and lamp posts I tried to

¹⁷Kourlas, Gia. "Red Chain Reactions Against the Sky." *New York Times* 12 June 2011, Arts sec.: n. pag. 12 June 2011. Web. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/13/arts/dance/trisha-brown-](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/13/arts/dance/trisha-brown-dance-company-at-the-high-line-review.html)

¹⁷[dance-company-at-the-high-line-review.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/13/arts/dance/trisha-brown-dance-company-at-the-high-line-review.html)>.

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assure that the work was dependant on the space. It wasn't just something that was adapted to the space or inserted. Just like Trisha Brown's dancer was faced with the task of putting one foot in front of the other until reaching the ground, I aimed to use tasks in my direction and creation of ISaT. For example, there is a section where two dancers are challenged to make it to the top of a hill by crawling up then rolling down repeatedly, they are to repeat this task until they actually summit the hill with this two steps forward- one step back approach. Another example of this task based practice, occurs when two dancers are forced to stare at each other doing a silly movement where they slap their legs then shake their hands in an attempt to make their partner laugh. They don't move on until someone laughs. These moments do not have a set number of repetitions, rather they are based on the completion of an assignment. Using a task based approach in some moments of the work harkens back to the unique nature of dance in this context. The tasks will never be completed in the same amount of time or in the same way, adding to ever- changing and beautiful reality of ISaT.

Meredith Monk: Media based Inspiration, Perspective, Scale, and Time

Meredith Monk, a multidisciplinary artist and performer, isn't necessarily known for her site-specific performances. What she is known for are her new opera performance pieces involving original music, theater, and choreography. Since the late 1960's, Monk has crafted stage worlds that utilize a variety of elements including original musical scores, live vocal performances, contemporary choreography, and complex scenic design. For example, Monk's opera "*Education of the Girlchild*" (1973) features nine dancers performing specific and detailed gestural movement, an original score that develops from the sounds of death to the babbling of a newborn, a large platform set, painted white and furnished with a chair, and a long winding cloth

pathway she uses throughout the piece as she travels backwards through her life.¹⁸ All elements of this historical performance are designed and executed by Monk to create a unique and well-crafted stage world. Initially, I avoided looking into Monk as a research source, because quite frankly, I found her work to be incredibly esoteric and boring. I also imagined that all of her performances took place on the proscenium stage. But somehow I came across pictures of her site-specific work here at Connecticut College, and subsequently her essay entitled "Meredith Monk as Site Pioneer". I learned that Monk was not only a leader in the early field of site-specific work, but also that we were drawn to the topic through a similar inquiry. In the opening paragraph of that essay, Monk describes her personal inquiries and investigations that lead her to begin working outside of the proscenium theater. One such inquiry leapt off the page, "Can we make it (performance) an inherent part of our lives, a template of experience?"¹⁹ This specific question spoke to what I felt was the core question leading my project. I, like Monk, wanted to play with notions of space, time, duration, and presentation in order to redefine what the campus community's and my own conceptions of dance were. After finding this kindred curiosity with Meredith Monk, I found it important to look into her site-specific repertory, in order to see how she had dealt with the same themes I was seeking to address. In the late 1960's and early 1970's Monk created three works that dealt with space, duration, and performance in unique and inspirational way: *Blueprint* (1967), *Juice: A Theater Cantata in Three Installments* (1968), and *Needlebrain Lloyd and the Systems Kid: A Live Movie* (1970). I will briefly discuss those three works, and the ways that they influenced my own investigation.

¹⁸ "Meredith Monk." *Current Repertory*. SOLO FROM EDUCATION OF THE GIRICHILD, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

¹⁹ Monk, Meredith. "Meredith Monk as Site Pioneer, 1969-71." (n.d.): 40-51. *EBSCO*. Web. 4 Apr. 2013.

In an interview with Josephine Reed, Monk described her early interest in site-specific work, before it named as such. Monk explains her reasoning for her first outdoor work *Blueprint* as an "exploration [of] other spaces [outside of] a theatrical space, because I just was getting bored with that kind of frontal presentation."²⁰ For *Blueprint*, this took place in rural Woodstock, NY, the audience stood outside and downhill of the performance space; while all the action occurred through the glass windows of the main building. This piece was innovative because at the time (1967) choreographers and Monk's peers at the Judson and were just beginning to question conceptions of performance. The use of an atypical theatrical space challenged conventional notions of where art took place, and how that art is viewed. It is important to note that by taking dance outside of the dance studio or theater, the way in which the dance is viewed is inherently different. Viewers are no longer limited to a frontal perspective, instead audiences are free to walk around and take in images from numerous angles. Ideas of scale shift to be a much more prominent aspect of the work, and the relationship between the performers and the audience can be redefined through limitless viewpoints and spatial configurations.

In my own project, I aimed to play with perspective by placing movement in locales that allowed the viewer to "find" new aspects of the choreography as time went on. For example, in the beginning of ISaT when the balloon girl sings, "You Are My Sunshine" the viewer is given an auditory clue and the opportunity to discover the performer by looking down over a wall that they normally just stroll right past. But once they find the singer, the viewer is given a bird's eye view of the event, a perspective that could not otherwise occur in a traditional theater space.

Monk's work, *Juice: A Theater Cantata in Three Installments* was a three-part installation that took place at the Guggenheim Museum, the Minor Latham Playhouse, and in Monk's

²⁰ "An Interview with Meredith Monk." Interview by Melanie Kloetzel. *Site Dance* 14 Oct. 2006: 33-40. Print.

personal loft. The Guggenheim installation of the piece featured 85 performers, all of whom remained stationary and were viewed from a 360 degree angle. The second installation of the piece only featured nine performers and took place on a proscenium stage. The third installation featured all the props and costumes from the previous two performances, but it featured no actual performers.²¹ Juice explored several elements and questions associated with site-specific work. The first of which was the shifting of roles between the audience and the performers. At the Guggenheim, Monk attempted to reverse the typical exchange of activity level and observation that takes place between the two groups. During the first installment the audience was able to travel around the dance while the performers remained stationary. The viewers were forced to "be viewed" by the performers. The contrast between the first and second installments of the work, which were performed a month apart, encouraged the audience to recognize the limitations and the meaning of the traditional proscenium space. The third and final installment of the work, pushed the process of viewing a step further by completely eliminating the performers themselves, instead, their presence was referenced simply by the placement of objects and costumes that had been present in the two earlier installments. It also raises the ideas of permanence and absence/presence Juice used proximity and temporality as tools in the creation of the structure and presentation of the work.

What I found to be most influential from *Juice*, was the idea that the audience is an inherent part of the performance. The way the audience views and takes part in the performance is a performative act. What I mean is when people are put in a situation where they are viewing something, especially when they are not viewing it in the dark of a theater audience, they are

²¹ Kaye, Nick. *Site-specific Art: Performance, Place, and Documentation*. London: Routledge, 2000. 56-60. Print.

being viewed. They perform in the space for themselves, the performers, and their perceived audience.

I noticed this phenomenon in ISaT, particularly when the idea of performance made people nervous. Sometimes people would keep their head down, walk faster, or take an alternate route in an effort to “not perform” or embarrass themselves by being put on display in front of their peers. I sought to include the audience in this performance and heighten their engagement by addressing them both verbally and physically. For example, two of the performers in the dance become escorts to the people walking around the library at the given time. These performers walk and converse with members of the college community before asking the viewer to take a role in controlling the performance. The viewer is asked if they would like to see the performers jump, spin, or rest. This interaction blurs the lines between creator, performer, and viewer. It makes the "audience" a vital and necessary part of the work, by taking the performance out of my hands of the choreographer. In that moment on that day, a small portion of the performance is decided by the lax bro walking down the sidewalk or the nerdy looking girl who decided to jump right along with the performers. It is in these particular moments, that the difference between dance and sculpture is so palpable and wonderful. These moments are the ones that are changeable a dependent on the community we are trying to connect with. Similarly Monk allowed her audience to become an essential component of *Juice*, by shifting the roles and presence of the performers and the audience throughout her three installments of the project.

After *Juice*, Monk was asked to choreograph for the 1970 American Dance Festival located at Connecticut College. It was then that she premiered her work *Needle Brain Lloyd and the Systems Kid*. Monk described the piece as "a live movie". This "movie" took place throughout an entire day and all around the college campus. *Needlebrain* relied on events and

happenings as opposed to pure "choreography". Meaning *Needlebrain* was constructed through a series of cinematic images and ideas as opposed to kinetic movement sequences and phrases. The dance included boats in the arboretum, horses on the campus green, dancing on slow moving cars, croquet games, and finally a nighttime motorcycle parade. It didn't include large dance sequences requiring the skill of classically trained dancers, there were no pirouettes, and no 8 count phrases to memorize. Instead, this work was a study in using a cinematic eye to control the scope of what the viewer witnessed. Monk worked with traditional cinematic concepts like disjunctions of time and space, pans, zooms, close-ups, and dissolves in order to create her "live movie" which took place at four different campus locations sporadically over a 6 hour time period. Film is an interesting medium to consider because it actually controls the eye of the viewer. By using a camera a filmmaker is able to zoom in and out of an image, choose a perspective, and control the timing and angle from which something is seen. Monk described one of her framing techniques as follows, "a land rover filled with performers moved slowly around the perimeter of the green. At times it would appear miniscule in the viewer's frame, and then it would drive around the green toward the audience, stopping in front of them and obstructing their view."²²

In the same way I can't completely mimic sculpture through dance, Monk would be unable to truly mimic the level of control a filmmaker has. Yet it is interesting to recognize that she uses dance as a way to connect with the elements she values in film. *Needlebrain Lloyd and the Systems Kid* inspired and interested me partially due to its historical tie to this campus, the site of *ISaT*, and also due to its connection between a non-live medium and dance. *Needlebrain* was a study in the choreography of objects, actions, space, transportation, time, and spectatorship.

²² "An Interview with Meredith Monk." Interview by Melanie Kloetzel. *Site Dance* 14 Oct. 2006: 33-40. Print.

This was important to me because I initially struggled with my choreographic process and the creation of material I felt connected to. I knew that I did not want to simply create "modern dance in the grass", I wanted to create and present "a thing" that was entertaining and unique, as well as tolerable and ever-changing throughout its long performance run. *Needlebrain* inspired me to utilize the variety of theatrical and physical tools at my disposal in addition to dance phrases and gestural work I had been exploring early on. I incorporated storytelling, humor, games, hopscotch, singing, puzzles, audience participation, conversation, and improvisation as devices to address the perspective, scale, and attention of the viewer's experience of the work. For example, there is a moment where three performers squish their faces against the Chu room windows. In this moment we are not doing anything particularly technical with our bodies, but we do shift the way we are being seen. Our audience shifts from the viewer outside the library to the student inside the library, and our silly action infiltrates their space in a very different way for a brief moment. In some cases this "infiltration" was considered disruptive. One student appeared irked on a thread entitled "pink and yellow balloons" on ConnCollConfessional.com, an anonymous gossip site. She claimed, "that happened right outside of where my senior seminar was having its final presentations -.-"²³ notice the comment was followed by a perturbed looking emoticon. Others regard this same moment as a much needed levity amidst their serious studies or lectures.

The use of non-traditional dance elements really became a part of dance dialogue during the 1960's because of the work of the JDT. While the Judson movement gained support from reviews by Allen Hughes in the New York Times claiming the work was "splendid chaos" and The Village Voice's Jill Johnson praised the groups performances as an evening where "special

²³ Anonymous. "Pink and Yellow Balloons?" *ConnCollConfessional*. N.p., 13 Dec. 2012. Web.

moments arose as expected”²⁴. I would argue that acceptance of Judson style post- modernism did not, and has not reached a broad spectrum of audiences in the years between then and now. In my experience, general audiences today are not familiar with the efforts of the Judson movement, and they feel alienated by the obscurity. These elements and their existence in ISaT caused some audiences to ponder the nature and the validity of the daily performance itself, while allowing others to feel a sense of wonder and accessibility in the quirkiness of this daily happening. This balance was something I really desired to create and struggled with throughout the choreographic process.

The title of this project is decidedly "I Saw A Thing" not "I Saw A Dance.” I made this decision because I knew my audience might not view this project as dance. The title is intended to give the viewer permission to take the performance for what it is, simply “a thing.” I think this is an important idea that Meredith Monk herself has contributed to the concept of live performance. It is my understanding that Monk has been making work for more than 40 years that is not confined by the categorical terminology of dance, music, visual design, theater, or film. Her interdisciplinary and non- exclusive approach to art making allows for the creation of rich complex work. More importantly, this approach invites audiences to view a performance for what it is, as opposed to what they expect to see from a performance within a particular discipline.

Monk’s command of space and temporality, interest in the roles of performer and viewer, and mixed movement vocabulary set her apart. By studying the way she utilized those skills in relation to the language of a non-live art like film, I was able to learn the way images are translated between mediums. This furthered my understanding of the tools and ways in which

²⁴ Johnston, Jill. "Democracy." *Village Voice* [New York] 23 Aug. 1962: n. pag. *Movement Research*. Web. <<http://www.movementresearch.org/criticalcorrespondence/blog/?p=5419>>.

my own project could utilize the unique qualities of dance in order to create a work that had a similar effect of sculpture.

Clarinda Mac Low: Freedom through Play and the Performer- Viewer Connection

Clarinda Mac Low is a contemporary installation artist, dancer and performer. She describes her own work as the "creation of situations and environments... where viewer and viewed are mutually affecting, often engaging audiences in the context of their real lives."²⁵ I was drawn to her work after seeing footage of a project that she did titled, "Assisted Street Crossing". This work has been performed throughout New York City and also in Kuopio, Finland as part of the ANTI Contemporary Art Festival. During this event, Mac Low and three dancers dressed in white painter's pants, white shirts and construction vests stand at a busy intersection and ask members of the public if they would like to be carried across the street. The 'liftee', or person being lifted, gets to choose one of six lifts from a "menu" on the inside of the lifters hat. After selecting a lift the lifter explains the technique of the move and then swiftly picks up the participant and carries them safely across the street.

I thought this work was brilliant, and I knew I wanted to incorporate both physical and theoretical inspiration from this project into my own choreography. I wanted people to feel the joy of being lifted off the ground. As well as the feelings of fear, safety, and trust that go along with that physical sensation. This is what inspired one of my favorite moments of the piece, in which we give an audience member a balloon, and "a lift" to the library door.

For me, it is beautiful to see artists like Mac Low engaging with the public in a way that is warm, fun, exciting, inviting and simultaneously daring. After doing further research on

²⁵ Mac Low, Clarinda. "About." *Clarinda Mac Low Art Performance and Ideas*. WordPress, n.d. Web. 23 Feb. 2013. <<http://clarindamaclow.com/about/>>.

Assisted Street Crossing, I discovered that it is one manifestation of a larger project by Mac Low and her collaborators called *TRYST*. Mac Low's website describes *TRYST* as a project that "aims to make situations where the real experience is left up to the individual audience member's choice and whim."²⁶

The reason I am so drawn to Mac Low's work is because it is refreshing to see performance that is made for the specific experience of people viewing it, in a way that is thoughtful, creative, and playful. In the creation of ISaT, I spent a lot of time acknowledging my own notion of physical play, and the reintroduction of that to our college community.

Pink and yellow are playful colors. Balloons are playful. Squishing your face against a window, hopscotch, rolling down hills, singing songs, and allowing your feet to leave the ground are all playful experiences for me. It was important for me to use these moments to acknowledge the utter importance of play, while still acknowledging the inherent risk involved in presenting lightheartedness with importance. Many people lose a sense of wonder by the time they are in college, and these playful things no longer seem important. When I created this piece, I put myself at risk to be critiqued as childish, silly, and just downright strange, because I saw value in exposing a softer side of the art world.

Some of the best moments from ISaT have arisen when we could see people's willingness to play, or interact with the piece, change overtime. For example, one day early on in the process we offered to escort a boy into the library by picking him up. After four or five minutes of failed persuasion the young man finally decided he wasn't ready to be carried around just yet. But he said he actually really wanted to do it, he just wasn't ready yet. Two weeks later, the same boy was standing outside of the library waiting for that portion of the performance to

²⁶ Mac Low, Clarinda. "TRYST Overview." *Clarinda Mac Low Art Performance and Ideas*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2013.

come. When it did, he volunteered to be lifted with a smile on his face the whole time. Other viewers have gotten decidedly more playful throughout the process as well. People have joined in to sing or dance with us on numerous occasions. A girl even beat boxed with us as we sang through "You are my Sunshine".

These interactions mimic and celebrate what Clarinda Mac Low is doing with TRYST. She believes that through physical interaction, and interactive social experiments we can actually access larger questions about our freedom and the structure of our society. All too often, I think artists believe their work must be serious, or that it will not be taken seriously unless it addresses some sort of existential personal crisis or a giant geopolitical plight. While these topics can certainly make for thought provoking and important work, we can't forget the light that art can bring into our lives, and the true impact the simple recognition of joy can have. I could see this importance specifically time when I was performing *ISaT*. I have been told by countless people that *ISaT* makes their day better. One specific moment I remember occurred when I was asking a boy if he wanted to see me jump, spin, or rest. He replied that he really just wanted a hug and my balloon. He had just received news that a loved one was in the hospital. We hugged for a while before he thanked me for bringing a "little lightness to his day". These small moments of connection were the big victories and celebrations of this work. I admire Mac Low, because she strives to create art that reminds us what it is like play, feel joy, and to feel connected.

Mac Low's work and philosophy has greatly influenced the way that we interact with our own community while performing "the thing". Mac Low's repertory differs from other site-specific forms because "the site" depends heavily on the presence of an involved audience as opposed to the physical or architectural landscape. This is what allows her to translate her

performance so easily from the streets of New York to an intersection in Finland. When we perform ISaT, specifically the later sections that rely so heavily on the involvement of the audience, we shift away from the need to define the space through its architectures. The dancers are allowed to move anywhere in the general space in pursuit of the viewer's participation. In these moments the "site" becomes dependent on the location of the people within a larger space. In these moments ISaT becomes about individual conversations taking place between the performers and their audience, not necessarily the conversations taking place between the performer and their larger environment. These personal interactions are what keep the performance fresh, alive, real, and playful for the performer. This is because no two interactions are ever the same. The performance becomes about the people who encounter it, and their unique experience of the event. It invites the viewer to reimagine the way they interact with and experience their community and environment.

Noémie LaFrance: Movement Generation, Theatricality, Accessibility

Noémie LaFrance is a French Canadian site-specific choreographer and director. LaFrance creates work that inhabits spaces with beauty and with grit. Her work is defined by movement, strong bodies, and a sense of fun in order to create captivating dances. The main reason I looked into LaFrance's work is because I was having trouble creating actual movement. Her work demonstrates such a strong sense of the motion. She highlights the innovative, entertaining, and technically skilled body, while still paying very close attention to the space in which she is working. LaFrance has also recently finished three works that heavily involve audience participation, an integral element to *ISaT*. Her latest project, *Dance for an Audience* is a film that captures the complex patterning of a human game board. The audience received a team color rules and instructions for a movement based game that would form the raw footage for a dance.

The project challenged the public, instilled a sense of play in the participants, and created a movement sequence that was uniquely complex. yet another example of how contemporary artists are incorporating/including their audiences into their choreography.²⁷ I appreciate the fact that Lafrance allows her viewers to shift from being passive spectators to integral performers.

Lafrance has done choreography and film in both the commercial and artistic realms. This has shaped her movement style in a way that makes it both incredibly entertaining and choreographically compelling. She has a movement style that is quirky and sexy, virtuosic and nonchalant, simple yet intricate. Furthermore, she integrates the "phrase work" and "dancey dancing" seamlessly into her overall choreographic picture. This is one of the biggest faults I have found in my construction of the *ISaT* choreography. I am still trying to find my own sense of flow between pure exciting movement, and the more pedestrian or playful parts of the work. I am particularly captivated by the choreography in Lafrance's work entitled *Agora*. This performance takes place in McCarren Pool, an abandoned 66 million gallon pool in Brooklyn. In this dance, Lafrance conquered over 50,000 sq feet of open space by filling it with simultaneous images, movements, and events.²⁸ The events ranged from the graceful, to the surreal, to the sublime, and back again. *Agora* is an overload of images. One person may be sitting on a couch watching tv, nearby a couple struggles to slip flippers onto their feet and an inflatable inner tubes around their waists, meanwhile children run frantically sprint through the pool yelling, amidst all of these "theatrical" images dancers are everywhere. They move ferociously legs flying into the air as they turn dive and swing with power and grace.²⁹ This constant flow of chaotic information was meant to instil feelings agoraphobia in her audience, and while my project was in no way

²⁷ Boynton, Andrew. "WHEN YOU ARE THE DANCE." *The New Yorker*. N.p., 21 Sept. 2012. Web. 1 May 2013.

²⁸ Yung, Susan. "Noemie Lafrance/ Sens Productions." *Dance Magazine* (2005): n. pag. Print.

²⁹ *Agora Clip*. Dir. Noemie Lafrance. Perf. Sens Productions. *Vimeo*. N.p., 2011. Web. 03 May 2013.

intended to scare people, there is something to be learned from the world that Ms. Lafrance shapes inside of that swimming pool. The characterization and movement of Lafrance's dancers suggests that the viewer is being let in on the lives of 30 people. Hundreds of little worlds open themselves up and reveal their secrets throughout the piece. As the work becomes more and more chaotic, the choreographic choices seem more intentional in their ability to create the feeling of phobia in the audience's head, while remaining technically interesting. It is works like these that still get me excited about dance. "Agora" operates on a gargantuan and miniscule scale. Its robust cast, stunning athletic movement vocabulary, and complex choreography demonstrate Lafrance's prowess as a shaper of movement time and space. By studying her work, I hoped to gain a sense of Lafrance's eye, as well as simply admire and enjoy the contemporary realm of this rich historic practice of site-specific performance.

Conclusion:

I Saw a Thing was an experiment dealing with issues of ephemerality in time and space. In an effort to create some sort of lasting impression on the Connecticut College campus community I undertook an ambitious project. With the help of 20 very dedicated performers I was able to create a piece of choreography that pushed conceptions of dance and performance while maintaining a lighthearted and pleasant tone. It was my hope to redefine the way viewers interacted with their space, their community, and the art itself. By acknowledging the historical and contemporary work of Trisha Brown, Clarinda Mac Low, Meredith Monk, and Noémie Lafrance I was able to hone in on what I viewed to be driving elements in the creation of impactful site-specific choreography. These artists demonstrated ways in which to utilize the scale and architecture of the performance space to guide the eye of the viewer and find perspectives and viewpoints not possible in the theater. By analysing the work of Monk in

conjunction with Lafrance I sought to find a balance between large technical movement and more theatrical abstract movements. I believed this balance was necessary in maintaining the accessibility of the work. Each choreographer focused on the importance between the interaction between the performer and the audience. After examining the traditional roles of the viewer and the performer and ways to subvert or change those roles, I recognized the communal landscape of the work was just as important as the physical one. The role of the viewer, meant much more to me than that. I wanted to involve the viewer in the joy of the performers. Ultimately, *ISaT* became a daily way to interact with the campus community, each day for a short time a piece of art appeared. This project was more than simply “a thing”. It was a way to redefine a campus space as a place of joyous celebration and art.

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