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A Choreographic Exploration of Site Context

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Abstract

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Site-specific choreography has been explored throughout the history of modern dance by many choreographers, including Anna Halprin, Meredith Monk, and Trisha Brown. By taking dance out of the studio and off the traditional stage, choreographers find new opportunities for introducing unique movement ideas into their dances and invite audiences to view space through an altered point of view. In my research, I investigate the effect of site context, or the space in which a piece of choreography is created and performed, on the process of creation and the overall qualities that the choreography exudes. As part of this process, I choreographed a site-specific solo on Emory University's campus and translated it into the Schwartz dance studio. Conversely, I commissioned Blake Beckham to set a solo on me in the Schwartz dance studio, and translated it into the site used for my original work. The project may be viewed as an abstract version of a reciprocal transplant experiment, in which the choreography represents the genetic differences between the two core solos, and the sites in which each was created may be considered analogous to the environmental factors. Through this process, the four pieces have developed unique qualities through the influences of both spaces, and my intimate understanding of the sites and the choreography has been enhanced.

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I. Introduction

Standing just under five feet tall, I am relatively compact in size for an adult female. When other people describe me, my small stature is one of the first features they mention, and I am constantly aware of this perception. As a dancer I am expected to move with as much fullness and take up as much space as my average-sized peers, even with my much shorter limbs. Many of my dance teachers have coached me in finding length in my joints and to utilize my musculature to move with as much volume as possible. By challenging myself to do this, I have learned throughout the years to move beyond what appear to be my physical boundaries and to “eat up” space. I now have an affinity for large movement, and full-bodied, expansive movement is often at the forefront of my choreography.

Though my size forces me to work hard to take up a large amount of space with my dancing, it also allows me to fit into tiny spaces with ease. I enjoy the novelty of being able to wedge myself into small spaces that most adults could not even imagine fitting inside. For this reason, when it came time for me to find a space for my site-specific piece in *Choreography I*, I chose a very small space between two columns at the front of the Schwartz Center at Emory University that I could barely wedge my body between. I was drawn to this space because I was the only person in the class who could fit inside it, and I was interested in exploring the challenge of generating movement in such a confined space. Little did I know that I would be asked not to choreograph a new piece inspired by the site, but rather to translate a previous study into the site.

Since my first study was based on my preexisting affinities for expansive motion, it contained many voluminous movements and a far-reaching floor pattern. It seemed like it would be nearly impossible to condense the movement of the first study into this highly contained

space, but I was excited by the challenge. I was able to find new detail in the original movements and boundless opportunity for working with the composition in the new space by altering my spatial orientation to the ground and the scale of the movement. Upon completing my site-specific, or rather site-sympathetic, composition, I felt that I had risen to the challenge of adapting large movement into a tiny space and had produced a reputable piece. Compared to the other assignments in the course, I became most interested in, challenged by, and invested in this project, and I enjoyed the opportunity to further investigate the space and the site through film in the class's final project.

When I explored the possibility to conduct an honors thesis in dance, I wanted to revisit some of the elements that I enjoyed most from Choreography I: translation, restriction, site work, and film. When I wrote my thesis proposal, I intended to extend the challenge that I faced in the site-specific assignment—adapting expansive movement into a confined space—into several types of sites. I planned to have a solo set on me by another choreographer and then to adapt the solo to three different types of spaces: a two-dimensional floor map, a three-dimensional enclosure, and varied tight spaces around Emory's campus that would be portrayed through film. As I progressed into the actual planning phase of my thesis, however, I became increasingly interested in the site context of choreography and less interested in the specific manipulation of condensing large movement into confined spaces.

My project thus shifted to focus solely on site context, or the relationship of movement to the space in which it is conceived and to a preexisting space into which it is translated. This alteration allowed me to focus on the creation of site-specific choreography and how site-specificity differs from translating movement into a site, as I had done in my assignment in

Choreography I. The content of my thesis would remain a series of solos, but instead of one core solo with three manipulations, its final form contains two core solos with a single manipulation of each. One of the core solos was choreographed by Blake Beckham inside the Schwartz studio, and I choreographed the other solo, a site-specific work. The location of the solos was then swapped as I translated Beckham's work into the space of my site-specific piece and translated the site work into the studio.

For the context of this research, I use the term "translate" to describe the action of transferring and adapting a piece of choreography to another site. Here, the most applicable definition of "translate" is: to change form, condition, nature, etc. of; transform; convert.¹ In the process of translating choreography, I allow the movement to react to and alter based on the stimuli of the new spatial context. I use multiple words to describe this complex process in my analysis, including adapt, restage, reset, manipulate, and transferability.

In addition to dance, I am deeply committed to the study of biology. Reflecting these dual interests, I like to also describe the manipulations in this project in biological terms as a reciprocal transplant of choreography. A reciprocal transplant is an experimental technique often used in ecological research. The method involves first observing organisms in two or more native environments and then introducing the organisms to the sites in which they were not originally located. This technique allows researchers to investigate the relationship of genetic and environmental influences on the adaptation and differentiation of separate populations. In my project the choreography may be considered analogous to the genetic differences between the two core solos and the sites in which each was created may be considered to be the

¹ Translate. (2014). from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/translate?s=t>

environmental factors. For this reason I chose to use the same site for the original site-specific piece and the translation of Beckham's piece. The site acts as a control in my research, in order for me to compare the process and product of creating a work based on the influences of the space to translating a fully formed piece into the site without additional external factors like variations of architecture and ambient features that would arise if I were to use multiple sites. Though this comparison of my research in choreography and performance to a reciprocal transplant in ecology is useful for understanding the design of my project, it is purely metaphorical, as my project will not give rise to the same type of measureable data that an ecological experiment would.

I treat the studio and performance stage as synonymous sites for this research. The dance theater at Emory lacks a proscenium arch and serves as both a stage and studio, which allows me to work on the studio pieces in the exact location in which they will be performed. Theoretically, though, the work created or translated in the studio could be performed on any stage since the studio serves as a "blank slate," or what may be considered to be a neutral performance site. My research is not related to the distinction between dance made for the traditional proscenium stage versus that designed for less conventional performance spaces, such as galleries and black box theaters; rather, it is focused on how a site with its own unique identity, shaped by cultural context and physical characteristics, affects the composition and performance of choreography, and how work created in such a highly defined environment translates to the "blank" stage.

The main thrust of my research is to analyze the differences in composing dance pieces in the studio versus in an external site and to explore the implications of translating each type into a new site. Two of the key questions that I consider in my translational work are: "What is a site-

specific piece without its site?” and “How is previously existing choreography influenced by ancillary stimuli?” In the translations of the core solos, I am interested in discovering how choreography may be influenced and manipulated when set in a new site context. In this case, site context implies not only a shift in the spatial framework (the focus of my original project proposal), but also additional environmental factors that may shape the work in unique ways not investigated in the original composition.

II. Historical Background and Choreographic Context of Site-Specific Dance

Site-specific choreography has been created for many decades through a variety of processes. For many, the history of site-specific dance begins in the 1950s and 1960s during a period of blurring the lines between art and everyday life as artists rebelled against traditional practices of creating and performing.² Merce Cunningham’s “Events” and Alan Kaprow’s “Happenings” are credited with reshaping people’s understanding of choreographic space during the nascent stage of this revolutionary era.³ Though choreographers of the early twentieth century such as Rudolf Laban and Isadora Duncan are depicted in photographs dancing outdoors, they used natural and Greek settings as props to achieve an idyllic image of the “Utopian Past,” rather than using the sites as the actual inspiration for choreography.⁴ Because they breached the previously underutilized frontier of using nontraditional spaces to inspire creation, choreographers Anna Halprin, Trisha Brown, and Meredith Monk usually come to mind with any mention of the beginnings of site-specific dance. I have found the work of these three choreographers, in particular, to be helpful for the development of my own choreographic voice in a new site context and for gaining understanding of my own creative process in the site.

The Halprins—Anna and her husband Larry, an architect—moved to San Francisco after World War II, where they both found inspiration from nature and the city. As Ross states in *Anna Halprin Experience as Dance*, “Taking the grand scale of nature and the urban landscape of the West as their stage, and using the massive social and cultural changes under way in

² Pavlik, M. K. a. C. (2009). *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces*: University Press Florida. pp. 7-8

³ Rubidge, S. (2012). On Choreographic Space. In S. R. a. L. Rouhiainen (Ed.), *Choreographic Space*: University Press of South Denmark. p. 19

⁴ Jarvinen, H. (2012). "Dancing Back to Arcady" --On Representations of Early Twentieth-Century Modern Dance. In S. R. a. L. Rouhiainen (Ed.), *Choreographic Space*: University Press of South Denmark. pp. 57-65

American society as their themes, Ann and Larry began to explore space and environment as critical silent partners in their arts.”⁵ Anna Halprin described her dance making as exploring the geographies of the mind and body, while drawing inspiration from the diverse landscapes of California.⁶ Her isolation from the dance community on the East Coast allowed her to investigate dance in her own way, resulting in a “radical repositioning” in which her “performance practice [existed] somewhere between the stage, the environment, and the home.”⁷ In 1954, Larry created a dance deck nestled in the lush natural environment of the Halprin’s backyard that served as Halprin’s outdoor studio/theater.⁸ The dance deck allowed Halprin to draw inspiration from nature by physically immersing herself in it,⁹ and it served as the setting for her summer dance workshops that many up-and-coming East Coast dance makers attended.¹⁰

Halprin was keenly interested in improvisation (a key focus in her dance deck workshops) and she began crafting improvisational dances based on movement scores inspired by the surroundings.¹¹ Her first outdoor public improvisation in May 1953, “People on a Slant,” was performed on one of San Francisco’s steeply sloped roads on which three dancers walked up and down the road while trying to keep their bodies as upright as possible.¹² When describing the inspiration of the piece Halprin remarked, “I was trying to break down patterned movement, to find actions uncontaminated with dance.”¹³ This type of task-oriented, site-specific composition

⁵ Ross, J. (2007). *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance*. Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press. p. 71

⁶ Ross, J. p. 73

⁷ Ross, J. p. 75

⁸ Ross, J. p. 104

⁹ Ross, J. p. 115

¹⁰ Ross, J. p. 127

¹¹ Ross, J. pp. 126-127

¹² Ross, J. pp. 126

¹³ Ross, J. p. 127

would later be revisited by Trisha Brown on the East Coast in her iconic piece “Man Walking Down the Side of a Building,” on an even more severe incline. In 1957, Halprin and five other dancers performed for a dance film called “Hangar,” in which an airport hangar under construction served as the improvisation score for the dancers to run toward, climb on, and investigate.¹⁴

Halprin also choreographed site-specific pieces that had ceremonial or healing purposes. In 1981, a series of several workshops culminated in the performance “In and On the Mountain,” that served as a ceremony of remembrance for the victims of seven murders that occurred in 1979 on Mount Tamalpais.¹⁵ At one point in the performance, performers and audience members left a proscenium stage to walk and dance down the trails of the mountain while leaving offerings at the murder sites.¹⁶ Halprin extended this piece by repeating the performance for five years according to instructions from a Huichol Indian shaman to “complete the purification” resulting in *Thanksgiving* (1982), *Return to the Mountain* (1983), *Run to the Mountain* (1984), and *Circle the Mountain* (1985).¹⁶ Later she continued her exploration of the themes of loss, recovery, and reconciliation in *Circle the Earth* (1991).¹⁷

Anna Halprin’s improvisational workshops influenced the East Coast pioneers of the Judson Church era, including Trisha Brown and Meredith Monk. However, her themes about exploring nature contrast with the urban reality of the New York City setting in which the Eastern choreographers were engulfed. Trisha Brown, Meredith Monk, and others took their own

¹⁴ Ross, J. p. 130

¹⁵ Ross, J. p. 318-319

¹⁶ Ross, J. p. 319

¹⁷ Ross, J. p. 320

approach to site-specificity and breaking the norms of traditional theater spaces while embracing the cityscape that they called home.

Meredith Monk took her audiences on “tours” or “pageants” during her huge scale, site-oriented performances. With *Blueprint* (1967), Monk began to design her choreography with architectural and nontheatrical sites in mind.¹⁸ *Blueprint* took the audience on a journey through multiple sites in Woodstock, NY and concluded a month later in New York City.¹⁸ The piece incorporated live performance, filmed events, and a combination of the two; and the audience viewed different parts from multiple perspectives as they moved from building to building.¹⁹ *Juice* (1969) took place throughout the Guggenheim museum, the Minor Latham Playhouse at Barnard, and Monk’s loft in lower Manhattan over the course of a few weeks.²⁰ As the piece progressed through the three locations, the theatricality was stripped away, while the audience’s connection to the characters became more intimate.²⁰ In 1971, Monk reversed the scale of *Juice* with *Vessel* by progressing from Monk’s loft, to the Performing Garage at Wooster and Grand Streets, to a parking lot down the road.²¹ Between the years 1969-1971 Monk choreographed other similar performances, which have been dubbed the *Tour Series*.²²

The *Tour Series* and the other site-specific journeys allowed Monk to manipulate the audience/performer relationship²³ and to challenge established conceptions about performance

¹⁸ Banes, S. (1977). *Terpsichore in Sneakers*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. p. 152

¹⁹ Banes, S. p. 160-161

²⁰ Banes, S. p. 152-153

²¹ Banes, S. p. 153-154

²² Meredith Monk in Conversation with Deborah Jowitt. (1998) *Art Performs Life: Cunningham/Monk/Jones*. Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center. p. 69

²³ Meredith Monk in Conversation with Deborah Jowitt. p. 69

space and scale.²⁴ In her interview with Monk, Deborah Jowitt commented on Monk's intention to make the audience really see a space and its architectural details, saying that she had never been as aware of the ramps of the Guggenheim than when watching *Juice*.²⁵ Monk responded by discussing her concern about architecture as structure.²⁵ She said, "*Juice* became a dialogue about how space affects images and time. I still think with a counterpoint of my ideas and images, and a particular space—to excavate a space and let it speak."²⁵ Monk crafted her pieces in a wide variety of sites, including displays at the Smithsonian Institution, an abandoned hospital on Roosevelt Island, and "unconventionally small" spaces, in her exploration of scale and the creation of fantastical landscapes.²⁶

Trisha Brown also highlighted the architecture of New York City in her site-specific works, although her work did not involve taking the audience on tours. Brown attended Anna Halprin's summer workshop in 1960 and drew inspiration from Anna's improvisational style of composition.²⁷ Brown used the architecture of her studio apartment as an improvisation score for *Inside*.²⁷ She later recreated the piece at the Judson Church with the audience forming the walls around her.²⁷ A series of works that started in 1968, referred to as the *Equipment Pieces*, used support systems to change the body's spatial orientation and relationship to gravity.²⁸ For example, in *Walking on the Wall* (1971) dancers walked on the walls of the Whitney museum, as if the walls were the ground;²⁸ and in *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1970) Brown's

²⁴ Meredith Monk in Conversation with Deborah Jowitt. p. 67

²⁵ Meredith Monk in Conversation with Deborah Jowitt. p. 70

²⁶ Banes, S. (1998). Introduction *Art Performs Life: Cunningham/Monk/Jones*. Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center. p. 14

²⁷ Banes, S. (1977). *Terpsichore in Sneakers*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. p. 79

²⁸ Banes, S. p. 80

husband walked down the backside of their loft building in a rock-climbing harness.²⁹ Brown made *Man Walking* with the notion that site changes movement. In this work, the building determined the length of the walk, and was treated by Brown as a “partner in creation” rather than an arbitrary site.³⁰ This point was demonstrated forty years later when *Man Walking* was recreated on the side of the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2010 with Elizabeth Streb and Stephen Petronio performing the vertical walk.³¹ The 2010 recreation was realized on a much larger scale than the 1971 original, and was much more visible to the public.³¹

Trisha Brown has been credited with making use of spaces that are not considered to be “normatively legitimate” for performances.³² In an interview with Effie Stephano in 1974 Brown remarked, “The theater avoided any association with me,” a reference to her relationship with traditional theaters.³² Deborah Jowitt claims that the initial space experiments of the 1960s were economically advantageous for choreographers since they did not need to rent out theater spaces, while also making dance accessible to different audiences and allowing choreographers to investigate new ideas that the sites provided.³³ However, many of the spatial investigations evolved into highly complex, expensive productions. Many of the performance sites that Brown utilized are referred to as “found sites” because they are everyday places, like the side of a building, that are not normally highlighted. The concept is similar to the “found movements,” like walking, that she incorporated into her choreography.³² With her use of nontraditional sites

²⁹ Graham, A. J. (2013). Out of Site: Trisha Brown's Roof Piece. *Dance Chronicle*, 36(1). p. 61

³⁰ Graham, A. J. p. 63

³¹ Graham, A. J. p. 65

³² Graham, A. J. p. 64

³³ Jowitt, D. Edited transcript of a lecture by Deborah Jowitt. In A. Livet (Ed.), *Contemporary Dance* (pp. 134-152). New York, NY: Abbeville Press, Inc. 1978. p. 142

that were generally viewed as unremarkable, Brown “revealed their dormant theatrical utility.”³⁴ Much like the Judson Church’s notion that anyone can dance, Brown showed audiences that any space could house a performance.

Brown’s site performances often happened out in the open in New York City, but required the spectators to direct their focus or place themselves in a new orientation to the city. For example, in the original staging of *Roof Piece* in 1971, the performance was staged as a private viewing on top of the city.³⁴ Unseen by the public on the streets below, the dancers and audience stood on the top of buildings in SoHo.³⁵ In 1973 *Roof Piece* was restaged, advertised to the general public, and heavily documented.³⁵ Nevertheless, viewership of the piece still depended on the knowledge of it happening and being on the rooftops during the performance.³⁶

Some of Brown’s pieces took on many different forms and identities during the span of time that she worked with and presented them. One of these works, *Primary Accumulation*, evolved from a stationary solo performed by Brown into various renditions that involved multiple dancers manipulating their orientation to space and to each other, and it was manifested in multiple places.³⁷ *Group Primary Accumulation* was translated into many different spaces and was performed on a variety of surfaces, including the plaza of the McGaw-Hill Building and rafts on Loring Lagoon in Minneapolis.³⁸ Some may argue that in translating dance from one place to another, the site-specificity of the original is abandoned and cannot be recreated in a new space.³⁴ Miwon Kwon, an art historian, refers to the practice of translating pieces between

³⁴ Graham, A. J. p. 65

³⁵ Graham, A. J. p. 66

³⁶ Graham, A. J. p. 70

³⁷ Brown, T. (1975). Three Pieces. *The Drama Review: TDR*, 19(1). p. 29

³⁸ Brown, T. p. 31

sites as “museological and commercial practices of refabricating” that make transferability a normal practice for site-specific art in the 1960s and ‘70s.³⁹

Anna Halprin, Meredith Monk, and Trisha Brown are significant to my research in many ways. By researching their choreographic processes and the works they produced, I gained insight for shaping my choreographic investigation. During my choreographic process in the site I used the space as an improvisational score, much like the works of Anna Halprin and some works by Trisha Brown; however, I eventually set my choreography based on the influence of the improvisational investigations, rather than manifesting as an improvisational performance. Meredith Monk translated her choreographic ideas throughout different spaces, while allowing each site to impose a different influence on the choreography, either by stripping away the theatricality or building it up as the dances moved from site to site. Trisha Brown executed more definitive translations of her pieces between multiple sites and allowed changes to be made to fit the space. In the translations of my site-specific piece into the studio and of Beckham’s piece into the site, I investigate how the environment of the site or of the studio affects the movement’s ideas and alters the choreography. Monk and Brown also utilized film both for documentation purposes and to integrate into their live performances, similar to my use of film in presenting my site works to the audience. These choreographers and I, among many others, were lured away from traditional dance spaces, intrigued by the abundance of opportunities that arise through site-specific explorations.

³⁹ Kwon, M. (2002). *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: The MIT Press. p. 97

III. Approaching the Site: *Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides*

A. Initiation

The first step of initiating my site-specific choreographic process was, clearly, to find a site. I walked through campus everyday with a keen eye, identifying the spaces that drew me in for their choreographic potential while taking note of my aesthetic preferences. I found that my greatest affinity is for outdoor spaces that maintain an industrial quality. I was not particularly interested in working in a completely natural space, partially due to the lack of architectural elements and partially due to the changeability of nature. I wanted to find a site that would be essentially constant throughout the changes of seasons and that would provide its own definitive structural qualities. I also found that I wanted the space to be structurally quite different from a stage or platform and to have accessible vertical depth. For this particular project I did not limit myself only to finding a confined space like the site of my Choreography I assignment, *Caught Between Two Slabs of Marble*, because I became interested in exploring my response to new environments that bestowed different types of stimuli.

After discussing these desired qualities with Gregory Catellier, my adviser, and expressing the difficulty I was experiencing in finding a space, he suggested that I scope out a ramp near the library that spans the corner of two intersecting streets. I immediately found this space interesting because it is comprised of all the structural qualities that I gravitate toward, including vertical depth, industrial architecture, multiple textures, and non-seasonal plants. Additionally, the right angle of the path serves as a great contrast to the open rectangular shape of a dance studio or stage, and the scale of the space is relatively expansive, but with some confined dimensions. Since the space is designed as a handicap-access walking path, rather than

a performance space, it reminds me of the “found sites” in which Trisha Brown choreographed.⁴⁰ I decided to use this space for my site-specific choreography based on its varied qualities and the gamut of movement opportunities that it seemed to inspire in me right away.

My creative process usually involves jumping right into a project by improvising, generating material around a central idea, and following the direction in which the movement leads me. I initially treated this project no differently and attempted to start creating material right away inside the space. Although I was able to produce a few phrases and movement motifs inspired by the architecture and my initial interaction in the space, I quickly began to feel hindered.

I found it very difficult to move freely and without judgment in an environment that made me feel as if I was on display to my peers and teachers. When creating in the studio I gain a sense of being completely alone and free to do anything without judgment from others. The openness of the space began to feel completely inhibiting given that people frequently walk through and around the space. At the beginning of the process no one ever approached me or asked questions about what I was doing, but the fleeting glances of passersby often stalled my creativity. I was hesitant to completely negate the conventional utility of the space with witnesses around; and I became nervous that people would not only judge me personally, but also judge modern dance through my actions. I was also worried that I was going to be reprimanded by campus authorities for climbing on the rails and the walls and performing actions that would likely be deemed dangerous by most. At this point, I sensed myself behaving in a very apologetic manner for lingering in a transient space and for performing abnormal

⁴⁰ Graham, A. J. p. 65

actions for others to observe. After working with this tension for a while, I recognized that I needed to find a new approach to the choreographic process in order to view the space and my relationship to it in a new, more liberating light.

This new approach materialized through an assignment in Sally Radell's Contemporary Issues course. The class was given a site survey questionnaire as segue into our discussion of site-specific choreography. Students were instructed to find a space on campus that featured some personal significance to him/her and to acutely observe the space in order to answer the questions. I chose a different space for the assignment, but decided also to complete the questionnaire for my thesis site. The questionnaire required surveillance of the size, sounds, smells, textures, rhythms, colors, predominant shapes, general physical properties, and spatial directions of the space. It also involved assessing the function of the space, whether or not personal memories are attached to it, if it induces an empathetic response, what type of movement ideas it inspires, and if it invokes a sense of community. I walked through the site several times before answering the questions for the sake of gleaning as many details as possible.

The site survey caused me to appreciate the minutiae of the space that I had previously overlooked. For example, I noticed the weathering on the concrete walls and sidewalk that caused subtle variations of color in spots and streaks along the large surfaces. I also became very aware of the even rhythm of the space with the regularly spaced vertical bars, the uniformly spaced horizontal supports of the handrail, and the geometric lines of the concrete slabs that formed the walls and ground. The smooth curve at the center and the slight diagonal slope at one end became beautiful features in my new perception of the site for their ability to interrupt the even, geometric qualities that dominate the space as a whole. I also noted that the function of the

spaces is to serve as a handicap ramp or walking path and that it is meant to be a place that one passes through rather than a place for lingering; it serves as a tool to get from one place to another, rather than a destination. My approach of stepping away from the rush to generate movement by taking time to truly experience the space was valuable for my process since it allowed me to view the space from multiple perspectives and to draw inspiration from its small details.

B. Extension

With my new appreciation and understanding of the space, I was able to reenter my site-specific process equipped with strong inspiration and a drive to create. I also harnessed my mental strength through ideas expressed by Bebe Miller. Last summer in the Creative Process class at Bates Dance Festival, Bebe Miller emphasized the idea of not holding anything too precious during the act of creating dance. This concept was meant to encourage the class to refrain from editing movement during the initial stages of creation and not to hold the product to such a high standard that the process is hindered by fear of failure. I tried to internalize the idea of non-preciousness during the initial stage of choreographing, but I allowed the pressure of creating work for an honors thesis to distract me. I found that once I took the time to step back and appreciate the nuances of the space, I was able to take a calmer approach to my process and to actually understand Miller's words.

Upon reentering the site, I also decided that I needed to provide myself with a framework to work with in my site that would prevent me from feeling overwhelmed by the scale of the space. Making this framework involved determining the boundaries of the space that defined where the dancing would occur. The boundaries on either end seemed pretty apparent since the

structure of the ramp has a clear beginning and end point. My interest and ability to climb over the rails and up the walls caused the boundaries of the width of the space to be a little more ambiguous. During my thorough survey of the space I also found a gate in part of the railing that allows one to easily access the mulched area between the ramp and the exterior walls of the library. I capitalized on the ambiguity of the boundaries within the space by incorporating crossing the rails, by means of climbing over or passing through, as a central motif.

The framework also includes five divisions throughout the space that form discrete sections that I worked with one at a time. The sections include: the open area at one end, the mulched space along the ramp on the other side of the rails, the curve of the ramp, the ledge above the space along one side, and the long incline that leads to the other end. By concentrating on each section independently I was able to generate movement with more ease than when I approached the space as a whole. I developed relationships between the different areas of the space by repeating phrases of movement in multiple sections. Through this process I observed the different influences that each section imposed on the movement. Noticing the nuances of each section of the site would prove to be a useful tool in the translation of this work to the studio as well.

To develop one of the core phrases in the site, I filmed myself improvising on the high ledge. I was interested in exploring the movement that this section of the site inspired because its characteristics are especially unique to the site. The ledge is quite narrow, providing a confined sense that I am drawn to, and it highlights the fundamental qualities of the site: black rails, rough concrete, and vertical depth. The height and narrowness of the ledge, in particular, dissociate it from other ramps and sidewalks. I analyzed the footage of my improvisation and extracted the

movements that I found interesting and indicative of my overall relationship to the space. I then linked the movements together and created a long phrase that I would later adapt to three areas of the site.

I allowed the three discrete areas of the space: above the site on the ledge (the original), below the site in the mulch on the other side of the rails, and the straight path with the incline, to influence the ledge phrase in their own way. The narrowness of the ledge and its parallel quality to the path below inspired me to retrograde the phrase in order to continue the two-dimensionality that this section of the space inspired at the outset. The lower space also felt compressed even though the ground below me was wider than the ledge, partially because I still used the rails to guide me and tether me to the site. This spaced allowed me to increase the speed of the movement since the element of danger that the height of the ledge provided was extracted and because my momentum carried over into this space as a result of the transition of running and jumping into it. The inclined path allowed me to find more openness in the movement and to break away from the strict spatial relationship dictated by the use of the rails. I abstracted some of the movements by using multiple levels and directional facings. I reintroduced the retrograde along this path since it is adjacent to the original ledge, but I switched the direction of the retrograde in order to advance to the end of the path for the conclusion of the piece.

In order to maintain the site-specific integrity of the piece, I refrained from generating movement for it in the studio. This choice was especially important to my process given that translating choreography created in the studio into the site is one of the key components of my project as a whole. However, restricting my creative process to the site alone was difficult for

multiple reasons. As mentioned before, my creativity was hindered by my awareness of people watching me in the site.

My process was also drastically delayed by adverse weather conditions since the site is outdoors and I worked throughout multiple seasons. I was unable to work in the site on rainy or extremely cold days, nor during the two snowstorms that passed through Atlanta this year. The weather set back my timeline quite a bit; I expected to finish my site-specific piece by the end of the fall semester, but did not actually finish until late February. One of the ways in which I counteracted the issue of unfavorable weather was to visualize myself in the space when looking at photos of the site. I mentally created images that I wanted to form and general movement ideas that I wished to explore in the space. The process of visualizing myself in the space and recording the ideas in my journal helped me to develop an agenda and maintain focus when I was actually able to enter the space.

I expected to have issues with unpredictable weather and spectators when I set out to choreograph in the space, but I did not anticipate the space itself to undergo physical changes. However, a lock was put on the rail gate after I had incorporated passing through it in my composition. This unforeseen obstruction that prevented me from using the space in the way I had originally planned appeared relatively late in the development of my choreography, so I had to make significant adjustments to the choreography with careful consideration of the flow that had already been created in the piece as a whole. I felt like I would inevitably lose the element of surprise that opening the hidden gate provided, but it was interesting to be faced with this new challenge late in the process. I considered multiple options for how to address this issue, including climbing over the rails, translating the movement that happened on the other side to

another area of the space, or completely omitting the section on the opposite side of the gate from the piece. I eventually made the decision to expand the boundary of one end of the space to include a ledge along the adjacent stairs, which I used to maneuver around the end of the rails. I loosely translated the movement of walking on the wall of the curve that appeared elsewhere in the piece to this new ledge as I walked up its side and jumped off of it onto the mulch.

As I finished crafting the piece and rehearsing it from beginning to end, I realized how fun the piece is and how much it embodies my approach to movement. The piece as a whole is very physical and requires power, stability, and strength. Though I choreographed it with an almost entirely physical approach, the playful nature and my indulgence of the movement seemed to surface more and more as the piece became fully developed.

C. Completion and Filming

Given the closed-off design of the space and the difficulty of presenting a combination of site-specific and theater performances in the same concert, I chose to depict my site work through film. I became interested in advancing my proficiency in the field of dance film after making a film of *Caught Between Two Slabs of Marble*, the piece that inspired the research for my thesis; this served as another natural extension of the original impetus. The medium of film also provides unique opportunities to exhibit the details of the space that drew me to it and influenced the movement.

I hired Vita Brown to operate the camera for me based on her experience with dance on camera, but I chose to execute the film editing so that I would have control over the presentation of the choreography. Before filming *Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides*, I took Brown to the space and discussed with her the kind of shots that I envisioned for each section of the

choreography. I carefully considered how I wanted to present the movement, emphasizing my response to both the small details and the scale of the space, but I was also interested in the ideas for framing that Brown could contribute. While filming I was very pleased with the efficiency of our collaboration and the unique angles that Brown added to my vision.

Reviewing the footage of the piece gave me useful insight into the aesthetics of the choreography that I was able to employ in my creation of the film and in the translation into the studio. One of the most striking characteristics of the choreography that I noticed in my viewership of the work was how deliberate it is. My acute focus, even rhythm, and tactile scrutiny of the space became more apparent to me upon watching my delivery of the choreography than when I was performing it. This fully realized perception of the deliberate execution of the movement and my thorough approach to the space spurred me to title the work with a site-specific play on the phrase “Crossing the t’s and dotting the i’s,” which I felt embodied the feeling that the choreography and the film invoked in me.

I view the filming of this piece as a mixture of the worlds of documentation and dance filmmaking. I chose to maintain the linear sequencing of the choreography in making the film, rather than taking advantage of opportunities unique to filmmaking for disrupting the order in which things are revealed to an audience. The primary incentive for my research is to exchange movement between the site and the studio; therefore, I wanted to maintain the original sequence of the choreography to ensure that my later translation of it would be recognizable and clear to the audience.

Rather than imposing music or other audio on the film, I used only the diegetic sound. The audio consisted of an eclectic blend of birds chirping, ringing from the bell tower, cars

passing, people talking, construction noise, and sound generated from my movement. I was intrigued by the level of clarity with which the camera was able to detect the scraping of my shoes on the concrete and my hands grasping the rails. I did not purposely try to amplify these sounds, but I did find them valuable for showing the audience the tactility of the movement and the textures that influenced me. I was very surprised by the ease with which I was able to link the sound of multiple clips together during the editing process. This convenience can be partially attributed to the even rhythm that the space dictated in my movement and the exhaustive attention to detail that Brown and I embraced while filming. I also made very specific choices with the audio of the film to include some of the serendipitous interactions with other people and external sounds that arose. One comedic example of this is the sound of a man declaring, “Alright now” as he drove past.

I incorporated surprising moments, like this exclamation and people nonchalantly walking through the site, into the film because they allowed the audience to see a glimpse of my experience working in an unpredictable space. Based on my experiences in the site, the intimate design that film-making can create encouraged more of this spontaneity from people in the area than when an audience was gathered around me in the site. I was also interested in the extremely discernable depiction of the textures of the space that the film was able to show the viewers. I recognize, now, that film is a valuable device for providing the audience with insight into my process and my partnership with the space that may have been underappreciated or imperceptible in a live performance.

IV. Addressing the Studio: *Terminal*

When formulating the design of my thesis project, I decided to commission the core solo in the studio instead of choreographing it myself. One of the primary reasons for this decision was to prevent the piece from being influenced by a spatial bias that I might impose on it by thinking about the space into which I would later translate the work. I was also excited to take this opportunity to work with Blake Beckham again. I danced in a piece she set on the Emory Dance Company during my sophomore year of college, and I have immense respect for the quality of her work. Upon beginning our process, I told Beckham that she had complete freedom over what the piece would become. I was interested in the challenge of having to manipulate whatever Beckham created in my later translation of the work.

The timeline of Beckham's current project, *Dearly Departures*, conveniently lined up with the schedule for my thesis. She had just begun forming the concept for this new evening length work shortly before I approached her to set a solo on me. We set the work in an expedited manner toward the end of the fall semester. Our collaboration helped Beckham develop some of the movement vocabulary for her larger work before she began working with her company members.

Beckham and I constructed the piece through an accelerated workshop, during which we rehearsed multiple times a week for less than a month. Our first rehearsals took place in the Rich studio, but we composed the piece in the Schwartz studio where the performance would take place. The Rich studio seemed appropriate for the first few exploratory rehearsals, since it provided an intimate setting for Beckham and me to formulate the theme of the work. Initially, I wanted the actual formulation of the piece to take place in Schwartz in order to mirror the arrangement of choreographing and performing in the same space that occurred in the site.

However, I later came to the conclusion that the major advantage of working with a piece designed for a traditional stage setting, rather than a site-work, is the ability to rehearse or perform it in almost all studios and stages with only minor adjustments. This is the intention of crafting within a blank slate, after all. Toward the end of the process I became interested in experiencing the piece in other studios, so I conducted some rehearsals in the Woodpec dance studio and one at a yoga studio in Candler Park that Beckham uses as a rehearsal space for *The Lucky Penny*.

The first few rehearsals were very exploratory and we improvised to gain a feeling for what the piece would become. The two of us improvised together based on a score that Beckham articulated to me, and then she would eventually drop out and observe how I was moving. For me, this rehearsal symbolized my college dance experience coming full circle: I took Beckham's Movement Improvisation class my freshman year and was now able to recreate the experience as a senior. One of the main concepts that we explored was experiencing the feeling of disembodied arms. The challenge of the score was to move my arms in a contemplative but full manner without allowing their movement to affect the rest of my body as they would in normal full movement. I was asked to develop a series of arm gestures, based on this idea, to form an easily repeatable phrase. Beckham directed my performance of this series in a variety of qualities. We were both able to deepen our understanding of the material by feeling and seeing it performed in numerous ways. Beckham also taught me a phrase from a work she had been developing this past summer during the initial stage that was related to the feeling of disembodied arms that we explored in the improvisation. We later integrated both my phrase and parts of hers into the actual piece.

Our improvisational exploration of the material also involved the use of props. Beckham created a scene with two chairs—one for me to sit in and one placed on its side. The close proximity of the chairs created the tableau of a conversation that went awry, leaving me sitting in the aftermath. We experimented with numerous ways for me to relate to the chairs and their role in creating the stage environment. A gray sweater with an oversized turtleneck served as another prop. Beckham and I probed the action of screaming into the sweater to make a muffled sound. The vocalization realized multiple forms through a variety of tones and motivations. The piece eventually took shape around this act of releasing repressed frustration as we worked in a mainly linear pattern to develop the material. The piece evolved as Beckham connected new movements and concepts to the sequence and viewed my execution of the material. We usually analyzed multiple versions of an idea before setting it in the work. This process helped me to solidify my performance of the movement during its creation because I became acquainted with many facets of it at the onset. We also explored the idea of dressing one of the chairs in the sweater, forming an inanimate embodiment of the person missing from the implied conversation. I began to simultaneously relate to the sweater as a piece of clothing, a source of solace, and a representation of another person.

The piece became a mixture of phrases that Beckham set and movement that I created based on specified prompts. Some sections of the piece remained fundamentally improvisational and changed slightly with each delivery. The sweater and the chairs were included in the final structure of the piece, and they played a pivotal role in my understanding of the theatricality of the work. The vocalizations morphed into an alternation between singing a dial tone note and screaming, and the sweater became even more anthropomorphized as I depicted holding hands with it. Beckham moderately edited throughout the process so that by the end of the fall

semester, we had created a somewhat polished work. We stepped away from the piece for a couple of months as Beckham commenced rehearsals with her company and I directed my focus toward strengthening my performance and translating the work into the site.

During the period of rehearsing the piece now called *Terminal* on my own in the studio, I deepened my relationship to the movement. I also established a strong emotional connection to the piece, as it began to feel profoundly sad. I knew that the material possessed a level of inherent sadness, but it was not until I performed it alone that I established a personal connection. When we initially started working with the concept of screaming into the sweater, I told Beckham that the concept seemed very foreign to me because I never yell or scream. It seemed like something that one would do alone where no one else could watch or hear, which was violated by the design of our rehearsals. By carrying out this act in solitude, thereby actualizing its natural scenario, the emotion of the task began to feel authentic even though I did not think about specific words or situations while vocalizing. In one rehearsal, the emotion completely overcame me, causing me to lie on the ground crying with the sweater over my face.

Beckham and I returned to our rehearsal process about a month before the concert. I related my emotional experiences that had manifested when I rehearsed on my own and my new understanding of the genuine sensibility of volatile frustration. She encouraged me to hold onto the sensations of this discovery when performing for her or for an audience. She described the opportunity for the theater to simulate the feeling of being completely alone by making everything but the stage dark. This idea indicates an important distinction between the stage and the site, since I could never truly recreate the same feeling of being completely alone in the site.

After further developing the material with her company members, Beckham revised some of the motifs in *Terminal*. She introduced a few new movements and tiny gestures and altered others that no longer seemed relevant to the work as whole. It was interesting to observe Beckham's reactions to viewing the piece again, and I noted the moments that surprised her and those that now felt obsolete. Most of the movement modifications did not deviate from the original theme of the work, but Beckham's reexamination of the screaming altered the tone of my performance. She transformed the screaming into speaking to an unresponsive phone receiver, still muffled by the sweater. With this change, I cast off the extreme tension that the screaming provoked, and embraced the vacant numbness forged by mumbling "Hello? Are you there?"

Beckham commissioned a sound design by Paul Kayhart and costumed me in a black dress for *Terminal*. The soundscape aurally illustrated the theme of emptiness that my utterances suggested. The lighting design by Ari Shaw-Faber also contributed to the stark ambiance that behooved *Terminal*. From the onset, *Terminal* exuded a much deeper emotional quality than *Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides*, so I was eager to investigate the influence that the site and the character might impose on each other.

V. Returning to the Site: *Incommunicable*

Given the design of my investigation of how space and choreography influence each other, I chose to refrain from translating *Terminal* into the site until the completion of *Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides*. I wanted to observe the interaction between each piece of choreography and the site separately, requiring that I keep my work temporally divided. I also wanted *Terminal* to be fully formed before I started its translation in order to execute an accurate adaptation of the choreography. Beckham handed the choreography of *Terminal* in the site completely over to me, stating that I could treat it however I wished in the site and that she considered the translation my work, not hers. She expressed her excitement for viewing my modification of the choreography in the new space and chose not to influence it herself.

Even before I entered the site with this material, I knew that it would feel very different from *Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides*. Based on the divergent movement and feeling of the two pieces, I began to analyze how the predominant elements of the site would influence *Terminal* in a new way. I considered using less of the space for this piece since the choreography of *Terminal* suggested a feeling of containment even though it traveled throughout the space in the studio. The rails in the site now seemed to represent the bars of a cage rather than their true identity as pedestrian handrails. The rough concrete became a potential threat to my body's wellbeing as I envisioned flinging myself to the ground relentlessly and repeatedly.

The site fulfilled my expectation of feeling trapped behind bars and hesitant to throw myself to the ground when I physically tested the choreography in the space. I began the process by roughly sketching the material in the space, which initially felt completely disorienting. As I marked through the sequence I took note of opportunities to make the movement interact with the space. I decided to capitalize on the new perception of the rails as a cage by treating the walls

and rails as true boundaries that trapped me in the space. Rather than climbing over the rails or up the walls, as in *Crossing the Rails and Dotted the Slides*, I pushed off the structures and allowed them to enclose the space.

Since the choreography already possessed a spatial pattern in the studio, my treatment of the spatial and directional orientation of the movement acted as one of the greatest challenges for translating the choreography. I needed to carefully consider my manipulation of the space as well as its filmic depiction. I elected to confine the choreography to one platform of the space and to narrow the peripheral boundaries slightly. These choices contributed to the contained quality that the space introduced to the choreography. In my approach to the floor pattern, I chose to hybridize the leave-and-return pattern created in *Terminal* with the utility of the space for traveling from one edge to another.

I allowed the movement to transport me through the space in a somewhat linear fashion, but left the sweater at the place where the piece began, forcing me to return to it at the conclusion. In my experimentation with the new environment, I felt as if I were being pushed through the space by the movement. The structure seemed to establish an inevitable trajectory that caused me to advance to the edge of the wall where the space opens up, only to lure me back into the core of the space. This pattern arose from my visceral response to performing the choreography in the site and my consideration of whether or not to incorporate filmic devices in the use of the space.

I deliberated between two scenarios for how to conclude the use of the space. One option was to methodically walk back to the sweater from the opposite end of the space. The other relied on the use of film to make it appear as if I had approached the sweater in a different area

of the space than where it was discarded at the beginning. I found the latter option intriguing because it would enable me to address unfamiliar cinematographic effects as I addressed the space in a new way. However, I settled on the former scenario, because I felt physically compelled to reverently embrace the space and reflect upon the journey that I had made. This option also allowed for me to present the work to a live audience, which I hoped to do at some point before the formal concert.

Another aspect of the translation that I extensively contemplated was how to replace the chairs in the site. I struggled with letting the chairs go because they had played a pivotal role in shaping the environment of the stage to which I had become very familiar and somewhat attached. I dismissed the idea of using the short ledges on either end of the space that I had used in *Crossing the Rails and Dotted the Slides* as substitute chairs; I wanted to discover new treatments of the space for the translation and excavate its numerous opportunities. I entertained the possibility of bringing chairs into the space, which would have treated the space as a shell, open for the introduction of new elements. This hesitation to abandon the chairs arose in part because of their relationship to the sweater; I struggled to envision a way to convey the personification of the sweater without the chairs that I deemed vital to the integrity of *Terminal's* choreography.

After experimenting in the site, however, I decided to rise to the challenge of relying on the space alone. Due to my inability to find something to clothe in the space, I discovered that I could strategically tie the arm of the sweater to the handrail. This enabled me to replicate the act of holding hands with the sweater as I pulled the opposite arm to make the sweater slide along the rail. I felt particularly drawn to the shadow formed by the tensed sweater. This image

inspired the conclusion of the translation as I released the hand of the sweater, relieving the tension between the rails and me. In the closing image of *Terminal*, the lights fade as I pull on the arm of the sweater, leaving me bound in the enigmatic relationship. The site invoked a different conclusion that allowed me to free myself from the sweater, suggesting the possibility that I could exit my cell.

The screaming from the early version of *Terminal* remained in the translation into the site because Beckham did not change this motif until I already had translated and filmed it. When Beckham made the modification, I felt a bit disappointed that I had unintentionally misrepresented one of the major thematic motifs in the site version and briefly considered quickly refilming some of the scenes. However, as I rehearsed with the new version, experiencing it in the studio with the sound design and the chairs, I began to truly appreciate the drastically different influences that the site and the studio introduced. The screaming in the site now seemed very logical, serving as a vocal extension of the tension. In contrast, in the studio with the soundscape, the screaming no longer seemed appropriate because the tension had dissipated over time, and the new idea of searching for someone on the other line of the phone became the most fitting choice. I thought it was somewhat ironic that the action that had formerly seemed most appropriate hidden away from other people became most relevant in an outdoor space, vulnerable to observation.

When titling this piece, I felt that the screaming motif needed to be addressed, especially since it was no longer included in the studio version of *Terminal*. The theme of something being said but unheard or an idea that cannot be successfully communicated became pervasive in this piece. I wished to match the one-word title of *Terminal* that expressed this idea, and I eventually

settled on the word “incommunicable,” meaning both incapable of communicating with others and an idea that cannot be communicated.

The tone of *Terminal* conveyed a sense of darkness and isolation to me, so I decided to film *Incommunicable* at dusk or night. This choice in lighting added a new layer to the sense that the space contained me as the darkness felt much more oppressive than daylight. However, there are very few surrounding streetlamps and no power outlets in the space, which posed a concern for filming. Brown and I overcame this issue by placing yellow filtered LED lights, borrowed from Mark Teague, along the adjacent ledge of the library. The LEDs closely replicated the light from the streetlamps and allowed for greater visibility throughout the space while maintaining the feeling of darkness. We also utilized the portable lights to create interesting shadows and produce favorable lighting for the visibility of the movement. The lights altered the space slightly by introducing a new design element, but I think they were a necessary addition for producing the imagery that the choreography evoked.

For the filming and editing of *Incommunicable*, I employed the same kinds of techniques that I utilized in *Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides*, including manipulating the scale and interweaving multiple vantage points. Brown filmed this piece as well which allow for consistency in the style of filming for both pieces. The opportunity to highlight the small gestures and interactions with the rails and the walls through tight shots excited me because it enabled me to simultaneously highlight the textures of the space and the details of the choreography. The wide shots that included the surrounding illuminated buildings became beautiful to me in the absence of other light, whereas in the daytime I barely noticed these structures.

VI. Reexamining the Studio: *Shedding the Structure*

As I had done in the timeline established for *Incommunicable*, I waited until both core solos were fully composed before translating *Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides* into the studio. I felt most intimidated by this process due to personal skepticism that the site-specific choreography would still possess interesting qualities without the site. My biggest fear was that this piece would relate as amateur or overly literal to the audience. However, the opportunity to dissect the choreography and discover its essence excited me.

I began the process by executing a literal translation of the choreography into the studio. I first mentally mapped the geography in the site, with some inevitable changes to the spatial relationship of the five sections I identified in the site, and then performed the movement based entirely on its original form. I viewed this stage as a necessary part of the process, because it allowed me to familiarize myself with the choreography in the absence of the space, but I eagerly proceeded to manipulate the material. The fundamental questions that I asked myself before altering the choreography were: Should I maintain the map of the site? How much liberty do I have to change my spatial orientation? And how can I portray movements that are impossible to execute without the site?

I wanted to portray the unique differences that the five sections of the site extracted from the movement in the absence of the physical structure. This was particularly important for my treatment of the long movement phrase that was adapted to multiple sections. I assessed the fundamental properties of each section of the space and the essence of their effect on the movement through my kinesthetic memory of the choreography. In result I identified: 1) narrow and confined, 2) grounded and tethered, and 3) long and expansive as the three motifs that characterized the three versions of the long phrase. I also considered the spatial relationships

within the geography of the site. The one up on the ledge seemed distant, so I decided to place its corresponding movement as far upstage as possible. In contrast, the lower section on the mulch felt as if it needed to be extremely close to the audience to convey the antipodal relationship between the high and low areas. The long incline of the ramp provides the greatest accessibility to pedestrians, so I wanted to represent this movement as the most connected to the audience. I played with this idea by moving the material straight from upstage to downstage, but felt inhibited by the lack of length that was so prominent in this section in the site. Thus, I shifted this part of the movement to travel along the diagonal to take advantage of the longest dimension of the stage.

After I established the spatial structure in the studio, I focused on ways to transform my spatial orientation. I maintained the narrow quality of the upstage movement, but immediately noticed my increased ability to balance and move with ease when dancing barefoot on marley compared to my experience on the concrete ledge in shoes. I felt compelled to introduce the concept of my being at a low level, since this area in the site was lower than the ramp. I achieved this by translating the movement in a plank position facing the ground. This technique was stimulating because it achieved the depiction of the lower level, while subsequently resurfacing the quality of being bound to the space. This version of the choreography became much more physically demanding than the upright original.

Besides the spatial representation of the movement, I invested much consideration for the treatment of the tactile interactions with the space in the translation. I did not want to belabor the depiction of my experience in the space by overly miming grasping the bars and climbing on the walls. I soon discovered that my gestural depiction of the somewhat task-oriented movements

from the space did not seem overly literal, and the separation from the site opened the movements to multiple interpretations. I attempted to keep the first image of the piece intact as I took the liberty to loosen the literal representation of some of the later grasping of the rails and omitted the depiction of climbing the wall. I replaced the movements that involved walking on the side of the wall and jumping off of the walls with partial handstands, slides to the ground, and a slow plié in parallel followed by a tucked jump. I inserted subtle weight shifts to take the place of other interactions with the space, such as climbing over the rails. While rehearsing the choreography, I found that some aspects felt necessary to exclude because they dictated a trite attachment to the site, whereas some movements evolved into new interesting forms in the studio.

As I experimented with the movement, I realized that I accumulated more abstractions as the piece progressed. It seemed logical to journey from the direct to the transformed, as I allowed the studio to introduce its influences on the movement. This progression of abstractions, along with the actual departure from the site, inspired the title, *Shedding the Structure*. By the conclusion of the piece, I allowed the strict spatial dimensions to dissolve as I meandered slightly and broke up the continuous spatial and temporal motivations of the movement. Within the diagonal trajectory, I seized the opportunity to pause, briefly step away from the format, and directly confront the audience. I think that these introduced elements to the choreography allowed *Shedding the Structure* to take on its own unique identity

Sound acted as another element that allowed *Shedding the Structure* to further diverge from *Crossing the Rails and Dotted the Slides*. My treatment of the sound posed one of the hardest decisions to make when translating into the studio. I was not sure if I should perform in

silence, overlay the recording of the diegetic sounds from the site, or introduce a new sound environment. Through research on the role of the studio or stage, I determined that allowing an artist to create a new soundscape is one of the fundamental qualities of the studio or stage, because the studio acts as a blank slate for all elements of a performance, not just the choreography. For this reason, I chose to use music for *Shedding the Structure* that had a definite presence in the space, but did not overshadow or dominate the choreography. I found that my choice of music introduced new dynamic qualities to the movement and allowed me to find more softness. I found myself indulging in the sound and shaping some of my movement choices around the inflections in the music. While working in silence, I had struggled with performing with the same kind of monotonous rhythm that had been imposed on the movement by the site. It was not until I introduced new sound that I became comfortable with letting this structured rhythm go to adopt a more complex temporal relationship to the choreography.

By taking advantage of the opportunities of the stage to introduce elements of sound and lighting design, I observed the choreography developing into a completely new manifestation. I wanted to see the lighting choices that *Shedding the Structure* inspired Shaw-Faber to create, so I gave him full artistic license for designing the lights. He contrasted the design of this piece to that of *Terminal* by introducing multiple colors and clear spatial distinctions. A diagonal of light acted as one of the most distinct lighting choices for the piece. Shaw-Faber picked up on the spatial patterns that I created in the site and decided to highlight the concluding diagonal by creating a unique architectural-like feature. With input from Catellier, Shaw-Faber also incorporated a yellow cyclorama as the backdrop for the piece. The lighting design shaped the stage in a completely new way, creating a hybrid of structural details and open space.

Through the manipulations of space, timing, sound, and lighting, the choreography of *Shedding the Structure* actually departed from the purview of the site, and formed a piece that appeared as if it had been created entirely in the studio. By retaining some suggestion of the form of the site, but not holding strictly to its organization, the choreography was able to flourish in its own right. The final product alleviated my fear that the site-specific choreography would not be meritorious without the site. I found that the choreography had rich potential for discovery in a new spatial context.

VII. Welcoming the Audience: Performances

In addition to an informal showing at the site, I presented my work in a concert at the Schwartz Center, showcasing the two live studio pieces and the two filmed site works. I chose to have a discussion with the audience at the end of each performance in order to gain insight from their viewership. I refrained from asking the audience to answer a formal survey after the performances, in order to inspire articulation of individuals' genuine responses. Due to the experiential nature of my process and my personal assessment of the work, I did not form specific questions that I wanted the audience to answer; nor did I want to narrow their perception of the performances. The post-performance discussions were open to comments and questions, allowing me to hear what the audience was intrigued by, what qualities they held onto, and the concepts that sparked their curiosity.

The informal showing at the site was presented to the current students in the Modern IV and Improvisation courses in the dance department. The concert occurred during the day and I performed without costume. I prefaced the performance by instructing the audience to stand wherever they pleased in or around the space and to freely walk through it as they observed. I gave a brief description of the spatial pattern of both pieces, but I did not divulge anything about the content and themes.

Performing for an audience in the space felt very new, as I had only presented the work to individuals or small groups of two or three throughout the process. The live audience also provided a much different energy than performing for the camera. I felt as if I was in a silent dialogue with the audience inside the space because they moved based on where I led them and they responded to my intrusion on the crowd. When I danced for the camera, the stop-and-go flow necessary for film production occasionally made the movement feel stale or forced. With

the live audience, I could sense their engagement with the work and I experienced the intense rush of performing for people in very close proximity. During the performance I experienced a greater sense of vitality in both pieces as I harvested energy from the viewers.

After the performance, the audience and I gathered next to the site and Catellier moderated the discussion. The Modern IV class also continued the discussion after leaving the site. Some of the trends in the comments involved drawing comparisons between the two pieces and complimenting my performance of the material. Most of the audience members described being strongly connected to the emotion of *Incommunicable* and the physicality of *Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides*, replicating feelings that I have previously described; however, some viewers claimed that they felt acutely aware of the emotion in *Crossing the Rails* by perceiving me overcome a struggle and defy boundaries. People also related the idea that *Crossing the Rails* emphasized the large scale of the space, as *Incommunicable* directed the focus to the tiny details of the space. Someone commented that the use of the multiple levels was interesting in *Crossing the Rails* because it highlighted the vertical depth of the space, a detail often overlooked in the pedestrian use of the site. Another picked up on the artistry of the shadows formed by my movements and the structure. Many of the comments about the movement execution were based on the controlled use of my body and my attention to detail in moving through the space.

Some of the questions that arose revolved around the elements of working in a site, character development, and film as a tool. One classmate asked if I had an idea of what I wanted to choreograph before choosing the site, or if I made the material for *Crossing the Rails* solely based on the site after it was chosen. Other questions about the space involved my feelings about

working in a public space and the interactions that arose between spectators and me; how the time of day and the presence of an audience affected my performance; and, theoretically, if there is such a thing as true site-specific dance. Questions about filming included whether I had considered simply using one long shot of the camera, and whether or not I would still use film if I were to redo the project. The feedback from this performance boosted my courage for the upcoming formal concert and somewhat validated the quality of my work.

The thesis concert in the Schwartz Center involved two nights of performances and was open to the public. Many students, faculty members, and people from the community attended. The order of presentation was: *Terminal*, *Incommunicable*, *Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides*, then *Shedding the Structure*. I chose to present the core solos before the translations in order to introduce the audience to the choreography before they viewed the manipulations; this order also facilitated the audience's ability to make comparisons between the site and studio influences. Catellier opened the show by explaining what an honors thesis in dance entails and by describing the impetus for my research.

It felt incredibly rewarding to finally present my work to an audience after devoting so much time and investing enormous amounts of energy. I felt like I performed with the quality I hoped to achieve and that the pieces were well received. For *Terminal*, I embraced Beckham's advice to continue discovering something new with every performance while striving to maintain the illusion of being alone in the space. It was very different to hold onto this idea with the knowledge that the audience was peering into my private space, but I felt as if my body attitude and the nature of my performance remained true to my intention. While performing *Shedding the Structure*, my focus was to clearly articulate the nuances I had crafted, maintain the consistent

timing I had established in rehearsal, and remain solid in my placement and balance as I executed the demanding movements. Relief rushed over me as I bowed after this piece both nights after feeling that I had performed to the best of my ability and exposed my vulnerabilities to the audience throughout the concert.

Audience members were allowed to decide whether or not to stay for the talk back following the show as I gained my composure off stage. Catellier again, facilitated the discussion and allotted for roughly fifteen minutes in total. After Thursday's show the discussion immediately began with questions and on Friday Catellier encouraged the audience to begin with comments or observations. Additionally, several audience members corresponded with me privately after the show to share their thoughts.

The two audiences provided quite diverse observations and asked a wide range of questions. Questions about how I chose the site and why I used the same site for both site works arose both nights, but served as the only common inquiry between the two audiences. Some audience members were interested in hearing about the decisions I made for sound, including whether or not I amplified the diegetic sound and how I chose the music for *Shedding the Structure*. Concerns about the integrity of the movement arose in the form of asking how I proceeded to translate in consideration of the original choreography and how similar the two spaces felt in the haptic sense. Questions about the filming process focused on how I chose what to highlight and what to hide, and if I had watched a lot of dance films to inspire my cinematographic style. One question was about whether this spatial exploration also facilitated an investigation of my inner space—this surprised me the most.

Many people commented on the emotional and physical qualities that seemed to arise in all of the pieces. Several people spoke about my ability to shape the space around me as I dance, and commented that my spatial awareness and body control were very apparent in my performance of the movement. Some audience members provided affirmations for the show's order, observing that my depiction of the site allowed them to visualize the open space of the stage through a specific lens. A friend described the order of presentation as peeling away the layers of my identity as an artist, revealing the essence of me in the last piece. People commented on the lighting design for the live pieces and the shadows in the films, emphasizing that this element played a significant role in shaping the space. Conflicting opinions arose for the perception of some aspects, like the treatment of the curtain and the cyclorama. Some people thought the closed curtain suggested a contained space, while others perceived it as an open, ambiguous vacuum. Some spectators thought that the yellow cyclorama opened the space significantly, making it feel sunny, while others viewed it as truly framing and defining the space. People also described the types of places they visualized me in during *Terminal*, including underground in a damp subway tunnel, on a plane, and in a dirty kitchen. Someone told me that my filmography reminded her of Luis Buñuel's style due to my tendency to intersperse detailed shots into the overall composition. Through email, some people told me about experiencing an altered perception of everyday spaces and choreography throughout campus and others related that they had been enthralled throughout the concert, despite being very new to viewing modern dance.

VIII. Conclusion

Hearing and responding to the opinions, observations, and queries of the audience after each performance helped me to formulate my own conclusions about the work. When answering questions about selecting and working with the site or experiencing the differences in the studio, I was able to articulate ideas that I had been pondering throughout the entire process. In this journey, I deepened my awareness of my affinities for industrial outdoor spaces, filmography that combines tight and wide perspectives, subtle humor that arises when working in an unpredictable place, the use of diegetic sound in site work and music in the studio or stage environment, and strenuous movement. I was surprised to realize that this experience did serve as an exploration of inner space and my understanding of self. As I reflected on the struggles and challenges I encountered as I exposed my vulnerabilities through unfamiliar acts on stage and creating in the public eye, this project has allowed me to mature on many levels: performance, creative, and personal.

After relying on film as a pivotal resource in the presentation of my work, I value its form and special opportunities even more. If I were to recreate this project in the future, I would retain my use of film because I recognize it as a valuable asset for shaping the viewership of the audience by allowing them to observe the material and space through an informed perspective. Several details of the space and multiple aspects of the choreography are inaccessible to the audience when viewing the piece live; audience members had to make choices about where to view the work, so everyone saw it from a different vantage point, but each person inevitably lost sight lines at some point while navigating the site. One audience member also pointed out that there are many distractions during a site-specific performance that draw the audience's attention away from the work due to a lack of theatrical framing; and the work becomes somewhat

threatened by the possibility of being diluted in the expansive surround environment. Through film, I was able to provide the audience with continuous access to the movement and allow them to witness the textural influences of the space. I chose to include multiple angles of the space when filming so the audience could see the space as I saw it and appreciate the space on a more intimate level than that experienced by pedestrians walking through it.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have received the audience's authentic observations, allowing me to understand that each person has a different approach to viewing and analyzing movement. The comment about peeling back the layers of my artistic identity resonated with me and caused me to view the work as a whole through a new light. I had not thought about my personal relationship to the four pieces as a whole before hearing this, but I think the viewer captured my feelings of the vulnerability in creation. In *Terminal*, I indulged in the familiar realm of performing another artist's work. *Incommunicable* caused me to make decisions about the interactions with the space and presentation, but the movement still felt as if it belonged to someone else. *Crossing the Rails and Dotted the Slides* showcased my choreographic voice, but in a setting that provided its own artistic influence, which, in itself, provided the audience with visual stimulation. My true identity as an artist came through in *Shedding the Structure* as I cast off the external elements of the site and film to show the audience the essence of my choreography.

Beckham shared with the audience and me that she felt most interested in the choreographic differences that arose through my translation of *Terminal*. She stated that she had not expected me to hold onto the form of the movement as tightly as I did, but the two pieces, nonetheless articulated very different ideas and formed unique identities. She expressed her

appreciation for the time that I allotted in the movement for “soaking in” the environment as I slowly walked through the space and that I found an innovative use of the sweater for *Incommunicable*. After viewing my choreography, Beckham described my movements as not quite task-oriented, but a representation of fulfilling a goal, even in *Shedding the Structure* in the absence of climbing and navigating the site. I experienced this feeling when performing the movement, and I also recognize it as a representation of completing my intention in this project to assess the influences of site on choreography and performance.

My experiences working in the site and the studio taught me a number of things. I discovered that the sensations of moving in the site cannot be fully recreated in the studio because of the loss of tactile sensations. Nothing in the movement felt quite the same between the two site contexts as I was surrounded by completely distinct stimuli in each, even on the fundamental level of having to wear shoes in the site and being able to dance barefoot in the studio. I was able to form mental images of the site when translating in the studio, but the physical sensibility of the site was replaced by the stimuli of the studio. I also familiarized myself with the challenges of creating outside the studio and how to overcome them. Based on my experiences, I would recommend other artists to take the time to acutely observe a space and identify its range of qualities before embarking on a creative project. Because I started out by diving into the process and found myself creatively inhibited, I recognize the value of stepping back to witness the complexity and richness of the inspiration.

To address the issue of whether or not site-specific art truly exists, I rely on Fiona Wilkie’s explanation of site-specific performance. Wilkie, a senior lecturer in Drama at the University of Roehampton, identifies three classifications of site-work: site-specific (generated

for and inspired by a particular place), site-sympathetic (an existing piece adapted to a place), and site-generic (performances created for a series of similar locations).⁴¹ I classify *Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides* as truly site-specific piece due to the nature of its creation. On the other hand, *Incommunicable* can be considered site-sympathetic since it was not created for the site, but succumbed to its influences. Loosely, *Terminal* and *Shedding the Structure* can be categorized as site-generic because they can be performed in any studio or stage space with little adaptation; yet, this is the very nature of composing in the studio, which was considered at the onset of my research.

This artistic rendering of a reciprocal transplant demonstrates that the environmental parameters of a site have the capacity to greatly influence the composition and performance of choreography, as many other choreographers have previously discovered. Through creating, translating, rehearsing, filming, and performing the choreography of these works, I have become intimately aware of the distinctions of each piece and the influence of the site context. The studio and the site presented unique opportunities to the choreography, and encouraged each piece to adopt distinct characteristics of timing, character, production elements, and movement vocabulary. I found the process of letting go of the external inspiration of the site to translate the site-specific work into the studio much more difficult than adapting the studio choreography into a site-sympathetic form. Yet, by allowing the adapted spatial context of the translations to inspire abstractions of the movement, I was able to discover new qualities in the choreography. I view these discoveries as enhancements rather than tradeoffs because they allowed me to develop the choreography in a new depth that I had not initially anticipated.

⁴¹ Wilkie, F. (2002). Mapping the Terrain: a Survey of Site-Specific Performance in Britain. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 18(2), p. 150

There are endless possibilities for the extension of this project to continue the exploration of the role of space in the creation and performance of dance. In this project, I investigated the influences of one external site compared to the studio, but there are countless other types of sites that could be used in similar research. Additionally, this project only examined how my personal choreographic style approached and handled the challenges of transferring choreography between sites. Potentially, other choreographers would treat this task with completely different aesthetic values and give rise to very different work, even when dealing with the same choreography and spatial contexts. As I continue to develop my personal choreographic voice and identity as a performer, my heightened appreciation for space and its role in shaping movement, cultivated by this research, will inevitably play a role in how I create, view, and perform dance in the future.

Appendix A: Promotional Flyer



A Choreographic Exploration of Site Context

a dance honors thesis by Emily Hammond

March 27-28, 2014
8pm

Dance Studio
Schwartz Center for Performing Arts
Free Admission

dance.emory.edu (404) 727-7266 dance@emory.edu



This project is supported in part by the Emory College Center for Creativity and Arts, the John H. Gordon Stipe Society, Scholarly Inquiry and Research at Emory (SIRE), The Lucky Penny, and the Emory Dance Program.

Appendix B: Concert Program

(Promotional flyer served as front)

A Choreographic Exploration of Site Context

Concept and Performance by Emily Hammond

Terminal

Choreography by Blake Beckham with contributions from Emily Hammond

Original sound design by Paul Kayhart

Lighting design by Ari Shaw-Faber

Project development made possible in part by Theater Emory's 2013 Breaking Ground residency. This work is part of a larger piece, *Dearly Departures*, premiering July 24 - August 2, 2014 at DramaTech Theater. Blake wishes to thank Emily along with The Lucky Penny's dancers and collaborators for the many ways they shape and inspire her creative process.

Incommunicable

Translation of Blake Beckham's choreography by Emily Hammond

Film by Emily Hammond

Camera operation by Vita Brown

Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides

Choreography by Emily Hammond

Film by Emily Hammond

Camera operation by Vita Brown

Shedding the Structure

Choreography by Emily Hammond

Music edited by Kendall Simpson

"Getting the Done Job" by The Books

"Chestnut" by Reiko Kudo

Lighting design by Ari Shaw-Faber

There will be a talk back following the concert.

Sincerest thanks to Gregory Catellier for guiding me through this process. Thank you to Anna Leo for your insight and support. Dr. Juliette Apkarian, thank you for your enthusiastic commitment to this experience. Thank you, Blake Beckham, for sharing your creative process and for this incredible collaboration. Vita Brown and Ari Shaw-Faber, thank you for your expert artistry and collaboration. Lori Teague, thank you for your support, marketing, and photography. Thank you to George Staib and my classmates for your valuable feedback and generous support. Thank you, Anne Walker and Cyndi Church, for ensuring that I have a polished presentation. Thank you to the Emory Dance Program for making this possible, and to friends and family for your generous support.

Production Staff

Technical Director: Gregory Catellier

Stage Manager: Amelia Reiser

Assistant Stage Manager: Andre Lumpkin

Light and Sound Technician: Ari Shaw-Faber

Costume Coordinator: Cynthia Church

Music Coordinator: Kendall Simpson

Dance Program Director: Lori Teague

Dance Program Office Manager: Anne Walker

Promotional Assistance: Caitlin Ryan and Nick Surbey

House Management: Nina Vestal and Holley Mitchell

Videographer: Hal Jacobs

Appendix C: SIRE Budget

Expenses:

Choreographer Fee **\$500**

Blake Beckham is setting a 10-minute solo for the piece. This work will be performed in the Schwartz center according to Blake's staging.

Sound Score Commission **\$500**

Blake has requested for funds to commission an original sound score for her piece. This will allow her the freedom to choreograph solely based on the movement she wishes to set on me. Blake has used various composers for her choreography in the past and is experienced with this type of work.

Film **\$100**

Olivia Luz, a film student at Emory, has agreed to film my site-specific pieces for me. She has access to filming equipment and will only be responsible for shooting the work. I plan to do the editing myself.

Light Board Operator **\$300**

Ari Shaw-Faber will design the lighting for my concert and run the light board during the show. Ari has experience in technical production for theater and dance at Emory and has worked closely with Gregory Catellier for designing and running several Emory Dance Company concerts.

Costumes **\$200**

Blake has requested a budget of \$150 to costume the solo she is setting on me. I am requesting an additional \$50 to cover the other three solos in the concert. I plan to borrow most of the costuming for these three solos from the Emory Dance costume closet and my own wardrobe, but the extra funds will ensure that I have access to everything that I need.

Paper **\$50**

Program printing materials for the thesis concert

Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Manager **\$650**

\$350 for stage manager and \$300 for assistant stage manager. These estimates were made by Gregory Catellier, who runs the technical production of the Emory Dance Company and his own company, Catellier Dance Projects.

In-Kind:

Videographer

A videographer will be provided in-kind by Emory Dance for the thesis concert.

Promotion and Printing

Promotion and printing expenses will be provided in-kind by Emory Dance.

Income:

CCA (Pending) **\$500**

Stipe Specific Pool (Pending) **\$500**

Total Expenses: \$2,300

Total Income from other sources: \$1,000

Amount Requested from SIRE: \$1,300

Appendix D: CCA Project Grant Proposal

I am conducting an honors thesis in choreography and performance that explores the relationship between site-specific choreography and compositions choreographed in the studio for traditionally staged performances. My project consists of four solos performed by me; two will be developed and performed in the Schwartz center dance studio and the other two will be developed in a site chosen by me on Emory's campus and shown to the audience through film adaptations. Gregory Catellier is my thesis advisor in the dance department. My thesis concert will take place March 28-29, 2014 in the Schwartz Center for Performing Arts and will be free and open to the public.

Blake Beckham, an Emory alumna and critically acclaimed choreographer in the Atlanta community, has agreed to choreograph one of the solos for my thesis. Her piece will be approximately ten minutes in duration and will be developed in the Schwartz dance studio. Blake and I will rehearse multiple times a week throughout the month of November to set the piece. Blake also has planned to commission an original sound score for the work. I have given Blake the freedom to choreograph with open parameters, because the focus of my thesis is related to my later adaptation of her work into a site-specific piece. I have chosen to have this work commissioned in order to prevent the original choreography from being biased by my anticipation of setting in the site.

This project is partially inspired by my site-specific solo choreography assignment for Anna Leo's Choreography I class last fall. Instead of choreographing traditional site-specific pieces in which the choreographer draws inspiration primarily from the site, the class was instructed to adapt an already existing solo from the first assignment into a new site. The dance faculty has asked my permission to post the film adaptation of my piece developed from this project, "Caught Between Two Slabs of Marble," on the Emory Dance website.

In my thesis, I will be exploring this theme further by adapting Blake's solo into a site as I take note of the necessary changes to the original choreography and the new opportunities that the site presents. I will also execute the reciprocal of this process by choreographing an original site-specific piece in the same site and later adapting it for the Schwartz studio. The overall focus of the thesis is to compare the choreographic processes of setting a site-specific work based on previously established choreography and creating work inspired solely by the site itself. I will also explore the choreographic opportunities and performance dynamics that arise when adapting work for a space that is different from the space in which it was initially designed. This concept is partially inspired by the work of Monica Bill Barnes, as she has described that her choreography for specific pieces, such as "Luster" (2012), shifts based on the different venues in which it is performed.

For the two site-specific solos, I have chosen to choreograph in the handicap ramp along the library at the intersection of Asbury Circle and Fishburne Drive. I have chosen this site because I find it aesthetically pleasing and it presents many creative opportunities. I have chosen to present the site-specific choreography through film in order for it to be more accessible for the audience and so that I can control the vantage point. Olivia Luz has agreed to film the pieces for me for a fee.

This project will promote dance at Emory because it is the only Honors Thesis in Dance and Movement Studies this year.

Appendix E: Video Material

Thesis Concert Video: <https://vimeo.com/90869942> (password: emorydance)

Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides: <https://vimeo.com/89678514>

Incommunicable: <https://vimeo.com/89678850>

Caught Between Two Slabs of Marble: <https://vimeo.com/89676492>

Appendix F: Performance Photographs

Informal Showing in the Site



Terminal





Incommunicable





Crossing the Rails and Dotting the Slides



Shedding the Structure





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