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They say they see me

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THEY SAY THEY SEE ME

by

Christine Howe

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Dance in the
Graduate College of
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Thesis Supervisor: Professor Charlotte Adams

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PUBLIC ABSTRACT

They Say They See Me seeks to reveal the navigation of a performer's identity and sense of self within a concert dance framework. Using myself in the position of the performer, I will analyze my own performative habits and conditioned responses to dance performance and then utilize performative and choreographic strategies to break these habitual pathways. This process will be conducted in two different works. *They Say They See Me* is a self-choreographed solo in which I use my position as both choreographer and performer to uncover aspects of my identity that are hidden under conditioned performative responses. I situate the spectatorship of the audience as the key factor in my habit to conceal parts of myself. From this process, I hope to complicate the spectacle nature of dance performance and re-pattern the way the audience connects to their gaze. *Unearthing edges/constructing caps* is a work directed by Ailey Picasso in which I analyze my conditioned performative response with in an ensemble. Through more of an emphasis on process rather than product and the use of improvisation as a generating tool, I hope to re-orient my engrained values of movement aesthetics and uncover a more genuine way of incorporating myself into the work of the ensemble.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
THEY SAY THEY SEE ME	3
UNEARTHING EDGES:CONSTRUCTING GAPS	12
CONCLUSION.....	20
REFERENCES	23
CONCERT PROGRAM.....	24

INTRODUCTION

Performance elicits the idea of an intensified mode of ontology that pertains to a specialized and cultivated display of a body in action. We typically specify the space in which these actions occur and cultivate the parameters in which these actions are to be viewed. “The main ingredients of performance are place, content, audience, time, and the goal-the end, so to speak-which could be instruction or pleasure, or a combination of both-in short, some sort of reformative effect on the audience” (Thiong'o 12). However, these aspects do not need to occur within a stage space to be considered performance. Performance is an innate component to our existence as consciously engaged bodies that connect and interact with our surroundings. We perform to express our ideas, emotions, and identities in the form of action in our everyday life. The difference between performance as an artistic practice and performance in everyday life is the intensification of stakes defined by the gaze of the audience. The intensification of the gaze transforms performance into that of spectacle and the performer as object.

Taylor constructs performance as “vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” (2). The way in which we express and share knowledge is through action, through performance. Using a phenomenological lens, we can identify ourselves as conscious bodies that can experience the moment of the present and reflect on how “our bodies both shape and are shaped by our life experiences” (Albright 8). The ways in which we perform ourselves in the world as well as the way in which the world performs on us serve to shape our sense of self. Rowell’s ideas of reciprocity further this phenomenological investigation in terms of artistic expression. In the creation of artistic works, we are able to “reflect and give sense to our experience and in their capacity to function in multiple ways, artworks have the capability to reflect the complexity of our reciprocal interaction with the world, without

fragmenting that experience” (Rowell 143). The moment of concert dance performance is a reciprocal action of knowledge transfer in which both the designated performer and designated audience share an exchange of knowledge.

By placing Rowell’s idea of reciprocity adjacent to the consciousness of being witnessed, the stakes of the performer intensify. The intention behind the “gaze of the other”, both actual and implied, directly affects how the performer perceives that moment in time, the moment of performance (Fraleigh 14). Thus, the performer takes on a complex position in which subjectivity and objectivity are in a constant state of flux, merging and diverging from one another. The performer both has a heightened sense of corporeality through their own experience of their phenomenological nature which may be simultaneously supported and deconstructed through the lens of the audience. The tension of witnessing being witnessed creates an environment vulnerable for inscription which shapes not only how the performer perceives that moment but also how they perceive themselves both as spectacle and as a person.

In looking at my personal history in Western concert dance, I had my first concert stage performance experience at the age of four and continued to present myself on stage consistently through my life. My own history has sparked my interest in exploring how the repetition of these experiences have informed my sense of self as an artist and as a person. In this thesis, I will be focusing my study in two performed works, *They Say They See Me*, a self-choreographed solo, and *unearthing edges:constructing gaps*, a group work directed by Ailey Picasso. Through these different processes of crafting and embodying work, I will explore my own inscriptions from my embodied history of concert dance performance. From the knowledge of these inscriptions, I will craft choreographic and artistic processes to disrupt my conditional patterns and to access different facets of myself within the act of performance.

THEY SAY THEY SEE ME

Learning practice for dance is structured upon repetition in order to fully embody the style as well as building the strength and awareness to execute the technique. We condition our bodies to support the movement and establish patterns of muscularity to deepen our ability and understanding of the movement. "A danced term or a simple series of terms is embodied habitually and "inscribed" into a dancer's body once the body's connective tissues themselves bear the evidence of that practice" (Ness 12). The inscription of the technique on the body is evident on a physical level in that the body is structurally changed from this conditioned practice. The same process of inscription can happen on the psychological and emotional level in which the way we think and view ourselves is altered through repeated patterns of ontology. In this way, the repeated act of concert dance performance has not only inscribed my physical body, but also my sense of self. The pattern of projecting a cultivated sense of self on stage inscribed this process into my identity and how I, ultimately, perform myself.

In thinking of my own embodied history, I trained extensively in ballet technique which enforced patterns of perfectionism and obedience. My performative choices and the way that I valued my body was directed through the intentions of the choreographer rather than through my own agency. "Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (Foucault 138). The docility of my body became an inscription that led me to constantly look for permission and to hide under the approval of someone else's work and vision. While there was opportunity to input my own performative choices and expression of movement, it was still under a sheet of permission which could be

yanked out from underneath at any moment. There is an instability of agency when you attempt to find your own voice inside a work with the knowledge that your contributions can be changed and manipulated through someone else's perspective. Knowing that my research interests were to excavate my own inscriptions and my intimate experiences, I felt called to craft this part of my thesis through my own direction in order to go deeply into the personal and produce a piece that was both embodied and framed by my own relationship with concert dance performance. In placing myself in the position of the choreographer, I was able to access a different perspective on myself as a performer and re-orient my ways of thinking about my sense of self in space.

The catalyst for my entry point of research was a phrase I would often hear growing up after a dance performance, people would say that they saw me when I danced. This comment was always jarring to me because I noticed clear differences between my sense of self on stage and my sense of self in everyday life. Even at a young age, I noticed that there was a transformational process of embodiment occurring between these ontologies. The reflection of my memories and emotions tied to these events spurred my interest in investigating these differing modes of being and my own sense of self. I began this process by first categorizing words that I felt described my sense of self on stage in performance and my sense of self in everyday life. On stage, I found words such as bold, confident, worthy and in life I found words such as small, quiet, and analytical. With such a disparity, how could an audience member say that they saw me when I didn't even know where my sense of identity fell within this range? The disparity of these selves tempted the conclusion that I had constructed a particular version of myself for the stage space. This alternate self served as a projection to mask my sense of self in everyday life in concealment. In this alternate sense of self, I could project the image of myself

that I wanted to be witnessed which was reinforced through the patterns of values and aesthetics engrained in my dance education. Erving Goffman, a sociologist, explains,

“Let us turn now from the individual as character to the individual as performer. He has a capacity to learn, this being exercised in the task of training for a part. He is given to having fantasies and dreams, some that pleasurably unfold a triumphant performance, others full of anxiety and dread that nervously deal with vital discrediting in a public front region. He often manifests a gregarious desire for teammates and audiences, a tactful considerateness for their concerns; and he has a capacity for deeply felt shame, leading him to minimize the chances he takes of exposure” (128).

Goffman’s ideas speak to the duality that I found in my own practice of wanting to express the parts of myself which were attributed to a fulfilling performance and keeping the qualities that did not fall into this hierarchical structure hidden. The spectacle, then, would not be the vulnerable parts of myself but rather the confident, constructed parts which demanded to be witnessed and were given external validation. In this way, the complex layers of subjectivity and objectivity surface. In an attempt to not be objectified by the gaze of the audience, I objectify myself through a process of discerning which parts of myself are suitable to view. The parts that complete the whole of the subjective remain protected and hidden from exposure.

The intrigue of these inscriptions lent itself to an interesting choreographic and embodied investigation in order to disturb and reorient my conditioned practices within the framework of the stage space. The stage space is “a self-contained field of internal relations: the interplay of actors and props and light and shadows-mise-en-scene-and between the mise-en-scene as a whole and the audience” (Thiong'o 12). The condition of internal relations yields an embodied response related to the performer’s condition toward these relations. From the beginning, I

looked for what to interrupt my conditioned embodied response and enter the stage space from a different sense of embodiment. The opening image of *They Say They See Me* reveals a select portion of the stage and myself in the process of braiding my hair. This image was specifically chosen as a choreographic tool rather than an aesthetic image for the audience. Prior to performance, I find that the nervous energy and anticipation of performance is a particular entry point into my conditioned response to default to my energetic, cultivated self. The mundane act of braiding my hair was a choreographic and performative tool as a means to repattern my default method of entry into a performance. The act of braiding my hair is one that is very familiar to me and is a particular performance that I do often in life. On top of the mundane familiarity, this act also holds personal significance in my childhood memories. When I was younger, my mother would meticulously comb my hair and braid it into a long French braid. This act was more than just a simple hairstyle, but a performative act of ritual which imbued a sense of tenderness, care, and bonding between us. The symbol of ritual felt important to include as a means of entering the stage space. It allowed me to access a sense of calmness in order to control the adrenaline infused energy of live stage performance and to embody a sense of my body outside of the stage space. The combination of physicality and memory resulted in a different perspective and awareness in entering the stage space and questioning the inscriptions embedded in the stage space itself.

After braiding, a pool of light then revealed the left downstage corner of the stage and served as a curious beacon which drew me into that space. The spotlight is a particular tool of theatrical performance which has the intention of highlighting the body and drawing the eye to that particular space. The light serves to intensify the gaze which in affect intensifies the embodiment of the occupant of that light and space. Once I stepped into the pool of light, I

reacted to these inscriptions but in a controlled process of analysis. I allowed my body to start to change embodiment through a slow process of allowing the performative energy to fill my body and expand my energetic presence. I attempted to go to the extreme of that process and waited until my body was physically and visually shaking before breaking the transformation and leaving the pool of light. The enactment of this transformation allowed me to notice this change in my physicality when given this particular coded impetus, however, the control of this transformation altered the means in which I access this state of being. “Stillness allows for associations beyond immediate perception, that is, how it mobilizes virtual meanings of the event. Stillness also allows for the perception of physiological processes in the body, breath, heartbeat, or reflexes such as the blinking eye” (Fabius 338). While I was not supporting complete stillness, I was moving at a slow enough rate as to which these processes of humanity could be highlighted through the transformation of my energetic body. This becoming a symbol for the human within the spectacle not only for the audience but for myself as the performer.

The spectacle nature of performance is in direct relation to the gaze of the audience and the knowledge of that gaze on behalf of the performer results in a different state of embodiment and in my case, a constructed sense of self to serve as that spectacle. As a female embodied and identified person, my personal stakes are increased with not only the knowledge that the gaze is present but also having no control over the quality or intention behind the gaze. The possible objectification of my bodily presence conjures feelings of fear and signifies a loss of agency. Rebecca Schneider in *The Explicit Body in Performance* explains, “Within the terms of perspective, there is no reciprocity - the seen does not see back” (67). Through this model, the audience establishes a sense of security in their invisibility. The active field of vision is unidirectional and “the distance between viewer and viewed is radically collapsed onto the

person of the artist/object herself” (Schneider 74). Recognizing this collapse of control, the constructed version of myself is an attempt to regain agency over how I am viewed.

In attempt to merge these versions of myself, I analyzed the theatrical components of the stage space that would obstruct the primacy of the visual. In this way, I hoped that complicating the visual component to performance would allow me to retain agency through the ways in which I framed my body in space rather than through a constructed sense of self. The intentional use of the wing space defined by the legs of the stage became a vital obstruction to visual consumption. By undermining the stability of the visual, I attempted to reorient the ways in which the audience interacted with my body on a visual level. “The spectator becomes aware of the flux of multiple perspectives in perception of the performance” (Fabius 334). The destabilizing of the visual creates an opportunity for the audience to find different qualities of the gaze. Within the stage space, the curtains serve as a frame for the space to highlight the visibility of those occupying the space. The function of the curtain legs is to act as a doorway between the visible and the not visible. In my history of concert dance performance, the legs were taught to be a formidable and stable presence that were not to be touched or manipulated in any way. Their presence served as the transitional space between the pedestrian and the spectacle, from the mundane to the spiritual. The inscription of reverence for these rectangles of fabric hung from the ceiling seemed to become another symbol for the way in which I view myself from behind the curtain and then revealed by the curtain.

In investigating this particular inscription, I was interested in an attempt to breakdown this sense of transitional space in which an individual transforms into a performer but still in keeping the function of the curtain leg. I utilized the curtain as a means of obstructing the visual of my body but expanded its presence on stage to reveal the backstage area to the audience. By

pulling the legs out, I was able to reframe the stage space and the space in which my body was able to occupy that space. Through this break down of coded reverence and traditional proscenium framing, I had the agency and control to frame my body and challenge the way in which the audience was able to react visually. It simultaneously served as a means of finding balance between my modes of being and allowed me to access facets of myself from within the same space. Towards the end of the solo, I replaced the curtains to their traditional setting. Even though the curtains hung in their traditional location, it was through my action and my choice to be framed in this way. In addition, it was my hope that the movement and life embedded into the curtain would remain and the ephemera of that presence would continue to challenge the audience in their visual consumption. The last manipulation of walking through the curtain and entering the space of the audience, the stakes of vulnerability through the visual began to level. I was seeing the audience aware that they were looking at me and they were looking at me aware that I was seeing them.

In my navigation of the gaze, the idea of balance became an integral investigation through the symbolism of the facets of my sense of self and more literally in an embodied investigation. There are several moments of balance which occur at varying points within the piece. In these moments, I establish a position and then attempt to rise to $\frac{3}{4}$ pointe and sustain balance until I decide to transition out of the balanced position. On the outside, these moments of balance could be seen as a trick or with the intention of purely awe-inspiring the audience. On a certain level, this is not false as there was some motivation to display a particular skill that I have cultivated through my training that I do not always get to perform in work choreographed by others. However, there are deeper and more complex investigations and theorizations that can be applied to these sustained moments of balance.

Firstly, I do think there is something to be said about showing this feat on stage as a means of showing the effort and the difficulty of the action. My experience with concert dance has always aesthetically valued the air of grace and effortlessness in movement, even when performing extremely physical and athletic movements. Balancing, especially on one leg $\frac{3}{4}$ pointe, shows the effort and difficulty of the action not necessarily because of a physical sign of struggle to find balance (although that can certainly be the case) but rather because of the change in embodiment that is necessary to sustain balance. “Mastery of balance evolves in practice as a mastery of directing oneself to places that are extremely difficult to find and extremely easy to miss or lose, places that are literally infinitesimal. They are so tiny that their margins for error are virtually nonexistent” (Ness 17). The difficulty to balance the energies and anatomy of the body requires a different sense of proprioception and internal investigation that is not necessarily required to achieve other actions on stage. I have found in my studio practice that in order for me to achieve balance, that I had to re-channel my sense of performativity and focus on my bodily position and internal awareness. I wondered how this would translate to the stage space where performative and adrenaline energy is heightened and if I would have the means of channeling that energy into balance. In choosing to explore this task, I knew that it would be a gamble in that I would not be able to practice with all of the factors that go into a live performance until opening night. In order to incorporate this into the piece, I had to confront a strongly engrained impulse of perfectionism and give myself permission to fail. “The imagery of directional realms is not set to work as a means of seeking out a certain knowledge of balance for spectators. Rather, it is understood inwardly by performers” (Ness 18). I found that claiming the balance for my own use and letting go of audience expectations allowed me to navigate my relationship to perfectionism in order to re-channel my anxiety into internal focus.

The combination of the adjustment in performative approach and permitting myself to fail made this feat of balance so much more than a display of skill. Rather, it became this intense challenge of bodily control and awareness as well as a moment to manage the different facets of my performing body. Within the balance, I was hyper aware of my internal state in noticing micro-adjustments happening within my body as well as the energetic output I was sending out to the world. In the structure of the piece, these moments were meditative and a means to check back in with myself rather than an outward focus with the intention of impressing the audience. I strategically placed these moments of balance in areas of the piece where I felt that my energy inside the performance may have caused me to revert back to performative inscriptions. Balance as a choreographic and performative strategy served as a means of reigniting my sense of internal presence and sense of self. While I was subconsciously aware of the audience and their gaze, my internal attunement and investigation relieved that direct knowledge and, for a moment, seemed to transcend from the power of the gaze.

In the culmination of my attunement to my own embodiment and the changing visuals of manipulating the visual framework, I perceived the gaze of the audience differently. Through a process of choreographic decisions and performative strategies to repattern, I found a different connection to myself on stage and the parts of myself that can be present in stage performance. The moments of internal awareness and outward expression supported one another in my embodiment as a performer which allowed me to access the facets of my holistic sense of self. Within Rowell's ideas of reciprocity, I perceive that the audience too had a different connection to themselves as a viewer and to me as a performer. "It follows that we simultaneously see person dancing as well as persons transformed; that is, that we see embodied minds, but we see them in the context of artistic practice" (Rowell 140). The demystification of the transformation

reveals the human behind the spectacle and reciprocally emanates that knowledge to the audience but also to myself as the performer.

UNEARTHING EDGES:CONSTRUCTING GAPS

The second component to this thesis research was in Ailey Picasso's ensemble work, *unearthing edges:constructing gaps*. It was my intention to research within an ensemble group because my performative history has placed special significance on my solo work and the value judgements that go along with that condition. I wanted to build relationships with other dancers and notice the differences in how I relate to my sense of self as solo performer and from within a collective. This work featured movement and performance from Sonja Schulz, Danica Clayton, Jensen Steinbronn, Anna Wetoska, and myself. This cast was an interesting mix of ages, technical abilities, and differing levels of previously established relationships which served as an interesting basis in which to analyze my sense of self as an individual from within this collective. I will focus on my inscriptions as a performer within an ensemble that are revealed from this process and analyze my agency within the piece to disrupt these established patterns.

The creative process for this piece was focused into building relationships between the collective, connecting with our own sense of self from within the collective, and trying on other's perspective through the embodiment of movement. All of these layers were constructed through a means of communication and improvisation. From the beginning of this process, I immediately noticed my tendency to hierarchically categorize my place within the group. In my ballet training, I felt that as students we were constantly ranked in terms of aesthetic and technical ability by my instructors. Even though this was never explicitly stated, it would be revealed in terms of who was given compliments and corrections and ultimately who would be

given specialized roles in our productions. Operating in this framework, I constantly evaluated my place in order to determine where I fell within the hierarchy. This process of ranking became engrained into my experience within ensemble groups and would create an underlying sense of distance and competition between the group.

In order to establish a human connection between the cast of dancers, we would start each rehearsal with a check-in where we would talk about how we were doing, what we were working on, what frustrated us, what we were excited about, etc. This allowed me to get to know these women on an intimate, personal level and feel connected to who they were as people, not just as dancers. This foundational relationship became the true gem through this process and served as the basis for the movement we generated and cultivating a positive, supportive environment. Throughout this process, Sonja, Jensen, Danica, Anna, and Ailey became more than just collaborators but rather people I genuinely cared for and trusted. Our time in the studio and on stage served to deepen these relationships and changed the quality of the work we produced. In giving priority to our connection as a group, the compulsion to evaluate my hierarchical position within the group faded because it was clear that the hierarchy was not given priority among us or in the framework of Ailey's thinking. Jenny Roche in *Embodying multiplicity: the independent contemporary dancer's moving identity* explains,

“It offers us the possibility to discuss the differences we perceive from dancer to dancer, and for dancers to recognize the influence that choreography has on their movement choices. If dance creation is acknowledged as an emergent process that involves the dissolution of bodily boundaries into a Deleuzian process of ‘becoming’, then it follows that the choreographic outcome and even the choreographer’s practice can be significantly influenced through the encounter with the dancer’s moving identity” (9).

This idea of dissolving boundaries became salient for this process and actualized through getting to know one another on a human level. This gave me a different appreciation for the people that I was dancing with and a longing to support their goals rather than just my own.

In the actual movement generation, we utilize tactics of authentic movement and improvisation. The process of re-orientation and re-patterning is embedded in the practice of improvisation as Ann Cooper Albright suggests,

“My improvisational experience has been based on the combination of training in disorientation (falling, being upside down, moving through fear and with a great deal of momentum, being out of control) and somatic study in subtle bodily awareness.

Improvisation can lead us out of our habitual responses by opening up alternative experiences-new physical sensations and movement appetites, encouraging dancers to explore new positionings and desires” (260).

The use of this practice to generate movement and connect to ourselves as individuals and the ensemble support new modes of thinking deviating from conditioned responses. Ailey directed us through sessions of authentic movement as a means of connecting us all to our individual impulses and preparing our minds and bodies. In starting this way, the expectation of product was dismantled and instead cultivated an environment of experimentation. Then, we would engage in more directed improvisational structures which usually was prompted by a question that in some way challenged sense of self and the different facets of our being. The freedom of navigating these questions from an embodied state led to movement creation that was unique to each individual. I do not mean unique in the sense that it was original or stylistically different because we all are stemming from similar structures of Western concert dance, but different in the sense of the intention and emotion engrained within the movement. From here, we would

demonstrate our personal movement phrases and then teach them to the rest of the group. In this way, we not only were dealing with our own sense of self, but we were able to try on other's way of moving and tap into their navigation of the question. I found this to be an extremely humbling process which has made me think about the rehearsal space in a different way. In removing the product from our immediate train of thought, we were able to connect with one another and generate movement that felt important and meaningful to all of us. In my history, the rehearsal space had an air of competition in determining who was going to be featured, whose ideas would be valued, and who could embody the vision of the choreographer in the best way. In navigating through this inscribed competitive component of my embodied past, I was able to release the tension and pressure of constantly questioning my place and instead dropped into the group with humbleness and a truer sense of myself as an individual.

Agency revealed itself to be an integral component to the creative process and my navigation of research within the piece. Ailey was very clear from the beginning that we had agency in the space to take care of ourselves and our bodies in whatever capacity that meant for us in a day. Sometimes this would manifest in improvisation and consequently set material that was less physical in an effort to give our bodies rest. We had the freedom to move in a way that felt personal which led to a manifestation of movement derived from our own internal investigations. Ailey was very conscious to not manipulate or alter the movement we created and let them exist in the form that we generated. We were able to investigate ourselves while also accounting for the members of the ensemble creating an environment where "individualism does not have to degenerate into selfishness and where collectivity does not have to dissolve into conformity" (Fischlin, Heble, Lipsitz xiii). This process of generating our own movement and

having the movement be represented in the performed version felt validating and again laid the support for us all to relate to each other as equals.

Even though Ailey had set this expectation of agency in the movement generation process, I felt that I had to relinquish some of my agency as Ailey was setting the structure of the piece. Ailey directed and crafted the order and spatial organization for the version that was to be performed which at some points felt dispiriting and mentally taxing. As I mentioned earlier, we had agency to generate movement based on how available we were physically and mentally. However, what I did not expect was that these particular phrases would be present in the performed version. It was an odd disconnect to have these phrases which were embodied in a time of exhaustion to be placed in a structure that was to be performed on stage. I noticed in myself the different expectations between movement generated for the studio and movement generated for the stage and the value judgements that I had in place for each of those spaces. Under my own agency, I would have selected the material that was created when I was more physically and mentally present in my body to be performed on stage and would have left my less embodied phrases to the studio. This excerpt from my journal entry from October 16, 2018 explains how I was processing from within the process,

“I’m curious about the feedback of where I am at mentally entering this rehearsal and how that feeds into the movement I create. Going back into the movement phrases from previous rehearsals, I’m remembering how I was feeling during that time. Almost like entering a past version of myself. My question is should I have let my mental state of the day reflect in the movement I create? Or should I, as is often encouraged in technique class, leave my problems at the door? What does it mean to be true to your own sense of self for the day versus trying to be a productive contributing member of the group? What

is more of a disservice... bringing in perhaps less than ideal parts of yourself or bringing in perhaps “fake” or constructed versions of yourself? What does this mean in terms of authenticity and knowing that this will be a performed product?”

This uncovered a deep inscription of wanting to show the best version of myself on stage based on my value judgements of movement and what I considered to be stage worthy. While I knew I could voice my discomfort and Ailey would have taken that into consideration, this felt like an important performative investigation in light of my research interests. How could I give the movements of the exhausted body the same importance as the more physical moments of virtuosity in terms of my performative choices? How might these moments serve as a means to show the full range of myself as a human on stage in order to undermine the spectacle? The connection to humanness and the full range of what it means to be human promoted space to re-orient pathways and perform exhausted moments of humanness. These questions and research interests were not only a means to explore my personal inscriptions of performance, but they also served to reframe the way I viewed my agency within the process. Yes, I was performing these movements by the means of Ailey’s direction, but it was through my own agency that I was able to engage with them and be able to explore them in my own way. This process has reframed agency in that it is not exclusive to one party but that it can be shared, especially in the roles of director and performer.

Halfway through the creative process, our cast of five doubled with the addition of five metal structures. Even though the structures were not alive, their presence was substantial and curious in ways that both enlivened and complicated the creative process. Our first rehearsal with the metal structures was mainly dedicated to solo improvisations with the box in order to figure out the possibilities and limitations of the structures as well as our bodies inside of the structures.

Through our improvisations, we found that they were both stable and movable, large but not quite large enough, heavy but light enough to manipulate. The contradictions of their ontology became a continuing point of fascination in that we could never quite determine what these structures were or what our relationship to these structures should be. This constant questioning allowed space for us to determine our own relationship with the structures and how each of us would interact with our own structure.

Undergoing the same improvisational process of movement generation, we were able to see each person's interest and relation with the structures. Sonja and Jensen seemed to be comfortable with the stability of the structures and looked for pathways to climb, hang, and test the limits to which these structures could support them. Danica moved with her structure in a way that was fluid and seamless. She seemed to find a harmonious duet with her structure in the ways that they could move together. Anna found interesting entry points which challenged the strength of the structure. She utilized her own strength to undermine and over power the strength of the structure. I was more interested in the instability of the structure and finding a means of establishing my own stability through that contradiction. This manifested in improvisational research to find ways that I serve as support for the structure and display its instability. All of these differing entry points from the cast showed the broad range of possibilities with the structures and the multiplicity of meaning for each of us. The structure was an both an obstacle and opportunity that required all members of the ensemble to reorient our physicality and decision making.. Choreographer Ann Halprin used scores and task-based movements that "distanced the dancers from their working process, objectifying the work of combining movement elements into longer phrases, and thus disrupting their unstudied impulses with imposed tasks. While they disoriented the dancers, they also released them from their own

preferences and habits” (Kowal 237). The metal structures became a score, embedded with a set of rules of what was possible and what was not possible due to its matter and presence. This score removed us from our current comfortability within the process and forced us to access a different sense of embodiment based on our own individual investigation in response to this structural score.

The multiplicity of entry points increased the fascination with the structures and while this served in generating broad, interesting material it also became an obstacle to find our relationship as a group. We were much more curious about our relationship to the structures than our relationship to each other which for me felt like a complete shift of atmosphere from our previous rehearsals. The relationships we had built with each other were overshadowed by our curiosity with the structures. It seemed as if these inanimate metal structures had taken over as the focus of the piece and as the focus of our improvisational and performative choices. Consequently, the improvised portions of the work were not that of a collective but rather individualized solos happening simultaneously. It so happened that in our last rehearsal after multiple failed attempts to change the structure of the improvisational sections, that I felt this impulse to break the reverent curiosity we had built for the structures. I somewhat randomly asked, “What if we made a domino with the structures?”. We then lined the structures in close proximity and Anna pushed the first structure which in turn created this domino as each structure fell into the other until there was a loud thud hitting the stage. This was a pivotal moment of catharsis and irreverence toward the structures which led us down a pathway of toppling the structures, colliding them into one another, and pushing them over. These investigations not only broke our carefulness and sincerity with the structures but also allowed the cast to find our way back to each other. In order to accomplish the task of destruction safely, we had to be in tune

with one another and be aware of each other in space. The process of building relationships and generating through improvisation gave me the agency to propose this idea whereas in other situations I would have not given my input. “Improvisation promotes personal confidence and makes people accustomed to taking action, to activating their agency publicly and in relation to others. Improvisers have to be aware of the needs of others. They must recognize problems rapidly and invent solutions immediately” (Fischlin, Heble, Lipsitz xv). This attunement changed how we interacted with each other through the rest of the work and to bring to surface the foundational relationship that had been somewhat buried under the presence of the structures. In changing our attitude toward the structures, we broke the pattern that we had established in our rehearsal process.

In excavating our foundational relationship, we were able to bring that fruitful part of the process forward into our connection with each other on stage in performance. The relationship built through out the process allowed me to navigate around my performative inscriptions of the virtuosic spectacle and settle into the attunement of the group.

CONCLUSION

Through the process of creating and performing *They Say They See Me* and *unearthing edges:constructing gaps*, I was able to reveal aspects of my performative inscriptions and complicate my awareness of self both in stage performance and in life. In *They Say They See Me*, I focused on the transformation of my embodiment from the mundane to the theatrical as a means to juxtapose these forms of being to the audience in addition to deepening my own understanding of self-awareness. Through the use of autobiographical elements, the use of the legs to reframe the space, and my own agency in the crafting of this piece, I found ways to

disrupt the stability of the visual and to bring a more holistic sense of self to the performance. In my experience of the performance, I did not feel like an objectified spectacle but rather was the subject of the gaze. While I can never know if any of my choreographic or performative choices actually influenced the quality of the gaze, the agency over how I presented my own body as a woman was empowering. The empowerment was not a crafted performance or a mask to conceal vulnerability but rather an embrace of vulnerability both within myself and with the audience. The mix of pedestrian and virtuosic movement and visibility of transitional spaces revealed differing facets of my identity and embodiment. Through all of these factors, I cultivated my own sense of seeing and found the reciprocity in the exchange of knowledge from the audience looking at me and me looking at them.

In *unearthing edges: constructing gaps*, I found different avenues of agency from within a collective group structure. The shared agency between all members of the group allowed us to work together on an intimate level and form a lasting bond. I was able to confront histories of needing to prove my worth to the group and layering an atmosphere of competition in order to determine my place within the group. Rather, I found validity in equality and humility in recognizing the importance of each person's unique contribution. I also found myself combating my perfectionist tendencies within the improvisational scores and the value judgements I placed on movement suitable for the stage space. In breaking down some of these barriers, I was more open to possibilities in both the successes and failures that occur in live performance. More importantly, I developed a trust in the collective which allowed me to attune my attention to the group rather than creating a spectacle version of myself for the audience.

In the 50 minutes of dancing on stage, I found intersections between the two pieces and how the underlying research questions of both works supported one another. This most vividly

manifests in how I related to the metal structures in *unearthing edges:constructing gaps*. As mentioned earlier, my main source of investigation with the structures was to find its instability and how I could compromise the integrity and power of these structures. This became not just a metaphor but also an embodied process for how I viewed my sense of self constructed to serve as the spectacle. The metal structure served as a symbol of this constructed version of myself which gave an image for something that in a way is invisible. Giving visibility to this construct made it easier for me to realize the moments in which I surrendered myself to this image. The process of improvising with the metal structures to find its instability informed my process to find the instability in this constructed image of myself. Then, the catharsis of tossing and manipulating the structures became a release of emotion for the aspects of myself that were kept hidden under this mask. In performing these works back to back, I also hoped that it would influence the way in which the audience related to me on stage. Even though I entered into a different atmosphere and different framing of my body, I wondered if the audience felt a greater connection to me or if it was easier to separate my presence in each work.

Moving forward from this experience, I hope to bring these findings with me into the rest of my performance career both on stage and in life. I want to continue to find ways of subverting the objectified gaze and instead refocus through a lens of subjectivity and humanity. Perhaps then we can give a different connotation to the word “spectacle”. A way of looking that does not elicit a loss of power on behalf of the subject but rather acknowledges the reciprocity of performance and the power of the subject to look back.

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CONCERT PROGRAM

They Say They See Me

Choreographer/Performer: Christine Howe

Music: Hidden Truths by Victor Howe

Costume Design: Juliana Waechter

Lighting Design: Jeff Crone

I feel very fortunate for the people who have supported me through this process. To my father, Victor Howe, who composed and performed the original work Hidden Truths for this performance. It is a special honor to have collaborated together for this project and to have your strength and creative ingenuity vitally present in this work as it has been through my life. Thank you for all you have done for me. To my mother, Pauline Reilly-Howe, who gave me this wonderful gift of dance and has served as my role model in every facet of life. She graduated with her MA in Dance from the University of Iowa, a legacy which I am very proud to uphold. I would not be the dancer or woman I am today without your compassion, generous spirit, and our passionate conversations about tendus. I am so honored to call you mom. To my boyfriend, Jesse, I am so grateful for all the laughs, love, and support you have shown me. Thank you for being such a beautiful presence in my life and being my biggest and most enthusiastic cheerleader.

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unearthing edges/constructing gaps

Direction by: Ailey Picasso

Movement by: Danica Clayton, Christine Howe, Sonja Schulz, Jensen Steinbronn, Anna Wetoska

Sound by: Ailey Picasso, including excerpts from Aphex Twin, bibio, Boards of Canada, Helios, Jon Hopkins, Múm, and This Will Destroy You
Costume Design: Juliana Waechter and Ailey Picasso

Lighting Design: Jeff Crone

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