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## Unearthing edges : constructing gaps

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UNEARTHING EDGES : CONSTRUCTING GAPS

by

Ailey Rose Picasso

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts  
degree in Dance in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2019

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Charlotte Adams

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## ABSTRACT

In questioning the complexity of human identity, the multiplicity of the self is uniquely grounded within embodied experience. *Unearthing edges : constructing gaps* is the result of creative research centered on investigation of the following questions: What can practices of collaborative movement making bring to the process of illuminating, excavating, and perhaps reconciling these alternate versions of the self? In practices supporting the development of individual movement vocabularies and physical agency what can be learned of the complications of the self and identity? What can be revealed of self and community in collective movement practice and in sharing solo practice? How can improvisational work, practiced in the realm of rehearsal and performance, engage with these ideas? Through studio practice utilizing a range of methodologies, this project seeks to contend with ideas of the self, identity, alternate reality, spontaneity, empathy, agency, and community.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25820/eyd8-xa17>

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

In questioning the complexity of human identity, the multiplicity of the self is uniquely grounded within embodied experience. *Unearthing edges : constructing gaps* is the result of creative research centered on investigation of the following questions: What can practices of collaborative movement making bring to the process of illuminating, excavating, and perhaps reconciling these alternate versions of the self? In practices supporting the development of individual movement vocabularies and physical agency what can be learned of the complications of the self and identity? What can be revealed of self and community in collective movement practice and in sharing solo practice? How can improvisational work, practiced in the realm of rehearsal and performance, engage with these ideas? Through studio practice utilizing a range of methodologies, this project seeks to contend with ideas of the self, identity, alternate reality, spontaneity, empathy, agency, and community.

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## INTRODUCTION & FRAMEWORK

Practices of dance and choreography offer unique potential for the construction and experimentation of alternative societal and communal models. In my work, I seek to employ the form of dance and collaborative movement making practices towards the construction of new ways of working and engaging with a group. The research of *unearthing edges : constructing gaps* was predicated on finding ways to restructure and reconceive of hierarchical and often patriarchal roles of choreographer and dancer in the choreographic process. It is founded in practices that offer a different –perhaps a feminine– approach, with an understanding that the idea of a feminine approach is not the inverse of the patriarchy but the development of a model that does not rely upon a hierarchical structure.

The role of the traditional Western choreographer has historically been used as a way to relegate and consolidate the power of authorship to one individual. In contrast, the role of the dancer has been that of vehicle or muse serving the creatively powerful choreographer. I find these roles to be divisive, narrow, and easily employed in service to hierarchical notions and practices. They devalue the inherent embodied, intellectual, and choreographic knowledge of the dancer. Considering the dancer as an empty vehicle seems by my account to be a vast underutilization of the people who share in the generative process of choreography.

The model I am investigating seeks to cultivate and value each individual as full agent, collaborator, and choreographer. My role in this process is that of the external facilitator and director, though I am wary to employ the title of director as it is more a role of compiling and constructing in this experience. The type of collaboration employed in this way of working is one where each person involved has creative and personal input throughout. Investigating this model

intentionally has influenced all parts of the process. As such, content, themes, and experiences emerged throughout and lead to the compositional and societal revelations of the work.

*Unearthing edges : constructing gaps* began as an investigation into the complexities of the self, and the role of collaborative movement making practices in the potential for knowledge production on this topic. As humans we constantly encounter our own prescriptions of “what if” thoughts, about our past, present, or future. These thoughts are deemed counterfactual and by definition “counterfactual thoughts focus on how the past might have been, or the present could be, different” (Fessel & Roese 2007, 197).

As we go about our lives, options of what could have occurred or what might have transpired collect. These collections accumulate and begin to form the structure of our self as experienced in the present. These thoughts are intertwined with the human condition and offer us some way of coping with the present while dreaming of the future. Fessel and Roese state:

Counterfactual thinking is an essential component of effective social functioning. Geared mainly toward regulation of ongoing behavior, they also make us think more, inspiring further creative supposition. The capacity of counterfactual thinking to launch us into further reveries of thought is one of several reasons why counterfactual stories are so enchanting—they encourage our minds to roam where they otherwise would not have gone (Fessel & Roese 2007, 198)

In embarking on this project, I propose that humans function at the juncture of their multiple selves, as understood by and housed within the bodily experience. Gallagher states on the relation of the body to the self “The human body, and the way it structures human experience, also shapes the human experience of self, and perhaps the very possibility of developing a sense of self. If the self is anything more than this, it is nonetheless and first of all this, an embodied self” (Gallagher 2005, 4). *Unearthing edges : constructing gaps* investigates how collaborative and individual movement making practices can contribute towards

illuminating, excavating, and perhaps reconciling these different versions of the self. This project works to address how spontaneous and choreographed movement can function as a tool for exploring this complexity of self. It also considers the ways in which shared creative and discursive practices can be used towards development of agency, empathy, and community.

*Unearthing edges : constructing gaps* was centered on rigorous practice, inquiry, and discussion in the studio, evolving to the stage. As such, the process itself will be centered in this account. The project was not a solo venture. It included the deep intellectual, artistic, and movement contributions of Danica Clayton, Christine Howe, Sonja Schulz, Jensen Steinbronn, and Anna Wetoska. The responsiveness, contribution, and reflections of these collaborators will be present in the account. In this paper, I will articulate the methods of the creative research utilized in the making of *unearthing edges : constructing gaps*, detail the emergent findings, account for the formation of the resulting movement work, and analyze the work itself as one outcome of the creative research process.

As a female facilitator working with a group of five women collaborators, this research reflects and provides commentary on contemporary notions of the female experience. While not explicit at the outset of this research, the content of the feminine experience was unavoidable and emerged repeatedly throughout the research and construction of *unearthing edges : constructing gaps*. The way each collaborator understood and related to the structures of their individual self was consistently influenced by the way they each perform, perceive, and experience their woman-ness in society. The studio practice of building choreography does not occur in a societal vacuum, and neither does the performance itself. Throughout the process and embedded in the constructed work are ideals, considerations, and priorities that reveal the societal container that is ever present. I intend to excavate those considerations in this account.

There is an internal and phenomenological nature to the process and the description of the artistic process that makes it “vulnerable” to use Sondra Fraleigh’s word. She states, “Existential phenomenology is vulnerable because it rests on experiential descriptions of the lived world [...] While much of male dominated philosophy has striven for invulnerability through logic and reason, phenomenology took up the risky position of experiential” (Fraleigh 1991, 11). The excision of a final product is more available to arguments of logic and reason to confirm the value and effect of the product. However, in my perspective there is infinite richness and great knowledge in the soft underbelly of the product, the process.

The process itself can craft a residue that has potential to be less ephemeral than the product itself. As Schneider contends, "in privileging an understanding of performance as a refusal to remain, do we ignore other ways of knowing, other modes of remembering, that might be situated precisely in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently." (Schneider 2001, 101). Access to these different ways of knowing is not exclusively found by way of the performance venue or virtual archive but instead within the bodies of those who share the process, as Sally Ann Ness asserts (Ness 2008, 23). Thus, it is through the phenomenological perspective that this knowledge can be accessed.

In this account, I will do my best to translate and relate the knowledge born of this process from my own perspective and that of my collaborators. The vulnerability of this account is real. My lens, while containing the multiplicity of my own experience, is also limited to that of my own understanding, curiosity, viewership, and translation. I will do my best to share the input and influence of my collaborators whenever possible, though their words and ideas are further curated through my own position.

Throughout this process I have sought to make space for the individual perspective even as the work is constructed by way of a collective effort. A prime method I employed was the feminist pedagogical technique of critical reflection (Barr et al, 2016). Through discussion, free writing, and journaling, I sought to invite each person involved to actively reflect upon and consider the events and experiments of this process. There is currently a dearth of “current research available from dancers interrogating the dance-making process” (Roche 2011, 105). Within the larger field of dance the voices “most difficult to hear are the voices of the young, the inexperienced, the less technically fluence, the locally and regionally based artists – in other words, the vast majority of participants in dance activity” (Bracey 2004, 7).

Within the process of this work, I have attempted to reaffirm and amplify the understanding that "from both feminist and phenomenological perspectives, our individual movement experiences are valid sources of knowledge and appropriate sites of research" (Barbour 2008). This research, while thematically grounded in interrogation of the multiplicitous self, is practically grounded in the work of researching the complexity of individual movement experience, by way of the collaborative construction of a movement-based choreography. In concert with this effort, I have considered this research to be a testing ground for methods in fostering the evolution of an empathic micro-community within the group of collaborators. In the following writing, I will describe the performed movement work, share the practices that were employed throughout this creative research, and consider the revelations that emerged throughout.

## THE PERFORMANCE DESCRIBED

The lights come up. Five female dancers stand equidistant at the front of the stage in a horizontal line. Wearing variations of grey jeans and grey t-shirts, they face out towards the audience. Their presence suggests they are asking to be seen, but not demanding a particular attention. Interspersed between the dancers stand five black structures. The structures appear like two cubes stacked on top of each other, the middle section fused into one bar. They stand about four feet tall with just over two feet in width on all four sides. Metal bars outline the empty space the structures contain.

The first image is that of ten objects including structures and humans, aligned at the front of the stage. The structures are rigid, they have sharp corners, strict angles, and straight lines. The women have no straight lines or strict angles. The edges of their bodies are soft, irregular, and curved. All five structures are relatively identical. All five women are related in their human and bodily qualities but distinct and unique in their composition, complexion, and image.

The lights go out. The lights come up again. Five female dancers stand equidistant at the front of the stage, facing out towards the audience. The structures are absent, but in some ways the residue of their presence lingers in the image. The women again look out into the audience inviting attention and close viewing, without demand. The lights slowly dim and go out. The lights come up, to a textured bright stage. The dancers and structures are now in two vertical lines slightly on either side of the center. The structures, instead of being upright matching the height of the dancers, are laying on the floor. Each dancer is standing atop a structure. They face through each other, looking towards something beyond the stage itself, that perhaps only they can see.

Out of stillness, the dancers collectively step off the structures, pick them up by one side and drag them to a vertical line on the left of the stage. The movement is pedestrian. The dancers are somewhat synced in their action, yet they appear to be more consumed with accomplishing the task than smoothing out the mechanics. It is unceremonious. Once they arrive to the line, the light shifts. White light enters from behind the dancers at the left of the stage, casting long shadows of structures and bodies into the space. The dancers again stand interspersed with the structures, this time staring into the wings across the stage. From a pause, all the dancers fall out of the line together. Two dancers step back into the line.

Three dancers propel themselves into the space, taking the slightest pause before entering into individual movement phrases, following with each dancer pausing and crouched, facing upstage before spinning out of it and returning to the line. All fall again. This time, two dancers spill into the front right corner of the stage. They launch into individual phrases, slow into a pause, and return to the line. All fall again. When they recover to the line, each dancer reaches to the structure on their right. The dancers begin moving with the structures. They attend to the structures with distinct movement but similar careful attention. They navigate the properties of the structures and how those properties relate to the dimensions and capabilities of their physical forms.

Standing again on the structures which lay on the ground, three dancers pause and watch as two dancers pull their structures out into the space and proceed with the investigation of self and structure. Eventually the dancers find themselves facing to the right of the stage through the structures standing upright in front of them. They move in unison now, continuing the careful manipulation of the structures. The dancers enter the structures and emerge, moving them from both the inside and the outside. The structures fold over, spin around, get closer to the ground.

This unison is revealing. Each dancer navigates the uniqueness of their own bodily form in the confines of the unforgiving metal structure while attempting to perform the movement simultaneously.

The dancers spin the structures back to an upright position and drag them back to the vertical line on the left of the stage. The light which had opened to a warmer textured bright stage, returns to the white light from the left, again casting long shadows. The dancers pause in the line. Then one at a time they each drag a structure into the space, building a sculpture of structures. When the sculpture is built, the dancers return to the line without the structures. The contrast between the line of bodies and the mass of structures is stark. The metal of the structures and the flesh of the bodies are separate for a moment. The lighting reflects this moment of distinction. The dancers on the left are lit with a slightly warm light, while the sculpture in the center is bathed in a cool light with linear texture.

The dancers slowly enter the sculpture of structures and they explore and investigate this formation. Led by curiosity, the dancers in this moment function as both individuals and members of the group as they explore. Out of the exploration, the sculpture is quickly and carefully deconstructed as the dancers drag the structures to a vertical line now on the right side of the stage. In the line of structures and dancers again, they pause. Facing into the wings on the left of the stage, long shadows follow the dancers and structures, this time from light behind them on the right of the stage. The dancers fall out of line. This time they all spill out into the space, performing the same individual phrases and trickling into a collective pause before recovering into the line again.

The dancers return, lining up past the structures and further to the right. They stand behind the structures, facing into the wings on the left of the stage. They pause again. The dancer

furthest downstage slowly brings her hands up to rest on the structure in front of her. Then in one motion she pushes the structure over. It crashes loudly to the ground, echoing through the space. The other four dancers turn their heads to look and pause. Then in quick succession, each dancer pushes their structure over. The sound of the crashes merging together before coming to a silent pause. The structures lie in front of the dancers, again the collective bodily humanity of the dancers contrasting with the inanimate nature of the structures. The careful and precious relationship previously held between dancer and structure is irrevocably shifted.

The dancers leave the line, one at a time. They move past the structures and begin to find each other in the space. They connect with each other. The world they inhabit now is not one in which they are separated by structures. The group coheres and devolves and coheres again as the dancers move through the space. They attend to self and other without the defined seams found in past explorations. They return to the line, this time standing atop the structures looking out at the audience. Their gaze is more piercing now, more unified, more determined.

They dismount the structures and return them to standing unceremoniously, briefly returning to the line before running into the space beginning in solos that quickly converge to a unison phrase ending as the dancers retreat to the upper righthand corner of the stage. They pause in a group, close together in the corner, angled on the diagonal towards the lower left corner of the stage. The dancers explode into a run along the diagonal and spilling into the wings they halt and slowly retreat. Walking backwards towards the corner they came from. Their focus remains in the corner they retreat from. They pause in the back corner before again exploding into the diagonal this time with dynamic movement. With flying limbs and sinking torsos the dancers clamber towards the front corner, again halting at the very edge and retreating. They

begin walking and then jogging as they find their way out of the diagonal tract and return to the line among the structures.

One at a time, the dancers pull their structures from the line and into the space, building another sculpture. The dancers return to the line and pause before re-entering the space. One dancer finds her way to the sculpture and shoves it. The structures smash into each other before tumbling to the floor. The other dancers join in. The sculpture is deconstructed in a severe fashion. The structures fall, flip over, crash, slide, and settle. When the commotion dies down the dancers loosely circle the remnants of the structure before each quickly grabbing the edge of a structure and dragging it to a horizontal line at the front of the stage. The dancers pause, facing away from the audience towards the back of the space. They fall out of line again in two groups, returning to the line and falling forward each time they return. Three dancers re-enter the space, while the remaining two dancers watch from a perch standing on the center rim inside of the structures.

When all dancers return to the line again, they turn to the right in unison and tilt the structure next to them, balancing it on its edge. Each dancer makes three semi-synchronous attempts to balance the structure on its edge before peeling off into individual phrases. The dancers manipulate, enter, and exit the structures again. But in these phrases the careful touch has now given way to clear deliberate handling of the structures by the dancers. The dancers climb atop the structures, dive inside them, lift them, push them, and generally test the physical limits of body and structure. The dancers converge in front of the structures, balancing them again briefly before running into the space, leaving the boxes teetering in the wake.

All five dancers enter the space and begin phrases that sync and separate and re-sync. The structures lining the front of the stage both frame and somewhat obstruct the dancing happening

behind them. The dancers again return to the structures, dragging them backwards and into a diagonal before spilling out in front of them, creating a trio and a duet that accumulates in the back-right corner. The dancers repeat the running, retreating, exploding, and retreating into the corner, this time with more urgency. In the final retreat each dancer drags a structure back to a horizontal line at the back of the stage.

All five dancers spill out of the line, repeating again the individual phrases. This time the dancers sync for a few moments of pause throughout the phrases before returning to the line. The dancers again reach for the structures and work to balance them on one edge before peeling off into the same phrases that test the physics of body and structure ending with the structures tilted on one edge, the dancers poised behind the structures looking through them to the audience. The dancers run together to the front of the stage, and again they come to a horizontal line at the front, looking at the audience. The dancers are breathing more heavily than they were the first time they assembled in this line. Their gaze is more potent now. The history of what they have done since the start of the work has accumulated in their bodies.

The dancers run back from the stage and into the upper left corner. Again, they set off running on the diagonal to the front right corner, screeching to a halt before running backwards to the upper corner. They pause just for a second before exploding in wild movement again, cohering just before they spill off the stage. Finally, they run backwards and find the structures again, pulling them broadly into the space. The textured lighting clears to dim white light that covers the whole stage. The dancers return to the balancing attempts, only this time they remain in unison, diving into the structures and standing triumphantly inside them before dismounting and dragging the structures to a horizontal line at the front of the stage again.

The light shifts to constrain the space, the back of the stage recedes into darkness. The dancers stand interspersed with the structures, on the other side of them now. Again, they look out to the front. The light goes out. The light comes up. Five structures alone line the front of the stage. The dark space is eerie without the dancers as the residue of the bodies intervenes in the image. The lights go dark. The lights slowly come up. Each dancer is now standing behind the structures in the same orientation.

The dancer on stage right slowly brings her hands to the structure in front of her and pushes it to the ground. One at a time each dancer pushes their structure to the ground, a satisfying crash accompanies each one. The dancers pause for one moment standing behind the structures laying in front of them. Then together they step onto the structures and look out into the audience exuding confidence and a sense of accomplishment. The lights slowly fade.

## SHARED PRACTICES & IMPROVISATION

The start of this process began in the same way as every rehearsal started, with a check-in. Adapted from a practice used by Jessica Anthony, the check-in invites a moment for each person to share how they are feeling with the group. Sitting in a small circle of six, each person updates the group on how they are doing. This practice is both simple and complex. As the dancers account for their experience of the present moment, they often find themselves in relation to the past or the future. These check-ins are uncensored, and each person has the opportunity to share once. It begins with a volunteer to share first and continues around the circle. Exchanging these small windows into each person's current state invites an awareness both of the self and the group.

Bringing this awareness to every rehearsal was a foundational step in facilitating an emergent community amongst the small group of collaborators. The collaborators while all functioning within the same academic department did not necessarily have an existing rapport with each other. Regardless of existing relationships within the group, it was important to the process to craft ways of engaging through and with each other that supported each individual in their present existence, allowing them to be unencumbered by old perceptions or performances of themselves as they entered the studio. In this temporary relinquishing of the facade of the self, the structures of the self to some degree were made more available for observation, consideration, and potential reformation both as individuals and members of a group.

Over the course of the process, the collaborators evolved and shared through a myriad of structures and with a range of content, building a history with each other through every meeting. In sharing the long or the short check in, each collaborator was able to build a sense of the others in the group, while retaining their own articulation within it. Additionally, a scheduled time at the outset of the rehearsal to be spent acclimating to the present, allowed each person to enter the creative and generative space with a little less occlusion from the inevitable chaos occurring in each collaborator's life beyond the studio. This is not to mean that they shed their current state of being to enter the studio. Instead it considers that the acknowledgement of a current state served as a reminder of the potential for a current experience of being to be both temporary and available to be shared across the group.

As part of our rehearsal process, we utilized Authentic Movement practices. The practice initially developed by Mary Starks Whitehouse evolved by Janet Adler and passed to me by Daphne Lowell and Alton Wasson has broad definitions. Adler notes as quoted by Lowell "The

form of this work is simple—one person witnesses another person moving in a studio space”

(Lowell 2002, 14). Lowell expands on the role of the mover and the practice stating:

movers turn their attention inward, and move (including stillness) from impulses arising from a range of sources (personal history, kinesthetic initiatives, spiritual insights) [...] free of any requirement to relate to the viewer. Both movers and witnesses cultivate acceptance/nonjudgement of themselves and each other, and they work to recognize their interpretations of the experiences as their own (Lowell 2002, 15)

For the mover, this eyes-closed practice invites an inner attention not often bestowed upon the dancer experiencing class or rehearsal. It works as a tuning device, enhancing the one’s ability to perceive and contend with the goings on of the self.

In rehearsal we employed the practice in 20-minute timed sessions. I acted as the only outer witness and my collaborators inhabited the role of the mover. I employed this delineation in an attempt to contain the attention of the collaborators towards their interior experience in their practice rather than towards an external witnessing practice. Following the eyes-closed, impulse led, solo practice, each mover had the opportunity to share with the group about their experience. The Authentic Movement practice –also called Contemplative Dance by Lowell and Wasson– offered the movers a chance to connect with their own movement pathways and internal structures from an interior perspective with an open invitation to rest and listen. Removing the visual stimulus is one component that works to relieve the self of external constructs of how one should move, respond, behave, or think. Instead the practice seeks to invite a non-judgmental noticing.

In the individual movement research offered by Authentic Movement practice, I encouraged the collaborators to employ “spectrum thinking”, a method of valuing information and practice on a horizontal spectrum rather than a vertical hierarchy (Lerman 2014, xvi). As the rehearsal process evolved to include the creation of set individual movement phrases, this

practice of working to inherently value the movement that emerges through generative experiments was of great importance. In collaboration, each individual needed the space for creative impulses to grow without immediate external perception of judgement.

Using Authentic Movement, the group was able to practice inviting a spectrum of awareness to their movement and interior landscape rather than judgement. Throughout the rehearsal process the group continued to employ the language of awareness in their reflection and navigation of the shared and individual research we conducted. In the experience of Authentic Movement, the collaborators were also able to engage with the Jungian idea of the “Active Imagination” allowing the unconscious to emerge and the mind to wonder (Lowell 2002, 14). I believe this imagining is in relation to the counterfactual thinking that buoys considerations of the alternative self. In the quiet of Authentic Movement practice, the interior structures and the multiplicities of the self are given license to emerge, converse, and converge with attention rather than judgement.

Throughout the rehearsal process and integrated into the performed work, improvisation was a key component for both investigation and excavation of the self in relation to the group.

Janice Ross surmises that:

an improvisation doesn't just spring forth from the void. Each new one is in context with others that came before. And it can be followed by another and another in a series. Ideas can be worked out. Elements can be tried out in various ways. Each new improvisation with its own particular essence. The whole experience leading to new ideas, building the ground for the next series. (Ross 2003, 55-56)

In this way, improvisation as a medium asks movers to consider and relate the complexities of the self in real time. It is historical, futuristic, and deeply anchored in the present simultaneously. Thus, improvisation as a form acted as a prime tool to expand the creative research of this project.

Improvisation was employed as a method of inquiry and synthesis throughout the rehearsal process. One way this was utilized was through open-ended questions. I would pose a question to the collaborators. They would then consider the question through embodied practice as individuals. Following group discussion of the experience and the question, the collaborators were invited to use physical or theoretical curiosities from the initial practice as a source for a practice that expanded into the group as well. Questions were aimed at excavating ideas of the self. Examples include: Who do you get to be and who do you want to be? What are you carrying with you today? Of that, what is necessary for you and what could be left behind? Why are you here? How do you perform yourself; how do you perceive yourself? And what if?

These open investigations invited active negotiation and reflection both from the questions themselves and how each collaborator reacted to the question. To the group and for the individual the practices revealed things about interpretation, curiosities, propensities, patience, inspiration, and inkling. In the repetition of this way of working, a rigor in approach was cultivated. Reflection was embedded in the process, though that reflection was as open-ended as the movement journeys. Each collaborator could be transient with how they related to each question, entering in a present state and echoing into the chamber of their past and future selves without concretizing too fiercely. As Nachmanovitch writes “Part of the alchemy engendered by practice is a kind of cross-trading between conscious and unconscious” (Nachmanovitch 1990, 73). The collaborators were able to toggle between fixed and unfixed states of being, learning of themselves in between.

Throughout the rehearsal and performance process, many other scores were utilized to support the improvisatory work of the ensemble. Improvisation allowed the group to expand and learn through rigorous play. Of the practice of play Nachmanovitch writes “In practice, work is

play, intrinsically rewarding. It is that feeling of our inner child wanting to play for just five minutes more” (Nachmanovitch 1990, 73). In cultivating the child-like in terms of curiosity and decision-making, the group learned to build –sometimes with the structures themselves– and explore the territory they crafted as an ensemble. As Drewal notes, “Play as a mode of activity is by nature tactical. It also demonstrates how individuals handle themselves and manipulate situations” (Drewal 2015, 419). The internal investigation offered by improvisation in this process has fostered an understanding of the momentary or habitual roles each collaborator plays or could play in a given score. These roles offer a trying-on of otherness or digging into the familiar, practices that encourage a deepening of understanding of the multiplicity of the self. By incorporating improvisation into the final performed work, this negotiation of the parameters of the self continued to hold liveness throughout the entire process.

## GENERATIVE EXPERIMENTS

In the making of *unearthing edges : constructing gaps*, each collaborator made upwards of eight individual movement sequences. These movement phrases while being central to the creative research process also built the foundational vocabulary of the resulting choreography. In this way, each collaborator was also a key choreographer. Instead of utilizing the dancer as a vehicle for a singular movement vocabulary, in this process each dancer functioned as a contributor intellectually and physically to the whole work.

Engaging the five female collaborators in this project choreographically was intentional. In the larger dance field, the proportion of women choreographers compared to men does not mirror the number of women and men in the field at large. The role of choreographer and artistic

director is more often provided to men. Practicing and sharing the act of choreography with young women in this process was an effort to invite and validate more physical and artistic contributions from young female dancers.

In creative research and performance, the props that were used played a large role in the construction of the final work and influenced the process immensely. The props consisted of five structures about four feet tall and just over 2 feet in width on all four sides, they appeared like two small cubes stacked on top of each other, connected by a fused metal bar. Their hollow box-like presence and their size of almost but not quite human proportions were curious to me. I discovered them in a prop warehouse, where they had been stored after being used to build a theater lighting structure. I found the structures to be fascinating with much physical and metaphorical potential in the excavation of the structures of the self.

The structures were introduced to the collaborators about halfway through the process and thus the resulting movement work contained movement sequences that existed without and within the structures. The structures challenged the collaborators to contend with the physics of the bodily, they investigated the limitations and licenses provided by the structures both physically and metaphorically. As Nachmanovitch notes “Working within the limits of the medium forces us to change our own limits. Improvisation is not breaking with the forms and limitations just to be “free,” but using them as the very means of transcending ourselves” (Nachmanovitch 1990, 84). Both improvisation and movement generation through limitation allowed the collaborators to expand and evolve in relation to the physical limits of the structures themselves.

One method of movement generation employed in this process was that of automatic writing stemming from a shared initial phrase of words. Stephen Nachmanovitch considers that

“one can jump-start the creative process by automatic writing, just letting words flow without censoring or judging them”, he continues to note that this “therapeutic form” offers a way of “drilling down into preconscious and unconscious material and letting it emerge in a free-form way” (Nachmanovitch 1990, 69). In the creative process, utilizing automatic or free writing as a way of sourcing ideas that can be further translated into movement has proved curious to me.

This way of working, not dissimilar to that of Authentic Movement, offers a way for the preconscious to emerge into some manner of form. As movement-based practitioners, beginning with the written word is a way of seeking an approach that is focused on excavating an abstracted internal landscape, rather than emulating or constructing from external images. The collaborators were given two minutes to free write in continuation of a phrase. Then, following a moment to share the writing with the group, each collaborator was asked to isolate words or phrases that stood out to them. Using these words or phrases as inspiration, the collaborators were given the task of building a movement sequence.

The movement making process was contained to five to seven minutes, as a way of encouraging generation rather than curation or editing in movement creation. This practice promoted moving beyond a sense of preciousness with the act of movement making and into a more free-form method, thus allowing for the less conscious material to manifest in the physical form. These writings and movement generation practices, while stemming from the same initial words, invited each collaborator to follow their own stream of consciousness, allowing their sense of self to emerge anew with each writing and movement construction. Throughout the process, movement sequences were made based on the initial phrases “In searching...”, “At first, I thought...”, “I am...”, and “I am not...”

In the final week of the rehearsal process, each collaborator re-read their writing and contemplated how they felt about it now in relation to its initial meaning, the resultant movement sequences, and the choreographed work. In discussion, Danica noted that for her the writings contained “wisps of the emotion” they held in initial conception. The collaborators agreed that the meaning has changed. Jensen concluded that the words and movement were not what they were before, as the phrases were shared through the group they had “evolved in the other bodies.”

Christine still felt like the emergent themes of her writings were with her. “All of these things are always present for me” she stated, maybe not so explicitly but they still resided at the core of her work. Sonja echoed that sentiment, noting that she was still doing the things she wrote about. Anna commented that she felt “far away from these things.” She noted that it has become something new and “life has changed since then.” The group discussed the variation of superficial, deep, or performed depth they discovered in the writings. They commented on how “real” they were being with themselves in their writing and how their evolution led them to more clearly reflect on how they were performing for themselves and the group in some of their writings.

The movement phrases resulting of this process had the capability of evolving with the people and bodies in which they resided within. The words are the inanimate archive and the movement sequences are the living and changing residue of a particular moment, embodied newly in each iteration, rehearsal, and performance. In this way, movement serves as the reconciliatory medium and the body of knowledge that houses the many selves constructed throughout a period of time.

In addition to the writing prompts, movement sequences were generated from a number of other experiments. One investigation from early on in the process was that of the simultaneous monologues. The collaborators were split into two small groups and each group got to participate in both roles. One group stood in front of the other group and each individual was asked to discuss in monologue style a version of themselves: past, future, alternate, or otherwise. The individuals of the speaking group spoke simultaneously. The task of the individuals in the watching group, was to write down the words that stood out to them as they listened.

Following discussion and sharing of each person's experience speaking and list of words, the collaborators each developed a movement sequence from the words they wrote down. As this experiment was completed at the start of the process –during a time before I knew to have my pen and paper at the ready during our discussions to capture the sage quotes of my collaborators– I will recount the experience from my perspective. The collaborators started with some hesitation in their simultaneous monologues, but as one person began to craft with words the picture of a version of themselves they wished they could be always or someone they embody on occasion, the energy in the room shifted.

The simultaneous monologues began to converge or parallel more closely. The collaborators detailed the kind of confident women they wanted to be in their lives, including some moments of when they had been that person and ideas of what that person would say, and feel, and do. Without an external instruction or direction, these five collaborators, all women, landed on source material that resonated with each of them individually and echoed into the group. For reference, some of the words written down in the process were: courage, accepted, fearless, rebel, endearing, badass, edgy, bitchy. Another phrase that snuck in: doesn't follow the rules.

The movement sequences that emerged from this practice were tonally distinct from others made in the process. In physical quality, dynamic, facing, and overall movement pallet, they were unique. The sequences included daring stares, pauses, poses, snaps, kicks, and swirls. There was a satisfaction in the creation and delivery of these sequences. As each sequence was shared, they were met with applause, laughter, and intrigue from the group. The embodiment of another version of the self was rewarding for the collaborators. The process concretized considerations and versions they had of themselves that had only previously existed without form or physical structure.

In addition, this experiment uncovered the depth of complication involved in the female experience. The structures each woman navigates in society can be narrow and stifling and moving outside those structures can involve risk of persecution on a micro or macro scale. In this exercise, each dancer had the opportunity to navigate their comfort or discomfort with pushing outside of the role they normally occupy. In discussion, the group was able to give language to the ways they police their behavior and judge themselves for not relying on or pushing away from the imposed structures and compliances experienced as a woman.

Another experiment was that of the selfie. Inspired by the work of Kim Brooks Mata and Mona Kasra, collaborators were tasked to take two photos in consideration of two different versions of themselves (Kasra & Mata 2017). After the image capture and the discussion, collaborators were invited to use the experience including the process, images, or discussion as source material for the construction of a movement sequence. Each image was distinct, and each phrase was unique to each individual and had some reference to a dichotomy or tension that was experienced in the contrast of both images. The selfie experiment was repeated a second time, with the added constraint of including the prop structures in each image.

Two additional sequences were built from prompts following improvisational research. One was the task to build a sequence from the memory and experience of a dance floor or space that held particular meaning and history for each collaborator. Another, utilizing the prop structures, was the invitation to build a movement sequence about what it is like to molt or unhinge from a part of yourself. In these multimodal experiments that landed in the physical, the collaborators had the opportunity to bring physical consideration to their musings of the self and the structure they inhabit.

These investigations carried the possibility to reveal, without only using the strict and singular confinement of language, one's multiplicity of experience. In these experiments, the considerations of the female experience again were centered. Each collaborator navigated their image differently but still in relation to the societal conditioning of the risks associated with revealing or concealing aspects of the self as women. Some collaborators discussed a desire to obscure their face, others took images that were representational of the emotional labor they feel burdened by. The theme of contending with the structures associated with the female experience continued to emerge.

All set sequences while built by the individual were also compiled into a common phrase. Meaning that, following the making of every set sequence, individuals shared and taught one or two movements in service to the creation of a greater sequence that included some movement from each collaborator. In the making of the common phrase, collaborators had the opportunity to curate what they contributed to the group, they taught their movement and learned the movement of their peers. In this trying on and sewing together of movement, the group crafted a unique and shared vocabulary and navigated the transition from self to other and back again. This shared vocabulary functioned to engender and expand the physical empathy of each

collaborator while they each retained individual physical agency, while simultaneously crafting a sense of shared experience and overall community.

## CONSTRUCTION & ANALYSIS

Through the creative research process, many distinct choreographic components were generated. The construction of a larger cohesive movement work from these components required a different method of research and investigation, one that was equally open ended, curious, and reciprocal with the collaborators. While the phrase-work components at times contained narrative elements for each individual, my goal in the constructed work was not to singularize a narrative. The prop structures alone invite much narrative potential. However, retaining multiplicity embedded within the meaning of the work seemed significant in consideration of the subject matter and approach of this project.

With much material to work from, finding a container for the overall construction was essential in anchoring the viewing potential for those experiencing the work as observers. The main way I attempted to arrange the work for such approach was through a choreographic structure of repetition and rearrangement. The choreography was structured and framed by the arranging and aligning of the prop structures in the stage space. The dancers drag the structures across the space at varying moments to make a line of structures separated by bodies. Following the prologue of still images, the dancers drag the structures to a vertical line on the left of the stage. The dancers fall out of the line into movement phrases, the section evolves from there. Then the dancers drag the structures into a vertical line on the right of the stage, and after a time the dancers assemble the structures into a horizontal line across the front of the stage. Following

another section, the dancers drag the structures to a horizontal line across the back of the stage. After each line is made, the dancers performed the same movement phrase. Each time the movement is rearranged and performed with slight differences.

This central form served to anchor the viewing for the audience, by revealing the repetition and its evolution over the course of the work. The viewer was allowed to develop some sense of familiarity with the content, the form, and the movers. In my interpretation, this repetition, the same in vocabulary but different in timing, bodily arrangement, and perspective acts thematically as a representative parallel with the experience of the diverging self, opening alternate paths that still retain a core relation to each other and the source. Thus, from my perspective the work in its function retains a sense of the complexity held in the multiplying, reconciling, and diverging self.

Within the repetitive structure of the work, each of the four sections evolves and uncovers different ways of relating, new vocabulary, and altered qualities. The first section contains a preciousness and curiosity in the relationship each collaborator has with their structure and with each other in the space. It is orderly and a visible exploration of the physics and mechanics of the world they inhabit together. In an earlier version of the work, all sections contained this similar way of relating to the world, the structures, and each other.

The way in which the dancers care for the structures is not without metaphorical significance. This tender and gentle approach is exemplar of the expected tone and interaction for women with other people and objects. In fact, it was the default way each dancer engaged with their structure. Even when given prompts to explore, the dancers were well conditioned to care for the inanimate objects, not to disrupt the objects or their peers in the investigations. This default was not considered or revealed in its specific rules at first.

In the rehearsal process, I spoke at length with the collaborators about what it was like inside of the choreography, moments that felt strong to them, and others that felt murky or unclear. They each shared their unique knowledge of the internal structures of the work itself. Each collaborator was able to trace and conceive of their role with detail and navigation impossible to garner or discover as an external participant. In revision and evolution of the choreography, it was the collaborators lending their experience and astute knowledge that allowed the advancement of the final form. We discussed the internal logic of the individual and shared aspects of the work as a whole. The collaborators posed questions about their actions and encouraged the location of clarity within their movement and motivation.

In rehearsal during this evaluative process, while working intently on the improvised sections of the work and preparing to attempt another score, one collaborator wondered aloud about whether the structures could be made into a domino of sorts by pushing the structures into each other. We had not yet, in many rehearsals considered the prospect of handling the structures with anything but gentle rapport.

Naturally after this question, we paused to construct said domino and see what would happen. We weren't entirely successful in our attempt, but the energy of the group was electric as we had discovered a new way of working with the structures. Quickly the score was amended to be an open invitation to explore this way of interacting with the structures. We set a time limit and the collaborators began experimenting. There was a deep satisfaction in the move from the careful interactions and phrases that had been previously made to this deconstructionist approach of expanded investigation into the physical potential of structure and body in interaction. The noises, the physicality, and the effort all fueled the collaborators.

There was a power in the clear and dynamic manipulation that was electric. These structures that had previously only been calmly moved or used to support the dancer, were now under a different exertion of control and chaos. The collaborators were now agents of change in an unruly fashion. They were emboldened to make noise, to be destructive, to make a mess of the space with the structures. This group of women, like most women in contemporary American society today were used to being at least passively quiet, with an inclination to clean up after themselves and thus keep things tidy to begin with. The destructive energy of throwing the structures around irreverently in the space was in fact quite constructive and generative creatively.

With this new discovery, the work was amended to include this method of manipulation and play with the structures. Thus, the second repeated section in the final work began with the similar careful tone, only to have that tone briefly broken when one collaborator pushes a structure over and the others follow suit. The collaborators leave the structures temporarily and then return. Following additional phrase-work, they return to the line on stage left and drag the structures into the space building a precarious sculpture of sorts before returning to the line. From there, the collaborators enter the space and deconstruct the larger sculpture irreverently. They use their bodies to push over, hurl, spin, and shove the structures. In this section the relationship between collaborator and structure is evolved, shifted, and altered.

After the sculpture is destroyed, the dancers pull the structures into a horizontal line at the front of the space, and the repetition of the work continues. The repeated and evolving section is seen through the metal bars of the structures themselves. The collaborators perform phrases integrated within and around their boxes again, however this time as I see it, the curiosity is replaced by a sense of confidence. Within the collaborator and structure relationship a stronger

sense of equal reciprocity emerges. The relationship continues to evolve through the next section as the work retains its repetitive structure.

This evolution is also representational. The experience of femininity is confining. As women, we work within the imposed behavioral structures of our world. At times that can be controlled and careful, gentle and precious. In growing into the structures, external and internal associated with the feminine, women learn to manipulate those structures. Through trial and error, women work to employ rigid form for their own benefit. They learn how to stand upon and deconstruct the boundaries that surround them.

On either end of the line-based structure of repetition and content evolution in each section, the work includes two additional sections, an image-based prologue and epilogue of sorts. In the prologue, the lights come up on a horizontal line downstage, structures and collaborators stand side by side facing the audience. The lights go out, and when they return the collaborators stand without structures in the same position. These images are meant both to invite the viewer to look closely even in stillness and also to present a subtle destabilization of the relationship between the collaborators and structures offering the potential notion that the structures themselves may not exist in the physical world as presented. In my view this is a moment to consider at the outset, the relationship of the self to its own structure, and further the relationship a woman holds with the many structures she navigates.

In the epilogue the collaborators drag the structures to a horizontal line at the front of the stage, the audience again is given a moment to look closely at the collaborators as they have changed throughout the process of the performance. The collaborators have evolved, they have moved and been moved, they have built and deconstructed, they have shifted, and they have been still. The lights go dark and they come up to an image of just the structures. Again, in my

opinion, this image attempts to subtly destabilize the complex relationship between the self and the structure it employs. It is also rather striking at least for me, to see the stage without the bodies it has held during the duration of the work, and the image gives viewers a movement to manage the residue of the movement. The lights go out and come up again for the final time. The structures are in the same horizontal line downstage and the collaborators have returned, each standing behind a structure. You can see their bodily form, but they are also obscured.

After a brief pause, the collaborator on the stage left side pushes her box to the ground, again every collaborator follows suit along the line. Each structure slams loudly to the ground. When all structures are down the collaborators climb atop the structures and look out into the audience before the lights go dark for the final time in the work. Metaphorically, there are many ways a viewer could consider the final image in relation to the work itself. In my own view, I find this motion to be an overcoming and rejection of imposed structure, simultaneously with a utilization and directed employment of the structure in service to the self.

Though a powerful image, I don't intend to be prescriptive of interpretation of the work. Through this account, I have tried my best to situate my analysis from my own view point. In the construction of this work, I wanted to find a way for the viewer to come to the work of their own accord. A way for the viewer to come to the work that included space for individual reception, interpretation, and allowance for unique knowledge to be constructed in the relationship between the viewer and the work. Vered Aviv shares this idea in her discussion of dance and the abstract stating "Many thinkable concepts that are expressed are not necessarily conscious or verbalized by either the dancer or the spectator, but they shed light on knowledge and general ideas about the human body and its range of movement capabilities" (Aviv 2017, 777). I feel the range,

potential, physics, and capability of the human form was certainly on display in *unearthing edges : constructing gaps*.

The title of the work *unearthing edges : constructing gaps* was not a directive of the audiences viewing, but instead a reference to the process of crafting the work. In the creative research of excavating the details of the self, the group unearthed their own edges. And in this practice of self-excavation, the group constructed space for this investigation to occur individually and with the collective. The title feels in some ways as ephemeral and slippery as the work itself.

As a partially external and partially internal experiencer, facilitator, and witness of the work, there are a few sticking points that emerged for me during the performance period. Firstly, this work in every performed iteration required the collaborators to engage in real time navigation and choreography throughout the performance. With every viewing, I noticed new ways in which the group made choices individually and collectively in service of the work, from reorienting a unison phrase based on the point of entry of the last collaborator, to reorganizing momentarily as the group flew through space in a diagonal, stopping spontaneously together without teetering off the stage.

This real time navigation was of course, deeply present in the improvised sections where each collaborator evolved greatly in their contributions and listening through the course of the process and performance of the work. The individual and group attentiveness was thrilling to watch as the content shifted with each run-through. Beyond the choice making held in the improvisations alone, in each performance every collaborator inhabited the more “set” movement with different and evolving qualities that expanded into their relationships with the props and the other collaborators. They entered the phrase-work anew every time, feeling

emboldened and flexible in their decision making. This confidence in choice making and excitement in the experimentation further reveals the dancers as true choreographers throughout the process and into performance.

The flexibility and malleability of the work was intentional. Watching the collaborators continue to expand and develop the piece itself was fascinating and exciting for me to witness. The work was set to a sound score I crafted, made of found sound and selections of electronic music. The sound was built with swaths of silence folded into the single playable track. The sound started at the beginning of the work and played throughout, not linked directly to the specific movements or transitions. In this way, the contribution of the sound was that of a changing landscape, available for the movers to harness as they desired, and yet also unfixed in the evolving and open nature of the internal timing in the work. In my opinion the plasticity of the work mirrors the plasticity of the self and its ability to form and reform in any given moment in relation to the past and the future.

The negotiation of the collective and collective decision making is crucial to the functioning of the work. This negotiation has potent potential in the ways it enacts alternative models of power distribution. On this topic Belgrad states:

the group interaction is seen as a microcosm of the ideal democracy. Creative authority, instead of being concentrated in the person of a director or choreographer, is decentralized, passing among the performers as they take initiative and relinquish it. Each individual presence enlivens the others, creating a collective energy that in turn fosters individual expression. (Belgrad 2016, 2)

In the decentralization of power within the group of collaborators performing, each individual navigates the evolving roles necessary for acting together. I found these considerations to be evident in the moments of collective pause found throughout the work. These pauses are almost a pre-requisite of collective action. A moment of shared pause, where the pause is entered into and

out of collectively, while relatively simple to watch is a careful negotiation, one that makes the next action of the group collective at the inception.

Each individual engaged in this process retained their agency throughout. Which is something that doesn't always occur in the traditional dancer/choreographer divide. Perhaps this retention of agency is the reason why these pauses could be found as a group decision, rather than an external imposition. The choices that were made in the final work, were a result of shared agency navigated and re-navigated in real time. In this way, power became a tool not a singular desire or reward, it was redistributed as necessary amongst the collaborators depending on the needs and evolution of the group and the performance.

While *unearthing edges : constructing gaps* is ephemeral in the evolving form it took during performance, it engaged a process and product that considered and investigated notions of the complications of the self and the negotiation of self within a collective. It also excavated ideas and experiences of the feminine and the structures of the female. The knowledge born of this shared collaborative experience is embedded in the bodies of the individuals involved in the making and the witnessing.

## CONCLUSION

This creative research process sought to utilize movement making practices as a means to excavate and understand the multiplicity of the self while increasing physical agency and empathic capacity of collaborators. This investigation resulted in many types of knowledge production. It also however, resulted in the development of an empathic micro-community of the collaborators involved. This community was built and evolved throughout the process, and

though the container of rehearsal no longer exists, this group of people now have a knowledge of themselves and their peers that does not dissipate.

Final thoughts written by the collaborators following the last performance include “We supported one another, we held space for one another, our work was free of judgement or perspective, our movement was our own. I felt equal, I felt appreciated, I felt supported, I felt liked.” This statement is a reflection of the power of a decentralized practice in collaborative artistic work. The collaborator shares fluidly about the collective experience and the individual experience. Without prioritizing one over the other, instead showing how the interaction between self and collective supported both individual and group simultaneously.

One collaborator wrote, “There’s nothing quite like connecting with people in a way like that. To dance with someone is to feel the intimate side of them. You get to feel their emotions and feel them as a person. I am so grateful for the community that has been made.” This statement shows the embodied knowledge found in shared movement practice and experience. The collaborator got to know more of themselves in this process while also learning more about the depth of the other collaborators throughout. The group shared their excavations with each other, formulating a foundation for the emergent community.

Another collaborator remarked, “Just wow, being in the moment. I felt very connected to each other and helped fuel some cool improvisation sections. It just felt really good to be onstage with those lovely women tonight [...] I think we had such a strong positive energy.” The strength this collaborator discusses is profound. In shared acts of physical and emotional strength found in the studio and on the stage, the five women in this work found new confidence and power within and beyond the structures of their selves.

One collaborator noted about the final performance, “This run felt like it wasn’t for anyone but ourselves. It seemed nostalgic and heartwarming. Longer pauses. More eye contact with each other. Savoring every moment.” The work while performed for an audience in a proscenium theater did not serve solely as an experience to be consumed by viewers. The choreography was built by and made for the collaborators; thus, the performance was in service to the collaborators. In this way, the women benefit from their own creation and their own structures were implemented in service of the collaborators.

The skills of this community were developed through many forms and interactions, but also through the act of listening to each other and themselves in action and reflection. Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz posit that “listening is a crucial form of agency that generates ethical and artistic imperatives, like those generated in an improvisation founded on the capacity to hear the other in ways that change one's own contribution to the collective narrative” (Fischlin, Heble, Lipsitz 2013, 232). The crucial form of agency found in the act of listening is one that necessitates employment and use as the individual relates to the larger world.

There is no singular way to conclude this research. It is ongoing, in my own body and the bodies of my brilliant collaborators. The body is a site that is ripe for investigations of the human, the personal, the shared, the complex, the indefinable. The consideration of the individual and collective is one rich for further inquiry. Especially in the contemplation of how we as people construct our relationships and understandings of each other. Susan Foster states, “empathy forms the basis upon which knowledge of self and other is generated” and notes that through dance it is possible to “enact the process through which that knowledge production takes place” (Foster 2010, 218). Thus, investigation of the bodily is inherently an investigation of the self and the process through which knowledge of other and self can be produced in tandem.

## CONCERT PROGRAM

### **unearthing edges : constructing gaps**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25820/eyd8-xa17>

Direction by: Ailey Picasso

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

Sound by: Ailey Picasso, including excerpts from Boards of Canada, Mum, and Shigeto

Costume Design: Juliana Waechter and Ailey Picasso

Lighting Design: Jeff Crone

To my collaborators in this process: Danica, Christine, Sonja, Jensen, and Anna, thank you all for your creativity, willingness, intelligence, kindness, patience, and commitment to this process. This work is a direct result of your brilliance and contribution. I am immensely grateful to have shared this experience with each of you. Thank you for everything you each brought to all parts of the process, the piece, and to the community we made together!

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