

ENHANCING THE PERFORMER'S
EXPERIENCE OF ABSORPTION THROUGH THE CHOREOGRAPHIC
STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN DANCE
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

APRIL 2014

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Abstract

Through the creation of three dance works over the course of the second year of my MFA research, I explored the question of how the process and structure of a choreography could enhance the experience of absorption (bliss, focus) for the performer. The factors that most notably had an effect on this experience were: relationship, most strongly the relationship between performers but also the relationship of the performer(s) to myself as director and the relationship of performer(s) to the environment and objects, both imagined and real; the nature of the imagery employed and the transpersonal emotional bridge it can facilitate between performer and audience; the nature, wording and rate of direction given to the performer; and increasing specificity and structure to build complexity and energy.

Acknowledgements

There are many people who have made this research period and writing possible for me. Firstly, I'd like to acknowledge my primary supervisor, Professor Carol Anderson for her fine balance of patience and persistence, her wisdom, support and many, many hours of attention over the years. Also thanks to my secondary supervisor, Professor Susan Cash, for her input and attention at crucial moments as well as the rest of the MFA graduate faculty, Professor Darcey Callison, Professor William Mackwood and Professor Holly Small for their valuable guidance throughout the program. Further, I'd like to extend thanks to all of the faculty of York University's Dance Department, and a few from the Department of Music for their willingness to have me in their classes, sometimes as student, sometimes as guest teacher, in particular, Susan Lee, Terrill Maguire, John Ottmann, Julia Sasso, Claire Wootten and Casey Sokol from the Faculty of Music. To my classmates and peers in the MFA program, Valerie Calam, Patrizia Ferlisi, Marie France Forcier, Sharon Harvey, Maria Victoria Mata and Michelle McLelland who provided countless moments of inspiration, insight and empathy and enhanced my learning through this program immeasurably, thank you. Thanks to the dancers and artistic collaborators who gave so generously of themselves throughout each of the creative processes: James Ervin, Beata Labikova, Amanda LaRusic, Sarah McQueston, Chelsea Papps, Christy Stoeten. Final thanks go to my parents, Ben Levin and Barbara Wiktorowicz for their nourishing and steadfast support and interest, to my spiritual mentors Sensei Doug Duncan and Catherine Pawasarat, and to my brothers and sisters on the path, in particular those four individuals with whom I currently share an abode, for nurturing that most hungry and important part of myself, without which none of this would matter.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Process 1: <i>drag</i>	8
Beginnings.....	8
Strategy 1: Physical Impulse.....	10
Strategy 2: Imagery.....	11
Strategy 3: Task-Based Movement.....	15
Making a Dance Piece: The Strategies Interwoven.....	15
The Light In Between: Absorption in the Work of Margie Gills.....	17
Process 2: <i>I am she</i>	20
First Impulses.....	20
Building our Relationship: Laying the Ground for Effective Collaboration.....	20
Our connection: the Basis for Absorption and Creativity.....	21
Shaping the Journey: Structure that Allows Feeling to Lead.....	25
Never Exempt: My Role as Observer and Participant.....	29
Desire and Specificity: Jeanine Durning's Approach.....	32
Process 3: <i>eField</i>	34
First Directions.....	34
Benefits and Challenges of Task-Based Work.....	36
The Importance of Structure.....	42
Where am I? The Use of imagery to Create a Relationship with Audiences.....	43
Outcomes.....	45
Endnotes.....	49
Bibliography and Works Cited.....	50
Appendices.....	52
Appendix A: [<i>drag</i> : photographs from David Hou].....	52
Appendix B: [<i>I am she</i> : Poetic narrative of events].....	53
Appendix C: [<i>I am turned on</i> : poster].....	56
Appendix D: [<i>I am she</i> : program write up].....	57
Appendix E: [Summary of discoveries from <i>I am she</i> process].....	58
Appendix F: [<i>eField</i> 40 word promotional write up].....	59
Appendix G: [Program notes for <i>eField</i>].....	60

Introduction

The human BodyMindⁱ is infinitely complex, replete with mysteries. One of these seems to be the fluctuating level at which we experience the 'now'. Why are some moments painfully sludge-filled while others are bright, easeful and awake? What factors lead to an enhanced experience of the moment? Any one moment is shaped by an infinitude of influences, what we ate, the weather, our upbringing, the clothing we have on and countless other factors. Most of these phenomena are beyond our control, and even with those that are not, there are still far too many shifting factors to lock a 'formula' in place. As someone with a background in the spiritual discipline of Buddhism, I believe that we can achieve a sense of underlying wellbeing independent of changing and unpredictable factors, and that dance can offer a microcosm for observing this phenomenon.

A choreography could be understood as a sequenced ordering of planned events involving the physical presence of at least one human being. Given this definition, I wonder if there is a way of creating, shaping and sequencing these events in a way that enhances one's experience. My research this year was focused on how the choreographic process and structure could enhance the experience of 'absorption' for performers.

There are many ways to refer to this 'enhanced state of focus' but for the purposes of my research I have chosen to use the word 'absorption' as for me it represents most clearly the actual experience (one is 'absorbed' into the point of focus) and carries less esoteric connotation than the word 'bliss'. I propose to define absorption as a zeroing-in of

attention on one particular facet of experience, leading to an increased sense of cohesion, ease, and a new or expanded awareness of self beyond what is habitually perceived.

Additionally, it is a word that suggests that this is an active process.

I undertook this research through the creation of three different choreographic works, a self-solo, a solo on another dancer, and a duet for the proscenium stage, taking note of the factors that either enhanced or challenged the experience of absorption throughout each process.

Because I believe the search for absorption to be of primary importance to every human being, I think the examination of structures and processes that lead to greater absorption is relevant on a fundamental human level. Additionally, it strikes me as an important examination in relation to performing and art making because in my experiences making and seeing dance one of the critical factors of my enjoyment is the depth at which the performer is experiencing their subject matter. I believe the fullness to which a dancer experiences the dance, sensorially, emotionally, psychically is what transmits the work to audiences. Renowned post-modern dance artist Deborah Hay describes this relationship as follows: “A performer's inattention is glaringly visible. Questions rush in to fill the space where attention has been - whereas a performer's attention, without question, elicits audience attention.” (Hay 11) I therefore believe that though an absorbed state is fundamentally in the hands of the performer, it is the job of choreographers to do their utmost to encourage and allow this enhanced state of focus throughout the creation and performance of the dance piece.

Researcher and author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has written extensively on the topic of “optimal experience” or what he has termed “flow” (39), naming the factors that define this state, the typical causes and the results of this “ordered state of mind that is highly enjoyable” (72). Though not geared specifically towards the choreographic or artistic process, his book *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience* has been a useful resource throughout my research.

I am far from the first dance artist to venture into this territory; from one perspective, all dance could be said to be related to the human drive towards absorption. Additionally, there are artists and teachers who are working directly to cultivate the experience of absorption in and through their work. Iconic Canadian solo dance artist Margie Gillis is the artist with whom I have had the most contact and experience. In her own words her process is “based on listening to the different connections that exist between the spirit and the body. This is the natural kinetic process whereby our inner landscape translates into electric impulses that transmit to the muscles the information as to how and with what quality to move.” (Gillis) In this statement Gillis emphasizes a sense of cohesion between inner and outer experience, a characteristic of an absorbed state. Deborah Hay approaches the situation with similar underlying aims. In her book, *My Body, the Buddhist*, Hay writes, “My Body, dancing, is formed and sustained imaginatively. I re-configure the three-dimensional body into an immeasurable fifty-three trillion cells perceived perceiving, all of them, at once. Impossibly whole and ridiculous to presume, I remain, in awe of the feedback.” (Hay xxiv). In this sense, Hay is employing a

deep kinesthetic listening as movement and performance practice, a listening that leads her into a fresh and expanded sense of self. A third artist, Jeanine Durning, is a New York-based performer and teacher who works with Hay. Her approach, which I was exposed to through classes I took with her in January, 2014, could be described as a cultivation of presence.

Butoh, a dance form that evolved out of Japan in the 1960s, is another arena within established dance practices that uses absorption as a key feature of its practice. Butoh draws on imagery to evoke sense and movement-based experiences, often juxtaposing unexpected images, creating a sort of embodied poetry within the nervous system, shared with audiences via the physical expression of these sensations (Fraleigh 11-12). Performances are developed from this internal imagery into form rather than the other way around. Also, spiritual teacher Gabrielle Roth's *5 Rhythms* practice, though not intended for presentation to audiences, is designed as a framework to allow people to experience absorption through awareness of their bodies in motion.

As a student of meditation and a spiritual lineage based primarily in Buddhist philosophy, I draw on these perspectives for insight into the nature of absorption and how to facilitate it in myself and others through dance and dance making. The experience of absorption uninterrupted, in all moments of life, could be articulated as one of the goals of these philosophies and practices. It is arguable whether there is another system of thought and practice in which as much time and energy has been invested – thousands of hours, over thousands of lifetimes, over thousands of years – into the firsthand study and

implementation of absorbed states of consciousness. I am curious how the insights and approaches of this school of thought, and those I have experienced myself, can be translated into dance practice, choreography, teaching and performance. I believe that my background of meditation and study, which includes nearly eight years of consistent practice, two month-long and dozens of shorter retreats as well as several extended stays at the meditation centre that is the 'home base' of the lineage I am a part of, is one of the key features that contributes to the perspective I bring to this research.

In my personal movement and choreographic practice, I have been working with the following process and ideas to guide me. The following steps are drawn from the preparatory steps one would use for various meditation, somatic and dance practices with additions I have made.

1. Recollecting the Awakened State: Bringing to BodyMind a state of total well-being. Acknowledging this as a real and fully accessible experience.
2. Aspiration: Cultivating the desire that the following undertakings bring me and all those with whom I interact to the embodiment of this state.
3. Recollecting Emptiness: All thoughts, feelings and sensations, not as 'me' or 'mine' or evidence of a defined and static 'self' but as the dance of the manifesting universe.
4. Keeping it in Context: Connecting to the feeling of gravity and situating my body, in a studio, on Earth, in the universe, in infinite space, so that I have a sense of being grounded and expansive simultaneously.

5. The Holocratic Body: Giving every cell in my body equal attention. Moving away from a 'head-centred' way of being to conceive my body as an intelligent whole at all moments.
6. Breath: Feeling the breath intimately and pervasively. Allowing it to breathe me, not the other way around.
7. Follow the Impulse: Asking the question 'given that my body knows exactly what it needs to soothe, heal, integrate and enliven, what is it asking? How specifically can I fulfil these sensation-based directives?' Responding through movement.
8. Project the Fully Supportive Witness: Imagine one or many witness(es) to your practice who are fully present and supportive of your exploration.
9. Whatever is Present is the Path: In the words of Margie Gillis “let it be there and let change”. One of the surest ways to hinder a connection with absorption is by 'trying to get to it'. Practice the understanding that whatever is present, no matter how uncomfortable, is 'the right experience' and is, in that moment, our practice and path.

I mention these steps, because they are valuable assets in establishing conditions conducive for absorption and healing. While I drew on select elements from this list continuously, I found it challenging to move from them into the actual generation, selection and ordering of material necessary for making a dance piece. As a result, for each process of my research a 'sub-theme' had to be chosen. This 'sub-theme', coupled with the specifications of the piece (dancers, venue, length of process, rehearsal location and

frequency) would then inform and direct my choices of how to generate and craft material. For the autobiographical *I Am* solo piece, I focused on creating and entwining physical qualities and movement phrases that evoked aspects of my sense of self. For the self-produced solo created with/for dancer Sarah McQueston we focused on emotional and archetypal narrative developed through personal imagery and connection to each other, sound, the costume element and the performance space. For the final piece of the year, a duet with dancers Amanda LaRusic and Christy Stoeten, shown on the proscenium stage of York's Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theatre, the work was developed from different explorations of movement initiated through relating to space and bodies in space.

The course of my research yielded many insights. The most notable of these are the use of imagination for creating a transpersonal context for performance; the power of relationship as a means for enhancing the experience of absorption; the importance of the wording and pace of direction in encouraging the performer's active exploration; and the use of structure as a means of encoding greater energy into a work.

Process 1: *drag*

Beginnings

I started to work on the piece for the *I Am*ⁱⁱ solo show with a handful of ideas and images to explore. The first of these was a hoodie, recently purchased at a used-clothing store, a baggy, formless thing that draped my upper body in shades of grey. I would don it along with a pair of navy track pants and booties as a way to mitigate against the always-cold main floor studios at York University where I rehearsed. I loved the juxtaposition of contemporaneity and mystery it offered, the hood evoking images of monks simultaneously with those of unruly, modern-day youth. I liked the way I could hide and reveal my face selectively, and the myriad possible ways of clothing myself in the garment. It also seemed suitable to choose a costume for my *I Am* piece that was something I would also wear outside of the performance context.

Wearing such drab and unimpressive garb helped push the physicality of the movement phrases I developed and may have been part of the reason I was drawn to wearing it. As a performer, facial expression is one of my stronger elements, as is the use of my hands and arms. The ambiguity of the baggy hoodie took away my ability to fall back on these strengths and forced me to push the clarity of my entire physical self.

The title for the work came from a quote I read on a bathroom stall. It read “we come into this world naked, everything else is drag.”ⁱⁱⁱ As well as resonating with the Buddhist philosophy to which I ascribe, I felt the quote touched directly on the question I wanted to explore through the making of the piece, namely: What makes up our sense of

self? The unrevealing and gender neutral attire also tied in nicely with the use of the word 'drag', the clothing providing a metaphor for what I perceive to be the 'drag' of our 'selves'; the behaviours, attitudes, postures and preferences we learn as we grow up.

Throughout this process I referred frequently to my original thesis question: how the choreographic process and structure might enhance the performer's ability to be in a state of absorption throughout performance. Though referencing this question did further my thinking, it did not seem to offer a specific enough framework to actually direct the choices I had to make to shape a dance work. I wondered at my own question and realized I actually felt like *any* content could generate absorption, that the absorption was not dependent on the content, movement or structure of the work but on my approach as the interpreter of the movement. For many of the choices along the way to accomplishing the work, I felt that I needed to note and follow other impulses (the quote and hoodie for example), seemingly unrelated to the question of absorption. This said, though choices like the title of the work and the costuming were not likely to affect my ability to enter into absorption, these decisions are best made *from* a state of absorption. Absorption is what frees us up to imagine and to find resonance with that inner sense of direction that is necessary to make meaningful artistic choices.

Still, though I recognize that, fundamentally, the calm and inner-directed focus needed for absorption are under my own (and every performer/individual's) control, we do not exist, dance or make art in a vacuum, and the surroundings, processes and people with whom we are involved do affect us. I have first-hand experience as a dancer of a range of

creative processes, with diverse results in terms of my ability to enter absorption.

Rehearsals during which I was barely able to execute the movement because fear and distress were occupying the majority of my attention, that left me feeling drained, upset and incompetent, contrasted starkly against processes in which I was able to enter into exploration of the movement and its quality almost immediately, coming out of rehearsal feeling capable and engaged.

Strategy 1 : Physical Impulse

Throughout the making of *drag*, in attempting to enter an 'absorbed' state and generate compelling material, I used three main strategies. Knowing that defining a clear point for the mind to focus on and return to is crucial for accessing absorption, I wanted to be specific about what this point of focus was with each approach. In order to be able to experiment around my research question, each strategy defined its 'focal point' differently.

The first strategy, and perhaps the most traditional of the three, was to improvise, note movements I found interesting as they emerged, and gradually sequence them into a phrase. In this process, focus is on the sensations of my body as it moves. In these improvisation sessions I start moving, seeking to find and deepen contact with movement that feels good, healthful and expressive. This heightens my physical listening as well as warms my body up in the ways it most needs. It does not, however, always generate the quality of material that I am seeking for a specific work. There were certain qualities of movement I wanted to evoke for *drag*, such as fogginess or confusion, aggression, distraction, openness and beauty; qualities that are familiar to me and, when expressed

through my unique body, specific to me. In these cases it was a matter of honing my sense of that quality and then, once I had warmed up my body and focus, allowing that quality to infuse and direct the way I moved.

Strategy 2: Imagery

The second strategy was to start from an 'image' – a visual or qualitative element – either pre-chosen or one that emerged through improvisation. My meaning for the word 'image' here, comes from my experiences working with Toronto-based performing artist and teacher Fiona Griffiths^{iv}. She uses the word to mean an internal, qualitatively-specific experience, typically with a visual element. This visual element often serves as the key into the experience. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio uses the term in his research on the relationship between human emotion and neurobiology, defining image as “a mental pattern in any of the sensory modalities, e.g., a sound image, a tactile image, the image of a state of well-being.” (9) An image, as I mean it here, could be anything from the feeling of your feet in warm sand, to the visual of a bird flying through the sky, to the feeling of being at the edge of a cliff, with the wind blowing against your body, your feet on uneven ground and your heart beating quickly

Imagery is a key element in many dance practices. Particularly in Skinner Release TechniqueTM developed by American dancer and teacher Joan Skinner and Open Sources Forms developed by her student, now teacher, Stephanie Skura, images are used as a way to bring fresh exploration to our physicality. These approaches seem to have the power to short-circuit our habitual ways of experiencing our bodies, encouraging instead a curious

perspective. The advantage of this image-based approach is that it seems to give my mind more to focus on. Working with imagery calls not only on my physical and kinesthetic resources, but also on my visual and imaginative ones. Additionally, it seems that imagery is highly tied to feeling; if I want my emotional body to be genuinely present in the work, an image seems to be important. The disadvantage is that, in the context of trying to structure a work, movement generated through imagery alone tends to remain undefined physically. Because with this approach the image is chosen as the defining feature, body shape and movement sequence remain 'un-set', which can make it challenging to make meaningful choreographic choices. As a choreographer and performer, I then need to find other ways to specify the work.

Images used in *drag* emerged in a variety of ways. Sometimes I would come into the studio with an image already in mind, whether it was a memory of a past experience or a new sensory experience. Often images would emerge while in the midst of executing the first strategy, that is improvising sensorially impelled movement.

At least to start, images seem to fall under one of two categories. They are either external to my body, what I call *environmental images*, like a particular quality of environment or an imagined object in the space, for example walking in deep snow or imagining someone I know or care about in the room watching me; or a *body image*, in which I am imagining some alternate physical form, for example, being made of dust or water or being a blade of grass. In *drag* both of these types of images were used in the process of making and in the final work itself. For example, in one draft of the piece there

were many images of stepping into and being immersed in water. In these moments I imagined the water around me, the look and temperature of it, the force of it acting against my body. With this strategy, it is a matter of allowing the mind to rest in the image as fully as possible, thus infusing it into my physicality.

What I discovered with this strategy is that ultimately, the most successful of the images fill out to be present both in the environment and within the body. One of the most striking discoveries, realized early on but made clearer late in the process when entering into show week, was that an important jump happens for me when working with images. They all start, of course, just in my mind, but the most powerful are eventually genuinely projected into the space around me. This does not mean they appear in physical form to myself or audiences, but that for me, within the work, there is a real sensing of that object, texture etc. in the space around me. I shift from making it happen to trusting that it is there. This difference between imaging internally and projecting an image into space is a subtle one, and requires further investigation to learn to reliably employ myself and encourage in others.

There were a few examples of this phenomenon in this first creative process. The first time was in rehearsal, while working on a section where I was trying to give the illusion of being dragged into the space. When I ran this section for Professor Anderson, she mentioned that it was not a believable gesture as it was, and needed to be worked to be effective. In attempting this, I remember a specific moment where I realized “oh, I need to genuinely relate this pull to a point in space outside of myself!” In that moment, the pull

took on a very different feeling. It felt much more realistic, and beyond anything I could have tried to shape in terms of imitating what I thought would be the shape of the body in this circumstance. Unfortunately, in the rehearsal time I had with this section, I was not able to access this relationship to space consistently in performing the movement so this material was not included in the final version of *drag*.

Another key moment in realizing the power of projecting imagery and relating to something outside of myself came while working on the opening section of the piece. Because the piece started with nothing more than me standing and swaying in the light, I knew I needed to work on honing a strong image to make it compelling for viewers. I tried many different images, and though I found many of them interesting, nothing seemed to stick. Finally, however, in rehearsal after the lighting had been set, I was practicing the beginning of the piece, imagining the light shining directly down on me from above, and I realized that I had found the image I needed. I knew this was the image to use because of the way it informed my physicality. My whole body shifted and my posture adjusted. In energetically connecting with the light, whether actually there in performance or imagined in rehearsal, I had finally found an image that was interesting to me as a performer, that made sense with the standing, swaying and falling of the opening section, and because the work unfolded in and around that square spotlight it created a 'glue' for the work as a whole. I never got to a point where this relating was as consistent and strong as I would have liked, but I am sure this discovery made a difference in the overall cohesion of the work.

Strategy 3: Task-based movement

The third strategy for developing movement material via absorption was to give myself a movement-based, unfulfillable task. One example that I used in *drag* was to seek to keep every cell in my body in continuous and observable motion. This cellular approach has been inspired by the writings and performances of post-modernist Deborah Hay. In her book, *Lamb at the Altar*, Deborah Hay writes:

All I can be at any moment is all of myself. If myself is more than fifty trillion cells in radical transformation every moment, I am off the hook of being any one entity. I am flux in a corporeal body. Responsibility to a singular identity is a misconception. Engaging the work of the imagination to translate "I am" into fifty trillion and more cells at once dispossesses fixed ideas from cultivated patterns that continue to determine what dance or dancer should be. (36)

In this sense, the cellular focused task frees me, as the performer, from the feeling of 'needing to do', shifting this responsibility for activity over to the very capable body. In addition, the nature of the task makes it always accessible and always improvable. Unlike actual set movement, there is no basic skill level or coordination necessary to attempt this task. Because it is unfulfillable, there is also no end to the exploration that it offers. For these reasons, this cellular approach to movement and absorption worked well for me. It was present extensively all throughout the process. From an invigorating warm up to a reoccurring theme in the finished work, it was always a satisfying and interesting movement task to explore.

Making a Dance Piece: The Strategies Interwoven

In its final form, *drag* was a collage and layering of all three strategies. Until fairly

close to the performance dates I had not found a way of integrating the large amount and variety of material generated into one coherent piece that was the desired length. In the end, I found it necessary to work tightly from one concept, leaving the material that did not fit out and threading the rest together as made sense, either logically or intuitively. In the case of *drag* the 'tight structure' was, both literally and metaphorically, the square of light I moved in and out of onstage. Once I committed to working with the idea of this small box of light, it became much clearer how the material should be sequenced for aesthetic, logical and emotional satisfaction. With this decision in place, I could play meaningfully with interlacing the developed movement phrases, motifs and images.

Once the order was set, there was room to pay attention to the subtleties of each section by shifting elements of the images or movement qualities to discover and develop the relationship among movements. Additionally, once the order was set and I had the time to explore the relationship of each part to the next, the lines defining each piece of material, initially developed using differing strategies, began to blur. To fulfill the work in the performance context, it seemed I was working towards having all three strategies present at all times. This meant trying to hone physical awareness and specificity, having an image element present and also articulating and approaching the movement so that it was unfulfillable and explorative in nature, as the cellular, task-based movement did so well.

One example from *drag* where all three strategies were present, was the final image of the piece. I chose to end the work using the task of keeping every cell in motion,

wanting this fluid and constantly shifting state to contrast with the stillness of the initial standing scene. The task never failed to be an effective point of focus, again because of its infinitely demanding nature. Still, in wanting to give it more meaning within the work as a whole and in seeking to heighten the contrast with the beginning of the piece, I started to build in the use of image as well. Once I had chosen an evocative image, it became a matter of rehearsing this image again and again, to imagine it internally as well as to project it into the space around me and include the audience in this projection. Though the task of keeping every cell in motion was effective on its own as a point of focus, with this image in place I was more than 'a body in a void'. Through the employment of my imagination, I sought to give this compelling movement a context in which the audience could be included.

The Light In Between : Absorption in the Work of Margie Gillis

A few weeks after the performance of *drag*, I had several opportunities to view dance performances as an audience member. For my research, the most relevant of these was Margie Gillis' *The Light In Between*, seen at the Fleck Theatre on November 12, 2013. Although her work has had a pervasive impact on me as a dancer, this was the first full-length performance of Gillis' I had seen. Most of my interactions to date had come through master classes and workshops as well as a short but intense creative process with her as a student at the School of Toronto Dance Theatre. It was inspiring to see Gillis perform, though I wish I had been able to see the performance at least twice to observe more deeply and note changes from evening to evening.

In experiencing a creative process with Gillis, I noted several dramatic differences to other processes in which I have participated. Most notably, the majority of the work was left unstructured and there was little difference between the exercises we undertook as preparation and what we performed for audiences. Our task as dancers was to connect to each other, the music, the space in which we danced, and the audience. The music we danced to was chosen and our entrances and exits were set spatially and in synchrony either with the music or events on stage. Motifs were given as sparse landmarks throughout but the actual movement was left mostly unspecified^v. Had the process been longer, I imagine Gillis would have gone on to specify further, but another dancer who had recently performed with Margie^{vi} affirmed that a great deal had been 'left open' in that process as well.

I believe that Margie leaves unaddressed those details of the dance that are usually first addressed by choreographers, such as the precise shapes one's body will be making, in order to place primary emphasis on the performer's sense of connection and listening. I have heard Margie articulate a checklist of connection as “Am I connected to myself? Am I connected to the other dancers? Am I connected to the space? Am I connected to the music? Am I connected to the audience?” By emphasizing such attention and listening before and beyond any physical shapes or dynamics, Gillis brings to the forefront of the process activities that are guides into and hallmarks of an absorbed state. In this way, I understand Margie's work to be about creating a container and platform for the BodyMind to surrender fully into its experience, and for this experience to be read by and shared with

the audience.

Seeing Gillis perform, I felt I was able to see her fall in and out of absorption and feel carried by this as an audience member. I felt the piece as whole to be strong and there were moments I found particularly noteworthy. One of these was when Margie, dressed in an open-backed, black satin dress, was dancing, sweeping circles around the mid-upper stage, her arms slipping in and out of the long sleeves as she moved. Her movement was so silken, it was like she became the fabric itself. Soft, cool and smooth, as she seemed to become further and further engrossed in the sensuality of her movement, I could feel that texture resonate throughout my awareness more clearly and pervasively, as if I were the one onstage, slipping my arms in and out of those sleeves. I would describe it as feeling like I was 'falling into' the subject matter. Thoughts recede into the background, a primarily emotional, sensual experience emerges and there is a feeling of being connected to something larger than myself. Though it could have been my own increase of focus that I was noticing, throughout the performance I felt as if I could, in keeping my focus on Margie and the other performers, watch and feel the dial of their focus turn up and down as they ventured into different subject matter, and ride with them into those explorations.

Process 2: *I am she*

First Impulses

The second research process was the creation of a piece for my self-produced project. In actuality a co-produced project, initiated by dancer/artist/creator Chelsea Papps and myself, the show, a three-hour, open-door event at a downtown gallery, was called *I am turned on*.

The work I presented was called, in following the semantic theme of the night, *I am she*. For this piece, I chose to work with dancer and peer Sarah McQueston. I chose Sarah because of her strength as a performer, as well as our artistic compatibility and friendship. I thought our established comfort in dialoguing about performance and emotional subtlety would nurture both my research and the dance.

The first impulse for this piece was an image that came up after Chelsea and I had decided to produce this evening in a gallery setting. The image was of Sarah, winding her way through the space, wearing a very long veil. Though visually compelling, I was worried about the cultural and gender commentary potentially suggested through the use of the veil and did not want to go down a road that might cause offence and in which I was not well versed. Still, I knew that if an image presented itself persistently it was important to explore it, so I resolved to try.

Building our Relationship: Laying the Ground for Effective Collaboration

Our first rehearsal, though not yet working with the veil, was an important one. Knowing the impact of being physically warm and of feeling supported rather than

critiqued on the ease in which one can enter absorption, we started off by simply moving together in the space. With the simple intention of arriving more fully in our bodies, in the space and with each other, we danced and stretched, exploring our movement and sensorial range. As well as being conducive to entering absorption and helping me empathize with Sarah as I directed her, I was hoping that warming up together would establish a lateral working relationship, a relationship in which, though we definitely had distinct roles, we were equal collaborators. I wanted Sarah to sense that though I was responsible for carrying the work forward and making final calls, I valued her input as the dancer of this piece. I wanted her to feel autonomous and responsible for the work, while still offering clear guidance in terms of its direction. Though this was a constant negotiation, I knew from the outset that this horizontal approach would make it a more meaningful experience for her, and that Sarah finding the experience meaningful would carry the work furthest within our limited time together. My research was mostly about *her* absorption; if she wasn't one-hundred percent on board it would not work.

Sarah stepped fully into this role of collaborator. There were even times in the process where her investment and commitment to the work carried us forward more than my own. This commitment was most apparent in her ability to perform an emotionally intimate and challenging piece without difficulty, even when I was not there to support her.

Our Connection : the Basis for Absorption and Creativity

In our rehearsals a couple of factors emerged as particularly relevant to the experiencing of absorption. The strongest of these was our connection to each other. This

was something felt tangibly, in my own body, whenever Sarah and I were in the space together, particularly if we were both dancing. There was a sense of listening to each other, of relating, of making choices in tandem rather than isolation. When this relationship was active, even with my back turned to Sarah, I was aware of what she was doing. This sense of connection was the most notable difference from the solo process creating *drag*. In that process, in working with imagery, I had discovered the absorptive power of relating to things outside of myself. In process with Sarah I realized the even stronger absorptive power of relating to another human being.

I realized also the role that music could serve in enhancing this communication between us, seeming to offer an additional level on which we could meet. To connect in sonic, as well as physical space, meant greater listening, which meant greater absorption. I believe that this meeting, through hearing, is also possible without music, as it is the honing of our commitment to hearing sound as we dance that enhances absorption.

Our connection was the ground from which the work unfolded. For our second rehearsal, I had conceded to the idea of trying to work with a veil and had purchased a beautiful pink sari to use for this purpose. After warming up together, once I felt the connection between us to be adequately strong, we went straight into 'a run'. This is a strange phrase to use, given that there was no piece 'to run' yet, but there was a sense of going into an exploration together, and that the exploration, though we had no idea where it would take us, would through my direction, Sarah's choices and our listening to the space, come to fulfilment.

While warming up, as my computer shuffled randomly through my library, the song *Go Long* by Joanna Newsome had come up. As well as being a beautiful song, sophisticated in both musicality and in the depth of its poetic lyricism, the feeling tone it provided seemed very appropriate for our exploration. We decided to use it as support for the 'run'.

We started with what I knew I wanted, which was that Sarah would start off-stage (in the studio this meant in the corner) with the veil tied onto her head and layered over her, and emerge slowly from this covering. With Newsome's song lilting plaintively and set to repeat, Sarah started, emerging from the corner, on hands and knees, crawling slowly and carefully forward. As soon as she started, there was a quality to Sarah's movement that held rich layers of emotion. It is Sarah's skill as an interpreter and performer, rather than any direction on my part, that is most directly responsible for her ability to fulfil movement in a way that has such emotional potency. In speaking with her throughout the process however, it is clear that the atmosphere we established together, and the manner in which I was able to journey with her into her emotional world, enhanced her ability to enter specific states, and my ability to make choices that were coherent with her experience. I will touch on this more later when I talk about my role in the piece.

What happened next was quite astounding for both of us. Having not determined the full course of events beforehand, neither of us knew what was going to happen in 'the run'. Yet, as Sarah fulfilled each directive, the next would appear before us, often

seemingly out of nowhere. Either I would direct an action, for example: “Once the veil comes off your head, go to the corner and press yourself into it.” Or, given a much looser directive, for example, “Find a way to leave the wall”, Sarah would find her own way to fulfill the task. These unfolded like 'spontaneous arisings' fitting meaningfully with what came before.

The absorption we built together through our sense of connection made it easy for our imaginations to come alive and ideas to flow forth. In this creative space, our imaginations freely offered imagery that was meaningful for wherever we were in the work. This meant that the movement could have meaning and context beyond 'empty gesture'. There was a who, what, where and why to every part of the dance.

Whether I voiced the directive out loud or Sarah made a choice quietly herself, whenever a shift occurred we were both very conscious of it as it emerged. There was a sense of co-creation; we seemed to be making choices together, as one mind. This 'connected mind' was especially apparent in relation to emotional shifts. Though the work was structured as a series of tasks, often described in relation to things and space, for example: “Offer the scarf to the circle”, there was a distinct emotional intensity to whatever Sarah did. When we were well-connected, I could pick up precisely on Sarah's emotional experience. Those moments when her tasks brought her into a deep sadness, or even when she instead chose to keep the emotion at bay, I would usually be able to note and articulate these emotional shifts back to her for confirmation clearly and accurately. I even had the feeling that though the focus was on Sarah, my softening into or resisting a

feeling was equally responsible for the turns the journey took.

This experience of being highly emotionally in tune with another human points, I believe, to the transpersonal nature of our emotional bodies. I think most people tend to consider their feeling states as contained within the outline of their skin; although I already knew this to be false, this example is a clear case in point. This is a relevant realization for creators and performers because in understanding emotion as transpersonal we can tap its potential as a mediator between performer and audience. In my experience, to access this transpersonal emotional body, one needs to be in a state of absorption. Fostering a felt sense of connection between performers and between performer and viewer is the best way to practice this state.

Shaping the Journey : Structure that Allows Feeling to Lead

As Sarah and I rehearsed, choices emerged that we knew we wanted to retain as a part of the piece. A gesture or event would strike us as potent, and would become a signpost to be repeated in future runs. Gradually, as we ran the piece, more and more was specified. Each event found its right place in the whole of the work.

Throughout this process of refining, it was important the task be articulated to make space for Sarah's ongoing investigation. I felt this to be my most important role as director of the work, to sense when Sarah was still mining a direction and needed space for further discovery versus when she had reached the end of her line of enquiry on a particular task and needed more direction to open into further question. This question of the amount of direction to give a performer is something that a choreographer has to

wrestle with. As directors of the space we need to know that there is an optimal level of information processing for every individual and that keeping this shifting level fed, and working to expand it, yields growth and satisfaction in the performer. “When all a person's relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenges of a situation, that person's attention is completely absorbed by the activity. There is no excess psychic energy left over to process any information but what the activity offers. All the attention is concentrated on the relevant stimuli.” (Csikszentmihalyi 53) Additionally, my choice of words was integral; it was important to direct in a way that named the emotional significance and still encouraged Sarah's continued exploration.

I also made it a rule that Sarah have the freedom at any point to make a different choice from what we had decided should she feel compelled to do so. As well as empowering Sarah's intuitive sense of the work, this freedom kept alive a heightened sense of listening. To veer from the pre-determined path is a big deal; to do so consciously would require clear awareness of and commitment to the arising impulse. Whether or not another impulse actually presents itself, watching for this possibility takes deep listening. This freedom kept Sarah looking for the 'what?' and 'why?' of a given task while still being supported by the structure of defined direction.

What we generated through rehearsals was not so much a storyline as a chronology of archetypal actions (see Appendix A). Some were left broadly defined and some were more specific. Keeping the directives specific yet open allowed Sarah's own imagery to shift throughout the development and performance of the work therefore remaining

compelling to her while still giving us a structure to refine. The specificity provided the structure necessary to stimulate her imagination, while the openness encouraged active exploration. With this type of structure, Sarah could bring real difficulties from her life into the studio and into the work, exploring them emotionally through this creative process.

In this way, we crafted together not only a dance, but a ritual form that could be done by anyone, as a way of exploring sub-conscious material about self in relation to the world and to others. What we made reminded me of 'river work', a type of embodied, imaginative exploration pioneered by actor and renowned director Jerzy Grotowski^{vii}. This work is about allowing images to emerge from the unconscious, projecting them into the space around us and interacting with them until they shift of their own accord. It is also analogous to *active imagination* work as first outlined by Carl Jung, who explored archetypes so deeply in his work, then developed and practiced by dance and arts-based therapy workers. It is a relevant practice for choreography because involvement of the imagination is the means through which movement gains emotional content. In connecting the movement vocabulary of a dance piece to a performer's own imagined and emotional life, these dimensions of human experience – feeling and dreaming – are invited into the work.

The duration of the piece was an interesting question throughout the process, and also enhanced Sarah's ability to rest into deep emotional content. Because of the nature of the show it was a part of, we had the liberty of no set cut-off in terms of length of the

work. Having this freedom throughout the exploration was helpful. It meant that the piece was defined, and that sections ended and began as Sarah fulfilled the directive to her satisfaction, not based on an external keeper of time. In her words, Sarah said the openness of the time-score “allowed directions to really resonate in me”. The transitions from one section to the next were based on Sarah's emotional shifts. The best way to allow this to drive the piece was to keep the timing open.

Another facet that allowed for this freedom was the musical accompaniment. Beata Labikova, already enlisted by Chelsea and me as performer and collaborator in the show, was our composer and musician. Beata is an experienced improviser and her expertise in this regard was a perfect fit for this work. Her familiarity in working with dancers and making adjustments and choices based on realtime feedback from the dancer in space allowed us to keep the time-based choices open without compromising the quality of the music. The three of us discussed the feelings and shifts that we felt to be appropriate and Bea, working with the *mbira* (African thumb piano), her voice and a loop pedal created a haunting and beautiful score.

Additional to the aural support, Bea also offered the support of another psyche in the space, totally tuned into Sarah; Bea's role was to watch Sarah and support her every move with the sounds she was making. Aside from the moments where her musical cue was taken off something I was doing in the space, there was never a point where Bea's focus broke from Sarah moving through the space. Though hard to measure, I am sure this had a positive effect on the work beyond providing a rich soundscape.

Never Exempt: My Role as Observer and Participant

At the outset of the process, I was glad to take an 'observation only' role. It was a welcome change from being so immersed in the creation of *drag*. As the process and piece progressed, however, it became apparent that my role as observer was actually integral to the piece. Embracing this role led to a better experience of the work for myself and I believe that when well executed enhanced the audience's experience as well.

The question of how one watches is an oddly under-addressed topic in the practice of dance. I notice watching, in all of my interactions with performers, be it in class, rehearsal or a performance setting. *How* I look at the dancers in the room has an impact, both on what I see and also, from what I can tell, on them. With Sarah, I was attempting to see her beauty and potential, rather than fixate on any shortcomings. Instead of looking for 'what's wrong' I was trying to see 'what is in the way of me seeing the full expression this person is offering?'. Taken from this angle, the human being is given the full benefit of the doubt and any challenges are not seen as 'inherent to them', just patterns of unconsciousness. This depersonalizes the challenges, making it easier bring them to awareness and 'work on' them. It also includes me the viewer as equally responsible for the situation.

We can look for clues into the *how* of what we are seeing by noticing our physical state as we watch. Where does our energy go in our bodies? Is there excess tension in and around the eyes? One of the ways this question came to light was that I noticed myself, on several occasions, squinting my eyes as I watched Sarah dance. I realized this was a way

to heighten my intuitive, emotional listening – the listening of my heart and skin. Rather than be drawn to details of shape and place, this blurred visual field helps me to take in a 'vision of the whole'. In the performance context, I realized that how I watched Sarah while she was performing the work was contributing to the energy of the room, and in turn cuing the audience as to how they might watch the work in order to get the most out of it.

In addition to my observation of Sarah, there were other tasks that were important for me to fulfil for the piece. The first day that I put the veil on Sarah, we realized that the act of covering her, even though the audience would not see it, was a consequential part of the performance. As I was the one doing it throughout the rehearsal process, in a specific way, it was inappropriate for someone else to step into the role at a later point. The other factor that brought me into the work was purely practical. The veil was long and unruly, and Sarah was totally blind under several layers of fabric, not able to detect or manipulate it to ensure its successful unfolding and placement in the space. I realized that the unveiling too needed to be executed specifically, that the individual's relationship to Sarah impacted the work, and so decided to fill the role myself.

Without a dress rehearsal in the space, Thursday's performance had gone well enough, but our psychic energy was mostly occupied negotiating a new space. On Friday, being more familiar with the environs, there was more room to notice lacks in specificity/clarity in my role. Also, having been careless with a few key elements, I was unhappy with the quality of my support for the work, particularly because I allowed these mistakes to affect my thinking and, rather than staying absorbed in the work, got caught in

unhelpful thought patterns that likely did nothing to support the piece as it unfolded. The upside of this dissatisfaction was a realization that I was indeed filling an important role in the piece and that I needed to be more committed to this throughout. I went into Saturday's performance with the clear notion that I too, though filling a less demanding and less central role, was performing. I therefore prepared more appropriately, rehearsing my parts beforehand and clarifying the intention behind my relationship to Sarah.

This relationship was of 'supporter', more specifically, a sort of 'grandmotherly' support. I felt invested and interested in Sarah's welfare, but not enmeshed in the specifics of her struggle. I cared deeply for her, but with a view of the long-term and a trust in her capacity for transformation. Additionally, I played the role of 'time'; re-arranging the veil in space to evoke a sense of change in the world around Sarah. With my role clarified and intensified, Saturday's performance was much more satisfying. I also believe that it was this vantage point that caused a heightened connection with Sarah throughout the work, culminating in the last moments of the dance.

Though most of the notably strong moments of connection between Sarah and myself were in rehearsal, the strongest of all of these happened on Saturday evening at the very end of the piece. As Sarah was making her way towards the other end of the room, turning slowly, the gauzy white fabric winding slowly round her ankles, I experienced a strong feeling that the woman I was looking at was actually myself; there was no separation between Sarah and me. I felt very clearly that Sarah's fate, Sarah's well-being, was my own fate and well-being.

Though difficult to measure, I believe that my ability to connect with Sarah throughout the performance enhances the possibility for other viewers to do the same. In witnessing Sarah in a particular way, I felt my role was to direct the psychic energy of the audience and model the way in which one could partake of the experience in order to get the most out of it. Clarifying how I was watching and embodying the 'grandmother' character was the best way for me to do this. It is this extraordinary experience of connection with performers and the feeling of accompanying them on their journey that gives live performance its magic and that I want most for audiences. In later discussions, Sarah and I agreed that my engagement through the way I watched had an effect on the energy in the room and the way in which others partook of the work. We wondered if there was a sort of 'critical mass' of invested psychic energy, a certain number or percentage of audience members focused in this way that would have the power to sweep audiences into the story the performer was embodying.

Desire and Specificity: Jeanine Durning's Approach to Absorption

Just prior to the performance evenings, I attended three company classes with Toronto Dance Theatre, taught by performing artist Jeanine Durning from New York City. Currently and in the past, Jeanine has worked with choreographer Deborah Hay. Both women's approaches cultivate increased presence and aliveness; in Durning's words "closing the gap between seeing and doing". I would equate this aim with a state of absorption. The classes were comprised of task and game-based exercises, with some specific movement activities threaded in. I found Durning's approaches highly creative and

much of what she said resonated as relevant to my own practice.

Two elements in particular resonated as under-articulated in my current process. The first feature I could bring further into my own practice was Durning's emphasis on specificity. In several exercises she encouraged us to open ourselves to “the possibility of infinite specificity in every moment”. This seeking of greater specificity keeps one's attention active and gives one both cause and point to bring it back to again and again. There is always more to take in more precisely and when there is always more to notice, one's attention is never off the hook. 'On the hook' attention leads us into absorption.

The second element I felt I could emphasize more clearly in my own practice was an explicit contacting of desire as a precursor or necessary corollary to absorption (or, as Jeanine would be more likely to say, 'presence'). As mentioned in the introduction, over the past few years I have been honing a system/practice for heightening my sense of absorption in movement research and creative sessions. In this sequence, the first two steps are connected with enlivening our desire function. They are taken directly from meditation practices designed by mystics, who over the years, have come to the same realization as Durning, that desire focuses our mind and makes constructive action possible. Activating desire provides the energy necessary to mobilize us into seeking, turning on our curiosity and resources of intelligence. I also realized how fundamental a sense of inquiry or curiosity is to absorption. Absorption is not something we get into and call 'done'. It must be renewed in every moment, actively. With desire as our fuel, we can use curiosity and applied attention to enter and sustain a state of absorption.

Process 3: eField

First Directions

Because it was to be shown in the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theatre at York University, I knew the third and final process of my research needed to be approached through a different lens than the first two pieces. Opposite in most ways to the intimate gallery setting in which *I am turned on* took place, I wanted this work to read in a proscenium stage space for a larger, more removed audience. I also knew that at least a good number of the audience would be students from the Dance Experience class, likely a less experienced and less patient audience. For these reasons I wanted to make a piece that moved, that had big energy and brightness, but that still pushed at the edges of what viewers might be familiar with as 'acceptable dance vocabulary'^{viii} and incorporated and furthered my learning from past processes.

The first work-in-progress showing for the faculty took place in early December and though I had no work to show, this was our one opportunity to be in the theatre before our technical rehearsals so I wanted to get as much of a sense of the space as possible. Because the showing finished early, I was able to spend time moving on stage and through the house, taking in the size and scope of the space. I had a sense of some of the material I wanted to develop for this piece, but had yet to settle on a clear thematic focus. In looking for a way of integrating the movement ideas I wanted to explore with a performance space such as this one, I realized that the theme of 'relating to space' would meet both of these goals. Additionally, this focus could further my learning from the first two processes.

Throughout the process for *drag* I realized that the clearest physical imagery and the movement that felt most fulfilled came when the image or task I was involved with related to something in the space around me. In making *I am she*, the strongest aid in absorption came through the relationship between Sarah and me. I hypothesized accordingly that the same enhanced sense of connection and presence might be achievable in this final process by making the space around us the focal point for our attention.

This time in the theatre was also when I realized how I wanted the stage set. As the technician restored the theatre to its neutral, 'resting' state I was taken with the first stage of this process, when all of the legs are raised approximately half way up. In seeing the stage like this: broadened, but still contained, with the legs partially lifted and the cyclorama stretching out wide in the background, I had found a look that capitalized on what the space could offer while stretching the typical approach to staging.

The title for the work emerged gradually. The idea of the dancers repelling, attracting and maintaining an exact spatial relationship to each other was apparent within the movement we played with. In looking up magnetics and ions on the internet one evening to see if and how these concepts might apply to the work, the terms 'magnetic field' and 'electric field' came to my attention. Both terms appealed linguistically, but in reading Wikipedia's definition of electric field: "mathematically, the E Field can be thought of as a function that associates a vector with every point in space." (Wikipedia) I was immediately sold. I loved the notion that directionality, and movement impulse could be inherent in every point in space and felt this idea to both contain and further all of the

explorations we had done so far. I chose the title *eField* to suggest this, while still attempting to leave some ambiguity for the viewer's imagination.

Realizing the energy it takes to coordinate schedules and not having financial resources to put towards this work, I chose to work with two dancers for this piece: Amanda LaRusic and Christy Stoeten. With Amanda out of town, the first few rehearsals were just Christy and me. In these initial rehearsals, we played with developing task-based^{ix} movement motifs through relating to each other and to the space that we were in.

The Benefits and Challenges of Task-based Material

I was drawn to developing task-based material for this process for several reasons. First, it offers a clearly specified point of focus to orient the mind; with this focal point continuously available, opportunities for absorption increase. Also, because the point of the performer's focus is the basis of the work, I have more information and control to experiment with crafting material to bring the performer into absorption. Secondly, task-based material can be a way of generating longer segments of material in less time. Thirdly, I believe it leaves more space for the dancer's own voice to be showcased and their intuitive wisdom to emerge.

All throughout the process it was important for me to try the tasks, motifs and movement that I was directing. Because I was often filling in for a missing dancer, I did this frequently. Often a task I thought would work or be simple was actually extremely difficult to execute. For this reason, though challenging to me as a choreographer, I was grateful for those opportunities when I needed to step into the work. It forced me to

experience the directives from the inside, which kept present the question of 'What am I actually trying to achieve here and how do I articulate it?' It was interesting to note how frequently the words I was using to describe a task did not satisfactorily relate or account for all of the movement quality. A dominant example was in working what came to be known as the 'motif' section. This section, held in the centre of the dance was a period of time in which the dancers were tasked with the following:

1. Notice a directional impulse within the body, allow it to affect your structure and as soon as you register it, switch to another one. Sequence these together as quickly as possible^x.
2. While this is happening, travel towards a fixed point along the edge of the space. Start slowly and accelerate as you draw closer to the point.
3. On occasion, allow one of the directional impulses to endure, extending increasingly out through your limb(s) in order to connect with (a) point(s) along the edge(s) of the space.
4. Maintain this sense of connection out through the limbs and change the point in space to which the limb is relating. Increase the frequency and tempo of these shifts until your balance breaks down. Return to the state of ever-shifting directional impulses within the body.

These elaborate directives were complex to execute. Present in rehearsals from the very beginning of the process, I was continuously working to articulate this motif in an accurate way. Rather than simply emphasizing the tasks as described through my words, I

would also describe the general look and feel I was after for the movement, showing, directing and adjusting what the dancers were doing. I was wary, however, that this choice may have undermined the emphasis on absorption that executing such a complex task was meant to generate. Because as dancers we are trained to see and duplicate movement, I wondered if the dancers may have been trying to fulfil my aesthetic desires instead of genuinely investigating the task, in which case, the whole point of falling into an absorbed state might take second place to fulfilling the aesthetic. Perhaps if dancers are trained to focus on fulfilling an aesthetic this task is for them the best means into an absorbed state. Perhaps it is through being rigorous, elaborate and specific in our physical demands that a choreographer calls trained dancers to the greatest states of attention. Though if this is the case, working in a way that forces dancers to draw on their resources of attention in a non-habitual way could also be considered to be a valuable practice.

One of the downsides of task-based movement is that it can be difficult to craft. Because it relies on spoken language to define and communicate what it is, if one wants something slightly different, one needs to find the words for it, so that it too can be integrated into the task. Finding the right words to express the desired embodied quality is challenging. Additionally, task-based vocabulary can tend to draw out habitual movement range and patterns. I noticed, both in myself and in the dancers, that in executing the 'motif section' we each have very specific qualities and movement patterning that we made frequent recourse to; it can be hard to find alternatives when the structure is not in place to push us there. All throughout the process, I was looking for ways of building in and

encouraging a greater dynamic range in the movement quality contained within the work. In the end, the only way I was successful in this process was to ask for it directly from the dancers, literally asking them to vary their tempo and/or levels more.

This said, I did notice a shift and expanded range of movement in the dancers as they rehearsed, particularly in the 'motif' section. It seemed that as the dancers became familiar with the tasks the level of visible physicality of the task and the movement range within it increased. I venture to guess that this is because as the dancers are able to hold all of the directions simultaneously as an integrated activity rather than a list of tasks to be switched between, less of their energy is needed for intellectually navigating the exercise and more can be invested into physical exploration.

Along with this motif, we practiced all of the task-based sections a great deal. We sped them up, slowed them down, practiced adding detail and cutting away. It was challenging to sense when an increase in difficulty – through pushing the speed or range of the task – would help the dancers to deepen their focus, or when we needed to slow down and simplify. What I noticed as a general trend, was that when the dancers were low energy, or visibly distracted, pushing the challenge seemed to increase the energy and focus. If the dancers were confused by my direction or starting to execute the task in a cursory manner, it was helpful to simplify and hone in on the details of the task at hand.

Though the movement became more interesting and varied to watch as we rehearsed, I was not always convinced that the dancers were staying true to the task. Particularly in the section we crafted with the sequence of body parts being pulled in

particular directions, it often seemed as if the dancers were just doing positions, albeit interesting ones, rather than motivating the gesture from a pull towards a point outside of their body in space. As a way to work on genuinely feeling this impulse, we played with relating to each other in the space, using each other, rather than an abstract 'point in space' as the catalysts of the attraction. This was helpful. We realized the importance of pacing the pulls; switching to the next one as soon as the impulse had grown to the point where it was taking our centre off balance. It also helped me realize that relating to 'space' in general was not helpful for the performers; it was in relating to other bodies or actual points/objects in space that the task could be executed more fully.

One of the challenges I found throughout this process was warming the dancers up. Knowing that they know their own bodies best and wanting to trust them to do what they needed to bring themselves into the BodyMind state in which they were ready to focus and work, I found myself unsure of whether to allow them the time and space to warm themselves up or to jump in and start directing. As the process drew closer to completion, this challenge found some resolution as we collectively realized the importance of warming up the movement tasks and motifs that were the meat of the work before running the piece. Whenever possible, we would exaggerate the task further than necessary for the actual work in order call the necessary somatic listening into play. For example, in several sections I asked the dancers to move through space keeping their spatial relationship exact. To warm this task up we designed a game where one dancer would travel through the room trying to disturb their spatial relationship while the other dancer tried to keep it

intact. The dancers were encouraged to respond accurately to both subtle and big adjustments in this relationship, from a slight lean or twist in the torso to rapid travel through space. When the lead dancer brought the pair to stillness, it was then the turn of the other dancer to try to 'lose' her partner as she travelled through space. This game became part of a pre-run ritual that warmed the dancer's bodies and minds up in the way they needed for the piece.

A final example of task-based material is an exercise I learnt from Margie Gillis which she calls 'moving into the touch'. In this simple exercise, movers pair off, one putting their hand on the other. The mover who is being touched then moves whatever part of their body the hand rests upon towards the sensation. I find this exercise powerful on many levels. First of all, it is contrary to the exercise that most of us as dancers have practiced which is receiving an impulse through touch and carrying this forward into movement. When I introduce this task to dance students I often see them nod knowingly and then as soon as they go to try it for themselves start suddenly and say 'oh *into* the touch, that's different'. Because it is often a new exercise, movers need to bring fresh attention to what they are doing. Interrupting the habitual forces us to bring greater attention to what we are doing, increasing the likelihood for absorption. Secondly, this exercise is powerful because one has to be in their body to respond accordingly. You cannot fake it, you actually have to feel the person's hand on your body in order to fulfil the task. Third, there is absolutely no thinking necessary, in fact, thinking takes energy away from the somatic listening needed to execute the task with precision. Because of

these factors, I have found this exercise to be a good way of encouraging focus and absorption. With this in mind, as well as finding the movement it encourages to be intricate and beautiful, I was interested in using it in the piece. Additionally, it made sense to me within the theme of the work, as a way to introduce movement being motivated by a directional pull towards a point in space.

The Importance of Structure

The benefit of structure, as I have seen in my creative processes this year, seems to be that it allows complexity to increase. Increasing complexity builds energy. Structure allows more information to be contained in the same amount of time. Because *eField* was primarily task-based movement, it was interesting to negotiate how to structure the task to expand the dynamic range of the movement or focus the energy on stage.

Though I enjoyed the quality of all of the task-based movement we were developing and felt it the most appropriate avenue of inquiry for looking at absorption in the creative process, I was unsure of how it would translate to a performance context. Very specific in quality, most of the tasks offered little definition in where they occurred in space. I wanted to look for ways of containing or specifying the tasks so that they were not only about the state of listening of the performer, but also about clear choices in the use of the performance space. As a way to give 'moving into the touch' more definition within the work, I decided to ask for compartmentalized lighting (a rectangle, a column – or long rectangle – and circle) at this point in the dance. I thought the clear edges of the shapes would help contrast and contain the typically circular, soft, flowing quality of the task, as

well as force the dancers to specify where they were in space along with their listening to the touch.

One of the sections of *eField* that was most satisfying to develop choreographically was the 'circle' section. I had set myself up nicely with certain rules, such as a limited movement vocabulary and the dancers needing to maintain the circular course on which they travelled. As a result, I was able to envision and play with many variations as well as tweak, bend or add to the rules where it became appropriate. The strict limitations of vocabulary and spatial relationship created room for more creative choices. Also, because it followed a more regimented structure than any of the dance before it – it was the only section in the work where the task, step, and spatial relationship were all set – this section fulfilled an energetic build in the work.

Though the dancers' relationship was set and consistent throughout this section – they had to always create a circle between them, the size and location of the circles (except for one) was undetermined and to be decided by the dancers in the moment. Because of this uncertainty, and because they were often executing challenging movement as they circled, the dancers had to hold strong spatial awareness of each other to maintain the integrity of the circle. In my opinion, the urgency of this continual awareness also helped to heighten the energy of this section.

Where am I? The Use of Imagery to Create a Relationship With Audiences

One of the questions that arose through the process of *eField* is in relation to the use of imagery versus simply being in the immediate environment. In *drag*, I found that

the strongest moments were those in which I felt I could have both running simultaneously. My original intention with *eField* was to encourage the dancers to relate to the actual space they were seeing and experiencing rather than any imagined setting. When the dancers first asked about how they should relate to the audience, I responded that they should include the audience only in that they happen to be in the space in which they are moving. This means actively allowing being seen on the dancers part, but not looking at the audience so as to see people there. I responded in this way, because I wanted the dancers to stay away from developing and interacting with the audience via a 'persona'. When the topic was raised again, I responded differently, mentioning Margie Gillis' differentiation between looking *to* audiences and looking *through* audiences. I emphasized that I was looking for the latter. I also mentioned that I saw this piece taking place in vast, interstellar space. I did not want to force this image on the dancers, as I knew the image they used had to come from their own imaginations, but had I been performing the piece, this is the image that I would have used as the contextual container for the movement.

Because with *eField* I was focused on experimenting with task-based movement motifs and relating to space, I think I left the conversation around imagery and the dancers' emotional bodies under-addressed. Because the imagination is intimately connected with our emotional and energy bodies and these bodies are transpersonal, I believe image to be one of the performer's greatest allies in both deepening their own state of absorption and achieving greater connection with audiences. In future, I will look for ways of building greater imagery into the action-based tasks.

Outcomes

The discoveries from three choreographic processes and a year of research are numerous and have left me with many further questions.

In both *drag* and *I am she*, there were several realizations around the use of imagination. In *drag* I had the first hints of the jump necessary from imagining something in my mind and actively projecting it into the space around me. I realized that the most potent images for me as performer spoke to both what was happening within my body as well as in the space around me. When I was genuinely able to relate to an image outside of my body, my physicality was informed infinitely. These images that filled the space also created a container for me to see and be with audiences. In *I am she*, what was highlighted most about imagination was its interconnection to our feeling bodies. The piece was a series of archetypal actions, meant to be filled out by Sarah's imagination as she travelled through. The images that arose from her mind were symbolic to her and brought with them genuine feeling. Sarah and I experienced a strong sense of interconnection when working in this way, like we were spontaneously co-creating the piece as it happens. I believe this points to the power of emotion, accessed through imagination, to be a transpersonal bridge not only between performers, but also between performer and audiences. In future processes I will experiment more with this. In particular looking for ways of projecting my imagined world into the space and including the audience in this projection.

Another realization from this year's research, applicable both in and out of the creative process, is the importance of keeping the BodyMind actively engaged. In other

words, specificity enhances absorption. There seems to be an immediate correlation between the amount of detail I take in and the level of focus I achieve. With this in mind, when an absorbed state is elusive, I can at least busy myself with endeavouring to notice more and more about my BodyMind as it moves, knowing that this endeavour is what puts me on track towards a more focused state. It is also informative for how to best direct dancers. This is why the pace of additional direction was so important in the work with Sarah. The best results in keeping her focused and delving into the work happened when I could offer her more direction as her own explorations on the theme reached an end. It was important that I pay attention and look for signs of these moments. Though the same with Christy and Amanda, because many of the task-based motifs and movement sequences were loaded from the start with movement objectives, it was important that I allow them lots of time to rehearse the motifs. Through practicing the motifs extensively they were able to hold all of the directions simultaneously with ease, freeing up more psychic energy to be present with the specifics of their physical explorations.

This emphasis on the pacing and nature of direction leads into the realization of the power of increasing specificity and structure. It is the means through which I could encourage a performer to be continuously exploring the work, and also the means to increasing the potency of a dance piece. This was made clear to me when rehearsing and performing *drag*. I noticed that as I continued to press my attention into all of the 'in between' moments not previously attended to, my sense of time and control expanded. I experienced more and more pleasure in performing the work.

Perhaps the most notable insight from the year is the importance of relationship for accessing absorption. This played out differently in each of the processes. In *drag*, it became apparent in the imagery I was working with. When I could clearly imagine something outside of my body in space to which I was relating, the clarity and specificity of my movement increased and I felt better able to integrate the audience into my imagined world. In *I am she*, the connection between Sarah and the music and more strongly Sarah and myself was what seemed to bring us into a heightened state of listening, a state where our imaginations were active, responsive and attuned to each other. There was a clear sense of expansion of the boundaries of self and of emotional interconnection. In *eField*, though we were working to relate to the space in which we found ourselves, this proved tricky to access in a real and visible way. I still believe cultivating this relationship has great potential for absorption and will experiment more with this in future processes. In the end, the relating that was most potent in this work was also the relationship between the performers, particularly in the 'circle' section of the work, where they needed to stay attuned to each other to know where to travel on stage.

As mentioned previously, these insights have yielded many questions and avenues for future investigation. As a dancer, performer and creator, worlds have opened that merit a great deal of attention. The above insights will be carried forward into future endeavours, as I seek to maximize the experience of that optimal state of mind for myself, other artists with whom I work and audiences. Perhaps what I am most excited about however is that much of the learning gained through this research is able to span both my creative and

'ordinary' life, enhancing not only my experience when on-stage but also my day-today living. I hope to, as time unfolds, find meaningful ways of bringing the special tools and awarenesses learned through performance and creation to 'non-dancers', helping all sorts of people to access a greater sense of enlivenment, wonder and connection; growing their appreciation for the wisdom of their bodies in motion and the tremendous power of dance.

Endnotes

- i Throughout this paper I will be using the term 'BodyMind' to emphasize the interrelationship of what we usually separate into the two distinct aspects of body and mind. I choose to capitalize both the 'b' and 'm' out of respect and to still allow for some understanding of autonomy.
- ii *I Am* is the title that York uses for this first show of the year until the choreographers rename it as they choose. The pieces are meant to be autobiographical in nature.
- iii I later discovered that this quote originates from RuPaul. It reads “We all came into this world naked. The rest is all drag.”
- iv Fiona Griffiths is a “teacher, coach, mover, actor, clown, deviser/choreographer, fitness professional, body work and nurse currently based in Toronto, Ontario.” (Griffiths)
- v The sole example of this I have from my part in the dance was to find a small 'egg-like' shape near the end of one of my crossings.
- vi The performer is Eleanor Duckworth (a retired professor in her late sixties), who had recently performed in Gillis's *M.Body*.⁷
- vii Jerzy Grotowski is a Polish theatre pioneer of the later half of the 20th century. He founded the Laboratory Theatre in Wrocław, Poland and later The Work Center in Pontedera, Italy. His research and creative work emphasized the skill and presence of the live actor with audiences as the primary focus of theatre and culminated in the latest phase with work known as “Art as Vehicle” where the attention for art goes together with the approach of the interiority of the human being.”(The Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards). I have been exposed to this work through Fiona Griffiths, who learnt it from Richard Pochinko and Linda Putnam who studied with Grotowski.
- viii In assistant teaching the Dance 1500 class last year, which involved both leading a movement class and marking papers they handed in about contemporary dance work that they saw, I was exposed to a sampling of students' perspectives on dance. A common perspective among the thirty students in my lab, particularly those with a background that included formal dance training, was a limited and particular definition of what movement they considered to be dance. There was often resistance to acknowledging movement that was outside of the established forms that they had been exposed to as dance.
- ix Task-based movement is movement that results from task-oriented directions rather than shape-based movement sequences. For example: stay close to the ground as you travel towards the other side of the room as fast as you can.
- x This first element of the 'motif section' stems from a practice I've done in classes with Margie Gillis. She calls it 'primordial ooze', and directs it slightly differently. In her version, she asks movers to notice the smallest movement impulse in the body they can and to, as soon as they can discern it, change to a different impulse. In practicing this exercise within the context of her classes, I have noticed profound openings and feelings of increased integration within my physical structure.

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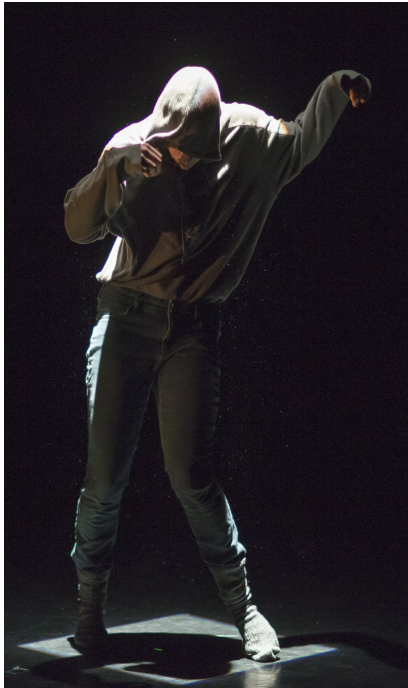
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Appendix A: *drag*: photographs from David Hou



Appendix B: *I am she* : Poetic narrative of events

Together, we gather, out of sight
The first veil is placed over you and tied into place
Then the second veil, connecting you to the full length
You crouch, down to your hands and knees
Layer by layer, the fabric is draped over you
Then secured to something that will hold, in this space we start from.
I lay my hands on your head and upper back
I give you my blessing
Then I open the door, displaying you for all to see

You emerge, crawling
Slowly forward
I mind the veil, watching, drawing it off you
You feel the weight of the fabric on your body
the changing light as the layers of fabric slip off
beige to green, to deep purple
As they fall behind you, I arrange them
Until just that incredible pink remains
Gleaming with promise in the candle light
Connecting you to me and to the space from which you've come.
You lift your chin, raise your eyes to the sky
The veil falls behind you
You travel to the corner & press yourself in

I rise from my resting place
Shaping the train of fabric into a circle
Laying the pink end open and flat, extending towards you
Your head turns, cheek pressing against the surface of the wall
Shoulder sliding along the wall you crouch down
One hand tentatively joins the other
Fingers clasping, intertwined
You come to stand, back in the corner
Then with both hands staying connected to the wall
You step gently forward
Slowly, slowly, you aren't ready just yet
What is out there? Out of this place of safety you have found?
You lean ever-forward, arms taught...

The connection breaks
You fall forward, away from the wall

But webs still cling to your finger tips
You flick and toss, thrash, trying to free yourself
I watch as the last veil falls from you face
You don't even notice,
so focused on freeing yourself from the tangle
I gather the veil from the ground, hold it out lengthwise
Both a screen and reminder
of the unfinished business
In which you're still entangled
There is more to see dear one, come
Come see for yourself.

Recognizing the futility of your struggle
You return to where I stand
Grab the veil from my hands
Gazing through, with fear and resolution in your pulse
You gather courage, breath by breath
Until your hands open
The veil falls.
Your shadow is seen
And you are swallowed
Into the eddies of your own heart

You grow exhausted
Collapse to the ground
You notice the sheer veil, heaped at your feet
You gather it, wrapping it into a bundle.
Gazing at the circled veil
You walk to it, step over its boundary
And make your offering
Then you walk to end of the train
Take hold of the pink and waft it high in the air
It floats down upon you
Resting over your body, lying flat

While you dream, I rouse
I untie the far end of the veil from where it is anchored
Back where we started
I carry it over, towards a new direction
Disturbing and re-laying the fabric along the way
I gather your offering
Go to where you sleep, lift your head, and place it under you

A pillow for your dreaming.
When my work is done, I settle

Then you begin to wake
Your fingertips emerge at the edges of the fabric
Palms open to the sky, you bring your hands slowly
To the cushion under your head, then to the fabric over your face
You draw it slowly down
Then gather it into your chest and come to sitting
You see the long road of fabric extending out from your feet
You continue to gather
Draping it, winding yourself in
You follow its course
Revelling in the elegance, the colour, the feel
You layer yourself until you can wear no more
Then you begin to turn, seeing the broad horizon in all directions
the gauzey, white fabric encircling your ankles
When you can wind and carry no more
You remove the layers from your body
They fall to your feet around you
The pink still clutched into your chest
You step out of your fallen cocoon
Then lay the bundled pink fabric
On this rainbow pyre

Then you notice your offering
Still bundled, lying where you last dreamed
You go to it and gather it up
Bring it to the fabric heap
Holding it a last moment.
Then allow it to unravel from your hands
and drape it over the piled veil.
Then you turn your attention to the direction in which you were headed
and exit from the space.

Appendix C: *I am turned on* : poster



Appendix D : *I am she*: program write up

I am she

Hidden with veils. Layered with fabric.
Her eyes glimmer with trepidation and great courage.
She doesn't know where she's going. She knows she has no choice.
Dressing, weaving, adorning.
Caring, loving, releasing.

What does it mean to be a woman?
Why this long history of hiding and covering?
What is this relationship with fabric and textiles, with dress?

I am She is the second of three pieces as a part of my thesis work for my MFA at York University. It is a choreography of archetypes. It is about the role of a mother, the role of a lover, the deep pain and utter beauty of loving without restraint, all the while knowing we must, sooner or later, relinquish that which we hold so dear.
It is about wisdom ripening, about learning to love and let go in the same breath.

*

Huge thanks to dancer Sarah McQueston for the deep gift of her presence and unfailing engagement with this work, to Bea Labikova for her astute and heartfelt accompaniment and to Chelsea Papps for her artistic and emotional investment.

Thanks also to my parents, Ben Levin and Barbara Wiktorowicz for their unflinching support. To my housemates and heart-friends, who keep me honest. To my primary supervisor Professor Carol Anderson for her wisdom, care and belief in my artistic vision, also to Professor Susan Cash and the faculty at York University.

*

Breathe deep and let your attention settle. Feel the pulse of your heart and the ground under you. Allow for whatever images, feelings and thoughts arise (I would love to hear about them!) and please enjoy the journey.

Appendix E: Summary of discoveries from *I am she* process

The most important factors I noted in helping Sarah enter and maintain a state of absorption (compiled from journal notes) :

How the directive is articulated. Must be forever expandable/cannot have an endpoint.

Pacing of adding information and directions.

Always allowing the performer(s) the freedom to make a different choice than what has been established: keeps them always listening.

How I look at/bear witness to Sarah is critical.

Everyone in the space contributes to the energy in the room.

Commitment counteracts doubt. This can be fostered through positive outlook and appreciation of the process.

Don't be afraid to make choices and set structures. These can always be adjusted/shifted or moved at a later point but without the clarity that structure offers it is hard to know what the next step is. (this is more in terms of just making work period).

Can't have rigour without specificity. How can we be allowing (in order to avoid self-destructive dialogue) while still demanding ever-increasing specificity.

Appendix F: *eField* 40 word promotional write up

eField gives credence to the space around us as a catalyst for movement.

A dance of polarity, charge, reverberating impact and interpenetration

Infinite directionality and singular vectors

It is the wild, reckless negotiation of two autonomous charges

Appendix G: Program notes and image for *eField*

Title: **eField**

Choreography: Ruth Naomi Levin

Dancers/Interpreters: Amanda LaRusic, Christy Stoeten

Lighting Design: Laura Andrew

Original Music Composition: James Ervin

Costume Design: Ruth Naomi Levin

MFA Supervisors: Professor Carol Anderson, Professor Susan Cash

Listen for a directional impulse in your body. As soon as you're following it, switch to a new impulse. How quick, how specific can you be? Now relate this ever-shifting activity to a point in space. Allow yourself to be drawn in that direction, velocity ever-increasing as you approach.

