

**ASSEMBLING A PRACTIS**  
Choreographic Thinking  
and Curatorial Agency

LAUREN O'NEAL





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Assembling a Praxis:  
Choreographic Thinking and Curatorial Agency

This publication is the written component of the Doctoral Thesis in Fine Arts for the Doctoral Programme at the Academy of Fine Arts at the University of the Arts Helsinki.

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COVER IMAGE  
Cover: Detail of a score generator sculpture made of string and wood created at the Galleria Gjutars at the Vantaa Artists Association.  
Inside: Lamont Gallery floor plans in motion.

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# Abstract

We curate our playlists, our menus, and our outfits. Urban planning, poetry, and software design have choreographic elements. These phenomena point to the potential of the curatorial and the choreographic to open new spaces for aesthetic engagement.

*Assembling a Praxis: Choreographic Thinking and Curatorial Agency* imagines a site where the curatorial and the choreographic meet. I formulate this “choreographic curatorial” through three projects I developed at the Lamont Gallery. My curatorial practice is characterized by movement and arrangement, embodiment and encounter. What happens when you curate from this position?

Rather than seeing an exhibition as an answer—a static proof of concept or a demonstration of knowledge—I consider exhibition-making to be a dynamic method of prototyping. Within this research, I examine how narratives emerge in open-ended curatorial practice, complicate notions of authorship, investigate the influence of movement, and delineate the contours of curatorial dramaturgy. Throughout the journey, I emphasize the vital role of curiosity, experimentation, and desire.

To explore what it means to curate with choreographic sensibilities, I differentiate curating from the curatorial with the help of Maria Lind and Beatrice von Bismarck. I wrestle with defining choreographic thinking with the support of Adesola Akinleye, Erin Manning, and William Forsythe. I reorient myself with the company of Sara Ahmed. Alongside Keller Easterling, I question the need to name and the need to know. I embrace the potential of wandering and wandering with Raqs Media Collective. I dance in museums with Trisha Brown.

As a practice-based artistic research inquiry, my analysis also raises questions about the nature of artistic research. Curation is a key site for my inquiry, but not the only one. My research contributes to broader conversations around how the visual arts and the performing arts intersect, and what this intersection enables. Curation under these conditions becomes a way to ask questions, make introductions, and invite possibilities, using the platform of the gallery space as laboratory, rehearsal room, studio, and stage. It *seeks*, rather than seeking to answer.

## Keywords

Curatorial, choreographic, gallery, museum, artistic research, exhibition, curiosity, experimentation, interdisciplinarity, movement, embodiment, invisible research.

# Tiivistelmä

Kuratoimme soittolistojamme, ruokalistojamme ja asukokonaisuuksiamme. Kaupunkisuunnittelussa, runoudessa ja ohjelmistosuunnittelussa on koreografisia elementtejä. Nämä ilmiöt viittaavat kuratorisen ja koreografisen mahdollisuuksiin avata uusia tiloja esteettiselle osallisuudelle.

*Assembling a Praxis: Choreographic Thinking and Curatorial Agency* kuvittelee paikan, jossa kuratorinen ja koreografinen kohtaavat. Muotoilen tämän ”koreografisen kuratorisuuden” kolmesta Lamontin Galleryssä kehittämästäni hankkeesta. Kuratoriselle toiminnalleni on ominaista liike ja sovittaminen, ilmentyminen ja kohtaaminen. Mitä tapahtuu, kun kuratoi tästä näkökulmasta?

En pidä näyttelyä ratkaisuna—staattisena todisteena konseptista tai osaamisen osoituksena—vaan pidän näyttelyn valmistelua dynaamisena prototyypin tekemisenä. Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastelen, miten avoimessa kuratorisessa toiminnassa syntyy narratiiveja, monimutkaistan käsityksiä tekijyydestä, tutkin liikkumisen vaikutusta ja piirrän kuratorisen dramaturgian ääriviivat. Korostan tutkimuksessa uteliaisuuden, kokeilujen ja halun elintärkeää roolia.

Erotan kuratoinnin kuratorisesta Maria Lindin ja Beatrice von Bismarckin avulla tutkiakseni kuratoimisen merkitystä koreografisella herkkyydellä. Painin koreografisen ajattelun määritelmän kanssa Adesola Akinleyen, Erin Manningin ja William Forsythen tuella. Etsin itselleni uuden suunnan Sara Ahmedin seurassa. Keller Easterlingin rinnalla kyseenalaistan nimen ja tietämisen tarpeen. Syleilen vaeltelun potentiaalia Raqs Media Collectiven seurassa. Tanssin museoissa Trisha Brownin kanssa.

Käytäntöön perustuvana taiteellisena tutkimuksena analyysini herättää kysymyksiä myös taiteellisen tutkimuksen luonteesta. Kuratointi on tärkeä alue tutkimuksessani, vaan ei ainoa. Tutkimukseni osallistuu laajempaan keskusteluun siitä, miten kuvataide ja esittävä taide risteävät ja mitä tämä risteäminen mahdollistaa. Näissä olosuhteissa kuratointi on tapa esittää kysymyksiä, tutustua ja luoda mahdollisuuksia käyttämällä galleriatilaa laboratoriona, harjoitusluokkana, studiona ja näyttämönä. Se *etsii* vastauksen etsimisen sijaan.

## Avainsanat

Kuratorinen, koreografinen, galleria, museo, taiteellinen tutkimus, näyttely, uteliaisuus, kokeilu, tieteidenvälisyys, liike, ilmentymä, näkymätön tutkimus.



# Abstrakt

Vi kurerar våra spellistor, menyer och kläder. Stadsplanering, poesi och mjukvarudesign har koreografiska element. Dessa företeelser pekar på potentialen att kurerandet och det koreografiska kan öppna nya platser för estetiskt engagemang.

*Uppsättning av Praxis: Choreographic Thinking and Curatorial Agency* föreställer sig en plats där kuratorn och koreografen möts. Jag formulerar detta ”koreografiska kurerande” genom tre projekt som jag har utvecklat på Lamont-galleriet. Min kuratoriska praktik kännetecknas av rörelser och arrangemang, förkroppsligande och möten. Vad händer när du kurerar från den här positionen?

Hellre än att se en utställning som ett svar—ett statistiskt prov på ett koncept eller en demonstration av kunskap—anser jag att ordnandet av utställningar är en dynamisk metod för prototypning. Inom denna forskning undersöker jag hur berättelser framträder i öppna kuratoriska metoder, komplicerar begrepp om auktoritet, undersöker rörelsens inflytande och beskriver konturerna av kuratorisk dramaturgi. Under hela denna forskning betonar jag den viktiga roll som nyfikenhet, experiment och önskan spelar.

Genom att undersöka vad det innebär att kurerar med koreografisk känslighet skiljer jag mig från kuratoriet med hjälp av Maria Lind och Beatrice von Bismarck. Jag brottas med att definiera koreografiskt tänkande med stöd av Adesola Akinleye, Erin Manning och William Forsythe. Jag omorienterar mig i sällskap av Sara Ahmed. Tillsammans med Keller Easterling ifrågasätter jag behovet av att nämna och få veta. Jag omfamnar potentialen av att vandra och vandra med Raqs Media Collective. Jag dansar på museer med Trisha Brown.

Som en praktisk konstnärlig forskning väcker min analys också frågor om den konstnärliga forskningens karaktär. Kurerande är en viktig del av min förmåga, men inte den enda. Min forskning bidrar till bredare diskussioner om hur den visuella konsten och scenkonsten korsar varandra och vad denna skärningspunkt möjliggör. Kurerande under dessa förhållanden blir ett sätt att ställa frågor, ge introduktioner och bjuda in till möjligheter genom galleriets plattform som laboratorium, övningsrum, studio och scen. Den söker snarare än försöker hitta ett svar.

## Nyckelord

Kuratorisk, koreografi, galleri, museum, konstnärlig forskning, utställning, nyfikenhet, experiment, tvärvetenskaplighet, rörelse, förkroppsligande, osynlig forskning.

# Acknowledgements

But what if locating yourself by yourself is like trying to use a compass without the North Pole, and what if the expectations of others are constellations to navigate by? What if self-possession is the tautology you are trying to escape?”<sup>1</sup>

—Briallen Hopper

This has been quite a journey. Fortunately, it has not been a solitary one.

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1 Briallen Hopper, “Lean On: A Declaration of Dependence,” in *Hard to Love: Essays and Confessions* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 18.

me that the dissertation “wouldn’t write itself”), and the artists, collectors, colleagues, and students I had the pleasure of working with over the years. Special thanks to collaborators and supporters Jung Mi Lee, Jon Sakata, and Gail Scanlon.

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A Preamble: Walking,  
Wandering, and Wondering

## Walking

It is February in Helsinki. It is not as cold as I had imagined it would be, but this is because I have arrived from Boston, where snow, ice, and chilly winter winds are typical. I get off at the Hakaniemi metro stop in anticipation of my admissions interview at Kuvataideakatemia (KuvA), the Academy of Fine Arts. I am a bit disoriented. Jet lagged. I do not have a smartphone to confirm my position on the paper map, one hastily procured at the airport tourist desk. In front of me is a large outdoor market full of people and brightly colored tents, the scent of burnt coffee in the air.

I study the map.

*I think I should walk this way . . . No, wait, I'm sure it's in this direction.*

I walk a bit down one street, stop, and turn around. I walk in the other direction. I linger. The intersection teems with walkers, cyclists, buses, and trams. I turn around again. I wonder what I might discover. I walk down several side streets. I know my destination won't be found in any of these detours, but I have time. I am curious.

Hakaniemi functions as my point of orbit: where I can extend myself in all directions to meet and mingle with unknown territories.

With one map in hand, I make many others. I diagram my embodied experience by moving in, around, and through this place, letting it inform my next movements. This imagined map, with all its tributary wanderings, is not reproduced in line elsewhere. It exists as potential. It stays with me as I eventually make my way to KuvA.

Walking, traveling, seeking: navigating streets, subways, airports, galleries, studios, and seminar rooms, and all the marked and unmarked spaces within, are regular features of my artistic practice. Even movement itself has moved, from a practical way of getting from here to there—a condition of everyday life—into an artistic research mindset, or perhaps even a methodology.

## To Wander and To Wonder

*I do my thinking and making through movement.* The movement of ideas, objects, materials, and people is the place I begin, how I make my work, and where I develop theoretical interests.

I move to spatialize my thinking: to give ample room for concepts to emerge and assemble. Through movement, I link disparate sources into a weave that becomes a matrix for my own artistic development.

I move to encounter.

Preceding pages: Suomenlinna island. Walking home after a seminar at Kuvataideakatemia (the Academy of Fine Arts).

Raqs Media Collective<sup>1</sup> offers an evocative meditation on the role of encounter in our engagement with works of art:

The way in which a work of art can be approached in an exhibition also holds true of the way in which the work of art itself faces the world. Not as the arbiter of truth, but as a gateway of possibilities. A process whose consequences may not be anticipated by its artist or custodian and that may not be realized even within their lifetimes. This calls for a slow, deliberative prolongation of the interaction between the artwork, its public, and its critical milieu, which is not predicated on the instant processing of readily available information alone.<sup>2</sup>

What is the nature and pace of this encounter? It is not a straightforward march, conducted with rhythmic regularity. Rather, it is a meander. A leisurely, exploratory, and responsive activity, meandering requires an awareness of what *is* as well as a receptiveness to *what might yet be*.

These encounters are characterized by relationality: art can *face* the world, and, in turn, we can *approach* works of art or be *oriented* toward them. The work of art, as a “a gateway of possibilities,” invites us to travel down a path where the endpoint is unknown.

To meander or to wander—in relation to art or to knowledge—anticipates wonder. To hold knowledge in this suspended state requires

a belated insertion of the category of discursive and critical wonder, as opposed to the need simply to “know,” as a valid mode or orienting oneself toward a work of art. Here, by wonder, we do not mean a retreat to ineffability. Rather, we mean in some ways a sidestep into an eloquent and busy conversation founded on possibilities rather than on certainties alone. How to learn again how to wonder aloud in the presence of art.<sup>3</sup>

My artistic practice is characterized by this sidestep. The direction of my movement is less important than the act of stepping. Am I stepping forward? Not always. The most significant movements are often alongside, around, or under. My activities take the form of iterative and roving gestures: an expanded art practice that includes curating exhibitions, building installations, performing in museums, coordinating educational programs, writing, presenting at conferences, and traveling. These simultaneous movements collectively constitute my artistic research.

1 The collective consists of media arts practitioners, curators, and writers Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta.

2 Raqs Media Collective, “To Culture: Curation as an Active Verb,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schaffaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 109.

3 Raqs Media Collective, 109.

Perhaps I should call this activity *moving-thinking-making-seeking-mapping-building-writing-arranging-researching-experimenting-configuring-assembling-testing-tweaking-assessing...*

There is a fluid relationship between these constellational activities. Each informs the other in an ongoing, indirect feedback loop. There are no obvious links that connect one activity to another in a way that is easily discernable. It would take me a lifetime to connect these heterogeneous forms into a singular entity. Even a lifetime would not be enough.

For that reason, I focus my doctoral research on one aspect of my practice, curating, which already contains this multiplicity. My moving-thinking-making in a curatorial framework is *choreographic*, although I did not have the language to identify it as such beforehand.

Naming choreographic thinking produces an arc I can trace—a dramaturgy of curatorial assemblage. Things come together in a temporary arrangement in an exhibition context, take on a new type of agency when they interact, and then assume other positions when they are dispersed back into the atmosphere, where they reassemble again in some other form.

In conversation with Sara Ahmed, I am oriented through and by my curatorial practice: “orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward.”<sup>4</sup>

I return often to the sites of curation, which allows me to observe my research as it takes place over time. Tim Ingold notes that “research is a second search, an act of searching again. To search again is not to repeat, exactly, what you did before, under identical conditions. For every search not only doubles up your previous intervention, but also makes an original intervention that invites a double in its turn... Every step is a new beginning.”<sup>5</sup>

Any step into an ongoing flow of activity requires both an attunement to that activity and a suspension of the expectations and demands usually associated with knowledge-as-arrival. I need to cultivate *not-yet* or perhaps *not-ever knowledge*. To be available to what(ever) the movement brings, realizing that things may unravel or reassemble in unexpected ways.

4 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

5 Tim Ingold, “Anthropology Between Art and Science: An Essay on the Meaning of Research,” in *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, no. 11 (Fall 2018), <https://field-journal.com/issue-11/anthropology-between-art-and-science-an-essay-on-the-meaning-of-research>.



I need to be ready. I need to plan. And, in the same moment, be *unready*.<sup>6</sup> Ralph Lemon captures the tension between planning and (un)knowing: “My prepared plan provides a semblance of courage. The illusion of courage is necessary in giving the shape/form to the amorphous and imprecise nature of what will actually happen: a daily event appropriate to uncontrolled circumstances and my precise daily discipline of being structurally available to this unknown.”<sup>7</sup>

Curating is a way of being present in the world, a commitment to wandering within territories of *to-be* and *as-yet*. Wandering begets wonder. The process takes—and makes—time.

6 Former Trisha Brown dancer and educator Shelley Senter often starts her Trisha Brown repertoire classes by asking us to be “unready” for movement. Instead of steeling ourselves to deliver some unyielding assumption about the starting sequence of the choreography, we relax our READY stance to allow *other* movements and knowledges to emerge. This is a helpful strategy for curating as well as for dancing.

7 Ralph Lemon, “Four Years Later,” in *Planes of Composition: Dance, Theory, and the Global*, eds. André Lepecki and Jenn Joy (London: Seagull Books, 2009), 254.





**Where We Are Going  
and What You Might Find**

## The Structure(s) of the Text(s)

In *Assembling a Praxis: Choreographic Thinking and Curatorial Agency*, I examine how choreographic thinking operates in three curatorial projects developed at the Lamont Gallery at Phillips Exeter Academy: *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting* (2015), *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation* (2017), and *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* (2020).

The research has often involved work within gallery and exhibition contexts. Curation has been a key site for my inquiry, but not the only one. Along with curating, I engage in dance practice, experimental performance projects, pedagogical exercises, and choreographic writing in order to theorize choreographic thinking in the curatorial.

This project is composed of both textual analyses and artistic elements, which together form the doctoral thesis as undertaken at the Academy of Fine Arts within the University of the Arts Helsinki. The primary elements are:

1. The printed book you are reading (the written component), and
2. The artistic components, which consist of the three curatorial projects considered within online expositions in the Research Catalogue.

The two components are not autonomous in the sense that one is the analytical, textual analysis and the other is illustration. Both components function in analytical, reflective, and artistic ways, often simultaneously (and collaboratively).

This section summarizes my research focus, identifies key motifs, and outlines the contents of the printed book and the online expositions.

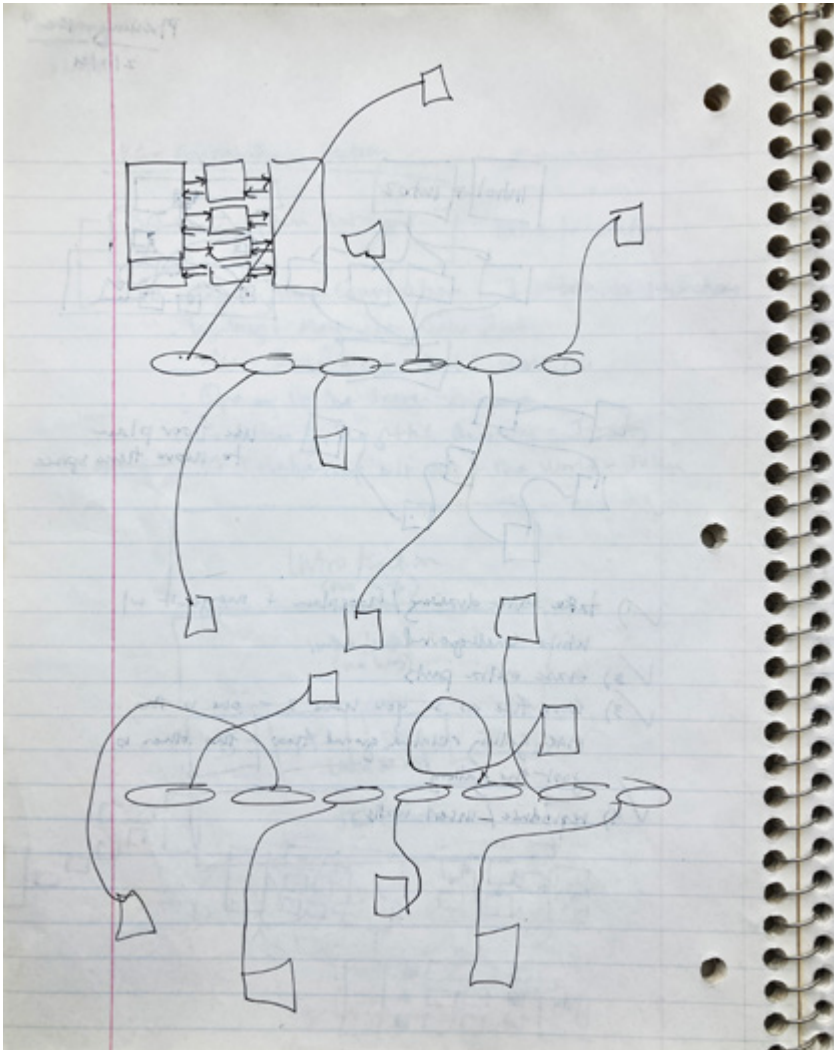
## Motifs and Operating Principles

### The Through Line / The Constellation / The Motor / The Weave

Reoccurring motifs in my artistic research include the flexible *through line* and the *constellation*, both features of my choreographic curatorial practice.

The through line and constellation exist within each platform, where the elements may read like a series of propositions, rather than a chronological or developmental journey. Constellation points are attached as clarifications, interruptions, or tangents. Multiple points and vectors converge

Preceding pages: Ferris wheel, Helsinki.



Early attempt to visualize a structure or map of my doctoral artistic research.

and diverge. The exhibition projects addressed in both sections serve as the overarching through line.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, the *motor* and the *weave* address how the curatorial practice and related research activity motors or compels the research, and how the research enables links or loosely woven connections between sometimes disparate domains.

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Mika Elo for pointing out that the mechanisms I was trying to use to evoke my research could also function as structuring devices for the text.

## Becoming Choreographic

This structure is a temporary stopping point (as well as a beginning). I curate what demonstrates my artistic research—from this text to the online exhibitions to the defense—through movement, arrangement, and duration. I *assemble* my choreographic curatorial sensibilities and embody an artistic research practice that Estelle Barrett describes as “praxis: a movement between what is known and what will be revealed.”<sup>2</sup>

My inquiry remains incomplete as proof but ongoing in terms of discovery. I am seeking and listening in partnership with my research. As Tim Ingold notes: “Research, knowing-in-being, means joining *with* the ways of the world, and following them wherever they go.”<sup>3</sup>

## Organization and Navigation

How is this research organized? What is the structure?

### The Book

The printed book serves as a companion, conversationalist, and periodic skeptic of my artistic research agenda.

Early sections address the contexts that inform my research, introduce key concepts, detail formative experiences, position my research within multidisciplinary conversations, contextualize my relationship to artistic research, and articulate methodological frameworks. Middle sections map the arc of my research and theorize choreographic thinking in the curatorial realm through my curatorial practice. The final section offers reflections and concluding remarks about the research and where it might take me.

### Sections

*The Preamble* establishes wandering and wondering as foundational generating devices.

*Where We Are Heading and What You Might Find* (this section) summarizes the organization and content of the dissertation.

*Section One: Making Introductions and Inviting Encounters* identifies curiosity as a motivating force in artistic research and situates my inquiry within broader conversations between the visual and performing arts. I speculate on the curatorial and the choreographic with Maria Lind, Beatrice von Bismarck, Irit Rogoff, and Adesola Akinleye, and acknowledge the challenges

2 Estelle Barrett, “Developing and Writing Creative Arts Practice Research: A Guide,” in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 186.

3 Tim Ingold, “Anthropology Between Art and Science: An Essay on the Meaning of Research,” in *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, no. 11 (Fall 2018), <https://field-journal.com/issue-11/anthropology-between-art-and-science-an-essay-on-the-meaning-of-research>.

of interdisciplinary research with Mick Wilson. Section interludes highlight formative museum and curatorial experiences.

*Section Two: In, Through, As, and With: Artistic Research as Context and Research Topography* contextualizes my work within the landscape of artistic research. I converse with Henk Borgdorff, Natalie Loveless, Susan Rethorst, and Sister Corita Kent. I introduce my research methodologies and activities. Renee Gladman and Gabriella Arrigoni help me identify the exhibition as a curatorial prototype.

*Section Three: Assembling the Curatorial* advocates curating as an art practice, discusses the context of my curatorial research, outlines key tendencies in my practice, examines the importance of being embedded, and addresses the role of movement and time in curatorial processes. I locate my curatorial practice in an academic setting informed by a distinctive discussion-based pedagogy, Harkness. My interlocutors for this part of the journey include Paul O'Neill, Alison Green, Raqs Media Collective, and Fleur Watson, among others.

*Section Four: Wrestling with the Choreographic* defines and deconstructs the choreographic through associative jumps and turns, accompanied by Adesola Akinleye, William Forsythe, Erin Manning, Trisha Brown, and Jenn Joy. I encounter, disassemble, and reconfigure definitions. I propose an awkward alliance between the curatorial and the choreographic (which I liken, with great affection, to the high-camp roller skating finale of the 1980s film *Xanadu*) and examine choreographic urges in exhibitions. I invoke choreographic thinking as a research strategy. Periodically, I dance in museums.

Sections five through seven address how choreographic curatorial practice manifests through select curatorial projects (detailed in online exhibitions in the Research Catalogue).

*Section Five: Arranging Spaces of Relation(s): What Can Objects Do?* addresses the role of objects in choreographic curatorial practice. With the help of Lorraine Daston, I imagine how objects induce artists and audiences to move. I address the object's disposition and its capacity for interplay in dialogue with Keller Easterling. Through the lens of *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*, I propose taxonomies of movement in relation to curating, examine hospitality, explore the connections between objects and affect, comment on knowledge production, and champion the *surround* of things.

*Section Six: Extending Lines: Curatorial Dramaturgy* draws from *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation* to explore how curatorial dramaturgies are produced and communicated. I consider dramaturgy within theater and dance with the support of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Katherine Profeta, Pil Hansen, and Katalin Trencsényi. Sara Ahmed and Vanessa Garcia help (dis)orient assumptions. I learn to lean on my artistic collaborators. I identify *Clew's* dramaturgical motifs, recognize the difficulty in seeing and saying with Carrie Lambert-Beatty and Roopesh Sitharan, and advocate slow and sustained attention.

*Section Seven: Letting Things Move* centers on *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*, a project set within the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This section examines what moves in an exhibition project, if not the bodies of artists, audiences, and objects. Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Keller Easterling help me reconceptualize movement in times of stillness. I reflect on how conversation moves curatorial thought and action in the absence of a physical gallery with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hannah Hutzig. With Juhani Pallasmaa, Sara Ahmed, Adesola Akinleye, and Sarah Robinson I reimagine curatorial spaces and sites. I hum with Bill T. Jones and trouble the cube with Trisha Brown. I embrace failed, speculative, and invisible research.

*Futuring* summarizes my research. I attempt to answer questions for artistic researchers from the *SHARE Handbook for Artistic Research*. I reflect on frustrations, failures, and possible futures.

## The Research Catalogue Expositions

The three projects at the Lamont Gallery that were designated part of my doctoral studies have corresponding online expositions in the Research Catalogue. The expositions contain my analytical, theoretical, and poetic reflections. Each exposition relates to a section of the book.<sup>4</sup>

Assembling the expositions is a form of choreographic writing.<sup>5</sup> The expositions share and enact my artistic research by fostering a choreographic milieu for each project. Some key ideas only become discernable because of the exposition's digital format, which operates differently than a printed and bound book.

### *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting* (2015)<sup>6</sup>

*Open House: A Portrait of Collecting* is an inquiry into how objects and collections catalyze affective and material movements: between objects and memories, between collector and audience, between private storage and public staging. The project featured a variety of institutional and personal collections, from vintage radios and paint by numbers paintings to model horses and record albums.

4 Most of the images of the curatorial projects in this dissertation are included within the Research Catalogue expositions rather than in this text.

5 I owe this shift to Annette Arlander. My first exposition was a plodding, lifeless repository. I was not happy with it, but I was new to the Research Catalogue and wasn't sure where to go. Annette kindly suggested I use choreographic thinking to enjoy the process.

6 The Research Catalogue exposition at <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/518043/2038633> corresponds to Section Five: Arranging Spaces of Relation(s): What Can Objects Do?



## *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation* (2017)<sup>7</sup>

*Clew*, a collaboration with a visual artist, a poet, and two interdisciplinary musicians, introduces curatorial dramaturgy and traces how an open-ended and exploratory curatorial process creates multiple narratives. The word *clew* evokes images of unfurling sails at the start of a quest and the myth of the labyrinth. The project encourages audiences and participating artists to navigate uncharted territories with a sense of anticipation and adventure.

## *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* (2020)<sup>8</sup>

*Being & Feeling* examines how we make our way through the world, full of feeling, as solitary individuals and together with others.<sup>9</sup> The project, which was upended by the pandemic, reveals how curating is not confined to or dependent on physical sites. The exposition identifies the choreographic devices that drive movement, highlights the importance of conversation and connection, and champions the invisible or the unrealized in curating and research.



Screen shot from Research Catalogue exposition for *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation*.

## Navigation Within the Expositions

The landing page has tips for navigation. You can navigate using the links to subsections, through the Table of Contents at the top left of the screen (if you hover or click), or by the arrows or buttons at the bottom of each

<sup>7</sup> The Research Catalogue exposition at <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/515799/2038746> corresponds to Section Six: Extending Lines in All Directions: Curatorial Dramaturgy.

<sup>8</sup> The Research Catalogue exposition at <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/978294/2038750> corresponds to Section Seven: Letting Things Move.

<sup>9</sup> Lauren O'Neal, curatorial statement, *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*, Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, 2020.

page. The *Project Overview* gives a more in-depth look at the curatorial project and the artistic research that shaped and emerged from the project. Each exposition includes a comprehensive PDF document with combined texts and descriptions of images for accessibility purposes.

Expositions include a *Research Summary* that provides an overview of my research (the *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* exposition contains the latest version). The *Linking Papers*, specific to each project, connect the expositions to my larger research agenda.

Each exposition has an exhibition archive (which I differentiate from the artistic research elements in other sections). The archives are accessible by “Open House Direct” and “Clew Direct” buttons in the upper right of the page or by the “Exhibition Archive” link toward the bottom of the *Being & Feeling* landing page.

The exposition design reflects my emphasis on the curatorial rather than on the singular outcome of curating, such as an exhibition that is visible to the public. My research includes the work that takes place before, during, and after exhibitions, along with the recognition of unremarkable or indiscernible aspects of the practice that are fundamental to my approach.

## **Avec, Alongside, Gap, Diagram, Map, Breather, and Break**

In 2017, I attended the UMAC (University Museums and Collections) conference in Helsinki and Jyväskylä. The friend or family member of an attendee was called the “avec” (“with” in French). I appreciated the avec designation. There was no pressure to identify, justify, or explain someone else’s presence: they were there as a companion, sounding board, and collaborator.<sup>10</sup>

Avec is not only *with* but being *alongside*, co-producing knowledge and creating intervals for contemplation. The avec is a slant, a digression, a gap, an extension, and a break. It clarifies what I cannot perceive through a fixed research gaze. As a dramaturgical device, the avec reveals new territories where critical aspects of my research become enlivened and operational.

The avec, sometimes distinguished graphically (but not always), provides evidence of the synergy between my research themes and broader discourses. It acknowledges ideas that have been influential but that are otherwise not addressed directly. In that sense, the experimental and experiential elements in the text may initially seem unrelated to the curatorial project at hand. A remark about an outside exhibition or a recollection of a trip are meant to underscore how research emerges from specific, personal, and sometimes

<sup>10</sup> The avec attendee designation may be common in some European conferences (aside from artistic research conferences), but it is not typical of U.S. conferences. In this example (the conference in Helsinki and Jyväskylä), I also want to acknowledge the Finnish context. My research developed in particular ways because of my affiliation with the University of the Arts Helsinki.

idiosyncratic encounters and to emphasize the impact of lived experience. Applied consistently enough, these encounters have become a research method.

Feel free to add your own notes or drawings in response.

## **An Awkward Duet**

I am choreographing a somewhat inelegant duet between the printed book and the Research Catalogue expositions.

The material in the book is not repeated verbatim in the online expositions, although I do integrate passages. The text, images, and other materials in the expositions are not reproduced in their entirety within the book. I lean on *either* the book *or* the expositions to externalize the research in the most appropriate format.

In both settings, I integrate a variety of texts, including essays about curating, architecture, and research. I reference poetry, trash, and travel. These moves reflect how I map my thinking. I grapple with the implications of my research as the writing unfolds. Theoretical and contextual themes are woven throughout the text as reminders and refrains.

The way you navigate this project is up to you. I recommend starting with the book—the Preamble and Sections One through Four, jumping over to browse a Research Catalogue exposition, and returning to the book to examine its affiliate section.

I struggled with how to make this duet work. Ultimately, I settled on keeping this awkward pairing of the book and the expositions by seeing them as a loose weave, co-imagined by their intersection. While each component may stand unassisted (momentarily), they are intended to be understood together.

The book delineates the contextual and theoretical landscape of my doctoral research. The expositions go into more or *other*, detail on the three artistic components. They are each other's *avecs*.

## **Promises, Promises**

It might help if you see this research as a series of expeditions where I (we) make temporary assemblages. Instead of answering the *what*, this writing-as-wandering encourages *what if?*

Within this wandering, conversations are initiated. Lists are made, ignored, rediscovered, and revised. Images supplant texts. Structures coalesce and then disassemble. Themes are pushed and prodded by detours, experiments, and aspirations.

I cannot make any promises.





**One: Making Introductions  
and Inviting Encounters**

## What Happens When You Research from This Position?

We curate our playlists, our menus, and our outfits. Urban planning, poetry, and software design have choreographic elements.<sup>1</sup> These phenomena point to the potential of the curatorial and the choreographic to open new spaces for aesthetic production.

In this section, I explore this potential. I submit to the propulsive force of curiosity. I loiter at the intersection between the visual and performing arts. I resist the need to name and the need to know. I reflect on early experiences that have influenced my curatorial practice. I traverse disciplines and interdisciplinarity with enthusiasm, if not grace. I differentiate curating from the curatorial. I wrestle with choreographic thinking. Not every move is successful. My *choreographic-curatorial* assemblage becomes a slightly off-kilter generator.

### Becoming Curious

From the gallery to the studio to the train to the sidewalk to the seminar to the library to the conference and back again: I am always on the move. Different roles, different time zones, and different sites of practice. Curiosity provokes movement.

Embracing curiosity in artistic research is an optimistic act. It persists in its commitment to knowledge even when that knowledge is perpetually in the process of becoming.

To identify curation's potentials, my research focuses on the *to-be* rather than the *as-is*. How do you examine not just a thing by itself but the thing in relation to the futures it offers? How do you keep a dynamic practice still long enough to analyze and communicate it? Keller Easterling notices that:

Culture is very good at pointing to things and calling their name, but not so good at describing the chemistry between things or the repertoires they enact... These things with names, shapes, and outlines are usually valued in markets and possessed as property, and they are generally regarded to be inert or inactive rather than dancing with interdependent potentials.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Choreorobotics is one recent area of inquiry. Catie Cuan discusses her research in dance and mechanical engineering in a fascinating *Scientific American* article from 16 July 2021, "Dancing with Robots: The Emerging Field of Choreorobotics Can Make Humans More Comfortable Interacting with Machines" (<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/dancing-with-robots>). Choreography is also used as inspiration in game design and UX design, among other applications.
- 2 Keller Easterling, *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World* (London: Verso, 2021), vii.

Preceding pages: From the *Flux* curatorial artistic research residency at the Nave Gallery (2013).

As a doctoral researcher with affiliations in the visual arts, curation, and choreographic practices, I operate in parallel spaces: at the crossing of disciplines or perhaps in their margins. My work is in conversation with durational and spatial art practices, including installation, sculpture, and dance, but the primary focus is on my curatorial projects: how they are produced via a choreographic ethos and what they might produce in turn.

Cultivating sustained curiosity within research turns out to be quite a lot of work. It takes discipline. It requires daily immersion in lively and oftentimes contradictory impulses. Research, observes Tim Ingold, “is not a technical operation, a particular thing you do in life, for so many hours each day. It is rather a way of living curiously – that is, with care and attention. As such, it pervades everything you do.”<sup>3</sup>

The word curiosity evokes leaning toward the object of research. The word is linked to *cura*, or care, which connects it to curation.<sup>4</sup> Leaning into curatorial curiosity is an extension into space—a touch. The curatorial puts me in contact with the wider world.

## **In Conversation: Intersections Between the Visual and Performing Arts**

*My moving-thinking-making-seeking-mapping-building-writing-arranging-researching-experimenting-configuring* artistic research practice involves turning with, over, and across concepts, disciplines, and spaces. Multidirectional movements reflect my curatorial practice: *a choreography of intersection*.

This research project contributes to discourses around the ways the visual arts and the performing arts connect: the shared histories, methods, and vocabularies; how the different domains together produce new, interdisciplinary art forms; and how the practices of creation and reception shift when activity in one domain is realized through the lens of another.

This area of inquiry has a long history. Artists regularly use the conventions and devices of other disciplines to produce, display, or contextualize their work. Sculptural objects are often integrated into performances, such as in the costumes of Oskar Schlemmer’s Triadic Ballet (1912–1922) and the ceremonial Chiwara masks of the Bambara in West Africa. Senga Nengudi integrates everyday items such as pantyhose into performative sculptures, causing us to reconsider their symbolic power in joyful and surprising ways.

3 Tim Ingold, “Anthropology Between Art and Science: An Essay on the Meaning of Research,” in *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, no. 11 (Fall 2018), <https://field-journal.com/issue-11/anthropology-between-art-and-science-an-essay-on-the-meaning-of-research>.

4 *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Curate,” accessed 22 December 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=curate>.

Pablo Bronstein incorporates choreography, drawing, and architecture into his work to interrogate our assumptions about history.

Yoko Ono, Ann Hamilton, and William Pope.L (who has crawled down 42nd Street in New York City in a Superman costume), use their moving, acting, and reacting body in connection with sculptural objects and staged situations to address aesthetic, political, and moral questions. Helena Almeida, Jacques Tati, Ulla von Brandenburg, and Julie Mehretu attend to the compositional and conceptual impacts of arrangement, duration, and motion. I view their visual art practices as choreographic, independent of their relationship to dance. In some cases, art objects are not even necessary: Tino Sehgal's choreographic "situations" made for museum and gallery settings consist of the bodies, gestures, and voices of performers and their interactions with spaces, contexts, and audiences.

This dissertation joins an array of publications, such as *Assign & Arrange: Methodologies of Presentation in Art and Dance* by Maren Butte, Kirsten Maar, Fiona McGovern, Marie-France Rafael, and Jörn Schaffaff, and *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy*, by Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza, that highlight the connections between curating and performance.<sup>5</sup> These voices position the curatorial as a performative endeavor and, in some cases, as a choreographic and dramaturgical one.

Interest in the visual art-performance interchange is equally reflected in exhibitions. The New Museum's "R&D" season in 2014, "Choreography," curated by Johanna Burton, included performances, classes, restagings, and residency projects, recognizing choreography "for its potential to negotiate the systems of value that govern intimacy, transmission, and exchange alongside an interrogation of the systems of control specific to different mediums and the politics of space."<sup>6</sup> Other exhibitions have included *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2018–2019) curated by Ana Janevski and Thomas J. Lax, and *Objects and Bodies at Rest and in Motion* at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm (2014), curated by Magnus af Petersens and Andreas Nilsson.<sup>7</sup>

5 Also see *Theatre, Exhibition, and Curation: Displayed and Performed* by Georgina Guy and *Choreographies of the Curatorial: Performative Trajectories for Choreography and Dance in the Museum* by Sarah Spies.

6 New Museum, "Fall 2014 R&D Season: CHOREOGRAPHY," New Museum, 2014, accessed 8 October 2014, <https://www.newmuseum.org/pages/view/choreography>.

7 Additional exhibitions include *Move: Choreographing You* at the Hayward Gallery in London (2010–2011), curated by Stephanie Rosenthal, and *Dance/Draw* at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston (2011–2012), curated by Helen Molesworth.



While curatorial discourse and practice increasingly reference concepts and vocabularies from dance and the performing arts (and vice versa), the explorations are often brief. I have been eager to develop these lines of thought into a more robust theoretical structure from which to develop and analyze my work. Although I am not conducting a comprehensive review of each of these artists, texts, and exhibitions—I center my own practice first and foremost—I share their concerns. Clearly, I am not alone in wanting to imagine new paradigms in curating or to combine distinct disciplines or areas of practice.<sup>8</sup>

8 For other examples of research related to museums and galleries, see Dr. Úrsula Imbernon Valls' work on how museums could plan exhibitions more effectively ("A Decision-Making Method for Programming Exhibitions in Museums and Art Institutions" at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0149718922000568?via%3Dihub>), Nina Czegledy's and co-authors' reflections on curating in "The Edge of Everything: Reflections on Curatorial Practice" (<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Edge-of-Everything-%3A-Reflections-on-Curatorial-Czegledy-Day/d4e01a54475663cd8ae5688d6a1ba41bf23d5a56>), or the curatorial toolkit produced by the 2010 Legacies Now project ([https://visualarts.net.au/media/uploads/files/Curatorial\\_Toolkit.pdf](https://visualarts.net.au/media/uploads/files/Curatorial_Toolkit.pdf)). Despite these resources, there are few models that examine curatorial practice in depth, from a personal and embodied point of view.

## FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES (THIS IS NOT ABOUT THE AUTONOMOUS ART OBJECT)

I moved numerous times. In each new house, I spent time organizing, labeling, and arranging installations of toys, books, and other objects, and then disassembling the arrangement—evidence of my early curatorial leanings. I was never interested in cementing the objects into a permanent formation but seeing what they revealed through their temporary assemblage.

### Partitioning Being, Space, and Time

Several early museum experiences were especially influential on my later curatorial practice.

On visits to the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., I encountered Alexander Calder's large black-and-red steel mobile, *Untitled* (1977), suspended from the lobby ceiling of the East Building. I would stand beneath it, or on a nearby staircase or balcony, transfixed.

I was fascinated by the sculpture's simultaneous mass and weightlessness, how it occupied space and intersected with the architecture and the skylights above, taking on different guises and moods depending on the weather. It had agency, despite not exactly being "animated" in any literal way.

The sculpture partitioned time in a particular manner. It required me to acknowledge the *duration* of perception: the sensation of an action or condition over a long period, a perception that could be recalibrated by various attentional strategies.

On certain days, I stayed in the lobby, never making it to the interior galleries.

### *Luminosity and Presence*

When I did spend time in the galleries, two of the more memorable installations were a room of paintings by Mark Rothko and a tiered gallery that included sculptures by Alberto Giacometti.

The luminosity of the Rothko gallery was as much a felt and tactile experience as a visual one. I would sit on the bench in the center of the gallery or stroll along the periphery. I was attentive to the space: the proportion of the room, the lighting, and the placement and pacing of the works. I experimented with the way I positioned myself in relation to the paintings—how close, how far, and at what angle. What other ways were there to perceive something *apart* from vision?

I recall the sculpture gallery as being a lofted space. The Giacometti sculptures (and probably works by David Smith and Constantin Brancusi) were placed on mezzanines that ascended the gallery. The diffused daylight flattened the space, making the various architectural and sculptural surfaces ambiguous. The air itself felt misty. I noticed my own movements in and around the works and the movements of other audience members. The sculptures moved with us, despite being stationary.

While I am uncertain of the accuracy of these memories, I'm not sure the details matter. My choreographic awareness within art museums was established as embodied and sensorial. Even then, it was not about the singular object but how objects *propel* and how curation reciprocates in response.



Performing in Heidi Latsky's *On Display* at its first run in July 2016 at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston. Photograph by Kathy Desmond.

## The Performative Turn in the Gallery: From Object-Based to Experiential

André Lepecki has proposed that the recent “performative turn” in the arts is actually a *choreographic* (or dance) turn that has been “central to curatorial imaginations in the visual arts over the past half-decade.”<sup>9</sup> Dance’s qualities of contingency, corporeality, and its urge to actualize representation through movement explain why “choreography and dance have become crucial for reimagining the status of images, for reinventing the relationship between images and actions, the relationship between institutions and corporealities, between presence and representation, between performing and initiating an action.”<sup>10</sup>

This performative or choreographic turn, and the renewed interest in the connections between performance and the museum, was examined at Para Site’s 2014 conference, “Is the Living Body the Last Thing Left Alive?”<sup>11</sup> Bree Richards, reflecting on the conference, argues that the increase of live performance—and dance in particular—in museums contrasts and confronts museums’ traditional object-based focus: “As performance has emerged into the bright lights of the Gallery – because it inevitably involves bodies that challenge this object-based system – it has begun to push the institution to adapt itself and its rules.”<sup>12</sup> This shift ushers in expanded aesthetic considerations for curatorial practice, which in turn require new ways of working.

Outside of this aesthetic and theoretical intersection there is a social and perhaps more market-driven one. Museums, alongside other nonprofit and commercial enterprises, have prioritized generating experiences for audiences and consumers. In “High Culture Goes Hands-On,” Judith H. Dobrzynski observes that “the quest for an experience has taken over giant portions of our lives. Everywhere, we are assaulted by endless opportunities and activities,” a pursuit that is reflected in programming choices within cultural institutions: “Playwrights now turn theatergoers into participants or let them choose the ending. Botanical gardens are adding skywalks

9 André Lepecki, “Dance, Choreography, and the Visual: Elements for a Contemporary Imagination,” in *Is the Living Body the Last Thing Left Alive? The New Performance Turn, Its Histories and Its Institutions*, eds. Cosmin Costinaş and Ana Janevski (Hong Kong; Berlin: Para Site; Sternberg Press, 2017), 12.

10 Lepecki, 13.

11 Is the Living Body the Last Thing Left Alive conference: <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/31556/is-the-living-body-the-last-thing-left-alive>.

12 Bree Richards, “Double Take: The Choreographic (Re)turn in Contemporary Art,” in *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 271 (July 2014): 17. Richards notes that the recent choreographic turn is not a new development. The contemporary interest in dance stems from dance and visual art works developed in the late 1950s through the 1970s, as well as through the influence of choreographers such as Xavier Le Roy and Jérôme Bel in the 1990s.

that let visitors traipse through treetops. Museums stage sleepovers in the galleries and dance parties in huge atriums.”<sup>13</sup>

Richards is critical of this trend: “These new developments appear caught between contradictory impulses: apparently resisting the overwhelming commercialisation of an object-based art world and, at the same time, ‘perfect products’ of an immaterial experience economy, where memory itself is a prime commodity to be consumed like any other.”<sup>14</sup>

Of course, it’s possible to view these shifts less pessimistically: museums *do* need to change the way they engage audiences. As Museum of Modern Art Director Glenn Lowry believes, museums must move “from passive experiences to interactive or participatory experiences, from art that is hanging on the wall to art that invites people to become part of it.”<sup>15</sup> While the museum has never been truly passive (or neutral)—it actively produces social and political structures that codify knowledge and experience in specific ways—it is important to remember that artists have been engaged with multimodal and interdisciplinary forms of artmaking for years. It is time for museums to catch up.

## Disciplinary Dispositions

Artistic research can disrupt disciplinary boundaries.

Audiences don’t usually notice this disruption. Cross- or interdisciplinary projects are often read as frictionless and fully formed. The display, artwork, or exhibition has magically coalesced by the time we encounter it in a museum or performance space. This effortless entrance downplays the challenges of drawing from multiple disciplines, particularly when the influences aren’t clear-cut.

At this point, it is important to ask: What is a discipline? According to Mick Wilson, disciplines are “systems of knowledge-work organisation that entail enculturation (induction, immersion, training, education, certified progression and so forth) that coordinate and regulate a division of labour, competence and authority while also establishing broader subjective orientations or intellectual or attitudinal dispositions.”<sup>16</sup>

A discipline is central to the identity of the researcher, whose subjectivity comes into being in specific and structural ways through disciplinary enculturation. These structures produce “dispositions and . . . habits of thought,

13 Judith H. Dobrzynski, “High Culture Goes Hands-On,” in *The New York Times*, 10 August 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/11/opinion/sunday/high-culture-goes-hands-on.html>.

14 Richards, “Double Take: The Choreographic (Re)turn in Contemporary Art.”

15 Dobrzynski, “High Culture Goes Hands-On.”

16 Mick Wilson, “Discipline Problems and the Ethos of Research,” in *SHARE: Handbook for Artistic Research Education*, eds. Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten (Amsterdam: ELIA, 2013), 209.

behaviour, valuation and commitment that are not typically shared with professionals formed in other disciplinary formations.”<sup>17</sup>

How does artistic research address distinct disciplines or use them strategically to incite new modes of inquiry? What does it mean to operate in, against, or in conversation with one or several disciplines? For Henk Borgdorff, artistic research is “undertaken *for the purpose of* broadening and deepening our knowledge and understanding of the discipline . . . . Artistic research seeks in and through the production of art to contribute . . . to what we ‘know’ and ‘understand.’”<sup>18</sup> The pursuit can fundamentally alter how we conceive of a discipline. Thus, artistic research can deepen and enrich disciplinary knowledge and, at the same time, redraw its contours.

Traversing disciplinary spaces is not without discomfort. As Wilson observes, “Even though there is a great enthusiasm, within contemporary institutional rhetorics, for something vaguely construed as ‘interdisciplinarity’, there is nonetheless a series of challenges represented by this move across disciplines.”<sup>19</sup> Wilson urges the researcher to adopt an ethical sensibility: “given that we operate within an emerging artistic research framework, with competing claims and unfinished arguments about our own identity, role and remit as researchers, practitioners, professionals; how might we broadly negotiate the movement across disciplines?”<sup>20</sup> I am well aware of the need to maneuver carefully within interdisciplinary spaces, even if I do not always do so with ease.

If interdisciplinary and experimental research is demanding, it is still generative, and worth understanding. Scott deLahunta remarks that

the fundamental assumptions of the disciplines . . . are called into question precisely at these intersections, disrupting normative pathways toward output or production. Such disruptions could inspire shifts in thinking, and finding a means of tracing what occurs there . . . . This would allow for a divergence of both input and output, and still establish concrete evidence of shifts in thinking and changes in approaches informed by the collaboration.<sup>21</sup>

In my aspiration to jump between the choreographic and curating in my artistic research, I invite disciplines into a conversation. The etymology of the word *conversation* includes *con-*, meaning “with or together”; and *versare*,

17 Wilson, 209.

18 Henk Borgdorff, “The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research,” in *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, eds. Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (London: Routledge, 2011), 54.

19 Wilson, 209.

20 Wilson, 213.

21 Scott deLahunta et al., “Exploring Creative Thought in Choreography Together,” in *Performing Process: Sharing Dance and Choreographic Practice*, eds. Hetty Blades and Emma Meehan (Bristol: Intellect, 2018), 147–8.

or “to turn.”<sup>22</sup> I embark on a close analysis of my own curatorial practice by turning towards dance and somatic practice. While I encourage dialogue, I do not talk to everyone. I have conversations with select *parts* of disciplines.

Doctoral research allows me to develop insights about how these practices (curating, moving, making) intersect and inform one another without subsuming one into the other. While I have integrated choreography into visual arts and curatorial projects, the three curatorial projects within this doctoral research are not visibly related to choreography. Rather, they emphasize *choreographic thinking*.

My project attempts to convey (if not convince) that curation from a choreographic perspective is an embodied form of inquiry:<sup>23</sup> it is a way to ask questions, make introductions, and invite possibilities, using the platform of the gallery space as a laboratory, rehearsal room, studio, and stage. It *seeks* rather than seeking to answer.

What happens when you curate from this position?

## **The Curatorial and the Choreographic: Setting the Stage, Making a Map**

Before addressing this question, I want to summarize the two key concepts: the curatorial and the choreographic.

The curatorial is a framework that includes but extends beyond the exhibition. It enlarges the field of relevance in curating. It encompasses practical matters, such as artist research and building pedestals, and internal, emotional, and relational activity, much of which goes unnoticed by the public. It expands notions of authorship and expertise by distributing curatorial activity to many collaborators, not just the curator alone. It acknowledges the impact of the curatorial apart from the physical gallery.

Much of what I discuss may be familiar to many curators and artists. My position is not unique. What is distinct is my attempt to “assemble a praxis” for myself—to understand my process, motivations, and agency through a specific theoretical framework, that of the choreographic.

The choreographic centers movement, composition, and orchestration as core operating principles. Instead of looking at objects as fixed entities, the choreographic locates them within dynamic systems. To operate choreographically is to think and make while subject and object are in motion, and to go beyond subjects and objects into alliances and assemblages.

22 *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Conversation,” accessed 22 December 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=conversation>.

23 Adesola Akinleye, *Dance, Architecture and Engineering* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 30.





Lighting fixtures in the underground walkway at the Amos Rex art museum, Helsinki.

The choreographic is not limited to dance choreography, but my involvement in dance has helped me develop an awareness of choreography's application in other arenas.

Could you have a choreographic day?<sup>24</sup> Sure. At least, I hope so. But it might not look that action-packed to an outside observer. Choreographic thinking can also encompass cognitive, emotional, and atmospheric states.

Both concepts—the curatorial and the choreographic—are at once obvious and enigmatic to me. They take multiple forms. I attempt to unravel and clarify them throughout this text.

#### *How I Curate*

At the core of my inquiry is an investigation of *how I curate*. Moving in the studio, moving as a performer, and moving in the gallery inform one another. None of these activities alone rests as the sole, final curatorial output. This orientation takes precedence over art historical, chronological, or narrative approaches to curating.

I investigate these ideas through curating exhibitions, as well as through adjacent research practices such as writing and movement.

#### *Wait.*

“Investigating” sounds so unambiguous, as if I have conducted tests on the choreographic in gallery settings and arrived at a specific result. This is not the case. Perhaps it is more accurate to say I try to *touch* the choreographic, something akin to what choreographer Twyla Tharp calls “scratching.”

There are many methods of scratching. Tharp explains: “The first steps of a creative act are like groping in the dark: random and chaotic, feverish and fearful, a lot of busy-ness with no apparent or definable end in sight. There is nothing yet to research.”<sup>25</sup> It is an uncomfortable place to be. She remarks:

Scratching is not about control and repose. It's about unleashing furious mindless energy and watching it bounce off everything in your path. The hope is that a spark will fly from all that contact and combustion . . . . You have to trust the unconscious rush and let it hurtle forward unedited and unencumbered. Let it be awful and awkward and wrong.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps I diverge slightly from Tharp here: scratching, touching, and moving around are not the only methodological choices that bring us closer to the research. These activities *are also* the research. We don't have to wait for what comes after.

24 Annette Arlander once asked me this delightful question over coffee.

25 Twyla Tharp, *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 95.

26 Tharp, 107.

The *process* is choreographic. The *what* of choreographic thinking in curatorial practice remains elusive, partly because my approach has been to ask questions rather than answer them. Instead, I share the *how*.

My curiosity about the choreographic within the curatorial process is far beyond museums integrating dance into exhibitions. For example, while dropping a Lucinda Childs or Steve Paxton performance into the rotunda at the Museum of Modern Art may be enjoyable, the insertion itself does not offer many insights about the intersection between the choreographic and the curatorial.<sup>27</sup>

Curatorial writing and practice *do* try to address these intersections, but the alliances—between the museum and curatorial theory or the museum and curatorial practice—do not meet as readily as the abundant publications, conferences, and exhibitions suggest. Curatorial theory doesn't reach all museums and galleries equally. This problem is particularly relevant to smaller and midsize nonprofit galleries: most of our work is presented within “practical” (versus research) applications which are focused on operational and administrative frameworks.<sup>28</sup>

My comment is not a judgment on the Childs-Paxton-MoMA experience or similar works: I adore them all. Rather, my concern leads in a different direction. While dance in museums, and the terms *curatorial* and *choreographic* have exploded in use over the past few decades, there is no consensus on their meaning or how they might be applied. I appreciate this instability, though—it gives me room to propose my own interpretations.

It now seems important to set the stage—to provide additional context for the terms *curatorial* and *choreographic*—so that I can tease out their implications later.

## The Curatorial

The past several decades of curatorial theory have proposed differentiating curating from the curatorial. The curatorial as a concept is attributed to Maria Lind. In her 2009 essay in *Artforum*, Lind asks, “Is there something we can call ‘the curatorial’” which designates “a multidimensional role that includes critique, editing, education, and fundraising?”<sup>29</sup>

27 This depends on context, of course. MoMA's audiences have witnessed performances in the museum for decades, but other, smaller museums and galleries in regional locations may have audiences with different expectations.

28 Arts administrative concerns, such as audience development, fundraising, and collections management are not separate from theoretical concerns, but often their analysis emphasizes one side or the other. What I am *also* tackling in this research, indirectly, is the lack of interplay between everyday museum practices and the theorization of those practices, especially within smaller academic, nonprofit, or community-based settings.

29 Maria Lind, “The Curatorial,” in *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 63.

Here, *curating* refers to the logistics of creating exhibitions and to the tools, methods, and professional tasks of the curator. In contrast, the *curatorial* addresses the expanded field: everything else around and beyond curating. The curatorial reflects a dynamic situation of intersecting agents, objects, and ideas that is always in motion, what Beatrice von Bismarck describes as the curatorial’s “constellational”<sup>30</sup> nature.

Put another way: Curating presumes the exhibition is the singular or the most salient outcome—a *something*. The curatorial stretches a bit further to invite a plurality: exhibitions *and*. If curating aims to represent, then the curatorial aims to propel—to operate in the wider world beyond its initial aspirations.

Beatrice von Bismarck and Irit Rogoff echo and extend Lind’s proposal. The curatorial includes the front and the back of house activities: those that are marked for audience interaction or consumption, such as exhibition layout, gallery talks, commissions, and publications; and the many unmarked, ongoing activities that facilitate the aesthetic experience, such as planning, negotiating, mentoring, and advocating.

The curatorial contains the potential for self-awareness and critique. Drawing from Chantal Mouffe’s notion of the political, where “consensus, with its predilection for closure, becomes highly problematic,”<sup>31</sup> Lind envisions the curatorial as “a way of thinking in terms of interconnections: linking objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories, and discourses in physical space like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns, and tensions.”<sup>32</sup>

Our assumptions about the curator shift. By emphasizing “philosophical and ethical approaches of reflexivity, self-criticality, and knowledge production,”<sup>33</sup> says Hongjohn Lin, the curator can be understood not as a neutral, unattached figure, but entangled and implicated in curatorial choices.

The curatorial is not a singular, stationary object (e.g., the exhibition), but a “trajectory of activity”<sup>34</sup>—a movement. For Rogoff, the curatorial is an epistemic *duration* rather than a static condition, where “knowledges that come together momentarily to produce what we are calling the event of knowledge; a moment in which different knowledges interacting with one another produce something that transcends their position as knowledge.”<sup>35</sup>

30 Beatrice von Bismarck, “Curating/Curatorial,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schaffaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 24.

31 Lind, 64.

32 Lind, 63.

33 Hongjohn Lin, “The Curatorial Thing,” in *Curatography: The Study of Curatorial Culture*, no. 5 Curatorial Episteme, 24 January 2022, <https://curatography.org/the-curatorial-thing>.

34 Irit Rogoff, “Curating/Curatorial,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schaffaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 23.

35 Rogoff, 23.

Even momentary or transitory knowledges need to be examined. Curating should critique its own assumptions whenever possible. Lin advises:

Beneath the simple equation of the curatorial to knowledge can lurk the manipulation of power and the politics of knowing, which includes the possessions and the possessed of knowledge. When referring to the curatorial as knowledge production, we should be more careful with institutional factors that define what a knowledge is, which in turn may be a homogenous part of the outside world.<sup>36</sup>

In this sense, curating can be risky. Not everyone wants to see the questions that curating raises. Being willing to think *with* and *against*—expectations and aspirations, as well as assumptions of what constitutes knowledge (your own and others)—is critical. Donald Preziosi asserts: “Curatorship . . . is, to put it bluntly, a dangerous practice. As a theatrical performance, it involves the critical use of parts of the material environment *both* for constructing *and* deconstructing the premises, promises, and potential consequences. . . . It is a way of using things to think with and to reckon with—to struggle with and against—their possible consequences.<sup>37</sup>

In pursuing the curatorial, my goal is not to claim more territory as a curator but to describe my research and practice with more precision. The logistics of shipping and unpacking artwork, the interactions with audiences, the pre-planning for events and programs, and other behind-the-scenes processes are all equally part of the curatorial endeavor. Working under the canopy of the curatorial enables me to consider everything that contributes to the curatorial process and what influences its outcomes. The curatorial is a meta as well as mediating activity, able to comment on its own conditions while translating, framing, and rendering these conditions visible to others.<sup>38</sup>

What differentiates curating from the curatorial? Perhaps not much. The terms are not in opposition. Traveling back and forth between them, as von Bismarck suggests,<sup>39</sup> permits them to be in interplay. Curating is one of the many activities that enables or enacts the multiplicity of the curatorial.

36 Lin, “The Curatorial Thing.”

37 Donald Preziosi, “Curatorship as Bildungsroman: Or, from Hamlet to Hjelmslev,” in *Curatorial Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Contemporary Curating*, eds. Malene Vest Hansen, Anne Folke Henningsen, and Anne Gregersen (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 12.

38 Paul O’Neill’s foundational text, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012, comments on the mediating function of curation and provides a rich view of the evolving (and often contested) role of the curator from one who cares for art objects to one who facilitates their production, reception, and circulation.

39 von Bismarck, 31.

## EARLY CURATORIAL MOVES (STILL NOT ABOUT THE AUTONOMOUS ART OBJECT)

The Windows Art Project (WAP) was a public art initiative in Davis Square, Somerville, Massachusetts, that ran from 1995 to 2005.<sup>40</sup> The program, which I co-founded with artist Susan Berstler, activated underutilized and empty stores and storefront windows in Davis Square as exhibition and cultural programming space.

Although Somerville was considered an arts haven, it lacked the civic and cultural venues to showcase residents' creative activities and bring communities together. At the time, Davis Square was a bit downtrodden, known for its dive bars and its (then) cheap housing.<sup>41</sup> Despite the area's central location and access to mass transit, many businesses had closed. Some of the storefronts had sat vacant for years. WAP tried to address both issues.

As we tried to convince artists to lend their works and business owners to lend their windows, Susan and I mapped imagined pathways and future connections between the businesses, the artists, and the anticipated audiences. These gestures became WAP's dramaturgical motor and contributed to the project's content. At one point it involved over 100 artists and 65 locations. The project offered an opportunity to meditate on the shape and structure of Davis Square and reimagine the role of artworks within wider aspirations of city planning.

The storefronts were on several streets that radiated from Davis Square's center, which resulted in multiple and often simultaneous choreographies. While installing the artists' works in the storefront windows, our movements went back and forth: we considered angles, sunlight, architectural features, and the way the works occupied the space. Our movements went in and out: from the exterior of the building to the interior, as we clambered up and inside the display windows. Movements to and from: the hardware store, the studio, or home for supplies and materials. Rather than a binary divide between the center and the periphery, the project was a constellation.<sup>42</sup>

The installation process generated attention from passersby and many opportunities for conversation. The "ongoingness" of the project meant there was often no clear delineation between the process and the result. Audience members engaged throughout all phases. From *in* public to *the* public, the project began to emerge.

40 WAP has continued past these dates in various formats and guises, but there has not been a structured program in place at the same scale since the original project. Although equivalent projects are quite common now, there was nothing similar in New England at the time.

41 In urban areas in Massachusetts, a "square" is not a large, grassy, park-like area in the middle of a town, but rather a place where many streets come together, often haphazardly.

42 Without a central gallery space, there was no place to deliver or receive work. We met artists and their works everywhere: on street corners, in the parking lot of the nearby convenience store, in the local park, or at the artist's house, where we would wrangle the work into the back of my car.

Public programs included walking tours. While guided tours happen frequently in historic and cultural tourist attractions, such as on Boston's Freedom Trail and in Cambridge's Harvard Yard, they were nonexistent in neighborhoods like this one. The tours, unscripted and conversational in nature, promoted a special sense of collective participation and community pride—a way to enjoy spending time with “all the people you don't know,” as poet Fred Moten has suggested.<sup>43</sup>

Susan and I realized that our role was an ever-expanding one. Not simply founder and curator, but initiator, facilitator, messenger, negotiator, politician, persuader, art shipper, installer, carpenter, cleaner, writer, publicist, fundraiser, graphic designer, and tour guide. The program's administration reflects Terry Smith's understanding of contemporary curatorial thought:

Like contemporary art, contemporary curating is embroiled in time, but not bound by it; entangled in periodizing urges, but not enslaved to them; committed to space, but of many kinds, actual and virtual; anxious about place, yet thrilled by dispersion's roller-coaster ride. It does not follow a set of rules; rather, it adopts an approach arising from an emergent set of attitudes.<sup>44</sup>

Given my experience with WAP, framing my curatorial practice as “choreographic” might make more sense.

43 I might have heard this from Fred Moten at a lecture. Or perhaps I read it in a poem. I cannot find the original reference. I include the sentiment, even if imagined, because it reflects the conviviality and generosity I find in Moten's work.

44 Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 29.

## The Choreographic

Discussions that establish the curatorial as a dynamic constellation move us closer to the choreographic.

Maria Lind sees the curatorial as a methodology, one routinely used by artists that draws from “the principles of montage, employing disparate images, objects, and other material and immaterial phenomenon within a particular time and space-related framework.” Lind notes that this activity “includes elements of choreography, orchestration, and administrative logistics—like all practices that work with defining, preserving, and mediating cultural heritage in a wider sense.”<sup>45</sup>

It is not only the logistical or operational aspects of “orchestrating” exhibitions that reflect my awareness of and reliance on choreography. My interest in the choreographic and its relationship to the curatorial stems partly from my ongoing movement practice, which has included performing in pieces set within museums. Aside from performing in galleries, I have spent a significant time in museums observing the relationships between visual artworks, performances, audiences, and architecture.

The temporal, spatial, and notational characteristics of choreography, as well as its attention to staging, sequencing, and composition, link choreography to the curatorial. In transitioning to the *choreographic*, I don’t abandon choreography as much as make it amenable to other applications. The body is still part of the equation. We make room for choreographic thinking by allowing choreography to happen *with*, as well as *beyond*, according to Adesola Akinleye:

The orchestration of choreography appears to happen in, on and beyond the “body” of the agent. Choreography conducts these partnerships, coming to be associated with dance because of the way dance so easily traverses doer, environment and onlooker. Choreography draws on qualities of observer/observed/felt to create affiliations of understanding (and communication) between environment, dancer, choreographer, and audience.<sup>46</sup>

The body here does not have to be interpreted as a human subject only (or even as a uniform, coherent subject), but as an indication of agency more generally—characteristics that are plentiful within exhibition contexts. Akinleye notes that “Choreography explores how the soma is *felt*, but also how the somatic is organized and managed; woven into how the body is received, read and observed.”<sup>47</sup>

45 Maria Lind, “Performing the Curatorial: An Introduction” in *Performing the Curatorial: Within and Beyond Art*, ed. Maria Lind (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 12.

46 Akinleye, 18.

47 Akinleye, 18.



Like the curatorial, the choreographic promises an expanded field. It draws on some aspects of dance and choreography as they are commonly understood, and at the same time reflects broader conceptual concerns outside of dance. This expanded field is where I locate choreographic thinking,<sup>48</sup> which uses movement and arrangement to organize and construct the world. This can be done with actual bodies and objects, as well as through the movement of thought. As a mode of thinking, the choreographic allows potential (action) to infiltrate the curatorial, shifting it from answer to activation.

Megan Nicely captures the spirit of choreographic thinking when she notes that it “indicates the ways ideas arise in multiplicity during the process of moving. From this perspective, movement is the movement of thought not requiring something outside to motivate it—particularly not the planned execution of a singular concept, which closes down options.”<sup>49</sup> The aim of choreographic thinking is not to reach an endpoint (such as a piece of dance choreography presented on a stage) but to see knowledge as an active, continuous construction.

For Erin Manning, movement, or action, does not take place *after* thought or the form thought takes.<sup>50</sup> Rather than one preceding the other, or one being necessary for the other’s emergence, movement and thought coexist and co-construct. Embracing choreographic thinking makes thought and action concurrent, entangled, and antihierarchical.

Choreographic thinking has an *eddy* quality to it. In a body of water, eddies often move opposite from the main current, causing the water to split back over itself and produce new adjacent currents and microcurrents. Eddying is multidirectional, and at times counter directional. It involves stretching out, reaching toward, tumbling back, and rippling over.

As Sara Ahmed describes: “Each time I move, I stretch myself out, trying this door, looking here, looking there.” Eddying allows me to enliven and inhabit my choreographic curatorial process. For Ahmed, “The work of inhabitation involves orientation devices; ways of extending bodies into spaces that create new folds, or new contours of what we could call livable or inhabitable space.”<sup>51</sup> By stretching, I learn to negotiate each curatorial situation anew.

48 There are many interpretations and uses of choreographic thinking. For example, choreographer Wayne McGregor has developed “choreographic thinking tools” drawn from his research with neuroscientists: <https://waynemcgregor.com/research/choreographic-thinking-tools-mind-and-movement>.

49 Megan Nicely, “On Choreographic Thinking,” in *In Dance*, 1 March 2014, <https://dancersgroup.org/2014/03/on-choreographic-thinking>.

50 Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 83.

51 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 11.



*Attunement.* Some images are included in this text because they reflect the spirit of my choreographic curatorial and artistic research practices, rather than representing a specific concept or activity. I attend, engage, and immerse myself in spaces and environments, especially those outside of the gallery, and then respond to that potential.

## Through the Mesh

What exactly is the choreographic-curatorial? Is this something I can answer?

Keller Easterling observes that culture is obsessed with the declarative—naming as knowledge. This obsession limits our ability to be responsive, inclusive, and nuanced in our pursuit of knowledge. Building on the work of Gilbert Ryle, Easterling differentiates between declarative and procedural knowledge: *knowing that* and *knowing how*. *Knowing that* pushes you toward one right answer. *Knowing how* is flexible and operates with an awareness of the potential of objects, situations, or facts in interplay. It invites you to navigate in response to changing conditions.<sup>52</sup>

I advocate for *knowing how*. What can thinking through the choreographic reveal about the possibilities of curating? What can moving curatorially impart about the potentials of the choreographic?

What would it mean to curate *through* and *with* the mesh of the choreographic, and how does that impact the process, and potentially the outcome, of a curatorial project? Can you “co-read,” or, as Iris van der Tuin (drawing from Karen Barad) describes, undertake a type of “diffracted” reading, enmeshing several entities through one another to reconceive both as well as generating a third?<sup>53</sup>

Choreographic thinking and curatorial production have never been an either/or but an *and/and*. Interdependent and in between. “Subjects and objects,” observes Donald Preziosi, “exist by imbrication, *as contained within each other*, as nodes in networks or *assemblages* made up of heterogenous entities that together form the stagecraft and dramaturgy of our experience. Rhizomatic fabrications.”<sup>54</sup>

To some degree, my project is as much an attempt to share a *poetics of choreographic curation* as it is an effort to prove that such a thing exists in the first place.

52 Easterling, 27.

53 Iris van der Tuin, “Feminist Research/Algorithmic Condition” (keynote presentation, *Research Day IV: Performance & Feminism*, University of the Arts Theater Academy, Helsinki, Finland, 20 March 2019).

54 Preziosi, 16.





**Two: In, Through, As, and With:  
Artistic Research as Context  
and Research Topography**

## Wayfinding: An Unfolding Awareness of Artistic Research

After developing close to 300 exhibitions and cultural programs, I have come to identify my curatorial process as choreographic, although I certainly could not name it as such at the start. Artistic research has facilitated my understanding of what this means within my curatorial practice.

In Part I of this section, I consider artistic research: its attributes, its connection to conventional research, and its pluralistic tendencies.

In Part II, I turn to my own artistic research practice. To counter my hesitation with traditional research paradigms such as *problems*, *methods*, and *data*, I take a detour and rely on *attending*, *prototyping*, and *listening*. Rather than attempting to make my research adhere, I help it to expand.

Artistic research is a companion and catalyst. It highlights new possibilities for analysis and interpretation within my curatorial practice. Accordingly, it surfaces everywhere in this text, but is given special attention in this section.

### Part I: Artistic Research: Context and Characteristics

My doctoral studies are grounded in the Nordic artistic research traditions, which uphold what Henk Borgdorff describes as a *sui generis* perspective: the research stems from, and prioritizes, the conceptual and material circumstances of the artistic discipline itself.<sup>1</sup>

The nature of artistic research has been explored over the last several decades in numerous books, essays, conferences, seminars, and special working groups.<sup>2</sup> Artistic researchers, faculty members, doctoral candidates, and supervisors have all contributed to the complex, divergent, and

1 Henk Borgdorff, "A Brief Survey of Current Debates on the Concepts and Practices of Research in the Arts," in *SHARE: Handbook for Artistic Research Education*, eds. Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten (Amsterdam: ELIA, 2013), 148.

2 Artistic research has probably existed for hundreds of years. Evidence of more recent artistic research activity includes conferences and intensives such as "Artistic Research Will Eat Itself" (2018); Research Pavilions at the Venice Biennale; artistic research summer academies (such as in Seili, Finland, in 2011, which I attended); online platforms and journals including the *Journal of Artistic Research*, the Research Catalogue, and the *RUUKKU* journal. Artistic research is addressed within consortia, networks, and research initiatives, most notably the Society for Artistic Research (SAR), the European Artistic Research Network (EARN), the SHARE network, and Artistic Doctorates in Europe: Third Cycle Provision in Dance and Performance (ADiE); and within international policy documents such as the Vienna Declaration (2020).

Preceding pages: At the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Conference at the ICC Kyoto, Japan (2019) 4,000 attendees debated the definition of a museum.

unfolding understandings of artistic research, and how it is conducted, evaluated, and disseminated.

While I will not provide a comprehensive overview of this landscape, I do want to share a few relevant themes.

Let's start with the assumption that research aims to produce knowledge. How that knowledge is pursued, delineated, and conveyed takes different forms depending on institutional contexts and conventions.<sup>3</sup>

What about artistic research? How might it be intertwined with, but differ from, other non-arts research paradigms? In "The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research," Borgdorff observes:

Characteristic of artistic research is that art practice (the works of art, the artistic actions, the creative processes) is not just the motivating factor and the subject matter of research, but that this artistic practice – the practice of creating and performing in the atelier or studio – is central to the research process itself. Methodologically speaking, the creative process forms the pathway (or part of it) through which new insights, understandings and products come into being.<sup>4</sup>

This approach sets artistic research apart from other research frameworks within the humanities and sciences.<sup>5</sup> As Natalie Loveless outlines, "Artistic production is no longer solely an *object* of scholarly inquiry but is itself a legitimate *form of research and dissemination*."<sup>6</sup>

In my case, my curatorial projects are the means through which I pursue research, the content of that research, and, to some degree, the mode of dissemination. As Brad Haseman explains, in artistic research, the "outputs and claims to knowing must be made through the symbolic language and forms of their practice" a framework which "challenges traditional ways of representing knowledge."<sup>7</sup> Art and cultural projects do not simply *represent* new knowledge—knowledge validated through linguistic or numeric means—but are themselves new forms of knowledge, embodied and enacted through artistic practice and the art-based outcomes of that practice.

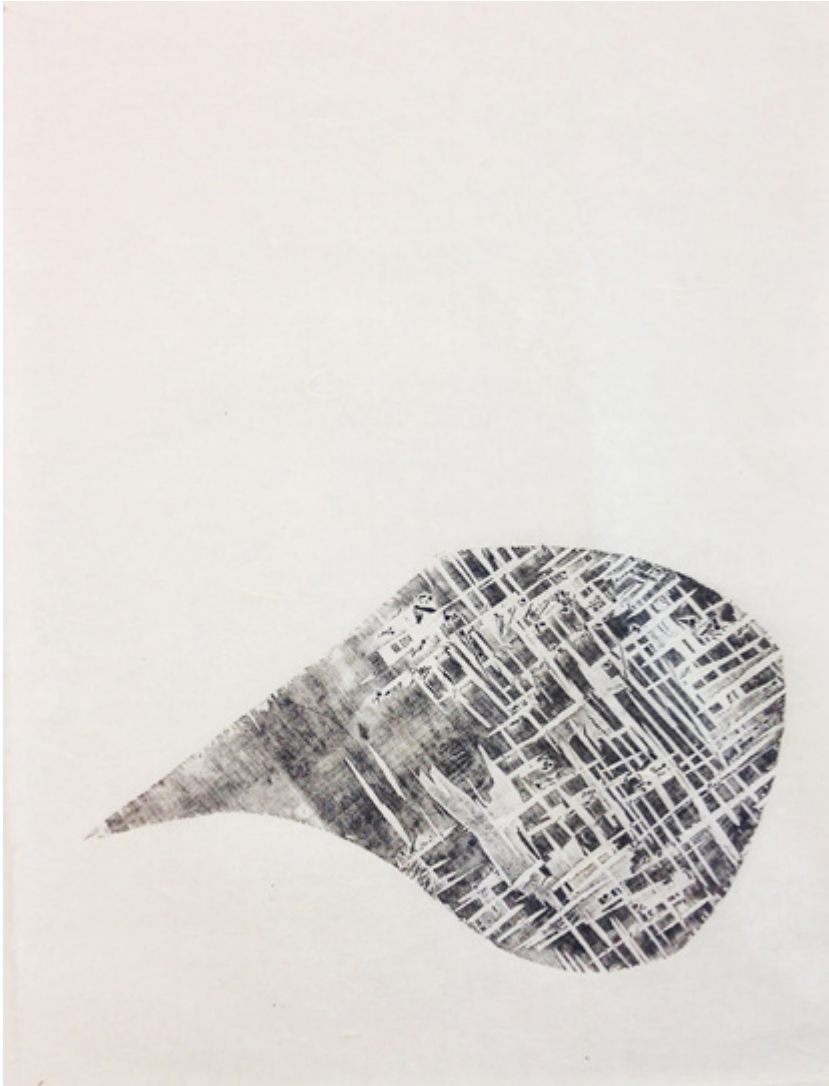
3 Henk Borgdorff, "The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research," in *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, eds. Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (London: Routledge, 2011), 44.

4 Borgdorff, 45–46.

5 Borgdorff, 46.

6 Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 12–13.

7 Brad Haseman, "A Manifesto for Performative Research," in *Media International Australia* 118, no. 1 (February 2006): 100–101, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>.



*I Would Like to Say*

Two terms frequently associated with artistic research are *practice-based research* and *practice-led research*. For Loveless, “*Practice-based* research generates new knowledge through or by means of artistic practice itself, and *practice-led* research draws on artistic methods to generate new knowledge about artistic practice in written form.”<sup>8</sup> Practice-based research could take the shape of a sonata or a sculpture. The results of practice-led research, in

8 Loveless, 5.



contrast, are often communicated in a more conventional written thesis or dissertation text.<sup>9</sup>

Linda Candy agrees that in practice-based research, the artwork can be the basis for knowledge.<sup>10</sup> However, what distinguishes practice-led research is less how it is communicated and more how it “has operational significance for that practice.”<sup>11</sup> Practice-led research contributes to the field.<sup>12</sup>

A strict division may be unnecessary. My inquiry is both practice based and practice led. This dissertation constitutes the research by generating new knowledge through the intersecting gestures of curating, reflecting, writing, and assembling. Through research, my curatorial practice shifts, which in turn changes my writing, presenting, and teaching practices. Each of these activities demonstrates a concern with producing new knowledge within artistic forms *and* with impacting operational and disciplinary conditions of the field.

Either way, art as research or knowledge is contested. Artistic or cultural production within academic<sup>13</sup> contexts is often relegated to illustrative or supplemental status. Loveless remarks:

In refusing the artistic gesture as an academic one—refusing it as *knowledge* and allowing it only expressive/affective/interventional cultural value grounded in the excessive, the open-ended, and the interpretative—all too often . . . the academic gesture, in contradistinction, becomes anchored to a logic of implementation, accountability, and predictable modes of disseminability.<sup>14</sup>

At stake is how we define knowledge and, by extension, how we measure, implement, control, and even monetize it. “The issue here is complex,”

9 Loveless, 5.

10 Linda Candy, “Practice Based Research: A Guide,” in *Creativity & Cognition Studios Report 1.0*, University of Technology, Sydney (November): <https://www.creativityandcognition.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/PBR-Guide-1.1-2006.pdf>.

11 Candy, “Practice Based Research: A Guide.”

12 For further insights, see *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* by Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (2006).

13 The word academic has multiple connotations, depending on cultural context, era, and application. It often refers simply to learning, teaching, and research within educational institutions. It references the European academy model of art training (later established in the U.S.) where dedicated art schools or academies operate outside of more generalized universities. In other cases, the word delivers a judgment: Artists are criticized for making work that is “academic,” i.e., technically excellent but lacking in expressive impact, or simply too traditional. Finally, in some university settings, art is subsumed into a humanities division, where what counts as scholarship is that which is *about* art rather than the practice of art. As Loveless notes, artistic practice-as-research is often relegated to a secondary position in terms of funding, recognition, and respect: it is not considered academic (enough). Interdisciplinary knowledge that includes the arts as an equal partner remains aspirational (recall Plato’s suspicions about art as imitation). These and other associations of the word are complex and embedded in broader histories which will not be explored here.

14 Loveless, 44.

notes Erin Manning: “it touches not only on the question of how art itself activates and constitutes new forms of knowledge *in its own right* but . . . incites us to inquire into the very question of how practices produce knowledge, and whether those forms of knowledge can engagingly be captured within the strictures of methodological ordering.”<sup>15</sup>

Loveless advocates for “research-creation.”<sup>16</sup> As a specific modality of artistic research embedded within academia, research-creation is an “insertion of voices and practices into the academic everyday that work to trouble disciplinary relays of knowledge/power, allowing for more creative, sensually attuned modes of inhabiting the university as a vibrant location of pedagogical *matter*.”<sup>17</sup>

*To make it matter.* Matter encompasses the material conditions of artistic research. Mattering acknowledges the value of the work. Artistic research commits to the forms that the research needs, even when the methods (or messages) are unrecognizable within conventional research paradigms.

## Every Good Researcher Has Problems

A fundamental feature of more traditional research paradigms is the primacy of a research question or problem. In quantitative and qualitative research, Brad Haseman outlines the expectation that “research design needs to flow from a central research question or problem statement. . . . The importance of identifying ‘the problem’ or ‘the issue’ is evident both in competitive grant processes and in framing research proposals for doctoral study.”<sup>18</sup> Graeme Sullivan defines this phenomenon as “means-ends thinking” wherein traditional concepts of research emphasize “problem solving as a core research strategy.”<sup>19</sup>

So, what’s the problem with problems?

Means-end thinking directs research toward a predetermined goal. After asking “Where do you want to go?” it points you in that direction. Here,

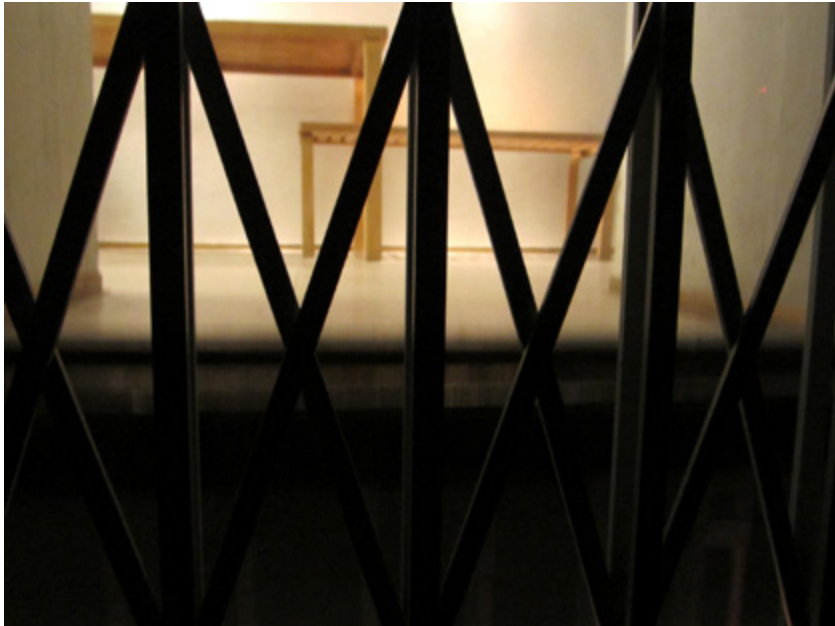
15 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 26.

16 The term *research-creation*, stemming from the Canadian context, is linked with academic resource allocation and funding. For the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), research-creation “combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation”: <https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programmes-programmes/definitions-eng.aspx#a22>. Here research is situated at “the complex intersection of art practice, theoretical concepts, and research. It is an experimental practice that cannot be predicted or determined in advance . . . attuned to processes rather than the communication of outputs or products”: <https://thepedagogicalimpulse.com/research-methodologies>.

17 Loveless, 3.

18 Haseman, 100.

19 Graeme Sullivan, “The Artist as Researcher: New Roles for New Realities,” in *See It Again, Say It Again, The Artist as Researcher*, ed. Janneke Wesseling (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2011), 83.



Stuck elevator.

Manning cautions, the researcher risks being “sidetracked by the encroachment of what is set up, in advance, as relevant or irrelevant,” where research is “framed and deadened through the crafting of questions that already have answers, or whose answers are close at hand, contained within preexisting academic discourse.”<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, you should learn something from your research. In *A Choreographic Mind: Autobodygraphical Writings*, Susan Rethorst argues that the singular and reductive loyalty required in traditional research paradigms ignore embodied, experiential methods:

The need to state a specific question not only rules out multiplicities as desirable, it signals a subtle privileging of articulated thought over the body’s mind. . . . The power of having declared a singular idea invests that idea with a demand for loyalty and follow-through. It acts as a filter through which methods and emergences must pass. It implies your process be held responsible to it, and so interferes with keeping that process light and in flux, with the potential to surprise you, or shift your direction. Meaning. You are trying to control it, meaning you will not learn much from it.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Manning, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Rethorst, *A Choreographic Mind: Autobodygraphical Writings* (Helsinki: University of the Arts Helsinki, Theatre Academy, 2015), 100.



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In fact, as Brad Haseman observes, many artistic researchers do not start with a problem, but instead are motivated by “an enthusiasm of practice’ – something which is exciting, something which may be unruly, or indeed something which may be just becoming possible.”<sup>22</sup>

I don’t want to leave out directional opportunities that the research itself generates. I’m not opposed to asking questions or identifying research problems: I simply tend to ask them without expecting answers or discover them at other points along the journey.

## The Spatial Configurations of Research

*Visualize a straight line, a clear path, with no twists, turns, unexpected encounters, or dead ends. So calming. You already know where you are going. All the benefits of the journey without the stress of forgetting your ticket, missing your connection, or getting lost.*

Artistic research is not necessarily “a logical and linear process of intervention and inquiry that builds on what we know,” according to Sullivan.<sup>23</sup> This perspective, stemming from positivist research traditions, is based on the belief that “if you don’t know where you are going, how do you know when you get there?”<sup>24</sup>

Problems within conventional research paradigms reflect linear spatial configurations: research moves in a line from point A (the identified problem) to point B (the response or solution). “When we follow specific lines, some things become reachable and others remain or even become out of reach,”<sup>25</sup> notes Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology*. “Such exclusions—the constitution of a field of unreachable objects—are the indirect consequences of following lines that are before us: we do not have to consciously exclude those things that are not ‘on line.’ The direction we take excludes things for us, before we even get there.”<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, artistic research is multidirectional: “all areas of experience are at play in this circular or spiral movement,” including experiences “that do not lend themselves to easy conceptualization.”<sup>27</sup> Artistic research is an incline or detour into *I wonder?*, *What if?*, and *Let’s try it!*: a position that George Smith describes as “imagination inclined toward creative

22 Haseman, 100.

23 Sullivan, 81.

24 Sullivan, 81.

25 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 14.

26 Sara Ahmed, 15.

27 Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta, and Tere Vadén, *Artistic Research: Theories, Methods and Practices* (Helsinki; Stockholm: Academy of Fine Arts; University of Gothenburg, 2005), 37.

productivity—or process.”<sup>28</sup> Artistic research involves leaning in (many) other directions and a patience with the disorientation these actions produce.

Artistic research is open to input and responsive to conditions. It is provisional and contingent, constantly in motion.<sup>29</sup> To move toward the unknown and away from existing lines—to queer artistic research, I turn: “Depending on which way one turns, different worlds might come into view.”<sup>30</sup> Each step in the curatorial process incites a cascade of actions and reactions, many which cannot be anticipated or controlled. I wait and see where the process leads me.

Artistic research is ongoing. For Evan Webber, it is “a practice . . . a thing to do for a long time, gradually supplanting the expectation of results for the broadening attention and curiosity.” The problems and questions are produced *through* the artistic act, which means, according to Webber, that “I can work without knowing exactly what problem I am working on.”<sup>31</sup>

28 George Smith, “The Non-Studio PhD for Visual Artists,” in *Artists with PhDs: On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art*, ed. James Elkins (Washington, D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2009), 89.

29 Gabriella Arrigoni, “Epistemologies of Prototyping: Knowing in Artistic Research,” in *Digital Creativity* 27, no. 2 (2016): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2016.1188119>.

30 Ahmed, 15.

31 Evan Webber, “A Way to Work on My Problem Without Knowing What It Is,” in *Canadian Theatre Review* 172 (2017): 36, doi:10.3138/ctr.172.007.

## **IT BEGINS (AGAIN AND AGAIN): A PERFORMATIVE ADDRESS TO RESEARCH<sup>32</sup>**

1. It begins with an itch in a place that is hard to reach or perhaps not even on your own body. You spend the next five, 10, or 50 years trying to scratch it.
2. It begins with an invitation.
3. It begins with an urge to move. One movement provokes other movements, sometimes in unexpected or unwanted directions. An unruly ripple.
4. It begins with desire. Usually, this desire is in tandem with feelings of irritation.
5. It begins with having a conversation with many others, some you have not yet met. I imagine poet Fred Moten describing this as “all the people you don’t know.”
6. It begins by seeking ways to place yourself in the world with friends and collaborators.
7. It begins in a space. Space, too, is a collaborator.
8. It begins with material. Something abject or delightful. Something you keep trying to ignore, but can’t.
9. It begins anywhere. It goes everywhere.
10. It begins with a refusal of the given. It embraces a type of stupidity a friend calls “another way of being inquisitive.”
11. [performer is silent]
12. It begins with a journey. A literal or imagined one. These are often the same thing.
13. We begin again.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Lauren O’Neal, “It Begins (Again and Again): A Performative Address to Research,” 2022.

<sup>33</sup> A version of this piece was performed at the University of the Arts Research Days event “I Experience as I Experiment – I Experiment as I Experience: Experience and experimentality in artistic work and research,” held in December 2019 at the Exhibition Laboratory, Helsinki, Finland. Another version was published in Harvard University’s *The Graduate Review* in 2021. It was modified again for this text. The piece was written before I encountered Renee Gladman’s *Calamities*. I found a wonderful synergy with that work when I finally read it.

## Both/And: Methodological and Disciplinary Pluralism

Artistic research employs techniques from multiple research paradigms, like those used in sciences, sociology, and humanities research.<sup>34</sup> For example, it may integrate qualitative research methods such as observation, reflection, and participatory and action-based research<sup>35</sup> or channel the scientific experiment.

Still, artistic research has something else in mind. While it may share methods with research in the humanities or sciences, it does not necessarily prioritize the reproducibility of the outcomes, even when repeating the research methods. The act of making an exhibition is consistent in my research, but the methods shift according to the needs of the project. I repeat the condition of the exhibition. Everything else changes.

There are multiple disciplinary and thematic areas which inform my research: curatorial theory, choreography, museology, pedagogy, art history, embodiment,<sup>36</sup> audience engagement, material culture, collecting, knowledge, preservation, design, social practice, performance, architecture, art practice, leadership, and philanthropy, to name a few.

Artistic research does not ignore traditional research conventions as much as it makes them more capacious.

### Pre-acceleration

Erin Manning offers that any (first) movement requires a *pre-acceleration*.<sup>37</sup> Nothing has been made visible yet. Even this is not really a beginning. Motion is ongoing, made of multiple steps. There are jumps in register that already contain some force *before* they are realized, while they endure, and after they morph to the next movement. Neither the pre-accelerations nor the jumps imagine a specific research method or output ahead of time.

34 Borgdorff, "The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research," 46.

35 Borgdorff, 51.

36 I use the term embodiment to indicate the importance of my direct encounter with the material, physical, and mental spaces of curation and research. My attention to other bodies—those of audiences, spaces, and objects, as well as bodies of knowledge—shapes my curatorial practice. Embodiment, which as a concept has a long and complex lineage, most often associated with the writing of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is common in dance theory. Despite this tradition, I do not employ phenomenology as a methodological lens (or use other qualitative research traditions based on direct experience, such as participant and action research in anthropological and sociological contexts). I focus on dialogues with contemporary curatorial texts that propose performative, choreographic, or dramaturgical perspectives in curating, texts which do not generally address the lineage of phenomenology despite being informed by it. Fully integrating broader phenomenological perspectives and histories into choreographic and curatorial ones remains a task for another day.

37 Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 82.



Along with curating, I am engaged in parallel research activities including performing in museum settings, mapping and choreographic writing, and devising experimental projects. Additionally, I am involved in a great deal of imperceptible research, unknowable until much later. Commuting and travel, for example, have been equal, though unexpected, research partners. I understand them as research only after the fact. Each activity pre-accelerates my inquiry. This gets complicated. As I attach threads between divergent ideas and disciplines, I constantly negotiate the methods and meaning of my research. I reference choreography, but do not necessarily present dance in the gallery. I envision the architectural resonance of the gallery through the lens of poetry. These conceptual jumps are more relevant for me than the visible outcome of the resulting exhibition.

As a result, no one research method is sufficient. My practice employs multiple research strategies, which align with what Borgdorff identifies as “methodological pluralism.”<sup>38</sup> Are there dangers in referencing so many varied disciplinary methodologies?

Surely, a few.

Am I even *allowed* to integrate fields where I may only be a visitor? The jury’s still out on that one. Will I disrupt some ideal notion of disciplinary or methodological “purity” by my unsanctioned intersections? Perhaps, but disciplines are already unstable entities.<sup>39</sup>

## Communication and Dissemination

In *Artistic Research: Theories, Methods and Practices*, Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta, and Tere Vadén contend that artistic research is predisposed toward communicating its discoveries.<sup>40</sup> Whether required by institutional accreditation or by the more general expectation that knowledge must be disseminated to be useful, communicating the research beyond the art object is often necessary. Even the most open-ended and experimental settings are required to provide evidence: a link between practice and theory. Teemu Mäki is skeptical: “The biggest challenge of artistic research . . . is how to deal with the gap that separates artistic experience from verbalised theory.” While “no bridge can be built to connect them,” he notes, “some kinds of jump and intercourse are possible.”<sup>41</sup>

38 Borgdorff, 46.

39 Mick Wilson, “Discipline Problems and the Ethos of Research,” in *SHARE: Handbook for Artistic Research Education*, eds. Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten (Amsterdam: ELIA, 2013), 212.

40 Hannula, Suoranta, and Vadén, 20.

41 Teemu Mäki, “Art and Research Colliding,” in *Journal of Artistic Research*, 26 May 2014, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/49919/49920>.

The act of communicating research transforms the research and the researcher, and ideally the field.<sup>42</sup> Whatever forms my research takes, what is common is that the curatorial projects, the writing, and the mapping collectively *produce* the research, *demonstrate* the research, and *shift* the research(er) simultaneously. The research enacts (itself).

Brad Haseman identifies this as “performative research” where “any object or discourse whose function is communicative can be considered a text.”<sup>43</sup> Drawing from J.L. Austin’s concept of the speech act, where the statement or utterance performs the thing being said while in the saying (such as “I nominate”), Haseman observes that “the symbolic data work performatively. They not only express the research, but in that expression become the research.”<sup>44</sup> In this vein, performative research “holds that practice is the principal research activity.” The outcomes of that practice are “research findings in their own right.”<sup>45</sup>

What forms can the outcomes take? An “annotated portfolio” approach, where the multiple facets “are not overarching verifiable theories but ways of articulating theoretical contributions,”<sup>46</sup> works well. The exhibitions, the book, the online expositions, and the eventual defense—all populated with texts, images, lists, links, diagrams, and utterances—perform the research.

This collective assemblage is my “jump.”

## Attention and Intention

Mick Wilson contends that “‘research’ refers to an intention to know something that is not yet known.” Research seeks knowledge “in a deliberate and considered way.”<sup>47</sup> Being intentional and systematic is a fundamental part of research, which distinguishes it from everyday activities and pursuits.

Artistic research happens in registers of *attention* and *intention*. One step is the curatorial project itself. As the process and outcome of research, curating “is always deeply embedded in the practice of actually mounting the exhibition,” reflects Terry Smith. “On analogy to the thinking within a medium that artists must do in order to create a work, it is praxiological.”<sup>48</sup> I attend (with intention) by curating.

42 Efva Lilja, “The Opening of the Mouth,” in *SHARE: Handbook for Artistic Research Education*, eds. Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten (Amsterdam: ELIA, 2013), 181.

43 Haseman, 100.

44 Haseman, 102.

45 Haseman, 103.

46 Arrigoni, 102.

47 Wilson, 214.

48 Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 38.

Many of my actions are unremarkable by themselves. As a curator, I develop themes for exhibitions, review artworks, and address shipping, installation, contracts, outreach, budgets, and staffing. As an artist, I perform in museums. As an educator, I teach. The reflection and analysis of these activities produce “reverberations.” I am attentive to these reverberations and navigate in response.

At what point does the artistic research enter? In my *intention* to codify it as research. I have to be careful with that word. In *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*, André Lepecki critiques the idea of intention, which implies “aiming with a bow and arrow”<sup>49</sup>—as something invasive, aggressive, and linear. While *aim* is one of intention’s historic connotations, its lineage also encompasses *purpose*, *stretch out*, and *eager*,<sup>50</sup> which are the meanings I follow in this context.

The research is not just about looking from the outside, at a stationary object or concept, or at something that is disembodied or neutral. It is about *perceiving from within* the research structure. As Borgdorff has noted, “Works of art and artistic practices are not self-contained; they are situated and embedded. The meaning of art is generated in interactions with relevant surroundings.”<sup>51</sup> I cannot separate myself from my research: it unfolds in particular ways because it is situated—how it looks to you, and even how I identify it, changes with the context.

Research also requires a willingness to be changed in the process. It entails “a ‘readiness’ to undergo a change in thinking, knowing, understanding, positioning or value . . . This is not just about being ‘open,’ or even ‘actively open,’ but systematically active in seeking to open out an alteration in shared understandings.”<sup>52</sup>

Encountering something new during the curatorial development process increases my awareness of its potential. Loveless observes that “to do research . . . is not simply to ask questions; it is to let our curiosities drive us and allow them to ethically bind us; it is to tell stories and to pay attention not only to which stories we are telling and *how* we are telling them, but how they, through *their very forms*, are *telling us*.”<sup>53</sup> My encounters in the gallery, in the dance studio, or in other non-arts settings, inform my thinking and become integrated into my curatorial repertoire. I am often surprised by what I learn.

49 André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 102.

50 Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “Intention,” accessed 22 December 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=intention>.

51 Borgdorff, “The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research,” 47.

52 Wilson, 214.

53 Loveless, 24.

## Part II: Research Activities—A Momentary Correspondence

Before addressing my specific research activities, I will outline—as directly as possible—my research questions/problems, methodologies, methods, data, and outcomes. I do this only partially, keeping in mind Mäki’s idea that while you cannot take a direct route, you can at least propose a connection.

### Research Questions and Problems

Research questions and problems do not dictate my initial research inquiry. They surface within the process and fold back into the research as it develops. Some of the questions that have emerged include: How does an open-ended curatorial process enable new narrative structures? What is the role of dramaturgy in curating? How does choreographic curatorial practice propose new models of authorship? These questions urge me to examine my assumptions. To tweak, modify, and reconsider.

### Modes–Moves–Methodologies<sup>54</sup>

I characterize my methodologies as research “modes”—habitual research moves that constitute my methodological lens or strategy. Within this framework, choreographic thinking is a methodology, as is curatorial practice. Modes, methodologies, and methods can trade places. For example, movement can engage with an idea through imagining its potentials. It can also be a technique or method for creating alternate curatorial outcomes.

### Methods

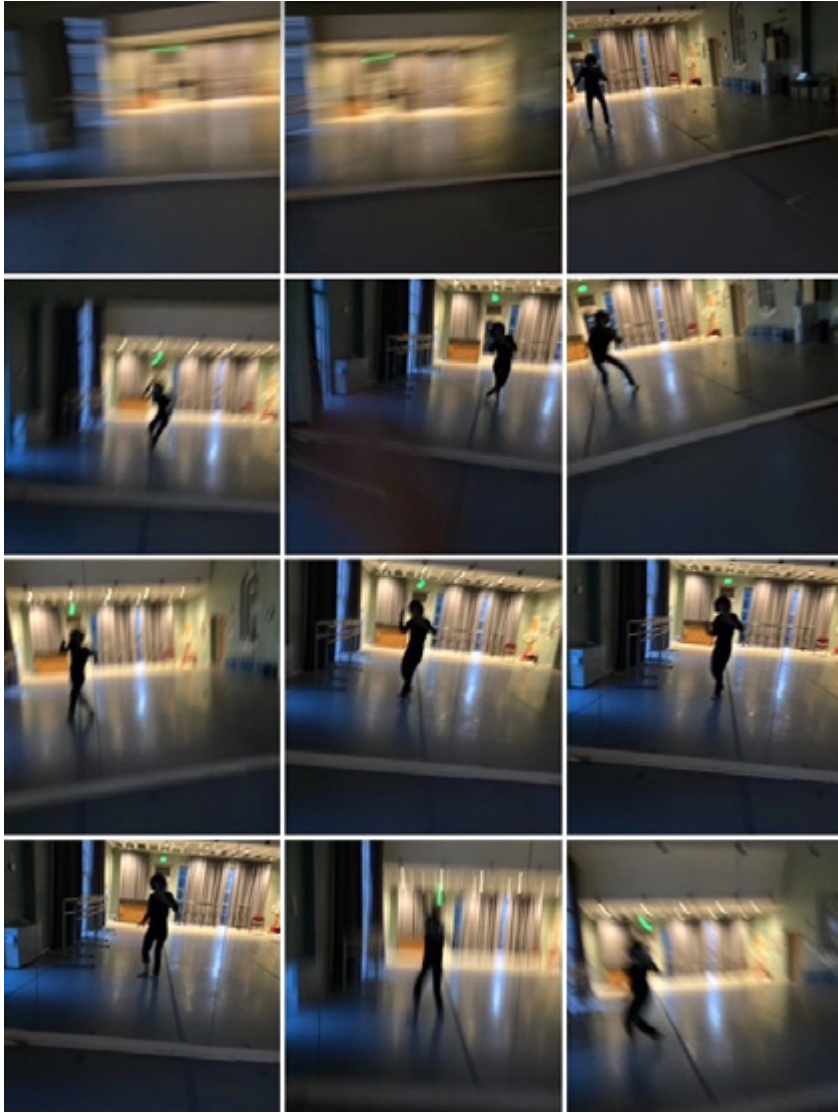
The methods are the ways the modes or methodologies manifest in a curatorial project.

My methods include everyday activities such as listening, holding, and inviting. They respond to the *SHARE Handbook for Artistic Research*, which encourages researchers to identify existing activities instead of aspirational ones:

The reference to “actual” is an attempt to focus on the mundane level of description (going to the studio; collecting samples; rehearsing a piece daily for several hours...) rather than an elaborated interpretative description (such as “I am currently engaged in a rhizomatic project that seeks to un-ask questions rather than posit a dichotomy of subject/object relations”). The latter approach . . . can often obscure the prosaic, but highly important, decision-making that happens.<sup>55</sup>

54 A nod to colleague and collaborator Mercedes Carbonell, an English instructor at Phillips Exeter Academy, who uses tildes throughout her texts. The tilde captures the *muchness* of aesthetic engagement that is difficult to capture in discrete words or phrases.

55 Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten, eds., *SHARE Handbook for Artistic Research* (Amsterdam: ELIA/European League of Institutes of the Arts, 2013), 277–278.



Experiments in research disorientation, Harvard Dance Center.

Despite my efforts to simplify, my methods become uncomfortably tangled up in disciplinary expectations, which “still tend to order knowledge according to specific understandings of what constitute proper methods, policing these methods through long-standing systems of peer and institutional review,” writes Erin Manning.<sup>56</sup>

“Disciplines also tend,” Manning continues, “to suggest that interdisciplinary research and especially transversal modes of thought are by nature

<sup>56</sup> Manning, 31.

weak because of their inability to secure robust methodologies that prove that knowledge was indeed formally attained.”<sup>57</sup> To address the intersection of choreographic thinking and curating, I have developed alternative methods, or given the status of a method to activities that would not ordinarily appear to be related to research.

At the same time, I resist the idea of method. The *SHARE Handbook* has inadvertently provoked this reaction. Can I *un-method* or *de-method*? Method otherwise?

## Data

Methods also function as the research data. What makes them move from methods to data is a shift in position. When I am engaged in research, the activities are the methods. When I shift to *consider* the research, the activities become data I analyze. Data include verbal, written, or visual observations about aspects of curatorial practice, such as reactions from audience members, reflective texts on process, or documentation of exhibition layouts.

## Outcomes

In the next breath, data then morph into outcomes, which include the curatorial projects themselves and the compilation of material that allows the research to be circulated, including images, online expositions, and theoretical texts. Outcomes include the visible, knowable, and sayable, as well as the invisible, underground, or speculative. The accumulative nature of artistic research can be characterized as “interdisciplinarity-as-emergence,” where the outputs “exceed what is demonstrably present in their constituent parts.”<sup>58</sup>

## What I Did, Noticed, and Explored: Research (Methods) in Choreographic Curatorial Practice

### Come and Go to Everything

Above my worktable, I have a well-worn copy of artist-activist-nun Sister Corita Kent’s<sup>59</sup> “Rules & Hints for Students & Teachers,” given to me by a mentor.

The rules advise that you “Find a place you trust and then try trusting it for a while,” and “Consider everything an experiment.” Toward the end of

57 Manning, 31.

58 Loveless, 26.

59 “Rules” was popularized as “10 Rules for Students and Teachers” and misattributed to John Cage, who is quoted in the text. When Kent is acknowledged, she is most often done so with John Cage as co-author. Despite my appreciation of Cage, Kent’s omission (or erasure) doesn’t sit well.

the one-page missive, the closing lines recommend: “Helpful hints: Always be around. Come or go to everything . . . Save everything—it might come in handy later. There should be new rules next week.”<sup>60</sup>

Kent’s text captures the spirit of my artistic research: I find a place to trust (for a while), attend everything and go everywhere, and make new rules—or unmake them—on a regular basis.

My research in and through curatorial practice has included consistent actions, even if they manifest differently in each project. The content of each curatorial project is not necessarily important to the research focus.

Pursuing—or being pushed into—experiences that foster experimentation allows me to circumvent rigid curatorial habits, and to step sideways, backward, or over into other situations or disciplines. It is only with these shifts in position that I can see my curatorial work with more clarity.

In this section, rather than describing the specific artistic research *whats*, I offer instead the commonalities in the research’s textures, rhythms, and residues.

A caveat: there is no one-to-one correlation, no chain of causality, that reveals “I took this action which led to that action which produced this reaction.”

(Choreographic) thinking does not work that way.

## I Moved

I moved. In the gallery, I observed my own and others’ movements. How did people interact with the work, the space, and each another? I moved in various spaces, from the Kaisa House library in Helsinki to the Cabot Library in Cambridge, to cafes, hostel kitchens, subways, and picnic tables. I danced: in studios, living rooms, and galleries. What did these movements reveal?

My research expanded to include the more indistinct movements of travel, to seminars and conferences in Helsinki, Japan, and London. Photographing the clouds or landscapes from plane and train windows created space for thinking and planning. Traveling enabled ideas to move, and for movement to generate ideas. Collectively, these disparate movements made me *think-move* differently about placement, perception, and encounter: a choreography of intersection within the gallery.

60 Corita Kent, “Rules & Hints for Students & Teachers,” in *Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit*, eds. Corita Kent and Jan Steward (New York: Allworth Press, 2008), 176.

## MOVEMENT AND SOMATIC PRACTICE AND PERFORMANCE

My participation in dance, somatic practice, and choreography informs my curatorial process. This research falls into two categories: education and performance. Ongoing workshops in contemporary dance, Butoh, and Bartenieff-inspired somatic practice, and master classes including “From Written Score to Choreographic Approach” with Ty Boomershine and “Mini Lab (a Glance into the Composition Process)” with Dafi Altabeb have refined my inquiries. I have performed in museums and galleries, including in Trisha Brown’s *Floor of the Forest* and Ryan McNamara’s *MEEM 4 Boston: A Story Ballet About the Internet*, as well as in other performances, such as Lundahl & Seitz’s *Symphony of a Missing Room*, and participated in collaborative performances at venues including Mobius and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.<sup>61</sup>

Movement-based research highlights areas including pacing, resonance, and access, to name a few issues that are also relevant to curating. How does my body engage with other bodies, art objects, spaces, and ideas within the museum context? What assumptions do I have as a performer that counter my experience as an audience member? My aim is not to apply choreography directly to the gallery situation. Rather, the movement practice operates alongside the *moving-thinking-making* of choreographic curation.<sup>62</sup>

Other curators have been influenced in similar ways.

Helen Molesworth, curator of *Dance/Draw* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, on seeing Trisha Brown’s drawings, remarks: “Just when I was sure they were indexical traces of an activity passed, I found them flirting with another form of drawing, the diagram, and I began to see them as a kind of notation for what one might do with one’s body, rather than simply what Brown had done with hers.”<sup>63</sup>

61 I have also commissioned (or catalyzed) performative works in galleries, festivals, and conferences. At the College Art Association Conference, this has included encouraging panelists to perform during, or in relation to, the panel session. André Alves, in a performative lecture, slept during his presentation as his slides advanced. Mireia c. Saladrígues held a collective theory reading in the conference hotel lobby.

62 Jenn Joy observes that her own participation in dance and somatic practice “warns against the use of choreography or the choreographic as yet another theoretical turn; or intrusion into another abstract meditation or philosophical seduction . . . where choreography becomes (if not necessarily intentionally) philosophy’s malleable muse.” Jenn Joy, *The Choreographic* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 13. Like Joy, I see dance and choreography as *both* embodied and theoretical. I try not to limit the dancing or moving body to an applied role. I simultaneously want to avoid having it exist only in service to a philosophical agenda. It is always a balancing act.

63 Helen Molesworth, “Dance/Draw: An Introduction,” in *Dance/Draw*, ed. Helen Molesworth (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art with Hatje Cantz, 2011), 11.



Molesworth continues:

I am certain that I would not have been able to see or feel these drawings in this manner had I not, two years prior, taken up a fairly dedicated yoga practice. In other words, the intelligence of Trisha Brown's drawings, which is an intelligence that emanates from her body, was only legible to me in the wake of my own attempts to sidestep my own logocentrism and rearticulate for myself my own mind/body equation.<sup>64</sup>

Interdisciplinary research requires sensitivity to disciplinary relationships and an awareness of the ethics of participation. Mick Wilson advises that "we approach the interdisciplinary dialogue with an attentiveness that is not the same as a desire to assimilate, control or own another way of doing things."<sup>65</sup> While I draw from dance and choreography to develop, present, and theorize my work, I do not characterize myself as a professional dance artist, despite my long involvement with movement-based art. This does make my position a bit outside the margins. What is my disciplinary home?

When "we begin to interactively and dialogically re-think both 'home' and 'away'," Wilson observes, we can make "another kind of encounter ... possible."<sup>66</sup> I try to avoid making dance and choreography "fit" my research agenda. Instead, movement has become my method for maintaining systematic artistic research "readiness."

64 Molesworth, 11.

65 Wilson, 216.

66 Wilson, 216.

## I Accumulated (Temporarily) and Dispersed

I collected materials, websites, books, texts, images, and other resources. If the project's focus was on collections, I would consider the idea from different angles: the parallels between museum collections largely hidden from view and the rise in the personal storage industry. That, in turn, would lead me to hoarding, and to landfills, and to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Someone would send me an article about collecting and decolonization. I would collect mirrors or magnets in anticipation of an installation at the gallery entrance. I would fret over misplacing an earring. I would revisit Betsy Brown's *Dignity in the Home*<sup>67</sup> and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons [Objects]*.<sup>68</sup> The curatorial project would emerge from this matrix.

Soon enough, what I had temporarily collected would be dispersed. This dispersal would usher in the next unknown curatorial assemblage, at some other time and place.

## I Arranged and Was Rearranged in Turn

I spent a lot of time arranging and rearranging artworks. Sometimes I did this with digital tools. Or on paper, with scattered thumbnail images and strips of texts, notes scrawled in the corners.

Or by picking up the work and moving it. Or imagining its path without displacing it.

*Here. Then there. No, here. Wait—back there.*

In the gallery, I placed myself in relation to the work. I viewed it up close, from below, from above, from afar, or from outside the gallery. I arranged work in relation to other works. I invited others to arrange. I arranged equipment, furniture, and signage. People, food, suggestions.

I arranged materials and objects in other spaces. I found portable easels, drum sets, rolling stepstools, mats, water bottles, markers, yogurt containers, notebooks, and lost socks scattered across dance studios, conference halls, and meeting rooms equally amenable to rearrangement. This process rearranged me.

## I Taught and Mentored. I Learned and Received Mentoring

Early in my doctoral studies I began to view my pedagogical activities—as teacher and student—as part of my research. I taught courses in curating and community-based arts. I invited student gallery proctors to co-lead public programs with me. I struggled with the beguiling and inscrutable scores of Lucinda Childs at Zodiac – Center for New Dance. I took seminars at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design and workshops at Waterfall Arts in Belfast, Maine. I leaned into lectures by Irit Rogoff, Florian

67 Betsy Brown's "Dignity in the Home": <https://poets.org/poem/dignity-home>.

68 Gertrude Stein's "Tender Buttons [Objects]": <https://poets.org/poem/tender-buttons-objects>.

Dombois, and Fred Moten. After, I returned to the Lamont Gallery with fresh insights about working with objects, spaces, and audiences.

### I Experimented. I Prototyped.

I experimented with structures and atmospheres. I changed layouts, opening hours, refreshments, and door prizes. I analyzed the impact of different light sources. I adjusted pedestals, displays, and signage. I tested and retested installations as they might appear in different situations or at various times of day. I inserted unexpected elements into displays, such as fresh flowers or bowls of candy. I prototyped potential ideas in anticipation of future situations.

Numerous curatorial and studio projects undertaken outside of the Lamont Gallery further motivated my research. Projects including *Situational: A Studio Research Residency* in Somerville, Massachusetts, and *Experimental Choreographies* at the Gjutars House Gallery in Vantaa, Finland, helped clarify my understanding of choreographic thinking in the curatorial realm.



Holding a hex weave.



Soundwalk on the roof of the Amos Rex art museum during the Fragile Forms workshop with MACHiNENOiSY (Delia Brett, Daelik, Nancy Tam, and Natalie Purschwitz) as part of Helsinki Design Week 2018.

## THE PROTOTYPE

In the series of short meditations in *Calamities*, Renee Gladman<sup>69</sup> takes us on a procession of beginnings, starting each entry with “I began the day.”<sup>70</sup> Gladman uses the steady rhythm of the opening line to contemplate how perceptual orientations structure the creative process:

I began the day standing at a threshold of time—the beginning of something, the end of something. I had a method for standing that was called art, then writing. The way I stood allowed me to see how things could begin and end this way—simultaneously.<sup>71</sup>

Beginnings are prototypes. While one solitary workshop, one performance, or one installation may not in itself constitute useful research, engaging in these activities repeatedly, over time, creates an abundance that is useful for recognizing research discoveries. Curatorial prototypes, as beginnings, allow me to iterate, and, as Gabriella Arrigoni observes, to “abandon the commonplace association between artwork and uniqueness and accept instead its insertion in more complex lifecycles and fields of action.”<sup>72</sup> The space of the gallery provides a container for the ideas generated by my research to manifest into physical form on a regular basis, enabling what Tero Heikkinen, Petri Kaverma, and Denise Ziegler call a method of “continuous prototyping.”<sup>73</sup>

Prototypes can introduce methodological innovations, inspire other researchers, and contribute sociological or even psychological insights.<sup>74</sup> Prototyping as a strategy in my choreographic curatorial practice compels artistic research to make its “identifiable and transferable contributions”<sup>75</sup> evident.

But choreographic curatorial practice, as an open-ended endeavor, is still elusive. The outcomes of artistic research “will always contain both an explicit contribution to knowledge, which will be disseminated through academic channels, and an undefined, experiential dimension,” says Arrigoni.<sup>76</sup>

As such, my research occupies a territory that regularly escapes the disciplinary and linguistic frames I attempt to put around it. This escape is

69 Gladman's drawings are featured in *Prose Architecture*.

70 Renee Gladman, *Calamities* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2016).

71 Gladman, 31.

72 Arrigoni, 110.

73 Tero Heikkinen, Petri Kaverma, and Denise Ziegler, my notes from “Continuous Prototype,” KuvA Research Days, University of the Arts, Helsinki, Finland, 8 December 2020.

74 Arrigoni, 110.

75 Arrigoni, 104.

76 Arrigoni, 102.

another form of prototyping, one I have come to relish: "You had to be okay that it took you twenty minutes to make this multilevel statement and accept that you hadn't actually scraped the surface yet of what you were really trying *to see* in this language," Gladman comments.<sup>77</sup>

To make interconnections between things, objects, or disciplines requires repeated gestures. You need to walk down a path that doesn't exist, over and over, and somehow make this experience tangible. In pursuing choreographic thinking in the curatorial, I try to render thinking material, "to inhabit a thinking space," as Gladman describes, "that would be seen and was not just a story we imagined about how thinking went on in our heads."<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Gladman, 43.

<sup>78</sup> Gladman, 81.

## I Listened

In the gallery, I listened to artworks, people, and spaces. I listened to the texts and voices of the artists, and to the sometimes-eventful journeys that accompanied the artworks as they finally arrived for installation. To the sound of packing tape and screwdrivers and Genie lifts being rolled across slate flooring. I listened to feedback and overheard comments and queries. I initiated opportunities for listening and for being heard: lunches, surveys, and conversations.

I listened elsewhere. I listened while performing in museums far from the Lamont Gallery. I listened to the exhales of ventilation systems at the Class of 1945 Library and outside apartment buildings. I listened to the arc of chatter in the waiting area of Penn Station. I listened to the sounds of small birds hidden in bushes. I listened to the sounds of weaving. I listened to the squeak of dry-erase markers. I recorded sounds and used them as visual scores and maps. In the studio, I listened, ear to the Marley, for reverberations from nearby steps. I listened to things I could only imagine hearing.

## I Became Responsive

I routinely sought input that could influence the process (and outcome) in unexpected ways, such as a suggestion for an artist, idea for a program, or invitation to collaborate. I attuned myself to outside or unforeseen connections, those at the periphery or external to my context. Insights could come from anyone or anything. A passing suggestion from a student over breakfast in the dining hall or an early morning walk in the mist along the Exeter River were as valuable as the latest curatorial publication.

For me, to be responsive as a curator does not mean you have none of your own desires or aspirations for a project, just that you are nonhierarchical in your receptivity.

## I Reflected

I reflected before, during, and after each curatorial project. Drawings, writing, video clips, performative texts, sculptural objects, abstracts, and conference presentations<sup>79</sup> were simultaneous sites of creation and reflection. Assembling the online Research Catalogue expositions and this dissertation have been forms of extended and coordinated reflection.

Each activity allowed me to consider my research via a different format, situation, or approach. No longer *research about*, my actions formed a bridge between research and the object of research: *research in, through, as, and with*.

79 Such as “What Moves (Us) in Exhibitions? From Representations to Relationships” (UMAC-Universeum International Conference, 2021) and “Generative Encounters: Choreographic Thinking in Curatorial and Visual Arts Research” (Per/Forming Futures: Investigating Artistic Doctorates in Dance and Performance, Middlesex University, 2019).

## I Attended

Along with noticing external (curatorial) outcomes, I considered my (internal) habits, decisions, and questions leading up to a curatorial project. I paid special attention to how choreographic thinking operated in settings outside of the Lamont Gallery. By examining Ragnar Kjartansson's *The Visitors*, Maria Hassabi's *STAGED?*, or Andromache Chalfant's and Dora Budor's *Benedick, Or Else*, I addressed how the work *worked* in these situations. As an audience member, how did I move? What moved me?<sup>80</sup>

Along with attending to the art object or the performance—those things we are supposed to observe as an audience member—I paid attention to the “surround.” How I arrived at the site (A smooth subway ride? A long drive? Hungry?). The entrance. The restrooms. Elements that were perhaps ancillary or even extraneous. What welcomed me inside (if anything)? When did I become enchanted or inattentive?

## I Felt

I acknowledged the impact of sensations unrelated to curating. While my curatorial practice was carried out via activities such as selecting artworks, editing signage, and planning events, it actually *felt* like:

*weaving a floating, gossamer installation of string in the quiet of a back stairwell;*

*moving a large and unwieldy painting from a cramped storage room, up the stairs and down the hall, negotiating numerous places along the route where we bend, shift, slide, lean, reverse, and lift to get the work into position;*

*reclining on the cool floor of a rehearsal room and analyzing the intersections made by the tops of props, lighting rigs, and door frames.*

In this manner, disparate, seemingly non-curatorial activities became artistic research. These fleeting sensations accompanied my thoughts back in the gallery.

80 For the most part, I prioritize projects I experienced in person. My presence and participation are critical for analysis. Being there helps integrate spatial, material, and curatorial knowledge more effectively into my own projects.



## GET READY, GET SET, GO: LEARNING AS AN ARTISTIC RESEARCH GENERATOR

### *Organizing Any Material: Dramaturgical Thinking with WAUHAUS*

The “Performance and Dramaturgy” workshop at Zodiak – Center for New Dance used WAUHAUS’s production of *Sapiens* at the Finnish National Theatre as a launching point. The workshop positioned dramaturgy as “the organising of any materials into a performance.” Led by Anni Klein and Jarkko Partanen, it promised to explore “different perspectives and ways of approaching dramaturgical thinking.”<sup>81</sup>

Working in groups, we considered the multiple textual dramaturgies of *Sapiens*, from the original book by Yuval Noah Harari and the subsequent script, to the performance of the script and the text of the translation app used during the show. We examined the dramaturgy of movement: of performers and of flats on and off the stage. Of spotlights and sounds and fog. Instead of asking “Where does meaning come from?” we asked “How is meaning assembled?”

In the studio, we designated an area as “the stage.” To unearth the dramaturgical potential of materials, we took 10 everyday objects (such as a key chain, a blanket, a roll of toilet paper, and a balloon). Through repetition and variation in placement and composition, we made our stages expand. A motif moves repetition into an interpretive role, which WAUHAUS described using the Finnish word *kuljetus*—a theme, material, or approach that directs the audience’s understanding.

We considered temporal and invisible dramaturgies: how long it took before someone moved an object, or when someone only *thought* about moving an object, but decided not to move it after all. Dramaturgies enable meaning to coalesce.

Repetition can create, condense, amplify, or alter meaning. We decided that true repetition was impossible—our previous knowledge and experiences always inform the texture and meaning of the next act. Those differences provide the capacity for change.

WAUHAUS proposed dramaturgy as a perspective, point of view, or mindset. A methodology. The workshop reinforced and energized my ideas and broadened my disciplinary attentiveness.

Meaning is always on the move, leaning forward slightly.

Get ready. Get set. *GO!*

81 WAUHAUS, “Performance and Dramaturgy,” Zodiak – Center for New Dance, accessed 22 November 2019, <https://www.zodiak.fi/en/w-u-h-u-s-performance-and-dramaturgy>.

## DIAGRAM, JOT, NOTATE, SKETCH, LIST, SCORE, MAP: CHOREOGRAPHIC WRITING

I am a compulsive list-maker. I have always used notebooks, sketchbooks, and other methods to make absurdly long lists, create ambitious schedules, and design impractical prototypes—modes of choreographic writing<sup>82</sup> that help me grapple with research questions and work out recalcitrant or resistant ideas.

### *Daily Writing, 2016 to Present*

The only rules for Daily Writing: The writing is oriented toward artistic research. I write for 15 minutes in one sitting. I use a timer. The Daily Writing document, an ever-expanding Word file, is an artistic research journal where I unravel a dense reading, reflect on a breathtaking performance, process an ambivalent reaction to an exhibition, or revisit the outcome of a project. These entries sometimes serve as the initiation for a longer piece of writing, such as an essay, grant application, or conference presentation.

Daily Writing also confronts the experience of doctoral study. The entries on productivity, priority-setting, and research goals are where I worry, promise, and scheme. Eager checklists and impossible timetables sit alongside drafts of emails. Admonishments and the occasional bit of praise are peppered with swear words.

The document spatializes my thinking (over time, and in length) and compels me to acknowledge preoccupations in my research.

### *Board Notes: 2015; 2018 to Present*

Board Notes occur on whiteboards (or chalkboards): surfaces where I can map ideas, see them move, and move in relation to their movement. Ideally, the whiteboards are larger than my standing body so that the mapping becomes immersive. The thinking space—the ideation process—moves beyond the edges of my perception.

I'll write on any whiteboard I encounter. I carry a dry-erase marker with me in the event I find myself in a suitable space. I have made notes in schools and conference rooms, and, with a roll of whiteboard material, in other people's houses, hotels, and offices.

I often document my surroundings—the research “trappings” of thermos, backpack, coat, notebooks, and snacks. In libraries, I photograph nearby books, the flooring (I am especially fond of the mid-century cork floor in one library), or the view from the window, intensifying my attunement with architectural space.

As choreographic notational practices, Daily Writing and Board Notes have become graphical and linguistic research methods, even when they are not visually evident in my outcomes. Language can be used to share the outcomes of research, and self-reflexively, to excavate and critique research expectations.

82 On another approach to choreographic writing, see Kirsi Heimonen and Leena Rouhiainen, “In the Shadows: Phenomenological Choreographic Writing,” in *Choreographic Practices* 13, no. 1, [https://doi.org/10.1386/chor\\_00042\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/chor_00042_1).



A Board Notes session in the library, 17 April 2019.

## Research Assumptions: What I Am Doing (and Not)

I am not derailing commonly understood notions of curation and exhibition development, but I am pushing at the boundaries to create more flexible structures. I am not overturning the institutions in which curating takes place. To some degree, I enjoy the challenges, and the structures, that institutional settings provide. I do not balance on these supports uncritically. I question the “naturalized,” static, and colonialist conditions of the gallery and the academic institution. This awareness shapes my current practice and will undoubtedly spark future research.

I take interdisciplinarity for granted. Different disciplines advance and enrich my practice. I delight in discovering ideas in one domain, and then try to apply them, however inelegantly, to another. The interdisciplinary disposition of artistic research “creates room for that which is unthought, that which is unexpected – the idea that all things could be different,”<sup>83</sup> Henk Borgdorff surmises. Art “allows us to linger at the frontier of what there is, and ... gives us an outlook on what might be. Artistic research is the deliberate articulation of these contingent perspectives.”<sup>84</sup> These awkward pairings—between the choreographic and the gallery, the dramaturgical

83 Borgdorff, “The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research,” 61.

84 Borgdorff, 61.

and the art object—are not made lightly. They are a way for me to move, literally and conceptually. They are a means for ideas to move.<sup>85</sup>

This commitment to (disciplinary) awkwardness has implications for how artistic research is disseminated. I am not certain that my objective is to share my research. I'm not against sharing. I just don't want research to hinge on shareability as its defining characteristic, as if sharing alone endows research with knowledge-bearing properties.

I am not mapping a history of curating or developing a manual of curatorial practice, at least not one that can be commodified for easy transfer. I disagree with the requirement that new knowledge can always be reproduced or scaled up. Sometimes new knowledge can be revealed, but only partially.

Instead, I advocate for *uneasy transfer*: knowledge that unfolds slowly and arises from a process of assembling, tweaking, failing, and trying again. In concert with other forces beyond my control. This knowledge is what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney might describe as “not finishing oneself, not passing, not completing; it's about allowing subjectivity to be unlawfully overcome by others, a radical passion and passivity such that one becomes unfit for subjection.”<sup>86</sup>

## It's Not About Me

I often *don't know* as much or more than *I know*. This can be frustrating. What seems evident in one setting becomes ambiguous in another. You cannot draw a direct line. Sparks fly in all directions: they generate heat, motion, and many minor arcs of light that nudge my thinking and making in ways that cannot be distilled to either their mode of operation or their specific outcomes.

The cartographic and experiential journeys of *moving-thinking-making* do something that a straightforward “accounting” of my curatorial practice cannot: they evoke the *sensation* of choreographic thinking in the curatorial by embodying that aspiration in textual and graphical arrangements. The strands of inquiry seek and make their own paths. I commit to following these paths, even when I don't know their destinations.

The relationship between my various research activities is one of connection but not causality. The research does not manifest neatly in any one exhibition, in the copious notes on an essential curatorial text, in the time spent in dance studios or rehearsal rooms, or in the Research Catalogue

85 I developed several key ideas for this text in an essay written in conjunction with the Research Days event at the University of the Arts Helsinki in 2019: Lauren O'Neal, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Choreographic Thinking,” *I Experience as I Experiment/I Experiment as I Experience*. Edited by Denise Ziegler. Helsinki: University of the Arts, 2019.

86 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 59.

expositions. Rather, the artistic research is in the ensemble. Maria Lind points out that “curating is the result of a network of agents’ labor. The outcome should have the disturbing quality of smooth surfaces being stirred—a specific, multilayered means of answering back . . . Rather than representing, ‘the curatorial’ involves presenting—it performs something in the here and now instead of merely mapping it from there and then.”<sup>87</sup>

In contrast to some of the connotations of the word share—a piece, a cut, a divide—this project proposes another way to disseminate research knowledge. While I use “I” to describe my research gestures—“I moved” and “I listened”—this isn’t quite accurate. These moves are produced in concert with the works, spaces, and human and nonhuman forces around me:

*We.*

87 Maria Lind, “The Curatorial,” in *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 65.



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Hand icon

A dark, moody photograph of a staircase railing. The railing is made of dark wood or metal, with several horizontal balusters. The railing is positioned on the left side of the frame, and its shadow is cast onto a light-colored wall on the right. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a sense of depth and texture. The overall tone is somber and contemplative.

## Three: Assembling the Curatorial

## Curating as (Art) Practice

In “Simple Operator,” Sarah Pierce asks:

Is the curatorial a condition? A device? Is it a field or subject? How does it claim certain conventions around curating, while also claiming that one operates *differently* through the curatorial? Are curators who are attentive or “interested” in the “curatorial” *different* to curators who aren’t? Are they *better curators*?

For me, the curatorial validates the broader range of activities within exhibition making. It recognizes both the visible, public-facing aspects and the behind-the-scenes or imperceptible elements of curatorial practice.

My curatorial work is part of an expanded art practice that includes program development, dance, and studio work as well as presenting, teaching, traveling, and encouraging others to make, view, and engage with the arts. The curatorial enables me to curate as an artist.

What are the stereotypes that come to mind when I say, “I curate as a . . .”?<sup>2</sup> When I claim I curate as an artist, I do so to distinguish myself from someone who curates as an art historian, as an archeologist, or perhaps even as a curator. I can’t ascertain whether this makes me a better curator, but assuming the role of curator-*artist* does give me a different agency: the problem-solving and experimental approach from the studio is legitimized in the exhibition space.

Paul O’Neill observes that since the 1960s, curating has moved from an “administrative activity” to a “mediating and performative activity akin to artistic practice.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than an exchange of roles between curator and artist, O’Neill describes it as a convergence that “necessitates an examination of how curatorial criticism has contributed to certain concepts of agency, production, and authorship, and most specifically how the boundaries between curatorial and artistic practices are disputed.”<sup>4</sup> In other words,

1 Sarah Pierce, “Simple Operator,” in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 97.

2 There are many critiques. For instance, curators want all the glory. Curators think they are artists. Both may be true. *Of course*, people want credit for their work. *Of course*, curating is a creative activity. Curating is also not neutral. Curators are gatekeepers. Much is at stake for who gets to show, which projects get funding, and what (or who) is saved in the archives. These issues are important, but they are not the focus of this inquiry.

3 Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 87.

4 O’Neill, 87.

Preceding pages: Ladder.



we need to rethink the narrative of the curatorial and how it intersects with artistic practice. Artists have always been curators.

In *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as Medium*, Alison Green argues that the art historian-curator is a more recent phenomenon. Most directors of British museums in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including those of the National Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum, were artists.<sup>5</sup> The combination of historic knowledge and artistic expertise was considered ideal for museum management.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this history, it hasn't always been easy to occupy the position of artist-as-curator. While artists and curators both have academic, scholarly, and intellectual agendas (and ambitions), to claim *any* authorial position is suspect. The issue of curators possessing a cultural status equivalent to that of artists, or giving their exhibitions the prominence of art objects, has been contentious. An oft-cited example is artist Daniel Buren's now infamous 1972 critique, in which he castigates Harald Szeemann—curator and director of Documenta 5—for using the exhibition to act “like a super-artist, with the artworks in the show like his brushes and canvas.”<sup>7</sup> There are good reasons for this apprehension: a lot is at stake, including power, claims to knowledge, and representational control.

*Fast-forward.*

These debates have not completely subsided, but it is more acceptable to blur the boundaries between curators and artists. Exhibitions are more likely to be acknowledged as creative work. Contemporary curatorial practice routinely encompasses activities such as educational programming, event production, publishing, and organizing conferences.

Civic and activist practices have been instrumental in enlarging the frame. Curating can act as a site for critique, including for the critique of its own structures. Maria Lind notes that the expanded field of contemporary curating “owes much to site-specific practices, and even more to context-sensitive work and various traditions of institutional critique—each encouraging you to think from the artwork, with it, but also away from it and against it.”<sup>8</sup>

Curating is recognized for its pedagogical and political roles. In *The New Curator: Exhibiting Architecture & Design*, Fleur Watson observes that “the curatorial intent” is to bring “the audience into active participation with the process of making a work and – or – to respond to and activate audiences with the contemporary condition or rapidly changing sociopolitical issues.”<sup>9</sup>

5 Alison Green, *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as Medium* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), 30.

6 Green, 29.

7 Green, 9.

8 Maria Lind, “The Curatorial,” in *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 63.

9 Fleur Watson, *The New Curator: Exhibiting Architecture & Design* (London: Routledge, 2021), 248.

The porosity of contemporary curating (and artistic practice) is linked to many factors, including changes in the perceived roles of cultural institutions, social and technological developments, and the impacts of capitalism and colonialism. Alison Green notes that shifts in the 1980s were especially pivotal in expanding the concept of the curatorial, and for

connecting art with wider sets of concerns, be they cultural, political, ecological, or otherwise. For many artists who worked in creative and spatial terms, shifting from objects and their makers to things-in-context was to acknowledge that relations are intrinsically mediated. For many, too, this led to very different ways of making art. Temporary forms of art making, such as exhibitions, allowed these ideas to be explored and evidenced in real time, with audiences, and in fluid ways.<sup>10</sup>

Art is still the main point, whatever form its circulation takes. Curating is one of many ways of making space for art's meaning and impact. The curatorial role may take different forms and be occupied by different subjects. Paul O'Neill argues that if exhibitions are attempts at "converting subjective value and personal choice into social and cultural capital through the arrangement of the primary material that is art," then "recognition might be afforded to those responsible,"<sup>11</sup> an acknowledgment of the curator's role, even—or especially—when it is subjective.

Reflecting on the curatorial work of artist Rosemarie Trockel, Green argues that the artist-curator's subjectivity makes "an exhibition more meaningful through exercising that subjectivity."<sup>12</sup> The word *exercise* implies a regular routine: you practice, repeat your moves, and expend effort, and do it again the next day. This makes no claim for the artist-curator as the solitary author or subject—the only one in the room who is exercising—but it does emphasize the impact of taking a subject position, even if only temporarily.

A choreographic curatorial approach is an exercise of coordinating many different subjectivities, not just those of the curator or the artist. The exhibitions I curate emerge from my own specific positionality. They expand with the voices of collaborators. A different curator, in another context, would inevitably do something else.

When I state that I curate as an artist, I do not mean that I view the exhibitions as my artworks, or the objects therein as raw materials.

*Hold on—I'm going to make a slight adjustment.*

I *do* see exhibitions as creative, artistic, and expressive. I consider my curatorial outcomes on par with—or *as*—artistic and studio productions. Making exhibitions is a spatial, durational, and sociable artistic practice.

<sup>10</sup> Green, 10–11.

<sup>11</sup> O'Neill, 87–88.

<sup>12</sup> Green, 122.

I also see exhibitions as artworks, but not ones made in a studio through my initiation alone. I do not advance my curatorial vision as the sole or expert one.<sup>13</sup> Curating is a way for me to connect with people, ideas, and the wider world. It allows me to disrupt and decenter myself—to widen my sensibilities. As Sarah Pierce suggests, “We venture to put our words and deeds into the world in recognition that someone else will take them up – misuse and reuse them, changing what *I* have done into something plural – and this unpredictable quality of action is also its community.”<sup>14</sup> It is this very unpredictability, where my dialogic practice engages with and responds to diverse, active, and thoughtful contributors, that the curatorial makes present. It is a way of building together, of being *in relation*.

13 I *do* claim the title of curator, however, for institutional, strategic, and academic reasons; I address this point in the Futuring section.

14 Pierce, 103.

## **FLUX: BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN ART, EXHIBITION, AND PERFORMANCE**

*Flux*, a curatorial research project I developed in 2013 for a residency at the Nave Gallery in Somerville, Massachusetts, was an iterative, process-oriented exhibition. I staged the gallery as a production zone. Materials were strewn about, tools were scattered across worktables, and assemblages idled in various stages of construction.

The gallery was open to the public while I worked each day. When people asked what I was doing, I would say that I was conducting a series of experiments that prioritized artistic process, rather than creating a finished exhibition. That seemed straightforward enough, but there were lingering questions (for me and for the audience) about *why* I was doing this and *why* it needed to be public.

I would try to assure people that “something would happen eventually,” but this often felt disingenuous. I couldn’t be sure if that were true. I couldn’t point out with any certainty the direction the piece might take.

How can meaning(s) emerge in the moment (or in the movement), instead of at the “end” of a work? How does expectation shape the perception of and engagement with artworks? What are the impacts of spacing, description, and conversation on curatorial experiences?

In *Flux*, I researched the viability and effects of an open-ended and movement-oriented curatorial process, something I would understand later as choreographic thinking. It was not a work-in-progress situation, but a *work-as-process* milieu.

## Experimentation and Open-Endedness: Seeking, Rather Than Seeking to Answer

My curating is restless.

My curatorial practice encourages multiple outcomes. I seek out collaborative, latent, and unanticipated forces that co-imagine, but do not fix, what ultimately emerges in the gallery. Erin Manning associates the emergence of latent form with the minor gesture:

It is a minor gesture in that it activates a tendency already in germ and emboldens it toward an altering of what that tendency can do. A thought less concerned with the certainty of what it knows is more open to the minor in thinking, more open to the force as the as-yet-unformed coursing through it. This minor tendency values the *force* of form, not just the form knowledge takes.<sup>15</sup>

The exhibition—one typical form of curatorial activity—is not the “answer,” but a set of discourses around a topic. The commitment to *seeking* rather than *seeking to answer* in curatorial practice does not mean that there are no scholarly, theoretical, or aesthetic goals in curatorial projects. While in most of my curatorial work there is no predetermined text or thesis, to say that there is no narrative framework would be incorrect. There needs to be *some* thematic scaffold, at the very least for practical purposes (such as exhibition titles and selecting artworks). Building curatorial positions within open-ended systems simply requires different strategies and areas of emphasis. Structures, as long as they are amenable to change, are useful.

Curating is a research modality through which I can both pursue experimental knowledge and consider knowledge experimentally. Annette Arlander notes that within artistic research, “experimentation can be understood more formally in the sense of testing a hypothesis, more creatively in the sense of exploring the unknown, or as an ongoing process of observation and analysis.”<sup>16</sup> Curating is a way for me to test propositions in a specific context and under particular conditions.<sup>17</sup>

15 Erin Manning, preface to *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), x.

16 Annette Arlander, “On Methods of Artistic Research,” in *Methods – Process – Reporting: Artistic Research Yearbook*, ed. Torbjörn Lind (Stockholm: Swedish Research Council, 2014), 32.

17 As an intern at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston (ICA), I spent many hours observing the relationship between artworks, people, and spaces. I wondered about their constitutive effect on curating. The experience highlighted the role of duration—the before, during, and after of the curatorial. Working in the same context in different ways over time remains an important element of my practice.

My research focus is on understanding the curatorial *process* that scaffolds my practice. The exhibitions are, to some degree, secondary to the theoretical propositions they enable. Following Donald Preziosi’s notion that “curating is a creative performance using the world to think about, and both affirm and transform, the world,”<sup>18</sup> I’m not entirely certain that a gallery is always necessary for this work. Simon Sheikh echoes this idea. Curating, as a research activity, is an

analytical tool and a philosophical proposition, and by indication, a separate form of knowledge production that may actually not involve the curating of exhibitions, but rather the process of producing knowledge and making curatorial constellations that can be drawn from the historical forms and practices of curating. The curatorial could thus be . . . a specific mode of research that may or may not take on the spatial and temporal form of an exhibition.<sup>19</sup>

What is the scaffold—through, or apart from, a gallery space—that supports open-ended curation? How do you “motor” without a text?

## **The Academic Gallery Context: Goodness, Knowledge, and Conversation**

### Phillips Exeter Academy

The setting for much of my doctoral artistic research is the Lamont Gallery, an academic gallery located at Phillips Exeter Academy.<sup>20</sup>

Exeter, founded in 1781, is a private residential college preparatory school in Exeter, New Hampshire, located just over an hour from Boston. Founded by John Phillips, Exeter grew with the support and business connections

18 Donald Preziosi, “Curatorship as Bildungsroman: Or, from Hamlet to Hjelmslev,” in *Curatorial Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Contemporary Curating*, eds. Malene Vest Hansen, Anne Folke Henningsen, and Anne Gregersen (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 12.

19 Simon Sheikh, “Curating and Research: An Uneasy Alliance,” in *Curatorial Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Contemporary Curating*, eds. Malene Vest Hansen, Anne Folke Henningsen, and Anne Gregersen (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 98.

20 I distinguish academic art galleries and museums from other types of galleries, such as commercial, standalone nonprofit, or artist-run. Academic galleries operate within educational institutions (most often higher education, but not exclusively) and have a pedagogical mission. While these spaces share characteristics with other galleries, they have unique aspects and challenges owing to their position within so-called “parent” institutions. The Committee on University Museums and Collections (UMAC, founded in 2000), part of the International Council of Museums (ICOM, founded in 1946), based in France, and the Academic Association of Museums and Galleries (AAMG, established as the Association of College and University Museums and Galleries in 1980), based in the United States, are two professional organizations that address the sector’s particular needs and conditions.

of Phillips's first and second wives, Sarah Gilman and Elizabeth Hale. The school's initial targets were affluent white parents and their young male offspring destined for the likes of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. This demographic shifted over time. Women began to be admitted in 1970. Students of color currently comprise approximately 46% of the student body.<sup>21</sup> Some 50% of students receive financial aid.<sup>22</sup>

### Goodness and Knowledge

The school's mission is articulated in Phillips's 1781 Deed of Gift: "Above all, it is expected that the attention of instructors to the disposition of the minds and morals of the youth under their charge will exceed every other care; well considering that though goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous, and that both united form the noblest character, and lay the surest foundation of usefulness to [hu]mankind."<sup>23</sup> Exeter today continues to champion its commitment to goodness and knowledge, especially through its motto, *non sibi*: not for self. The school, situated within the liberal arts and interdisciplinary education traditions, reflects a belief that exposure to the arts, sciences, and humanities forms the backbone of an engaged and empathetic citizenry.

### Harkness: Discussion-Based Pedagogy

Exeter is known for its specific pedagogical framework. In 1930, a gift from philanthropist Edward S. Harkness established a method of teaching that came to be known as Harkness: twelve students and one teacher sit around an oval table and learn through discussion.<sup>24</sup>

Harkness learning is exploratory, collaborative, and embodied: students (and teachers) learn from and with one another.<sup>25</sup> The radical openness of a student-led discussion-based class does not mean that there is no object of knowledge. Harkness classrooms do have syllabi, assignments, and grades. Teachers routinely assess student progress and identify areas for growth. However, there are variations in how knowledge is constructed, what defines it, and how it is recognized as knowledge.

21 *U.S. News and World Report*, "Phillips Exeter Academy," accessed 1 June 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/new-hampshire/phillips-exeter-academy-309491>.

22 Phillips Exeter Academy, "Tuition & Financial Aid," accessed 1 June 2020, <https://www.exeter.edu/admissions-and-financial-aid/tuition-financial-aid>.

23 Phillips Exeter Academy, "The Academy's Mission and Values," accessed 1 June 2020, <https://www.exeter.edu/about-us/academy-mission>.

24 I conceived of the movement within Harkness conversations as a form of choreographic thinking.

25 While the Harkness method shares some characteristics with the Socratic method, it is not Socratic: the instructor does not guide the class through a set of leading questions. This is not to say that the instructor never asks questions (they often do); rather, their questions are responses to student-initiated discussion.

Former history instructor Kwasi Boadi reflects:

Harkness instruction requires patience on the part of the instructor, who trusts that the class will in time reach their destination of self-discovery. It may take a day or two, or even a week. Students may have a hard time getting to know all the trees—as if that were even necessary—but they sure will get to know and understand the forest, which may, in turn, stimulate them enough to go back to look for the trees.<sup>26</sup>

Special mention must be made of the Harkness table, the large oval table that positions the instructor as a facilitator, rather than the authority or “head,” of the classroom. Harkness tables are the centerpiece in most classrooms, studios, and labs.<sup>27</sup> The Harkness pedagogy is used within every discipline: “Everything we do — our classes, our activities, our way of relating to each other — is influenced by the respect, enthusiasm, and challenge involved in learning together around a table.”<sup>28</sup>

While the gallery now has an “official” classroom and Harkness table, which makes the gallery’s work legible within the institutional context, I have always viewed the gallery, the art objects, and the exchanges within programs as *already* Harkness. *Table not required.*

### The Lamont Gallery

The Lamont Gallery was founded in 1953 as a *kunsthalle*: a non-collecting gallery with a rotating schedule of exhibitions. As a professional exhibition and teaching space, the gallery promotes artistic, civic, and interpersonal learning within the context of thematic exhibitions and programs. The gallery is akin to a university gallery in the scope, scale, and ambition of its programs. Past exhibitions have included the works of Paul Klee and Nancy Graves; featured architecture, photography, and drawings; and hosted special projects such as *Finnish Arts and Crafts* and Hans-Ulrich Obrist’s *do it*. More recent exhibitions include *Queer Kids*, *Luminous Terrain: The Art of the White Mountains*, and *Representing Feminism(s)*.

Informed by the Harkness teaching philosophy, the Lamont Gallery programs emphasize inquiry, engagement, and discussion. The gallery reflects and enlivens the interdisciplinary context of Exeter. It contributes to broader campus initiatives, especially in the areas of social justice, multidisciplinary learning, and collaboration. It supports numerous student artists and arts

26 Kwasi Boadi, “A Meeting Point of Ideas,” in *A Classroom Revolution: Reflections on Harkness Teaching and Learning*, eds. Jane S. Cadwell and Julie Quinn (Exeter, New Hampshire: Phillips Exeter Academy, 2015), 106.

27 How students listen, when they speak, and how they encourage others to participate at the table is visualized through charts and diagrams. Phillips Exeter Academy, “Harkness Teaching Tools,” accessed 1 June 2020, <https://www.exeter.edu/programs-educators/harkness-outreach/harkness-teaching-tools>.

28 Phillips Exeter Academy, “The Harkness Gift,” accessed 1 June 2020, <https://www.exeter.edu/about-us/harkness-gift>.





The Lamont Gallery's Harkness table in the classroom that was carved out of the back of the gallery in a 2017 renovation.

initiatives; contributes to alumni, reunion, and donor cultivation events; and participates in regional arts and cultural activities. A robust audience of approximately 7,000 annually includes students, families, employees, and external audience members.<sup>29</sup>

### My (Multiple) Roles

From 2012 to 2020, I served as the Lamont Gallery's director and curator. I was also the department head (the Lamont Gallery is a separate academic department) and a faculty member. On many days, and at certain angles, I was an artistic researcher too.

As the director, I advanced the gallery's mission through daily and long-term activities, such as securing funding, managing program calendars and budgets, creating lending contracts, overseeing the marketing strategy, and leading capital projects. As the curator, I was engaged in curatorial scholarship, developing exhibitions, conceptualizing exhibition signage and materials, and creating programmatic, curricular, and community outreach

<sup>29</sup> Audiences are invited via printed invitations (mailed to approximately 2,500 people), the website, email announcements, e-newsletters, social media posts, and exhibition posters. The institution's communications office sends out press releases, which, on occasion, generate reviews. Interest is also generated through word of mouth, unusual or playful educational outreach, collaborations, or the relevance of topics.



Prototyping within the *Flux* curatorial artistic research residency at the Nave Gallery (2013).

initiatives. As a faculty member, I taught in and through the gallery and exhibitions, developed classes, and mentored students.<sup>30</sup>

It is common in small and midsize organizations for people to have multiple roles. I managed a variety of program areas out of need: I was the only full-time employee.<sup>31</sup> While I recognized the power and independence afforded by this situation, we had limitations in our capacity. This encouraged inventiveness and regular collaboration across the institution. Many other departments, from communications to facilities, were instrumental in the gallery fulfilling its mission. We negotiated and compromised daily. In that sense, the locus of power shifted often to accommodate the expertise and insights of others. Curating in galleries small and large is always a collective effort.<sup>32</sup>

My role was an interconnected and interdependent one. Participation in nonart activities, such as the Martin Luther King Jr. and Climate Action Day committees, kept me responsive to local conditions, fostered an inclusive curatorial vision, and expanded my conception of curation to extend well beyond the gallery.

## **Choreographic Thinking in the Gallery: Making, Movement, and Meaning**

At the Lamont Gallery, I sought to bring different people (and objects) into “nested interactions.”<sup>33</sup> The diverse student body intersected with adult employees. Youth from a nearby elementary school interacted with seniors from the local retirement community. Divergent art materials and media intersected with each other. Ideas that ordinarily wouldn’t be found at the same party mixed and mingled.

30 Activities included slam poetry events, dance interventions, fashion shows, structured dialogues, studio workshops, community-based art projects, and installations in other parts of the campus or downtown. My work with students was especially meaningful. I created a student curator program, recalibrated an internship program to focus on education and community engagement, and supported students in developing significant independent curatorial and studio art projects.

31 The gallery had one part-time gallery manager and a handful of part-time, on-call gallery attendants hired to keep the gallery open on weekends. The rest of the staff were temporary, coming and going as funds allowed.

32 This experience is typical of working at small nonprofits. In larger galleries and museums, there are distinct tasks and areas of oversight based on department and title. Whether because of the size of the operation or the hierarchical structure, curators in these settings would not, for example, paint pedestals, meet with donors, or develop an educational program with students in the span of an afternoon. This happened frequently at the Lamont Gallery. While each setting (the small academic gallery, the larger museum) has different strengths and challenges, it’s important to note that my artistic research stems from the unique conditions and scale of the Lamont Gallery.

33 Sarah Robinson, *Architecture Is a Verb* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 3.

Thus, curatorial work is never about just creating an exhibition. Other considerations are equally important, such as the sociopolitical, interpersonal, and pedagogical agencies that are facilitated when you provide spaces for people and objects to gather.

### What It Feels Like

Gestures, actions, and feelings carry curatorial knowledge. How do I translate this embodied knowledge into research outcomes? How does it manifest in practice?

What it feels like to curate is a critical part of the process, but we don't often talk about curatorial feelings. On the best days, curating is like hosting a party, building a sculpture, talking on a front porch, skipping stones on the water, constructing a shed, writing a poem, diagramming a route, or waltzing. On other days, to curate is to be tired or frustrated, or to have disagreements, moments of confusion, and crises of uncertainty.

My challenge is to own this plurality of feeling-movement and to articulate its mechanisms and effects with more clarity and conviction.

### Origin Story?

It is difficult to deliver an origin story for my curatorial projects. Multiple experiences lead to exhibitions and programs. As Norah Zuniga Shaw remarks:

Beginnings are messy.

We deliberately start by not knowing in order to allow our research to emerge from the materials at hand. Beginnings are messy because we entertain all input, listen and watch, listen and watch and take in, and listen and watch, and gather multiple perspectives. Nothing is outside the boundaries in the beginning.<sup>34</sup>

Being inquisitive and responsive is a *continuous* state of artistic research readiness. Sarah Pierce adds that a beginning, "more than marking a point in time or space (an origin), indicates a *process being brought into being*. Beginnings move – they shift *what is already* towards *what will become*, and this epistemological/existential agency connects beginnings to knowledge production. More than *what we know*, knowledge production is *how we know* – how we engage with knowledge."<sup>35</sup>

34 Norah Zuniga Shaw, "Allowing for the Unknown," in *Motion Bank Two: Re-imagining Choreographic Ideas*, 28 March 2012, <https://motionbank.asc.ohio-state.edu/page/3>.

35 Pierce, 99.

I am always starting something.

I start each project with an indeterminate impulse—a spark or instinct, incipient in nature—the pre-acceleration of an idea. A vibration, echo, or memory. An itch. The initial inclination for a project could have nothing to do with art—for instance, research on how trees communicate<sup>36</sup> (which lodged in my mind as I developed the *Lush Life* exhibition in 2015); or the connections between girls’ adolescent development, social media, and empowerment<sup>37</sup> (which hovered as I assembled *Self Made* in 2014). These sparks, combined with my parallel research activities, were part of a feedback loop that suggested directions for the project. Ruba Katrib describes this process as maintaining an

active practice of looking, listening, and hoping that things will fall into place, click, or collide at the right moment... Making the commitment to developing the slightest flicker of an idea is when things start to take shape... [T]he act of exhibition making is about getting a dialogue started, actively following it through, and being receptive along the way.<sup>38</sup>

While the initiating gestures that catalyze an exhibition project may contain *some* of the attributes that shape a project, they do not dictate how those attributes are used. New elements, which may substantially change the exhibition narrative, routinely appear. To William Forsythe’s idea that the choreographic impulse for a work “can start from any point,”<sup>39</sup> I would add that the curatorial can also start from any point and go anywhere—at least in my methodology.

How does it begin? (Step outside.)

*At Kiasma, I am captivated by Juan Manuel Echavarría’s haunting video Bocas de ceniza (Mouths of Ash), which examines the history and impact of violence in Colombia. The faces of the singers fill the screen with songs of urgency, caution, and tenderness, evoking an ethic of witness and responsibility. How can such tenderness lurk in these ruins?*

36 See the work of Suzanne Simard in *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*, or Peter Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World*.

37 See MediaGirls.org and Johanna M. F. van Oosten’s “Adolescent Girls’ Use of Social Media for Challenging Sexualization” in *Gender, Technology and Development* 25, no. 1, doi: 10.1080/09718524.2021.1880039.

38 Ruba Katrib, *Pigeons on the Grass Alas: Contemporary Curators Talk About the Field*, eds. Paula Marincola and Peter Nesbett (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2013), 19–21.

39 Dana Casperson, “Decreation: Fragmentation and Continuity,” in *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography: It Starts from Any Point*, ed. Steven Spier (London: Routledge, 2011), 94.

*One late afternoon on the train, I wrestle with the draft of a curatorial statement. The ambivalent luminosity of this suspended twilight (civic, nautical, astronomical) intersects with the glow from my laptop screen. Window frames, moving past at high speeds, are a filmstrip stuttering in, over, and across landscapes. The twilight spreads, overlapping with my text. I am navigating now, somewhere else.*

*I hang out in the hotel lobby during a conference. I pick up an art magazine. Inside, I discover the cassette-tape crocheted signs of Nicola Vruwink: "I Wish I Knew What I Was Looking For" and "Please Shut Up." I feel awkward and cringey and 15 again.*

*At the Zodiak – Center for New Dance Side Step Festival, I sit next to a choreographer whose work I admire. Together, we are enthralled by Nicole Beutler's "Dialogue with Lucinda," based on a reinterpretation of Lucinda Childs's "Radial Courses" and "Interior Drama." We tackle the scores of these works in a master class with Ty Boomershine (Childs's former artistic assistant). Later, I see Boomershine perform in "Einstein on the Beach," which was choreographed by Childs.*

These encounters are associative and accumulating. Curatorial beginnings comprise actions (and effects) that go well beyond individual occasions to become sustained engagements marked by diverse and dynamic intersections. There are disagreements, counterproposals, and unexpected detours throughout the process. As Raqs Media Collective imagines it:

We come face to face with the "curatorial" whenever we witness within ourselves or around us the collision of artistic forms. There can be head-on collisions, unforeseen accidents, jolts born of contact, eerie after-images as well as the accumulation of readings against the grain of intention. Contact and confrontation, in art, as in life, are an occasion for the multiplication of misunderstandings, for epidemics of meaning.<sup>40</sup>

Much later, after this colliding and contact and cacophony, I arrived at something that would be called *On and Off the Page* (2013), which focused on the intersection of language and visual representation; *Possible Subject Positions* (2017–2018), which addressed the construction of individual and collective subjectivity; or *Change Agents: Personal Art as Political Tactic* (2017), a team effort with student curators that examined how artists mine deeply held personal beliefs to tackle sociopolitical issues. I do not discuss these exhibitions here but mention them as examples of the connections between process and outcome in my practice.

The sites where my curating takes place have been varied, but my main interest lies in galleries that are mission-driven and education-oriented, such as academic galleries. As a longtime educator with a deep interest in

40 Raqs Media Collective, "On the Curatorial, from the Trapeze," in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 18.

progressive pedagogy, I see the gallery as a pedagogical, aesthetic, and civic space, where pedagogy encompasses academic, political, social, and emotional learning. In traditional museum and gallery pedagogy, aesthetic education is often focused on learning through art objects. My interest at the Lamont Gallery was in expanding this approach to include the “surround” of the object—the wider landscape of unexplored and unnamed intersections, alliances, and potentials that the object fostered.

## “What If?” and “I Wonder?”

It sounds counterintuitive, but I liked planning exhibitions.

No, I *loved* planning them: planning as “what if?” and “I wonder?”. It was a balancing act to combine my exploratory and elliptical process with meeting the deadlines required for exhibitions to come to fruition. Planning took place in multiple, and not always concurrent, time spans. I did not illustrate the school’s academic curriculum. The gallery was academic and curricular in its own right.

Most of my curatorial projects were focused on group exhibitions. The group exhibition format has been disparaged as a thinly veiled platform for the ambitions of the curator. Paul O’Neill reminds us of artist Daniel Buren’s “distaste for group exhibitions acquiring the status of quasi-artworks . . . . He sees a residual conception of the curatorial hand at work, in that the curator transforms the work of each artist into a useful fragment.”<sup>41</sup> While I appreciate Buren’s perspective, we cannot all agree. In the expanded field of curating, there *has* to be more room for diverse practices, including those that emphasize curatorial agency. Curatorial agency, however, never rests in one person. The curatorial is manifested by the collective effort of many different participants.

I often used the group exhibition format because I was committed to making the gallery inclusive of artists of various backgrounds and different levels of professional involvement. Group exhibitions, according to Ralph Rugoff, elaborate

multiple subcurrents that ultimately open up our readings of individual works. Such shows set up resonant echoes within the progression of works on display, so that each new art object we encounter informs our understanding of the one we just saw as well as the one we see next. In this way, group exhibitions can create a powerful accumulative effect, immersing visitors in an experience that seems expansive and also responsive to the viewer’s own desires to explore a new world.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> O’Neill, 98.

<sup>42</sup> Ralph Rugoff, “You Talking to Me? On Curating Group Shows That Give You a Chance to Join the Group,” in *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, 2006), 48.



*Lush Life*, Lamont Gallery (23 March–2 May 2015). Foreground: work by Natalie Andrew.



My emphasis on featuring a diversity of artists also mirrored the school's student-centered pedagogy, which requires a plurality of voices to construct knowledge. Likewise, acknowledging the gallery's specific geographical context was part of my strategy. Regional artists, alongside national and international artists, were featured on a regular basis.<sup>43</sup>

## Locations and Dislocations

The physical spaces of the Lamont Gallery and of the campus propelled my curatorial moves and the evolution of my research in specific ways. I spent a lot of time on the gallery floor. This was a core part of my process. I moved as a method of inquiry, to make connections with others, and to develop curatorial plans and activities. I installed artworks in many other spaces on campus, including the countertop shelves in the school's library, the hushed reception area of the main administrative building, the lumbering concrete stairs in the athletic center, and spaces off-campus.

Visiting exhibitions outside the Lamont Gallery expanded my curatorial sensitivity. After returning home, it was less the specific details of a given artwork, label, or arrangement that remained in my memory, and more the atmosphere and feelings the experience induced. My recollection transformed into something durable and portable—something I carried with me long after the encounter.<sup>44</sup>

## Perambulating the Non-White-Cube Space

The Lamont Gallery is housed within the Mayer Art Center, a two-story brick structure built into the slope of a hill. It sits adjacent to the main academic quad. The music building, Phillips Church, the science center, and the student center are nearby. In addition to the gallery, the Mayer Art Center houses the studio art department and the college placement office. A ground-level

43 My focus was on producing original curatorial content versus hosting outside rental exhibitions. When we did host outside shows, such as *William Kentridge: Universal Archive* (2019) and *Cut Up/Cut Out* (2020), it allowed us to access work we could not have secured otherwise. I customized each exhibition to respond to Exeter's context.

44 After seeing Juan Manuel Echavarría's *Bocas de ceniza (Mouths of Ash)*, I included it in *On & Off the Page*. I was curious about the video's nonvisual elements—the sound and texture of the sung laments. What was the disposition of the aural qualities of the artwork? Juhani Pallasmaa has described sound as “omnidirectional”—it comes toward you: *one way*. In response, I installed *Bocas de ceniza* in a small side room, without headphones. The sound leaked out into the larger gallery, provoking a shared spatial condition. You either heard the singing before seeing the video or saw the large-scale projection but did not hear the singing. Within the gallery, the sound increased or faded as you turned toward or away, deciding whether to answer the call. The bidirectional encounter was the ethical situation I wanted to stage.

corridor connects it to a building full of classrooms for mathematics, history, and religion instruction, and to an auditorium for campus events.

The current Lamont Gallery space, built in 1982, consists of tan linen walls, dark gray slate tiles, and brick and mahogany moldings and trim. It is perforated by numerous glass doors, interior windows, and skylights. The main gallery space is approximately 160 square meters (1,700 square feet) divided into distinct areas. Smaller “side bay” areas function as cameo galleries or separate spaces.

The storage and prep spaces are accessed near the back of the gallery; these spaces, in turn, lead outside to a small loading dock. In addition to the gallery itself and operational support spaces, the Lamont Gallery has two small offices and several rooms in the adjacent building for additional pedestal, display, and archives storage. An adjoining 23-square-meter (250 square feet) classroom, carved out of the gallery space in a 2017 renovation, contains an oval Harkness table and a faculty workstation.

The gallery is not a white cube. It does not read as a contained and bounded space. This is an asset and a challenge. First, it’s unclear how to locate the gallery from outside the Mayer Art Center. The signage is too subtle, the entrances too numerous. Which is the correct entrance? Who is allowed inside? Is this gallery public or private?

Inside, this uncertainty is compounded by the design. The linen that covers the walls inside the gallery continues into the exterior hallways where artwork is displayed. People walk back and forth through this hallway constantly en route to classes and meetings. The building is a shortcut to other parts of the campus. The hallway’s role as route *and* display space furthers the ambiguity about the gallery’s boundaries and function.

The many glass doors and windows in the gallery give passersby multiple intersecting views from the interior and exterior. You can peer down into the space from the windows that connect to studio art spaces or look through the skylights when the shades are open, or you can access the gallery from one of approximately five hallways or staircases. Thus, the boundary between the installation and the finished exhibition is blurred: these two areas occupy the same register. The gallery operates in full view—always open, always populated, and always changing.

People do not move around the gallery itself in any predictable, consistent way. The layout encourages people to create their own narratives. The gallery has spaces within spaces, formed from a zigzag floor plan and periodic dividing walls. These dynamic elements are constitutive to the space, making it difficult to see the “whole” in one glance. Perceiving the exhibition requires movement and assembly.

## Making Arrangements

Choreography and curation share an emphasis on arrangement and composition, an attention to space and time, and a relationship to visuality and display.

For me, arranging work within exhibitions is one of the most enthralling aspects of the curatorial process. It is where I make discoveries and sense the emergent qualities of the project-to-be. The process can be literal—physically moving artworks or audiences in and through the gallery—or mental—imagining these movements. The activity is compositional, akin to choreography in the traditional sense. I aim to keep this part of the process *choreographic*, however, and not to make haste to finalize the composition.

### Scoring the Gallery

To prepare for the installation phase of the exhibition, I created a preliminary exhibition score. Using the gallery floor plan and thumbnail images of the work, I prototyped where individual artworks and exhibition elements might live and how they might trade places or shift positions. Soon after, the composition-by-floor plan acquired dimension: I combined the arrangements on paper with objects. On occasion, I created 3D maquettes.

I roamed the gallery with these floor plans, scores, and diagrams in hand. I moved chairs, stepstools, and ladders around so that I could sit or climb to gain a variety of vantage points and map different movement patterns. Pedestals and display cases, packing blankets, rolling work carts, and tools were brought into the space in preparation. I tacked my diagrams and larger print-outs of the artwork to the walls, embellished by sticky notes, tape arrows, and bits of text. The materiality of the curatorial began to edge into view.<sup>45</sup>

### Moving Artworks

The artwork for each exhibition had its own movement, from its initial journey out of an artist's studio, to perceptual movements, as the work emerged affectively into my awareness.

A significant moment was when the work arrived at the Lamont Gallery. As it was unwrapped from its protective enclosure of bubble wrap, foam, or cardboard, the work responded to the space and to the other work around it in ways that the preliminary exhibition plan could not anticipate. The work expanded, complicated, and often contradicted my assumptions, transforming the space and my perception of it *in* the space. The artworks became focusing agents.

45 Manning, 48.

The lighting influenced the layout and the movement of artworks and audiences.<sup>46</sup> Some areas of the gallery received a substantial amount of daylight. Some walls were never quite bright enough because of the limits of the lighting system, the angles of the ceiling, and the throw of the light cannisters. Other walls were the first thing encountered by another division or department. What did we want to emphasize?

The campus calendar had a surprising impact. Events such as family weekends, fundraising receptions, peer-school visits, reunions, and accreditation meetings highlighted the multiplicity of audiences and the various ways they engaged with the gallery. While these situations did not dictate my choices, I was responsive to them.

### Holding Time

I took as much time as I could with the installation process, sometimes to the concern of the rest of the staff. Raqs Media Collective describes this as curatorial “hibernation”: “To assert, propose or desire seduction into a long period of invisible ferment may be seen as a curatorial strategy to linger or loiter over thinking as opposed to making haste for the purposes of execution. Deliberation is at times preferable over deliverance.”<sup>47</sup>

I arranged and rearranged at all times of the day and night.

*Picking up, putting down. Moving. Bringing back. Holding aloft or at an angle. Pairing. Separating. Stretching. Kneeling. Hovering. Getting up close. Backing away. Leaving for a spell. Returning when the light, the pace, or my mood were different.*

Holding or touching artwork in museum settings is generally frowned upon, but in the process of arranging artworks, I touched the works as much as, or sometimes more than, I looked at them. Holding, in this case, does not just mean touching an artwork directly. It also means holding it in mind and holding it emotionally, in one’s presence and in one’s awareness. A vibration between grasping and seeing: *beholding*. While many of the exhibitions might have been aesthetically pleasing, my emphasis was on haptic and relational resonance as much as on external visual impact.<sup>48</sup>

I generally did not group individual artists’ works together but arranged the pieces to create a dynamic syncopation. Signage, display elements, and seating were equal partners in determining the composition, along with

46 The buzzing of gallery lights as the ancient dimmers were lowered created a choreography with nonhuman performers. The ethernet, the alarm system (with its ever-present cameras and sounds), and the huffing and puffing of the old HVAC systems were all moving, choreographic entities.

47 Raqs Media Collective, 22.

48 Fayen d’Evie, using blindness as a mode of operation, identifies blundering and beholding as aesthetic and epistemological strategies: “blundering implies kinetic motion and diffuse attention, while be-holding introduces moments of pause and concentrated attention.” Fayen d’Evie, “Orienting Through Blindness: Blundering, Be-Holding, and Wayfinding as Artistic and Curatorial Methods.” *Performance Paradigm* 13, *Performance, Choreography, and the Gallery* (2017): 63, <https://www.performanceparadigm.net/index.php/journal/article/view/193>.

books, magazines, and other resources. These materials expanded, connected, or complicated the exhibition's agenda. Many elements continued to shift throughout the exhibition's duration. Curatorial projects should have malleability—the possibility of literally shifting forms in space (both during the curatorial process and within realized exhibitions) and of allowing shifts in the positionality of project participants, including the curator.

No detail was insignificant: from the markers used to make speculative maps in the *Clew* exhibition (metallic and sparkly), to the way the nighttime illumination of Natalie Andrew's cryptogram works in *Lush Life* activated the gallery when it was closed. I analyzed the text next to the works: What stories did it tell? How did it make room for multiple interpretations? How did the edge of one work infiltrate the edge of another, an awareness that came into being only during certain times of day or with specific postures?

I needed *time* to be arranged as well. I grew to see the outside obligations, including meetings and trips, as necessary. They physically removed me from my preoccupation with the exhibition and forced me into other spaces and situations. As I became more adept at using these detours, I arranged the installation schedule to include periods of interruption within sustained, sequential workdays. These pauses were productive. I inevitably perceived something new when I returned.



Looking into the Lamont Gallery from the outside hallway. Pictured: *On & Off the Page* (9 September to 19 October 2013).

## Choreographing Encounters

During exhibition and program design, I attended to how audience members negotiated the space and one other.

Audiences are not monolithic. You cannot control (or usually even know) their interpretations. As Jean-Paul Martinon reflects in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, “it is no longer possible to talk of self-contained subjectivities experiencing exhibitions in a disinterested manner. Our relationship to exhibitions is a complex and ambivalent event, in which what is exhibited is not necessarily the centre of attention.”<sup>49</sup> I paid attention to where people lingered, what they said, and their bodily or behavioral reactions. Did people come alone? If they were part of a group, what were the dynamics? How did personal conditions affect aesthetic and philosophical ones? The atmosphere of the curatorial stemmed from myriad sources. At best, your curatorial gestures are aspirational ones.

Exhibitions often had interactive or participatory areas. The integration of interactive elements into exhibitions has a mixed reception. While you can install a nontraditional exhibition element with a sign that says “Touch” or “Sit” or “Feel free to lie down,” most audience members will not do so. Something else—another kind of welcome—must happen. Some installations in the Lamont Gallery succeeded in encouraging people to interact in new ways. Others failed to produce a visible impact. How did an object, book, or text take up space symbolically, even if we did not witness someone interacting with it directly? What did it mean to “interact” or participate within these settings? Did it always need to be measurable?

Patterns of audience engagement both reinforced and contradicted my assumptions. They illuminated ways of occupying the gallery that I did not anticipate. Rather than imposing uniformity, could I allow that difference to sit alongside<sup>50</sup> and contribute?

Exhibitions should make generous space for audiences. Mary Jane Jacob reflects:

I wondered who has the permission to be there, to look, and whose responses are given credence and why. And could a space be made for the viewer, an empty space of permission, rather than filling up space with information or amenities to alleviate the profession’s perceived deficiency of the viewer? How can we foreground the function of museums as a place for experiencing art’s unique ability to move beyond its objectness and out into the world.<sup>51</sup>

49 Jean-Paul Martinon, introduction to *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 6.

50 I intentionally ignore the grammatical requirement to name an object after the word *alongside*. This strategy emphasizes *alongside* as a mindset or orientation, rather than as a means of identification.

51 Mary Jane Jacob, “Making Space for Art,” in *What Makes a Great Exhibition*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, 2006), 135.

Asking audiences to move is not always about obvious, grand, or even perceptible gestures. My aims were modest: often, it was just about getting people to slow down. To drift. Sometimes it was enough to *invite* someone to interact or move differently—to give them the idea that it was possible—even if they did not physically do so. In this manner, the choreographic proclivities within my curatorial process mobilized choreographic thinking in others.

The atmosphere in the gallery was often casual: it was enlivened by children writing a story in front of an artwork, students learning how to use a level, or, on occasion, people demonstrating a yoga plank or singing. The benefit of a small academic gallery on a residential campus is this very informality: the gallery was a neighborhood, family room, and classroom, often at the same time.

## Programs as Invitations, Invitations as Movements

The broad themes or narrative impulses at the initiation of a curatorial project shift, alter, and expand as they intersect with outside forces. Programs, where audiences are invited to contribute to meaning making, is one way of generating this shift. Program development is foundational to my curatorial practice.<sup>52</sup>

Programs choreograph ways for artworks and audiences to inhabit the realm of the exhibition together. Inviting people to participate is an opportunity to be a host. As Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer note:

A curatorial situation is always one of hospitality. It implies invitation—to artists, artworks, curators, audiences, and institutions; it receives, welcomes, and temporarily brings people and objects together. ...[T]he curatorial situation provides both the time and the space for encounter between entities unfamiliar with one another.<sup>53</sup>

What *are* our duties to others? The institutional setting has a profound impact. The academic gallery and its parent institution may have different interpretations of audience, mission, and function. Academic galleries often aspire to serve students and teachers as well as audiences beyond the campus, arguing that this inclusivity is a core aspect of demonstrating broader civic engagement and responsibility. I believe strongly that institutions should extend their resources to the wider community. Not everyone agrees.

52 The emphasis of program development as a core aspect of my curatorial practice challenges the autonomy of the artwork and the modernist notion that art—or the curatorial project—“speaks for itself.”

53 Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, introduction to *Cultures of the Curatorial: Hospitality: Hosting Relations in Exhibitions*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 8.

I heard repeatedly from audience members they were not sure if they were allowed to enter, since the gallery was on the campus of a private school. That was my experience of trying to access the gallery on my first visit too. Every curatorial decision I made was an attempt to counter that impression, and to shift the perception of the gallery's atmosphere from one of exclusivity to one of inclusion.

### Talking in the Gallery as Program and Pedagogy

Conversation was a feature in most of the Lamont Gallery's activities. Before I arrived at Exeter, gallery talks involved traditional slideshow presentations held in a separate proscenium-style auditorium, aimed *at* rather than created *with* audiences. I shifted the gallery talks to a conversation format and moved them into the gallery to ground the discussions within the material and spatial conditions of the works' creation and display.

Gallery talks were often scheduled as lunchtime events or on Saturday mornings following a Friday night opening reception.<sup>54</sup> With chairs arranged in a semicircle, the Saturday morning conversations were especially intimate. At a certain point, I asked the artists and audiences to stand up and move around the gallery. This interaction echoed our Harkness pedagogy. Discoveries were made in dialogic exchanges between the artists, the audiences, the works, and the spaces.

Other programs included performances, class discussions, staged readings, and visits by outside community groups, which occurred alongside debates, flirtations, and homework sessions, interspersed with episodes of crying. Exeter is a residential school, after all: life happens in every part of the campus.

Many of the Lamont Gallery's programs were intentionally restricted in size to emphasize connections between community members. I was more interested in the textures of the experiences and the way they resonated with audiences than the attendance figures.<sup>55</sup> Hosting a variety of programs in various formats on different days and times allowed us to make exhibitions accessible to a broad audience.

## Activating Atmosphere

My choreographic curatorial practice anticipates an encounter with the public, even when significant gestures of my research are not apprehensible

54 Offering food was a frequent strategic move for fostering an atmosphere of conviviality and care. Morning meetings for the arts and business communities, midday presentations, and evening workshops were all accompanied by refreshments. Bowls of candy or cookies in the lobby appeared frequently and spontaneously.

55 But I did use our increase in attendance to communicate our value to the administration in every report, analysis, and strategic assessment.





Even unexpected campus plumbing problems contributed to the gallery's atmosphere. On this day, the issue centered on the drainpipes installed below the gallery. We quickly repositioned the work from the side gallery, effectively reinstalling the exhibition during public hours.

in any public way. Some features of the curatorial are imperceptible. You never witness them directly. They never produce a quantifiable outcome. You only miss them when they are lacking. These elements, though often inscrutable, are critical.

In attending to the material, social, and emotional aspects of the curatorial, I addressed what Henry Urbach describes as the *atmospheric*<sup>56</sup> potential of the curatorial. What is around the art objects is not merely “the frame, the container, the tool for presenting objects in ways that assure their significance and affirm their status.”<sup>57</sup> The exhibition is not just produced by the works, but by the intersection of the works with the wider world.

Atmosphere includes all the other conditions which may at first seem somewhat secondary or even unrelated to the exhibition. Material circumstances, as well as programmatic decisions, impact atmosphere. As Urbach notes, it includes everything, ranging from the design of the gallery to its lighting and furniture.<sup>58</sup>

Research through dance and somatic practice made me attentive to overlooked parts of spaces and to alternate viewpoints. I emphasized atmosphere by responding to the architecture and material conditions of the gallery—for example, by amplifying the invitation of the entrance, or by emphasizing the easy comfort of a cushioned bench. Taking different positions (literally) in buildings enabled me to think about auditory qualities too—the voices and movements of artworks and audiences. I became attuned to undercurrents: the tone of a class discussion; repeated words in an artist’s talk; the way someone would phrase a question; the pause, the sigh, or the intake of breath in a performance; the squeak of sneakers when someone turned the corner quickly; or the soft light of a late summer afternoon.<sup>59</sup>

It is not only the designed elements of the built environment that matter, but also the emotive, social, and interpersonal elements: “the activity and comportment of people, including security guards and other visitors; the ideas and affects that fill the air; the museological, curatorial, and artistic practices that discursively support the objects; the interpretative practices.” Even, Urbach muses, “smells and sounds, too.”<sup>60</sup>

This “more-than”<sup>61</sup> of the exhibition is its atmosphere. An exhibition should provide a place for us not just to view from afar or participate in

56 Henry Urbach, “Exhibition as Atmosphere,” in *Log*, no. 20 Curating Architecture (Fall 2010): 12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41765361>.

57 Urbach, “Exhibition as Atmosphere.”

58 Urbach, “Exhibition as Atmosphere.”

59 Even temperature impacted how audience members moved in the gallery. The main gallery was often chilly, prompting people to seek out the warmth of one of the notoriously overheated side bay galleries.

60 Urbach, “Exhibition as Atmosphere.”

61 Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation’s Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 77.

passing, unattached and unaffected, but to inhabit a world, with all the wonder and friction this entails.

## Variable Duration as Research Method

Anshuman Dasgupta argues that “the curatorial might effectively go beyond a certain fixity of presence. Because it is juxtaposed with time, the curatorial stands for a simultaneity of events that never quite add up. This is similar to map-making, in which words and images perform independently to build their own unexpected patterns. This is also similar to when one starts a conversation that does not have an end in view. The curatorial begins; it is a catalyst.”<sup>62</sup>

My choreographic curatorial practice operates in multiple temporalities. The ongoingness of my approach has benefits and drawbacks. The curatorial is a stubbornly unhasty process, but the exhibition is often deadline-driven, pushed along by outside demands. In fact, it is difficult to resist the pull of external expectations. For example, while I had to produce the text and image for the printed invitation card and other marketing materials well in advance, I waited until the last possible minute to write the curatorial statement. On some occasions, the exhibition shifted in scope and meaning so significantly that I would install a new curatorial statement after the opening. Or an exhibition might start with a certain set of didactics, and then—through community involvement—would change to include other voices and perspectives.

In a large-scale museum or gallery, these changes are often not feasible. The Lamont Gallery’s small staff and more informal atmosphere meant increased responsiveness and less hierarchy in problem-solving. The aesthetic goals were supported by logistical choices: instead of using foam core signs that were produced off-site, I changed our signage system to use mounted acrylic and steel sign holders that allowed text to be swapped out easily. Material opportunity and conceptual flexibility together expanded the interpretive options. This approach became a choreographic-curatorial strategy.

Likewise, developing programs combined advanced planning with an open-ended spirit. Even with a date and title in place, it was typical for a program to evolve into something altogether new by the time it arrived. I made room on a regular basis for this evolution, especially for programs initiated by others or programs that developed spontaneously.<sup>63</sup>

62 Anshuman Dasgupta, “In Unfamiliar Terrain: Preliminary Notes Towards Site-Relationality and the Curatorial,” in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 180.

63 In *A Whole New Game: Sports and Games in Art* (2014), I set up a chess set with signage that read: “Play me.” Numerous chess games took place, although we never knew the identities of the opponents. Later, in that same exhibition, I discovered a photograph had been added to the exhibition. I left it in place, delighted with the intervention.

## Delay: When Is the Curatorial? When Is the Research?

There is always a delay in how I ascertain a project *to be* a project. This is true even if the invitation card has been mailed, publicity has been sent, and reviews have been written. The opening reception or closing is not the arrival or endpoint. The effects and meanings of programs—how they articulate the narrative strands of the exhibitions—often do not become clear until much later. Paul O'Neill emphasizes the idea of the extended exhibition in contemporary curatorial practice:

Rather than texts waiting to be read, exhibitions have the potential to activate discursive processes that enable dialogical spaces of negotiation between curators, artists, and their publics. Such an approach to exhibition-making is durational—in the sense that, as “discursive exhibitions” that evolve over time, they do not prioritize the exhibition-event as the one-off moment or display . . . Instead, they allow for an open-ended, cumulative processes of engagement, interruption, and possibility.<sup>64</sup>

At the same time, I must identify *some* stopping point, at least enough to share the work with audiences and to gain the insights that enable me to adjust the project.

When is *the* time? When is the work? How do I know? Adesola Akinleye refers to this phenomenon in choreography as “*Yes-it-is-made*,” which happens in three moments. The first occurs during a late-stage rehearsal, where “the work has somehow found its own breath outside my inward envisioning”; the second occurs at the initial performance with a witnessing audience; and then much later, during a performance that takes place well after the premiere, the work suddenly “steps into its own presence.”<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, when is the research? Annette Arlander asks, “Where does artistic practice sit within a research project? What is its place in the process? Is it something one starts with to create material, or something one shows at the end as a result, or perhaps something one keeps up throughout the process, a way of thinking?”<sup>66</sup> Although each singular process or product (the invitation card, the curatorial statement, the arrangement of works, the program) was not a discrete research outcome, collectively they became research methods and results. The continuity of the process allowed me “to avoid the inherent duality of the ‘do first – write later’ model” of artistic research.<sup>67</sup>

64 O'Neill, 128.

65 Adesola Akinleye, *Dance, Architecture and Engineering* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 119.

66 Arlander, 37.

67 Arlander, 37.

## Long-form Curation: Lodge Yourself on a Stratum

As Henk Borgdorff observes, “Embedded in artistic and academic contexts, artistic research seeks to convey content that is enclosed in aesthetic experiences, enacted in creative practices and embodied in artistic products.”<sup>68</sup> As a curator and artistic researcher, my activity is most effective when it is embedded within a particular place. I am not pursuing a curatorial approach that could take place anywhere, but one that emerges from a sustained engagement with specific places and people.

This is a strategy. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari suggest:

This is how it should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it affords, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times.<sup>69</sup>

A long-form curatorial practice works best when it is durational, happening not just for a single project but over the course of many. Durational attention allows for the potentials of the curatorial to unfold.

I am interested in curatorial settings where I am present on a regular basis, or where I work or live. At the Lamont Gallery, my office was across the hall from the gallery space. I lived within walking distance, on and off campus, at various points during my tenure. I ate many meals in the dining halls, mailed gifts from the campus post office, and suffered innumerable miles on the elliptical machines in the school’s gym. I participated in the daily rhythms and rituals of departmental friends and neighbors.

These conditions permitted me to examine themes in my research as they appeared in different forms over time and provided the logistical support I needed to develop projects. In this setting, I had access to the manifestations of curatorial practice that simply looking from the outside would not have provided.

### Ripple Effects

I pay attention to the ripple effects of a project: the connections or expansions a curatorial project generates, or how activities propel or inspire future actions. Choreographic in nature, ripple effects surface in noticeable and imperceptible ways. I could rarely anticipate which projects would elicit a

68 Henk Borgdorff, “The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research,” in *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, eds. Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (London: Routledge, 2011), 45.

69 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 161.

reaction. I could not control (or did not always see) what, if anything, happened as a result of an exhibition. I simply had to be ready: *systematically open*, as Mick Wilson has put it.<sup>70</sup>

Ripples shift the emphasis from *curating*—planning exhibitions with time-bound start and end dates—to the *curatorial*, where the exhibition is only one element among many that encourages aesthetic experiences and sparks ancillary movements.<sup>71</sup> Ripples do not diminish the importance of authorship and intentionality within the curatorial, but they do make it questionable to bestow these qualities on one author alone.

Walking through the Lamont Gallery each day revealed potentials I had not seen until that very moment. With every step, I was in a different place. There was more to learn. Tim Ingold identifies a similar research spirit in hillwalkers: “Immersed as they were in the landscape, they found in it a source of perpetual astonishment . . . There was always something to catch one’s attention, and to pursue further.”<sup>72</sup>

Like the movement of water, artistic research eddying involves an idea, action, or outcome rippling out slightly and then carrying along new elements as it pulls back in; these elements are then dispersed on the way out, along other trajectories. This movement can be slow and hard to capture. It looks like the same body of water as when you started, a *nothing much going on*. But over time, the entire, loose assemblage starts to move. The goal of artistic research is to produce, and follow, these ripples.

70 Mick Wilson, “Discipline Problems and the Ethos of Research,” in *SHARE: Handbook for Artistic Research Education*, eds. Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten (Amsterdam: ELIA, 2013), 214.

71 M. Sharkey’s 2017 *Queer Kids* exhibition led to the development of a Queer Arts Residency program in 2020. The residency coincided with related student curatorial projects, Elizabeth Kostina’s *Hairlines* and Justin Li’s *Your Blood + Mine: A Meditation on Identity*. The Queer Arts Residency included collaborations with the Student Activities Office and the LGBTQIA+ club, an exhibition of archival materials developed with Academy archivist Magee Lawhorn, and an exhibition of Sharkey’s Exeter portraits that would join the next *Queer Kids* exhibition.

72 Tim Ingold, “Anthropology Between Art and Science: An Essay on the Meaning of Research,” in *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, no. 11 (Fall 2018), <https://field-journal.com/issue-11/anthropology-between-art-and-science-an-essay-on-the-meaning-of-research>.



What (the hell) is the chorocographic?





Four: Wrestling with the  
Choreographic



## Sitting with Something

The title caught my attention: *Advanced Workshop in Artistic Practice and Transdisciplinary Research: Choreographing the City*.

The seminar, taught by Professor Gediminas Urbonas and Dr. Adesola Akinleye, was held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2020. I had a hunch the course would be conducive to my understanding of the choreographic.<sup>1</sup>

*Choreographing the City* emphasized situated embodiment—the enmeshment of bodies (human and nonhuman) with their surroundings—through a range of areas including urban planning, dance, architecture, civics, and the ecological. The seminar proposed choreography as an expanded form, a way to “explore the edges” and permeate in-between spaces<sup>2</sup>—in the city, in sociopolitical and emotional contexts, and in other constructed and imagined places.

Each week, we began with Dr. Akinleye leading us through Gyrokinesis,<sup>3</sup> which we practiced on a chair. While the method shared aspects with dance, it was not about creating a performance. Rather, it was about *noticing*: “sitting with something” to tap into its potential. To use movement, literal or metaphoric, to respond or to inquire.<sup>4</sup>

It is surprisingly difficult to sit. In artistic research, sitting requires that you slow down and still your impulses. At the same time, you must lean towards those impulses and into the uncertainty that research reveals.

This section is my effort to sit with the choreographic—to foster a situation where the choreographic and the curatorial meet. To assemble the *choreographic-curatorial* as a hyphenate proposition.

- 1 I had taken another class at MIT several years earlier, *Contemporary Curatorial Practice: Theatrical Fields*, with curator Ute Meta Bauer, in which we produced a collaborative performance. The piece, which responded to the choreography of Yvonne Rainer and Xavier Le Roy, involved producing scores and archives, and examined how meaning developed through the slow accumulation of actions and gestures. I will not directly address this experience but want to acknowledge its influence.
- 2 Adesola Akinleye, class discussion, 4.314/15: *Advanced Workshop in Artistic Practice and Transdisciplinary Research: Choreographing the City*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, 9 September 2020.
- 3 <https://www.gyrotonic.com/about/gyrokinesis-method>.
- 4 Adesola Akinleye, class discussion, 4.314/15: *Advanced Workshop in Artistic Practice and Transdisciplinary Research: Choreographing the City*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, 14 September 2020.

Preceding pages: What the hell is the choreographic?

## Motivations, Or, Why Muck Around in the Margins?

My motivations are to examine the connection between choreography and curating to determine how a curatorial practice could be choreographic in concept, process, and effect.

As a curator, it is easy to toss out that you are working in an interdisciplinary manner, but when pressed to outline what this means in practice, it becomes more difficult. If you claim, “I take this concept/process/tool from discipline X and use it in discipline Y,” it seems you need to produce something—an artwork, a spreadsheet, a movement sequence—that has *visible* components of these multiple disciplines. This requires that research demonstrates its knowledge-generating capacity in a form recognizable by others, which assures its status and value. It is functional or productive only when it is evidently measurable.

I am proposing an alternative. Something that may not reveal itself as evidence: artistic research that produces no visible outcomes.

In chronicling her performance research project *Canal* (with Dorothea Secor), Claudia Kappenberg recalls that the main “work” of the piece was to release feathers over a canal in Venice and let the wind carry them to other destinations. The performance, Kappenberg recalls, involved “a set of interventions that looked like ‘work’ but didn’t make anything and left no (visible) trace.”<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, I advocate for something that doesn’t require art to be useful to another discipline. Sitting with something that is difficult to see runs counter to the “modernist economic framework” where there is “inconvenience that needs to be minimized in order to maximize profit and to secure the desired outcomes.”<sup>6</sup> Kappenberg proposes instead “a deliberate deployment of the notion of uselessness as an antidote and as an attempt to challenge the ubiquitous imperative to work and to always be useful.”<sup>7</sup>

Uselessness, pushed to the limit, makes way for something else to emerge.

## Uselessness, Exhaustion, and Invisibility

Kappenberg’s and Secor’s *Canal* challenges expectations of what confirms work: the motion associated with that work-like activity, the visible evidence of that work-motion, and the tangible output left behind.

In contemplating *Canal* in relation to artistic research, I wonder if the exhibition format somehow capitulates to the very research and knowledge paradigms I contest. Is the (continuous) movement I propose in the

5 Claudia Kappenberg, “The Use of Uselessness,” in *Performing Process: Sharing Dance and Choreographic Practice*, eds. Hetty Blades and Emma Meehan (Bristol: Intellect, 2018), 253.

6 Kappenberg, 253.

7 Kappenberg, 253.

curatorial process simply a need for external validation? The exhibition, after all, proves that I am working, that the works in the gallery are working. The exhibition takes up space. It aspires to be useful.

Can I refuse these aspirations, or at least release them?

In *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*, André Lepecki argues that both modern subjectivity and dance are linked to the expectation of continuous movement and an emphasis on outward display. How can we subject *differently*, “against the hegemonic fantasies of modernity . . . linked to the imperative to constantly display mobility”<sup>8</sup> he wonders?

Lepecki does not excuse writing (and I would add, artistic research)—the “graphy” within choreography—from falling into a trap. Choreography, as a technology of “early modernity . . . creates a body disciplined to move according to the commands of writing.”<sup>9</sup> Lepecki maintains that it is not dance, or even dance that is decoupled from specularly and constant agitation, that is the problem. The issue lies more in the critical and theoretical writing that perpetuates limited thinking within the construction of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Can I use choreographic writing—emergent, speculative, and pluralistic—as an antidote?

Exhaustion—through suspension, occlusion, excess, and horizontality, among other tactics—becomes means to bypass these traps. Choreographic thinking is a bypass strategy: it listens to forms of research that do not reflect expected ways of perceiving, classifying, and disseminating that research.

My research encompasses the invisible or unrealized aspects of curatorial process and exhibitions. It critiques the frenetic mechanisms of audience participation in museum settings, as well as some of the outward-facing expectations of artistic research, by arguing that the encounter—even a silent, interior one—is inherently participatory. Even a refusal to participate must be given space.

In one especially delightful passage in *Exhausting Dance*, Lepecki describes Jérôme Bel’s piece *Nom Donné par l’Auteur* (*Name Given by the Author*). Two performers do “nothing” but manipulate everyday objects for the better part of an hour. This suggests a more spacious capacity for artistic production and reception:

8 André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 11.

9 Lepecki, 6.

10 Lepecki, 2.

One flashlight creates numerous reflections from mirrored tiles (from *Queer Weather System*).



To just watch this piece is to certainly miss it. Rather, it is crucial to accept its invitation to engage in its playfulness, to move from a passive optical scrutiny to an active, multisensorial, polysemic receptivity. Then we find out that there is nothing silent, or quiet, in this piece's muteness.<sup>11</sup>

Within my own artistic research, I translate this as: choreographic thinking (in the gallery) doesn't necessarily have to result in a whole lot of dancing.

### Choreographic Curatorial Research

There isn't one stable definition of the choreographic or choreographic thinking. You have to access it elliptically. Dramaturg Dana Casperson highlights choreographer William Forsythe's method of "shearing," where a process, state, movement sequence, or idea, is not approached directly.<sup>12</sup>

#### I am shearing.

The connections between shearing, uselessness, and exhaustion in relation to choreographic curatorial research are instructive. In "Objects of Study or Commodification of Knowledge? Remarks on Artistic Research," Simon Sheikh takes a critical view of the systems that are complicit in a reductionist accounting of research. He argues that

art institutions and universities are often mere teaching machines, reproducers rather than producers of knowledge and thinking, which is why we should not maintain their structures while transforming their products... [W]e should learn from those structures as spaces of experience, as discursive spaces, and simultaneously to the implementation of its productive features, maintain a notion of unproductive time and space within exhibition venues.<sup>13</sup>

There is considerable pressure on artistic research to prove itself according to metrics that may not fit its modes or aims. Sheikh urges us "to move beyond knowledge production into what we can term *spaces for thinking*. . . . Whereas knowledge is circulated and maintained through a number of normative practices – disciplines as it were – thinking is here meant to imply networks of indiscipline, lines of flight and utopian questionings."<sup>14</sup>

Can prioritizing choreographic *thinking* (over knowing) support this goal?

11 Lepecki, 54.

12 Dana Casperson, "Decreation: Fragmentation and Continuity," in *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography: It Starts from Any Point*, ed. Steven Spier (London: Routledge, 2011), 98.

13 Simon Sheikh, "Objects of Study or Commodification of Knowledge? Remarks on Artistic Research," in *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2009), <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/sheikh.html>.

14 Sheikh, "Objects of Study or Commodification of Knowledge? Remarks on Artistic Research."

To *think-movement* differently: to think about choreography outside of dance, to think about dance outside of movement, and to think choreographically in non-dance contexts. My research on choreographic thinking in the curatorial, though enabled by the exhibition format (or by choreography), is not legitimized by it.

## A Choreographic Maneuver

In *The Choreographic*, Jenn Joy observes that “to engage choreographically is to position oneself in relation to another, to participate in a scene of address that anticipates and requires a particular mode of attention, even at times against our will.”<sup>15</sup> This sentiment is familiar. I have been circling around the choreographic for years. It is a bewildering search, pursued through cultural production and performance, curating, experimental writing, master classes, and by examining the work of choreographers, visual artists, and poets: a self assembled by iteration.

What exactly is the choreographic? How does it characterize my curatorial practice? How does the *choreographic-curatorial* manifest?

Hundreds of lists and notes on whiteboards and chalkboards have occupied space and time addressing this question. Although I’ve been sitting here a while now, I *still* can’t quite define the choreographic to my satisfaction. Can I proceed without clarifying what I assert is a key concept in my research? Can I occupy a position I cannot name? The thought makes me anxious.

It’s time for a choreographic maneuver.

Perhaps my problem is how I understand what it means to define something. Etymological meanings of the word define indicate that it designates a specific point or an end or demarcates a limit:

From Old French *defenir*, *definir* “to finish, conclude, **come to an end**; bring to an end; define, **determine** with precision,” and directly from Medieval Latin *diffinire*, *definire*, from Latin *definire* “to limit, determine, explain,” from *de* “completely” (see *de-*) + *finire* “**to bound**, limit,” from *finis* “boundary, end” (see *finish* (v.)). From c. 1400 as “determine, declare, or **mark** the limit of.”<sup>16</sup> (emphasis added)

That all sounds so impenetrable.

How can you begin again at a bitter end? How can you lurk outside of limits? Can I make the act of defining useless? Exhaust it? Assemble a temporary place for the choreographic, beyond these beleaguered, bounded

<sup>15</sup> Jenn Joy, *The Choreographic* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Define,” accessed 22 December 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/define>.

spaces, and notice how it operates within or *as* my curatorial practice (with a realization that it could, at a moment's notice, operate differently)?

There is distance between what I know and what I can externalize.

In dance notation, a written score may indicate *some* aspect of a piece, but then the spatialized, dimensional movement of actual bodies provides another view. The score cannot ever fully capture the movement. The *movement* can never fully encapsulate the movement, either. Not everything we offer is decipherable by others. The space between interiorized understanding and external representation may, or may not, translate. Can artistic research reconcile these parallel lives? Are these gaps irreconcilable, or opportunities for productive tension?

Natalie Loveless encourages artistic researchers to sit with the uncertainty that not-knowing produces:

This critical understanding insists that the question of *where* and *when* research-creation functions as noun (a site of attachment) or verb (a site of movement or undoing) remains open. It requires that one cultivate a robust capacity to follow curiosity *and* sit with anxiety. And it requires that one navigate multiple pulls across disciplinary sites, methodological approaches, and formal requirements.<sup>17</sup>

The two strands—the measurable and the invisible—remain different ways of experiencing and making meaning. My aim has been to make an imperfect bridge between these paradigms.

## A Definition Should Allow You to Launch

I aspire to give the choreographic a shape, texture, and propulsive force—in support of making the jump between choreographic and curating in my practice. To launch the *meaning-sensing-moving-making* agency of the choreographic, I propose reclaiming—or exhausting—fragments of meaning of the word *define*:

*To come to*

*To create a boundary*

*To mark*

*To determine (the significance of)*

I am *coming to* an encounter with a term (or an activity) through inquiring, grasping, exercising, and constructing it.

I am seeking ways to give it a flexible and permeable *boundary* or frame just long enough so that I can delineate its mode of operation.

17 Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 57.



I am *making marks*: the process of making, writing, and notating within artistic research are ways of marking—and mapping—my path through the world.

I am *determining the significance* of the term(s) through the process of assembly.

Quite possibly, lurking in *define*, is a link with choreographic thinking in the curatorial.

I return to the *launch*. The launch is a move.

## **HANGING WITH TRISH: PERFORMING IN TRISHA BROWN'S *FLOOR OF THE FOREST***

I responded to a call for performers for Trisha Brown's *Floor of the Forest* (1970), part of the *Dance/Draw* exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston (2010–2011).

Dancers activated *Floor of the Forest* by climbing in and out of clothing woven into crisscrossed ropes which were attached to a metal grid raised about 1.2 meters (4 feet) from the ground. The inclusion of the piece in *Dance/Draw* was timely: I was starting to connect movement, drawing, writing, curating, and artistic research.

The sculptural aspect of the work was striking. The ropes and draped clothing, which were lit from above, made beguiling shadows. It was reminiscent of works by Eva Hesse and Senga Nengudi, both included in nearby galleries.

### *Performer as Activator/Bodies as Objects*

I performed in the piece approximately 20 times. Each day, we entered the museum through the unobtrusive staff door, around the corner from the main entrance. We had lockers to store our clothes, but no place to warm up. The staff lunchroom doubled as a makeshift green room.<sup>18</sup>

A few minutes before the performance, two of us walked, barefoot, to the gallery, where we waited at the edge of the room. The floor was chilly. The indirect lighting gave the room the feel of a permanently overcast day.

After climbing onto the sculpture, I would crawl into a shirt or sweater, a pair of pants, a dress, sometimes even a whole ensemble. Once in a piece of clothing, I would hang, suspended just above the floor. My slow and deliberate movements were intentional, but the outcomes were uncertain.

It felt like a victory when I could settle into an entire shirt or skirt, but much of the time I was pleased if I managed to occupy just parts of those garments—one arm in a pair of pants, a foot through a shirt, and my head nestled in the hood of coat. I would hang there for several minutes, breathing heavily. Despite the faint ripping sounds, I hoped the piece of clothing wouldn't rip and dump me unceremoniously onto the floor.

As I became more accustomed to the piece, I began to consider the audience. How did they interact? Who sat on the floor? Who remained standing? How close did they get? Did they take pictures? Carry on conversations related, or unrelated, to what was happening? Did our movements impact theirs?

18 For some reason, the ICA's official green room was in use during this period. This situation illustrates the precarious conditions of performing artists in museums that are not designed to accommodate their needs.

### *Framing Performance*

*Floor of the Forest* was first performed outside. Since that time, it has been performed in numerous locations outside and indoors, including within exhibitions at the Whitney Museum (2010), the Barbican Art Gallery (2011), and the Hammer Museum (2013).

The ICA's version had the work installed in a rather small gallery. The walls around the piece extended only 1.5-1.8 meters (five to six feet) on two sides, and on the other two sides, approximately three meters (10 feet). The space was populated even before dancers and audience arrived. The numerous other works, including videos and photographs, made *Floor of the Forest* part of a lively conversation. Lines of communication extended across the space: the twist of a leg in a photo reached out to the flip of a hand in a nearby video.

The arrangement of works in the room—the curatorial framing—was complex structure that encouraged *Floor of the Forest* to acknowledge the museum setting and foster a sense of conviviality between various works, audience members, and performers.



Performing in Trisha Brown's *Floor of the Forest* in the *Dance/Draw* exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Photograph by Kathy Desmond.

## I Don't Know Anything About Dance

While choreographic curation is linked to dance and choreography, it is not (exactly) another form of dance-making. Yet, in my practice, involvement in dance and choreography *does* enable my curatorial work to be conceived and implemented through specific methods that are informed by embodiment, movement, and arrangement. Can I have it both ways?

Many people are baffled when I explain that I am linking choreographic thinking with curation. “Interesting! Do you make dances in response to artworks?” To which I back up hastily and reply, “Well, it’s not *exactly* about developing choreography for the gallery” (except when it is). “I don’t dance in museums” (except for when I do).

As you can imagine, this exchange is not especially reassuring for either party.

Both dance, and galleries, can make people nervous. As Adesola Akinleye points out:

The notion of “dancing” is not neutral, people have personal expectations, cultural assumptions and social aesthetics attached to what they envisage when the word is evoked. Dance also raises philosophical questions about self-determination and social expectations: Is dance judged by the observer of the dance or the dancer themselves? In other words, is it dance because it looks like dance to an observer, or dance because it feels like dance to the dancer? Or is it dance because someone said it was?<sup>19</sup>

Even when I position a dance work as a modernist object—even one with a well-established pedigree, such as Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A* or anything from Fluxus—I hear, “Sorry. I don’t know anything about dance.”

*It is and it isn’t.*

My inquiry into choreographic thinking in the curatorial is both related to dance in museums and not. Watching dance in museum and gallery contexts and performing within these contexts has been an important influence on my curatorial development. At the same time, my current enterprise is not directly about making site-specific dance works in galleries.

Despite the enthusiasm for participatory opportunities for audiences within exhibitions—and the increase in museum-based performance—dance is usually seen as a supplemental activity in the gallery setting, secondary and peripheral to the “main attraction” of visual art. Audiences generally don’t know what to make of it. When it is present, it is a slight irritant. It doesn’t ruin the view completely, but there is often a sense of relief when it finishes.

19 Adesola Akinleye, *Dance, Architecture and Engineering* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 13.

Dance is more than a supplement. Thinking about and participating in dance in museums encourages me to look haptically, in, from, and through the margins. In this dynamic process, movement is neither marginal nor centered, but mobile, a portable position from which I initiate, pursue, and realize curatorial projects. While I base my research *in* the body, it may not always be embodied *by* a body, or at least by a dancing one.

## Moves: From Choreography to Choreographic to the Curatorial (and Back)

Where do we begin?

I need to disassemble and reassemble some structures (already a choreographic endeavor). The choreographic is an exponential proposition. Each point along the path becomes additional points, paths, and lines. It makes it difficult to see. It makes it hard to contain. How do you get to know a line that moves?

Renee Gladman reflects on the challenges of identifying the beginning with any certainty. Is it a point or a line? What congeals around (or conceals) beginnings? How do they generate knowledge through their eventual intersection with spaces, times, and positions?

While I felt compelled to agree with her—the point certainly did take up less space than the line and seemed to be the originary gesture of all movement—I did have to counter that though the point may be the base of all communication, it could not function *as* the base, because most people did not begin looking at points until they became lines.<sup>20</sup>

To draw the line, I return to choreography: to define, demarcate, or at least set the stage for concepts of the choreographic—so that I can extend into territories of choreographic curation.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines choreography as both the “written notation of dancing” and the “art of dancing.”<sup>21</sup> While this straightforward definition still binds the word too tightly to dance, I can wander a bit within the etymological: choreography derives from the French *chorégraphie*. Stemming from the Latinized *khoreia*, the Greek word for dance is combined with *graphein*, meaning to write.<sup>22</sup>

Etymologies of these words, in turn, encourage other possibilities. The Latin *chorus* and Greek *khoros* reference dancing in a circle, or stories in the intervals of a theatrical piece. There is further speculation that the root

20 Renee Gladman, *Calamities* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2016), 17.

21 *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “Choreography.”

22 *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Choreography” accessed 21 April 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/choreography>.

of the Greek word might imply *to grasp* or *enclose*, or, alternatively, *to like* or *to want*.<sup>23</sup>

The word *curate*, stemming from *care* and *cure*, has a history of both caring for the logistical and material aspects of a society—curator as civil servant—and the caretaking of souls—a spiritual guide.<sup>24</sup> Pursuing the word’s expanded meanings gives way to *curiosity* and *concern*, along with *procure* and *secure*.

*Grasp – Unfold – Connotate – Gather – Behold – Promenade – Gallery – Care*

Gathering these words and concepts—choreography, gallery, and their respective and intersecting galaxies—reflects my experience of curating. When I gather the choreographic-curatorial, I bring together an assemblage of voices, words, histories, and sensations as a curatorial “collection” (one connotation of the word *gather*)—which in turn, enables other relationship and exchanges.

What gathers around the gallery?

The early meanings of the word *gallery* include “covered walk or passageway, narrow and partly open passageway along a wall” as well as “church porch.” In the 1500s and 1600s, galleries became known as places to showcase artwork, as well as the highest seats in a theater—the farthest away and the least expensive.<sup>25</sup>

I’ve had my share of sitting high up in the obstructed view seats. While limiting in some ways, learning to perceive from behind a pole invites you to endow a performance you can’t quite see with your own version of events.

Sitting too close also inspires alternate perspectives: you are immersed to such a degree that sometimes the simultaneity of an act and your reception of it short-circuits your vision. You engage through other modes of perception, including through sensations produced by heat, air flow, and intense proximity.

The gallery is a space where both proximities are possible.

## Arrange and Control

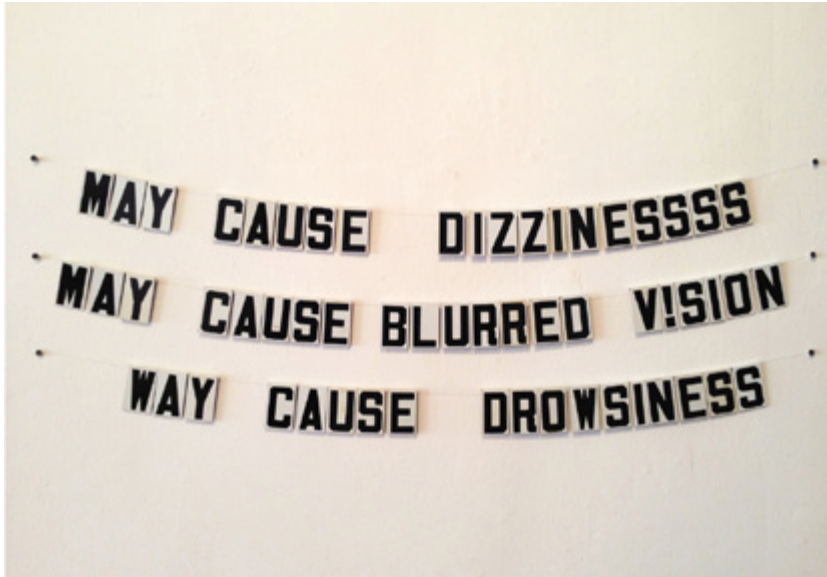
Curation, like dance, operates through “specific choreographic procedures which . . . organize the body in space and time.”<sup>26</sup> The idea of organizing bodies (of people, art objects, or knowledges) via “procedures” would seem to contradict my own curatorial desire for open-ended and responsive frameworks.

23 *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Chorus,” accessed 21 April 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=chorus>.

24 *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Curate,” accessed 22 December 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=curate>.

25 *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Gallery,” accessed 21 April 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=gallery>.

26 Gabriele Brandstetter and Gregor Stemmrich, preface to *Assign & Arrange: Methodologies of Presentation in Art and Dance*, eds. Maren Butte, Kirsten Maar, Fiona McGovern, Marie-France Rafael, and Jörn Schaffaff (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 13.



*May Cause Dizzinessss*

Is this desire more accurately characterized as the need to grasp something, to enclose it so that it performs according to my wishes? I acknowledge that some aspects of a choreographic curatorial process may be problematic if implemented literally.

Grasping and enclosing reveal curating's (and choreography's) connections to spectacle, classification, and power. In *The Birth of the Museum*, Tony Bennett makes a convincing case about the modern museum being a system of physical control and visual surveillance. This "exhibitionary complex," which rose alongside Michel Foucault's concept of the carceral archipelago,<sup>27</sup> renders artworks and audiences highly regulated. In this reading of the museum, exhibitions reinforce and reinscribe power relations. Eventually we internalize these forces and regulate our own behavior.

The lineage of Western choreography isn't that much better. Its historical legacy, transcribed within 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century dance notation, affiliated choreography with systems of representation, colonization, and othering. Choreographed movement has a long history of being controlling, abstracting (diverse) bodies and positioning (non) universal gestures within (never) neutral spaces of performance and display.<sup>28</sup>

27 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995/2007), 61.

28 The modern museum, ballet, dance notation, the proscenium stage, cabinets of curiosities, and the early operating theater gained prominence just before and during the Enlightenment (even though aspects of these practices were in use earlier). All were spaces for codifying knowledge and power through highly regulated systems of display and performance.



The structures that link dancing, writing, and viewing are “entangled with complicated networks of power,” agrees Jenn Joy, who notes that “this writing down of movements is never simply pure description or representation, but it is always a directive conditioned by prevailing notational devices, technologies, and pedagogical imperatives.” However, “these imperatives and apparatuses never quite describe the thing they strive to define.”<sup>29</sup>

### Into the Orbit

While these concerns are outside the scope of this research, it is important to acknowledge them and to ask: is it possible to move *against* these notions? To *de-un-* or *re-*define? Perhaps choreography and movement (as well as curatorial practice) could escape or expand: not choreography or curating as control, but choreographic *thinking* as a curatorial inclination towards openness?

Susan Leigh Foster’s definition of choreography provides a bridge to a more expansive terrain. Choreography, she notes, “constitutes a plan or a score according to which movement unfolds.”<sup>30</sup> The term is mutable. William Forsythe echoes this sentiment: choreography “is a curious and deceptive term. The word itself, like the processes it describes, is elusive, agile, and maddeningly unmanageable.”<sup>31</sup> The potential applications for choreography can expand because the term “presides over a class of ideas ... a thought or suggestion as to a possible course of action.”<sup>32</sup>

Notably, with these expansions, neither choreography nor the choreographic are tethered to dance, movement, or even bodies as they are commonly understood. Choreography can refer to the arrangement of elements or actions of *any* kind. Aspects which are typically associated with dance choreography, such as arrangement in space and time, composition, gesture, staging, and sequencing, can spread to include other fields, including curation.

In “Written on Water: Choreographies of the Curatorial,” Gabriele Brandstetter proposes that the curatorial embodies a “*modus agendi*, comprising very heterogenous forms of collaboration and transfer” where the choreographic helps us revise “the strategies of curating and programming in terms of choreography; in terms of composing space, objects, and bodies, in opening paths and structures of participation and placement through movement.”<sup>33</sup>

29 Joy, 16.

30 Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London: Routledge, 2011), 2.

31 William Forsythe, “Choreographic Objects,” in *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography: It Starts from Any Point*, ed. Steven Spier (London: Routledge, 2011), 90.

32 Forsythe, 90.

33 Gabriele Brandstetter, “Written on Water: Choreographies of the Curatorial,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 120.

These expanded notions of choreography reveal a rich territory.

Continuing to follow the words choreography and curation and their roots and affiliate words including *-gher*, *chorus*, and *graphein*, as they mingle and migrate in etymological spaces, I come across *house*, *garden*, *patch*, *enclosure*, *town*, *lines*, *to scratch*, and *to strive*. Also: *pleasure*, *effort*, *concern*, *grief*, *encourage*, *desire*, and *trouble*.<sup>34</sup> There are so many voices within each word, which multiply through the gestures of unearthing, intersecting, and tracing.

I use this associative approach as a method of artistic research. To be inquisitive. To encourage mental and embodied wanderings. I am trying to *touch* the choreographic: to stretch it, toss it, shape it, and be shaped by it. To gather it: together, for closer inspection, for companionship.

I also use it to resist. The launch away from given or assumed definitions is to refuse the given and to search for other options. Forsythe concurs: “To reduce choreography to a single denotation is to not understand the most crucial of its mechanisms: to resist and reform previous definitions.”<sup>35</sup>

Resistance often evokes oppositional stances. Impenetrable forms. Impervious boundaries. Not all structures are so inflexible.

In *Architecture is a Verb*, Sarah Robinson suggests that the Pantheon’s oculus gives the building the ability to breathe. What the arches “accomplish with opening and welcoming, heavy walls can only accomplish with sheer density and weight.” “Gravity,” Robinson continues, “is not a force, it is a curvature. The Pantheon curves to remain standing.”<sup>36</sup> I extend this idea into the realm of curatorial and cultural production: some structures facilitate exchange. Allowing for curvature enables what Mimi Zeiger calls “a methodology of softness,”<sup>37</sup> an evocative means of characterizing the elasticity and experimentality of artistic research.

With these curves, I anticipate the *choreographic-curatorial*.

Throughout this text, I use hyphenate structures. This isn’t laziness or convenience: I can’t find individual words to convey the core of my inquiry. I am not researching dances that respond to artworks in museum settings. I am not abstracting the gestures of gallery-goers into choreographic compositions. When I move in the studio (or on the stage, in the park, in the gallery) I summon the choreographic but do not illustrate it. When I analyze movement (in the gallery, at the office, at the performance), I think

34 References from the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed 22 August 2020: s.v. “\*gher-,” [https://www.etymonline.com/word/\\*gher-#etymonline\\_v\\_52744](https://www.etymonline.com/word/*gher-#etymonline_v_52744); s.v. “-graphy,” [https://www.etymonline.com/word/-graphy?ref=etymonline\\_crossreference](https://www.etymonline.com/word/-graphy?ref=etymonline_crossreference), and s.v. “Cure,” [https://www.etymonline.com/word/cure?ref=etymonline\\_crossreference#etymonline\\_v\\_42912](https://www.etymonline.com/word/cure?ref=etymonline_crossreference#etymonline_v_42912).

35 William Forsythe, “Choreographic Objects,” in *William Forsythe: Choreographic Objects*, eds. Louise Neri and Eva Respini (Munich: Prestel, 2018), 48.

36 Sarah Robinson, *Architecture Is a Verb* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 111–12.

37 Mimi Zeiger, class discussion, VIS\_2361\_SP2022: Discourse and Advocacy in the Spaces of Curation, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, Cambridge, MA, USA, 8 April 2022.

curatorially with an awareness of my own embodied knowledge.<sup>38</sup> I weave the choreographic *with* (not into) the curatorial as a mesh, matrix, and platform. The hyphen makes these concepts come into view.<sup>39</sup>

Erin Manning sees the hyphen as a generative force, a differential “that brings making to thinking and thinking to making.”<sup>40</sup> She suggests:

Different practices must retain their singularity. At the same time, when they do come together ... it is important to inquire into what the hyphenation does to their singularity. ... Problems that arise include: How does a practice that involves making open the way for a different idea of what can be termed knowledge? How is the creation of concepts, in the context of the philosophical, itself a creative process?... In what ways does the hyphen make operational interstitial modes of existence?<sup>41</sup>

## A Body in a Gallery? To Body (in) a Gallery?

I keep dancing around the question of dance in museums, don't I?

While I claim this research endeavor is *not* about dancing in galleries, at the same time, since my own experience includes performing in museum and gallery settings. I *do* think about what it means to place (curatorially) dance—and bodies—in museums. I think a lot about bodies in my work: my own as a curator and performer; the bodies of audiences; the body of the institution; and collective bodies as sites of perception, knowledge, and action.

I am aware that movement can too easily be oriented toward specific outcomes. To interrupt this habit, I adopt Erin Manning's position that movement should be *decisional* rather than intentional: “Movement-moving is at its most creative, its most operational, when not curtailed by the imposition of volition and intentionality.”<sup>42</sup> While I identify movement as fundamental to my curatorial practice, I detach it from the specific dance or choreographic moves I or others make in performance settings: “Form is less the endpoint than the conduit.”<sup>43</sup>

Embodiment is critical to choreographic thinking in the curatorial, but the body is situated as a flexible, processual *phase*, rather than a static entity. The choreographic is embodied and embedded in the world as dynamic *thinking-as-moving-moving-as-thinking*.

38 There is substantial research on embodied knowledge. While beyond the scope of this project, I acknowledge its influence, especially in texts such as *Ways of Knowing in Dance and Art*, Helsinki: University of the Arts, 2007, edited by Leena Rouhiainen, as well as in the work of Donna Haraway, Alva Noë, and Paolo Freire, among others.

39 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 11.

40 Manning, 13.

41 Manning, 11.

42 Manning, 19.

43 Manning, 48.

## Techniques of Making and Thinking: Bringing Forth

Being and knowing are dynamic, changing, and overlapping systems that activate potential forms without predetermining them. Manning questions the idea that movement comes *after* thinking, or that action is somehow separate from when it assumes contours we can recognize: “a choreographic practice challenges the presupposition that movement is secondary to form, subjective or objective. The choreographic ... is a technique that assists us in rethinking how a creative process activates conditions for its emergence as event.”<sup>44</sup>

We assume *form* is something we are supposed to have defined beforehand. When we go to put the trash in the barrel, we may believe that the end form—the concept of trash—and the ultimate form to delineate that concept—the trash barrel outside—is what we’re aiming for. We have the forms (thinking of something as trash, the act of taking out the trash, the trash barrel) and then the movement that gets us to articulate or enact those forms (digging out the stringy parsley from the refrigerator, deciding if you can recycle the metallic wrapping paper, wondering about saving that pair of snagged socks).

The activation of the trash or trash barrel as an object, goal, or event, is not dependent on the movement of us taking out the trash, but the initiation of that movement. The initiation of the idea sets the scene for the object of the trash, and eventually the container that will signify it as such, the trash barrel, to come into view, to become operational.

Is that it? I think so. Sort of. It’s still unclear. Besides what superficially looks like spending a paragraph contemplating the mechanics of how we think about taking out our trash, I am using the structure of the words to enact their meaning, choreographically.

If representation is often relegated to serving as an end point or arrival, choreographic thinking takes another approach. It does not aim to make representations or to be representational in nature—to seek an end—but to initiate something.

Manning uses technique imbued with *techne*, a sense of “bringing forth.” The interpretation already has movement as its generating principle. The choreographic in this sense would not necessarily be a set of procedures or tools called into service in a crisis (*We’re at a dead end. Quick! Initiate the choreographic!*) but the ethos that enables these tools to come into play in the first place. Through movement, choreographic thinking brings forth.

44 Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 74–75.

As Renee Gladman observes:

To enter it, you had to be in motion, and to see where you were you had to be in motion, and not just moving your body around constantly, frantically naming stations, then moving at varying speeds between them, but also naming with impermanence, seeing objects as in the middle of some process, and understanding your seeing as impermanent as well, changing always. Once I'd done this, I could look at the line falling from the building and speak differently about it. I wouldn't have to say one then two but could create a relation that sat outside of one and two, something that can't be named here in this space of one and two but perhaps could be pointed to.<sup>45</sup>

If I had trash, and a trash barrel, I would show you.

The choreographic is a technique in the exhibition realm in the sense that it brings forth. It can be used to challenge our assumptions about how creative activities work in the curatorial process, what their outcomes should be, and what counts as relevant when assessing those activities.

Is the choreographic, then, a *method*, when it comes to curating exhibitions in the visual arts setting?

Yes and no. On a literal level, this might entail inviting others into conversation during the exhibition development process or arranging the exhibition layout to prompt anticipated or desired movement. But beyond the applied understanding, the choreographic encourages a commitment to staying open to see where the process leads and a responsiveness to the compositions that are enabled by this open-ended framework.

Does curating choreographically mean that one integrates movement-based works into the gallery? Not necessarily, but perhaps on occasion. Choreography can be non-coincident with the choreographic, but still form part of its textural milieu.

Choreographic thinking in this expanded sense is both a practice and a motor. It "makes time"<sup>46</sup> for initiating concepts without reducing them to objects too quickly, as well as makes space for realizing them in the world when you (they) are ready. This is what I seek in choreographic curatorial practice: to provide a platform for artistic engagement without foreclosing what form that engagement takes.

45 Gladman, 122–123.

46 Manning, 76.

## A Desire to Move

Objects and subjects within the gallery setting are formed through mutual construction and negotiation, “manifested through an assemblage of everything around us,” according to Adesola Akinleye. What if we started with embodiment? What kind of world would that produce if we saw the environment as part of us?<sup>47</sup> The art object is already in motion when it arrives in the gallery. It offers multiple, contextually responsive meanings as it is encountered by different audiences and within different contexts. It opens space.

Like the object, the body within choreographic thinking is a space for potential. It’s not necessary to have a physical, actual, human body. It is a technique, in Manning’s sense: it brings forth. The physicality of my own body while in a dance studio or on the gallery floor can be operationalized to propel the movement of thought. While the movement of thought could originate elsewhere, outside my body, my body is still the means through which I negotiate and produce meaning as a curator in gallery spaces and situations.<sup>48</sup>

To imagine the embodiment of objects and bodies within the gallery context, I (re)turn to dance.

### The What Else? Body

Choreographer William Forsythe has an active practice in the visual arts. Many of his sculptural objects and performative interventions are set within museums and galleries. While the installations are dependent on bodies—those of the performers, and increasingly, those of the audience, Forsythe wonders about the need to have a body to render choreography or enable choreographic thought. This is not to say that bodies of *some kind* are not important, but how those bodies manifest is open: “What else, besides the body, could physical thinking look like?”<sup>49</sup> Physical thinking could be situated in bodies or objects, but it could also be situated in something ephemeral: a *desire* for movement.<sup>50</sup>

At the *William Forsythe: Choreographic Objects* exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston (2018–2019), Forsythe encouraged this desire in various ways. Sometimes it was accomplished spatially. In *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time*, where hundreds of plumb bobs hung from ceiling, their movements activated by intermittent motors, audiences were enticed to navigate through the installation by walking, hopping, or skipping from one

47 Akinleye, class discussion, 9 September 2020.

48 My own embodied knowledge is not universal, and my physicality or positionality are not the only, or most important, aspects of a curatorial project. Even if I initiate something, the most I can do is to facilitate its potential.

49 William Forsythe, “Choreographic Objects,” in *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography: It Starts from Any Point*, ed. Steven Spier (London: Routledge, 2011), 91.

50 Forsythe, 141.

side of the room to the other. There was pleasure and excitement in trying not to hit one of the bobs and knock the rhythmic sequence out of balance.

At other times, the desire for movement was cultivated linguistically. In *The Differential Room*, the audience moved according to instructions on chalkboards. The messages encouraged you to stand on one foot and hop, walk backwards with your eyes closed, or move slowly around a felt-topped bench. You performed the gestures *and* your desire, even if your movements did not successfully achieve the stated aims of the instructions.

In contrast to the choreography proposed by the exhibition, the *choreographic* in Forsythe's sculptural works is the potential for movement without presupposing the form—or even the realization—of this movement ahead of time (or at all). Like Forsythe's description of choreography as a "possible course of action," Erin Manning views choreography as "propositional"—it does not delineate specific positions. Instead, it "activates a diagrammatic force that exceeds the description or representation of a process."<sup>51</sup>

The desire of the audience member to enter the field of plumb lines in *Nowhere and Everywhere* is choreographic even if the physical movement is never realized. From the outskirts of the room, it was almost more compelling to *anticipate* moving through the cascade of plumb bobs than moving in them. Watching (and listening to) other people navigate the sculpture, or even attending to the gentle swaying motion and soft clicks of the motors when no one was inside, created feelings of expectation and promise, despite these feelings being unfulfilled in a physical sense. Forsythe's sculptures provide the structure for the realization of this impulse, but the impulse is already there, latent, prior to the sculpture's arrival: choreographic thinking can be invoked apart from having a physical object or structure in which to house it.

### Traversing the Political

While the Forsythe exhibition is not explicitly political, it has sociopolitical implications. The installations became sites for the representation of the polis, where bodies came together to enact, prototype, and negotiate an environment or a situation. Jenn Joy reminds us that "choreography ... as a play between gesture and movement also points to its dependence on systems of signification and their ideological force."<sup>52</sup>

Forsythe's works invites—or demands—audiences to move in particular ways, at times eclipsing the choreographic potentials. While some of this pressure within the ICA exhibition might have come from the instructional signage, the staff, or other audience members, I believe a significant part came from the works themselves. They performed by directing the performance of others according to assumptions about access (physical and

<sup>51</sup> Manning, 80.

<sup>52</sup> Joy, 95.

expectational), requiring external visibility and measurable “engagement” as metrics of activity on the part of the audience.

The display aspects of exhibitions (and concert dance choreography) are firm in our cultural consciousness. We quickly render ourselves obedient to their expectations of visuality, productive movement, and measured labor. These aspects were reproduced or even reinforced in the *Choreographic Objects* exhibition. Fayen d’Evie remarks that *Nowhere and Everywhere* privileges the ocular, despite being about touch, vibration, accommodation, and desire. She notes:

It was difficult to conceive of how a visitor with non-normative vision could engage in the movement encounter. A cane would have caused mayhem, while the pace and unpredictability of the swinging pendulums resisted navigation by echolocation. Moreover, if read aloud to a blind visitor, a qualifying clause on the printed information sheet effectively rescinded the initial invitation: “*You are invited to move through this field of pendulums ... but try to avoid touching them.*”<sup>53</sup>

The public nature of the exhibition exerted a social pressure to move, or at least to think about moving, as well as the actual opportunity.

Participating in *The Fact of Matter* installation, made of hundreds of rings suspended by ropes hung from the ceiling, was an ideological proposition. Success, at least defined by the audience members I encountered, emphasized virtuosic physicality and its public witness: the ability to traverse from one side of the room to the other without stopping or touching the ground.

Is there another way to experience this piece? Fayen d’Evie suggests detaching “spectatorship from manifestations of choreographic objects.”<sup>54</sup> She wonders what “might emerge from a reconceptualisation of choreographic objects attentive not to the previously invisible, but to the obscured, to the concealed, or the perpetually invisible?”<sup>55</sup>

We could extend d’Evie’s suggestion to propose that we could move *otherwise* within the work. In this manner, the audience could use *The Fact of Matter* and *Nowhere and Everywhere* differently—not just with the intent, but away from and beyond it. Hongjohn Lin suggests that “The political of the curatorial should attribute to antagonism between spectators and curators, who can create . . . a shift of epistemology through the form of exhibitions.” By illuminating the connections between objects and relationships through the exhibition format, this shift allows the audience to “have a chance to

53 Fayen d’Evie, “Orienting Through Blindness: Blundering, Be-Holding, and Wayfinding as Artistic and Curatorial Methods,” in *Performance Paradigm* 13, Performance, Choreography, and the Gallery (2017): 52, <https://www.performanceparadigm.net/index.php/journal/article/view/193>.

54 d’Evie, 53.

55 d’Evie, 53.





William Forsythe's *The Fact of Matter* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston (2019).

emancipate”<sup>56</sup> from the exhibition’s own assumptions. d’Eve extends this argument: “If perceptual variations and instabilities are acknowledged and destigmatised, then complex concepts of embodiment—including blindness—may extend the theory and artistic instantiations of choreographic objects, with unfamiliar bodily, spatial and social configurations.”<sup>57</sup>

Forsythe’s own desires for the installations may be choreographic—offering the potential of more than the given score—even if the installations themselves suggest a more pre-defined choreography. Resisting the given or expected performativity, and proposing other ways of engaging in the works, is a disruption that validates difference. To walk through the forest of hanging rings in *The Fact of Matter*. To roll under them. To stop in the middle and linger. Detaching the external aesthetic and curatorial goals from their expected impacts makes space for other forms of agency.

56 Hongjohn Lin, “The Curatorial Thing,” in *Curatography: The Study of Curatorial Culture*, no. 5 Curatorial Episteme, 24 January 2022, <https://curatography.org/the-curatorial-thing>.

57 d’Eve, 54.

## LOOKING AND LOOKING BACK: HETEROGENOUS BODIES IN HEIDI LATSKY'S *ON DISPLAY*

I performed in Heidi Latsky Company's *On Display* in 2016 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, in 2018 at the Boston Architectural College, and in 2019 at Harvard University.<sup>58</sup> *On Display*, conceived as a living sculpture court, investigates difference, spectacle, and the gaze. Latsky works with dancers of all abilities and disabilities (visible and invisible) to call attention to the hierarchies and power dynamics of spectatorship.

Before our first performance, Latsky emphasized the agency of the performers. It was not solely about audiences watching us—it was also about our noticing our own internal perceptions and returning the gaze. As the piece started, we moved slowly, deliberately, with our eyes closed, in resistance to the conventions of museum spectatorship. When we arrived at a position where we wanted to linger, we would stop, hold the pose, and open our eyes and look back at those who were watching us.

*On Display* is the type of piece that Ann Cooper Albright notes “finds ways to rupture the traditional representations that objectify the female body by ... focusing the audience's attention on, the ‘elsewhere.’”<sup>59</sup> Albright remarks that bodies in these works “elude a traditional gaze and defy the powerful pleasure of spectacle—that of looking at something to be looked at. Surprised by a disruption of their gaze, the audience, in turn, can be pushed out of its conventional consumption of these bodies.”<sup>60</sup>

The second performance at the ICA was indoors. I was positioned in the theater. The audience had to make an intentional trip to see the work. Once inside, people would encounter a small group of dancers on pedestals. While pedestals had been used in other iterations of *On Display*, the usual arrangement was to have dancers directly on the floor (with wheelchairs, canes, or anything else that is part of the performer's body). In this case, the pedestals created a barrier, widening the distance between audience and performer.

Situating part of the piece in the theater, away from the performers stationed in the galleries, was isolating. Fewer people varied their viewing positions (close, midrange, distant). They did not interact. In the right situation, both the performers and the audience in *On Display* vacillate between subjects and objects. However, this setting impeded the dialogic nature of the work: we were objects. Performers and audiences did not look with equal agency. The situation too quickly prioritized the gaze of the audience.

58 Performances take place on 3 December, the United Nations' International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

59 Ann Cooper Albright, *Engaging Bodies: The Politics and Poetics of Corporeality* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 65.

60 Albright, 65.

During that same performance, the shades in the theater had been raised to provide a sweeping view of Boston Harbor, a choice probably made to de-emphasize, and to some degree naturalize, our performance. We weren't in the theatrical spotlight. But spotlights have important functions—they are attentional beacons, for performers as well as for audiences. They differentiate or highlight. Undifferentiated light—or undifferentiated looking—is not always effective.

How did the choreographic apparatus or condition, such as the space or the lighting, create or discourage lines of exchange? How was the piece not just site-specific, but *site-dependent*? I have since revisited my ideas about open-endedness. Some focus is helpful. The curatorial is a focusing gesture. It should function like one.



Ripple.

## The Choreographic as Curatorial Methodology

Choreographic curation harnesses logistical, operational, and artistic choices to create dynamic conditions for aesthetic engagement to flourish. Performing in museums, as a form of participatory research, and analyzing dance-related museum exhibitions enable me to examine assumptions and expectations about curatorial processes and outcomes.

My interest in movement within spatial and relational conditions equally manifest in my work as an educator. My students will laughingly admit that I am somewhat obsessed with the configurations of classroom furniture. Ann Cooper Albright reflects that “Teaching—whatever one’s discipline or pedagogical focus—is an intellectual, social, and a physical activity. Often the very architectural conditions of the room help to determine the social dynamic of the bodies that inhabit the space.”<sup>61</sup> Like Albright, I do not claim a causal connection between architecture and pedagogical outcomes, but I agree that “an increased awareness of the physical contours of a learning environment can help us recognize these psychophysical patterns”<sup>62</sup> in students *and* audiences.

Albright suggests dance facilitates seeing differently. In Contact Improvisation, the focus of her own movement practice,<sup>63</sup> “one learns to see not by fixing one’s gaze on people or surrounding objects, but rather by allowing the eyes to rest back in the eye sockets and relying more on a relaxed, peripheral vision. This small shift in visual focus radically changes one’s experience.”<sup>64</sup>

In this way, movement in relation to curatorial research is not simply a conceptual conceit. In the gallery, I notice aspects of the layout, floor-plan, and rhythm of the walls. I look up at the ceiling. I stare at the floor. This awareness becomes productive and later strategic within curating. As Susan Rethorst observes, “Empathy with, sensitivity to, movement informs our daily lives, working as often as not under the radar of our conscious thoughts.”<sup>65</sup> Literal and imagined movements in the gallery allow me to prototype in response to what the curatorial process reveals. Rethorst describes how movements

61 Albright, 251.

62 Albright, 252.

63 See a short history of Contact Improvisation by Nancy Stark Smith, one of its key practitioners: <https://contactquarterly.com/cq/unbound/view/harvest-a-history-of-ci#>.

64 Albright, 254.

65 Susan Rethorst, *A Choreographic Mind: Autobodygraphical Writings* (Helsinki: University of the Arts Theatre Academy, 2015), 55.

can be placed in a corner or the center of the room and felt there. They can be first or last in a sequence . . . They can be envisioned in a corner or in the center upstage-facing the back wall. They can be . . . experienced as affected by varying places of space and time. They can be interviewed by the senses about their nature by being so placed here and there in the body-mind's eye.<sup>66</sup>

## Objects and Subjects

How objects or subjects are placed in space and time determines their relevance and interpretation. The exhibition layout is only the most visible manifestation of that arrangement. Historically, arrangements of art objects in museums have been used as classificatory structures that favor aesthetics, functions, or chronologies, or simply reflect who or what is in power at the time.

Contemporary curatorial practice encourages attunement to other arrangements, including the affective and the relational, to name only a few. Objects and subjects in a choreographic-curatorial realm encompass not only artworks, but people, atmospheres, systems, and ideologies, raising questions about “how subject-object boundaries are defined”<sup>67</sup> and how the arrangement of these entities can be reconsidered.

Developing successful curatorial projects relies on unseen but continuous choreographies, invoked not just by the solitary curator or artwork, but by the larger network facilitated by the curatorial. Choreographic thinking envisions objects and subjects in the gallery within a dynamic matrix of relationality, where positions and perspectives can shift. Movement links these diverse elements into a “rich temporal weave” where “the impetus of change is . . . a venturing of movement and discovering patterns, an adjusting and readjusting, and an expanding of one's bodily capacities according to the opportunities and constraints available.”<sup>68</sup>

I am reminded of Florian Malzacher's observations about the role of the curatorial in theater, which

allows us to observe ourselves while being part of the performance. It does not create an artificial outside of pure criticality but neither is it able to lure in mere immersive identification. . . . Theatre marks a space where things are real and not real at the same time, it creates situations and practices that are symbolic and actual at once. A curatorial thinking that makes conscious use of this knowledge underlines its own relational aspects and highlights social and political implications – it creates a space of negotiation.<sup>69</sup>

66 Rethorst, 91.

67 Catherine Wood, “People and Things in the Museum,” in *Choreographing Exhibitions*, ed. Matthew Copeland (Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2013), 113.

68 Robinson, 40.

69 Florian Malzacher, “Feeling Alive: The Performative Potential of Curating,” in *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy*, eds. Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2017), 31.

Paying close attention to movement and arrangement within the curatorial process emphasizes certain perceptual and gestural tendencies over others. My approach is ambulatory, responding to shifting needs or conditions of the exhibition, a “constantly mobile gaze that takes the side of both choreographer and spectator—within an in-between space of transference, of translation as a choreographic repositioning.”<sup>70</sup> In that manner, a choreographic-curatorial approach counters the representational fixity often common within the display conventions of both choreography and curating.

I agree that a choreographic curatorial practice functions, as Catherine Wood might say, as an “investment” that allows the complexities and the potentials of matter—the objects and the relationships within the gallery setting—to realize their capacity for change:

Here is potential for a new form of investment . . . to treat the museum as a space in which any ordinary concept of “the social” is multiply interrupted by its myriad stored, archived, and displayed things; a space suggesting that if we listened to them, mute objects push us to act upon, and elaborate their own subjective capacities between us, opening as yet unmapped pathways.<sup>71</sup>

The curatorial intention at the start of the project should be flexible enough to respond to meanings proposed by the process: “To move the interval, the more-than, rather than ‘the body,’ or ‘the subject,’” argues Erin Manning, “is to create an opening for politics that doesn’t begin with or settle into form, a politics that invents with the inframodality of a making-thinking that refuses to know in advance what it can become.”<sup>72</sup>

Unsurprisingly, my own agency shifts frequently within this framework. Often, this flexibility confounds my colleagues when they struggle to understand what it is that I think about and do in my practice. Sometimes I am a curator. Sometimes I am a choreographer. Sometimes I am a dramaturg. Sometimes I am a performer. Sometimes I am a sculptor. Sometimes I am an educator. It depends on my conversational partner. Or my mood. Most often I mumble something about being an “interdisciplinary artist.” This shifting of positions, too, is a type of choreographic experimentality.

As much as I have tried to clarify my intent in the previous pages, some of the connections between dance, choreography, and curating—those that are the most vital—remain subterranean. The influence of choreographic thinking probably goes unnoticed in most of my curatorial projects.

70 Brandstetter, “Written on Water: Choreographies of the Curatorial,” 124.

71 Wood, 122.

72 Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 127.







Five: Arranging Spaces of  
Relation(s): What Can Objects Do?

## The Capacities of Objects

Dorothy's ruby slippers. A passport. The Elgin Marbles.

Objects are powerful.

Along with the visible and tangible aspects of objects, objects are compelling because of their latent properties—what they suggest, inspire, and catalyze.

In *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, Lorraine Daston describes the devoted community that has assembled around the Glass Flowers, a set of botanical models created by father and son Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka from 1886 to 1936 that are housed at the Harvard Museum of Natural History in Cambridge, Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> The models have inspired fans and followers across the globe: this enthusiastic network around the objects constitutes their vibrant *thingness*. Daston, reflecting on critic Miguel Tamen's notion that objects are activated by "societies of friends," observes:

The capacity to call such a society of friends into existence is as much a part of a thing's thingness, of its reverberations in the world, as its material properties like weight and chemical composition. As Tamen points out, a society of friends acts to keep the favored objects visible.<sup>2</sup>

Along with making sure the Glass Flowers are visible—literally and in collective memory—and that the models are safe during their limited travels, the friends of the Glass Flowers "attach meanings to them."<sup>3</sup> This attachment produces other things: wishes, favors, affiliations, letters, discourses, and, in the case of the Harvard Museum of Natural History, ticket sales.

The idea of attachment in this context is intriguing. The Glass Flowers act as catalysts and connectors in a bevy of relational exchanges. Daston notes that "to send a note of inquiry concerning the Blaschka models . . . is to become quickly enmeshed in an international network of high connectivity. Start at any one node, and you are very soon linked up to other aficionados."<sup>4</sup>

The fanfare about the Glass Flowers is less about whether the models are accurate or useful for scientific knowledge. More noteworthy is that they compel various meanings, interpretations, and desires to attach to their history and lore, which compels people to *attach and re-attach to each other*.

1 The formal name of the models is the Ware Collection of Blaschka Glass Models of Plants: <https://hmnh.harvard.edu/glass-flowers>.

2 Lorraine Daston, "The Glass Flowers," in *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, ed. Lorraine Daston (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 228.

3 Daston, 229.

4 Daston, 228.

Preceding pages: Push puppets in *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*.  
Collection of Melissa and Erick Mischke.



The Glass Flowers, formally known as the Ware Collection of Blaschka Glass Models of Plants at the Harvard Museum of Natural History.

The Blaschkas pursued the academic and technical study necessary for the collection's commission through myriad movements. Research, travel, and trial and error accompanied the models' initial creation. The process compelled the direct and indirect involvement of many contributors beyond just Leopold and Rudolf. As Daston observes, "The Glass Flowers did more than crystallize labor; they multiplied it. Everyone who came into contact with them – the model makers, the curators, the botanists – added their mite of care and concentration to the horde."<sup>5</sup>

The intersecting lines of desire, affiliation, and opportunity were notable on the Harvard side of the partnership, too: George Lincoln Goodale, the botanist who engaged the Blaschkas to make the models, used the Glass Flowers to attract audiences and potential funders: "The Ware Collection was originally conceived as much as a collection of scientific models as a magnet for crowds and donors. Goodale unabashedly exploited this magnetism for all it was worth, as when he sent off selected models as part of the Harvard display to the World Exposition in Paris (1900)" in hope of inspiring philanthropic generosity.<sup>6</sup>

While the Glass Flowers are indeed captivating, mundane, functional objects can also foster alliances. In *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World*, Keller Easterling observes that objects have a generative force related to the intersection of their objecthood and the potential actions that this objecthood produces:

The objects in a simple room—table, chair, lamp, pen, teapot, teacup, apple, and window—are performing. Although static, they are projecting latent potentials, activities, and relationships. The chair is sized to accommodate a seated human body . . . The teapot and teacup have handles that fingers can wrap around . . . Some of the interactions are timed. The tea will go cold. The sun will go down, and the lamp will go on. Each of the objects in the assembly offers some properties or capacities that are in interplay.<sup>7</sup>

Ordinary objects like cups and shirts are never static or mute; they are always in relation. Objects are persuasive not only because they propose a dynamic state of *interplay*—the relational, oscillating force that pulses between objects and the world—but because of their potential, latent, or unrealized attributes.<sup>8</sup>

The notion of interplay and the latent potential of objects is foundational within choreographic curatorial practice. Terry Smith notes that "the

5 Daston, 240.

6 Daston, 247–8.

7 Keller Easterling, *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World* (London: Verso, 2021), vii.

8 Curating is an object under Easterling's framework, too—one that generates conditions for interplay.

uncertain, hoped for, or unanticipated consequence” within curation are “a key quality of many exhibitions: an opportunity that the best curators take advantage of when it presents itself and seek to underscore for visitors. It is one of the factors that distinguish curating from art criticism and art history, although not of course from art itself. Unexpected connections present themselves when works are hung within sight of each other.”<sup>9</sup> Objects and exhibitions both have the possibility of motivating actions and interpretations beyond their given, obvious, or discernable meanings or placements.

This section examines the choreographic responses that objects instigate. The choreographic capacities of objects—the ways they move and their ability to move us—become particularly evident when individual objects congregate into a collection. Through *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*,<sup>10</sup> on view at the Lamont Gallery from 19 January through 28 February 2015, I examine the nature of objects’ presence and agency and the ways that bodies and objects mutually constitute one another in and through movement, arrangement, and exchange.

## Surprise!

Several years before *Open House*, I discovered an unknown and unacknowledged collection squirreled away in the Lamont Gallery’s storage rooms. No one mentioned these objects when I first arrived. Or, more likely, no one knew about the collection of 800 objects and counting, either.

The Lamont Gallery operated as a space for temporary, rotating exhibitions. Because of the gallery’s non-collecting mission, it lacked a comprehensive collection inventory, had no collections management or conservation plan and no database of work. It did not conduct regular scholarship or curricular integration of the collection, and it had no collections-specific staffing or storage. No one seemed to know why the gallery had this disparate assortment of objects or how to address their presence.

The collection felt unintentional, almost accidental.<sup>11</sup> There was an odd mix of works: modern paintings barely holding on to their stretcher bars, drawings uncomfortably pinned beneath acid-marked mats, silkscreen prints secured by masking tape, broken bits of wooden sculptures, and an agreeable

9 Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 191.

10 See the *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting* Research Catalogue exposition at: [www.researchcatalogue.net/view/518043/2038633](http://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/518043/2038633).

11 The Lamont Gallery “uncollection” inspired many other projects, most notably, *Of Accidental Origin* (2017–2018), an exhibition of collection objects installed in the head of school’s campus residence. The project was a collaborative effort with a team of students and collections assistant Olivia Knauss: [https://www.exeter.edu/sites/default/files/documents/LamontGallery\\_Of\\_Accidental\\_Origin.pdf](https://www.exeter.edu/sites/default/files/documents/LamontGallery_Of_Accidental_Origin.pdf).

but anonymous collection of blown glass fish. Provenances were incomplete or absent. Conditions were somewhat bleak. I was surprised and unsettled.<sup>12</sup>

I am not a collector. I have an ambivalent relationship to objects. From a lifetime of frequent moves, I am sensitive to what people amass in their attics, basements, and storage units. It's not the individual thing that terrifies me—the treasured book, the nostalgic necklace—but what objects become when they accumulate: memorials and mausoleums.

As I learned about the objects in the Lamont Gallery's storage, additional gallery holdings began to surface in other offices, residence hall basements, and behind filing cabinets. The prospect of researching, conserving, and studying all those objects was daunting.

Numerous professional organizations, including the American Alliance of Museums, the International Council of Museums, and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre advise museums to follow certain ethical, administrative, and material guidelines to ensure the collection objects' care.<sup>13</sup> Museums charged with overseeing collections are often obligated to do so in perpetuity.<sup>14</sup>

As a non-collecting institution, what was the Lamont Gallery's obligation to the objects in storage? Despite my personal hesitancy about collecting, I felt accountable. Responding was an ethical imperative. I could not simply just let the objects remain stifled in storage.

Besides, I became curious. Why *did* we have these pieces? What had my predecessors done upon their discovery of the collection?<sup>15</sup> What hidden histories of Phillips Exeter Academy might we discover? How could we share this adventure with our audience?

12 Other questions surfaced during this project. What does the *condition* of a collection indicate? Are institutions excited, or embarrassed, by collections, especially if they are not financially significant or reveal uncomfortable histories? How do institutions demonstrate the commitment and resources to address these discoveries?

13 The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) has extensive guidelines in their Collections Management Policy (<https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/collections-management-policy>) which includes "Collections Stewardship Core Standards." For academic museums and galleries, the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries (AAMG) publication, "Professional Practices for Museums and Galleries," from 2017 is useful. The legacy of Western colonialist collecting practices certainly shaped the collection I discovered in the Lamont Gallery. Despite our establishment as a non-collecting space, we existed in the context of robust alumni involvement. Donations by alumni, spurred by U.S. tax law, mirrored the object-based philanthropy in other larger U.S. cultural institutions. The relationship between donors, objects, and institutional fundraising goals made our collections management issues challenging. We were never asked what would enhance our collection, and we never received additional support to maintain gifts of art.

14 This obligation of perpetual care is still the gold standard, despite recent deaccessioning trends due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic or because of museums' desires to diversify collections.

15 Former staff members had tried to address the collections issues decades earlier. The fact that nothing had changed was an indicator of a larger, systemic issue that one or two exhibitions was not going to change.

My initial questions about this “uncollection” led to broader questions about collecting: What are the divisions between collections-worthy objects and everyday items? What drives us to consume, save, and keep items ranging from ticket stubs to cut glass? How do institutions use and care for collections? What values, memories, and stories do collections reveal? How is a collection—or the practice of collecting—understood from ontological or epistemological perspectives?

*What should I do with all this stuff?*

## What, Where, When, or Who Is an (Art) Object?

### Dust & Discovery

I decided to confront my ambivalence. I began to integrate objects from various collections, borrowed from institutions and individuals, into every exhibition. A colleague’s stylish mid-century modern sofa landed in *Pop Paradise* (2013). Reverend Thomas Starr King’s near-ecstatic descriptions of the American landscape from *The White Hills, Their Legend, Landscape, and Poetry*<sup>16</sup> appeared in *Luminous Terrain: The Art of the White Mountains* (2013).

The insertion of collections objects became a repeating gesture of ushering one entity into conversation with another. These *objects of intersection*, which included board games, turn-of-the-century illustrated travel diaries, and taxidermy, became regular features within our contemporary art exhibitions.<sup>17</sup>

One project, *Dust & Discovery: Works from the Lamont Gallery Collection* (2013), went even further. In some ways, this project was the turning point in the development of my curatorial process.

For the exhibition we pulled close to 100 objects out of storage: everything from James Audubon, Alexander Calder, and Hiroshige prints, to works on canvas, silkscreens, wood carvings, assorted posters, and curious decorative objects. The set of blown glass fish made their debut. Works were displayed “as is,” with stains, rips, missing pieces, and broken frames.

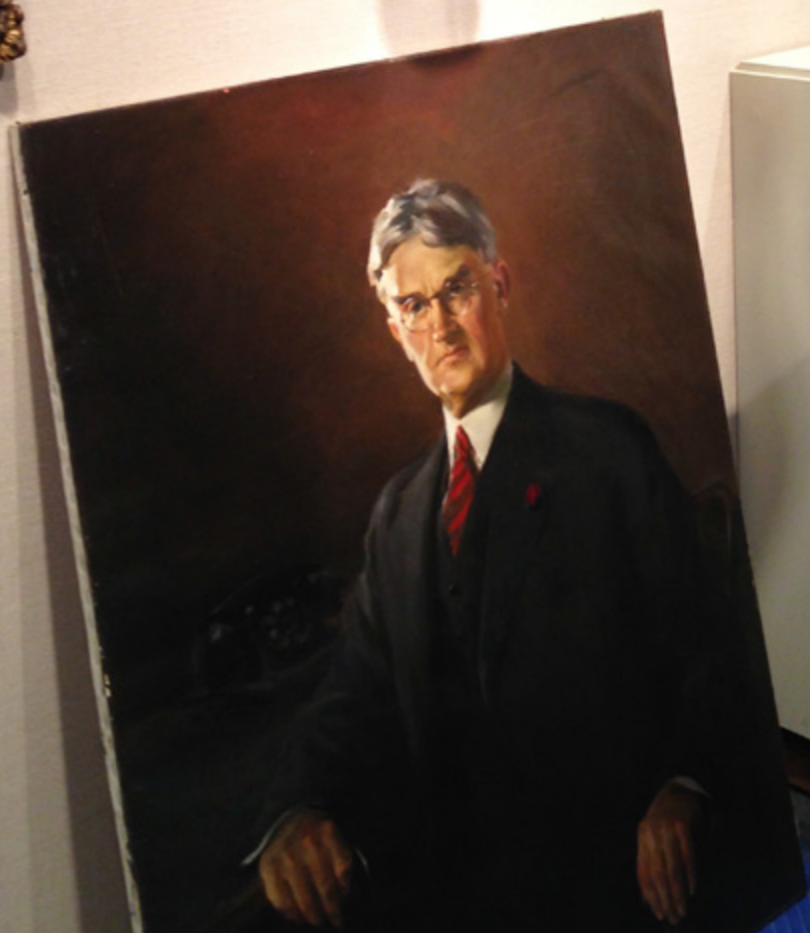
Objects were added weekly, and sometimes daily, to the gallery during public hours. This continually shifting and accumulating tableau provoked many exchanges with employees and audience members. By cultivating the audience’s curiosity, I hoped it would help us understand how the collection came to be.

<sup>16</sup> I was thrilled to find an original 1887 copy of the book in Exeter’s Class of 1945 Library.

<sup>17</sup> In contrast, I integrated contemporary objects into historic exhibitions. For *Luminous Terrain*, which showcased 19<sup>th</sup> century White Mountain and Hudson River School paintings, I displayed photographs of environmental and eco-fashion designs by Massachusetts College of Art and Design students.



Small informational card or photograph with text and a small image, likely providing details about the taxidermy specimen.





To investigate the material conditions of the objects, we arranged for painting conservator Elizabeth Leto Fulton to work on site. Paintings were unframed (or defitted) and placed on a worktable in the back of the gallery. Under the illumination of construction lights, Fulton examined the paintings, which were then returned to their prior locations on the walls. Frames were displayed nearby to support the notion that each aspect of a work—its materials, its supports, and its surround—were part of the investigation. Fulton’s object assessment reports, mounted in signs next to the works, detailed paint loss and warping, possible conservation methods, and the approximate number of hours needed for treatment. Fulton went studiously from one piece to the next, talking with audience members as she worked.

I became attentive to my own curatorial embodied, sensory, and emotional engagement through touch, sight, and even smell. Walking around the gallery often provoked feelings of confusion (“What is *this*?!”), dismay (“Oh no!”), and, on occasion, delight (“This is marvelous!”). The continuous movements of adding and rearranging objects in the gallery promoted compositional and interpretive flexibility, rather than narrative inevitability.<sup>18</sup>

## Objects as Interplay

What was the object in these scenarios?<sup>19</sup> I was starting to have my doubts.

Was it the wildebeest game head, allegedly crafted by James L. Clark (1883–1969), the same artisan who made trophy heads for Theodore Roosevelt? Or was it the curious audience member, standing face to face with the taxidermy trophy? Perhaps the object was our *experience*, behind the scenes, of

18 My involvement in dance was sometimes a literal influence on my curatorial practice, even if I was not cognizant of it at the time. Trisha Brown’s *Accumulations* works were especially present. Brown often worked with accretion. In a workshop with the Trisha Brown Dance Company, we tackled phrases from various *Accumulations*. The movement usually begins with a straightforward, pedestrian gesture. Once the gesture becomes integrated into the sequence, another gesture—a thumb, an elbow—is added, and the work builds from there. Each movement expands the piece’s narrative possibility. How does knowledge emerge when each accumulation prompts interpretive shifts and disturbances in the coherence of the narrative? It was a question I would return to repeatedly.

19 See object-oriented ontology (OOO) for another approach to this question: [https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews\\_features/the\\_big\\_idea/a-guide-to-object-oriented-ontology-art-53690](https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/the_big_idea/a-guide-to-object-oriented-ontology-art-53690). The concepts within OOO could support the idea of the object or the curatorial as a speech act.

Wildebeest taxidermied trophy head and other objects discovered in Lamont Gallery storage. As displayed in *Dust & Discovery: Work from the Lamont Gallery Collection* (25 June–31 July 2013).

carrying the piece to the gallery while it sloughed off fine hairs and smelled of preservatives.<sup>20</sup>

Or was the object the ensuing conversation with the Academy archivist about the many taxidermied objects once displayed in the Elting Room, Exeter's faculty meeting space, back in the era of boys and big game? "This is the paradox,"<sup>21</sup> Erin Manning maintains:

For there to be a theory of the "object," the "object" has to be conceived as out of time, relegated beyond experience, unchanging. Yet, in experience, what we call an object is always to some degree not-yet, in process, in movement. In the midst, in the event, we know the object not in its fullness, in its ultimate form, but as an edging into experience.<sup>22</sup>

## Disposition

At *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done* (2018–2019), at the Museum of Modern Art,<sup>23</sup> I had the pleasure of experiencing Simone Forti's object-based sculptures. Known collectively as "Dance Constructions," Forti's choreographic objects were activated in multiple ways at MoMA. I was especially enamored with *Slant Board* (1961). *Slant Board* was animated by the dancers charting their own trajectory up the 45-degree incline while they navigated the bodies of other performers.

When absent of performers, the piece was activated by audience members' imaginations.

From one standpoint, this seems obvious: *Slant Board* is a plywood structure with ropes. It is human scale. It is not unlike an object you might see at a playground or climbing gym. But how does the piece work even without engaging with it physically? There was something inherent in it that propelled (potential) action.

Easterling would describe this quality as the object's *disposition*. Much like unpacking the curatorial and the choreographic, "disposition is a familiar but nuanced word best understood by using it." She continues: "acquiring that understanding is similar to the way that disposition itself operates. Consequently, the word flourishes in common parlance and usually

20 I remember this transport well. The weight and design of the trophy game head meant that two of us were in close contact with it throughout the process. After dismounting it from the wall, we moved with great effort, holding the trophy head awkwardly between us as we navigated down several sets of stairs, through hallways, and around corners. What *were* these intense and curious chemical smells? When *did* they outlaw arsenic in taxidermy, anyway?

21 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 48.

22 Manning, 48.

23 Additional information, videos, and oral histories are available on the Museum of Modern Art's website at <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3927>.

describes an unfolding understanding of temperament, relative position, or tendency in either beings or objects.”<sup>24</sup>

For Easterling, disposition’s “latent potential is expressed as a quotient of action that exists without the need for the actual movement or event.”<sup>25</sup> She proposes that “disposition locates activity, not in movement, but in relationship or relative position. The physical objects in spatial arrangements and infrastructure, static as they may seem to be, possess agency.”<sup>26</sup> The historical and imaginary contexts of *Slant Board*—a loft in New York, a museum, or a playground—become part of this disposition and contribute to how the object’s disposition reveals itself.

*Slant Board* galvanized other objects in the MoMA exhibition: sculptural objects (Forti’s *See Saw* from 1960 was installed in the same gallery), objects-as-actions (climbing) but also *objects of thought*: the possibility that



Performers activating Simone Forti's *Slant Board* (1961) in *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done* (16 September 2018–3 February 2019) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

24 Keller Easterling, “Disposition,” in *Cognitive Architecture: From Biopolitics to Noopolitics. Architecture & Mind in the Age of Communication and Information*, eds. Deborah Hauptmann and Warren Neidich (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2010), 251.

25 Easterling, 251

26 Easterling, 251.

7 APRIL 2019

## How to make a curatorial score?

a score as thinking device not directional

apparatus (even though there is directional gesture or 'tending towards') contract

territorialization  
a tool for spatializing relationships  
spreading, seeking, touching release  
of connections + gaps

(this is a dynamic system) a bellows

a tool for marking temporalities  
shuddering  
extending, condensing, stretching

counterpoint (time of one place or another, awkwardly)  
unfurling time, time that moves, time  
that escapes, beyond (this) time

a curatorial score generator can be a sculpture, a list, a map,  
a conversation, a moment, a wave, an elongation of an idea or  
feeling, a series, a singularity, a disagreement, a glance, an accumulation



Board Notes session in Studio 709 at the Theater Academy Helsinki, 7 April 2019.

one *could* climb. In this manner, objects and exhibitions are inherently choreographic.<sup>27</sup>

## A Gathering Together: Open House: A Portrait of Collecting

### How To Do Things with Objects

The etymology of the word collection, “a gathering together,”<sup>28</sup> anticipated the shift which led to the *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting* exhibition.

What drives us to acquire items ranging from model horses to magnets? What is the nature of (private) acts of gathering and arranging, and how does (public) curatorial agency impact those acts? How do collectors share their collections and what does this activity produce in others?

At the start of the curatorial process for *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*, I hoped the project would inspire more support for the stewardship of the Lamont Gallery collection. But, as *Open House* unfolded, I moved from a concern with how we could do things with or to the objects, to how the objects themselves could do things. The project began to focus on how objects fostered connections *between* people, objects, and memories, instead of *about* them.

The urge to share a collection, and the response it brings forth, reveals that action is already inherent in objects as *potential* (movement). Objects catalyze us: *Open House* became an opportunity to encourage this gathering and invite other collectors into the discussion.

### Taxonomies of Movement

I identified certain types of movement with specific stages of *Open House*.

#### *Gathering:*

The process of selecting collections for the exhibition was organic, undertaken by me, the collectors, other employees, and audiences. *Gathering* was not simply one entity (the curator) summoning others (objects and collectors)—a score set upon unsuspecting bodies—but a gathering *together*.

27 Even the latent potential of objects is powerful, exerting a force even when the objects appear to be inert or missing. In the basketball photographs from Paul Pfeiffer’s *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (2001) series, the artist digitally removes the contextualizing features of the basketball player (including the jersey number and the basketball). Pfeiffer meditates on perception, the impact of technology, and questions of race, representation, and erasure. The images are potent. The lack of objects heightens your attention.

28 *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Collection,” accessed 22 December 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=collection>.

*Extension:*

The inclusion of some of the collections arose from casual conversations. The paint by numbers paintings were suggested by the gallery manager, who had seen the works on vacation. The idea for vintage radio collection from seeing a profile of the collector on a television program. The project grew in this way, by additive and responsive means. I characterized these movements as an *extension*—a looping movement of the initial query to a collector or collection, pulling back into conversations with other collectors and collections, and then reaching out again to initiate other connections.

The collectors for *Open House* included the American Independence Museum, the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, various departments from Phillips Exeter Academy, and over twenty private collectors. The emphasis on local and regional collectors highlighted the different relationships that can be found in dense, entangled communities. Collections revealed new dimensions of colleagues, as well as made introductions between strangers.<sup>29</sup>

*Assembling:*

Each collector had a different relationship to collecting. Some showcased their objects on a regular basis within an organizational context. Others collected for personal reasons and had never presented their collections publicly. The act of associating all the collectors together, with their diverse collections, subjectivities, and viewpoints became an *assembling* motion in concert with others: a collaborative construction.

*Making Intersections:*

Arranging the exhibition was an exercise in *making intersections* between objects, collectors, and audience members. What happens when you bring one space (of an object, or an idea, or a display) into conversation with another *without* leaning too much on the art historical or museological? Selecting the objects was done through the light touch of negotiation. I could suggest an object, but the collector was free to choose. The discussions prioritized the relationship rather than the external significance of a particular object (in contrast to approaches where the specific object is key to an aesthetic argument).

29 I wondered if there was space for criticality in this process. Collections, and their display, are never neutral. We make assumptions when acquiring and viewing objects. We promote, and value, some objects over others. The entire history of Western museums is built on these premises. Fred Wilson interrogates this terrain in powerful ways in *Mining the Museum* (1992). As these issues were not the focus of the exhibition or my doctoral research, I had to step back at these times, trusting that the process would provide subsequent room to maneuver (critically) in the gallery.

### *Moving and Being Moved:*

In a parallel project within *Open House, Significant Objects: Meaningful Objects from the PEA Community*, Exeter employees contributed personal objects to the exhibition. Including these objects furthered the project's investigation into emotional and relational territories. Contributors reflected on why an object was meaningful to them in the past and what it meant to them today. Audiences welcomed the objects and stories and enthusiastically shared their own: *moving and being moved*.

### *Holding and Touching:*

Outreach and programs were characterized by *holding* and *touching*. Programs offered a place to pause and to hold an object or idea (sometimes literally), to sit with it, to contemplate it. Objects, particularly those that lived with their collectors, revealed their tactile qualities: their worn corners, their frayed edges, and their repairs, lovingly made.

### Hospitality and Generosity

The title of the exhibition, *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*, was in response to my literal traversal of spaces via highways, side roads, and driveways. I found myself in living rooms, offices, and storage areas, surrounded by shelves, bedside tables, mantles, and closets, and discovered the generosity found therein.

I contacted collectors for *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting* by phone and email. The most meaningful work was done face-to-face. These conversations entailed more than just talking about the collection. They included making someone's acquaintance, even if it was someone I thought I knew. I was invited into people's workplaces and homes. I was offered coffee, snacks, places to sit, and access to intimate spaces: bedrooms, private work areas, and bathrooms. Kitchens in every state of chaos.

I was attuned to the intimacy and vulnerability at this stage of the project. Many of the individuals who lent items had not done so publicly. Both parties were eager to please.

What would I think of the collector's home and collection? What would they think of me, in situations and rooms that neither of us anticipated I would visit when the process started? Which collections objects were they comfortable loaning? Under what conditions? What types of handling and safe-guarding measures were needed? What stories did they want to share?

[meeting under one circumstance or the other]

Later, finally, having a casual conversation.

[we become busy with other obligations]

Forgetting.

[we accidentally send the person an email intended for someone else about another topic]

[we both serve on a short-lived, ineffective committee]

[we encounter each other late at night in front of the ice cream case]

Remembering.

Asking informally about an object or collection.

[trying not to be too pushy]

Having an open-ended conversation about that object or collection.

The discussion is initially personal.

[an awkward attempt to share]

"What did you unearth / discover / remember [at the vintage flea market / on your trip / in your father's attic] last weekend?"

[oh no, I can't remember if the father has already died]

Looping back around

[time : some, a long, or an indeterminate amount : has passed]

to another [maybe I should stop asking] conversation,

[where we both wonder what it is that I want]

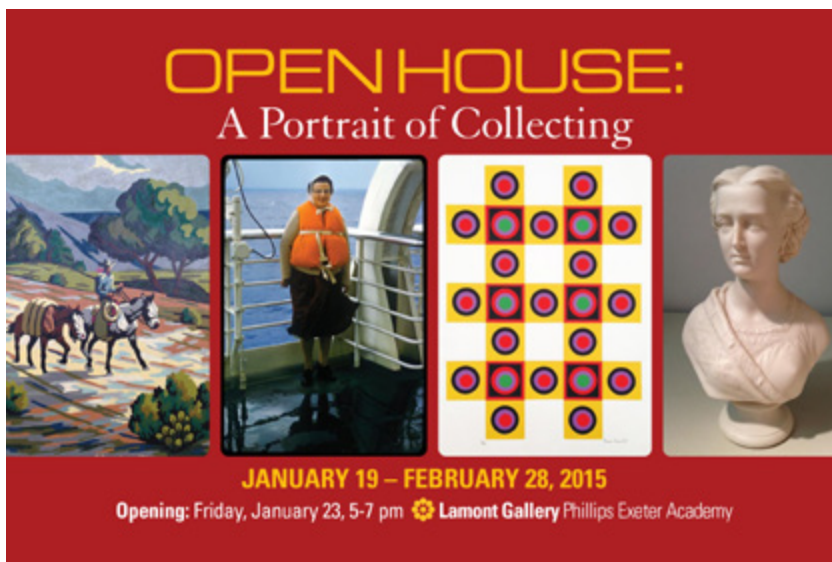
conducted in a casual manner,

"I'm thinking it would be wonderful to have a collections show. Maybe we can include some of your pieces..."

and so forth

[and so on]





Invitation card for *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*.

The individual collectors were curators: they spent time and effort arranging and reconfiguring their objects within their home or work environments. Certain objects, like the ANRI wood carved figures of Melissa and Erick Mischke, were carefully positioned on living room mantelpieces and side tables. The busts, lent by Cary Einhaus and Jim Mills, were displayed throughout their house, often placed in relation to items that enhanced or critiqued the object's narrative.

Curator Lisa Melandri has described that her own curatorial leanings stemmed from a personal proximity to collections that began in her youth. She recalls: “my father is not only a collector but an arranger. His collections are mostly objects ... and he spend as much time figuring out how best to present them as he did amassing them. My childhood home had and still has a great number of discrete ‘exhibitions’ that all work together to make a dynamic but simultaneously livable environment.”<sup>30</sup>

My conversations with the collectors revealed their process of collecting, which was never just about the search and conquest. Collectors shared their perspectives on the role of individual objects within collections and the ongoing challenge of storage, maintenance, and care. They spoke frankly about the emotional connections they had with objects, and how their feelings changed depending on how objects were displayed, an arrangement that was renegotiated each time a new object came into the household.

<sup>30</sup> Lisa Melandri, *Pigeons on the Grass Alas: Contemporary Curators Talk About the Field*, eds. Paula Marincola and Peter Nesbett (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2013), 11.

Collectors discussed the impact of their collecting on their families. Was collecting a shared endeavor with parents, partners, or children? Or was it considered an idiosyncratic trait, with family and friends looking on with patience or exasperation? Collectors mentioned the importance of meeting other collectors with similar areas of interest and building a community of practice around collecting. The pursuit and display of objects brought feelings of connection, pleasure, and accomplishment.

I was struck by the incredible hospitality of the collectors, my hosts. Hospitality is a complex and contested topic within curatorial theory. It is embraced as an emancipatory, empathetic gesture: “a deep spirit of hospitality should . . . imbue all aspects of (institutional) curatorial culture. . . . [M]any of these relationships are also profoundly reciprocal: the curator is always also a *guest*, most notably of the artist,”<sup>31</sup> reflects Dieter Roelstraete. At the same time, hospitality is seen with skepticism, as a paternalistic gesture: “Isn’t it obvious that inhospitable relations of exploitation and power structure curatorial practices from the very beginning?”<sup>32</sup> asks Ruth Sonderegger.

Both circumstances ring true. While not every negotiation within *Open House* went smoothly, I believe that an attempt at hospitality is necessary, if imperfect, in curatorial settings. You pursue it, you fail, and you try again. Conflicting perspectives are inherent in any dialogue. Ideally, Roelstraete says, you

cultivate an artistic environment in which antagonism is not merely respected . . . but is actively guaranteed and safeguarded; in which there is room (though not necessarily “tolerance”) for bad hosts and bad guests alike; in which a vital measure of art’s fundamental *inhospitality*, its hospitality to many things (among them, people), is maintained—an art world of friends and foes, of friendship and enmity and sound reasons for distinguishing between both.<sup>33</sup>

My goal was to leverage this complicated notion of hospitality as one entry point for the exhibition.

## Choreographies of Responsiveness: Exhibition Design

For Terry Smith, curatorial thinking is distinguished from art historical or art critical thinking, in that curating enables artworks to

31 Dieter Roelstraete, “Remarks on the End of Hostilities,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial: Hospitality: Hosting Relations in Exhibitions*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 30.

32 Ruth Sonderegger, “Curatorial Hospitality,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial: Hospitality: Hosting Relations in Exhibitions*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 21.

33 Roelstraete, 30.

be seen by a disinterested audience for the first time or be seen differently by such an audience because of the ways the works are presented. . . . Curating precedes art-critical response, audience participation, and the eventual assessment of art historical significance.<sup>34</sup>

The collections in *Open House* reflected institutional interests and individual passions. They ranged from carved figures to vintage radios, and from stuffed animals to cut glass. Works such as Dorothea Lange's Depression-era photographs and a painting of George Washington intersected with ceremonial and celebratory objects, which collectively examined personal and sociopolitical themes such as labor, family, poverty, legacy, and mass communication.

The exhibition design for *Open House* could have run along a functional, chronological, or aesthetic taxonomy—a common way of presenting collections. A choreographic curatorial practice follows another trajectory. My experience of transporting the wildebeest taxidermy trophy with a colleague for the earlier *Dust & Discovery* project cemented a mode of curatorial navigation. The *holding-touching-walking-talking* experience, though sensorially unpleasant, was relational.

In *Open House*, my aim was not to examine, for example, the history of the Great Depression through its material culture, or to make a case that the use of metal in ritual objects signified a shift in global trade patterns (though both of those points would be valid exhibition narratives). Instead of thinking about a collection through the filter of art history (artists, eras, styles), or through functionality (paintings, clocks, textiles), or through themes (activism, economics, childhood), I used other methods of addressing collections and the questions they raised.

For audiences, collections feel permanent and unchanging, although the materials within collections—from oil paint and canvas to wood and plastic—are quite unstable, as conservators will tell you. *Open House* acknowledged objects' inherent mutability and proposed that collections could also be sensorial, auditory, and imaginary. Several artists created project-specific works for the exhibition. Jung Mi Lee and Jon Sakata devised an installation around a collection of senses (which number way more than the five we assume). Students in the Democracy of Sound club designed an interactive hybrid sculpture-musical instrument as a collection of sounds.

What did the objects propose? Where did the collectors' desires, wishes, and interests lead?

How could we connect to each another *through* objects?

Erin Manning calls this shift in thinking *transduction*, a movement that is: "a jump in register that incites a new process."<sup>35</sup> The questions I asked about

<sup>34</sup> Smith, 41–42.

<sup>35</sup> Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 81.

the objects in *Open House* became *movements of thought* that were catalyzed by the (previous)(potential)(anticipated) *movement of things*. By attending to what emerged, I could be responsive instead of overdetermined: a choreographic approach, rather than a choreographed one.

### The Traces of Transport and Arrival

The logistics of transport and the exhibition arrangement are choreographic propositions. When work comes into a gallery, it is already in motion.

The way artwork arrives at the gallery often becomes part of the exhibition design. This phase is usually considered an unremarkable aspect of curating's behind-the-scenes activity, but Sara Ahmed suggests it can be much more influential. The background of objects, such as what is conveyed by their shipping containers, highlights the *emergence* of the object, which attunes us to aspects of those objects that "would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness, which is after all the presentation of a side."<sup>36</sup>

In *Open House* there was a lengthy and complicated process getting the work to the gallery. It came by foot, by car, and by truck. Some of the objects were packed in museum-grade shipping containers assembled by professional art handlers. Many of the personal collections arrived in handmade or everyday containers, including plastic bins, sheets, and file storage boxes. These more intimate conditions of transport spoke to the objects' use within the lives of the collectors. The objects were not mounted on pedestals and under vitrines but existed in and among the collector's everyday activity.

### Intersecting Relationships

My main compositional impulse for *Open House* was that of *affective intersection*. While some of these intersections were historic or formal (an object from one era in conversation with another), *more* of the intersections promoted relational and affective encounters between people and objects. I wanted to create multiple, simultaneous, intersecting moments for experiencing joint attention.<sup>37</sup> The collisions, resonances, and resting points addressed the intersections that objects produce between each other, between people and ideas, between public and private, and between the urge to accumulate and the wish to share.

How could I guide the project in a steady but expansive way, to encourage its unknown, but anticipated, form? Adesola Akinleye, in research with architects and city planners, describes this complex futuring

36 Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 549, [muse.jhu.edu/article/202832](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/202832).

37 For insights into joint attention in the museum setting, see Dimitra Christidou, "Art on the Move: The Role of Joint Attention in Visitors' Encounters with Artworks," in *Learning, Culture, and Social Interaction*, 2018, 1–10, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2210656117302660?via%3Dihub>.

process: design must “accommodate a sense of foretelling the identities that will interact with it. The design ... anticipates interactions that have not happened.”<sup>38</sup> Akinleye notes that neither buildings nor bodies are neutral, but “draw on socially and culturally prescribed pathways” that are not “passive in production of the moment of interaction.”<sup>39</sup> For *Open House*, I kept the planning process open and cultivated a curatorial sensibility that would be shaped by, and shared with, others.

## Unbeautiful

Visually, the layout was unbeautiful.<sup>40</sup>

It was jumbled, crammed, and chaotic. While care was taken in the art of arrangement, the effort was not to reproduce the contemplative but distanced space of the modernist art object. Instead, I sought to create an encounter that enveloped the audience. Following Ann Cooper Albright, I wanted the gallery to become “a field rather than a picture—a space rather than a stage.”<sup>41</sup>

Objects and their accompanying signs were tightly packed: too high, too low, too close, too far—as much as possible like objects on someone’s mantelpiece, bedroom vanity, or kitchen shelf. The objects intersected into the space(s) of the gallery, into various knowledge systems (the history of art, the materiality of popular culture), into institutional histories, and into the desires of the collectors and the audience.

I have always enjoyed subverting people’s expectations about what might be in the gallery in the first place. Juxtaposition is an effective strategy for exhibition design. Interjecting an unexpected resource or material, inviting one discipline to comment on another, or making unanticipated alliances was often accomplished through furniture, sound, field trips, interventions, and food. I was especially delighted by intersections that at first glance produced non-coincidence.<sup>42</sup> In *Open House*, having a wall of records next to a button collection, an engraving opposite a shelf full of toys, did just that.

38 Adesola Akinleye, *Dance, Architecture and Engineering* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 42.

39 Akinleye, 42.

40 Unbeautiful: See e.e. cummings, “the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls”: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47245/the-cambridge-ladies-who-live-in-furnished-souls>.

41 Ann Cooper Albright, *Engaging Bodies: The Politics and Poetics of Corporeality* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 80.

42 The layout did not (intentionally) reflect the “juxtaposition as exotica” of the cabinet of curiosity model, though this was probably the effect to some degree. At the time, I was beginning to question the use of cabinet of curiosity models in exhibition design, given their connections to colonialism. I wanted to advance a different way of using assemblage and bricolage in the exhibition. I am not convinced I succeeded.

## (Subject)ivities and (Object)ivities

Another consideration in the *Open House* layout was that of the collectors themselves: a politics of arrangement. Each person's collection was of paramount importance to them. It mattered that their objects were arranged with care. These sentiments were never expressed directly, but they became part of the subtext of our discussions. I paid attention to how the collectors spoke about their objects: how they expressed the thrill of acquisition, or pride, or how a particular object would evoke a memory. I used the echoes and murmurs of these conversations to enliven the placement of the objects once in the gallery.

The objects functioned as the collector's portrait, where their self-knowledge and self-representation coalesced. Tim Etchells has noted that the portrait is a "partial index of possible relation, speculative relation, a 'what if' of small scale collaborative encounters, invitations, meetings, shared events, discussions." It is a temporary layering of the public "knotted with moments of unseen 'private' exchange."<sup>43</sup>

The descriptions of participating collectors and their collections, used in gallery signage and online, were in motion. We did not use one standard format, tone, or approach but kept the individual voices as a *collection of difference*. The multiple representations within the institutional, biographical, or personal statements were narratives of self-interpretation. These narratives impacted audiences in profound ways.

Typically, we perceive only within a limited range. Things appear in ways we are already inclined to recognize. The act of sharing moves us from inner to outer worlds and from a solitary self to one that is in relation to other(s). *Open House* called into question the positions and valuations of objects and subjects.<sup>44</sup> This is key, according to Maite Garbayo-Maeztu, who writes "it is necessary to iterate critically the position of the object, to confuse it with that of the subject, to blur the limits of this division. To present oneself otherwise, in ways that have not yet been encapsulated and interpreted."<sup>45</sup> The collections in *Open House* revealed a different side of the collectors. The public setting expanded the frame. The combination of text, objects, and spatial arrangements were thus about the intersections of subjectivities, too.

43 Tim Etchells, "Through Days and Into Nights: Christine Peters' Portraits (2000)," in *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy*, eds. Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2017), 69.

44 I was aware of the collectors' roles within the institution. When possible, I *did* try to subvert institutional hierarchies and power dynamics through the placement of objects. I did not admit to this tactic at the time.

45 Maite Garbayo-Maeztu, "Object," in *Choreographing Exhibitions*, ed. Matthew Copeland (Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2013), 84.



*Open House: A Portrait of Collecting* at the Lamont Gallery.

## The Power of Show and Tell: The Agency of Objects

Objects are subject forming: they construct and clarify our identities to ourselves and to others.

An ongoing interest of mine was to mobilize the Lamont Gallery as a space that would foster community connections. Exeter had released a report in 2015 on the state of diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus from the perspective of its employees. Like many other institutions, there was much work to be done in this area.

I wondered how the gallery could support these goals. Every time I included objects from special collections in exhibition projects, it unleashed a cascade of responses from employees. It provided opportunities for people to interact outside of their habits, norms, and given roles. It made them talkative.

In *Significant Objects: Meaningful Objects from the PEA Community*, employees contributed personal objects and written reflections for display within the *Open House* exhibition. The project was inspired by Rob Walker's and Joshua Glenn's Significant Objects initiative from 2009,<sup>46</sup> centered on the premise that everyday objects paired with a narrative would increase in economic value.

Our version of *Significant Objects* assumed value beforehand, for the person and the object: value made visible by invitation, public display, and collective response. The project addressed the need to engage, recognize, and value employees across job hierarchies or departmental lines. By involving employees directly in the production of *Open House's* themes and meanings, the project magnified the exhibition's affective registers through the lens of the personal and the familiar.

People contributed toys from Hollywood movies, tea set, medals, and keychains. Some objects demonstrated uncanny or playful connections to the lender. A framed photograph of a parent revealed a striking family resemblance. A nearly flattened teddy bear affirmed its role as a childhood sleeping companion. The objects, not necessarily part of a collection as defined by the lender, became part of a collection within the curatorial setting. Objects were added throughout the duration of the exhibition. This action underscored the meandering, conversational, and accumulative nature of collections, communities, and relationships.

Some lenders worried about what object to lend and how they would position the object within the public context of the exhibition. Often lenders had not considered the linguistic framing of the object—had never notated it in written form with the purpose of having it reinterpreted through someone else's assessment. Despite this concern, the final narrative displayed with the objects in the gallery always sparked supportive and lively conversations.

46 Significant Objects (<https://significantobjects.com>) has had many iterations. See the delightful book about the project, *Significant Objects: 100 Extraordinary Stories About Ordinary Things*.



As Susan Stewart so aptly observes in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, the narrative “is not a narrative of the object; it is a narrative of the possessor.”<sup>47</sup> Unlike writing with literary ambitions, the reflective writings by employees were attempts to share aspects of themselves with the wider community.

Many of the objects in *Significant Objects*, according to Stewart, could be classified as souvenirs. Their importance was in their ability to tell, not their facility with reproducing the original experience: “We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather, we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative.”<sup>48</sup> Stewart affiliates the spatial, temporal, and material circumstances of the souvenir with a reduction:

Spatially, as any postcard tells us, this works most often through a reduction of dimensions. The souvenir reduces the public, the monumental, and the three-dimensional into the miniature, that which can be enveloped by the body, or into the two-dimensional representation, that which can be appropriated within the privatized view of the individual subject.<sup>49</sup>

However, the souvenir does not *always* lead to a movement from exterior to the interior, flattening and reducing. When objects are small and portable, and exist within a personal and private context, this makes sense.

From another perspective, a souvenir’s disposition can be monumental, even if this scale is first only visible to the owner. As objects in *Significant Objects* moved from the lender’s home into the gallery, from private to public space, they assumed newfound three-dimensionality. The contributed objects within the context of the exhibition moved us collectively—rather than individually—to bring the past into the present, which expanded the objects’ impact and meaning.

While Stewart contends that that the souvenir “generates a narrative which reaches only ‘behind,’ spiraling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future,”<sup>50</sup> *Significant Objects*, within the close-knit campus community, was multidirectional and multi-temporal. The nostalgia and longing of one collector could connect, by affective and material intersection, to other collectors and their objects, bringing shared sensations into the present.

47 Susan Stewart, “Objects of Desire,” in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 136.

48 Stewart, 135.

49 Stewart, 137–8.

50 Stewart, 135.

We need to make room for the *social* intimacy that objects promote when they operate in context. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin notes, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”<sup>51</sup> In *Open House*, objects had material, symbolic, and emotional weight by being embedded in the personal or institutional histories of the collectors. They were situated, contextualized, and present for audiences to experience their relational impact.

Benjamin comments on objects’ physical changes over time, the material traces of wear and tear, and provenance—the legal and psychic history as measured in changes of ownership. He acknowledges the importance of context and the shifting nature of that context: “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable.”<sup>52</sup>

The participating collectors’ knowledge that the objects would be seen by colleagues and students furthered this relational potential, linking the past of relationality to present and potential relationalities. The project became an object-driven memory relay.<sup>53</sup> Calling memory into the present as a collective activity can foster shared connections in the future.

51 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 3. <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf>.

52 Benjamin, 6.

53 After the exhibition closed, we compiled the images and stories from *Significant Objects* into a soft-bound booklet so contributors could revisit their object in conversation with other objects and contributors.

## INVITATION TO MOVE

A curatorial situation invites you to move.

In *Maria Hupfield: The One Who Keeps on Giving*,<sup>54</sup> curated by Carolin Köchling at The Power Plant in Toronto (2017), objects have a special resonance.

One evocative object in the exhibition was an oil painting by the artist's late mother. The memories of the place that the painting depicts, Parry Sound, Ontario, and the painting itself, are revisited by Hupfield and her siblings in performance videos. One is a video of a performance made for an audience in her home territory of the Wasauksing First Nation. Another video, made for the Power Plant, was filmed in the gallery. In the first video, Hupfield cradles the painting to her, with only the back visible. In the Power Plant video, the painting is turned to face the camera.

Rather than suggest a binary read—the intimate family tribute versus the staged and external representational stand-in—Hupfield argues that the meaning and weight of the objects—the knowledge that the objects offer—is contextual and accumulative, emerging through individual and collective interaction and reflection. Not everything that is meaningful is perceptible. We bring our own associations and identities to the objects we keep. I brought my non-Indigenous, white self into relationship with the objects. The knowledge these objects produce in me would be different than for someone else. Knowledge and experience both are moving targets, assembled and constituted by shifting, situational, and sometimes contradictory contexts, which is part of what I found so impactful in the exhibition.

The experience was an invitation. I discovered new things each time I returned.

54 The Power Plant press release explains that the title of the exhibition, *The One Who Keeps on Giving*, is the English translation of Maria Hupfield's mother's Anishinaabe name, a text-as-translation-as-gesture interplay.

## Programs: Pedagogies of Holding and Touching

Educational and outreach programs comprise a fundamental aspect of my curatorial practice. They do not function in an adjunct capacity in exhibitions but rather as key components of exhibition projects. They are part of the curatorial constellation. Programs reach audiences in new or different ways. Fleur Watson notes that this is

driven by a desire to subvert the traditional museum structure that generally separates out the experience of the exhibition space from its associated programs – curator talks in lecture theatres, workshops in education rooms, and so on – and to compress together these aspects, both in space and duration, to produce an experience that sits somewhere between installation, exhibition, and debate. As such, the move significantly shifts the experience of a space through a temporal insertion or set-like environment.<sup>55</sup>

*Open House* programs emphasized tactility and materiality over visual and factual certainty. Audiences experienced the affective through the tactile: the pleasure from picking something up that fits your hand perfectly or lifting an object and being surprised by its weight or center of gravity. To touch an object is to engage with knowledge experientially and experimentally.

Programs included a staged reading of scenes from Clifford Odets's 1935 "Waiting for Lefty" as part of a symposium, *Hard Times: The Great Depression in America*. Although performance is not new for many contemporary galleries, it was still somewhat of a novelty at Exeter. Like the vignettes of objects in *Open House*, "Lefty" is a series of vignettes about a labor strike. The play offered a rich symbolic territory for considering the objects from the 1930s and 1940s that surrounded the performance.

In another program, "Bugs, Cracks & Rust: Objects Conservation," 3D objects conservator Scott Fulton from the Harvard University Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology assessed some of the gallery's collections. As he examined the objects, he discussed their materials, fabrication, age, and use, and shared his perspectives on the ethical choices museums face in object conservation.

A drop-in paint by numbers program was inspired the paint by numbers collection in *Open House*. The workshop invited audience members to contribute to a large-scale painting of Academy Hall, the main administrative building on campus. Participants recast the building as riotously colorful and dynamic, a far cry from the building's staid New England brick.

Programs within the curatorial extend an invitation to engage with the work and make new meanings. Audiences insert their own narrative into

55 Fleur Watson, *The New Curator: Exhibiting Architecture & Design* (London: Routledge, 2021), 248.

the curatorial field. Programs are opportunities for audiences to make and take time through an interaction with objects: to hold time in suspension (for a time) while they consider—and contribute to—the meaning and impact of those objects.<sup>56</sup> Objects, for Sara Ahmed, “have qualities that make them tangible in the present. But these characteristics are not simply ‘in’ the objects but instead are about how the objects work and are worked on by others.”<sup>57</sup>

For the collectors in *Open House*, programs provided the opportunity to see their objects understood and appreciated by others. The atmosphere of the gallery was enriched with personal reflections. Student audiences gained insight into an instructor, coach, or dorm head through a jacket or fountain pen. Colleagues standing together admired a cherished teapot, and suddenly discovered previously unrealized connections.

### Imperceptible Programs

Demarcating programs by a specific day (e.g., Tuesday, 22 January from 9-11 am) is a stopping point, a curatorial gesture that creates a heightened sense of attention. However, not all programs need to be public, advertised, or bounded by specific dates to serve a programmatic function.

In that sense, *Open House* programs were not just public-facing activities, those that could be easily identified and encapsulated as discrete entities by outside audiences. The Classics department’s collection research, which ended up as a display in *Open House*, served as a self-directed pedagogical program for two Academy interns. The interactive sculpture by Democracy of Sound (exeter)/DOS(e) functioned as a learning project for students and the faculty advisor Jon Sakata, and later as an ongoing site of audience experimentation in the gallery.

The postcard collection on display in the Class of 1945 Library, a contribution by Stacey Durand, also had programmatic overtones. The postcard project provided a way for others to connect to familiar objects (postcards), learn about the life and family history of a colleague (Stacey), and consider the idea of preserving everyday personal family objects within the traditional scholarly function of the academic archive (the library).<sup>58</sup>

56 Programs are collections, too, serving a dual function of being both part of the curatorial project, as well as having agency as a separate educational or outreach activity.

57 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 50.

58 Programs of this nature teach through other mechanisms, often having nothing to do with the stated curatorial or pedagogical intent.



Two children interact with the sound sculpture.

## Objects of Knowledge: Knowing, Being, Feeling

Collections are commonly associated with the pursuit of knowledge made tangible through the acts of acquiring, classification, study, and dissemination. Pottery, textiles, and scientific instruments, when considered in the accumulated form of a collection, allow knowledge to be read *as* knowledge.<sup>59</sup> This is especially true in the museum setting, which centers object-based pedagogies.

Hans Ulrich Obrist proposes that “a collection is a way of thinking about the world—the connections and principles that produce a collection contain assumptions, juxtapositions, findings, experimental possibilities, and associations. Collection-making . . . is a method of producing knowledge.”<sup>60</sup> The impulse to collect also reveals our curiosity about the unknown, and the desire and pleasure in trying to know:

The effort to organize and explain the world's copious and strange complexity is the desire underlying the *Wunderkammer*—but equally evident is the desire to luxuriate in what cannot be understood. Even if we have, today, split apart the scientific from the artistic, the *Wunderkammer* reminds us that the two are both essentially forms of taking pleasure in the task of understanding the world.<sup>61</sup>

The curatorial produces its own agency and contributes to other agencies, in concert with artworks and events, which have agencies and subjectivities and epistemological territories of their own. This knowing and being is formed collaboratively, often outside of the curatorial itself.

During *Open House*, the gallery hosted a program with an epistemology class to explore the relationships between collections and knowledge. Developed collaboratively with the Religion, Science, and English departments, the class sessions in the gallery integrated blindfolded touch, storytelling, and conversation to address how the knowledge produced by objects could be brought to bear on other knowledge systems.<sup>62</sup>

59 Many cultures imbue objects with communicative and emotive power, such as the South American quipu, an Incan recording device which was almost entirely wiped out by the Spanish conquest. My curatorial tendencies have been informed by the work of Cecilia Vicuña, whose quipu sculptures advance ideas of collaborative and processual *knowledge-communities*: knowledge as enacted, shared, and co-produced: <https://bostonartreview.com/reviews/cecilia-vicuna-mfa-boston-quipu-interview>.

60 Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Collecting Knowledge,” in *Ways of Curating* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2014), 39.

61 Obrist, 42.

62 Individual objects can be constructed *by* knowledge, as well as constructed to *produce* knowledge. The Antikythera Mechanism is one such example. See Tony Freeth et al., “A Model of the Cosmos in the ancient Greek Antikythera Mechanism” in *Scientific Reports* 11, 5821 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-84310-w>.

There was certainly “traditional” knowledge to be constructed and discovered in *Open House: A Portrait of Collection*. Many of the objects illuminated historical events, social trends, and lessons in material culture, such as the black Bakelite “Radio Nurse” (1937) baby monitor designed by Isamu Noguchi in response to the 1932 Lindbergh kidnapping.

At the same time, we wondered: Can a collection really *produce* knowledge? Or just point at some other affiliated knowledge, knowledges that are already known? Is it the object that holds the knowledge, or the discourse around it?

Irit Rogoff notes that the curatorial is not something that *represents* knowledge but is an epistemic structure that actively *produces* it: “If you work with a thematic and assemble things that are seemingly engaged with that thematic, those objects don’t simply sit there and illustrate passively, they start to instantiate and embody and draw out the thematic with different meanings than it may have had originally.”<sup>63</sup>

It could be that the speculative discussions and short dialogues developed by the epistemology students amplified the communicative properties of the objects and rendered new knowledge systems during their inquiry. By rewriting the objects’ narratives, students questioned the conventions around how knowledge is constructed and communicated, and revealed the inherent instability of taxonomic thinking. The objects’ affective, contrarian, or debatable truths made space for retellings and resistance.

## The Propulsive Power of Talking

Returning to Keller Easterling’s idea of the disposition, which “describes the agency or potential immanent in an arrangement—a property or propensity within a context or relationship,”<sup>64</sup> the disposition of *Open House* was that it energized affective, reflective, and social movements of employees and the general public.

The dispositions of objects have the potential to shift interpretations and conditions: “The means to alter noopolitics can be found in interior virtual territory as well as exterior physical territory. . . . Altering perceptions, attentions, and habits of mind.”<sup>65</sup> Making people chatty.

Lorraine Daston notes that throughout history, things have talked. Statues have wept. Water has turned into wine. Certain things promote

63 Irit Rogoff, “Curating/Curatorial,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 22–23.

64 Easterling, *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World*, ix.

65 Easterling, “Dispositions,” 251.





Art history slides from the defunct art history curriculum, Phillips Exeter Academy. As displayed in *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*.

“loquaciousness: they give rise to an astonishing amount of talk.”<sup>66</sup> The meaning of things arises through a process of thickening: “Like seeds around which an elaborate crystal can suddenly congeal, things in a supersaturated cultural solution can crystallize ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. These thickenings of significance are one way that things can be made to talk.”<sup>67</sup> I did not know how the objects and their public positioning within the gallery would impact—and thicken—relationships. In *Open House*, I became aware of the disposition of objects as well as the disposition of the curatorial project as a whole.

The project especially stimulated people’s institutional memories.

Soon after the exhibition opened, collections-related chatter began to burst out in unexpected ways. A science instructor would stop by the gallery and reminisce, “You know, I used to have a wonderful Audubon print in my classroom . . .” An inquiry would come from our fundraising office:

### Overheard

“Hey, this is famous!” [Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother photograph.]

“Do you want my collection? Seriously. I have it right out here in my car/ in my house down the street/in my attic.”

“These used to be in my grandmother’s house.”

“I remember doing paint by numbers when I was a kid.”

“This is cool.”

“Do these radios all work? [Yes] Wow! That’s amazing.”

“What is this?” [35 mm slide from the defunct art history program]

“I think this is a candelabra.”

“I loved learning about other people on campus.”

“This looks like my basement. Well, actually, my basement doesn’t have a Walker Evans in it.”

“How did you fit this all in here?!”

“I have that.”

“I want one.”

“Those are really cute!”

“I guess I didn’t know I was a collector until I saw this exhibition.”

“This is my favorite show.”

Overheard: Reactions by audience members to *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*.

66 Daston, introduction to *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, 11.

67 Daston, 20.

“The (long-lost relative) of this (long-lost alumnus/alumna) is looking for some (long-lost work) he/she/they *might* have donated to Exeter in 1961. Do you know where it is?” In other cases, Facilities Management would alert us to the discovery of an historic portrait found propped up behind a file cabinet or spotted in the steam tunnel below a dormitory.

Equally frequent were the types of calls that started with: “We’re renovating this dorm/building/faculty apartment, and we found this painting/framed poster/figurine in the basement behind the heater. Do you want it? Do you have something else we could put in the new space?” and “I’m retiring. I forgot I had this painting (labeled clearly with “Property of the Lamont Gallery”) in my closet. Can you pick it up? When you’re here, I’d love to tell you about . . .”

In this way, objects talk: they inspire dialogue, shifts in perspectives, and action. It’s feasible to consider the art object or the curatorial project as a speech act, particularly in relation to artistic research. Brad Haseman makes the case that practice-based artistic research is performative. Its presentational forms are not only texts “in the way that any object or discourse whose function is communicative can be considered a text” but that are utterances under the framework of J.L. Austin’s speech act theory. Artistic research makes things happen.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, the choreographic, when considered a performative endeavor according to Haseman’s premise, makes curatorial research “loquacious.” The talkative nature of *Open House* happened both as part of the project, as well as in my efforts to extend the conversation into a research context. As Haseman notes:

When research findings are presented as performative utterances, there is a double articulation with practice that brings into being what, for want of a better word, it names. The research process inaugurates movement and transformation. It is performative. It is not qualitative research: it is itself – a new paradigm of research with its own distinctive protocols, principles and validation procedures.<sup>69</sup>

In the *Choreographing the City* seminar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Gediminas Urbonas and Adesola Akinleye invited philosopher Scott Pratt to share his work in Native philosophy. Pratt described the logic of place: that we are all coming from somewhere, interacting with the wider world as an ensemble that promotes connection without erasing difference. We seek more than simply to maintain equilibrium—we actively want to move and grow. The specific places where human and non-human

68 Brad Haseman, “A Manifesto for Performative Research” in *Media International Australia* 118, no. 1 (February 2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>.

69 Brad Haseman, “Tightrope Writing: Creative Writing Programs in the RQF Environment,” in *TEXT* 11, no. 1 (April 2007), <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april07/haseman.htm>.

agents are located enables them to be “propulsive”—this power is a “direction towards the future.” Futures are not given but made. Actions enact.<sup>70</sup>

In this manner, objects, curatorial projects, and artistic research, when entangled, can similarly said to have a propulsive force. Their talking catalyzes something in the world.

## The Surround of Things

I once had a conversation with a neighbor about loving a thing. I said, “I *love* (a thing).” He said, “Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t *love* a thing. You can *like* it. You can enjoy it. But you can’t *love* it.” We went around and around, until we both wandered off, the debate ending with no clear winner.

What was this conversation about, exactly? There are mere shades of difference between liking, loving, and desiring. I *do* believe many collectors love things, but the love for their objects may be more about what the objects produce in them affectively than about the things themselves.

In 2019, curator Helen Molesworth presented a memoiristic lecture at Lesley University in which she described her powerful early experiences with objects in museums. She recalled how visitors interacted with those objects, and how those experiences intersected with her other life experiences. She confessed that she is still in awe today of how museums and cultural institutions preserve and care for objects—a great benefit to society.<sup>71</sup> It was refreshing to hear of her appreciation.

Molesworth, in contrast to the assertions of my neighbor, was someone who *loved* things, but the thing never stops at its own boundaries. Molesworth loved the *surround* of things as well.

*Open House* addressed the affective *surround* of objects—their “more-than,”<sup>72</sup> as Erin Manning might say, and how this more-than is a composition in physical as well as mental space. A choreography of relations manifests through the object via the mechanism of joint attention, creating a “mobile architecture” that is “the gathering of a force-field not of bodies per se but of the active intervals their relational movement creates.”<sup>73</sup>

The process of developing *Open House* was the construction of a memory palace. Typically associated with using architectural space as a mnemonic device, a memory palace can function through objects and emotion as

70 Scott Pratt, class discussion, 4.314/15: Advanced Workshop in Artistic Practice and Transdisciplinary Research: Choreographing the City, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA, 9 November 2020).

71 Helen Molesworth (presentation, MFA in Visual Arts Art Talks, Lesley University, Cambridge, MA, 25 June 2019).

72 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

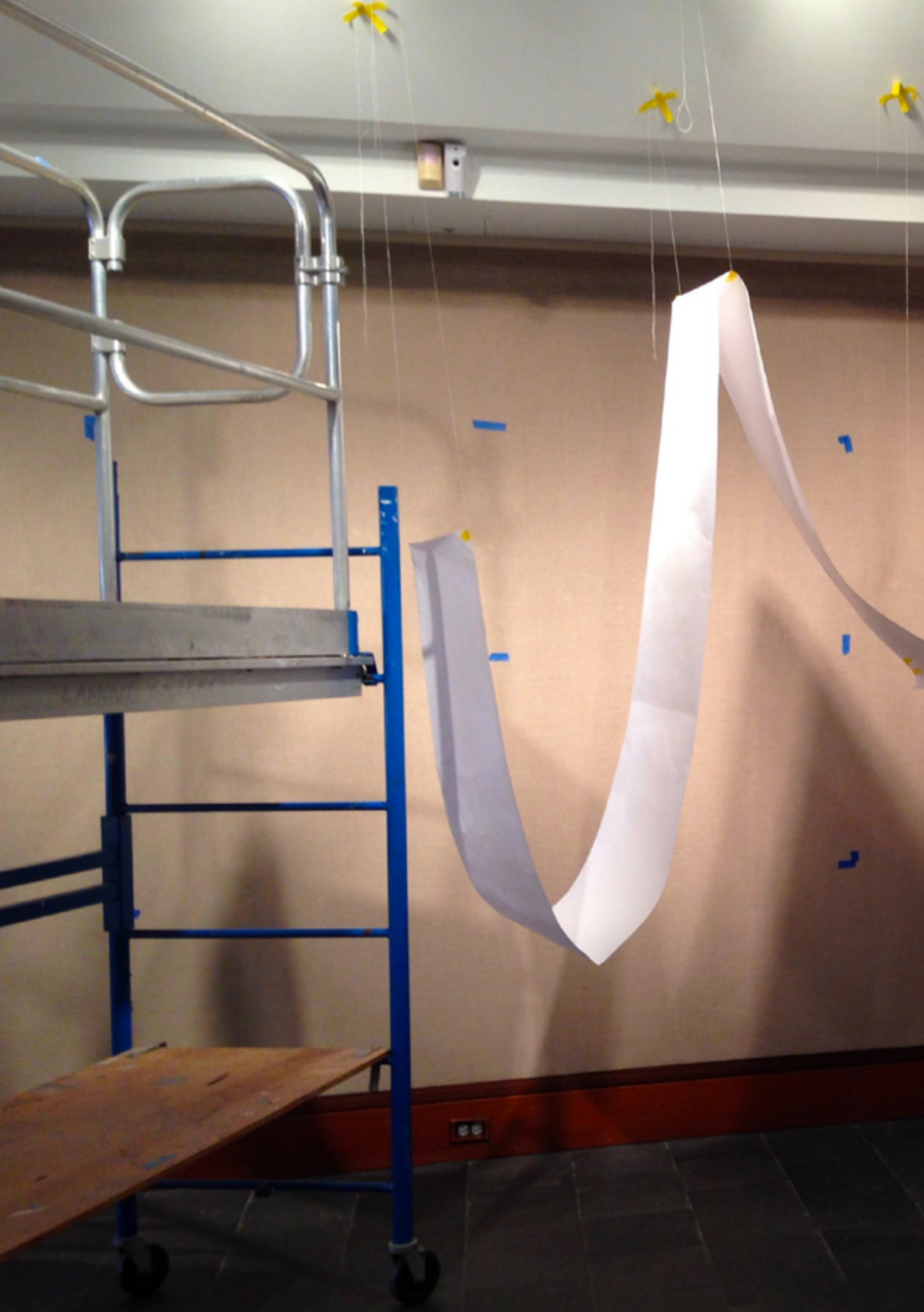
73 Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 136.

well as through spaces. Collections are so dense—each object—or series of objects, contains multiple spaces, accessed by a collector’s or audience’s emotional reaction or memory. Memory, understood in this way, is not simply about recalling facts or dates but about revisiting and reexperiencing *feelings*. This enriches the idea of choreographic curation practice in compelling ways: the compositional and temporal configurations of artworks and audiences do not rest in the physical objects or spaces alone but in mental and affective movements.

As the exhibition came into view, it became clear that it was not about me—or us—doing something with our objects, but rather, the objects doing something to us individually and collectively. I had not realized the extent of the objects’ power. The reactions of audience members expanded my understanding of the project. People came once, and then returned, often with a friend in tow. People (were) *moved*.

*Open House* was a compositional exploration into how objects and collections catalyze affective and material movements: between objects and personal memories, between collector and viewer, between private storage and public staging. The compositions that resulted at each stage produced encounters between things not previously in contact. Encounters led to unexpected conversations, which facilitated new ways for objects to become active agents that do things *to, with, and between* us.

*What do you collect?*





**Six: Extending Lines in All  
Directions: Curatorial Dramaturgy**

## To Kindle, Curatorially

Here's my problem: I need a language. Or rather, I need *to language*. To map my choreographic tendencies and convey how they operate in my curatorial work. My artistic research process is a felt, experienced, and atmospheric activity that is not always easy to translate. As Renee Gladman suggests, I want "a language to describe a kind of writing that one could do that was not a physical act of producing marks on a page or computer screen but was a duration of thinking." My choreographic curatorial method is open-ended and inquiry based. I am not seeking an answer but am engaged in seeking more generally.

Even in open-ended curating, there is *some* guiding force. After all, my exhibitions have titles, curatorial statements, invitation cards, specific works, signage, and programs, components that appear with alarming regularity.

Yet I crave a structuring framework to access and communicate what repeats conceptually across exhibition projects—a dramaturgy of artistic research.

I was initially resistant to dramaturgy. I had always associated it with a text that was already written. Dramaturgy functioned within theatrical contexts, not curatorial ones. But I was interested in seeing what was possible. I just wasn't sure how to apply it.

### A Scaffold and a Score

A sidestep into dance dramaturgy hinted at what dramaturgy might offer to the curatorial.<sup>2</sup>

In *Dramaturgy in Motion: At Work on Dance and Movement Performance*, Katherine Profeta, dramaturg for choreographer and visual artist Ralph Lemon, describes dramaturgy as a way "to kindle a fascination with a set of questions around the formation of an impending event . . . approaching it from as many different angles, as many different knowledge bases."<sup>3</sup> These words felt familiar within my own curatorial "kindling." Profeta's text invited me to imagine a *curatorial dramaturgy*.

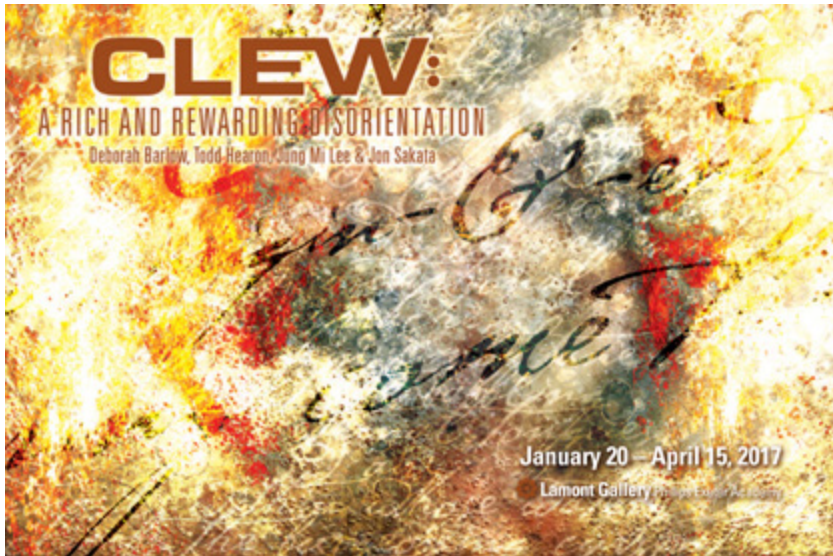
1 Renee Gladman, *Calamities* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2016), 81.

2 I cannot offer expert knowledge on dramaturgy. I use it as a catalyst. It broadens my artistic research horizons and creates a conceptual structure for understanding dramaturgy within the curatorial context.

3 Katherine Profeta, *Dramaturgy in Motion: At Work on Dance and Movement Performance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), xii.

Preceding pages: Prototyping a section of *Clew* with paper and string.





Invitation postcard for *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation*.

This section maps how curatorial dramaturgy functions within a choreographic curatorial practice. It does so alongside a discussion of *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation*,<sup>4</sup> a project held at the Lamont Gallery at Phillips Exeter Academy from 20 January to 15 April 2017.

In *Clew*, curatorial dramaturgy addressed three main conditions:

1. The structuring mechanisms of open-ended forms and how exhibition narratives emerge within this framework;
2. Authorship and the role of the dramaturg; and
3. The dramaturgy of materials, textures, and temporalities within the exhibition.

The process of developing *Clew* was dramaturgical: it was simultaneously structure, strategy, and narrative force. What could be called the “content” of the exhibition was nested within, and produced by, the process. Our interactions with materials produced a dramaturgy of materiality, which contributed to the narrative arc of the project. The collaborative process had its own dramaturgical atmosphere. The role of the dramaturg was clarified (and then confused), by shifting activities, responsibilities, and positions.

Along with clarifying curatorial dramaturgy, *Clew* reinforced other insights in my research. I realized how exhibition processes, even in unfixed forms, eventually coalesced around themes or motifs. I attended more

4 See the *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation* Research Catalogue exposition at <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/515799/2038746>.

carefully to the role of pacing and sustained attention in exhibition making. I noticed how the connections between curatorial dramaturgy, artistic research, and knowledge manifested and motivated.

This section has dramaturgical impulses. I use the concept of dramaturgy as a scaffold and a score. It is both the spark that helps initiate the inquiry and the device that supports and carries the emphasis. *Clew* is a story of woven and unfurling forms. I try to reflect this spirit in the text.

## Dramaturgical Leanings

### Sketching Some Lines

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines dramaturgy as “dramatic composition; the dramatic art.”<sup>5</sup> The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* extends it: “the art or technique of dramatic composition and theatrical representation.”<sup>6</sup> At the core, traditional theatrical dramaturgy concerns itself with the literary aspects of theatrical productions: the text, the script, the play.

The word *dramaturgy* was coined by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (1767–1769). Lessing’s text is written as a series of animated dramatic notes (“remarks”). He gives critiques of specific productions, proclaims the most compelling qualities of the actors, offers knowing asides to the reader, and shares utopian aspirations about the role of theater in society. In some ways, Lessing sets the stage for contemporary dramaturgy’s diverse and varied landscapes. It’s important, Lessing argues, to consider *everything* within a work of (theatrical) art—the sights, the sounds, the tones, the textures, and the audience reception.<sup>7</sup>

Katalin Trencsényi, in *Dramaturgy in the Making: A User’s Guide for Theatre Practitioners*, argues that Lessing’s agenda was not merely literary. He was attempting to *language into being* a German national unity and cultural identity through theater.<sup>8</sup> Lessing’s text, with its meditations on everything from

5 *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), s.v. “Dramaturgy.”

6 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “Dramaturgy,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dramaturgy>.

7 Understandings of dramaturgy (and characteristics of its practice) evolved through numerous other practitioners after Lessing, including Bertolt Brecht, Pina Bausch, and Raimund Hoghe, among others. Dramaturgy—dance and theatrical—has a complex and contested history which I will not examine here.

8 Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making: A User’s Guide for Theatre Practitioners* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 6–7.

the nuances of the gesturing hand to how music advances narrative, foreshadows a *more-than* of dramaturgy. Theater has within it a world-making capacity. Dramaturgy provides the structure and sustained attention needed to perceive or enact this world.

### Turning Toward an Expanded Field

Like theatrical dramaturgy, dance dramaturgy includes attention to “composition, structure, expression, the piece’s relationship with spectators.”<sup>9</sup> However, in contrast to theater, dance dramaturgy often operates in a space not predetermined by the customary understandings of the text.<sup>10</sup> The narrative or thematic emphasis is more often constructed through movement and choreography—through the process.

Contemporary dramaturgy is predisposed to accommodating a variety of definitions and applications. The Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA)<sup>11</sup> views dramaturgy as a conceptual *and* practical endeavor, framed by numerous research, logistical, and evaluative components that help the artist conceive of the potential form(s) of the piece and how those forms materialize as the work develops.<sup>12</sup>

Dramaturgical activities can encompass developing the mission of a season; contextualizing theatrical works; supporting production, marketing, and outreach; creating bridges between the play and the audience; and contributing to arts education and advocacy.<sup>13</sup> You may not see dramaturgy in action, but you miss it when it’s absent.

To translate LMDA’s concept of dramaturgy into curating: dramaturgy contributes to conceptualizing the exhibition or curatorial project and supports the various forms or shapes that project may take. Attention to movement, arrangement, composition, timing, research, and interpretation is shared by dramaturgy, choreographic thinking, and the curatorial. I want to weave these ideas together (loosely) to clarify my practice and research.

Dramaturgy is not even agreed upon by those who practice it, and it is perhaps this quality that most endears me.<sup>14</sup> My point here is not to delve

9 Trencsényi, 195–6.

10 Ray Miller, “Dance Dramaturgy: Definitions, Perspectives, Projections,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater*, ed. Nadine George-Graves (London: Oxford Handbooks Online, September 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199917495.001.0001>.

11 I reference LMDA in part because of my work with dramaturg Jeremy Stoller, an LMDA member and U.S.-based dramaturg. There are many other interpretations and histories of dramaturgy in different continents and countries, as well as attendant professional organizations, such as the Dramaturgs’ Network in the UK (<https://www.dramaturgy.co.uk/>) and The Danish Dramaturgy Network (<https://www.dramaturgerne.dk/?cn-reloaded=1>).

12 LMDA describes these forms as “the forms of the script as a script” and “the forms of the play as it grows” in “What is Dramaturgy,” on the LMDA website, accessed 15 March 2020, <https://lmda.org/what-is-dramaturgy>.

13 LMDA, “What is Dramaturgy.”

14 For some of these debates, see *Dramaturgy – A Revolution in Theatre* by Mary Luckhurst: [https://assets.cambridge.org/97805218/49630/excerpt/9780521849630\\_excerpt.htm](https://assets.cambridge.org/97805218/49630/excerpt/9780521849630_excerpt.htm).



*Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation.*

into the fascinating, complicated history of dramaturgy, but to position these ideas in relation to curatorial practice. We are all hoping to create, in every setting, rich, effective, and impactful works of art—and worlds through and around them. Trencsényi notes, “Our understanding of form and content might differ, but the main idea” is still “developing a meaningful piece of theatre,”<sup>15</sup>—a sentiment equally relevant to curatorial practice.

## Curatorial Dramaturgy

*Dramaturgy is all over curating.*

Dramaturgy, despite its disciplinary connections to performing arts, is increasingly applied to visual arts contexts.<sup>16</sup> One possible reason for the growing interest in the intersection of dramaturgy and curating may be due to museums’ integration of dance and theater into gallery spaces. From the operational side, there is a parallel increase in logistical structures to support performative and durational works within museums, including specialized spaces, equipment, and the appointment of performance curators and related staff.<sup>17</sup>

This trend has been decades in the making. Trisha Brown and other Judson Dance Theater members regularly performed in museums, galleries, and nontraditional spaces. Choreographers who emphasize scenography, such as Pina Bausch, and choreographers with significant studio art practices, such as Ralph Lemon and William Forsythe, have also contributed to situating dramaturgy within visual arts and curatorial settings.

Several captivating texts in contemporary curating remark on dramaturgy’s relevance to visual art curating. *Assign & Arrange: Methodologies of Presentation in Art and Dance* addresses artists who use “presentational formats or exhibition displays that generate dimensions of dramaturgy and choreography. In these spatial constellations and aesthetic situations, specific kinds of behavior, movement, aesthetic experiences, and meaning production are initiated.”<sup>18</sup> *Cultures of the Curatorial—Timing: On the Temporal Dimension of Exhibiting* recognizes performing arts activities such as dramaturgy and choreography as being influential on curatorial project development.<sup>19</sup>

15 Trencsényi, 11.

16 Peter Eckersall and Bertie Ferdman, eds., *Curating Dramaturgies: How Dramaturgy and Curating Are Intersecting in the Contemporary Arts* (London: Routledge, 2021), 1.

17 Eckersall and Ferdman, 3.

18 Maren Butte, Kirsten Maar, Fiona McGovern, Marie-France Rafael, and Jörn Schafaff, eds., introduction to *Assign & Arrange: Methodologies of Presentation in Art and Dance* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 20.

19 Beatrice von Bismarck, Rike Frank, Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski, eds., *Cultures of the Curatorial—Timing: On the Temporal Dimension of Exhibiting* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 7.

But dramaturgy, or at least an in-depth exploration of how it functions within exhibitions or in the curatorial process, is not addressed specifically within the texts. It appears only in fragmentary, occasional, and indirect references. You can infer it, but it primarily exists underfoot.

While discussions on dramaturgy and curating have been brief, they are still instructive. Raqs Media Collective acknowledges dramaturgy as the structuring mechanism for the attention and connection needed within the curatorial:

To culture, curatorially, in this sense, can be to set the stage or arguments between different protocols of knowledge and creation, to evolve a dramaturgy for the meeting of different claims to attention, and to nurture interactions within and between processes that may occupy very different locations in the global ecology of contemporary art... [A] biodiversity of cultures of curation—a plurality of rhythms, protocols, and methods—is the best guarantee for the health of “curatorial culture.”<sup>20</sup>

Dramaturgy is not simply a function of research, sourcing, and notating the curatorial, but one of growing, shaping, and catalyzing the form the curatorial takes. It generously *structures* but does not impose a structure.

### Elements of Curatorial Dramaturgy

In *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, Pil Hansen notes that the “need for new approaches and tools arises when thus departing from classical dramaturgical models and approaches.”<sup>21</sup> *Clew* enabled me to develop strategies to envision how dramaturgy, choreographic thinking, and curation intersect.

What are the features of curatorial dramaturgy within a choreographic curatorial practice?

First, rather than seeking (or responding to) one primary narrative or story, the practice encourages a multiplicity of narratives—diverse and dynamic **narrative propositions**. These throughlines emerge during the development of the project and include stories that are evident on the surface (i.e., what is conveyed directly through the exhibition title and description, the subject matter of the work, or the themes within artist statements), as well as the latent or as-yet-named narratives, uniquely formed as the project develops.

Spaces and structures, real and imagined, are **flexible architectures**. While these include the physical and operational, such as the gallery space, the

20 Raqs Media Collective, “To Culture: Curation as an Active Verb,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 100.

21 Pil Hansen, introduction to *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, eds. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 6.

materials, or the production of signage, flexible architectures refer equally to the mental, emotional, institutional, or atmospheric spaces and structures that surround the curatorial situation. Underrecognized or even unseen elements (the weather, the headlines) still exert a shaping influence. Flexibility reflects an attunement to what the project itself proposes, an awareness of how things outside your control set the tone, and the ability to respond to both conditions.

The compositional results of the curatorial process are generated, and subsequently perceived, by a slowly accumulating **haptic visuality**. Curators, artists, and audiences discover *and make* themes and motifs through sensory means, including, but beyond, vision, such as touch, temperature, or smell. As the landscape of the finished installation surfaces, it encounters idiosyncratic and individual bodies, desires, and reactions—which, in turn, become part of, and even modify, the project’s content.

*What you (first) see is only some of what you get.*

The position of the dramaturg is not located within one person. Dramaturgical thinking is shared, collaborative, condensed, and dispersed through people, things, and places: an **adjustable positionality**. The dramaturg is responsible for tending to the process, for engaging in research and advocacy, and for guiding the work to the form(s) it needs to take. These activities are critical however the role is embodied.

The **invitation**, the **encounter**, and **beckoning** address the way ideas, materials, and audiences are invited to contribute, and in so doing, change the process and outcome. These frameworks are especially noticeable in program development but apply to other aspects of exhibition development as well.

Curatorial dramaturgy operates in a mode of **sustained attention**. It can function in simultaneous temporalities: slow, quick, inconsistent, or indeterminate. Whatever the rhythm, it requires a type of committed attention to allow for the potentials of a curatorial project to unfold.<sup>22</sup>

By following Florian Malzacher’s suggestion that we can “employ but also co-invent strategies, forms, and concepts from theater, dance and performance as curatorial strategies,”<sup>23</sup> developing these devices within *Clew* led to an increased dramaturgical awareness.

22 These activities sometimes correspond with specific methods in curating, but more often they function as poetic sensibilities that shelter and shape reoccurring approaches.

23 Florian Malzacher, “How Can One Employ Strategies from Theater as Curatorial Strategies?” in *Curating Dramaturgies: How Dramaturgy and Curating Are Intersecting in the Contemporary Arts*, eds. Peter Eckersall and Bertie Ferdman (London: Routledge, 2021), 142.

## Clew: Discovery and Disorientation

*Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation* was a collaboration with painter Deborah Barlow, poet Todd Hearon, musicians/interdisciplinary artists Jung Mi Lee and Jon Sakata, and myself. This intense, two-year voyage resulted in an ever-shifting landscape of color, light, sound, and texture with no straightforward narrative. As Peter Eckersall and Bertie Ferdman propose in *Curating Dramaturgies: How Dramaturgy and Curating Are Intersecting in the Contemporary Arts*: “Visuality and the presentation of embodied states of action are often more in the foreground and dramatic text is replaced by monologues, poetic fragments, and atmospheric staging that surround and immerse the audience in a sensorium of visual, aural, mediated, and embodied sensations and experiences.”<sup>24</sup>

*Clew* was in turn rich and rewarding (with pleasurable and delightful discoveries) as well as destabilizing and disorienting. It comprised paintings, scrim, projected video, sound, a sound board, great lengths of audio cable, speakers, text, sculptural elements, pedestals, metal trays, salt, coal, furniture, books, magnifying glasses, water, and flashlights. The project offered new models for collaboration and new ways for artists and audiences alike to experience the gallery.

### Devising a Bridge

A bridge (or a leap) between theatrical and dance dramaturgy and choreographic curatorial practice might be found in devised theater, which Vanessa Garcia describes in *HowlRound* as: “theatre that begins without a script. The script gets ‘written’ as the rehearsal process takes place through a series of improvisations and collaborations.”<sup>25</sup> Garcia notes that the process of developing devised work is akin to “living in an underground bunker of ideas” where you need to build “a ladder to the surface of the contemporary stage. This ladder to the surface is complex.”<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, the aim is to serve an audience while keeping this underground alive within the work.

This sentiment resonates with the open-ended, exploratory spirit of *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation*. *Clew* did not stem from a script. We were not seeking to display a completed narrative, but to build it. *Clew* developed through the process. This does not mean that narrative framing disappeared, but it *did* require that the concept of narrative expand.

24 Eckersall and Ferdman, 3.

25 Vanessa Garcia, “The Paradox of Devised Theater on the Twenty-First Century Stage,” in *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, Emerson College, 21 July 2013, <https://howlround.com/paradox-devised-theater-twenty-first-century-stage>.

26 Garcia, “The Paradox of Devised Theater on the Twenty-First Century Stage.”



## How Does It Start? Where Does It Go?

In the development of the devised theater piece *The Underground*,<sup>27</sup> Garcia notes that the company's process focused on surfaces: what they reveal and permit, and their permeability. The company wanted to get under art's "surface." Garcia recalls:

Before we got on our feet with our project, we started at the table with a group of ideas and a book. . . . What does it mean to make art in the twenty-first century? Where does art incubate today? Is there an "underground" anymore, or is it—for good or bad—all "surface"? What is surface? What is underground? These are the questions we have been trying to take apart and translate into performance itself.<sup>28</sup>

To think choreographically within the curatorial process requires a similar incubation. There is a commitment to staying with the process even when the next step is uncertain. You accompany the lines wherever they roam.

For me, it often begins, as Garcia describes, in conversation, accompanied by "a group of ideas and a book."

The earliest inklings for *Clew* surfaced in an email Todd Hearon sent in 2015 about a potential collaboration with painter Deborah Barlow. In the email, Todd proposed a project that would engage his recently published collection of poems in a dialogue with Deborah's paintings. Jung Mi Lee and Jon Sakata joined the conversation soon after.

Subsequent planning for *Clew* unfolded through numerous discussions, emails, texts, and studio visits. There were spontaneous conferrals each week. The four of us based on-campus saw one another almost daily. These encounters became the table we gathered around. Our table was portable: it materialized whenever and wherever we found ourselves together.

From the beginning, we shared an unspoken desire to let the process and the materials shape the project. How could we all inhabit the underground?

This is where (and why) dramaturgy enters.

## How It Moves

Artist Theo Jansen's *Strandbeests*,<sup>29</sup> moving creature-sculptures made with plastic tubing that propel themselves by wind power, offer one idea for a launch. The awkward grace of the sculptures' movements belies a sophisticated engineering and coordinated effort. The *Strandbeests'* agency, their skeletal structures, and the activating force of the wind are inseparable from one another and from the audience experience. It is not one moving the other, passed back and forth in a volley—you, now you, now you—but a cohabitation of form, subjectivity, thought, and action: *movement that moves*.

27 Developed with The Crane theater company: <https://www.thekrane.com/the-underground>.

28 Garcia, "The Paradox of Devised Theater on the Twenty-First Century Stage."

29 Theo Jansen's *Strandbeests*: <https://www.strandbeest.com>.

The motor, scaffolding, and launch are a few of my artistic research motifs. I use them to examine what enables movements of thought and action, how a nascent impulse takes flight, what supports this movement, and how the system flexes and bends. Katherine Profeta describes dance dramaturgy as a skeleton—a structure that holds something up and enables movement.<sup>30</sup> Similar movement-structures enable curatorial dramaturgy.

As “the structural architecture of a work and as a collection of creative strategies and principles that can facilitate creation processes, composition, and audience perception,”<sup>31</sup> dramaturgy has a double function. It both structures and is *a* structure.

<sup>30</sup> Profeta, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Pil Hansen, “The Dramaturgy of Performance Generating Systems,” in *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, eds. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 124.



The sound board and speaker cables during the installation for *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation*.

## DRAMATURGY IN/AS/THROUGH MOTION

I had already been brewing on the idea of “co”—collaborator, commingle, conversation—and “co” in its etymological sense: *with*, when I discover the “Dramaturgy as Co-Imagining into Motion” workshop with Litó Walkey at Zodiak – Center for New Dance. The course proposes a dance dramaturgy that operates by “refusing the function of authoritative authorship, resisting semiotic analysis, and slowing down the consumption process.”<sup>32</sup> It promises we will “articulate from a more speculative field of associations that exposes gaps, breaks, holes, contradictions, frictions, and embarrassments” and create “by daring to initiate something that exceeds predetermined acts and intentions.”<sup>33</sup> The experience supports my theoretical framing of curatorial dramaturgy through the lens of dance dramaturgy, using written, gestural, and performative exercises.

### *Stepping into the Stream*

When I arrive, late, direct from my 8 a.m. landing at the Vantaa airport, I enter in the middle of the flow. I often ask students and collaborators to step into moving streams with me—streams of plans and thoughts, already in motion—so it seems only appropriate that I begin the workshop in the midst.

### *(Un)Do: Performance Imperatives, Agreeable and Contrary*

In Zodiak’s Studio C4, we are invoking the *un*. What happens when we introduce, append, or suggest a prefix to a concept: un-composing, un-forming, un-sharing? Or co-composing, co-forming, co-sharing? Can you uncompose yourself? Can you co-imagine yourself? (Litó Walkey mentions that André Lepecki has reflected on the concept of co-imagining. Naturally, we end up at “Lepecki yourself.”<sup>34</sup>)

I am in a formless, uncertain period of artistic research. These activities induce a mild panic. I am not ready to commit to the words’ meanings—I want the implications to be a bit more fluid, roomy.

Despite my discomfort, I linger in the “un” and “de.”

Lingering eventually decenters you: you relax into readiness differently. You detach the oncoming momentum from a predetermined outcome.

Our exercises lead us into performance imperatives:

*Build*

*Jump*

*Hail*

*Grasp*

32 Litó Walkey, “Dramaturgy as Co-Imagining into Motion,” Zodiak – Center for New Dance, accessed 4 June 2019, <http://www.zodiak.fi/en/dramaturgy-co-imagining-motion>.

33 Litó Walkey, “Dramaturgy as Co-Imagining into Motion.”

34 Litó Walkey, my notes from workshop discussions, “Dramaturgy as Co-Imagining into Motion,” Zodiak – Center for New Dance, Helsinki, Finland, 5–6 June 2019.

Adding the “un” or the “co” allows me to reorient: it is both the imagining of a thing, and its co-imagining. The building and unbuilding. The hailing and unhailing. It is not simply a dualistic language game: yes, and then no, this and then that. These shifts in register are the motors that propel choreographic thinking. Walkey’s exercises highlight these tendencies.

### *Mumble Around*

Walkey encourages us to *mumble around*, a suggestive mix of embodied knowing and linguistic framing (fumbling, fooling around, muttering). She asks us to identify a performance imperative and then undo it. The meanings are open-ended but precise: “How do you include the arrow quality of an imperative in a cloud?”<sup>35</sup>

Building from “co,” we arrive at commonplacing: the idea of using commonplace books to assemble bits of knowledge and inspiration. The commonplace book, a precursor to the anthology, shares characteristics with journals, diaries, sketchbooks, lists, and ledgers: it gathers materials from diverse sources and puts them into conversation.

Walkey remarks that commonplacing is a useful practice for dance dramaturgy: it is a way of creating a “place where things usually not in proximity are brought together.”<sup>36</sup> Juxtaposition is ultimately an effort to produce the commons, with its agreements and frictions.

After assembling a list of questions, we reformulate each into a “short positive imperative.” These imperatives invoke what Walkey refers to as carrier verbs—verbs that propel *doing* into *action*. While listening to the introduction to the activity, I write: *What are my thoughts at this table?* and then a few lines down, *Table my thoughts*.

The task is to stay with the subject of the question and use that to jump into another form. We resist our urge to answer. What activates out of fragments?

*Who does the light perform for?*

Perform the light.

*Can you still see the details when the light leaves?*

Leave the details.

*What does light do to in-between subjects?*

Subject light to the in-between.

Other participants add their imperatives:

Think of I as we.

Difficult yourself.

Trust the wall and forget it.

35 Litó Walkey, my notes from workshop discussions.

36 Litó Walkey, my notes from workshop discussions.

*It Is Never Just You and the Thing You Planned*

There is a minor grammatical sidestep in the performance imperative, like a slightly misregistered print. It holds enough of the original to be linguistically coherent but extends its possibilities.

We exchange performance imperatives with someone else to activate. We watch. Simple but significant differences surface. Each iteration allows room for change. Walkey encourages us to “be in a reciprocal relationship with the performance itself. How does the action inform your choices?”<sup>37</sup>

Giving someone a fragment of a performance imperative, having them reinterpret and re-perform it, and then hand it back to you, creates a new beginning. There is the risk of producing an ever-expanding morass of material at this stage. It is challenging to isolate it—it takes discipline—but doing so orients you toward the as-yet-identified that is foundational to the work.

37 Litó Walkey, my notes from workshop discussions.

## Motoring Without a Map: Narratives through Lines

What was *Clew* about? What was the story?

Throughout the process, our regular conversations and our experimentation with materials produced, and then rerouted, our narrative expectations. Other directional opportunities came into view as we worked.

*Clew* resisted the typical narrative conventions of plot, setting, and character, and the structures of beginning, climax, and denouement. *Clew* proposed the journey, rather than the destination. Dramaturgy contributes, as Bojana Bauer describes, “to the very creation of the conditions for the emergence of that material.”<sup>38</sup>

The incipient narrative of an exhibition grows like an organism. It germinates and ripens, perhaps like fruit or a fungus. Raqs Media Collective asks, “What does it mean then to culture an exhibition, or any curatorial project, to have it crystallize into meaning and patterns of signification?”<sup>39</sup> To initiate this process, Raqs suggests:

We have to create a flux of starting propositions that are fluid enough, neither too stable nor too volatile . . . Then . . . make it possible for there to be that degree of contact between the content of works and processes such that incipient patterns may be encouraged . . . We must also make sure that a host of conditions (such as the temperature of attention—neither too hot, nor too cool—and the density and gravity of the ideas and materials) are appropriate, and finally, we have to give the process time to ripen, to mature, to crystallize.<sup>40</sup>

To curate in this way requires a counter-curatorial effort: to betray curating’s penchant for power and control. Curatorial betrayal, as advanced by Joshua Simon, enables us to see exhibitions as “a moment and a movement that opens up new trajectories, horizons and traces and entail[s] the potentiality for everything to be otherwise.”<sup>41</sup>

The line was the initial (dramaturgical) impulse in *Clew*. Linked to the line was the map, the adventure, disorientation, the micro and the macro, and discovery. The exhibition took its inspiration from the manifold ideas evoked by the word *clew*, from the unfurling sails at the start of a quest, to Ariadne slipping Theseus a ball of thread to guide him out of the Minotaur’s labyrinth. The word also describes the lower part of a ship’s sail or the rigging of a hammock. Narrative propositions are always in motion:

38 Bojana Bauer, “Propensity: Pragmatics and Functions of Dramaturgy in Contemporary Dance,” in *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, eds. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 41.

39 Raqs Media Collective, 101.

40 Raqs Media Collective, 101.

41 Joshua Simon, “Betrayal and the Curatorial – A Testimony for the Committee on the Curatorial,” in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 117.

“Meaning is never carried discretely in one word or motion but in another sort of dance, the one to be found in their interaction.”<sup>42</sup>

Finally, a clew can be a fact or point, which, when followed, can reveal something surprising. Evidence. A clew is also a *clue*.

## Shifting Positions: Curator, Author, Artist, and Dramaturg

In an open-ended, choreographic-curatorial framework, who is the curator? Who is the author or artist? The dramaturg? What is the function of each, and when?

Even where there are mutable authorship situations, such as the artist-curator or the curatorial collective, there still seems to be anxiety, if not animosity, about defining the creative activities of those who organize, support, and even contribute directly to artworks. This anxiety is also at play in dramaturgy. In my work, positions shift depending on the project and often *within* the project. While this mutability has advantages and a certain amount of freedom, it can also be disorienting. What is my role in each stage of the curatorial process?

In *The New Curator: Exhibiting Architecture & Design*, Fleur Watson argues against the curator as “expert”<sup>43</sup> and advances a model where: “one who has an explicit agency in knowledge production and is leading a movement towards an increasingly expansive, porous and responsive mode of curatorship and cultural production.”<sup>44</sup> While the curator isn’t the author of the singular art object, the curator can be the main—or one of the main—authors of the exhibition. To Watson’s suggestion of “one,” I add “many.” Different kinds of authorship, singular and collective, can be invoked in response to specific situations.

### Curator-Author-Artist?

In exhibitions where I developed the themes and areas of emphasis and selected the work, I was the curator or artistic director, and then functioned as the curatorial dramaturg while realizing the project. In exhibitions where I worked with artists in a collaborative capacity, I considered myself to be a participating artist, and secondarily, a curatorial dramaturg. During the installation process for *Clew*, I was an artistic collaborator. This was reflected in materials such as an article by Nicole Pellaton, “Play to Learn: Four PEA Faculty Members and a Boston-based Painter Explore Sensory Perception

42 Profeta, 28.

43 Fleur Watson, *The New Curator: Exhibiting Architecture & Design* (London: Routledge, 2021), 248.

44 Watson, 13.



and Meaning in the Lamont Gallery.”<sup>45</sup> When I stepped outside this role to administer the project, I was the director.

Bringing a critical awareness to authorship is common in curating by artists.<sup>46</sup> Alison Green reflects that “the problematics of individual subjectivity on the one hand and universal categories of understanding on the other call for actively displacing the traditional ideas of creativity and originality that are called up in the form of the authoring artist.”<sup>47</sup> The uneasiness about curatorial authorship parallels the critique of authorship by singular artists.

Perhaps, however, the question about who or what facilitates, advocates for, and contributes to the content does not need to rest on authority, but attunement. As Watson sees it, a curator is “‘tuned to’ the relationship with the outside world” and attentive to the environmental, cultural, political, and social context.<sup>48</sup> The idea of attunement, in turn, moves us closer to understanding the role of the curatorial dramaturg.

### Dramaturg?

Dramaturgs provide support, collaboration, witness, and friendship during the development of a project.<sup>49</sup> The dramaturg thinks systematically and strategically about the work’s development, draws from awareness of a variety of possible artistic forms to “recognise, counter, or strategically utilise their influence,” and helps the artist take calculated risks.<sup>50</sup>

When a curator becomes the dramaturg, what does that entail? Perhaps the curatorial dramaturg is a mediator or interlocutor, “someone who speaks between different acts of speech by translating, annotating, mediating, criticizing, interpreting, and extending the contents of the different instances of articulation.”<sup>51</sup>

While I agree with Fleur Watson’s assessment that the curator is a space maker, translator, interloper, speculator, agent, and dramaturg,<sup>52</sup> despite the increased discourse about the intersection of dramaturgy and curating, there has been little discussion on what a curatorial dramaturg might do. Which activities are distinctly dramaturgical, recognizable as different from curatorial duties? Or is it mainly just a shift in position?

45 Nicole Pellaton, “Play to Learn: Four PEA Faculty Members and a Boston-based Painter Explore Sensory Perception and Meaning in the Lamont Gallery,” *The Exeter Bulletin*, Spring 2017, 30.

46 Alison Green, *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as Medium* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), 120.

47 Green, 121–122.

48 Watson, 248.

49 Pil Hansen, introduction to *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, eds. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2.

50 Hansen, 12.

51 Raqs Media Collective, 112.

52 Watson, 16. Watson uses the alternate spelling “dramaturge.”



*Mediated (Venice) and Charlestown, RI.*



In a gallery context, the curator may have dramaturgical duties, which are shared and distributed with others, from graphic design to carpentry to catering. This is especially true of small academic galleries and artist-run spaces. Here there is an affiliation between theatrical understandings of dramaturgs and curatorial ones. As LMDA notes, the dramaturg is tasked with organizing, planning, promoting, and affirming. Dramaturgs in both performance and curatorial settings “collate, cut, track, edit, rewrite, construct, and arrange,” “gather and arrange images, sounds, and ideas for rehearsal,” and more expansively, “nourish the arts wherever we find them.”<sup>53</sup> The dramaturg, by being “invited into the creative theatrical process . . . to interrogate the ideas,” and “to question theories and practices related to the productions,”<sup>54</sup> helps make a world.

Curatorial dramaturgy involves simultaneous creating, contributing, *and* interpreting,<sup>55</sup> which requires a willingness to shift positions in the moment. Thomas DeFrantz reflects that this flexibility assumes you are “willing to bring in great ideas, terrible ideas, no ideas, my research, my intuition, my crush on this performer or that one, my reading of the news that day, my writing of the always-needed and always-in-process program notes, my discomfort with no palpable sense of order.”<sup>56</sup> You then need to bring this awareness “into the room,” continues DeFrantz, alongside the “written-down and body-catalogued, detailed information from the preceding encounters with these artists, and this work, and the work from before. I have to be inside and outside time simultaneously.”<sup>57</sup> While this constant oscillation can be dizzying, it can also be creatively productive.

### Becoming Adjustable

Naming my roles helped ensure that I could support the curatorial process from the inside, connect the project to the curricular and institutional setting, and imagine the reception of an outside audience. My dramaturgical function in *Clew* was to activate *all* the curatorial, administrative, operational, and mission-driven aspirations of the project. The dramaturgical role, at

53 Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA), “What is Dramaturgy,” LMDA website, accessed 15 March 2020, <https://lmda.org/what-is-dramaturgy>.

54 Miller, “Dance Dramaturgy: Definitions, Perspectives, Projections.”

55 Vida L. Midgelow, “Improvisation Practices and Dramaturgical Consciousness: A Workshop,” in *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, eds. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 108.

56 Thomas F. DeFrantz quoted in Katherine Profeta and Thomas F. DeFrantz, “Field Notes: In the Studio with Ralph Lemon and Donald Byrd,” in *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, eds. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 147.

57 DeFrantz, 147.

least the way I practice it (to paraphrase Brad Haseman's characterization of artistic research), is to embrace an *enthusiasm for potentials*.<sup>58</sup>

This navigation required multiple perceptual strategies. Gabriele Brandstetter proposes that the dramaturgical role within curatorial settings involves passionate looking:<sup>59</sup> it is highly engaged, curious, and tenacious, resolute in making the work dynamic, complex, and fully realized. This requires immersion. If the artistic process is "a body of which the dramaturg is a part," according to Bojana Bauer, then "the distance of vision is replaced by an integration of the body of the dramaturg into the body of the process."<sup>60</sup> I was embedded in the project. At the same time, I had the agency to step outside to see the work as a whole.

Is a dramaturg required in curatorial settings? No. But it's useful as a guide, companion, and supportive interlocuter.

## Distributed Dramaturgy and Artistic Research

### Co-imagining, Co-orientation, and Collaboration

Adesola Akinleye observes that "collaboration can offer unexpected perspectives gleaned from the problem-solving approach of another discipline."<sup>61</sup> The interdisciplinary nature of Akinleye's work, which operates at the intersection of dance, architecture, and city planning, "challenges the assumption that it is about looking for sameness as an indication of the possibility of togetherness. A hunt for sameness can be a 'cul-de-sac-ing' activity of logging similarities . . . Rather, interdisciplinary work is most valuable through its revealing of contingencies of difference."<sup>62</sup>

*Clew* was co-imagined.<sup>63</sup> We did not want to isolate the collaborative process from some imagined, finished work. "When a process is delimited by the belief that there is a preexisting individual creating at its center, the collective becomes an afterthought,"<sup>64</sup> Erin Manning cautions:

58 Brad Haseman has described artistic researchers as demonstrating an "enthusiasm of practice" in "A Manifesto for Performative Research," in *Media International Australia* 118, no. 1 (February 2006): 100, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>.

59 Gabriele Brandstetter, "Written on Water: Choreographies of the Curatorial," in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 121–2.

60 Bauer, 33.

61 Adesola Akinleye, *Dance, Architecture and Engineering* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 3.

62 Akinleye, 7.

63 In an interview, Larisa Crunțeanu and André Lepecki discuss co-imagining as a collaborative, dialogic process that requires a close engagement with the work and expanded notions of authorship: Larisa Crunțeanu, "The Power of 'Co-' in Contemporary Dance," in *Revista-ARTA*, 16 January 2016, <https://revistaarta.ro/en/the-power-of-co-in-contemporary-dance>.

64 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 54.

In segregating participation from the work, in making participation the afterthought of a practice already under way, what we do is set apart integral aspects of a process. The real work is seen as that which emerges before the event opens to the public. Practice thus separates itself from techniques for activation. When this happens, the participatory is set up in an uneasy dichotomy between what becomes the inside and the outside of a process.<sup>65</sup>

In *Clew*, our combined disciplines included poetry, painting, theatrical production and directing, acting, musical performance and composition, installation, sculpture, sound art, video, dance, performance art, writing, and teaching, among other areas. We were all deeply interdisciplinary in our orientation and embraced the contingencies that disciplinary variation promoted.

Dramaturgs cycle between presence and invisibility, depending on the need. The experience “offers the opportunity to create situations that are real *and* symbolic, that allow one to be inside *and* outside at the same time.”<sup>66</sup> In *Clew*, I stepped in and out of my roles repeatedly, sometimes within a few minutes’ time.

It would be disingenuous to say that I did not feel any frustration. Collaboration is thrilling and confounding. At times, it’s exhausting. The fluidity of positions makes it difficult to know when to step in or step back. In “Lean On: A Declaration of Dependence,” the opening essay in *Hard to Love: Essays and Confessions*, Briallen Hopper observes:

The obstacles to shameless leaning are all around us, and they are also inside of us. ... [L]eaning in America has often been characterized as feminine or foreign, and independence has been declared to be a prerequisite for citizenship and dignity, these obstacles might even constitute us. Dependence does not have the same social meaning for everyone, and its weight is not equally borne. . . . Leaning, or being leaned on, can make one feel luscious, melting, known, held, solid, suspended, steely, light. It can also make one feel used, worn out, weak, diminished, infantilized, guarded, sick, spent. Leaning can be love. It is also an improvisation and a risk.<sup>67</sup>

The collaborative working method in *Clew* helped us realize something beyond what we individually imagined at the outset of the project. We declared ourselves (inter)dependent. We had to learn to lean on, and with, one another.

65 Manning, 54.

66 Malzacher, 145.

67 Briallen Hopper, “Lean On: A Declaration of Dependence,” in *Hard to Love: Essays and Confessions* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 21.



One afternoon when the gallery was closed, we tested how we could reimagine the perceptual capacities of *Clew* by capturing views of the exhibition with drones lent by a parent. This view into the exhibition is from the skylights.

The drone flight captures a low-level perspective from one of the smaller side bay galleries looking into the main space.

## A Mode of Thinking: Distributed Dramaturgy

Curatorial dramaturgy is a thematic and compositional motor. It produces, encourages, and scaffolds multiple registers of meaning and engagement. It is never undertaken as a solitary endeavor. It invites the involvement of multiple dramaturgical agents. In *Clew*, dramaturgy became a “perspective or mode of thinking rather than a specific role or job.”<sup>68</sup> Making exhibitions is a multifaceted, collaborative process that is supported and amplified by diverse partners at all levels and at all stages of an exhibition’s development.

The dramaturgical within my curatorial settings can be assumed by anyone or anything involved in contributing to the concepts or sustaining the narrative. The role can be adopted by the curator, the artists, the audience, or other human and nonhuman agents such as artworks, materials, or surrounding conditions. It shifts often and can be shared by multiple agents concurrently.

This phenomenon is one where the “agency in which an individual dramaturg anticipates compositional motivation and knowledge, through an agency which maps points of interaction and their affect from a position in between creators, to an agency that lives in and is produced by systems of action.”<sup>69</sup> Curatorial dramaturgy promotes a mutable positionality—and a distributed one.<sup>70</sup>

## Cloud as Research Space

In this sense, the distributed knowledge, dispersed among the participating artists, the staff, the materials, and the spaces of the gallery, had a cloudlike quality. We worked with and through what Norah Zuniga Shaw calls the “cloud space of research.” She notes that

clouds are hard to research. Unlike a clock, they cannot be taken apart piece-by-piece to understand how they work. Clouds exist in relationship to other things, in dynamic flows, and they are constantly being remade... It is a very different kind of research and sometimes uncomfortable and we don’t have the answers. That’s how we know we’re going the right way, toward the unknown, the curious, and the difficult to articulate.<sup>71</sup>

68 Middelw, 106.

69 Hansen, 1.

70 Freya Vass-Rhee, who served as a dramaturg for William Forsythe, parallels the concept of distributed dramaturgy with the idea of distributed cognition, drawing from Edwin Hutchins’s study of the U.S. Navy. A project fails when the tasks and roles are too delineated and predefined. Some amount of distributed cognition is needed for a project to be successful. Freya Vass-Rhee, “Distributed Dramaturgies: Navigating with Boundary Objects,” in *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, eds. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 93.

71 Norah Zuniga Shaw, “Allowing for the Unknown,” *Motion Bank Two: Re-imagining Choreographic Ideas*, 28 March 2012, <https://motionbank.asc.ohio-state.edu/page/3>.



*Clew* had moments of coherence and cohesion, even if they were different for each collaborator based on their disciplinary orientation. Freya Vass-Rhee would characterize these as “boundary objects.”<sup>72</sup> Boundary objects are objects or concepts that are shared but used differently by various participants, which allows dramaturgical inklings to pool or to spread. We used many tools to encourage this pooling, including a shared interest in writing, both descriptive and experimental, and an enthusiastic engagement with the project’s materials.

## **Dramaturgies of Spaces and Materials**

Materials, elements, and bodies were constantly in flux throughout the installation process, revealing dramaturgies of materials and movements. Motifs were driven by the materials and our movements in response to them. This activity produced the content and the conditions of the exhibition.

In *Clew*, the paintings, the projections, the poem, the sound files—as well as the characteristics of the gallery: windows, light, walls, floor, and temperature—all had dramaturgical implications. They reflected the narrative emphasis, expanded or complicated that arc, provided new ways of conceptualizing project themes, and served as an archive of ideas pursued and abandoned.

### **Unruly Mapping: The Installation Process**

The installation was done in waves. Some of the components were made by the artists in their individual studios ahead of time. Other elements were created in the school’s digital recording studio or with departmental A/V equipment. Some components were borrowed from employees, found at hardware stores and retrofitted, custom-built, or created on the spot.

We traced the looping, draping lines of the speaker cable and followed the shimmer of metallic surfaces. Core earth elements, such as salt and coal, contributed to the idea of the cosmos. Uncharted and vast territories (of the planet, of space, of the psyche). Ribbons or strips of paper or scrim were threads, sails, maps, and clues.<sup>73</sup> Like sound waves that hit uneven surfaces, amplification can veer in unexpected directions. The curatorial dramaturgy was the act of responding to those lines.

### **Bodying**

Adesola Akinleye cautions that even “The sensorial can become a habit, a singular type of body can become the trope of ‘dancer,’ and that body can

<sup>72</sup> Vass-Rhee, 93.

<sup>73</sup> *Clew* was one of the few exhibitions where we did not mount anything outside the arts center where the gallery is housed. There were many worlds with *Clew* already. We felt it sufficient to roam while staying in one place.

choreographically explore the same questions again and again. . . . Collaborating with other disciplines . . . offers new perspectives on the body in space purely by seeing one's own practice through the values of another."<sup>74</sup>

Objects escaped our expectations and performed in different ways. We coaxed the materials, arranging and configuring them. In turn, they coaxed us, recomposing our habits, defaults, and assumptions. We listened deeply to the materials as co-producers, not just representational remainders. Moving in response to the material elements of the exhibition became a choreographic enterprise for us, and later for the public.

We took turns being bodies who make and bodies who assess, in and out of the process. When we stepped outside (sometimes literally, to the other side the gallery's glass doors), we became detached, observing, and reflective bodies. Sometimes we had to unbody or disembody—to ditch habitual reactions—so that other ideas could emerge.<sup>75</sup>

Eckersall and Ferdman argue that the entire framework of contemporary performance is dramaturgical. This is the case in contemporary curating as well:

The artist and the spectator look for and follow dramaturgical threads that draw us into an awareness of performance as a medium that embodies, rather than merely represents, social relations. In this way, the creative use of bodies, text, spatialization, proximity, design, atmosphere, and music are legible and discursive dramaturgical practices that are made to engage the spectator entirely with their senses and intellect.<sup>76</sup>

We were motivated by sharing the creative process with an audience who hadn't yet arrived. We hoped the audience would become part of the process once the exhibition opened.

## Haptic Impulse

We touched everything during the installation process. We tweaked and adjusted the exhibition throughout its run, an almost daily ritual. Our touch included adjusting the video (angles, brightness, loops), the sound (volume, direction), the sand and salt (sweeping, redrawing, replenishing), the scrim (straightening, fluffing), the lighting (focusing, dimming),

<sup>74</sup> Akinleye, 3.

<sup>75</sup> Fayen d'Evie recommends blundering as a strategy: "A method for grappling with the intangible, the unknown and the invisible, blundering allows for uncertainty, tenuous threads, and peripheral distractions, while also affirming wayfinding through blindness." Fayen d'Evie, "Orienting Through Blindness: Blundering, Be-Holding, and Wayfinding as Artistic and Curatorial Methods," in *Performance Paradigm* 13, Performance, Choreography, and the Gallery, (2017): 43, <https://www.performanceparadigm.net/index.php/journal/article/view/193>.

<sup>76</sup> Eckersall and Ferdman, 4.

the mirrors (turning, shifting), and the paintings (leveling, angling). This repeated shifting was a dramaturgy of contact and connection.

Joshua Simon notes that “there are scripted and unscripted relations between the various authors of a piece, the worlds, spaces and contexts it connects to, the curated syntax and all that which the viewers bring forth.” Likening the multiple meanings and readings of exhibitions as a web rather than a point, Simon argues that “the exhibition as a retinal and non-retinal viewing mechanism ... proposes a wide range of aesthetic experiences.”<sup>77</sup>

The underground began to surface and pool in distinct ways.

*Clew* produced landscapes that summoned the lunar, the geologic, and the microscopic, underscoring the themes of scale, territory, and discovery. An undulating scrim installed in front of a large painting became a landscape of clouds. Low metal trays containing salt and mirrors were installed on pedestals, their glittering reflections changing with each angle of encounter. The gallery had different moods. Even the time of day and weather impacted the reception (and perception) of the project.

The audio components included a heavily mixed version of Todd Hearon reading his poem. A sound board was stationed in the main gallery and speakers were placed throughout the space, giving the sound a spatial and temporal quality. The speaker cable, as well as the meandering, twisting, and threaded qualities of the sound itself, mirrored the motifs of the exhibition.

Every installation decision summoned a different type of bodily engagement. You could not perceive everything from one vantage point. Each time you turned to get your bearings, the video projection would advance, the sound would accelerate, and the light would wane and flicker. As you moved, the looking consolidated, then splintered and dispersed, spreading and contracting.<sup>78</sup>

## **(Il)legibility and (De)illumination**

It is not always clear where to start or what direction to take once you are inside the Lamont Gallery. It has spaces within spaces, which vary by size, shape, ceiling height, and temperature. We encouraged the audience to

<sup>77</sup> Simon, 117.

<sup>78</sup> Prasanta Kumar Dutta examines the connections between dramaturgy and scenography in <https://medium.com/diarium-da-pacific/dramaturgy-through-scenography-1efd5a3a9de>.



People dropped pieces of charcoal, salt, and other materials into the water in the low metal trays in the middle of the gallery. Over time, the materials began to morph and change on their own.

inhabit the disorienting elements of *Clew* and make room for illegible bodies (of knowledge). To get lost. As Sara Ahmed observes:

“Getting lost” still takes us somewhere; and being lost is a way of inhabiting space by registering what is not familiar. ... The familiar is an effect of inhabitation; we are not simply in the familiar, but rather the familiar is shaped by actions that reach out toward objects that are already within reach. ... The work of inhabiting space involves a dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar.<sup>79</sup>

Signage for Lamont Gallery exhibitions typically included outdoor banners, posters, a lobby sign, and numerous interior texts, such as a curatorial statement, object labels, artists’ biographies, quotations, and binders with articles and price lists.<sup>80</sup>

As *Clew* was meant to be “a rich and rewarding disorientation,” we kept the signage to a minimum. The brief curatorial statement was the only traditional text in the gallery. The text in Todd’s poem was printed at such a minute scale it was barely legible. There were no signs about what you could touch or reposition. We created object labels but decided not to use them.

The lack of signage proved frustrating for the audience. Our artistic research produced “experimentation that generates an experience so new that it may not yet be recognizable.”<sup>81</sup> The audience was eager to *know*. What types of materials did Deborah use in her paintings? What were the coal-like clumps? Why was one wall or another so dark/bright/saturated/sparse? Why was the poem so small? What was the distorted voice in the soundscape trying to *say*?

### Seeing Is Difficult

Fayen d’Eve remarks that “audiences have become so habituated to 20/20 visual cultural paradigms, that it can be a struggle in a discrete event to persuade (or expect) an audience to navigate unfamiliar codes of encounter.”<sup>82</sup> Difficulties in perception and understanding within *Clew* were not just due to a lack of light or signage, but to an intentional effort to disrupt the appraising-consuming-knowing loop we expect the act of seeing to provide.

Carrie Lambert-Beatty, in *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*, describes Yvonne Rainer’s interest in “seeing difficulties,”<sup>83</sup> where the critical questions include: “How is the viewer positioned? What kind of viewer—what model of subjectivity—is brought into being? What mode of perception is invited, what kind of experience produced, what form of connection

79 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 7.

80 We sold work occasionally. The artists received between 75% and 100% of the revenue.

81 Profeta, 65.

82 d’Eve, 46.

83 Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge: October/MIT Press, 2008), 10.

proposed?”<sup>84</sup> Rainer, Judson Dance Theater, and Fluxus were surely on my mind during *Clew*. The difficulties in seeing within *Clew* paralleled Rainer’s adverted gaze (most famously in *Trio A*) and simultaneous insistence that the audience stays attentive.

Lambert-Beatty argues that Rainer’s approach to visuality reflected an “aesthetic of concurrence” which “caused the viewer to perform—a spectatorship that acknowledges distance.” Rainer “insisted on the ongoing existence of events outside one’s immediate, situated experience.”<sup>85</sup> (Emphasis in original.) Similarly, in *Clew*, the multiple levels, textures, and interpretative possibilities required that people think beyond what was in front of them at any one moment.

To promote seeing *otherwise*, we installed magnifying glasses on shelves throughout the gallery. How or where to use them was left open. While magnifying glasses seem most associated with enhanced vision, in this case it wasn’t clear how they would help.

Our aim was haptic: to invite an experimental investigation of the exhibition. People did not simply look directly through the magnifying glasses, but used them in combination with gesture, pose, and position, often employing the glass as a shaping tool, carving out different areas for interpretation. Every movement suggested a different narrative direction. Perhaps you were looking at a close-up of a cell, or a galaxy. Without scale or reference, how could you know? Did it matter?

Our efforts to imagine the futures of *Clew* and follow vectors toward those futures mobilized the project in unanticipated ways. Imagination “has a certain structure as well as a characteristic way of interacting.” For Sarah Robinson:

If the imagination is a body—it is a body in suspension ... that operates in an intermediate zone of possibility, in the pause between what has already happened and what might possibly be. This zone of possibility awaits an invitation to enter in. And the invitation must respect the nature of the pause. It must not complete or resolve the suspension, but must offer—indeed, encourage—a departure from the known.<sup>86</sup>

## Another Space of Encounter

What did *Clew* communicate? Kasia Tórz observes that “curating resembles a translating process – bringing far away worlds closer. ... not only works of art produced in geographically distant places, but the bare act of communicating with a stranger – the relationship between and artist and

84 Lambert-Beatty, 9.

85 Lambert-Beatty, 246.

86 Sarah Robinson, *Architecture Is a Verb* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 157.

viewer – captured in a third, extraterritorial space of the encounter.”<sup>87</sup> The open-ended mediation of *Clew* made it possible to occupy and traverse aesthetic experiences in alternate and inclusive ways.

Dramaturgy is not simply the interior guide and scaffold for a work, but the mechanism for how that work is externalized. Bonnie Brooks argues that the presenting function of cultural institutions—where art intersects with public audiences—is a dramaturgical move: “In taking on the role of catalyst in a locale or community,” the presenter calls “on all participants to pay attention, commit financially, and bring their imaginations into a shared circle of curiosity, possibility, and participation. This is dramaturgical in that it gives dynamic shape to the existing ‘text’ of artistic content as created by the artist and subsequently proposed to audiences by the curator.”<sup>88</sup>

The audience is an important agent in curatorial dramaturgy, but within a choreographic practice its influence is indirect.<sup>89</sup> Audiences are multiple and not homogenous. The objective is not to promote consensus but to produce a space for co-presence. Curatorial invitations are made without assumptions about what the invitations might produce.

*Clew* became a place to have brainstorming meetings with colleagues, review a student’s futuristic architectural maquette, or enjoy a moment of quiet contemplation at the end of a long week. These ensemblic movements modeled other ways of being present in the gallery.

## Beckoning

*Clew*’s programs augmented and enlivened the project’s themes. Meditation events, drone flights, and jewelry workshops took the form of beckoning: a gesture that radiates and compels someone to come closer—etymologically, “to shine.”<sup>90</sup>

Each program activated the rhizomatic qualities of the project. Gallery talks and class visits encouraged critical thinking and reflection, revealing aspects of *Clew* that did not become apparent through other formats. Studio art activities reflected the materials in the gallery and expanded their range. Impromptu conversations in the gallery between teachers and students touched on topics ranging from physics to language to music, making

87 Kasia Tórz, “Micro-Revolution on the Periphery: Agata Siwiak’s *Wielkopolska: Rewolucje* (2012),” in *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy*, eds. Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2017), 139.

88 Bonnie Brooks, “Dance Presenting and Dramaturgy,” in *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, eds. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 197.

89 I am interested in moving away from viewers, spectators, or onlookers in galleries to audience members. The word audience concerns listening; its roots reference “to perceive physically, grasp,” and shift the activity from the ocular-visual to the immersive-embodied-sensorial. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Audience,” accessed 11 June 2022, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=audience>.

90 *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Beckon,” accessed 21 April 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=beckon>.



Maps and mazes.

the gallery-as-classroom into a mobile, collectively felt experience. What kinds of learning were shared or constructed here? Could we make knowledge atmospheric?

People drew map- and maze-like drawings in response to the environment. We supplied metallic pens and pencils, and dark, richly colored pieces of paper. Galleries often have response areas such as this one. Many are yoked to explicit educational aims and aspire to produce certain outcomes. The designs of these spaces are often separate from the main exhibition and marked as “educational.” Embedding the mapmaking space within the gallery, rather than as a separate activity center, inspired the audience to integrate their responses into the exhibition.

## Pacing and Presence

An open-ended, exploratory approach to making exhibitions invites us to reinterpret, re-embodiment, or occupy time and space otherwise. It is improvisatory.<sup>91</sup> Embracing the dramaturgical involves paying attention to the *pacing* of movement in the gallery. Pacing can relate to the tempo of events, the momentum of an educational program, the progress of audience members, and even the (s)pacing of art objects.

<sup>91</sup> Akinleye, 86.



Choreographic thinking encourages “multiple opportunities of *present* to be available.” For Akinleye, “this is not just to meet the aesthetic needs of different people. It is to suggest that multiple rhythms offer multiple ways to be present, to be at the periphery of oneself, hovering at the surfaces of ‘we,’ ‘us,’ ‘community.’”<sup>92</sup> Choreographic curatorial practice encourages multiple and divergent temporalities apart from or against the rhythms imposed on us by curatorial or institutional structures.

Stillness, too, has a pace. Nothing is ever completely still—it is always just *coming from* somewhere or *about to be* something. Even if it is inert, it is durationally so.<sup>93</sup>

92 Akinleye, 87.

93 A striking example was Sari Palosaari’s *Time Is Out of Joint* exhibition at Galleria Sculptor in Helsinki in 2018. I went to see the exhibition several times, including once when Simo Kellokumpu was performing. It remains a potent memory of the ways objects and interactions catalyze philosophical and affective states: <https://www.saripalosaari.com/time-is-out-of-joint-1>.

## SLOW ART DAY

We're always in a hurry.

In a museum, we spend only a few seconds looking at each piece of art.<sup>94</sup> What happens when we take more time?

I worked with students to develop a Slow Art Day program for *Clew*. Slow Art Day is an international initiative focused on the meditative and transformational effects of looking at one work of art over an extended period.<sup>95</sup>

I am not entirely in agreement with the language around some of the more marketing-oriented aspects of the slow art movement. For example, in "How Long Do You Need to Look at a Work of Art to Get It?" Isaac Kaplan declares that "Studying an artwork for an extended period of time instead of doing other stuff (20 minutes is *almost* a full *Seinfeld* episode) is clearly *an important part of understanding what lurks inside it*"<sup>96</sup> (emphasis added).

The idea of getting an artwork and accessing the artwork's hidden agenda represents what I am trying to avoid.<sup>97</sup> Our agenda in *Clew* was not to extend the audience's looking time, or to have people "understand" the work. We sought to make looking expansive rather than reinforce the hasty visual-ocular mode common in gallery settings.<sup>98</sup>

To develop the Slow Art Day program, which resulted in observation, discussion, and hands-on art-making activities, the students and I held our planning meetings in the gallery, often during opening hours. The presence of people navigating the exhibition (with eagerness or bewilderment) added another layer. We noticed that the urge to read a label, have a conversation, or consult a

94 Research puts the amount of time between 15 and 30 seconds (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/slow-art-day-2019-1508566>).

95 See <https://www.slowartday.com>. Slow Art Day also reflects slow food, slow fashion, and the slow in urban development and teaching. In art history and museum education settings, slow is contemplative. The late Joanna Ziegler, from the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts, was a well-known advocate of contemplative looking, reportedly having her students study one abstract painting for an entire semester: <https://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree/beholding>. Shari Tishman, of Harvard University's arts education research initiative Project Zero, has delved into the pedagogical implications of this practice in *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

96 Isaac Kaplan, "How Long Do You Need to Look at a Work of Art to Get It?" in *Artsy*, 25 January 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-long-work-art-it>.

97 Most articles about slow looking and Slow Art Day use similar phrases.

98 I intend the phrase *slow looking* to encompass many forms of slow perception in recognition of other-than-visual sensory attunement. Slow perception invites opening to insights that are not revealed so readily in a quick sweep of the room.

phone, especially when the looking gets long, was powerful. Slow looking is hard work.<sup>99</sup> It takes practice. We realized that participants might be frustrated or bored. Were we comfortable with that possibility? What would encourage a mental “settling”<sup>100</sup> to help people enter a space of contemplation?

We examined our assumptions about pacing in relation to the word slow. Pacing involves time and timing: how long did we want people to look at each piece? Pacing is spatial: where and how would the audience approach the work or interact with others?

We asked people not to discuss the work with their neighbor during the initial part of the program. Spending time with a work in silence—not jumping to try to externalize or put observations into words right away—can be uncomfortable. In a slow-art framework, instead of focusing on what looks conventional and comfortable (such as a painting hung on a wall), you learn to turn your attentional capacity to anything—including those situations that aren’t overtly recognizable.

This can be challenging to implement. It is difficult to have a plan and not show it, or even use it. Reflecting on Exeter’s Harkness pedagogy, Molly T. MacKean recalls: “I come from a family of architects and engineers. . . . I have often guessed that my very being . . . was first sketched upon inky, waxy sheets of blue paper.” The challenge with Harkness was that:

I was supposed to have a plan but not to share it, to conceive of a lesson as a lasting edifice, but then ask my students to construct it on their own, without the convenience of the blueprints . . . . As an engineer, this kind of denial would make no sense and might well lead to catastrophe. As a teacher, this began to make every bit of sense.<sup>101</sup>

Slow Art Day argued that knowledge is still created collectively even in moments of individual, silent looking. Communication extends beyond the verbal to include the act of sharing space and spending time together. Slow looking makes room for all the other ways you can access aesthetic experience.

99 There is a *demand* inherent in Slow Art Day movements, as well as within programs such as Hans Ulrich Obrist’s Marathons and other durational cultural programs. The demand impacts both the institution and the audience. Having the availability, energy, or resources to attend these programs depends on privilege, leisure time, funding, staffing, space availability, and geographical proximity (or technological/virtual access), among other factors. Well-intentioned programs of this nature may reinforce existing inequities.

100 Lamont Gallery student proctor Elizabeth Kostina helped me develop a workshop for OLLI (the Osher Institute of Lifelong Learning) in conjunction with the *American Mortal* exhibition. Elizabeth so aptly observed that the participants needed time to *settle*, a sentiment that captures the body-mind’s need to recenter and reacclimate before learning something new.

101 Molly T. MacKean, “Planning Harkness,” in *A Classroom Revolution: Reflections on Harkness Teaching and Learning*, eds. Jane S. Cadwell and Julie Quinn (Exeter, New Hampshire: Phillips Exeter Academy, 2015), 111.

## Sustained Attention

*When did it start? (then and now and again)*

*Where did it go? (all over the place)*

*When did it happen? (before, during, after)*

*Where did you stop? (did we land, ever?)*

*Clew* was a durational project, operating in myriad times, a mode of curating as “an experimental form of time management.”<sup>102</sup> Progression was not correlated with arrival or closure. Terry Smith observes:

Contemporary curating aims to display some aspect of the individual and collective experience of what it is, or was, or might be to *be* contemporary. Thus, there is a spatial and phenomenological horizon for contemporaneity within the exhibition: it is a discursive, epistemological, and dramaturgical space in which various kinds of temporality may be produced or shown to coexist.<sup>103</sup>

The operational, staffing, and logistical impact of this way of working can cause trouble. As Nikolas Hirsch has noticed regarding the tense negotiations between galleries and institutions: “The relations between the physio-spatial configuration of art institutions and their programmatic and curatorial approaches seem increasingly difficult. There is a feeling of dysfunctionality, of schizophrenic institutional life in which the infrastructural needs can’t quite cope with sprawling curatorial ideas and vice versa.”<sup>104</sup> The sustained time of *Clew* was not always positive. It challenged the routines and schedules of staff and artists. It was materially intensive and technically involved.

We lacked the scoring devices of the signage. Without the object labels, the markers for each work, with their implicit directional and pacing suggestions, the audience had no road map. Our directional capacity as

102 Nikolaus Hirsch, “Plans Are Nothing—Planning is Everything: Productive Misunderstandings of Time,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial—Timing: On the Temporal Dimension of Exhibiting*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck et al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 66.

103 Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 30.

104 Hirsch, 68–69.

collaborators did not always translate when we were not present. Alone, the materials may not have performed their dramaturgies successfully.<sup>105</sup> Each audience member had to navigate on their own, which required time and effort. Boundless, unstructured time is sometimes *too* open.

Was this a failure of the project? Can the effort and length of time artists and curators impose on audiences be a demand? Can the requirement that the audience be self-directed and assume the role of co-producers be a bit of curatorial arrogance?

*Who has the time?*

More optimistically, the sprawling, ongoing curatorial can become a new, intentional mode of practice, argues Hirsch.<sup>106</sup> Florian Malzacher extends this idea and suggests that a performative temporal move can develop into a curatorial strategy:

Expanding, shortening, interrupting, or varying time (thus navigating the physical or mental strength, exhaustion, boredom, or enthusiasm of the collective body of the visitors) can create such an awareness, as well as creating specific densities of spatial complexities. Inventing specific dramaturgies or playing with the potential or limitation of narration or scores is another option, along with confronting works that might not be compatible at first sight, in order to create both tension and openness through their friction.<sup>107</sup>

Despite the challenges, we took time, and, in so doing, made time. André Lepecki might liken this to dance dramaturgy's "ethical persistence," which he describes as "a will to keep going without needing to know where we are heading, so that together we may build that which we do not know what might be."<sup>108</sup>

105 One exhibition that experimented successfully with materials and spaces as dramaturgical forces was *Benedick, Or Else*, at New York University's 80WSE gallery. A collaboration between scenographer Andromache Chalfant and artist Dora Budor, *Benedick* suggested the history of the building's use as housing for single male bachelors and artists (<https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2019/february/80wse-benedick.html>). I was entranced by the exhibition. With the worn carpeting and scuffed tile, the flickering bulb in the closet, and the stains and smells, it felt present, even alive. That the gallery remained empty of other people during my visit only heightened these sensations. My companion was not so enthralled.

106 Hirsch, 68.

107 Florian Malzacher, "Feeling Alive: The Performative Potential of Curating," in *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy*, eds. Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2017), 32.

108 André Lepecki, "Errancy as Work: Seven Strewn Notes for Dance Dramaturgy," in *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, eds. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 54.



## Notes on a Reprise

Serba sediki aku terasa bebas (atau kebas?), bukan dari lingkungan bahasa itu sendiri tetapi dari penerimaan secara membuta-tuli akan penggunaan satu jenis bahasa sebagai bahasa sejagat untuk umat manusia. ... The feeling of not knowing in spite of perceiving, not because I don't recognize the markings but because I can't articulate what it says.<sup>109</sup>

In "Aku menjadi saksi kepada – What I am Thinking," Roopesh Sitharan interrogates the gaps between representation and knowledge. To perceive is not to know, if knowing requires that you obliterate what you perceive by forcing it into language.

Large portions of Sitharan's text are written in Malay, a language I do not speak or read. What keeps me circling back to the essay is how it critiques assumptions about what and how it means to *know*. Sitharan aims for a "a sort of vacuum that becomes productive. That instigates questions of 'doing' rather than 'knowing.'"<sup>110</sup>

Attempts to demand that knowledge "show itself" in a representational manner reduce the very vibration that makes knowing possible and *meaningful*: "The oscillation of language in writing (that actualizes this vacuum) is the traction that sustains my doing. And I insist that this doing should (and could) only be performed and cannot be represented."<sup>111</sup>

As curators within academic settings, our role is to stimulate conditions, not to narrate their outcomes. Curatorial dramaturgy, like artistic research, is a ripple: much like when skipping a flat stone onto water, the ripples move outward and shift direction when they encounter other forces. As Sitharan offers, "I hope with my performance I am hinting at some obvious loop-holes. The usual covering up of the 'what' (doing) so as not to convey the actual event of the act of writing itself (or reading in your case). This manifestation/experience lies in sustaining the vacuum of not knowing; a vacuum that enables the working of knowledge in me (and you hopefully)."<sup>112</sup>

109 Roopesh Sitharan, "Aku menjadi saksi kepada – What I am Thinking," in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 110.

110 Sitharan, 111.

111 Sitharan, 111.

112 Sitharan, 112.

Audience members engaging with the *Clew* futon installation in one of the smaller side bays of the gallery. This room became a destination for students before and after classes.

## Space Hold

Could *Clew* happen again? What parts of it, and under what circumstances?

The project took a great deal of time: the long-term relationships, the reliance on so many contributors and partners, and the flexible, but not infinite, atmosphere afforded by a residential academic gallery. *Clew* produced an excess, a too-muchness, making it logistically hard to sustain. I doubt it could function in another site or as a traveling program.

From an artistic research perspective, *Clew* allowed me to develop my concept of curatorial dramaturgy and expanded my ideas about what could be realized in the gallery. It afforded me the opportunity to work with artists over a sustained period and increased my capacity for risk and experimentation on a larger, and more public, scale.<sup>113</sup> I only occasionally attempted to give this knowledge a linguistic frame. I was usually content to let it remain atmospheric:

We float in the clouds. It is a stormy summer afternoon and the clouds are unusually tall, thick, and bulbous. The plane bounces forward, shaking and rattling, and we all feel uneasy. But of course it's absolutely fine; we're just passing through different atmospheres, spaces of other qualities. And, with that in mind, we can navigate and know what each has to offer, and those that come after, too.<sup>114</sup>

Although I have not arrived at a definition or a reproducible set of methods for curatorial dramaturgy, I have plans. Until that time, this section creates what in dance is sometimes called a *space hold*—a temporary state or pause, a place to take up momentary occupancy, to anticipate future, unknown potentials. To hold space, writes Renee Gladman, is “to make a field of a field that was already there.”<sup>115</sup>

As I anticipated in the curatorial statement: “Imagine you are given a fragment of a map. It is crumpled, mottled with age and dirt, and only partially legible. What would you do with it? Does it need to lead you to a predetermined destination, or could you allow it to take you somewhere else, unexpected?”<sup>116</sup>

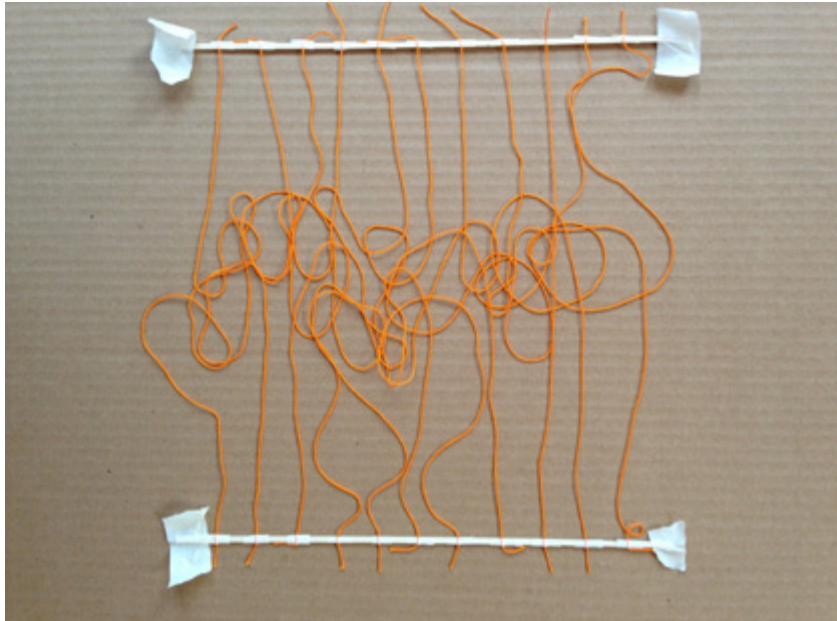
113 I have continued to experiment with curatorial dramaturgy. In 2019, I served as the curatorial dramaturg for *Situational: A Studio Research Residency* in collaboration with Kathy Desmond at the Nave Gallery in Somerville, Massachusetts. The project involved prototyping works in wire, lights, and projection and pairing these works with conversations and shared meals with invited guests. In 2020, in conjunction with *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*, I worked with dramaturg Jeremy Stoller to understand how dramaturgy functioned within curatorial practice, an experience addressed in Section Seven: Letting Things Move and in the Research Catalogue.

114 Henry Urbach, “Exhibition as Atmosphere,” in *Log*, no. 20 Curating Architecture (Fall 2010): 17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41765361>.

115 Gladman, 126.

116 Lauren O’Neal, curatorial statement, *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation*, Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, 2017.





Score generator. I often make score generators out of wood and string—at the scale of the hand or the body—to envision movement, patterns, and lines of potential (written, imagined, enacted) in relation to artworks, spaces, and audiences.

## CULTIVATING DESIRE AS AN ARTISTIC RESEARCH STRATEGY

Desire, love, and feelings of indebtedness are underrecognized components of artistic research. In “Developing and Writing Creative Arts Practice Research: A Guide,” Estelle Barrett mentions it in passing as one of the reasons or justifications for how you select your methods and materials: “The researcher will need to explain reasons for choice of materials and methods and link this to the broader conceptual approach. Possible aspects to consider include: Influence, indebtedness, intertextuality ... Area of expertise, inspiration, desire.”<sup>117</sup>

Could paying attention to desire be a method? I often feel a strong sense of attachment for my curatorial projects: an intense attunement with what the research reveals. As Tim Ingold describes:

The things we study begin to tell us how to observe. In allowing ourselves into their presence rather than holding them at arm’s length, in attending to them, we find that they are also guiding our attention. Our eyes and ears, hands and minds, absorb into their ways of working a perceptual acuity attuned to their particular ways of moving, of feeling and of being ... we also respond to them as they respond to us.<sup>118</sup>

Ingold imagines research as an exchange: “It is through corresponding with things that we care for them: it is a labor of love, giving back what we owe to the world for our own existence as beings within it.” As a specific and personal activity, research “is not just what we do but what we undergo. ... For in experience, things are *with us* in our thoughts, dreams and our imaginings, and we with them.”<sup>119</sup>

### *I Am Following Desire Lines*

As we seek and make desire lines, Natalie Loveless urges us to ask: “Whom and what do I traverse?” To frame artistic research through desire lines is to “unpin it from a primarily disciplinary orientation,” to acknowledge the researcher’s positionality and to move “beyond primary accountability to a specific discipline while still keeping the door open to discipline-specific knowledges.”<sup>120</sup>

117 Estelle Barrett, “Developing and Writing Creative Arts Practice Research: A Guide,” in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 191–2.

118 Tim Ingold, “Anthropology Between Art and Science: An Essay on the Meaning of Research,” in *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, no. 11 (Fall 2018), <https://field-journal.com/issue-11/anthropology-between-art-and-science-an-essay-on-the-meaning-of-research>.

119 Ingold, “Anthropology Between Art and Science: An Essay on the Meaning of Research.”

120 Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 25.

Desire lines “can be found all over the city and all over the world,” writes Robert Moor. “They appear anywhere people want to walk, where no formal paths have been provided. (Sometimes they even appear despite the existence of formal paths.)” The meandering, exploratory quality of my curatorial practice parallels desire lines in their “evidence of pedestrians’ inability or unwillingness to do what they’re told.”<sup>121</sup> Alternatively, desire lines “reveal the inherent flaws in a city’s design—the places where paths ought to have been built, rather than where they were built,” Moor observes. But perhaps we can “listen to and learn from them.”<sup>122</sup> Desire lines are both wayward and stubborn. Following them is a methodology.

Perhaps I stray from traditional aims of research: my desire is not necessarily to show or tell, even though those actions are necessary within artistic research’s academic context. Instead, I seek to position desire as a means of resonant renewal. To have the movement of thought transform itself in the thinking. To *be with* the research and its unarticulated, unanticipated, and emergent futures.

121 Robert Moor, “Tracing (and Erasing) New York’s Lines of Desire,” in *The New Yorker*, 20 February 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/tracing-and-erasing-new-yorks-lines-of-desire>.

122 Moor, “Tracing (and Erasing) New York’s Lines of Desire.”





Seven: Letting Things Move

## Pandemic Curating

It was impossible to know that this exhibition would forecast, as well as reflect, a felt and lived experience. However, to subsume the artwork into this period of profound alteration of our daily lived experiences—those characterized by movement, by congregation, by intimate exchanges and collective catharsis, by friends and walks and travel and work and prayer and joy and mourning—would be to lose sight of what the artwork can offer us both before and perhaps, *after*.<sup>1</sup>

Choreographic thinking encourages movement via a multitude of forms. It became critical for me to identify these forms and mobilize their generative force when one of my curatorial projects was impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Curating with a choreographic mindset allowed me to realize the project in alternate and dispersed ways.

*Being & Feeling (Alone Together)*<sup>2</sup> was held at the Lamont Gallery at Phillips Exeter Academy from March through July 2020. The exhibition focused on connection, isolation, and the social aspects of emotion. While some of the components of the exhibition (including the title) were developed well before the pandemic, most of the project unfolded during myriad spatial, emotional, political, and economic situations that the pandemic produced.

What moves in an exhibition project, if not the bodies of artists and audiences and objects? In response to the pandemic, I had to detach the curatorial from typical exhibition formats and use other movements to generate aesthetic experience. Paula Marincola remarks:

It is in practice that *a priori* assumptions and closely argued theories meet with the resistance of the empirical and the contingent. Various factors, many beyond a curator's control—insufficient budgets, recalcitrant lenders, space constraints, competing institutional imperatives and priorities, ancillary resources or lack of them, to name a few—defy the most carefully cherished ideals and beliefs. Curatorial intelligence, invention, improvisation, and inspiration are developed and refined by

- 1 Lauren O'Neal, "About the Exhibition as We First Imagined It," in the *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* exhibition catalogue (Exeter: Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, 2020), 5.
- 2 See the *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* Research Catalogue exposition at <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/978294/2038750>.

Preceding pages: Spending time in *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* without audience members reinforced the exhibition's themes of proximity, intimacy, and connection. Foreground: *Bird in Hand* by Sachiko Akiyama. Background: work by Andrew Fish, Katya Grokhovsky, and Lauren Gillette.

effectively engaging and reconciling these constraints as the inevitable limitations that accompany most exhibition-making.<sup>3</sup>

A choreographic ethos encourages curating to be curious as well as capacious. It invites us to become receptive to the potential of objects, spaces, and audiences. While this is my aspiration in *any* situation, in pandemic conditions, these principles took on additional urgency.

### In Stillness, What Moves?

*Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* was originally conceived of as a collection: a group exhibition and a series of interventions, events, and programs at the Lamont Gallery, and a second project at the MUU Gallery in Helsinki.

Participating artists in the Lamont Gallery iteration of the project included sculptor Sachiko Akiyama, painter Andrew Fish, conceptual artist Lauren Gillette, visual and performing artist Katya Grokhovsky, conceptual artist Stephanie Misa, animator Tobias Rud, sound and installation artist Jon Sakata, photographer Cheryle St. Onge, and composer Riikka Talvitie. Other contributors were to be involved in additional events, such as “Feeling All Your Feelings” and “Mental States: Psychedelics and Mental Health.”



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3 Paula Marincola, *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, 2006), 10.

In some literal way, *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* did not move, at least by the means that have characterized my prior projects. The Lamont Gallery was in the process of installing the visual artworks and finalizing plans for events when the pandemic shut down the campus. Although some artworks were installed (to the extent feasible given restricted access to the gallery), many other installation components, such as a wall-sized magnetic poetry board, were never built or put into place. None of the artists, aside from Jon Sakata, came into the space. No public events with live audiences were held in the gallery. The full scope of the original project could not be realized. The MUU portion of the project was postponed repeatedly, then cancelled.

I had to release the impulse to brace *against* this challenge, and to shift from making things move—setting action *upon*—to *letting* things move. The closure of campus was an opportunity to spur the project to move forward even if it took a radically different turn. Perhaps the stillness of the pandemic could promote “attention to strategies for conjuring and listening to the faint melody of new, less acknowledged relationships within *Place*,”<sup>4</sup> as Adesola Akinleye suggests.

## Trying to See/Seek Choreographic Thinking, Trying to Locate the Curatorial

When the future became uncertain, what were the options? Try to hold onto what had been? Or abandon the project for something altogether new? Neither option felt appropriate. The more I tightened my grasp, the less *give* I had to give.

If I looked hard and long enough, surely *some* solution would emerge?

Or could I *ease* into knowing by positioning myself *alongside* the objective, instead of the frontal aggression of facing it directly? Privileging vision over other senses pushes us “into detachment, isolation, and exteriority,”<sup>5</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa notes: “the hegemonic eye seeks domination over all fields of cultural production, and it seems to weaken our capacity for empathy, compassion and participation with the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Instead of gripping too tightly or staring something into submission, I needed to relax into the potentials of curatorial practice to give creative and critical thinking room to flourish.

There is a constant battle between the desire for flourishing and the pressure to know *earlier*, *faster*, and *more*, and to demonstrate this knowledge in direct and unambiguous ways. In the gallery, we expect works to be visually,

4 Adesola Akinleye, *Dance, Architecture and Engineering* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 50.

5 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 15.

6 Pallasmaa, 22.



physically, and conceptually *available*. The demand to fulfill these agendas is hard to resist, especially during times of uncertainty. In *The Choreographic*, Jenn Joy argues against such “over-determined looking,”<sup>7</sup> and advocates paying attention to the less visible and other embodied states of being and knowing. Seeing (or seeking) the choreographic and locating the curatorial are never achieved with a tightly controlled grip or fixed gaze.

### Taking a Detour

To curate with a choreographic approach is to practice—and foster for audiences—other ways of seeing. Dana Caspersen observes that “How we think about a thing determines whether or not we are able to see its wholeness, and that apparent disjuncture is often just the presence of an intricate set of detours.”<sup>8</sup> Caspersen describes the distinct visioning central to choreographer William Forsythe’s approach as “dis-focus,” or “a kind of seeing that is not a diminishing of vision, but rather a widening of vision, backwards.”<sup>9</sup> For *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*, exercising this type of “dis-vision” or “backwards” sensing was especially important.

As a curator, I am eager to move in the direction of detours that widen my frame of reference. Keller Easterling advocates seeing “the world at a different focal length—to see, as if through half-closed eyes, a matrix or medium of undeclared activities and latent potentials.”<sup>10</sup> What I am seeking has to be coaxed indirectly. By paying attention to the peripheral, the minor, and the undetected, I can reinforce what the choreographic does so well: it justifies stillness, illegibility, and the oblique<sup>11</sup> as valid practices for creative production and reflection.

I come to be and to know curatorially through ongoing interactions with the environment. During *Being & Feeling*, to keep plans in motion, I had to release my grip and soften my gaze. I adopted a new curatorial focal length and pace.

## “I Try Not to Fall Over”

The weeks leading up to the first pandemic shutdown in March 2020 were full of questions and back-and-forth decisions that were made, unmade, and remade. At many points, I was panicked. I could not grasp the form of the project and could not communicate what it would become. Efva Lilja has captured this sensation so memorably: “Bloody hell, damn, shit,

7 Jenn Joy, *The Choreographic* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 3.

8 Dana Caspersen, “Decreation: Fragmentation and Continuity,” in *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography: It Starts from Any Point*, ed. Steven Spier (London: Routledge, 2011), 93.

9 Caspersen, 95.

10 Keller Easterling, *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World* (London: Verso, 2021), 7.

11 Joy, 177.



*Echolocation*

disgust, frustration, impotence, paralysis. . . . Silence. Quiet. Fumbling to live what I do not as yet know. I try not to fall over.”<sup>12</sup> The challenge for recasting *Being & Feeling* within pandemic conditions was to become attuned to the possibilities that presented themselves, rather than attaching myself to preconceived ideas.

At the same time, I needed to remain committed to my process—even stubbornly attached. Susan Rethorst’s reminds us that:

Making this way – inviting arrival – asks for a fierce attention to the right here, right now. And it asks for an equally fierce resistance to abandon that immediacy in favor of a master plan that alleviates the discomfort of staying with the “just-this.” As it rests on making as thinking, it asks for patience with the wandering that is true of thinking in another form. It asks for a redefinition of rigor.<sup>13</sup>

It is one thing to claim this theoretically, and quite another to enact it. How could I be *sure*?

Curators should avoid the “dead habit of certainty,”<sup>14</sup> instead, according to Raqs Media Collective, “set in motion a series of open-ended interpretative maneuvers, a set of cultures in a laboratory . . . to take a work of art or an exhibition (and its public) into areas that may not necessarily have been anticipated by its creators and custodians.”<sup>15</sup> Recalling my original, pre-pandemic aspirations, *Being & Feeling* was about the complexities of navigating emotional states. The point was to introduce encounters and to make room for the unexpected, including within my own curating. As participating artist Jon Sakata observes, “the obstructions, as well, confront one to *imagine* what’s on the other side.”<sup>16</sup>

Apart from the pandemic, I was growing increasingly dissatisfied with the requirement to show, display, and delineate in a manner that satisfied the status quo but did not make space for the slow but transformative power of art. Could I deinstitutionalize the curatorial conditions (and myself) to hold space for what couldn’t be counted, named in advance, or put forth in a well-crafted press release? These desires were increasingly at odds with institutional expectations.

12 Efvá Lilja, *Dance – For Better, For Worse* (Stockholm: ELD, 2004), 18.

13 Susan Rethorst, *A Choreographic Mind: Autobodygraphical Writings* (Helsinki: University of the Arts Helsinki, Theatre Academy, 2015), 75.

14 Raqs Media Collective, “To Culture: Curation as an Active Verb,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schaffaff and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 109.

15 Raqs Media Collective, 109.

16 Jon Sakata, artist interview, *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*, Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, 2020.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney critique the “failed administrative accounting of the incalculable.”<sup>17</sup> They advocate for what lies under the radar: a radical and sensual undercommons as an alternate site for exchange and commonality. The undercommons, remarks Erin Manning, is “is not a given site, not a place predefined, not even a recognizable enclave we could return to having found it once. The undercommons is an emergent collectivity that is sited in the encounter.” It is a fragile entity in which “a belief in the ineffable and its powers of resistance keep it alive.”<sup>18</sup> The knowledge created in this space is shared informally, resistant to dominant economies and epistemologies.

In order to let things move, I had to let things go.

Move forward (fumbling, uncertain, somewhat curious)

Move backward (fall behind, grind to a halt, regress, get up off the couch)

Move along (get going, get moving, get out of your house)

Move differently (in our own rooms, out of time, dispersed)

Move together (as if, on screen, in anticipation)

Move around (get comfortable—we’ll be here for a while)

Move in circles (repeat all your other movements until you are exhausted)

(Re)move ( \_\_\_\_\_ )

Move again (get up and start over)

## Making Things Move Versus Letting Them Move

### Seeing with Scaffolding

The first time I saw the Gropius House, designed by Walter Gropius and built in 1938 in Lincoln, Massachusetts,<sup>19</sup> scaffolding covered two of the sides of the building. The large picture window in the living room was boarded up with plywood, blocking both the architecture and the view of the landscape. At first, I thought this was a shame. The structures were a distraction from what I imagined was the “original” architecture in its pure form.

My problem was that I kept trying to see *against* the scaffolding.

Upon entering, I noticed the house’s everyday wear and tear, the personal effects, and even the smell (aging modernist buildings have a distinctive odor). This building was well lived in by its occupants, Walter and Ise Gropius and their daughter Ati. I noticed the pacing, the flow of the floorplan, and the scale. I began to shift my perception. I began to see *with* the scaffolding,

17 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 51.

18 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 8.

19 The Gropius House is managed by Historic New England: <https://www.historicnewengland.org/property/gropius-house/>.

and in turn, began to understand the structuring choreography and invitation that the Gropius House offers its inhabitants and visitors.

Scaffolding supports and stabilizes. It lets things move. It is a flexible structure that facilitates ongoing repair and reconsideration. The Gropius House already had scaffolds: the slim pole on the exterior of the building that supported the cantilevered overhang. In the interior, the bookshelf or table that scaffolded intellectual and relational connections. A scaffold is a temporary support that can be modified, moved, or reconfigured as needed. As Sister Corita Kent observes: “*All good structure, like scaffolding, can be dismantled after the building is built. Scaffolding will be put up in a different shape for another building. So you are always making new structures.*”<sup>20</sup>

What I was seeking, in the uncertain unknowns of the early pandemic, was a portable scaffold to facilitate movement. Something that would enable me to be present with *what is* so that I might become open to *what might*.

### Medium Design/Thinking as Research Methodology

In a presentation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Keller Easterling outlined her perspectives on “medium design.”<sup>21</sup> Medium design apprehends the matrix of a situation and attends to what is in-between or within. It is a way to notice the *milieu* and to use this attentiveness to generate new approaches.<sup>22</sup>

As an artistic research methodology, medium design involves thinking about something generously and divergently: listening to what situation suggests, rather making an immediate and final decision about what to do about it.

Medium design resists the oscillating binaries of inside-outside, object-subject, figure-ground, and problem-solution by suggesting another modality: the middle. “We tend to confront space from a frontal perspective,”<sup>23</sup> argues Sarah Robinson, which prevents us from perceiving our embeddedness in it. This “impediment to imagining space as medium” is due to our “reliance on vision as the bearer of ultimate truth. Vision channels our attention to the space in front of us, and this reinforces the illusion that space is not only in front of us, but outside of us.”<sup>24</sup> To recalibrate a gallery space that was no longer materially present, I had to avoid categorizing

20 Corita Kent, *Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit*, eds. Corita Kent and Jan Steward (New York: Allworth Press, 2008), 65.

21 Keller Easterling, “Medium Design” (presentation, Art, Culture, and Technology Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, 29 April 2019).

22 For example, rather focusing on the placement of buildings in a plaza, the arrangement of suburbs around an urban center, or the location of transportation hubs, medium design invites you to consider the forces that undergird these choices. Who benefits from design decisions? Who receives a tax break? Easterling advises paying attention to the (often invisible) technological, corporate, economic, and political conditions that make choices seem inevitable or worse, neutral.

23 Sarah Robinson, *Architecture Is a Verb* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 24.

24 Robinson, 27.

space as *in front of* or *apart from* the curatorial experience, but as something that existed in the midst.

### Choreographic Devices

The curatorial arc goes beyond the exhibition to include programs, texts, and pedagogical and programmatic interludes. Emotions and capacities of staff and participants. Cracks in the floor. Non-functioning bathroom sinks. A weak drill battery. Being responsive to these existing conditions allowed me to imagine new ones.

I needed to attune myself to the latent properties of the artworks, the participants, and the spaces in ways that were not dependent on physical gatherings. What (else) could propel movement, even within stillness, absence, or inaccessibility?

One strategy was to use choreographic devices as compositional mechanisms—organizing forces that could motivate and guide my curatorial choices.

An initial choreographic device was **research and return**: using the occasion of research to (*re*)turn to project title and themes—*Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*. Reengaging with this original premise—as an artistic research move and a programmatic decision—supported reconceptualizing the project.

Ongoing **conversations** were pivotal in making the project realize its potentials. **Letting (things) go** in order to let things move was a metaphor as well as a poetic and practical injunction. I emphasized **spaces and sites**, including the inaccessible gallery. Contemplating these spaces increased the awareness of other spaces: asynchronous, text based, Zoom rooms, and social and emotional spaces. I engaged the **speculative, invisible, or unrealized** aspects of the project as imperceptible dramaturgical motors that kept the project moving.

### Co-imagining through Conversation

Prior to the pandemic shutdown, conversations with colleagues, students, and audiences had been especially generative. Conversations mirrored the sensibility of Exeter's discussion-based Harkness pedagogy, where dialogue, listening, and exchange construct knowledge collaboratively. Every aspect of campus life was an opportunity to have a conversation. I pursued this with eagerness: "Always be around. Come or go to everything. Always go to classes."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Kent, 176.



“On the path” is a common saying at Exeter. It describes how meetings, conversations, and ideas erupt as people intersect at all hours along the school’s interconnected system of paths, sidewalks, and patios. Photograph by Kelly McGahie.

### On the Path

At Exeter, conversations occurred as you made your way from academic buildings to dorms, from the library reading room to a picnic table near the dining hall, by way of an interconnected system of paved walkways, sidewalks, and patios. A common sentiment is to meet someone “on the path.”

Many of my encounters while walking from one place to the next led to collaborative public art projects, day-long performance events, and multimedia installations. I finally realized that this activity was a *method*. This embodied engagement informed my curatorial practice in ways that would not have been possible if I had remained in my office, having a conversation across a desk.

I would return to the gallery energized by these roving conversations and the ideas they sparked.<sup>26</sup> You made connections, friends, and meaning as you moved along the path.

<sup>26</sup> Conversation-as-pedagogy is used in other museum and gallery settings, most notably Visual Thinking Systems (VTS), a museum education framework developed by Abigail Housen. Housen’s and co-founder Philip Yenawine’s VTS sessions in museums (<https://vtshome.org>) start with the initial question “What’s going on in this picture?” While I integrate aspects of VTS into my work, my emphasis is on the impact of conversations on the curatorial *process*, rather than on VTS’s emphasis on conversations with audiences in relation to object-based learning.

## Conversation as Score/Generator

I decided to explore *moving conversations* for *Being & Feeling*. With support from a grant from the University of the Arts Helsinki, I examined how conversations during the planning process could reveal additional aspects of choreographic curation. I invited potential collaborators to help me reimagine exhibitions. Four artists joined me in experimental, movement-based discussions in the Lamont Gallery: choreographers Shannon Humphreys and Kara Fili, scenographer and production designer Jake Josef, and architect John Stephen Ellis. The artists drew from their disciplinary expertise to explore the sensorial and emotional impact of movement and engagement in the gallery setting.

As we talked, we moved. We stopped to bend, gesture, or stretch. We touched on the role of spatial design, lighting, and materials as means to invite (or drive away) audiences. What would make the audience's experience compelling, even before they came inside? What sensory cues—smells, textures, or tastes—might communicate welcome or promote interaction? Could we recreate our spirited and exploratory conversations for the audience, offer artmaking or movement, or encourage adventure or play? *Where do we start? Where could we go next?*

## Dramaturgical Dialogues

The grant also enabled me to engage dramaturg Jeremy Stoller from Beehive Dramaturgy Studio as a conversational partner.<sup>27</sup> Our biweekly conversations proved especially helpful as *Being & Feeling* shifted from an in-person project to a remote experience. Jeremy was a witness to my evolving thought process. He listened closely and provided input and guidance. He asked: Who is your audience? What do you want them to walk away with?<sup>28</sup>

Jeremy's questions illuminated how challenging it is to work effectively within a curatorial practice marked by multiplicity and open-endedness. I did not want to reduce this unruly multiple into a self-contained singular, but to identify the multiple as *the potential of a project*—and then to curate toward those spaces of plurality.

These collective conversations functioned as scores. They delineated the movement in front of me and articulated the potential of future movements. They heightened my awareness, patience, and aptitude.

## Curatorial Conversations

Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist is an advocate of integrating conversations into curatorial settings. Early in his career, Obrist read numerous artists' interviews and later became intrigued with having conversations over long

27 Beehive Dramaturgy: <https://www.beehivedramaturgy.com>.

28 Lauren O'Neal, my notes from conversation with Jeremy Stoller, Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, NH, 9 February 2020.



periods of time.<sup>29</sup> As of 2014, Obrist estimated he had over 2,000 interviews with artists, which he describes as “a research method and the basis for my curatorial practice.”<sup>30</sup>

Obrist extends his application of conversations as a curatorial method beyond the interview. His longform conversations have morphed into “marathons,” which eventually became one of the foundational programs in the temporary pavilions at the Serpentine Gallery in London. The idea of conversation-as-curation has grown to include conferences, speaker’s corners, and poetry marathons.

Conversations acknowledge the role of recollection and emotion in curatorial research and outcomes. As Obrist observes, “memory is not a simple record of events but a dynamic process that always transforms what it dredges up from its depths.”<sup>31</sup> Conversations affirm the variety of audience experiences within galleries and museums: “[T]here should be different forms of museum conditions, different forms of experiences, if possible, to enable the freedom to move.”<sup>32</sup>

In Hannah Hurtzig’s and Mobile Akademie Berlin’s *Market for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge* (2004-), conversations are both the curatorial mechanism and the content.

In these sprawling projects, participants sign up to have a conversation with an “expert.” No money is exchanged, and no commodity is offered. The meandering conversations that ensue become sites for reciprocal curatorial experiences, which are mobilized and dispersed across the room. The attendees are equally embedded in the activity. They co-produce the discourse. Who the expert is and what the topic is can quickly shift or even disintegrate:

The topic has to survive the curatorial treatment. It needs to be capable to assemble contradictory possibilities at a specific place. It is shredded, duplicated, torn apart. It is a wilderness of mirrors, is magnified, distorted, spiralized; some of its extremities shrink or are elongated. The result is the opposite of an adequate representation of something or somebody. Everybody who is familiar with the topic already should be at least a little scared to participate.<sup>33</sup>

29 Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Ways of Curating* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2014), 55.

30 Obrist, 56.

31 Obrist, 57.

32 Hans Ulrich Obrist, “A Protest Against Forgetting,” in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating But Were Afraid to Ask*, ed. April Elizabeth Lamm (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 129.

33 Karin Harrasser, “A Personal Alphabet: Hannah Hurtzig’s *Blackmarket of Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge* (2004-),” in *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy*, eds. Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2017), 95.

The *Markets* highlight the ethical role of the other in listening (and talking) in conversation. A banner with a quotation by Oswald Wiener hangs at every *Market*: “ONLY WHEN I FIRST HEARD HOW YOU’VE UNDERSTOOD ME, DID I KNOW WHAT I’D SAID.”<sup>34</sup>

In *Being & Feeling*, I reached out, to and with others, to co-imagine the curatorial. It was only through conversation that I understood what I was trying to achieve.

## Attuning to Spaces

During the pandemic it was difficult to draw upon the tacit knowledge that working onsite affords me. There were no interactions of the architecture, artworks, or collaborators, no rehearsals for events and programs, and no participation as a performer, audience member, or student in any external programs. I realized how reliant I was on these outside encounters.

I had to release my attachment to the project as originally imagined. This letting go took time. I needed the project—and my thinking—to become more porous. I kept Adesola Akinleye’s question in mind: “How do we create permeable spaces that respond to engagement rather than dictate it?”<sup>35</sup> What other spaces could become available as alternate sites for *Being & Feeling*?

Throughout the spring, dramaturg Jeremy Stoller continued to share questions he asked in his work with playwrights and theater companies: Why is this a play? Why is this a proscenium play?<sup>36</sup> I translated these into: Why is this an exhibition? Why is this an exhibition in a gallery? If, as Matthew Copeland argues, “an exhibition is a construction that reveals itself continuously,”<sup>37</sup> then what—or *when*—is an exhibition?

If anything, the physical gallery became even more present during the pandemic.

We had a limited presence in the gallery during the spring of 2020 while we continued the piecemeal installation process. As the sole occupant in the building on many days, I became reenchanting with the variety of sight-lines and potential encounters the gallery’s architecture offered. I became attuned to the materiality of the building: the reverberations from ventilation systems, the warmth of the gallery floor, and the subtle shifts of light over the course of the day.

34 Mobile Akademie Berlin, “WHAT IS THE MARKET FOR USEFUL KNOWLEDGE AND NON-KNOWLEDGE?,” in *Market for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge (formerly known as Blackmarket)*, accessed 20 September 2020, <https://mobileacademy-berlin.com/en/english-version-is-still-under-construction-4>.

35 Akinleye, 97.

36 Lauren O’Neal, my notes from conversation with Jeremy Stoller.

37 Matthew Copeland, *Choreographing Exhibitions* (Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2013), 23.

## The White Cube and the Floor Plan: Reimagining Lines

During this time, I also became more attentive to the gallery's floor plan.

The floor plan enables and restricts. It dictates where we can go and how we move. Floor plans are typically crafted by putting elements of space "into alignment." As Sara Ahmed observes:

Things seem straight (on the vertical axis) when they are in line, which means when they are aligned with other lines. ... Think of tracing paper. Its lines disappear when they are aligned with the lines of the paper that has been traced: you simply see one set of lines. If all lines are traces of other lines, then this alignment depends on straightening devices, which keep things in line, in part by holding things in place.<sup>38</sup>

The gallery floor plan is not a blank canvas or "pure" geometric abstraction, but the history of visualizing architecture can make it seem that way. In *Choreographing Empathy*, Susan Foster argues that dance notation, cartography, and choreography are inherently related to social regulation. It makes sense that floor plans (or blueprints) came into regular use during the Renaissance. More recently, software programs such as SketchUp have made it easy to adopt the "birds-eye view" and image yourself as a puppeteer in designing a built environment. My embodied presence in the gallery, made elastic with my ongoing movement practice, was a way of de-centering these histories.

In contrast to the imposition of a straight space, could I willingly *mis-align* space, expectations, and habits? Use the floor plan to think *with* the space as a malleable choreographic device?

The inaccessibility of the gallery made for a freedom from it.<sup>39</sup>

38 Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* Volume 12, no. 4 (2006): 562.

39 I am not proposing a binary between real and virtual space, or between physical and mental. I am suggesting opening the field of appraisal so that a wider variety of spaces become present and affectively operational.

## HUMMING

The cube is a demarcation. A boundary. We measure and model with geometric forms, from the Vitruvian Man to floor plans. We don't often think about sound within these (Western) forms. Geometries are silent, apersonal.

Can it be otherwise?

During my involvement as a performer in Trisha Brown's *Floor of the Forest* in the *Dance/Draw* exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, a small adjacent gallery contained an installation of *Ghostcatching*, a work by Bill T. Jones, Paul Kaiser, and Shelley Eshkar.<sup>40</sup> Sensors attached to Jones's body allowed motion-capture software to track and reproduce the many lines of his extending, looping, and overlapping movements. Within the projected animation, lines moved in relation to, and broke outside of, the virtual three-dimensional cube that was rendered within the work. The audio track included the sounds of Jones's voice: talking, telling stories, reminiscing. Humming.

The humming opened space. As a resonant, meandering line, it escaped the conditions of the box and restrictions of the screen and entered the room. It somehow entered me as well. Suk-Jun Kim observes:

Once it starts, however, the listener and the "hummer" are soon in the humming. ... Smiling is common in many occasions, and sometimes you can notice certain feelings – cheerfulness and gaiety, sorrow and sadness, fondness and welcoming, or melancholia and a sense of loss – that may not otherwise be identified and shared. Furthermore, humming can reveal rather ghostly and mysterious incidences that are usually hidden deep in our consciousness.<sup>41</sup>

Jones's humming invited other ontologies and epistemologies to take residence. Kim notes that "humming invites oneself to oneself; it guides and directs oneself to a path to knowing oneself whose constitution is sonic, and thus ... humming is epistemological. It is a grasping of the resonant self, whose body and memories – as well as the acoustic threshold of otherness – all contribute to a feedback system that probes into the surface of the body."<sup>42</sup> The surface—of the body and of the cube—is permeable.

40 Openended Group, "Ghostcatching": <http://openendedgroup.com/artworks/gc.html>.

41 Suk-Jun Kim, *Humming* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 3.

42 Kim, 5.



Invitation card for *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*. Image: Cheryle St. Onge, *Untitled (Bubbles)*, black and white photograph.

## The Anticipation of the Encounter

I moved forward with the installation of works in the gallery in the anticipation of its eventual reopening. I arranged the works as a series of encounters to encourage emotional responses in imagined or future audiences.

The artworks' abilities to foster emotional connections helped to propel the project—and my process—in unexpected ways. While my curatorial process routinely attempts to promote this connection, without gallery access, I was not sure how to leverage the works' affective power.

### Fostering Connections, Telling Stories

I started with Sachiko Akiyama's carved wood figurative works, which emphasize interiority and introspection. The sculptures require you to move in particular ways: to get quite close or to crouch down. You negotiate an ethics of approach and exchange. Woodcarving, Akiyama notes, "lends itself to creating compact, self-contained forms that direct attention inwardly. . . . My choices of scale and placement are meant to make viewers more aware of how they physically interact with the work."<sup>43</sup> It is both the interior of the piece, as well as the interiority of your own relationship to the piece and what it provokes in you, that is so compelling.

43 Sachiko Akiyama, artist statement, *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*, Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, 2020.

I arranged some of Akiyama's works to make them visually accessible after hours by positioning them for optimal viewing from outside of the gallery. Akiyama's *Mountain/Sky* was placed at an angle to the gallery's entrance. *Finding Home* and *Origins* were viewable from the hallway. These works were arresting and inscrutable, especially in a gallery devoid of activity.

On a wall across from *Finding Home* and *Origins*, I installed Cheryle St. Onge's black and white photographic portraits of her mother, who was suffering from dementia. St. Onge notes that the work was "made in the moment, as a distraction from watching her fade away. I would make a picture of her, then share that picture of her with others I love. Sharing the act of being in the moment, sharing the ephemeral nature of my looking and her seeing."<sup>44</sup> For St. Onge, the encounter is the site for the exchange of emotion: "I give the picture away to anyone who will look. It is an excruciating form of emotional currency."<sup>45</sup>

In this manner, works were placed throughout the gallery so that their emotional impact would accumulate over time. I later attempted to retranslate this into digital platforms—to make the accumulation not just a collection of discrete images, but a collective place of generosity.

### Reflective Capacities

The design of the Mayer Art Center and the Lamont Gallery creates a site of continuous exchange: the walls are punctuated by numerous glass doors and windows, making the space and our work accessible throughout the installation process. Juhani Pallasmaa has written that much of contemporary architecture has become a "stage set for the eye" and cautions that the increased use of glass and reflective materials "reinforces the dreamlike sense of unreality and alienation. The contradictory opaque transparency of these buildings reflects the gaze back unaffected and unmoved; we are unable to see or imagine life behind these walls."<sup>46</sup>

I considered Pallasmaa's statement during my solitary hours in the gallery. I agree with many of his observations and am equally critical of the materials used to denote "transparency," whether they be in buildings or in systems. However, the gallery was not built as a remote and glittering office tower, but as a connector and facilitator. While the gallery's windows and doors *do* act as mirrors, amplifiers, and multipliers, they act in concert with other elements. The artworks, events, and audiences become sites of refraction and multiplication, too, whether their actual surfaces are reflective. Multiple reflective surfaces co-exist and commingle. They produce alternative spaces and subjectivities.

44 Cheryle St. Onge, artist statement, *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*, Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, 2020.

45 St. Onge.

46 Pallasmaa, 31.

## Longing

Was my commitment to installing the exhibition simply a waste of time? The process of arranging the artwork spoke to my feelings of loss and confusion as I navigated an uncertain future. My movement was both a proxy for an unknown, undefined audience-to-be and for myself as the first, or maybe even the primary, audience. It is difficult to admit that I am one of the key stakeholders in the curatorial. As curators, we learn to avoid this subjective and personal perspective when speaking about curating. We downplay or deny our motivations and desires. I think this is a mistake. I moved in the gallery with the work because I *longed* to move. I hoped that this longing would give me tools to recognize and validate longing in others. Actual movement may not be the point: *desiring* is a movement of longing.<sup>47</sup>

The works in *Being & Feeling* anticipated this longing, a *desire-as-movement* within conditions of stillness. The intertwining of desire and anticipation as alternate ways of moving was especially meaningful when people could not access the work in person. My memory of holding and arranging the work informed my later program choices. As Vida L. Midgelow notes, “beyond learned or automated re-enactments, body memory not only repeats, but also re-shapes and re-forms. These ideas of memory as living, integrated processes, which are patterned by and take part in a body-environment interaction, usefully frames how memory operates in a dramaturgical consciousness.”<sup>48</sup> Choreographic thinking invites others to share in the process and outcome even if the periods of engagement are non-coincident.

Each time I went to campus, I unlocked the gallery. I slid open the main door, turned on the lights, and deactivated the alarm. I turned on the videos, projections, and audio components, preparing the gallery as if the audience might arrive at any minute. Perhaps the role of the curator is not simply as facilitator or mediator, words that convey a conference-like efficiency and purpose. Perhaps the curator’s obligation is to be someone who *carries* the work to and for the audience, a gesture of care and accountability.

47 Emotion can circulate through a choreography of anticipation. In the Ann Veronica Janssens exhibition at Kiasma in 2018–2019, you could ride through the gallery on bicycles. Arguably there was choreography *before* you got on the bicycle. The anticipation of riding (even if you did not do so) was affectively motivating. You might also have been inspired to move in and among the bicycle riders. There is not only one way that objects call you to respond.

48 Vida L. Midgelow, “Improvisation Practices and Dramaturgical Consciousness: A Workshop,” in *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, eds. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 117.



Lauren Gillette's mirror installation, *Things I Did*. Fragments of works by Cheryle St. Onge, Andrew Fish, and Jon Sakata reverberate in the background.



## Carrying

Letting things move is not a free-form activity. In choreographic curatorial practice there is still an ethical space or entity at play. A space that can be held accountable, a site that can be resisted and questioned, and a place that ensures that spaces remain open in intent and impact. You do more than offer or invite. As Susan Rethorst remarks:

Acting upon, being acted upon, sequence and juxtaposition become alchemy, and open worlds. In allowing for what temporal proximities and accumulations do, you bring in the affect of a time-based art. ... We carry the affect of moment a to moment b. We carry the whole rush of the ongoing changing unfolding, and are affected by the structure of that unfolding more than by any moment.<sup>49</sup>

Carrying is often an unrecognized activity, one which Erin Manning likens to the minor gesture. What is the agency of the minor gesture? Within this research, agency has assumed both personal and collective elements. But I can't seem to get away from agency's demands. Manning, drawing from Gilles Deleuze, proposes the concept of *agencement* instead. Rather than individual agency, *agencement*, which translates to arrangement or layout, facilitates "those very operations that 'secrete their own coordinates' *in the event*, affecting how it comes to expression." Every minor gesture is "the activator, the carrier, it is the *agencement* that draws the event into itself. It moves the nonconscious toward the conscious, makes felt the unsayable in the said, brings into resonance field effects otherwise backgrounded in experience."<sup>50</sup> In this way, as a minor movement, I carry.

## Right in Front of Us: Programs

Transitioning programs into digital formats was uncharted territory, not simply a change in format from face-to-face to remote. The anxiety about the virus, the precarity of arts employment, the impact of longstanding racial violence, and concerns about politics and climate change had a profound impact on people's ability to function. I decided to reground curating in its etymological roots of *care* more explicitly, and to reintroduce the link between care, curating, and curiosity. If I could not place myself on the path in person, I would find other ways.

The project moved ahead with a recast suite of programs that grew over time, which was paralleled by efforts of museums and galleries worldwide to create online content ranging from studio tours to curriculum guides. The extended unknown of the months ahead meant that we had time to

49 Rethorst, 92–93.

50 Manning, 7.

experiment and prototype. To make provisional and speculative platforms. To collaborate. To be patient. To step away from serving an anonymous external “everyone” to the people who were right in front of us.

My increased awareness of space and place informed how I developed remote programs. I maintained an openness about what spaces of *any* kind might offer if we let them. Throughout the process, I was learning not to fill the spaces too quickly, and to make them generous.

### A Memory. A Window. A Welcome.

Does the place reside in a literal space? Or in the audience’s perception and experience of it, wherever it is situated? Perhaps curatorial spaces are already dispersed: the Lamont Gallery has always been more than what the floor plan suggests.

We launched *Being & Feeling* programs with conversations with artists held on Zoom. Along with a “conversation score,” which I used for orchestrating the discussion, each event had slides with images of the installed work, which helped ground the project in the specificity of the Lamont Gallery.

Giving audiences and artists access to the installation in alternate formats, such as 360-degree tours, artist interviews, and performative responses to the exhibition, was helpful. Many in the audience were regulars. They had seen the space configured for early morning breakfast gatherings, evening performances, and hands-on workshops. Honoring the audience’s collective memories—evoking the absent place and making it present once again—provided windows to the familiar, the known, and the imagined. The platforms for sharing the exhibition and underscoring its themes highlighted the communicative powers of connection and presence apart from physical proximity. These themes were particularly resonant within the context of the pandemic.

### Resonant Care

It was equally important for the gallery to support our internal audiences, especially adult employees. Based on an enthusiastic response to a campus-wide survey, we developed collage and watercolor workshops to re-introduce care and creativity into employees’ daily lives. I hosted community and culture-building meetings where various departments could share their pandemic projects, learn from one another, and provide mutual support.

Both internal and external audiences were appreciative of the opportunity to interact with the artists and with each other through the presentations, discussions, and workshops. Perhaps we were all closer than we would have been in the gallery. The Zoom format allowed us to be digitally proximate, the adjacent squares a stand-in for intimacy across geographies, time zones, and experiences.

Knowledge here is relational, mutual, and hopeful. Our shared movements made room for something else to emerge.

## Latent (Choreographic) Dispositions: The Dispersed and Lively Grid

I approached the shift to Zoom and alternate formats with a motivation to foster feelings of inclusion and welcome, discovery and connection. While the Zoom squares initially seemed to echo the small nooks and side bays of the gallery, soon this virtual space began to *be* the gallery—as well as the commons, the studio, and the stage. The gallery dispersed into other spatial and temporal zones. The Zoom platform became a place, one which began to open to its dispositions.

Our Zoom sessions during *Being & Feeling* revealed a range of choreographic, gestural, and rhythmic conditions. People turned their cameras on and off, sat in front or at angle to the camera, spoke or were silent. The constellation of micro movements was generated by people wanting and willing to engage in whatever way they could.<sup>51</sup>

Brendan Fernandes reflects on the potentials of Zoom spaces: “There’s so many layers of space: the audience space, the virtual space that everyone’s in. And what I see is different than what you see, or what you’re experiencing—I’m really curious about that as a potential for political futures.”<sup>52</sup>

## Spaces Apart from Sites

Written interviews with the artists were place- and space-making.

The interview process created a place of connection between gallery staff and artists. The resulting text created a venue for artists to give space for their work, a space we had not previously mined as deeply or consistently for its benefits. It extended the curatorial by dislodging it from a centralized location.

Even non-digital and non-program spaces became more important. As Ana Miljački has noted about architecture—a sentiment that applies to the curatorial realm too—“the field of knowledge necessary to acknowledge ... is so much wider than form-making or tectonic assemblies. It includes anything from labor practices to material properties, sourcing, financing, and law.”<sup>53</sup> For example, the logistical and administrative spaces of negotiating the artist honorarium or the exhibition loan agreement can foster—or foreclose—possibility. During *Being & Feeling*, there was initial pushback for paying artists their contractual stipends because the administration assumed we had canceled the program. While the gallery space was closed, our programs, outreach, and activities *expanded* during the spring of 2020.

51 Our viewing modalities are changing. We no longer stand outside looking at the gallery, the stage, or the landscape. Now, our bodies and subjectivities are immersed within the thing viewed. Is this necessarily better?

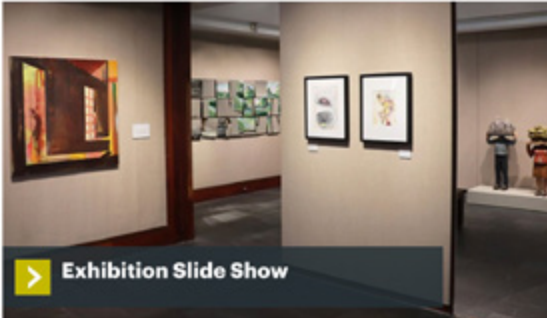
52 Brendan Fernandes, interviewed by Yaniya Lee, “Brendan Fernandes’s Zoom Choreography,” in *Canadian Art*, 5 November 2020: <https://canadianart.ca/interviews/brendan-fernandess-zoom-choreography>.

53 Ana Miljački, “Tending to Discourse,” in *The Futures of the Architectural Exhibition*, eds. Reto Geiser and Michael Kubo (Zurich: Park Books, 2022), 258.

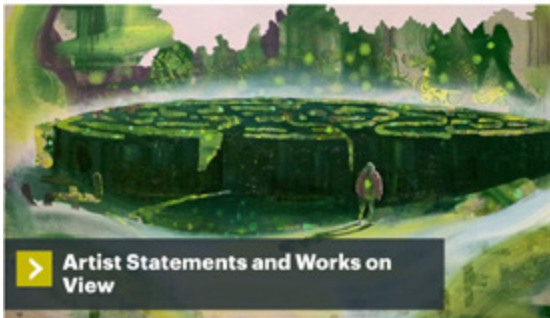
**Exhibition Overview**

Learn more about the Being & Feeling (Alone, Together) exhibition and artists.

➤



➤ **Exhibition Slide Show**

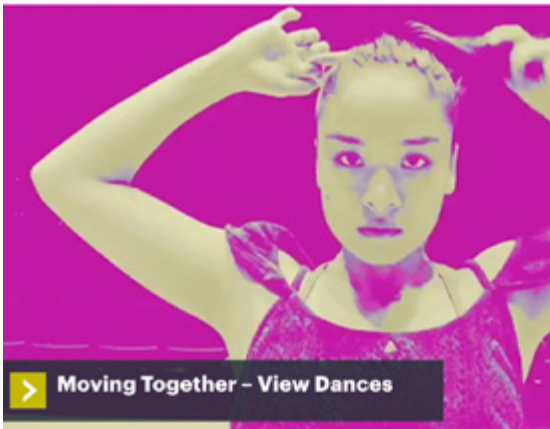


➤ **Artist Statements and Works on View**

**Curator's Exhibition Statement**

It was impossible to know that when this exhibition was realized, that it would become eerily prescient, that it would forecast a felt and lived experience, rather than merely a curatorial one...

➤



➤ **Moving Together - View Dances**

**Choreographic responses to Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)**

Dances by: Christina Xiao '21, Brooke Ottoway '23, Khinezin Win '20, Kara Fill, Ann Elliott, Shannon Humphreys & Chris Engles

Read the interviews with the choreographers.

➤

Screen shots of the redesigned Lamont Gallery website, which allowed us to reconceive of curatorial content and outreach in significantly expanded ways.

We were fortunate that people were dedicated to the project despite its challenges. This, too, is part of a choreographic curatorial awareness. Spaces that are difficult to see, name, or validate can transform the curatorial. Fayen d'Evie suggests that when we reconceptualize “peripherality as critical positions, generative of new paradigms and methodologies for practice,” then the exhibition can be “refigured as a topology now less bounded by normative biases, invoking new forms of choreopolitical resistance and transformation.”<sup>54</sup>

Recognizing *all* these spaces allowed me to be more thoughtful and strategic with their compositions.

### Durational Spaces

Spaces are also times. You need ample time to arrange generous spaces that linger and spread in their meaning and impact. As participating artist Riikka Talvitie recounts:

At this moment of total isolation, I have been thinking about artistic processes that could be more sustainable and long-lasting than in recent years. This might be a common thought among many people around the world. Should we actually produce less? Why do we hurry?<sup>55</sup>

The delays throughout *Being & Feeling* were useful: they expanded opportunities for participation. Discussions with artists, interviews, performative events, and workshops were supplemented week by week. The “season” of the exhibition, which might in other circumstances be more clearly delineated (if not finalized), emerged in a more leisurely fashion.

The time of synchronous Zoom-based programs stretched to include the materials that were accessed before or after an event. Email correspondence created a prolonged aesthetic experience—the audience read the text and viewed the links in their own space and time. Each section on the website, which was added throughout the spring and into the summer, provided additional, dispersed moments to engage with the exhibition.

### A Situation

Perhaps the gallery is less of a space and more of a *situation*, as envisioned by Adesola Akinleye, who notes that “*Situation* can be described as the container or assemblage in which the action (transaction) is happening.”<sup>56</sup> Akinleye's “*Being-in-Place* framework” is a condition of situatedness. Both the objects—

54 Fayen d'Evie, “Orienting Through Blindness: Blundering, Be-Holding, and Wayfinding as Artistic and Curatorial Methods,” in *Performance Paradigm* 13, Performance, Choreography, and the Gallery (2017): 54, <https://www.performanceparadigm.net/index.php/journal/article/view/193>.

55 Riikka Talvitie, artist statement, *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*, Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, 2020.

56 Akinleye, 30.

and the contexts—are “understood as contingent on the *situation* they are a part of. The body is open and connected through being in transaction, a part of the world around, that creates the situation of ‘now.’”<sup>57</sup>

Drawing from the work of John Dewey, Akinleye observes that the situation is created by the intersection and interaction of a variety of elements. The situation is both these dispersed, multiple elements, as well as the entity or effect produced when those elements come together. “The container itself is made up of the elements in transaction. Therefore, if the elements change, so does the container/*situation*.”<sup>58</sup>

The choreographic-curatorial is a situation in a similar vein. This is not a passive state: it involves *initiating* arrangements as well as responding to them.

## The Pursuit and Process of Artistic Research

By May, everyone had become more comfortable with Zoom. Why not try something else?

Stephanie Misa was originally scheduled come to campus in April to participate in a panel and a performance. When it became clear that galleries, flights, and borders were closed, we considered other options. In lieu of a planned live performance in the gallery, Stephanie set to work on recording a work-in-progress version of a performative lecture, *Filipinos, Cannibalism, and Mothers Dancing on Tongues*.

In preparation for the discussion, we sent preliminary information to the audience, including a link to *Foe* by Brendan Fernandes<sup>59</sup> and an excerpt from Brandon LaBelle’s *Lexicon of the Mouth*.<sup>60</sup> The audience then viewed Stephanie’s piece on their own through Vimeo. Subsequently, we held a live Zoom discussion that focused on the process-oriented nature of the work.

Revisiting the recorded performative lecture within a Zoom event made additional and parallel places: the *pre-space* of the original performance (hers and my anticipation of how it would unfold in the gallery in-person, and then later, virtually), the *alongside space* of each person watching a videotaped version of the lecture in their many far-flung locations. Then, the *collective space*: the Zoom room with its multiple inhabitants.

I considered what we missed by not experiencing the piece live in the Lamont Gallery: Stephanie’s act of eating the presentation notes. Her provocation to eat a Filipino cookie. Her decolonial critique on orality, identity, and representation. The potential of these gestures to rewrite the given narrative of an institutional setting.

57 Akinleye, 30–31.

58 Akinleye, 31.

59 Brendan Fernandes’s *Foe*: <https://vimeo.com/39946897>.

60 Brandon LaBelle’s “Lexicon of the Mouth”: [https://www.brandonlabelle.net/texts/LaBelle\\_Lexicon\\_Intro\(2014\).pdf](https://www.brandonlabelle.net/texts/LaBelle_Lexicon_Intro(2014).pdf).

However, having the piece as a recorded performative lecture facilitated engagement differently. The event granted exquisite attention to the sociopolitical and emotional materiality of language, its embodied force, and the very personal ways *we language* ourselves, our histories, and our futures.

Curators should create “the conditions and circumstances, intellectually, socially, physically, in whatever ways necessary—for the artist to make art: empty space, a space of experimentation, and more than that, a space in which the artist can linger not knowing.”<sup>61</sup> It is equally important to make these spaces for audiences.

61 Mary Jane Jacob, “Making Space for Art,” in *What Makes a Great Exhibition*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, 2006), 135.

## FROM HERE TO THERE. FROM THERE TO SOMEWHERE ELSE.

An initial interpretation of Trisha Brown's *Locus* (1975) might focus on geometric abstraction: the gestures trace a cube. However, Brown's cube was not abstract: the 27 points within the cube (the four corners plus all the points formed by the intersecting lines in each plane) corresponded to an alphabet, wherein Brown generated the movement according to an alphanumeric score based on her own history, starting with "Trisha Brown was born in Aberdeen Washington . . ." During a *Locus* intensive with Shelley Senter and Eva Karczag of the Trisha Brown Dance Company, we learned phrases from the piece and generated our own scores.

Brown's cube does not privilege front or up versus back or down. You can make movements in response to the points in every direction. The cube and the points establish an atmosphere of spaciousness. To paraphrase Eva Karczag in my hastily written notes, the work invites you to travel: "from here to there—from there to somewhere else."

Although the narrative aspect of *Locus* is not obvious to a casual observer, the personal undertone of the score is nevertheless translated. This gestural "voice" of the narrative within the movement seeks to be more present than the (visual) gaze. We are not merely looking but sensing in all registers: "While the gaze shoots outwards, aims at the depth of things, the voice aims at all, both the surface and the depth ... it permeates through all directions, in and out," Suk-Jun Kim observes.<sup>62</sup>

Having all the participants perform an excerpt together at the end of the week was a gestural arpeggio. The slight variations in movements, the lag of the Zoom connection, and the various angles of the cameras created a vibration: *a hum*.

62 Kim, 12.



## Desire, Frustration, and Access: Collaborative Assemblages

For *Being & Feeling*, Jon Sakata and the Democracy of Sound (exeter)/DOS(e) club created a site-specific installation. *ex(i/ha)le* consisted of a large mylar structure with projections, sound, and other components. The piece proposed a room *ad infinitum*—physical, mental, emotional, and atmospheric. Tactile and ephemeral. Introspective and exteriorized. The piece became literally inaccessible during the pandemic. Did that preclude participation? What did I mean when I used that word? I was forced to look more closely at my assumptions, and eventually abandon them.

### Multiplying the Collaborative

We developed an experiential presentation for Zoom. Dustin Schuetz, the gallery's exhibitions and collections manager, who had played a critical role in the piece's installation,<sup>63</sup> acted as our on-the-ground guide. The public program, *Multiplying the Collaborative*, was a live walk-through and discussion.

In the earlier programs, audiences expected to see everything clearly and immediately. During the event, we made strategic use of the technology's visual glitches, gaps, and time lags. Our moves countered what Pallasmaa has observed about “the technologically expanded and strengthened eye” with which we can “cast a simultaneous look on the opposite sides of the globe. ... [T]he world of the eye is causing us to live increasingly in a perpetual present, flattened by speed and simultaneity.”<sup>64</sup> We consciously pushed against ingrained reactions that a space or thing needed to be “filled” or unambiguously visible to be communicative.

The appeal of glitches and lags for artists is quite different than for audiences. These blank and black screens and pauses created anxiety during the event. I recalled Jeremy Stoller's question: How comfortable are you with confusion? Despite our eagerness to welcome the audience, it was important to maintain the work's aesthetic intent even when it denied easy access.

Choreographic thinking in the curatorial realm makes an opening, a place for artists and audiences to linger. As Simo Kellokumpu notes, “the choreographic emerges through opening and leaving space for the experiencing to be experimental ... there is no external object that needs to be experienced but relations between several objects.”<sup>65</sup> Sharing and navigating the space of *ex(i/ha)le*, mediated by Zoom, became an exercise in collective sensation and dispersed choreography. It was less important that the

63 Other contributors: Dale Atkins, who helped realize the work in the gallery, and Elizabeth Kostina, Gabriel Gee, Daisy Newbury, Sophie Turer, and Chloe Minicucci, who fashioned the original mylar cube.

64 Pallasmaa, 21.

65 Simo Kellokumpu, “Choreography as Reading Practice,” University of the Arts Helsinki, 3 September 2019, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/437088/438771>.

audience accessed the piece in the gallery—the “original” object. The object instead became the *experience* of navigating collectively, from afar. The program enabled other ways of being and moving in a place together.

## Making Another Space to Inhabit

As the pandemic constricted space and disoriented our sense of measured time, the production of a catalogue became another way to bring people closer. My involvement in dance and somatic work was especially helpful for conceptualizing the project.

### *I Sank to the Floor*

In response to the limited range of motion in the early pandemic—sitting, standing, and more sitting—I sought more horizontal spaces: *floorwork*.

By floorwork, I mean both spending time on the museum or gallery floor as a curatorial method, as well as work that takes place on the floor within a dance context. You might associate floorwork with the “warm up.” However, it is much more: the sensory awareness enabled by movement floorwork stretches my curatorial capacity. Efva Lilja echoes the importance of shifting positions: “You simply see the world differently lying down than standing up. Running or jumping gives you a different spatial experience than walking slowly. It raises the intensity of bodily orientation in time and space.”<sup>66</sup> The two types of floorwork, on the gallery floor and on the floor of the dance studio, are connected in my practice.<sup>67</sup>

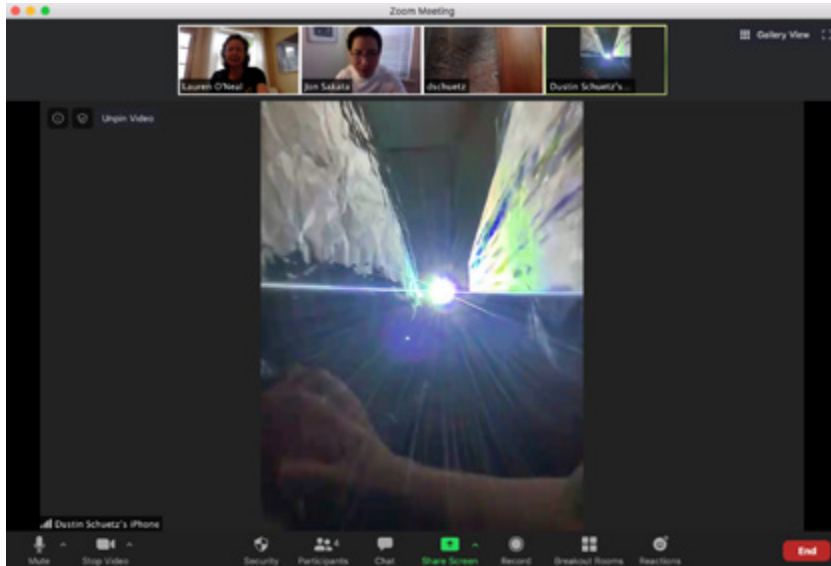
In the gallery, if you only looking at artworks along a sightline in relation to your upright walking body, you miss something important. Instead of trying to consume or dominate the work visually, you pay attention to perceiving *other, elsewhere, or alongside*. Choreographic thinking reflects the multiplicity of this *movement-thought-form* constellation, which is on a horizontal, rather than hierarchical, plane. You extend your sensorial capacity and your ability to notice. Alternate positions disrupt static, hierarchical knowledge. *Gnosis*, or sensuous knowledge, as Sarah Robinson remarks, “is closer to the word *understanding*”— “knowing from below, from standing *under*, from the ground rather than from a detached position surveying from above.”<sup>68</sup>

Floorwork fosters an awareness of time. Your pace is different. Often it is slower. There is a meditative quality, which is sometimes challenging. You

66 Efva Lilja, *Do You Get What I'm Not Saying? On Dance as a Subversive Declaration of Love*, trans. Malcolm Dixelius and Frank Perry (Malmö: Ellerströms, 2012), 17.

67 For additional perspectives on how artists reimagine bodies and movements in the museum setting, see the work of Mireia c. Saladrigues, such as “El seu museu / Her Museum” and “I’ll Find a Place for You”: <http://www.mireiasaladrigues.com/w/>.

68 Robinson, 43.



*Multiplying the Collaborative rehearsal over Zoom with Jon Sakata and Dustin Schuetz.*

fight the urge just to *get it done* or *get it over with* or *get on with it*. Efficiency is not the aim.<sup>69</sup>

### Alternate Spaces for (Curatorial) Desire

The catalogue became a place to bring voices, ideas, and works together. It provided a space for advancing *what could be* as more proximate than *what was*.<sup>70</sup>

On the floor of my living room, I spread out images and quotations of participating artists.<sup>71</sup> Instead of reproducing the existing installation, or grouping artists' works and statements together, I juxtaposed materials to spark connections not based on physical proximity, but on mental,

69 It took time for the catalogue to emerge as a curatorial element. I asked: What form is best for this project right now? Maria Lind suggests that "Each situation must be carefully analyzed and evaluated. Does it call for a traditional exhibition or some other form of presentation? This also involves giving a thought or idea, a piece of work or an artist, time—time to allow something to mature." Maria Lind, "Selected Nodes in a Network of Thoughts on Curating," in *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 30.

70 It was equally important that the catalogue would take up space in future gallery archives.

71 My bodily orientation to the reproductions of the works and the text was horizontal. Rather than standing, looking down at the work, I sat, stretched out fully, or crawled around. This disrupted the gaze captured by the iconic photographs of André Malraux's *Imaginary Museum* project, where Malraux stands over reproductions, surveying hundreds of images like territorial conquests: [https://www.christies.com/features/Walter-Grasskamp-The-Book-on-the-Floor-Andre-Malraux-and-the-Imaginary-Museum-8060-1.aspx?sc\\_lang=en](https://www.christies.com/features/Walter-Grasskamp-The-Book-on-the-Floor-Andre-Malraux-and-the-Imaginary-Museum-8060-1.aspx?sc_lang=en).

emotional, and atmospheric alliances. Such reorienting gestures proposed more expansive conversations between the works and themes.

The catalogue included elements that conveyed the sensation of the works. The patterns on the gallery's slate floor, made by the lights reflecting off Lauren Gillette's *Things I Did*, became the catalogue's interior spread. A detail of a projection in Jon Sakata's installation became the image for the interior cover. The sea of papers became another space to inhabit.

## Speculative and Imagined: Things That Never Happened

If only you walked a little to the side you would see the way the light refracts around the bend of the sphere, and then you would realize that what to you are outskirts are our daily realizations, and our always persistent field of view. Further – you cannot quite feel the longing that comes with wanting to join you.

—Anonymous submission, Open Letters project<sup>72</sup>

I have a longstanding interest in making space for the indiscernible, the unquantifiable, and the unrealized. The pandemic inadvertently provided a mechanism to investigate the “never happened” moments in *Being & Feeling* and reflect critically on their merit. These included installation components that were never built or only created at a modest scale; events and programs that never took place or that happened only partially; cozy furnishings that were never positioned in the gallery for live audiences who would never recline; banners, public art, and interactive components that were never developed; follow-up exhibitions and programs in Helsinki that were never produced; and aspirations that never materialized. Could these non-spaces and non-events be recognized and theorized, given their due as equally influential sites of research discovery?

While events such as “The Art of the Personal” and “Critical Cultural Practices: The Immigrant Artist Biennial (TIAB) and Diasporic Curating” were not held, they provided a scaffold. They were invisible atmospheres that reminded me of the initial motivations for the project, which focused on how our emotional and social selves play out in conditions of solitude and togetherness. The spirit of these events was woven back into subsequent programs, even though the original source for the motivation was absent. These non-programs included:

72 “If Only You Walked a Little to the Side,” submission to Open Letters project, *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*, Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, 2020.

*Letters:*

In *Open Letter to (My) Emotions*, I solicited letters to be integrated into the exhibition and performance programs. The project reflected on the many open letters to cultural institutions in 2020 that addressed equity, racism, and inclusion, as well as to McSweeney's "Open Letters" column, where letters are written "to people or entities who are unlikely to respond."<sup>73</sup> The project also referenced the literary tradition of letter-writing. Rachel Eliza Griffiths' "Dear America," James Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew," and Eileen Myles' *The Letter Q* collection present the letter as reflection, entreaty, protest, apology, and balm. Writing (or reading) a letter can be a powerful form of address and a means of connecting with others. I received a few submissions when the gallery closed.

*Public Address:*

I had arranged to use the Class of 1945 Library's intercom system for a series of public address works, which would include music and spoken word pieces. I had envisioned the Open Letters being read aloud in the library's

73 McSweeney's Internet Tendency, "Open Letters," *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, accessed 21 February 2020, <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/columns/open-letters-to-people-or-entities-who-are-unlikely-to-respond>.



The public address system in the Class of 1945 Library, which I had hoped to use for a performance event, was activated by a singular old-fashioned phone at the circulation desk: you picked up the handset, pressed a button, and spoke. Here, Elizabeth Kostina tests the system.



The Pink Stage.

cavernous Rockefeller Hall. We got as far as testing the system with a few poems and a short violin performance.

*Relax & Recline (Slant Yourself):*

I imagined large, colorful, soft body pillows throughout the gallery to encourage different types of engagement. Audiences could discover new ways of relating to the work and to each other, through lounging, lingering, and relaxing. While I only installed several small fabric stools in the gallery, I continued to envision the exhibition as if the larger furniture pieces were there, creating an atmosphere that was playful and restorative.

*The Pink Stage:*

*Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* originally called for a pink stage, a space where we could, in the spirit of Emilyn Claid, make movement “between things, becoming things.” Claid advocates for strategic queering, where bodies are “always on a journey with no final destination but with junctions of creative change.”<sup>74</sup> Perhaps the entire floor would be covered in wall-to-wall plush pink carpet? A disco ball above a lounge?

The Pink Stage and the project’s other “queer furnishings” allowed things to be present, even when they were materially absent. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, “The word ‘furnish’ is related to the word ‘perform’ and thus relates to . . . how things appear, how they gather, how they perform, to create the edges of spaces and worlds.”<sup>75</sup>

The modest Pink Stage, made of two low pedestals, was all that could be assembled before the gallery closed. It became platform for co-imagination, joy, and experimentation for artists and contributors. I added a microphone, even if the performances would ultimately take place on other stages.

## Objects of Thought

In retrospect, it is less important that the programs happened as planned. All artworks, exhibitions, and performances have material that ends up on the cutting room floor, left behind in rehearsal rooms, or jotted down in notebooks, unused.

The imagined and speculative *did* happen, in a manner of speaking. Carlos Basualdo reflects that “Even things most categorically evident can occasionally seem invisible—not because they do not exist, but rather because,

74 Emilyn Claid, *Yes? No! Maybe . . . Selective Ambiguity in Dance* (London: Routledge, 2006), 183.

75 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 167.

at particular moments, some act of intellectual conjuring, some configuration of action and thought, manages to conceal them from the horizon of perception.”<sup>76</sup> The “never happened” moments of *Being & Feeling* were drivers of curatorial actions that manifested in later and different choices, becoming welcoming movements “around which queer bodies can gather.”<sup>77</sup>

Artistic research does not just generate results that take physical form, things that are knowable as quantifiable evidence that proves that the thinking or the desire was authentic or meaningful. The planning and orchestrations of events and activities that do not result in “things” are *things* all the same, even if they are primarily objects—or movements—of (choreographic) thought.

76 Carlos Basualdo, “The Unstable Institution,” in *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, 2006), 52.

77 Ahmed, 167.



## NOTHING?

In choreographer Mette Edvardsen's solo performance work *Black* (2011), there is nothing in the space. Objects appear only through narration and gesture—specifically, through naming, which Edvardsen does in a continuous, sonic stutter: “tabletabletable ... legslegslegslegs.” Edvardsen names not just objects that have a specific shape, but objects of thought: “thatthatthatthat ... theretheretherethere.”

In handling these “invisible objects,” Edvardsen explains, the piece is “trying to bridge the invincible gap between thought and experience, between here and there.”<sup>78</sup>

Later, in *No Title* (2014), Edvardsen expands her inquiry into what is here and what is not, and how both states coexist. The stage is “empty” until Edvardsen draws an uneven chalk line in the middle while she continues to describe things (mountains, doors, birds) that appear and disappear. “I can see everything and nothing at the same time.”<sup>79</sup> Edvardsen notes. “Having been obsessed with what is here, I now look into what is not as a way of activating and producing thoughts and imaginations. In this new piece I address existence through negation. Once you leave behind that which is not, the perspective opens to all there is instead.”<sup>80</sup>

78 Mette Edvardsen, “Black (2010),” MetteEdvarsen.be, accessed 3 March 2022, <http://www.metteedvardsen.be/projects/black.html>.

79 Mette Edvardsen, “No Title,” On Enclosed Spaces and the Great Outdoors Performance Conference, accessed 24 August 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfHBRHgRpRI>.

80 Mette Edvardsen, “No Title (2014).”

## Invisible Artistic Research

### Bending the Curatorial?

On a broader level, invisibility permeates my entire research project. What right do I have to claim the (invisible) choreographic-curatorial?

Deaf-queer poet Meg Day describes attempts to “bend” the page. Drawing from the contrapuntal in music, Day created poems that were “each available to independent readings.” While this initial format “succeeded in creating spatial texture and multiple semantic meanings in unison, in an otherwise two-dimensional territory,”<sup>81</sup> Day felt the form still lacked the embodied language of ASL.<sup>82</sup>

Day then created contrapuntal poems that were partially on the printed page, and partially signed in ASL, “evidence of a communicative act that is actually occurring elsewhere.” Questions ensued: “How it can be a poem if there’s no evidence of it, or indication that it exists, or instructions on how to regard the alleged & mere fragment . . . What am I trying to get away with?”<sup>83</sup> In these dual-form poems, Day reflects, “There is no indication that another, signed poem exists . . . an additional, bilingual, bimodal poem—other than I am here, telling you that it does.” Holding onto, and carrying, the imperceptible as artistic research in this manner, even when others cannot access it, makes it valuable and *valid*.<sup>84</sup>

The invisible, or a break in the perceptible or realizable, is a gap. It points to what seems to be missing: a live (or any) audience in a performance, a non-functioning Zoom link, the empty space in the gallery. The gap is a productive pause, a space between. This break gives me much needed distance for generating insights that I cannot access otherwise. Gabriele Brandstetter has described these breaks as the “displacements” within the curatorial. When the tree (or map) of knowledge becomes nonhierarchical, it is the point where “the movement of knowledge is triggered.”<sup>85</sup>

81 Meg Day, “Unfit to Print: Refusing the Page in Deaf Poetics,” in *Wordgathering: A Journal of Disability Poetry and Literature* 15, no. 4 (Winter 2021), <https://wordgathering.com/vol15/issue4/disability-futures/day>.

82 Day, “Unfit to Print: Refusing the Page in Deaf Poetics.”

83 Day, “Unfit to Print: Refusing the Page in Deaf Poetics.”

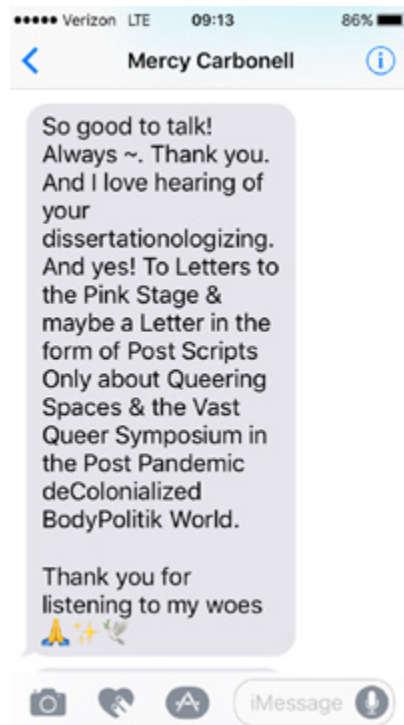
84 The Wind Tunnel Model by Florian Dombois provides a space for the invisible or unrecognizable in artistic research. He describes his effort as “The rejection of problem thinking that searches for solutions, but offering a solution, that searches for problems. The construction of an open space, thinking space and meeting place that survives in the institutional logic of booking rooms, because a wind tunnel can no longer be cleared away. . . . The wind tunnel as a mold that gives form to the wind.”: <http://floriandombois.net/works/the-wind-tunnel-model.html>.

85 Gabriele Brandstetter, “Written on Water: Choreographies of the Curatorial,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schaffaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 123.

These are the shadowy spaces in artistic research, ones that defy clarification and illumination. Shadows “offer perhaps the most enticing invitation of all to the imagination because they bring subtle bodies to light.”<sup>86</sup> By advocating for the imperceptible choreographic tendencies in *Being & Feeling*, I could (re)claim and restore the project’s original intent.

Pursuing the shadow is also a curatorial strategy, one of intentional refusal and resistance. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam advocates we “refuse the choices as offered . . . in order to think about a shadow archive of resistance, one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing.”<sup>87</sup>

I plan to dwell in the shadows a bit longer.



Text from frequent collaborator Mercy Carbonell as we co-imagined future constellations of *Being & Feeling* and life beyond the pandemic.

86 Robinson, 163.

87 Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 129.

## The Ethics of Dispersal: What Is Lost

The work of reconceiving *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* was not always seamless. Throughout the spring of 2020, staff, artists, and audiences were anxious, scared, and increasingly exhausted. The world around us was in the throes of multiple, longstanding crises around systemic racism, labor inequity, and environmental devastation. As Stephanie Misa observes:

What the pandemic highlights is the fractured state of things: how healthcare is *not* (though it should be) a universal and accessible right, how those with casual work contracts cannot afford to stay in home quarantine, how those living in densely poor areas do not necessarily have running water to wash their hands or the space to social distance — the pandemic is exacerbating what neoliberal capitalism has left us with — a collapsing and rigged system. What should come next, what would truly equalize us all?<sup>88</sup>

The participating artists examined complex and often silenced narratives, including stories relating to immigration, aging, and gender. Their artworks addressed belonging, exclusion, hope, and fear through the validation and communication of lived experiences.

Shifting programs to online formats, when they were not originally intended that way, brought another type of loss. The white cube of the gallery space “attests to the fantasy of a spatial apparatus that vanishes.”<sup>89</sup> So, too, does the notion of whiteness, according to Sara Ahmed. Whiteness is oriented “‘around’ itself, whereby the ‘itself’ only emerges as an effect of the ‘around’. . . . [W]hiteness gets reproduced through acts of alignment, which are forgotten when we receive its line.”<sup>90</sup>

Not having the ability to host in-person audiences increases the marginalization or invisibility of important narratives. Seeing something occupying space—in person, in front of you—has power. What other potentials go unrecognized within systems that prioritize only what can be bounded and encircled? Ahmed remarks:

It is hence possible to talk about the whiteness of space given the very accumulation of such “points” of extension. Spaces acquire the “skin” of the bodies that inhabit them. What is important to note here is that it is not just bodies that acquire their tendencies. . . . [S]paces and tools also take shape by being orientated around

88 Stephanie Misa, artist interview, *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*, Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, 2020.

89 Henry Urbach, “Exhibition as Atmosphere,” in *Log*, no. 20 Curating Architecture (Fall 2010): 12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41765361>.

90 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 121.

some bodies more than others. We can also consider “institutions” as orientation devices, which take the shape of “what” resides within them.<sup>91</sup>

While the pandemic did produce some innovations, it also reinforced the hierarchies, power dynamics, and problematic practices of the art field. The Museum of Modern Art in New York was vigorously critiqued (and rightly so) for terminating the contracts of their museum education staff. Cutting these types of positions, which are most often contingent, low-paid, and non-benefited, disproportionately impacts women and people of color. This scenario was repeated across the U.S. at the same time as museums were heralding community outreach and Instagramming their support for Black Lives Matter.<sup>92</sup>

I saw the impacts of these issues daily. The pandemic reignited my memories of the many unproductive discussions I had with administrative leaders in a variety of cultural and educational institutions about workloads, stagnant salaries, and unequal benefits.<sup>93</sup>

At the same time, I was concerned for the viability of the gallery itself. I did not relax my expectations as much as I should have. More candidly: I relaxed my expectations for others, but not for myself. I was not modeling the behavior I knew to be recuperative. The administrative conversations about furloughing staff during the summer made me nervous. It was assumed we were “off” and didn’t have that much to do during the pandemic. But the gallery’s work was year-round: we were always orchestrating current programs and planning future ones—even if these were virtual. I felt our work had to have measurable, identifiable outcomes from the institutional perspective. I wanted to ensure we took up space as well as *made* space. These goals, and actions, were often at odds.

As architect and curator Ann Lui notes, “Curating and editing is also about creating collective space—physical space, as well as time, money, and visibility—for others to do their own work and share it with a broader audience.”<sup>94</sup> Lui argues that

91 Ahmed, 132.

92 Jillian Steinhauer observes that these operational decisions have major implications: “At stake is a crucial question: who is the museum for—tourists or locals, white folks or people of colour, wealthy crowds or low-income visitors?” Jillian Steinhauer, “A Crisis in Community Reach: MoMA’s Arts Educators on the Consequences of Their Contract Cuts,” in *The Art Newspaper*, 9 July 2020, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/07/09/a-crisis-in-community-reach-momas-arts-educators-on-the-consequences-of-their-contract-cuts>.

93 The “Art/Museum Salary Transparency 2019” Google spreadsheet produced by curator Michelle Millar Fisher was particularly revealing and empowering: <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/google-spreadsheet-museum-workers-disclose-salaries-12670>. The Art + Museum Transparency website continues the dialogue: <https://www.artandmuseumtransparency.org/press>.

94 Ann Lui, “Curating Collective Space,” in *The Futures of the Architectural Exhibition*, eds. Reto Geiser and Michael Kubo (Zurich: Park Books, 2022), 280.

institutions, because of old habits, fail their own purported values. . . . [T]here has to be a way . . . to be self-reflective and self-critical, and that doing so always makes the world around us more interesting, richer, and more expansive. A design practice should also consider its own practices suspect. There's always a way of engaging buildings in both curating and practice that is discursive, that resists the easier illusion of the white box . . . making an architecture exhibition should mean that the architecture in which the exhibition takes place is also under scrutiny.<sup>95</sup>

Taking up space and time—giving generous support, resources, and being willing to commit to the duration it requires—was and is an important activity for the Lamont Gallery. My challenge was to facilitate these conditions in more structural and sustained ways.

## Research Movements

In the midst of research, I often get lost in the fog, which “is one thing when it is an object and quite another when it is an atmosphere,” remarks Henry Urbach, when “it approaches and eventually overtakes the place you are in.”<sup>96</sup>

Fog is elusive.

The curatorial process is most compelling when it is somewhat unwieldy and proposes something that is just beyond my comprehension or grasp. Thinking is a dispersed process. In a curatorial project, for a moment, you can gather this dispersion into a temporary frame. The frame, however unstable, allows you to theorize: to behold an idea, a sensation, a tending-towards. These things are in themselves manifold: an exhibition always contains multiple, often conflicting ideas, sensations, and propositions. It presents itself differently with each encounter.

I had to reconsider what I meant by *gallery*, *exhibition*, *audience*, *content*, and *access*, and uncouple these terms from expected forms of knowledge production with artistic research. This distancing effect gave me insights how my practice advances without its customary supports. The pandemic became an unlikely research collaborator.

Even without the pandemic, it was time to reconsider my approach. “The next step for exhibition practice” reflects Hans Ulrich Obrist, might be “the possibility of lightness, and a subtlety, density, and intelligence, through the invention of a flexibility that allows us to best adapt the structures we have and imagine new, supple ones for the future.”<sup>97</sup>

95 Lui, 304–5.

96 Urbach, “Exhibition as Atmosphere.”

97 Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Shifts: Expansions and Uncertainties: The Example of Cedric Price,” in *Curating with Light Luggage: Reflections, Discussions and Revisions*, eds. Liam Gillick and Maria Lind (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2005), 71.

Subjects and objects—and curatorial projects—are always in a state of emergence. The initial shape or beginning of a project is informed by the context or form, but that does not require that it cleaves to that form. It always exceeds its assumed or given representational constraints in the process. In *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance*, Erin Manning proposes that choreography, as a “generative practice,” enables actions to become “propositional . . . the coalescing ecology becomes more-than the enabling constraints that set it into motion.”<sup>98</sup>

Artistic research is not restricted or obliged to produce coherent bodies or objects of knowledge. The given or assumed form of something is only one aspect of its expression. There are always others in the room: “Choreographic thinking is about tracking how desire moves—how it compels us toward something, how those somethings move in turn. This desiring ‘reaches’ to and from, back and forth, to generate a score for moving and being-with in new registers.”<sup>99</sup>

In *Beautiful Evidence*, Edward R. Tufte recalls that early sky maps, such as *Uranometria* (1603) by Johann Bayer, included stars or planets within a constellation that were *not* visible to the human eye,<sup>100</sup> making an early case for what counts as knowledge and for mapping the invisible. Through the scaffold of reflection, I attempt to map and diagram both visible and invisible knowledge. My aim has not been to locate a final position with certainty, but to locate *myself* in relation to elements that are themselves always in motion.

I cannot map this route directly. I rely on attentive triangulation. I pay attention to motivations, trace the characteristics of my research and curatorial activity, and note what combinations propel projects forward.

This text is not simply a record of a reaction to the pandemic. It details how the pandemic produced an *alongside* or alternative site for research where I can theorize my artistic production in relation to, and apart from, a given context. What is the alongside or alternative for the curatorial? Is the curatorial still needed?

*The process hastened my arrival to a place I was already heading.*

98 Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 77.

99 Lauren O'Neal, “This Is,” Project Overview, *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* Research Catalogue exposition, 2021, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/19c9d48a80c611c7457302d94b70c5ba>.

100 Edward R. Tufte, *Beautiful Evidence* (Cheshire: Graphics Press, 2006), 20.







# Futuring<sup>1</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> The term “futuring” is drawn in part from the work of choreographer Ame Henderson and her company Public Recordings. In the work *relay*, dancers summon memories of past performances and offer those as future possible moves to be performed in unison with others. The point is not to achieve mirror-like fidelity, but to honor difference within a shared action: <https://www.candance.ca/relay-ame-henderson>.

## Could It Be Any Other Way?

In 2011, I participated in the Nordic Summer Academy for Artistic Research on Seili, an island on the southwest coast of Finland. There was a full roster of feedback sessions, walks in the woods, performance pieces in saunas, and one turbulent boat ride during that intense seven days.

There was also confusion, friendship, experimentation, and learning.

During one presentation, faculty member Mick Wilson suggested that artistic researchers should be able to answer the following questions:

*What are you trying to find out?*

*How do you go about seeking this knowledge?*

*How will you know if you have found it?*

*Why is it worth knowing?*

I admit: the questions terrified me at the time, even though I realized their relevance. I became consumed with not being able to find adequate answers to the degree that I began referring to them as the “Dreaded MWQs” (Mick Wilson Questions) in my notes.

A few years later, I encountered an expanded set of these questions in the *SHARE Handbook for Artistic Research*,<sup>2</sup> where they were nestled within a chapter entitled “Questions of Method” under “Pedagogical Model for Method Disclosure.” The handbook framed the questions as a series of “tasks.”<sup>3</sup>

The tasks address the importance of self-awareness for artistic researchers: How do I know that I know? How do I demonstrate this knowing? How does the research take up space, and where does it reside after?

The MWQs were the first task.

With some distance from the summer academy, and the memory of the choppy boat ride fading, I attempted to answer them.

In an undated note, I wrote:

*Q: What are you trying to find out or understand or otherwise enquire into?*

*A: I am inquiring into the nature of choreographic thinking as applied to curation. I am curious about how choreographic thinking is something I use in my own personal artmaking and then have begun to apply this approach to my curatorial projects. What other models for curation-as-art-practice are out there that are not participatory, art-historical, or analytical?*

2 Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten, eds., *SHARE Handbook for Artistic Research* (Amsterdam: ELIA/European League of Institutes of the Arts, 2013), 275.

3 I paraphrase some of the questions/tasks from pages 276–280 of the handbook.

And:

*Q: How will you know that you have found it, how will you know when you are finished finding out or conducting this inquiry?*

*A: I will know when I have found it when I can describe how the distinct strands/themes/ideas [in choreographic curatorial practice] operate in specific case studies and then use those specific strands to foreground an exhibition. They aren't likely to be realized or understood in the same way with each application, but they can form a landscape or setting within which the ideas operate.*

This all sounds right on target.

The MWQs ask you to come clean about what you are *actually* doing. Not what you hope to do, what you think you are doing, or what you anticipate doing, but what are you *really* doing, *right now*.

*Q: What are you actually doing?*

*A: Curating. Sitting. Worrying. Procrastinating. Applying to random opportunities, getting some, and then using that instead of finishing my work.*

And then:

*OK, really: curating, taking movement workshops, attending events, performances, and shows, and trying new approaches.*

Another task asks why the specific activities you are doing seem to work for this research. My answer acknowledges that:

*A: The consistency of the curatorial frame has been helpful. The frame becomes a given condition, so that everything is not variable each time. With each exhibition, independent of the theme, I have been able to ask new questions not just about the context (inquiry as a curatorial method of asking into/after ideas) but also about the meta-frame of curation itself.*

## **Choreographic Thinking in the Curatorial Realm**

The *SHARE Handbook for Artistic Research* asks researchers to articulate what has been enacted or produced because of undertaking these tasks.

Here it is:

*A: Within my research, I gained an understanding that it is unnecessary for me to use choreography as commonly understood in dance contexts. Instead, I realized I can use it to start a process. Choreographic-curatorial thinking is a launch.*

I have embraced this launch.

Choreographic thinking in the curatorial realm is characterized by open-ended movement and arrangement characterized by responsiveness. Movement informs the way I research potential works and exhibition themes, the way my research intersects with various disciplines (dance, visual art, architecture, poetry), and how I classify my actions within the curatorial process. Exhibition layout, program development, and outreach are each informed by an attention to what moves artworks and audiences, what arrangements facilitate these moves, and what elements motor or scaffold the

effects. Having a consistent frame—such as group exhibitions in the Lamont Gallery—has allowed me to investigate these themes.

Maintaining this type of curatorial practice can be difficult. I often wrestle to resist the pull of gravity that forces knowledge into static and unyielding forms. I must be willing to keep this unnamed space accessible while continuing to plan, coordinate, and schedule *as if* I know. It requires the patience to be open to what emerges. More than simply being open, I need to invite outside participants actively and consistently. I need to arrange and be rearranged in turn.

While I am curious to know *about* or *how*, I fight the urge to know *that*.<sup>4</sup> Rather than trying to predetermine a project's outcome, where the exhibition exists as an answer or solution, I advance exhibition-making as an exploratory, meandering conversation. This conversation unfolds differently depending on the project and brings specific aspects of my curatorial practice to light.

In *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*, the focus was on what might be considered the most fundamental function of the museum and gallery: as custodians of the art object and the collection. Rather than addressing the object from the art historical frame, I explored its latent potentials through a choreographic mindset. How do singular objects, and objects gathered in a collection, move *us*? How do they catalyze thinking and promote relationships?

Exhibitions are often expected to start with a specific narrative or thesis. Within my practice, I start otherwise. *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation* clarified my understanding of how open-ended narrative structures construct exhibition trajectories, which led to a more nuanced view of curatorial dramaturgy. The project involved making room for shifting authorship within collaborative projects and highlighted aspects of dramaturgical thinking I could employ strategically.

As an embodied and embedded researcher, I had previously relied on physical gallery spaces, objects I could touch, and in-person audiences to contextualize and motivate my work. In *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*, which unfolded during the first months of the pandemic, I had to let these attachments go and find other spaces to inhabit. This resulted in a curatorial approach that was dispersed, but ultimately more resilient.

## Detachment

In a sense, my broader project proposes detaching the exhibition from specific situations, allowing the curatorial to take up occupancy in other affective forms.

4 Keller Easterling, *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World* (London: Verso, 2021), 27.

## *Futuring*



Detachment is critical, even without the circumstances of the pandemic. Choreographer Twyla Tharp describes the oscillation between involvement and detachment within creative activity. At a certain part of the process, the need for detachment becomes urgent: “When I’ve learned all I can at the core of a piece, I pull back . . . In the theater, I frequently go to the back and watch the dancers rehearse. If I could watch from much farther away, from outside the theater in the street, I would. That’s how much detachment I need from my work in order to understand it.”<sup>5</sup>

Much of my work happens at close range. I become intimate with my research, moving so close that my body brushes the surface of the object under consideration. With the next breath, I back up, and reposition myself away from the gallery, outside of a specific curatorial context, conceptual site, or geographic location. The dissertation has provided an opportunity to prompt the next move—one of detaching—so that I can perceive the milieu.

### Research Habits

Adjusting my embodied, physical proximity is not always enough. I also need to shift my *durational* proximities to apprehend my actions and their impacts. The length and structure of doctoral study does that, to some degree, by requiring reflection, analysis, and dissemination as part of the research process. But even (lengthy!) doctoral study does not provide enough distance. This is where “alongside” research activities come into play: the movement and performance practice, the travel, the writing and working and making in studios and hotel rooms and libraries. By traversing places and spaces on foot, by bus, or by plane. Detours into poetry, floor plans, and weaving. Getting lost.

The *SHARE Handbook for Artistic Research*, under the seventh task on “Reflecting on the Rhetorics of Method Disclosure,” asks if your methods can be applied to other research settings or tasks.<sup>6</sup> Absolutely. In my case, how these methods coalesce into a form that could be used by others or applied to different settings will be the next step in my research. I have already begun to prototype this framework within teaching. Naming my methods in the context of doctoral study has brought them to my attention and given them structure. Most importantly, the methods can be modified or retired when they are no longer functional.

Another task in the *SHARE Handbook for Artistic Research* became a favorite of mine: *Could it be any other way?*<sup>7</sup> Sometimes I would ask this question at random in the gallery during installation or in relation to everyday activities such as waiting for the subway or making a sandwich. The question had a poetic urgency I found appealing.

5 Twyla Tharp, *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 41.

6 Wilson and van Ruiten, 280.

7 Wilson and van Ruiten, 278.

*Q: Could it be any other way?*

Initially, I answered this question rather too agreeably:

*A: Sure. I could see how these framing devices might apply to curating in other settings. I could develop a specific rubric and then see how that works in the creation of an installation or other project. I could do it “scientifically” and compare a show done with these methods vs. with some other methods.*

I returned to this question repeatedly, trying to answer it in other documents and within presentations.

Was it necessary to use the choreographic as a concept that frames and drives curatorial practice? Couldn't I just knock off all this gratuitous dancing (around) and conceive of curating in some other way?

Yes: I could have researched curating from other vantage points, other conceptual, historical, or aesthetic frameworks. But this project is not a review of the past 50 years of curating in the spirit of Hans Ulrich Obrist,<sup>8</sup> or an analysis of the systems of control inherent in museums and exhibition display spaces, à la Michel Foucault.

I do not know how choreographic curatorial practice would function at a larger institution, or what aspects of it would scale up or out. The activities would certainly take on other characteristics in other venues, but they would still be identifiable to me. Movement and spatial practices are integral to how I make my way through the world. I do not want to detach them from my practice—only make them function with more clarity.

I appreciate the question of the fourth task, as it asks you to consider the contingent nature of artistic research and to envision alternative scenarios. The question itself could be a definition of choreographic thinking.

## **Aspirations (in Hindsight)**

There are many things I did not get to do.

I would have liked to revisit select curatorial projects. *Open House* could have expanded to investigate collections repatriation or functioned as a site for collections relinquishment. (For example, colleague Adriane Herman runs Emotional Value Auctions where she helps people let go of their belongings.<sup>9</sup>) *Being & Feeling* could have morphed into a platform for examining mental illness. *Clew* could have invited additional participants to make, improvise, and prototype with us throughout the run of the exhibition.

There were also opportunities to integrate pedagogical programs more directly with choreographic thinking—to have students and audiences

8 Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist has voiced the need for a more robust history of curatorial practice. I agree, but that's not my agenda today.

9 Adriane Herman's Emotional Value Auctions: <http://www.adrianeherman.com/emotional-value-auction>.

reimagine gallery spaces and exhibition themes. The gallery could have become a shared research platform.

I could have pursued more commissions, cross-institutional collaborations, or alternate venues for dispersed curatorial practices (such as the catalogue-as-exhibition model or curatorial kits for home use). Along with the opportunities to redo exhibition structures, I would have liked to revisit integrating choreography into exhibitions.

## I Still Have Questions

*Who is invited?*

Many types of bodies are marginalized in both curatorial and in dance settings.<sup>10</sup> It is not enough to say “welcome” and keep every other system in place. Even the suggestion to linger, to lounge, or to rest in a gallery setting has connotations. Not everyone, as Adesola Akinleye has observed, has the luxury of being still or slowing down.<sup>11</sup>

*Is it possible to decolonize Western museums and galleries in any significant manner?*

To reorient museums and collections away from white Eurocentric aesthetics and histories—to decenter them—and to prioritize and center other subjects in structural, paradigm-shifting ways? How do I sufficiently decolonize my own thinking? Curator Shaheen Kasmani argues that decolonization is not simply about making the museum more diverse. It is an “upfront challenge of white supremacy” that “de-centres the Eurocentric view, values narrative of that has been made Other. It dismantles systems of thoughts [that place] the straight white man as standard.”<sup>12</sup>

*What about the repatriation of collection objects?*

Aside from the Lamont Gallery’s attempts at decolonization and embracing inclusive practices, we would have to address the larger context, especially the collection. What is the role of donors and funders in supporting or hampering this work? The parent institution does have responsibility for structural changes that cannot be fulfilled by good departmental intentions alone.

*Is curation’s disposition inherently extractive? Or simply too agreeable?*

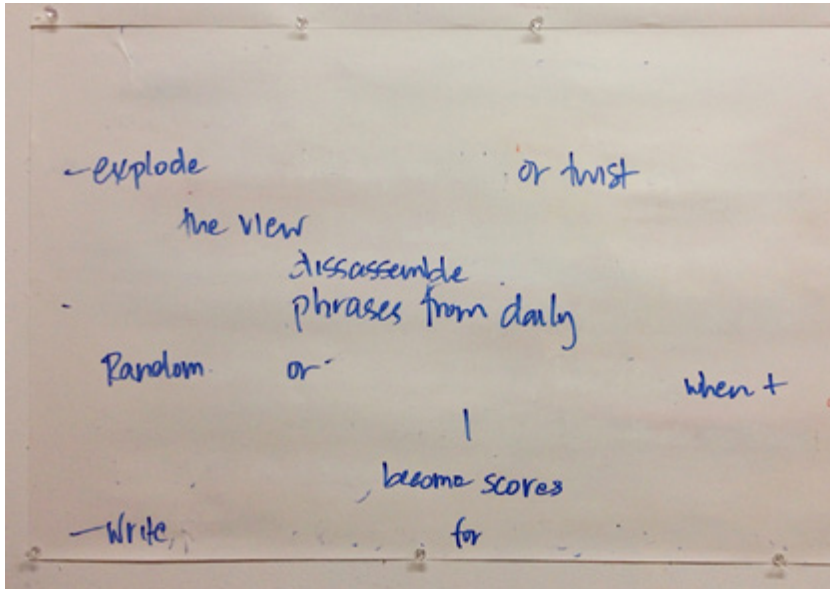
Drawing from environmental and economic paradigms, the notion of extraction involves *taking* something, such as natural resources or human capital, and using the benefits of those resources to bring economic, social, material,

10 Adesola Akinleye, *Dance, Architecture and Engineering* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 11.

11 Akinleye, 60.

12 Shaheen Kasmani, “How Can You Decolonise Museums?,” MuseumNext video, 0:36:15, 2 June 2020, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/decolonising-museums>.





*Explode or twist the view, from Board Notes, 20 November 2020.*

or political gain to some other entity. These resources are distributed unequally, and they are never replenished.

Are the flexibility, innovation, and responsiveness I sought in curating something that reinforced negative characteristics of late capitalism and cultural “managerialism”? Maria Lind recommends critical self-reflection: “Activities that create relations and social situations” are

crucial to the paradigm of post-Fordist work. ... [T]he production of communication, social relations, and cooperation are constitutive of immaterial labor. Furthermore, creativity and flexibility are essential for maximizing profit under these conditions, so the worker/producer must be prepared to work on short-term contracts. Those who work should also be innovative and think in unconventional ways... [A]rtists in particular, become important role models.<sup>13</sup>

In “The Curatorial,” Lind draws parallels between “the curatorial” and Chantal Mouffe’s concept of “the political.” She notes that in Mouffe’s “quest for a better model of democracy than the representative forms we think we know, she sketches one in which opposition is lauded and consensus, with its predilection for closure, becomes highly problematic.”<sup>14</sup> If politics typically involves the reproduction of the status quo through the perpetration

<sup>13</sup> Maria Lind, “The Collaborative Turn,” in *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 190.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Lind, “The Curatorial,” in *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 64.

of rules, Mouffe advocates for *dissensus*. Curating should go beyond the well-worn, agreed-upon tasks of exhibition-making and move toward becoming “a presence that strives to create friction and push new ideas.”<sup>15</sup>

In framing my work as choreographic, my goal is to reimagine curatorial process, to reconceive of the agency of artworks and audiences, and to re-envision the atmosphere of museums and galleries. Museums must reconsider their missions and operations in a radically different way. This may not be possible. It may be necessary to start from scratch and demand alternative organizational, funding, collecting, research, and sustainability models. While these issues are not the focus of this study, contemplating them has revealed urgent areas of inquiry for future research.

## Resistant Research

Many museums have created visible storage areas for collections, where the objects, conversation treatments, and behind-the-scenes tools and equipment are made (visually) accessible to the audience. Other museums have posted diversity and equity statements on their websites. Does mere transparency lead to organizational change?

In contrast, I wonder if it is ever useful for some aspects of institutional critique to be underground. In other words, does critique hinge on the visible, the sayable, and the agreeable, inadvertently reinforcing the merits of identification already ascribed to existing knowledge systems? Does *imperceptible* criticality have political potential that is worth supporting, even if it runs counter to transparency’s aims? Does transparency eventually become its own closed system?

How do we resist within the curatorial? Offer *otherwise* spaces?

Resistance is equally important in artistic research. Erin Manning argues that research-creation<sup>16</sup> supports disparate (and even disagreeable) practices which contest normative research modes and outcomes. Resistant research “generates forms of knowledge that are extralinguistic; it creates operative strategies for a mobile positioning that take these new forms of knowledge into account”<sup>17</sup> that allow us to rethink what we value and how we manifest new practices and pedagogies.

<sup>15</sup> Lind, 64.

<sup>16</sup> As described by Natalie Loveless in *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 9, as well as within the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)’s framework: <https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programs-programmes/definitions-eng.aspx#a22>.

<sup>17</sup> Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 27.

It often seems necessary to produce something that is visible for the purposes of outside validation. Peter Eckersall and Bertie Ferdman question “the neoliberal and cultural political idea that art is best when it serves the society and is visibly and demonstrably productive in various ways. It is not only free-market ideology that produces this state of affairs but also socio-culturally interventionist ideas as well.”<sup>18</sup> If externalizing something (an activity, a theme, an achievement) is equated with knowledge, can we agree that this perception of knowledge is dependent on the onlooker’s agenda, and thus open to discussion?

These questions are particularly relevant to the academic context. Natalie Loveless argues that artistic research-creation is an act of resistance to the: “all-administrative university” which depends on exploitative labor, speed of production, and a landscape “governed by the desire for clear and immediate individualized impact metrics, by greater online, informational (rather than critical interpretive) content in classes.”<sup>19</sup>

What was important for the Lamont Gallery to externalize for our parent institution, such as attendance figures or media placements, were often at odds with the less visible, but no less significant, impacts we had on students, artists, and audience members.

Visibility, knowledge, recognition, and resistance are intertwined. At the Lamont Gallery, I felt pressure *to name* within the institutional context. Increasingly, I found myself withdrawing from projects that would not be explicitly marked by a Lamont Gallery sign. I had to put my name, and my title, or the gallery’s name, on everything.

Naming can be blunt,<sup>20</sup> but it can also be transformational. While the requirement to name was frustrating, I had an ethical obligation to do so. Academic galleries and cultural programs within institutions not convinced of the benefits of these programs are always in precarious positions. To name and to give space to the labor and production of the gallery—to claim this space—counters the invisibility so common in the arts industries.

## I Am Exhausted

Throughout much of my curatorial projects, especially at the end of my time at the Lamont Gallery, I operated in a state of exhaustion. This was a physical, felt sense, as well as an intellectual one.

Exhaustion has potential: it offers other ways of engaging—other speeds, other positionalities, other viewpoints. The slow and still qualities of

18 Peter Eckersall and Bertie Ferdman, eds., *Curating Dramaturgies: How Dramaturgy and Curating Are Intersecting in the Contemporary Arts* (London: Routledge, 2021), 10.

19 Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 9.

20 Katherine Profeta, *Dramaturgy in Motion: At Work on Dance and Movement Performance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 26–27.

exhaustion are forms of resistance. Can I be strategic with exhaustion?<sup>21</sup> Leire Vergara, drawing from Gilles Deleuze, argues that one who is exhausted

cannot go on any longer and for that reason turns his own state of collapse into the opportunity of reassessing the limits of any given convention. In this respect, the exhausted is not a passive agent who suffers from the alienation of a demanding situation, but an active one, capable of interrupting a set of conditions and creating new forms of engagement with reality.<sup>22</sup>

Have I reached my limit with curating? This exhaustion, this saturation with curatorial practice and the artistic research reflection on that practice, may ultimately be useful. The limit renews “the sphere’s given conditions. In that respect, an exhausted approach could help to reassess any contemporary mechanism that may entrap a cultural practice.”<sup>23</sup>

There are many other models of curating to experience, such as indigenous<sup>24</sup> and queer<sup>25</sup> curatorial approaches. I could use curatorial tools for advocacy, wellness, or pedagogy, or experiment with AI, VR, and AR—not to remake the curatorial in a digital space, but as a methodological orientation.

In exhausting curating, I discover there is much to do. I need only to move in new directions.

## Radiant Things

Do disciplines need to be visibly or identifiably present to the researcher or to observers to contribute to research’s claims to knowledge production? How and to what extent? How do artistic research outcomes manifest within emergent research paradigms? Can invisibility be a research aspiration?

21 Exhaustion and fatigue, as sociopolitical and theoretical propositions, are opportunities to contest the expectation that subject formation requires modernity’s relentless movement and the contemporary’s demand for hypervisibility. Key texts include André Lepecki’s *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*, Byung-Chul Han’s *The Burnout Society* (originally published in Germany as *The Fatigue Society*, which has quite different connotations), and Teresa Brennan’s *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy*. Early in my doctoral research I proposed a “fatigue aesthetics.” Fatigue brings me closer to resistance and refusal, seen in Yvonne Rainer’s “No Manifesto,” E. Jane’s “NOPE (a manifesto),” and William Pope.L’s crawls, among other works. I hope to return to these themes in future projects.

22 Leire Vergara, “An Exhausted Curating,” in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 73.

23 Vergara, 74.

24 For example, the work of Candice Hopkins: <https://curatorsintl.org/about/collaborators/7599-candice-hopkins>, and essays such as “Indigenous Curatorial Practices and Methodologies,” by Michelle McGeough.

25 Numerous articles and essays, including those on *OnCurating.org*, as well as recent texts, such as *Radicalizing Care: Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating*, edited by Elke Krasny, Sophie Lingg, Lena Fritsch, Birgit Bosold, and Vera Hofmann, address this area.

Embracing invisibility usually causes discomfort. How can something—an artwork, an exhibition, or an artistic research outcome—occupy theoretical, epistemological, or ontological space without representation? Lorraine Daston muses:

Imagine a world without things. It would be not so much an empty world as a blurry, frictionless one: no sharp outlines would separate one part of the uniform plenum from another; there would be no resistance against which to stub a toe or test a theory or struggle stalwartly. Nor would there be anything to describe, remark on, or complain about – just a kind of porridgy oneness. Without things, we would stop talking.<sup>26</sup>

My research is supposed to be about a thing—choreographic thinking in curatorial practice. In the end, can I really take this “thing” and make it transferable, sharable, and measurable? Ensure it conforms to the metrics of classical research paradigms and institutional benchmarks? Can I give a convincing definition or make a how-to manual? Deliver a manifesto?

Over the course of this research, I am more comfortable with my answer:  
*No.*

I am conducting resistant research. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney support resisting the impoverishing effects of institutional containment: “Every time it tries to enclose us in a decision, we’re undecided. Every time it tries to represent our will, we’re unwilling.”<sup>27</sup> To resist is an ethical obligation, a generous act that requires both spaciousness and commitment: “We owe each other the indeterminant. We owe each other everything.”<sup>28</sup>

While I *have* managed to transfer and share my research, to some extent, I still desire an object. Something to delineate the borders.

A thing.

In *Things That Talk*, Daston acknowledges that certain things are both hard to name but also difficult to dismiss. It’s challenging to describe “thingness” when it takes residence in a variety of forms, from spaces and artworks to inclinations and habits: “all of these things exhibit a certain resistance to classification, though they are all of a sort to be seen, touched, and otherwise dealt with in the manner of tables, pencils, and other banalities.”<sup>29</sup>

Daston urges us to pay attention to the things that make us want to talk about them—and in that way, those things begin to talk.<sup>30</sup> Curation is a thing in this sense. Choreographic thinking is another thing. Assembling my

26 Lorraine Daston, introduction to *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 9.

27 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 19

28 Harney and Moten, 20.

29 Lorraine Daston, introduction to *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004) 10.

30 Daston, 11.

curatorial process by combining these things has created a multiplicitous thing. Resistant to fixity, this thing is difficult to capture. But I still follow it: “It is precisely the tension between their chimerical composition and their unified gestalt that distinguishes the talkative thing from the speechless sort. Talkative things instantiate novel, previously unthinkable combinations. Their thingness lends vivacity and reality to new constellations of experience.”<sup>31</sup> This framing has helped me see my object of inquiry—choreographic thinking in the curatorial—as a thing I can talk about and talk with.

It is only now that I can address the last MWQ for artistic researchers from the long-ago seminar on Seili:

*Why is it worth knowing?*

Unlike the other questions, I never found an answer in my research notes. I attempt to address it here.

My aim for this project has been to contribute to discourses that examine how the performing arts and curating intersect. Specifically, I offer an in-depth examination of a choreographic curatorial process through the lens of my own curating.

The research has been important for personal, pedagogical, and theoretical reasons. From a practical standpoint, the pursuit has developed and sharpened my capacity for research and analysis even when the object of research was elusive. In an era where we are increasingly measured by short-term, results-oriented thinking, there is value in researching the amorphous.

The project has provided an example of how to embody theoretical and conceptual ideas about curation and movement, curation and dramaturgy, and curation and collaboration, to name a few. I now have a scaffold for choreographic thinking and a sense of what it facilitates in the gallery setting.

I transmit this knowledge through this text and the Research Catalogue expositions, and by developing exhibitions, programs, and projects. I also convey this knowledge by teaching and presenting, including within courses such as Curating and Activism, conference panels, or serving as a juror. When I make myself available as a resource to individuals and institutions informally, I share curatorial and artistic research knowledge as a mentor. Mentoring goes both ways. I am mentored in this process. These exchanges make *as-yet curatorials* possible.

This journey certainly tested my endurance and (somewhat uncomfortably) highlighted my obstinate tendencies. At the same time, it encouraged and validated my inclinations to wander and wonder—to be stubborn in *this way*—and to be meticulous and rigorous within my chosen mode of research. While artistic research knowledge can feel ephemeral, the project allowed me to recognize the processual nature of knowledge—including my own—and to articulate its kinesthetic operations with more confidence and conviction. I have learned to trust the research.

<sup>31</sup> Daston, 24.

Following the path of invisible or resistant aspects of artistic research or cultural production—or any work that does not meet the demands of existing protocols but creates its own terms of engagement—means naming and framing your research *as* research. As Sara Ahmed recommends, it is up to me to articulate my activity as meaningful by attending to the object *and* to its background.

Fortunately, I am skilled in excavating (and mediating) the latent and the invisible and putting them into play. Illuminating the background or “surround” of things allows them to radiate. As Édouard Glissant suggests in *For Opacity*, “We have already articulated the poetic force. We see it as radiant—replacing the absorbing concept of unity; it is the opacity of the diverse animating the imagined transparency of Relation. The imaginary does not bear with it the coercive requirements of idea. It prefigures reality, without determining it a priori.”<sup>32</sup> Opacity, Glissant offers, “far from cornering me within futility and inactivity” makes me “sensitive to the limits of every method . . . relativizes every possibility of every action within me.”<sup>33</sup>

A methodology of opacity moves artistic research to radiate beyond its boundaries, and to externalize that radiance as a moving research multiplicity rather than a unified singularity.

*Care to move with me?*

32 Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997), 192.

33 Glissant, 192.

Following pages: View from Toronto Islands.









# Image List

All photographs by Lauren O'Neal unless otherwise noted.

## A Preamble: Walking, Wandering, and Wondering

18–19 Suomenlinna island. Walking home after a seminar at Kuvataideakatemia (the Academy of Fine Arts).

## Where We Are Going and What You Might Find

24–25 Ferris wheel, Helsinki.

27 Early attempt to visualize a structure or map of my doctoral artistic research.

31 Screen shot from Research Catalogue exposition for *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation*.

## Section One: Making Introductions & Inviting Encounters

34–35 From the *Flux* curatorial artistic research residency at the Nave Gallery (2013).

42 Performing in Heidi Latsky's *On Display* at its first run in July 2016 at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston. Photograph by Kathy Desmond.

47 Lighting fixtures in the underground walkway at the Amos Rex art museum, Helsinki.

56 *Attunement*. Some images are included in this text because they reflect the spirit of my choreographic curatorial and artistic research practices, rather than representing a specific concept or activity. I immerse myself in spaces and environments, especially those outside of the gallery, and then respond to that potential.

## Section Two: In, Through, As, and With:

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58–59 At the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Conference at the ICC Kyoto, Japan (2019) 4,000 attendees debated the definition of a museum.

62 *I Would Like to Say*

65 Stuck elevator.

66 *Attending* (Cambridge, Massachusetts)

75 Experiments in research disorientation, Harvard Dance Center.

81 Holding a hex weave.

82 Soundwalk on the roof of the Amos Rex art museum during the Fragile Forms workshop with MACHiNENoiSY (Delia Brett, Daelik, Nancy Tam, and Natalie Purschwitz) as part of Helsinki Design Week 2018.

89 A Board Notes session in the library, 17 April 2019.

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92–93 Ladder.

103 The Lamont Gallery's Harkness table in the classroom that was carved out of the back of the gallery in a 2017 renovation.

104 Prototyping within the *Flux* curatorial artistic research residency at the Nave Gallery (2013).

110 *Lush Life*, Lamont Gallery (23 March–2 May 2015). Foreground: work by Natalie Andrew.

115 Looking into the Lamont Gallery from the outside hallway. Pictured: *On & Off the Page* (9 September–19 October 2013).

- 119 Even unexpected campus plumbing problems contributed to the gallery's atmosphere. On this day, the issue centered on the drainpipes installed below the gallery. We quickly repositioned the work from the side gallery, effectively reinstalling the exhibition during public hours.

#### Section Four: Wrestling With the Choreographic

- 126–127 What the hell is the choreographic?  
 131 One flashlight creates numerous reflections from mirrored tiles (from *Queer Weather System*).  
 138 Performing in Trisha Brown's *Floor of the Forest* in the *Dance/Draw* exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Photograph by Kathy Desmond.  
 142 *May Cause Dizziness*  
 151 William Forsythe's *The Fact of Matter* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston (2019).  
 154 Ripple.

#### Section Five: Arranging Spaces of Relation(s): What Can Objects Do?

- 158–159 Push puppets in *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*. Collection of Melissa and Erick Mischke.  
 161 The Glass Flowers, formally known as the Ware Collection of Blaschka Glass Models of Plants at the Harvard Museum of Natural History.  
 166 Wildebeest taxidermied trophy head and other objects discovered in Lamont Gallery storage. As displayed in *Dust & Discovery: Work from the Lamont Gallery Collection* (25 June–31 July 2013).  
 169 Performers activating Simone Forti's *Slant Board* (1961) in *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done* (16 September 2018–3 February 2019) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.  
 170 Board Notes session in Studio 709 at the Theater Academy Helsinki, 7 April 2019.  
 175 Invitation card for *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*.  
 181 *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting* at the Lamont Gallery.  
 188 Two children interact with the sound sculpture.  
 191 Art history slides from defunct art history curriculum, Phillips Exeter Academy. As displayed in *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*.  
 192 Overheard: Reactions by audience members to *Open House: A Portrait of Collecting*.

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- 196–197 Prototyping a section of *Clew* with paper and string.  
 199 Invitation postcard for *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation*.  
 202 *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation*  
 209 The sound board and speaker cables during the installation for *Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation*.  
 216–217 *Mediated (Venice) and Charlestown, RI*.  
 221 Top: One afternoon when the gallery was closed, we tested how we could reimagine the perceptual capacities of *Clew* by capturing views of the exhibition with drones lent by a parent. This view into the exhibition is from the skylights.  
 Bottom: The drone flight captures a low-level perspective from one of the smaller side bay galleries looking into the main space.  
 226 People dropped pieces of charcoal, salt, and other materials into the water in the low metal trays in the middle of the gallery. Over time, the materials began to morph and change on their own.  
 230 Maps and mazes.  
 236 Audience members engaging with the *Clew* futon installation in one of the smaller side bays of the gallery. This room became a destination for students before and after classes.

239 Score generator. I often make score generators out of wood and string—at the scale of the hand or the body—to envision movement, patterns, and lines of potential (written, imagined, enacted) in relation to artworks, spaces, and audiences.

### Section Seven: Letting Things Move

242–243 Spending time in *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* without audience members reinforced the exhibition’s themes of proximity, intimacy, and connection. Foreground: *Bird in Hand* by Sachiko Akiyama. Background: work by Andrew Fish, Katya Grokhovsky, and Lauren Gillette.

245 *23 March 2020*

248 *Echolocation*

253 “On the path” is a common saying at Exeter. It describes how meetings, conversations, and ideas erupt as people intersect at all hours along the school’s interconnected system of paths, sidewalks, and patios. Photograph by Kelly McGahie.

259 Invitation card for *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*. Image: Cheryle St. Onge, *Untitled (Bubbles)*, black and white photograph.

262 Lauren Gillette’s mirror installation, *Things I Did*. Fragments of works by Cheryle St. Onge, Andrew Fish, and Jon Sakata reverberate in the background.

266 Screen shots of the redesigned Lamont Gallery website, which allowed us to reconceive of curatorial content and outreach in significantly expanded ways.

273 *Multiplying the Collaborative* rehearsal over Zoom with Jon Sakata and Dustin Schuetz.

275 The public address system in the Class of 1945 Library, which I had hoped to use for a performance event, was activated by a singular old-fashioned phone at the circulation desk: you picked up the handset, pressed a button, and spoke. Here, Elizabeth Kostina tests the system.

276 The Pink Stage.

281 Text from frequent collaborator Mercy Carbonell as we co-imagined future constellations of *Being & Feeling* and life beyond the pandemic.

### Futuring

286–287 Theater Academy, Helsinki.

291 *Futuring*

295 *Explode or twist the view*, from Board Notes, 20 November 2020.

302–303 View from Toronto Islands.

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We curate our playlists, our menus, and our outfits. Urban planning, poetry, and software design have choreographic elements. These phenomena point to the potential of the curatorial and the choreographic to open new spaces for aesthetic engagement.

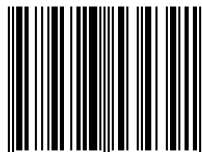
*Assembling a Praxis: Choreographic Thinking and Curatorial Agency* imagines a site where the curatorial and the choreographic meet. Curation under these conditions becomes a way to ask questions, make introductions, and invite possibilities, using the platform of the gallery space as laboratory, rehearsal room, studio, and stage. It seeks, rather than seeking to answer.

What happens when you curate from this position?

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