

The P(art) of the W(hole) –
investigations, through choreography and mysticism,
on the imponderably basic equation: we are; we are
not.

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ABSTRACT

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TITLE OF THE WRITTEN COMPONENT/THESIS The P(art) of the W(hole) – investigations, through choreography and mysticism on the imponderably basic equation: we are; we are not.	NUMBER OF PAGES + APPENDICES IN THE WRITTEN COMPONENT 66 pages
TITLE OF THE ARTISTIC/ ARTISTIC AND PEDAGOGICAL WORK Artistic work: <i>REV DIV LUV</i> premiering at Uniarts TeAK, Studio 4. Dancers: Nella Matleena, Elias Berglund, Valtteri Juvonen, Miska Palsio, Anniina Dyster, Monia Kimara, Katri Kämpynen, Inka Auvinen, Paria Mohajerani, Altinay Kapsiz, Samu Kotilainen, Li Krook, Designers: Lighting: Katinka Ebbe, Costume: Satu Muurinen, Sound: Ilja Pippa The artistic work is produced by the Theatre Academy. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<p>An exploration on choreography as a compositional practice of mysticism; one that, through analysis of dispositions making, performing, and attending, invites the reader to consider live choreographic performance as a means of practicing <i>the end</i>. This research inquires as to how choreographic work can be approached as a durational, devotional, mystical process – one that not only allows for, but is supported by contradiction, fragmentation, emergent wholeness, and most importantly – its ending. Drawing from performance theory, medieval/contemporary philosophy, medieval mystic's texts, and my personal/professional relationship to art, the writing itself develops as ongoing journey through various fleeting forms; it incorporates many voices. Upon completion, this written component leads me into my studio work, where I'm currently reimagining, reinterpreting, and reformulating its content towards a new and different shape: my final production.</p> <p>This writing is fundamentally dialogical. It attempts to spark generative friction through polyrhythmic, multivocal composition, by putting different voices, different eras, and different approaches on the page – then rubbing them together. Maybe, some kind of w(hole), emerges. It is contradictory. It is an ode to the medieval fragment with nods to the postmodern one – meaning it does employ the postmodern conception of wholeness as impossibility because of and <i>through</i> fragmentation...but it simultaneously strives for, aims towards, and ultimately, attempts to believe in, the possibility of wholeness – <i>despite</i> fragmentation. Each part, despite its brokenness, despite its hole-ness, is a whole... and through that hole, the whole becomes realized – if only for a fleeting moment. Hole-ness towards holiness.</p> <p>This thesis functions as a sieve. Watery questions are poured into it...some of them remain, others drip through the holes of the whole. But really, it is about the act of pouring itself: Together, this written component and the artistic work serve as a choreographic engagement with meaning – my desperation for it and my great frustration with it. It contributes to choreographic discourses concerning epistemology, historiography, temporality (via duration and death), and relationality. This is the kind of writing that materialized from someone who has experienced loss. For that reason, it contributes to discourses on grief, mourning, and recovery through the framework of live choreographic performance.</p>	
KEYWORDS Choreography, Mysticism, Problems, Dialogue, Friction, Questions, Duration, Fleeting, The End, Endings, Devotion, Live Event, Death, Making, Performing, Attending, Joy, Ecstasy, Practice	

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1. INTRODUCTION

*“The mystical life is a journey or itinerary” – Simon Critchley, *Mysticism**

Hi.

How are you doing?

While I cannot hear your response, perhaps it is worthwhile to simply check in with how you are, and how you feel, in this moment. Wherever you are, whoever you are, I sincerely hope that you are well.

Whatever it is that brought you here, you are now embarking on the journey that is this reading. It is, fundamentally that – a journey, which as of right now, has already begun! It was created out of and through my own journey in writing it, and this journey-ness is preserved in its now final iteration. It was written to be read... and in reading it, you are both completing, and furthering the writing process itself. Thank you. This introduction serves as a set of suggestions/guides as to how to engage with the writing. The addendum being, that even if one follows them, there may still be moments where one feels lost. While I cannot, nor want to control the *exact* reading experience this writing begets, what I feel I can share, is that if in fact one does get lost while reading...I’m right there with you. There were many moments during the process when I didn’t know which way to turn – which direction to go in. However, this is one of the most important parts of writing: the not knowing. And maybe, hopefully, through the act of writing itself, one discovers where it is they actually *needed* to go...which is often, a different direction than the initially charted one. The path unfolds as one walks it.

1.1. Contexts and Co-texts

This written component, as well as my final production, are influenced and inspired by the fourteenth century mystical text *Revelations of Divine Love*. Written by Christian mystic Julian of Norwich, in what is speculated to be sometime around 1373, it is considered the first English language text definitively written by a woman. The text is divided in two parts: “the short text”: written soon after Julian received sixteen revelatory visions of God, on what she believed to be her deathbed, and “the long text”: written over the course of the next 20 years, in which Julian developed a complex and multifaceted

theology, interrogating and extrapolating upon the visions she received. Within Julian's long text, each chapter is prefaced by a small summary. It serves as a lens to read each chapter through. For example:

“The seventh revelation concerns frequent feelings of joy and sorrow, etc. And how it is expedient that a person sometimes be left without comfort, even though sin is not the cause.

And after this he revealed a supreme spiritual delight in my soul. [...]"

This is characteristic only of Julian of Norwich's long text, as her short text is not written with such prefaced lenses. This thesis pays tribute to Julian of Norwich, in that it is composed of a short text and long text as well. However, the formats are slightly altered. My long text, comprised of chapters one, two, three, and four, comes first. The short text of chapter 5 follows. Within the long text, I have also employed Julian's small summary form; but my summaries take the form of quotes. These quotes come from scholars of the medieval, the mystical, and the ecstatic, as well as from medieval mystics themselves. The usage and placement of these quotes can be interpreted as a source of generative friction – they offer a lens through which the writing beneath can be read, however, the writing beneath does not refer to the quote above directly. Rather, it refers to it *obliquely*, which, as philosopher Simon Critchley states in his work *Mysticism*, is one of the seven adverbs through which mystical texts should be approached. (All quoted and consulted works are listed in the References section for transparency and acknowledgment.) Lastly, at the end of each chapter, there is a “postscriptum”. These postscriptums operate as syntheses; they attempt to weave what has been discussed in each section with some features of mysticism that apply. Within these postscriptums there are different forms of summary, another homage to mystical texts themselves, which often included a variety of forms such as “poems, homilies, dialogues, or courtly romances” (Critchley 2024, 21).

It is important to acknowledge that due to my own positionality as a Jewish US-American woman, I approach this realm of European Christian mysticism from a distance. Because of my initial inspiration from Julian of Norwich, and page number this thesis adheres to, the discourses of mysticism that I refer to and rely on are predominantly Eurocentric. However, mysticism extends far beyond Christianity to the other Abrahamic religions, (Islam, Judaism), other Monotheistic religions (Zoroastrianism, Sikhism), Polytheistic

religions (Hinduism, Shinto, Wicca), Non-theistic religions (Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism) amongst many others. Mysticism exists in innumerable ways within the myriad of religious traditions on the globe, and I would argue, it exists in realms that we do not necessarily consider to be religious upon first glance. If one would like to read more about mysticism from a less Eurocentric perspective, *History of Mysticism* by S. Abhayananda, *On Race and Religion: My Journey from Jim Crow to Mysticism* by Lauren Joichin Nile, and *Harper's Encyclopedia of Mystical & Paranormal Experience* by Rosemary Ellen Guiley, are great sources.

1.2. What am I doing?

What I have attempted to do in this writing is articulate my notion of choreography as an excuse to gather, in order to practice endings...through mystical, theoretical, and practical frameworks. With the works of various writers, artists, and mystics, I try to detangle and re-tangle the realms of making, performing, and attending from a choreographic, mystical perspective. It is important to note that I am very much following Critchley's formulation of mysticism, which is: "not a religion, but rather, a tendency within religion" (Critchley 2024, 49). While it is difficult to write, out of fear of how it sounds, art has, for the duration of my life, operated as a religion – one that I was born into, and one that I've followed, since birth. Mysticism for me then, does not equate to art...but it is, or can be, a tendency within art.

I'm the only child of an experimental jazz/electronic composer, and a visual/ecological artist and curator. I was born in New York City in the mid 90s and was raised in the very particular contexts of post- 60s and 70s NeoAvantgarde experimentalism and downtown loft-rave culture. Both of my parents struggled financially; there were always many side gigs. Art, for me, was never something to engage in for the purposes of making money – quite the opposite. It meant that you would always need to have other jobs, other skills, in order to even call yourself an artist... In fact, that's kind of what "artist" meant: someone who does many things. Still, given the kinds of spaces, events, and people I was exposed to, this kind of upbringing is reminiscent of nepotism and privilege – and in many ways, I have been privy to both. What this has afforded me is a complicated, problematic, emotional, and religious relationship to art. Like any child raised in a

religion, I lived by a set of rules and practices determined by artists. However, while rebellion is sometimes characteristic of those who are raised in a specific religious context – I never rebelled. I followed in the footsteps that were shown to me. Perhaps this was to my advantage, perhaps to my detriment. Perhaps both. It is difficult to know. Either way, art is, and has been, for all intents and purposes, a religion to me. Some people choose to devote themselves to art as a religion, while others are born into and shaped by it, but choose to travel different pathways – ones that perhaps, lead them far away from such artistic realms. And then, there are those, like me, who were born into it – and stayed. These are just a few examples as to how one forms a religious relationship to art and artmaking. There are, undoubtedly, many other versions, one of which is important to mention: there are those who have chosen art as a religion, but never received any kind of institutional, social, or familial support, due to structural inequality, systematic oppression, or socio-economic disadvantage. These artists, in my opinion, are the ones to which the world is most indebted. Those whose work remains unknown within academic/art-market contexts, but who continue, despite the circumstances, to foster a creative life – inspiring those around them through direct relationality to perhaps do the same; embodying and demonstrating the possibilities of creativity, to those who have maybe, never had the chance to consider such possibilities. I say all this to preface my interest in mysticism as a way to engage with my religious relationship to art.

1.3. Choreography and Mysticism

I was particularly drawn to writing about mysticism as a choreographic premise, and choreography as a compositional practice of mysticism for many reasons, one of which, while it is not overtly discussed in the body of this text, is due to the rise in fascist authoritarianism in many parts of the world. In his 1933 book *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich vehemently argues that fascism is mystical, in the sense that it is a co-option and manipulation of mysticism itself, one that implants itself in, and manifests itself through, people's bodies. Reich writes: "[...] all forms of fascistic, imperialistic, and dictatorial mysticism can be traced back to the mystical distortion of the vegetative sensations of life, a distortion that results from a patriarchal and authoritarian organization of the family and the state" (Reich 1980, 136). By vegetative, Reich refers to the automatic functions of the body: respiration, digestion, circulation, (important corporeal systems within the forms of medieval female mysticism

I am dealing with), and he implies that fascism operates upon and warps such sensations with its own manner of fraudulent, mystical treachery. As is the case with many people I know working in the arts, I am often consumed with a sense of utter hopelessness and total futility, as to what my artistic work could possibly do, or possibly help, given the current state of global politics. However, upon re-encountering Reich's book towards the latter half of this writing process, I started to wonder: could choreographic mysticism act as some kind of counter, or rebellion, to the co-opted and twisted mysticism employed by authoritarianism, which preys upon people's mystical urges, tendencies, and desires to feel a *part* of something larger? To put it differently: we are all susceptible to the manipulation of our mystical inclinations because life itself *is* enigmatic, mysterious, numinous, and contradictory. How can choreographic work act as a reclamation of mysticism towards its radical, counter-hegemony, anarchic essence? The female mystics of the high Middle Ages were actively resisting the institutional authority and patriarchal social structures of the time. This thesis inquires as to how choreography can be used to re-choreograph mysticism itself, to find and encourage alternative, re-sensitized modes of relationality.

“Mysticism is existential and practical. It is the cultivation of practices which allow you to free yourself of your standard habits, your usual fancies and imaginings and see what is there and stand with what is there *ecstatically*.” (Critchley 2024, 3). I find this Critchley quote to be deeply aligned with my own understanding of, practice in, and relationship to choreography. I was first acquainted with Julian of Norwich's text ten years ago, and I have worked with it in a variety of ways: I tried to make a dance film of it with a friend of mine in Bogotá, I tried to make a techno opera about it with a different friend in Paris, And I wrote a 250 page text based on it while participating in yet another friend's writing group in New York. *Revelations of Divine Love* has been a companion to me throughout the past decade, and my relationship to the text itself has been shaped by friends. Upon the completion of this degree program, I felt it was the time to work with it in the frame of this choreographic production – with new friends. There are a few points that Critchley makes regarding the reading and interpreting of mystical texts, that I feel are important to share. “We can draw closer to mysticism if we think obliquely, autobiographically, vernacularly, performatively, practically, erotically, and ascetically” (Critchley 2024, 23). – I have written this text by employing these adverbs, and it could be helpful to

consider them upon reading. “The mystical palimpsest is more authoritative than the original text” (Critchley 2024, 244). – Mystical texts are about letting another, or others, speak. Most commonly this other is God – which is, to me, accessed most profoundly through other people. This text is composed of many different voices. It is dialogical. It jumps around. It is an homage to the medieval fragment. “Reading mystical texts is lateral, associative, cumulative, and synthetic, rather than linear, progressive, parsimonious, and analytic” (Critchley 2024, 45). – This writing is a friction between a mystical and rational text. Perhaps at times it is chaotic. But it is, above all, a practice in devotion to writing itself. There are more questions than there are answers.

1.4. Itinerary

There is no right or wrong way to read this thesis. And however your singular journey while reading unfolds, I do hope that there are intriguing, or thought-provoking, or touching moments along the way – even if it’s just one sentence, or one word. In medieval philosophy, the part is equal in importance to the whole. Each part is a whole unto itself. An additionally important feature of medieval mystical texts, is that they were, most frequently, read aloud. I composed this writing through reading it aloud to others, and if you would like to, you are absolutely encouraged to read parts, or wholes, aloud as well. Here are a few additional options, or invitations, as to how you *could* read:

- You could read all the section titles and quotes first. Then take a break, have a coffee or tea, and return to the beginning. From the beginning, you then could read just my text and postscriptums.
- You could disregard the prefacing quotes altogether, and just read what’s left. The quotes influence the content of the page, simply because they are on the page... whether they are read or not. Taking breaks in this case is still recommended! A walk, a talk with a friend, etc.
- You can read everything that’s on the page, as it is on the page. In which case, breaks are essential! Have some snacks, watch some TV – whatever feels good.
- You could read the chapters in reverse order, starting from the last – the end – and finishing at the beginning. Just to see... what happens. (And still take breaks.)

And so – Thank you for saying yes to the taking of this journey – through reading! It is – now – yours. I am grateful, and humbled, and honored that you’re here. Much Love, Kadence.

2. THE LONG TEXT

*“Every time I think of you
I feel shot right through with a bolt of blue
It's no problem of mine, but it's a problem I find
Livin' a life that I can't leave behind.”*

- New Order, *Bizarre Love Triangle*

2.1. Problems as Frictions

“They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith.” – William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Within my own choreographic practice, I depend upon problems – uncovering, working through, rubbing against, and dancing with the problems at hand are often where I feel the most aligned with whatever kinds of creative forces are moving through me – where I feel, simultaneously uncertain, and at home. The problems are propagative. What is perhaps the most rewarding outcome of working with and from problems, is that sometimes, it is revealed through said working, that maybe, what I thought of as problems, aren't actually problems at all... perhaps they transform into something totally different, if only for a few moments in a rehearsal or a performance... maybe they are material(s) asking to be woven into the work, maybe they're generative forces of friction that create something else, something entirely unlike what I had previously imagined, but which is ultimately, more aligned with the actual work itself. It is a wonderful feeling when the work proves to be smarter than you; when it reveals something that you could not, and would not, have revealed to yourself without it. The dealing with, and of, the problem, allows for some kind of form(s) to emerge, and change, emerge, and change... and sometimes, for revelations to happen.

2.2. Methods of Creation with Problems

“[Mystical states] tell of the ideal, of vastness, of union [...] they offer us hypotheses, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset.” – William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

In her book *Choreographing Problems*, performance theorist Bojana Cvejić relies upon philosopher Gilles Deleuze's conceptualization of "problems", to articulate the various concepts and performances developed by particular choreographers – all of whom utilize, "problems as a method of creation" (Cvejić 2015, 2). According to Cvejić's reading of Deleuze, problems function as specific kinds of conditions – conditions that give rise to different forms of thought, propositions, and concepts. (Cvejić 2015, 49). Within his 1968 work *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze formulates a complex entanglement between his conception of problems and that of Ideas – the capitalization of "Ideas" being a deliberate linguistic, philosophical choice. An Idea is distinguished as "an n-dimensional, continuous, defined multiplicity" (Deleuze 1994, 182). The term *n-dimensional* refers to a structure that exists beyond familiar three-dimensional space, suggesting a topological conception of Ideas as intensive, rather than extensive, spaces. Here, *n* does not represent a fixed number but rather a variable field of conditions (Tanaka and Saito 2012). This is not to say that in defining what an Idea is, it becomes static or fixed. Rather, its defining features are that of multiplicity, continuousness, and n-dimensionality – all of which combine and constitute the mutable, dynamic nature of an Idea itself.

With respect to the Deleuzian conception of problems, Cvejić notes that "problems are objects of Ideas" (Cvejić 2015, 2), and furthermore, "Ideas are problematic and differential: they engender thought in the form of problems and conceive or express the sensible through difference" (Cvejić 2015, 46). We come to understand that from a Deleuzian perspective, neither problems nor Ideas can be thought of as pre-given or pre-existing. They emerge in a continual feedback loop, a la the feedback loop form that gave rise to their very emergence.

It is through this intertwined, repetitive dance of problems and Ideas that the expression of difference occurs – the perpetually generated loops are never identical. Each circulation begets different solutions, different questions, different frustrations, and different revelations...all of which in turn are incorporated and synthesized. This consequently informs and re-shapes the problems and Ideas themselves: resulting again, in *different* expressions of difference.

2.3. Positivity Problems

“The Mirouer (Marguerite Porete) is the nomadic text of the abstract machine. An immanent reading of its mysticism leads to a conception of molecular mutation that braces the plane of immanence of love, in the experimentation of new ways of living beyond patriarchal/divine domination, in the rejection of property, in the invention of disobedient modes of subjectivation, [...] in the becoming of an unruly composition.” – Gerald Raunig, *Dissemblage*

Deleuze writes: “The positivity of problems is constituted by the fact of being ‘posited’” (Deleuze 1994, 266). Cvejić argues that this Deleuzian framework of the positivity of problems “offer[s] us an insight into a coextensive parallelism between thinking and the practices of making, performing, and attending the choreographies under question. Thus, the parallelism accounts for their dual status: the problems stem from the very process of creation, [...] and the problems are also *given by* the performances.” (Cvejić 2015, 2). Problems beget problems beget problems...

By positing problems’ ability to generate a “logic of creation” (Cvejić 2015, 25), as well as being, unto themselves, a “method of creation” (Cvejić 2015, 2), Cvejić furthers this notion of parallelism. However, I find this to be, as articulated in the previous section, a more circuitous phenomenon. The problems developed as the method(s) of creation in making, influence the problems perceived as the logic(s) of creation in viewing. This viewing itself subsequently reflects on, and or alters the initial problems employed as the methods of creation – Cvejić later writes:

The invention of the problem by which an Idea operates entails experimentation, the probing of a path in which new compositions of movement and body are differentiated. This experimentation inserts time into the construction of the problem [...] This time could be regarded as a time of learning, which involves unlearning or undoing, ungrounding the knowledge of possibilities that reproduce rather than create new movements, bodies and their relations. Such learning implies “violent” training without a general method, but with a dedication to the problem that, as Deleuze describes, “demand[s] the very transformation of our body and our language.” (Cvejić, 2015, 49).

What I interpret Cvejić to mean here, is that the constructing of the problem requires experimentation in unlearning, undoing, and ungrounding, in order to most precisely formulate and articulate the problem itself. Unlearning is necessary to get to the core of what the problem is, and in dealing with that core problem, new compositions, movements, and relations will be formed – ones that are outside of the makers habitual

predispositions. As Deleuze says: “[The problem] is solved once it is posited and determined, but still objectively persists in the solutions to which it gives rise and from which it differs in kind” (Deleuze 1994, 280). I wonder if the *invention* of the problem, as Cvejić writes, could be additionally thought of as the continuous formulating and articulating of the problem... and this continuous re-formulating, and re-articulating, begets the problem’s newness. In the re-formulation, the previous formulation is undone. Perhaps this unlearning that such a dedication to the search of the problem implies, positions the work towards the unknown... adjusting one’s creative process towards *not* knowing, brings up uncertainty. Uncertainty can feel precarious; precariousness can feel dangerous; and dangerousness can feel “violent”.

This is part of such dedication to the problems – dwelling in the contradictions... (how can I love what I cannot know?) Perhaps this commitment to discomfort in *not* knowing, can actually serve as an antidote to a different kind of violence – the violence produced by certainty, sureness of thoughts and opinions, and the inherently immutable belief that “I know”. Perhaps it is *not* knowing that demands the very transformation of our body and our language. Knowing, whether subtly or overtly, often situates itself in certainty, stuck-ness, and adversity towards transformation. For me, and I’m sure many others, the creative potentiality of the problem lies in the searching, rather than the solving.

2.4. Ocean of Devotion: Crossing(s) to Nature Theater of Oklahoma

“Returned to the sea, all waters lose their names. In becoming sea not only the proper name is lost, but also the possibility of locating, naming, and attributing individuals. The name of the soul loses its meaning when she flows into the sea of love.” – Gerald Raunig, *Dissemblage*

The works that Cvejić undertakes to analyze were created by notable European choreographers from the contemporary dance field – Xavier Le Roy, Eszter Salamon, Boris Charmatz, Mette Ingvartsen, etc. – Cvejić notes that she accompanied several of the artist’s choreographic processes as a dramaturg, and or, was quite familiar with the artists’ work through her continued presence as a passionate audience member to it. This elicits a curiosity in me on the relationship between scholarship and familiarity. It is often the case that when writing about artistic work – that which is not necessarily one’s own – there is a pull towards discussing works that one is, at least, relatively close in proximity to. Perhaps there is a question as to what one feels entitled, or allowed, to write about?

Or rather, what one feels legitimately capable of writing about, in a way that would be meaningful for others to read? Or, perhaps a third option – that writing is, no matter how scholastic or theoretical, a practice of devotion... and being devoted to finding the most accurate, most precise language in describing what we love – however inadequate and flawed we feel the system of language to be – is more fulfilling...and maybe, more important. I say all of this to preface that I too will discuss work with which I am quite familiar, because I find it to be useful in conversation with Cvejić's formulation of problems as a method of creation, and because, the work itself, is profoundly close to my heart.

I started working as a performer in the dance theater company Nature Theater of Oklahoma in 2016, through which I became deeply aware of, and dedicated to (in the context of my own work), the creative potentiality of assessing, acknowledging, dealing with, and transform-alizing internal / external – problems. Every NTO project deals directly with the specific problems encountered within each arrangement of conditions – both in the making of the work, and in the performing of it. Because these problems and circumstances are never the same, and because the work is born out of the encounter with said problems, NTO's nonidentifiable, slippery, shapeshifting between genres/form quality, is maintained. A la the work that comes out of it, the company itself problematizes the very categories that the discourses of contemporary dance are built upon, evoking such questions as ... wait... are they American, or European? Is it dance, or is it theater? Don't they also make movies? Are they prewar historical avant-garde or postwar Neo-Avantgarde? Is it like, classical or is it contemporary? Professional or amateur? Is 'Nature Theater of Oklahoma' a Kafka reference, or are they just from Oklahoma?

Whether it's a symptom of having worked with them for almost a decade, or these kinds of questions pre-existed within my own self-consciousness as a maker – I do not know. But it has become so that I deal with these same frictions, (problems?), tensions, and inquiries around location, form, historical influence, and reference in my own life – and therefore, in my own work.

2.5. North America & Europe: Symbiosis & Dialectic

*“And why not – whatever despair we may feel concerning resurrection and reassemblage – find comic relief in the human determination to assert wholeness in that face of inevitable decay and fragmentation?” – Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption**

In articulating the relationship between North American and European contemporary dance, Cvejić brings Judson Dance Theater into the discussion, stating:

The European choreographic practices of the last two decades in focus here acknowledge some heritage of the Neo-Avantgarde of the 1960s, (Judson), but also distance themselves politically by probing the conventions of theater within the institution itself (Spångberg 2001, and Le Roy, Nachbar, and Spångberg 2001). Their political ‘ambition’ lies in critically and experimentally examining the ideological effects exerted by the socioeconomic consensus of contemporary capitalism on the theatrical apparatus of representation. (Cvejić 2015, 10).

Cvejić furthers this notion more specifically in a later chapter, stating that the aforementioned choreographer’s work: “fully resided in the institutional framework of theater, yet it incorporated the historical experience of Neo-Avantgarde performance art, which renounced theater and theatricality in the name of the everyday and art-into-life... but their decisive difference lies in their readmittance of institutional support to reconfigure the experiment” (Cvejić 2015, 96). In their own way, NTO also accepted this readmittance of institutional support to reconfigure the artistic project of the 1960s Neo-Avantgarde. However, given the half American-ness of the work, it was maybe more of an admittance rather than a *readmittance*, (institutional support in the U.S, like the “American Dream” itself, is mythology, and becoming increasingly more so by the day). NTO has worked primarily within European institutional frameworks for the past 15 years, inside of which they have also critiqued the theatrical apparatus of representation in relation to capitalism. But both in being marked with – and maintaining, using to their advantage – slight outsider status, their critique itself takes on a more unruly, vaudevillian...American flavor. One that does, in a manner I think only Americans can, pay deep tribute to, and make glorious fun of, the 1960s and 70s Neo-Avantgarde lineage.

It is perhaps additionally worth mentioning that because NTO choreographer and director Pavol Liška was born and grew up under communism in former Czechoslovakia, whereas co-director Kelly Copper was born in Florida, the forms and aesthetics that their work embodies, especially in their own “experimental examination of the socioeconomic

consensus of contemporary capitalism” (Cvejić 2015, 10), are simultaneously deeply informed by, and irreverent towards, Eastern Bloc communism and U.S. hyper capitalism... western Europe itself being positioned in the middle of these two polarities.

2.6. Pavol Liška, Problems, and Aesthetics of Practical Solutions

*“Mysticism lives on as aesthetic experience. Mystical practices of inspired reading and interpretation are rewritten as a form of poetic self-fashioning and world making.” – Simon Critchley, *Mysticism**

I asked Pavol Liška about his relationship to the notion of problems as a method of creation, most prominently his working phrase, “problem solving builds aesthetics”. (It’s important to note that for the remainder of this writing, those whom I refer to that I have direct contact / a relationship with, I call by their first name.)

KN: *Where does the phrase ‘problem solving builds aesthetics’ come from?*

PL: The words I often use when describing the work of Nature Theater of Oklahoma are “aesthetics of practical solutions” – (from which the actionable phrase, problem solving builds aesthetics comes from). The concept would not, and could not, have occurred to me at the start of my work, when one usually invents in a vacuum, looks for inspiration and great “original” ideas in, paradoxically, either other, successful artists, or in one’s own limited biography, which both are inevitably unrelated to the actual material circumstances available for creating work. This causes a lot of frustration, and a young artist is distraught that she won’t be able to produce the kind of work that artists she admires are making because she doesn’t have the same resources. This was certainly the case in the early years of NTO, a lot of bemoaning our lack of funding, permanent space, technical equipment, etc. In other words, we focused on what we didn’t have and allowed it to defeat us, to the point of quitting. I didn’t make live work for four years and was firmly resolved that I would never return to it. The problems I had to solve to make theater were uninteresting, and about 80% of them had nothing to do with art. In the interim, I was introduced to and fell in love with the works and artistic practices of the New York avant-garde filmmakers of the 1960s and 70s like Jack Smith, Mike and George Kuchar, Ken Jacobs, even Andy Warhol, and so on, who all worked with no money, -- at least at first in Andy’s case - - stolen or borrowed equipment and film, used their apartments as sets, or the streets, no permissions, and yet their work was epic and ambitious, rigorous and undismissible. It was from them that I learned to stop thinking about what I don’t have, what I’d like to have, but only about what I do have when conceiving a new work. I now, decades later, first make an inventory of all the available resources, identify what the actual problems are, and the project becomes about solving those problems using the resources at hand. These problems are never hypothetical, invented, divorced from the world where I make the work, but always practical, and me trying to solve them is also my response to the world I have to live in. Hence the “aesthetics of practical solutions”.

It is an important thread that Pavol picks up on regarding the problems, (lack space, materials, money), that the New York avant-garde artists he mentions faced with...a thread that is somewhat omitted from the fabric of Cvejić's investigation, who writes: "Judson Dance Theater, contested theater under the principle of fusing art and life or temporarily abandoned it for other ideologically or physically more suitable performance sites – galleries, or the street, and other sites of everyday life" (Cvejić 2015, 96). It was not some kind of conceptual, ideological shift towards the "fusing of art and life" that caused 60s / 70s New York artists to start making work on the street. Rather, if there was some kind of ideological shift, it was due to the fact that there was no other option, no support, institutional or otherwise, and no extra money to fund your art stuff because it's all going to the cost of your apartment... well, if you still wanna' make work, sounds like you gotta' use that apartment to do it...cause that's what you have. And if someone's making their art in their bedroom, not as some kind of abstract artistic statement on private space and dreaming, but simply because there is nowhere else to do it, how could the fusing of art and life *not* happen? The problems were practical. And the artistic solutions that were created in response to these problems – as Deleuze says they are wont to do – transformed the nature(s) of the problems themselves. Perhaps these problems did then become ideological, but only through the genuine dealing with, working on, and attempting to solve them – practically.

While Cvejić's analyses are constructed from a deeply theoretical, scholarly, formally choreographic lens, Pavol brings into play not only the artistic problems that one starts from in terms of how to create new compositions, but also, the problems one is actually facing in one's life – the personal, political, material and mystical situations, frictions, circumstances, and conditions that are always actively affecting the creation of a work...perhaps most prominently: Why do I need to do this? And how am I going to do this, when there seems to be no viable path for me to do this? While Cvejić referred to the "The invention of problem by which an Idea operates" (Cvejić, 2015 49), Pavol articulates that the problems he works with, and from, are never invented – but always practical.

2.7. Theory of Practice, Practicing Theory

“Mystical experience without theology is blind. Mystical theology without experience is empty. [...] We must see experience and theology as mutually informing each other and encouraging ever-greater feats of conceptual imagination and affective depth.” – Simon Critchley, *Mysticism*

Within the scope of her analyses, Cvejić problematizes on why choreographic performance, (from the western dance theater context), is so often approached as a fleeting act, an object of momentous occurrence, rather than as a transformation process that occurs in and out of duration (Cvejić 2015, 25). She furthers this view by noting that choreography is, almost always:

approached from a unitary perspective, as being one with the live event and not diverging into three versions of the same work synthesized from the distinct viewpoints of maker, performer, and spectator. The differences in views, processes, and experiences between maker, performer, and spectator are relegated to matters of difference in experience, [...] but they remain exterior or subordinated to the kind of performance representation as well as the theater institution deploy mechanisms to unify or subsume the different activities and faculties of making, performing, and being a spectator of performance under the act of respect to its terminus, or objective – the live event – and reception is framed by the various functions of the theatrical apparatus [...] that conditions the live event. In sum, performance entails that making and performing, performing and attending performance be bound up with one another or synthesized into the event. (Cvejić 2015, 23)

I find this quote extremely relevant, in the sense that choreographic composition entails relentless attention to all three realms: making, performing, and attending. Cvejić inquires on the live event itself here, noting that the distinct categories of maker, performer, and spectator are almost always subsumed by it, and subordinate to it. When really, these three categories: “are three differential structures that condition the genesis of performance in three divergent temporalities and processes” (Cvejić 2013, 24). I am in full support of theoretically detangling and analyzing the live event, through the knowledge systems and temporalities produced by each specific modality. I too will go through my own process of distancing and detangling these modalities shortly. After separating, examining, and reflecting on them as the different, specific entities that they are, perhaps their entangled nature within the live event can take on a different tonality – in practice. Perhaps the live event of a choreographic performance, is an oscillation between disentanglement and entanglement, between the singularity of each modality, and the interrelated nature of all three of them...

2.8. Making, Performing, Attending Choreography

“For all our life consists of three” – Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love

Cvejić notes the important distinctions between these categories of making, performing, and attending – the bizarre love triangle that they are – However, these three categories *can*, and often do, blur within both the live event of a choreographic performance, and within the choreographic creation process (which also takes place through the course of many live events: rehearsals, meetings, crying on the phone to friends.) Sometimes, being the choreographer in a rehearsal can feel like the ultimate performance...sometimes the greatest choreographic proposals and contributions come from the performers themselves... and sometimes, it's unclear who is actually performing for who... the performers for the audience? Or the audience for the performers? Or both? Making, performing, and attending are not such fixed, rigid, definitive categories; each one of these words is predisposed to varying amounts of malleability, indeterminacy, and open-endedness... throughout a live event, you can transform into one, then shapeshifting into another, sometimes consciously, at other times, unconsciously. That's what makes any of this stuff fun! The transformational, ecstatic nature of it all, the potential to exist outside of oneself, outside of whatever one *thinks* one is, if only for a few moments within the live event(s) itself. Perhaps these categories of making, performing, and attending are more like dispositions, modes of perception, states of consciousness that are subject to, and maybe even dependent upon, change...?

2.9. A Fleeting Duration

“Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade. Often, when faded, their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory; but when they recur it is recognized; and from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development.” – William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience

Cvejić articulates that performance is better approached as a transformation process rather than as a fleeting act. This “locates the genesis of performance in process and duration, in the nexus of different time dimensions that making, performing, and attending possess, rather than in an act whose meaning transcends or lies outside of duration” (Cvejić 2015, 25). For sure! Both process *and* performance take place in the transformational, processual, ongoing-ness of live events themselves. A choreographic performance is

created through a durational series of live events, and it is performed by, and in, a durational series of live events. The performance is just another live event within the choreographic process – composed of and through, live events. Still, I wonder, could there be any value – aside from the monetary aims of each respective category, the performance being the terminus, or objective, for everyone involved to be paid for what they’ve done, or receive something in return for what they’ve paid for – of viewing performance, additionally, *as* a fleeting, momentous act? Could there be something positive in viewing live performance as a fleeting act outside of duration, where all three positions are subsumed, by the live event itself? Could there be some part of us that wants, or even needs this subsumption? And could this subsumption itself, *be* a transformation process?

What I hope to communicate through the durational, devotional process that is this writing, is that a live choreographic performance *is* a transformation process, which *should* be viewed as a fleeting, momentous act. That this “nexus” of the different time dimensions, (of making, performing, and attending), is a porous, transmutable one, and it is created / co-composed within the context(s) of the live event(s)... both the ones leading up to the performance, and the performance itself. And, that the wonder, sacredness, success and failure, agony and ecstasy, problem and solution that is a choreographic performance, comes from the sheer fact that it both occurs in and through duration – *and* – that it ends. That it is a fleeting momentous act – a la the live event that is one’s life.

Life... which exists as a durational process of transformation(s)...and is impermanent, fleeting...with an ending. Duration, according to Deleuze, is endowed with “the power of qualitatively varying with itself” (Deleuze 1988, 31). From this, it could be construed that the end – whether it’s the end of a performance, or the end of a life – is a qualitative variation on what that performance/life *was* before... prior to the variation that is its ending. So, in this case, yes: the end of a life, and the end of a performance, are just additional, qualitative variations within each respective *durational* process.

But maybe a live choreographic performance – most particularly, its end – is not only a qualitative variation with itself. Perhaps it is, (if we choose to consider it as such), a practice. A practicing...of the unpractice-able: that which is the big, (biggest?)

qualitative variation within the durational process that is our life. We cannot experience our own death – until we do. What we can experience, is a performance’s end – the end of that particular live event – in contrast to the ongoing sequence of live event(s) that is: our life. We experience a performance’s end instead of our own, through which, we practice *the* end. Until of course, we don’t. It is a durational practice – a part of the whole, of fleetingness.

In author Priya Parker’s book “The Art of Gathering”, she begins with a simple question, “Why do we gather?” She responds: “We gather to solve problems that we cannot solve on our own” (Parker 2018, 1). Perhaps in the context of live choreographic performance, these problems that I cannot solve on my own – the ones for which I need to gather – have to do with such things: endings, durations, parts, and wholes. It is, I suspect, why I needed to write about them as well...so that you and I could, dear reader, gather here on these pages. Albeit at different times, in different places, with different realities... but still... hi ☺

2.9.1. Postscriptum: Problematics of Mysticism, A Summation through Contradiction

Critchley states: “In mysticism, it is contradiction that has to be lived.” Perhaps this can serve as a frame for the contradictory, problematic nature of the live event that I’ve described: It is a transformational process of duration, *and* a fleeting act which ends, and should be approached as both. It is a part of a larger whole, but each part *is* a whole, unto itself. Perhaps live choreographic performance could be approached as both, the oscillation of both, as the inhale of duration and the exhale of fleeting. (And vice versa). It is this very alive contradiction that constitutes it as a *live* event, and through the experiencing of this live event, contradiction is live(d). Medieval scholar Caroline Walker Bynum writes on this notion of contradiction through the medieval, mystical framework of objects: “the power of the object lies, not so much in indexicality, as in the *paradox* of what we might call ‘dissimilar similitude’”. (Bynum 2020, 10). Bynum articulates how the material (earthly) and the spiritual (divine) — were thought of as similar, but not identical in the conception of medieval mystics, and that mystics themselves employed such metaphorical, contradictory, paradoxical language in order to bridge this gap. The object as a dissimilar similitude, means that the object both is, and is not – something. It

is what it is because it is what it is not. The Eucharist both is and is not God. Incense is a burning stick – and the rising up of a prayer. Perhaps making, performing, and attending are simply that: dissimilar similitudes. That they are, in what they are, similar to what they are not. And performance itself? Similar to life... but not identical.

An excerpt from an email to my dear friend, writer and performer Jake Levy:

March 9th, 2025: I still haven't really written anything to you about my thesis -- but maybe it's because I'm writing it right now, and it is literally draining me like a vampire, and maybe I just can't write it, and write *about* it at the same time, although who knows maybe that would help? I worked on it for like 12 hours today and feel I just made it worse than it was before. I don't even know if I'm excited about making this show, I think maybe I am, but maybe I'm also afraid or but somehow I've framed the whole thing (secretly, to myself... and now to you) as the staging of my funeral for my death to the art world(s), a la Julian of Norwich's. Part of becoming an anchoress, (which she did become), Is a ceremony in which you receive all the last funeral rites of the dead, then basically you go to pray in the church basement for the rest of your life. So you basically have a funeral for yourself, so you become dead to the living world. But this whole thing is like being dead and alive at once? Dead, (but still alive) to the living world, but in being dead you're alive to the spiritual world because... you're dead, (but you're not) ... Anyway for the past 4 years I've just felt so much like that – this dead and alive at once state, my whole life just unfolding as this paradox but like, a really *felt* paradox? So I guess, idk even if this really is the last show I make, (somehow I'm more able to make it if I frame it as the last one), hopefully it'll at least go out with a party...

3. MAKING: COMPOSITIONAL FRAGMENTS OF THE FAR - NEAR

“Mysticism, then, offers us the history, as old as civilization, of a race of adventurers who have carried to its term the process of a deliberate and active return to the divine fount of things. They have surrendered themselves to the life-movement of the universe...” – Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*

It is certainly worthwhile to distance these dispositions: making, performing, and attending from each other, and ponder them in their own wondrous dissimilar similitude. The kinds of questions I now turn to are that of the compositional; What are the compositional nuances, differences, singularities, and similarities that each of these dispositions possess? How do they influence each other? And, perhaps most prominently, whenever one engages in any of these three dispositions, are they fundamentally, composing?

When we take “composing” at its base definition – that is, “to put together”, we could answer with a resounding – yes! All three of these dispositions inevitably engage in some kind of putting together, most explicitly in a performance itself – which inherently puts together all three dispositions in one space and time. But this begs a second question: in order to compose, does one have to be conscious of the fact that one *is* composing? Or, is composition happening with one, through one...regardless of said entity’s awareness of it? These questions will snake through the remainder of this writing – sometimes lurking quietly in the periphery, coiling around themselves; sometimes rearing their heads, demanding to be looked at. And sometimes, we’ll hear them hissing in the spaces between words, sections, fragments...reminding us of their mystical, compositional presence. I’ll discuss these three compositional dispositions, making, performing, and attending through the writings of Kirsi Monni (making), Jenn Joy (performing), and Isabel Lewis’s choreographic work (attending).

3.1. Kirsi Monni’s Ontological Premises of Composition

“We know of mysticism through operatio, the act of composition” – Simon Critchley, *Mysticism*

According to choreographer, researcher, and professor in choreography Kirsi Monni 2015 article, “Considering the ontological premises for tools in artists’ education—on poiesis and composition”, composition itself refers to, and relies on, the manner in which it is composed. The actual putting of the things together – I move the cup of coffee on my table closer to the nail polish – is both the act of composing, and the way in which composition emerges. Monni highlights that when it comes to the creation of choreographic work specifically, composition is unavoidable; it’s always there, whether we acknowledge it be or not. “Differently composed is still composed” (Monni 2015, 7).

In contextualizing what she means by poiesis, Monni turns to philosopher Miika Luoto’s reading of Plato: “he [Luoto] starts with Plato’s statement that ‘any cause that brings into existence something that was not there before’ is poiesis. This means simply that there is poiesis every time something comes from non-being to being” (Monni 2015, 5). This provokes Monni to inquire – what kinds of ‘causes’, bring into existence something that was not there before? Following Heidegger’s reading of Aristotle, Monni describes the four causes of: matter, form, telos, (the end), and the considerations of the maker, as the four causes responsible for the emergence of poiesis – but more importantly, it is the *interplay* of these four causes, the putting together of them, that results in the act of poiesis. This interplay serves as the base from which Monni develops her view on composition, which she regards as: “togetherness-in-relatedness”.

She articulates that this view on composition is additionally derived from Heidegger’s elaborations on logos: “logos is letting something be seen in its togetherness with something – letting it be seen as something.” (Monni, Heidegger 1962, 56). It is the inter-relatedness of the four causes that allows for something to be seen as something – in its togetherness. How the causes are related in any given composition, how the artist *considers* the causes’ relatedness, and in which manner the artist *chooses* to relate to their relatedness – or not – are all features of any compositional process. Monni writes: “I see that, in every composition, there is a certain relatedness of the causes to which the composition is indebted” (Monni 2015, 7).

3.2. The Composition of the Four Causes

“It [medieval mysticism] was a period in which the overcoming of partition and putrefaction occurred either through reunion of parts into a whole, or through assertion of part as part to be the whole.” – Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*

Monni highlights the compositional nature of these four causes themselves, by noting the fact that the maker, or artist, or “composing subject” (Monni 2015, 7), is positioned as the *fourth* cause – not as the first. The order in which the four causes are delineated produce specific kinds of interpretations, responses that would undoubtedly differ if in fact the four causes were listed in a different order. Monni notes that she enjoys the fact that the artist is positioned as the fourth cause, and not as the first, because: “it recalls the necessity to ponder the material’s own expressivity, meaning the material’s own *togetherness-in-relatedness*, its own *logos*. Each part of the whole is a whole unto itself, and the whole is a composition of parts.

Monni indicates that when the considerations of the artist are positioned as the fourth and final cause, The first three causes become necessities to consider prior; without matter, form, and telos, how can the considerations of the artist really take place? Which is to say, the artist is encouraged, through the syntactical composition of the four causes themselves, to consider form, matter, and telos, before their own artistic affinities. However, in that same vein, because the artist occupies the final position in the four causes composition, could we not postulate as to whether the artist in fact *is* the telos? It is through the artist that the function of poiesis emerges, and the function of poiesis is ultimately in service of the artist. For whom does bringing something into existence that did not exist before, matter to? Perhaps we could say, *at least* the artist – or composing subject – or the person who is carrying out poiesis attempt itself.

When referring to composition specifically, without the artist, the other three causes remain at a distance. They are still legitimate and intrinsically compositional each in their own way, but it is the artist that chooses to synthesize them, to encourage their interplaying towards the creation of an artistic work. Maybe, these four causes are *interplaying* within the world’s infinite, multitudinous creative processes constantly, all the time, all around us; and what artists do, is consider them. These considerations however are highly important, because it is these considerations of the artist that,

according to Monni, distinguish an artwork from a commodity. However, this gives rise to a problem: what exactly *is* an artist?

3.3. The Problem of the Artist: Monni to Grau

“Directly participating, like all artists, in the Divine Life, they [mystics] are usually persons of great vitality: but this vitality expresses itself in unusual forms, hard of understanding [...] But the deep contemplations of the great mystic, her visionary reconstructions of reality, and the fragments of them which she is able to report, do not seem to us — as they are — the equivalents, or more often the superiors of the artistic and scientific achievements of other great artists.” – Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*

Throughout Monni’s article these three characters of the maker, the artist, and the composing subject are used, and I find myself thinking about the subtle differences between these terms. Perhaps Monni provides the articulation of the “composing subject” as an alternative to those of artist and maker, which highlights that one does not necessarily need to be or consider oneself an “artist” in order to compose. (this is one of those moments when my earlier questions on composition, those snakes lingering on the sidelines, are hissing... does composition require awareness of the fact that one is composing?)

In critic, scholar, and current head of Contemporary Programmes at the Louvre Donatien Grau’s book *The Age of Creation*, he discusses three revolutions that have occurred in relation to art making: democracy, the market, and the final that he posits as the condition to all the others: the mythology of “the artist”. He states that artists:

[...] are nonetheless seen as transcendent figures. Being a successful artist is generally considered to be socially more gratifying than being a successful lawyer. Why so? Because art deals with limits, and because its whole purpose is to exceed them in order to enlighten the world. It is not by chance that the concept of art – as we post-Romantics see it – was very much forged during the eighteenth century. It is a result of a fusion between a hermeneutic, late eighteenth-century perspective and a Romantic, early nineteenth-century ideal. (Grau 2013, 25)

Of course, Grau himself is speaking from a European, post-Romantic, late capitalist perspective, and if the question “what is art’s purpose?” were to be posed to someone of a radically different positionality, their answer would, potentially, be quite different. Problems emerge for me in response to the words transcendence and success in Grau’s quote – which consequently prompts me to ask: success by who’s definition? What does

it mean to be a successful artist? Rich? Famous? Existentially fulfilled? (Couldn't a successful lawyer also be these things?) And what exactly is it that artists "transcend", for them to be seen as transcendent figures? Society? Consciousness itself? Death? Even if one is remembered as an artist in books, museums, or in the artworks of other artists, the thing is – nobody makes it out alive. This applies to artists just as much as it does to everyone else. (There is an intriguing thread here on the potentially anachronistic quality of "artist" and "mystic" – medieval mystics did not see themselves as mystics. (Critchley 2024, 33). They were deeply devoted, radical, perhaps a bit odd, but often, opposed to and rejected by the ruling hegemony. The category of mystic is projected back through history, to make sense of the phenomena... could the same potentially be said of artists? Did they / do they, see themselves as transcendent figures...? Do I see myself as one?)

However, the word I am most drawn to problematize is "limits"... it's complicated, stickier... regardless of whether artists, as Grau says, are attempting to enlighten the world or not – a notion I do believe artists should personally interrogate for themselves, if only to get closer to the core of what it is one is doing – there is something particularly resonant when putting the two concepts of "artist" and "limit" in conversation with each other. The working definition of poiesis itself speaks to limits, in the sense that the bringing forth of something that did not exist before, implies the crossing of limit or threshold... of all the things that *did* exist before, this new something, at a certain point, did not. But now it does. A limit that was once there has been surpassed.

3.4. The Limits of Artistry: A Turn to Practice

Mysticism is a learning of the practice of unsaying, an unsaying which must continually and excessively be said, and which, by saying more, says less. – Simon Critchley, *Mysticism*

Later in this same chapter, Grau quotes curator and museum director Klaus Bisenbach, who at this time was still employed as chief curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art. "There is no such thing as contemporary art anymore. There are contemporary practices" Bisenbach stated. (Grau 2013, 27).

It is a provocative statement from the head curator of one of the most famous art museums in the world, that in fact, the very thing housed in the museum he curates, doesn't exist anymore. However, this generates a series of additionally stimulating problems, most

notably what this quote implies about limits. Have we reached the limit of contemporary art? And is practice the new limit? This proves to be additionally problematic, seeing as practice quite quickly denotes a continual, (unlimited?) doing. I am aware that this opens the door to an entire discourse on the practice turn in artmaking (Boon, Levine 2018) – however, for the purposes of this thesis, we won't go through that door entirely – perhaps it's enough to just leave it cracked and peer through it.

If in fact there is no such thing as contemporary art anymore, do artists now exclusively produce practices? If each performance created by a choreographer were to be viewed *not* as a production of a contemporary work of art, but as a production of contemporary practices, what kind of experiences would be generated for makers, performers, and attenders? Practice itself does connote a kind of duration – the very thing Cvejić wishes was more prominent in the conception of performance. But when applying the premise of poiesis to this notion of contemporary practice – what would the differences be between poiesis of an artwork, and poiesis of a practice? Is it a question of differing temporalities? which one is ...longer? Or does it have something to do with the four causes themselves? To me, the poiesis of practice would mean an elimination of the third cause – the telos. The end. Because, by its very nature, practice is ongoing... it doesn't *really* have an end – until, of course, the person who practices ends. If we follow my line of thought from section 2.2, where I speculate on artists themselves *as* the telos... would this elimination of the telos equate to the elimination *of the* artists themselves, in a poiesis of practice? When I think of the proliferation(s) as to what a practice could be – walking as a practice, smoking cigarettes as a practice, journaling as a practice, shopping as a practice – does one really need to be an artist to practice any of these things? Or, does it simply mean that what an artist is, is someone who believes and treats these things as practices? what is an artist? Someone who sees a practice... *as* a practice?

3.5. Life as a Work of Art

“In the same cloud is a very great number of the blessed having all the spirits of life. No one can count them up.” – Hildegard of Bingen, *Secrets of God*

Within the first two paragraphs of his book, Grau cites Zygmunt Bauman's *The Art of Life*:

The sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman suggests that living is an art in its own right – that the title idiom [The Art of Life] is in fact an actuality. The text raises critical issues: “The proposition ‘life is a work of art’ is not a postulate or an admonition (of the ‘try to make your life beautiful, harmonious, sensible and full of meaning – just as painters try to make their paintings, or musicians their compositions’ kind), but a statement of fact. (Grau 2013, 13)

So if one’s life is certifiably a work of art...well... would this not denote that everyone is, by default, an artist? Grau goes on to articulate that Bauman’s statement, “goes against 200 years – others might say 2,500 years – of European art history” (Grau 2013, 13), and that it contradicts several major dimensions of normative post-Romantic definitions of art – the most relevant one here being: “art is created by artists” (Grau 2013, 13). What Grau means by this is that if, as Bauman says, life truly is a work of art – whether one considers their life to be a work of art or not – we can no longer say that art is created exclusively by artists. This is because there are many people, who are actively making the work of art that is their life – whether they view it as such or not – that do not identify as artists in the slightest.

There are slight differences between Grau’s interpretation of Bauman – “living is an art in its own right” – and Bauman’s proposition itself – “life is a work of art.” This gets into deeply semantic territory... This distinction between art as a work, which is to say, a thing, an object, an entity unto itself produced by someone or something, and art as an active mode of being, a tool one uses in order to do something *artfully*, a la The Art of War (Sun Tzu), The Art of Loving (Erich Fromm), or, The Art of Gathering (Priya Parker). What does it mean to engage with these things as art? Does it mean to do them creatively? Precisely? Cunningly? As a practice? Or does it simply mean to do them as an artist would? What would it mean to do something as an artist vs. as a non-artist?

3.6. The "Art Of" ...

*“A good number of mystical texts. [...] take the form of ‘how to’ books – manuals full of instructions, rules, and exhortations.” – Simon Critchley, *Mysticism**

If aforementioned Priya Parker were to have titled her book just “Gathering” sans “The Art of”, perhaps we could expect a book about what gathering is, what it means to gather, and the similarities and differences between various kinds of gatherings. What changes when the art of precedes the gathering? For me, this “art of” prompts a shift in my

expectation; I now think the book will be not only about gatherings themselves, but about *how to* gather. There is an instructional, practical sounding quality to “the art of” ... and a different kind of expertise that I expect the author to have, meaning that the author must have some level of practical knowledge or hands-on experience with gathering. I think of Heidegger’s 1935 lecture *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in which he states: “The work arises out of and by means of the activity of the artist. But by what and whence is the artist what he is? By the work” (Heidegger 1935, 143).

When the title is considered in full, that is, “The Art of Gathering”, I expect to learn about gathering itself, how to gather, and additionally – perhaps problematically – how to gather “better” than I was gathering before. In new ways. I think back to the statement of Grau’s: art deals with limits, and its whole point is to exceed them. In an age when art and market have become inextricably intertwined, to the point where it's almost impossible to discuss one without the other (Grau 2013), it is difficult to deny that when we discuss contemporary art, the words “more”, “different”, and “new” – all of which deal with limits – are often quick to follow. It’s true, in the sense that when I read “the art of” before any other words, I assume I will learn how to participate in said phenomenon even better, deeper, with more skill or efficiency. Or it will reveal different, more knowledgeable approaches to the topic, formerly unbeknownst to me. So...What is an artist? Someone who deals with limits. And someone concerned not only with what, but with how.

3.7. Constructional Elements of Art and Life’s Composition(s)

“Mystical states merely add a super-sensuous meaning to the ordinary outward data of consciousness.” – William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience

Monni offers an additionally complexifying point to this discussion in relation to her account of the constructional elements of composition:

By the constructional elements of composition, I mean such concepts as motive, repetition, variation, contrast, proportion, balance and transition. As I see it, these constructional elements are originally abstractions from the way our consciousness recognizes and organizes our everyday being-in-the-world. I mean that everyday life emerges as perceived and recognized motives (targets of attention, identified things), patterns (collections of things, temporal and spatial structures), repetitions, variations, contrasts and transitions. We understand when and how a transition from one thing to

another happens; we perceive and recognize a change and a difference. (Monni 2015, 8)

If we take Monni's constructional elements of composition as being fundamental to the way consciousness works, perhaps it's true that art is not only created by artists. Maybe, art is created by simply living, all different forms and shapes of living, and what artists do is merely highlight, intensify, abstract, underline, reimagine, this already existing art. Perhaps poesis can emerge not only from the attempting to bring forth something that did not exist before... but by paying attention to that which is already here... and then making choices. What is an artist? Curious about the world in which they live.

Both Monni and Bauman, albeit through slightly different angles, seem to reach somewhat similar conclusions: Life is already compositional in nature. From Monni's perspective, it is the abstraction of life's pre-existing compositional elements that are foundational to any work of art; however, in claiming this abstraction, she upholds the distinction between life and composition, and by extension, an artwork. Bauman on the other hand collapses the distance between art and life entirely, claiming that life *can't not* be a work of art, if it is in fact a human life – the life of a being endowed with will and freedom of choice. “Will and choice leave their imprint on the shape of life, in spite of all and any attempts to deny their presence and/or to hide their power by ascribing the casual role to the overwhelming pressure of external forces that impose ‘I must’ where ‘I will’ should have been, and so narrow the scale of plausible choices” (Bauman 2008, 52).

Bauman asserts that even amidst the constraints that external forces impose upon our choice-making abilities, we are always shaping our life through our will and choices, even though at certain moments, we potentially wish we weren't. Sometimes, the fact that I am inescapably responsible for at least *some* of the shape of my life is already too much to bear. On the other hand, this can serve as comforting reminder that one always has the ability, even when one feels overcome by the external forces that narrow our scale of plausible choices, to compose – composition as a form of agency, even on the smallest, seemingly insignificant details. I move my cup of coffee closer to the toothpicks, the bottle of orange juice, and the post-it notes on my table. I turn the coffee cup, so the handle frames the toothpicks. (I think to myself, “portrait of a thesis process.”) Something happens. A thought emerges in response to my compositional choice. Maybe composition

offers us a pathway to change our circumstances ever so slightly, and to notice how those changes resonate back to oneself and the environment we're inhabiting. Through composition, I create a feedback loop between me and the world. Or, to refer back to the Deleuzian problem: I respond to a problem compositionally, and I change the composition of the problem itself.

This agency, this making of compositional choices can re-inspire or re-configure my relationship to the world(s) outside of me, the world(s) within me, and perhaps the severity of those external forces – the ones that impose 'I must' when I would prefer to say, 'I will' – softens, if only for a few moments. Maybe, composition is a modality through which one can practice life. The choices I make within the frame of an artistic composition, can reveal to me the potentiality I have to creatively compose other parts of my life as well. I am reminded of a phrase that was said to me by performance artist and professor Karen Finley, at what was a particularly painful moment of my life. "Why make art anymore?" I asked her. "Because sometimes, life is too much, and sometimes, it's not enough", she said. Composition as a means to deal with the too-much-ness of life, and the not-enough-ness of life... practically.

3.8. From Poiesis to Life and Back Again

"The franchise of Porete's Mirouer is not freedom of the will, but radical liberation from the will." – Gerald Raunig, *Dissemblage*

If we were to apply the premise of poiesis from Monni to Bauman, would it not indicate that life itself is an act of poiesis? That with each decision we make, with each choice to move in a certain direction or not, we are inherently bringing forth an existence, a life, that did not exist before. The interplay of the four causes is still relevant here, due to the fact that the four causes themselves simultaneously exist *within* us. Human beings have matter and form (flesh), telos in the sense that this flesh – at least in this particular form – eventually, will reach its end. And, if we follow Bauman, we are all continuously shaping, making, creating our lives through our choice-making processes. It is the interplay of these four causes within us that actually makes us, us ... ever changing, ever evolving, bringing forth a new reality each day that did not exist before, because today is different than yesterday, and tomorrow will be different from today... and so on and so forth. In the same way that what distinguishes the artwork from the commodity are the

considerations of the artist, perhaps what distinguishes the inevitable work of art that is a life, from the *intentional* work of art that is a life, is just that – intention. This is not to say that one can or should be intentional all the time, but rather it is the awareness of the capabilities of intention that matter. Perhaps, one is always composing. But composing practically, is composing with the awareness that one is *composing*.

3.9. The Artist's World(s)

*“Mysticism becomes the basis for a cosmopoiesis, a world making, where mind and nature poetically converge. It no longer intimacy with Christ but poetry that gives a heightened, broadened, ecstatic experience of self and world.” – Simon Critchley, *Mysticism**

In Monni's upholding of the distinction between life and composition, she states that:

In the interplay of the four causes, it becomes evident that the act of poiesis, the creation of the work, is not about and of the artist but of the world which speaks through the creative process of the artist. How the artist perceives the potentialities and materialities of reality and their relatedness informs all phases of the composition process. But it is the matter not only of the perceiving subject but also of how the world speaks to us in the composition process, how the world dispossesses and exposes us to what needs to be thought of and what calls to be composed anew. (Monni 2015, 7-8).

I find this to be a particularly meaningful formulation in several ways. The first being that Monni inadvertently brings the discourse of apophatic mysticism, or negative mysticism, into frame. By framing the act of poiesis as *not* about and of the artist, but rather, as the world speaking through the creative process of the artist – a creation is thus able to be brought forth. Monni indicates that the artist's creative process becomes a kind of vessel, or conduit, through which the world speaks.

However, even within negative mysticism, the person, the one who is trying to eliminate, deny, or negate themselves in order to get closer to God, can never truly escape the core problem: that the living, breathing, corporeal being with thoughts and feelings, which constitutes what and who they are... cannot be eliminated. There is, as long as they live, an impenetrable distance between themselves and God...and in many ways, this is precisely the point. It is in the trying, in the attempting, in the doing of such self-negation practices – through which God comes closer. All the while knowing that total self-negation is, actually, impossible. But it is a holy impossibility.

The singular being – the mixture (milkshake) of personal and political experiences, corporeal and metaphysical knowledge, history, problems, solutions, hopes and dreams, preferences, and biases – that they, and *only* they possess...is what the world is filtered and speaks through. There is no removing positionality. It is always a matter of how the perceiving subject experiences the world, because this dictates the *kind* of world that speaks through them. Which is to say, there are as many singular experiences of the world as there are singular people – and it is that person's *specific* world, which speaks through that person's *specific* creative process, that allows for a creation to be brought forth. This is not to say that the work then is definitively about them, but maybe, it is *of* them. It is *their* world which speaks through them – not *the* world. But perhaps through *their* world, we can have access to, or catch a small glimpse at, *the* world. The problem that is the person's world, meets with the multiplicity of solutions that is: the person. They continuously shape each other through this meeting, through this friction – from which poesis of artwork(s), practice(s), emerge. *The* world reveals itself to be what it is, through *their* world. Deleuze's framework is useful here – maybe, the problem that is the world, expresses itself through the multiplicity of solutions...that are people.

3.9.1. Postscriptum: Mystical Composition

In her book *Fragmentation and Redemption*, Caroline Walker Bynum writes of female mystics practicing a "mixed life" [...] they understood the meaning of their lives to be such a profound combination of action and contemplation that the contrast between the categories vanishes" (Bynum 2012, 69). What I am moved by in this quote, is the emphasis on both the radicalism, and temperance, of these women. It is not that these categories of action and contemplation themselves vanish; it is the contrast *between* them that vanishes. One is still active in contemplation, and contemplative in action. In light of all that was said on the nature of composing, whether one needs to be aware of if they are composing or not, life as a work of art or art as an abstraction of life... what if we considered artists to be those practicing a mixed life? Whether this mixing comes from considering the interrelated, interplay of the four causes and how they mix into a choreographic work, or from mixing beats together on soundcloud, or mixing cake batter for your child's birthday party...there is a mixed life unfolding, between thinking and doing. Perhaps practicing a mixed life in the arts would mean to practice life in art, and to practice art in life. What I mean here is not in reference to the fusing of art and life

discourse of the 60s NeoAvantgarde, but rather, the cultivation of a more mystical approach to art making. As philosopher William James wrote over one hundred years ago, “We are alive or dead to the eternal inner messages of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility” (James 1982, 383). I cannot speak to art’s whole purpose, or the eternal inner messages of arts – nor do I want to. All I can speak to is how today, right now, my interests and excitements within artmaking are taking shape – that which is helping me... It is this mystical, mixed approach. Practicing art in life, and practicing life in art. What is an artist? A mystic.

Steel Prayer: A Poem

After –

It alternates – sweetbitter.

I’m not sure about those things that I cared about I –

Talking to myself in hope – something – that something else,

Something I’ve forgotten will surface and swallow –

If I haven’t remembered... it will hit hard.

More lucid, less dream-like...

Ever-gyrating in yearn, it’s strange...

The half-dead part of me does not fear.

It’s the living part that knows –

If I move this then this, then this this this, to this,

Put together: in to or back from Ikea.

“Reality as a thing seen by the mind,

Not that which is but that which is apprehended”

That which is – that which is not.

Dear coffee cup, my audience of one,

We both get cold.

4. PERFORMING: THROUGH-FORM-ING

“Mysticism is a style, a set of practices, a way of acting that is self-authorizing. Mysticism is performative. It is a certain form of writing and speaking which does not just record experience, but also produces experience, new forms of experience that might not have been previously lived.”
– Simon Critchley, *Mysticism*

In taking up Cvejić’s second component of the live event – performing – a continual question thread begins to weave itself into the discussion: how does form emerge? As per usual when I’m faced with starting points, I turn to etymology. Performing: from Latin *performo*, “to form thoroughly”, and Old French *parfournir*, from *par* ‘through, to completion’ + *fournir* ‘furnish, provide’. In the etymology itself we see the notion of an end, of finitude – perhaps a compounding factor towards Cvejić arguing for performance as a transformational process of duration – completion, not ongoing-ness, is rooted in the concept of performance itself. But perhaps as an initial response to this question, how does form emerge? *Through* form *ing* – through the active making, carving, assembling, formulating, articulating, re-formulating, re-articulating... through *practicing* forming. As the late artist Louise Bourgeois states: “I do, I undo, I redo.” (Zambreno 2017, 103).

4.1. Joy-ing

“To be joyed – to face the extremity of being, which is to say at once its completion and its limit, beyond desire or short of it. This is joy, and this also reflects on the essence of chagrin and pain. For joy is not appeasement, but a serenity without rest. To joy is not to be satisfied – it is to be filled, overflowed.” – Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*

I turn now to scholar and dance theorist Jenn Joy. In her 2014 book *The Choreographic*, Joy argues through careful readings of philosophers, sci-fi writers, dancers, and choreographers, that “the choreographic” is not only a critical discursive force, but always already explicitly social, historical, and political. Still, it’s important to acknowledge, that even when the choreographic *is* employed as a critical discursive force, that force itself is never neutral, but rather already embedded with certain social/historical/political ideologies, biases, and tendencies. Joy writes: “Perhaps choreography invites a rethinking of orientation in relationship to space, to language, to composition, to articulation, and to ethics. 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” (Joy 2014, 1).

When putting this quote in relation to Bauman's decisive comment regarding the consequential imprints that will and choice make on the shape of one's life, something (a problem?) emerges. What if we engaged this will and these choices not only artistically – as Bauman suggests is anyway, already happening – but specifically choreographically? What happens when we view our individual will, and our individual choices in relation to another? Quite early on, Joy references Judith Butler's notion of the precarious state, inside of which, “‘demands that come from elsewhere’ reach out to the world and structure the very possibility of discourse and dissent” (Joy 2014, 1). This is not dissimilar from Bauman's articulation of the external forces that “...impose ‘I must’ where ‘I will’ should have been” (Bauman 2008, 52). I wonder – regarding both Butler and Bauman's notions – could the possibility of a mutual reckoning exist? Wherein my will also shapes the external force, just as the external force shapes me? We could think back to Deleuze here, in that the solutions to the problem actively affect and change the very nature of the problem itself. How I respond to the external force, bears significantly on the external force as well. Joy postulates that in facing another – and we could frame “another” as a form of external force – “we encounter precariousness as the condition of the address.” (Joy 2014, 1). The kind of address that Joy is referring to is one of mutual exchange, one that has the potential to affect and alter all parties involved, meaning that all parties must be sensitive enough to allow themselves to be affected or altered ...or the address itself needs to awaken such sensitivity. Joy continues:

I imagine the work of the choreographic as one possibility of sensual address – a dialogic opening in which art not only is looked at but also looks back, igniting a tremulous hesitation in the ways that we experience and respond... Trespassing into the discourses and disciplines of visual-sculptural-audial-philosophic practice, *the* choreographic works against linguistic signification and virtuosic representation; it is about contact that touches even across distances. (Joy 2014, 1)

How does form emerge? Through contact.

4.2. Looking at Looking Back

Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks;” – Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*

As I mull over this notion of art that is not only looked at but also looks back, the snakes jostle each other: Is awareness of the fact that one *is* composing, required to compose? Perhaps this looking back that Joy proposes could be taken one step further regarding the performing of choreography – that what’s needed is not only a looking back, but an awareness of the fact that one *is* looking back... it is one thing to look back at something that is looking at you, (in this case: audience), it is another thing to be *aware* that you are looking back, to allow this awareness to be seen, and to allow this awareness to affect both you and the observers. I’m looking back at you. (As I write this, I wink at my computer screen. ;)). And I know that the way I’m looking back at you, affects how you are continuing to look at me. We affect each other sensorially, corporeally, perceptually, through this ever-changing dialogue.

4.3. The "How" of the Gaze: Joy, Han, Sprinkles of Me

“It is a question of presence: to joy is an extremity of presence [...] It is not that identity in joying simply loses itself. It is there at its peak. To joy poses without reserve the question of the singular being.” – Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*

In my choreographic work, particularly in the performing of it, it is not enough just to look back – but rather, to interrogate, to research while and through looking back – “how am I looking back? How am I changed by how I’m being looked at? And how am I changing those looking at me, by how I am looking at them?... again... It’s not just looking back, but *how* one is looking back. This is quite connected to philosopher and scholar Byung-Chul Han’s consideration of the contemplative gaze vs. the working gaze in his reading of Heidegger. Han writes: “The contemplative gaze, by contrast, *goes easy on* them, letting them be in their own space or radiance. This gaze is a practice characterized by friendliness” (Han 2017, 75). (I think back to the premise of a poiesis of practice... what would a practice of friendliness generate when making, performing, and attending work?) The contemplative gaze differs from that of the working gaze, which Han states: “ultimately, aims at domination and assimilation. It destroys the distance to things” (Han 2017, 75). Perhaps Joy’s notion of a contact that touches even across distance is amplified by Han’s formulation of the contemplative gaze, in the sense that, a contact that touches even across distance could be most simply thought of as: eye contact. When a performer truly makes eye contact with an audience member, there is potential for said audience member to experience it as dominating or reprimanding, as the performer forcing a kind

of assimilation upon them, when maybe, this audience member just wanted to see a show from a safe distance... “What did I do wrong?” they could begin to feel. When I encourage the performers I work with to look back at the audience, I ask them to simultaneously consider, “how am I looking and what is it doing?” This question is the actual substance, the actual material that the work is built upon. Essentially, the task is to contemplate gaze – both one’s own gaze, and the gaze of others.

4.4. Performing as Composing: Butler, Han, (and still some sprinkles of me)

*“To approach mysticism sympathetically, it is more helpful to think of texts as performed for a certain effect. This is an affective effect, with a theological and political impact on a community of listeners, participants, or celebrants rather than silent individual readers. In this regard, a fragment or extract may have more significance than a whole book.” – Simon Critchley, *Mysticism**

A kind of tension emerges when considering Han’s contemplative gaze characterized by friendliness, a gaze that goes easy on them, in relation to Butler’s notion of the precarious nature of the address. However, I do not see these two formulations as being in opposition to each other, but rather in compliment. The kind of performing gaze I am interested in goes easy on the those watching not because it is a gaze filled exclusively with love and admiration towards them – constantly appeasing, and communicating, “it’s ok”. Sometimes when one is on stage, it’s not ok. Things go wrong. Mistakes get made. Anxiety and fear can infiltrate the nervous system, both because of what’s happening in the room, or outside of it. All of this is part of the material – part of, and affecting, the real-time making of forms. But this performing gaze must go easy on them in the sense that an audience must be made aware, that the performers themselves are aware...the audience needs to see, (and feel) that the performers are sensitive to their audience presence; They need to witness that a legitimate contemplation process is happening within the performer as to how their looking is affecting. (And I wonder, isn’t this active sensitivity to another what we have, or aim to have in life? Perhaps performing, like composing, is a means to practice life.) Rather than an exclusively forceful gaze that says, “look at me looking at you”, I aim to foster a performance gaze that says, “Hi – how are you? Who are you? And how are you now? Who are you now? And now? And now? And now?” It is a contemplative gaze, but perhaps even more so, a curious one. It does not go easy on them by trying to remove the precarious nature of the address that Butler

describes – that is an essential feature of actual meeting, actual contact, and, I would argue, actual friendliness. How it goes easy on them is by articulating through one’s gaze, and with one’s body – I am aware of the precarious nature of this address, and we will dance through it together.

It is with and through this mode of looking that a performer is not only performing the choreographic composition, as in doing the tasks in real time that the pre-agreed upon composition requires them to do, but also, composing. By putting the pre-determined choreographic material together in front of the viewer, noticing and then incorporating how the viewer’s gaze affects this putting together, performing becomes its own manner of composing. Performing *is* composing, through-form-ing; it is the putting together of fragments of movements, in-relatedness, (Monni 2015). in front of another(s). In this sense, each movement, however small or big, is revealed in its being put together. Perhaps the most important part of a performance was simply the way one performer’s elbow was bent.

4.5. Gloria, Aporia! Choreography as an Excuse

“She who joys is bedazzled” Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*

Employing the choreographic as Joy expresses, is not only about contact across distance, but also what this contact has the potential to undo, regarding our historical experiencing of art, response mechanisms, processes of meaning making and knowledge production. Joy relies heavily on frameworks brought forth by Art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, who in his work *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, dismantles the dominating models of art history (from a western context), most prominently that of art historian Erwin Panofsky, who’s “neo-Kantian addiction to reason and logic” produces an “enclosing of art, such that it closes off all confusion, enigma, and aporia.” (joy / hubermann / pg. 4), Perhaps this enclosing, in the context of dance history, could be thought of as a lack of attunement towards *how* one is affected by *how* one is being watched, and how one is affecting those that are watching... and how both modes, affecting and being affected, are major parts of the material itself.

To the performers I'm working with, I often say that the "choreography", -- is ultimately, just an excuse to be in a room with other people (other people here meaning the audience). The movements, the timing, the body placements and tasks, the coming and going, the narrative or lack thereof, anything and everything comprised to constitute the choreography itself – is arbitrary. What is not arbitrary is the fact that we're all here, in this moment, within the context of this live event. And why are we here? To learn? To feel? To be seen? To hide? To imagine? To forget? To remember? To entertain and be entertained? To dazzle and be dazzled? To finally have an opportunity to wear that incredible outfit you love? Maybe it's all of these and more at different moments; maybe it's none of them. Maybe they're all valid; maybe none of them are. But if performers and viewers are open to being in a space where all these questions and more are in play, perhaps this tremulous – and I would also say glorious – hesitation that Joy describes in the ways we experience and respond, can occur. If this kind of space is opened, it is certainly not one that provides answers. Rather, it opens a dialogic field of not knowing, of hesitation, anticipation, unsureness ... it is a space of problems. And if the problems are stayed with, or dedicated to, as Deleuze says, perhaps "the very transformation[s] of our bod[ies] and our language[s]" (Deleuze 1994, 192), can happen...

Perhaps these elements of hesitation, anticipation, unsureness, not knowing, delaying of meaning-making, could be thought of as additional constructional compositional elements... ones that dance in conjunction with Monni's repetition, variation, contrast, transitions, etc. Each one of these, both Monni's and those that emerged through my reading of Joy, are extrapolated from "the way our consciousness recognizes and organizes our everyday being-in-the-world" (Monni 2015, 8). They are phenomena that we experience and perceive, both within ourselves, and within/through others.

4.6. Representation's Inability to Represent

"God might be ineffable, but the mystics are constantly effing the ineffable, for as long as it effing takes. They are saying the unsayable, if only through the continual dismantling of language." – Simon Critchley, *Mysticism*

Whenever one is working within the "theatrical apparatus" (Cvejić 2015, 23), that is, within the three major elements constitutive of theater in the western tradition: "liveness, audience as community, and the contract of address-response that determines the

relationship between stage and audience.” (Cvejić 2015, 97), engagement with discourses on representation is, relatively unavoidable. Cvejić writes: “Both within and outside the discourses of theater studies, theater is regularly associated with two mechanisms or sets of ideas, laws, and conventions which can be considered as either disparate or synonymous: representation and spectatorship” (Cvejić 2015, 99).

Within the frame of this writing, there is not enough space or time to delve into the increasingly vast amount of theory and knowledge on representation, however, I bring it up now to articulate more precisely what I mean by my phrase, “choreography is just an excuse.” Specifically in relation to Joy’s invocation of Didi-Huberman, with his phrase: “the inability of representation to represent.”

Casting our gaze toward an image would feel as if we were standing on the beach pulling a net in from the waves, watching as the water recedes leaving only bits of algae and frayed rope in our hands. Rather than consider these fragments as icons or symbols directing us to an intrinsic meaning, he [Didi-Huberman], describes the ‘work’ of these residual and fragmented images as ‘symptoms’ of the inability of representation to represent. (Joy 2014, 5).

Joy invokes Didi-Hubermann so fervently perhaps because of his multi-level arguing against the “tyranny of the visible... and the legible” looking instead towards “the visual and figurable”. (Joy 2014, 5). Rather than Panofsky’s logical, detached forms of knowledge produced by engaging with art, Didi-Hubermann describes more gaseous, viscous forms, “like a sea spilling through a net or clouds mutating in the sky” (Joy 2014, 5).

If, as a performer, one is aware of representation’s inability to represent, that the forms they are making – within the theatrical apparatus, which inevitably evokes representation (or at least, discourses on representation) – are ultimately, not the point – as each movement, gesture, form they make – no matter how representational it is or isn’t – can be interpreted to “mean” a truly infinite amount of things to any given viewer, (who always perceives through the filter of self that is their history, positionality, memory, pain, what they had for lunch that day or what they have to do after the show), the performer gaze takes on another contemplative quality, a kind of inquisitiveness. The content of the choreographic composition, that is, what the performer literally does throughout the performance, is no longer treated as a tool to convey intrinsic meaning to an audience,

but rather it is a tool to support and re-invigorate the attention of the audience – and that’s it.

If it’s not about what the form is trying to communicate, then... what am I trying to communicate? Then why am I here...doing this movement at all? And why are you here? Why are any of us here? These are, albeit in the simplest, most generalized, rudimentary form, the problems I am most interested in / consumed by, both in my work and in my life. The choreography is an excuse to get people together, only to have them ask “why am I here, together with these specific people? What is this togetherness revealing to me that I could not reveal to myself alone?” Perhaps this is the kind of meaning making I am fascinated by... not the meaning per se that comes from the content of a show, but the meaning that is revealed to one and through one, simply because they went to go see a show that day. What is revealed that would not, and could not have been revealed otherwise?

4.7. Choreography as an Excuse...That Matters

“Although much mysticism might aim at an intellectual intuition with the divine, it remains a discursive practice. Indeed, mysticism is a somatic practice that requires the disciplined attention of language and the body in the performance...[of ritual]” – Simon Critchley, *Mysticism*

The asking of such questions through the contemplative gaze inevitably affects the dancer’s next motion, and the next, and the next...The choreography is just an excuse to get people in a room together, so that this chain reaction of questions can be posited and exchanged. This is not to say the choreographic composition does not matter – it does, and one should try to perform it to the absolute best of their ability. Only after a deep commitment to the movements themselves, can the work become... not about the movements. But the movements themselves still matter – they are the excuse! And this excuse is a highly important one. It is what allows for such questions to unfold: what happens because it is specifically you performing, on this day, at this time, in this city, etc. and, because it is specifically those watching? Perhaps this is the problem... the choreography matters, and, it is just an excuse...How does form emerge through this? Instead of working from the standpoint of what representation can do, what happens when one works from the position of what representation can’t do? How does one work with,

and allow representation's inability to represent to shape the encounter? What it is incapable of doing? What kinds of forms emerge from its incapability?

4.8. Being in a Room Together: Towards Community of the Ecstatic

"It is within this liminal space that that I suggest investigating the queer possibilities of medieval English anchoritism. The foundational paradoxes of the anchoritic lifestyle foreground these possibilities – the anchoress was simultaneously dead and alive; the cell was both secular and sacred; the life was both mundane and glorious." – Michelle M. Sauer, Representing the Negative: Positing the Lesbian Void in Medieval English Anchoritism.

In chapter three of Joy's *The Choreographic*, titled: "Ecstatic Community", she refers to philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of community, stating: "Nancy allows ecstasies to fold into community. Here lies the tension of ecstatic experience: even as the terms of ecstasies and community merge in Nancy's writings, ecstasy requires a constant oscillation between singularities and community" (Joy 2014, 123). It is this oscillation to which Joy refers that I insist so heavily upon. The actually essential part of the choreography is how this oscillation, how this "contract of address-response" (Cvejić 2015, 97), between performer and viewer is constantly in flux, frictioning, – how it is precarious. It is not dissimilar from how, in his highly famed essay on friendship, philosopher Michel de Montaigne characterized the nature of his friendship with writer Étienne de La Boétie: "If you press me to say why I loved him, I can say no more than because he was he, and I was I" (Montaigne 1580, 169). It was their singularities, and the singular composition(s) that emerged as a result of their combined singularities, that gave rise to Montaigne's experiencing of love. This provides another angle (angel) to think through Han's notion of the contemplative gaze as "a practice characterized by friendliness." Maybe, this friendliness comes from looking at those who are in the room with you as the singularities that they are, no matter what position you occupy, on stage or elsewhere. Each singular, live event unfolds in the singular way that it does...because it is composed of singularities contacting other singularities – across distance. Joy continues with Nancy's conceptualizing of community:

In our historical moment, we are faced with the failure of community – as the ruined legacy of the communist project and by the impossible alliance of individual subjects. Both of these doctrines – of communism and of the metaphysical (rational) subject –

omit the possibility of real community as Nancy sees it. In his attempt to reconcile a conception of community, Nancy is not suggesting that we return to some nostalgic bucolic or romantic cohabitation with others, but instead reminds us that community is at the limit of the human and the divine (Nancy [1986] 1991, 11). It is not what we have lost but “what happens to us” of our own invention and we remain “entangled in its meshes” Thus community must be re-choreographed, experienced as sensual, relational flux, a joining not of discrete individuals but of singularities. (Joy 2014, 124).

The problem that is the failure of community. Of course, this refers to a specifically western, post-communist, hyper-capitalist failure of community, and there are plenty of places around the globe where people do cohabitate, and it is not considered to be nostalgic, bucolic, or romantic. However, The second half of this quote moves us backwards and forwards simultaneously. It refers us back to Grau’s notion of art’s dealing with limits – it moves us forward in thinking of community at the limit of the human and divine. This phrase of Nancy’s, “what happens to us”, brings us back to Butler’s precarious state, with its “demands that come from elsewhere” (Joy 2014, 1). Joy then adds, “of our own invention” to Nancy’s that which happens to us. This brings us back to Bauman’s conception of life as a work of art – one that we are constantly in the throes of making ourselves. This quote moves us forward in articulating the need for *community* to be re-choreographed, to be experienced as the sensual, relational flux between singularities – to embrace the paradoxes, the tension, of singularity and community. And we move furthest back... when we think of community as the problem... the problem to which we need to respond with re-choreography, with relational, fluctuating, ever-evolving solutions.

4.8.1. Postscriptum: Transforming, Performing

In philosopher and art theorist Gerald Raunig’s book *Dissemblage*, he relies heavily on the biography and mystical writings of French medieval mystic Marguerite Porete. This chick is f**king incredible, and I am so obsessed with her! In Paris circa 1310, Porete was burned at the stake for heresy in refusing to recant her views within her book *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls*. Raunig translates from Porete’s work: “She mutates into a flowing, streaming, dripping part of a whole sea of joy, she transforms into joy itself” (Raunig 2022, 101). I include this to honor synchronicity – Jenn Joy as part of a whole sea of joy – her own, Porete’s, Nancy’s, Raunig’s, mine...Porete’s sensual

language addresses me, touches me across many years of distance, how desperately I want to become a dripping part of a whole sea of joy! A singular part immersed in the relational-flux in a churning, changing whole sea of singularities... How can I create performances that feel like this sentence? How to choreograph performance as a transformation process (Cvejić 2015), into joy... which is not to say removed from pain, but rather bedazzled by life...just for a little while... Critchley writes: “Mysticism as an account of personal transformation: The only test or warrant for the authenticity of and authority of a particular mystic’s account is whether that transformation was transformative for others. Although so much of mystical writing is intensely idiosyncratic, it speaks to, and indeed requires, *an audience*.” I do hope anyone who reads this, is doing ok...that they’re not too bored, that it’s not too much, or too overwhelming... It’s hard to fit it all in, and I know it’s hard to read it all and follow... Have a snack! In the end, it's just me. Just me, writing to you. I’m right here with you.

Throughout my time performing with NTO, I started a practice of journaling backstage while the shows were in progress. This is an excerpt from my 2022 Journal:

Trying to really look at the audience like the actual, real people that they are composed of... What’s hard is that I feel like I make discoveries too late, can’t share them, can’t incorporate them into the work itself, maybe I’m just not that good at this... but I am trying, trying to touch hearts, trying to let them touch mine... Music change. I’m writing nothing interesting, but I guess it’s just interesting to me to write during a show, to write entirely during another live event, there’s a whole world being created and lived in out there, just there, in front of the curtain I sit behind... all these people out there, sitting in seats to witness this mess, this performance, and here’s me... sitting behind the curtain, bathed in blue backstage light, scribbling away. My foolish whimsical musings... They’re happening simultaneously, these two shows – the show for the audience, and here's me, performing for me, in writing... an audience of one. I wonder if it does something? Can they feel there’s something else going on back there? Does the energetic field of the performance receive this? Do I? Download from the invisible show... *KN, November 2022*

5. ATTENDING

*“The sacred is nothing less than the experience of sociality through and as infraction given in ‘inter-affective’ excess, given in and as ‘collective ecstasy.’ The sacred here manifests as the experience of innovation and improvisation” – J. Kameron Carter, *Otherworlds, Nowhere (The Sacred or Otherwise)**

The third component of Cvejić’s formulation of the live event is attending, which I will analyze through the lens of Isabel Lewis’s choreographic work. Again, Cvejić asserts that “performance is better approached as a transformation process rather than a fleeting act” (Cvejić 2015, 25). This ties us back to the previous discussion on performing as well, in which I’ve noted that performing is its own form of composing. The question, “how am I looking and what is it doing?” as the foremost material for dancers to compose with and from, evokes the processual nature of performance itself. Regarding attending, Cvejić states: Directing attention is a possibility or a contingency – either something we choose or something that happens to us. Here “us” means spectators whom some performances turn into attenders, when their duration requires our perception short-circuits with memory, and when perception and recollection become indiscernible” (Cvejić 2015, 201). This draws a line back to Jean Luc Nancy, who also relies on this what happens to us...

When someone attends a live performance event, it is – generally speaking – their choice to do so. In the making of this choice there are implications that one will, for however long the performance lasts, direct one’s attention towards the live event itself. Still, over the course of the performance, whether it's conscious or unconscious, one both chooses what to look at – who or what to pay attention to – whether to think about what this show references, or what one will have for dinner later. Simultaneously, one is immersed into a space of unknown; things will unfold and happen to one, thoughts and feelings will arise simply because one is there, in that specific environment, with those specific people, at that specific moment. Whether a performance is characterized as improvisational or not, it is always different; there is always the possibility that something will happen to us, even if we’ve seen the exact same show before. However, each space, performance format, and temporality are coded with the ways in which they shape attention and perception for makers, performers, and attender alike – meaning we have a downloaded, incorporated awareness as to how we are supposed to “be”, in a proscenium auditorium,

or a park, or a railway station, etc. If a performance takes place in any one of those locations, our prior knowledge as to how we should behave there is activated, and therefore, how we receive the live event itself, “what happens to us” (the phrase both Nancy and Cvejić employ) is informed and molded by this prior knowledge. Perhaps what Cvejić means by some performances turning spectators into attenders is a performance’s ability to make us aware of this embodied behavioral coding in any given situation – we are perceiving and recollecting simultaneously; we are perceiving the fact that we are recollecting.

5.1. Isabel Lewis and Communal Epic Fiction

*“An image that has been expressed is an ‘emanation of form’, and ‘knows its own emerging forth.’ It is not distinct from the exemplar but shares the very life of the exemplar.” – Umberto Eco on Meister Eckhart, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages**

In the summer of 2024, I was lucky enough to take part in the Impulstanz Danceweb scholarship program under mentorship of Isabel Lewis, who’s choreographic work deals heavily with such thematics. In Isabel’s workshop titled “Communal EPIC Fiction” – which I participated in during the first weekend of Impulstanz – the notion of attending is crucial from theoretical, practical, compositional, and performative standpoints.

Communal EPIC Fiction is, fundamentally, a compositional practice with an emphasis on action, meaning all participants are performing and composing at once, generating “instantly created fictions” together. (Lewis, Impulstanz website). To maintain the sanctity that is Isabel’s work and the experiences that occur within the frame of a Communal EPIC fiction workshop, I will speak predominantly on just one component (attending), of many, which combine to make Communal EPIC fiction what it is. Within the format of the workshop, the alternating and differentiating of various perceptive/active modes occurs, however there is one mode in particular – the “intent attendant” – that is most relevant here. The intent attendants are activating and amplifying what Cvejić described as the possibility of directing attention; the intent attendants choose. They choose how, when, and from where to direct their attention, in order to support the collective composition in the making – the Communal EPIC fiction. As Isabel put it so beautifully, the intent attendants are to “hungrily pursue” *how* they want to see. As an intent attendant, everywhere you are, anywhere you place yourself in relation to what is happening in the room, is a compositional choice. There is no passivity. This is

not to say that you cannot relax as an intent attendant – you can... but it is a choice to do so. In this way, everything and everyone in the space is activated as a performer; how am I looking and what is it doing becomes everyone's inquiry. There is no outside eye that exclusively watches with a sense of removal from the actions that are unfolding in the space.

5.2. Possibility and Contingency: A Duet

“And when I will anything,” saith this soul, “then am I with myself so, and have I lost freedom? but when I will naught, and have all lost out of my will, then faileth me nothing: free-being is my maintainer. I will naught of none!” – Mauguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*

As an intent attendant, one could watch from a distance and not actively engage with the actions unfolding in space – the composition in its making – but again, it is choice to do so. This choice is not only visible, but it also energetically shapes and informs the composition itself. In this way, the decisions that one makes, what one says yes or no to, when one chooses to do something or not and why, are all valid, legitimate states of inquiry to exist in, and existing in or lingering with these questions, hesitations, desires and or urgencies, serves as additional material towards the composition. Responsibility is dispersed to and through everyone, no matter what role one is occupying, and through the collective composing, one is able to perceive their actual agency within a group.

Within the format of Communal EPIC Fiction, there is a continuous oscillation of possibility and contingency, as Cvejić describes. One is constantly negotiating between, and aware of, the possibilities to do, enact, change, direct, based off how the composition (fiction) is developing. So, in a sense, the composition happens to one; it develops with or without one's overt action, and one experiences it. But as one experiences it, the possibilities to act, to do, how and where to attend from, begin to emerge in response to the composition itself. As Isabel said at the beginning of the workshop, “You don't have to make anything happen – it will happen.”

This connects us back to our dear compositional snake companions... Perhaps one does not need to be aware of the fact that one is composing to compose. It will happen to you, through you, and of you, simply because you are there. One is composing all the time, making choices, imprinting on the shape of one's life, (or, as it applies here, on the Communal EPIC Fiction). Maybe, all it comes down to is a slight linguistic differentiation

in the repetition, a la Deleuze. Maybe there's composing, and there's also, *composing*. Composing would denote what we are, inevitably, always doing, whether we choose to express it as such or not. *Composing* would then simply be... expressing it. Practicing it as a practice.

5.3. Endarkenment: Isabel and Nathan Snaza

"Endarkenment ceremonies have always already begun. They don't await a call to order. So let us instead listen, pray, study, tend." – Nathan Snaza, *Tendings*

Through Isabel's Communal EPIC Fiction, one engages in the energetic, experiential cultivation that everything and everyone is, performing. And what this heightens is the sense of constantly attending to the situation at hand. In author and affect theorist Nathan Snaza's recent book "Tendings: feminist esoterisms and the abolition of man", he articulates his both theoretical and practical notion of "endarkenment" – an active critique of the dominant systems of knowledge and power in contemporary thought tied to enlightenment thinking, those that promote reason, progress, clarity, and certainty. Snaza calls for a releasing of such enlightenment concepts and turns instead towards the embracing of ambiguity, mystery, the limitations of knowledge and the dark...hence, endarkenment. he writes in deep alignment with many components of Isabel's work, for example: Endarkenment attending shifts [this] background to foreground, [it] notices the hum. It is to have a sense (which will always only be minimally about consciousness or the volition of a liberal subject) of how the world's becoming allows what Massumi calls "freedom" adhering *in* the situation as a possibility to be played, a material spur to improvise otherwise worlds" (Snaza 2024. 85).

Freedom, within a situation as a possibility to be played, is a beautiful angle to contextualize Isabel's work further. Within the composition that is Communal EPIC Fiction, the background and foreground shift, slip, melt, bounce and blur into and against each other...and the hum, whether it's your own, or the space's, or the person's next to you, or the 12 peoples in the center of the room, is not just noticed – it's music.

5.4. The Positive Problem of Tension

"In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than states of intellect." – William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Isabel articulated to us that throughout the workshop there will inevitably be tension around the choices that one makes, both in relation to oneself – the questioning, second guessing, hesitation that occurs when one reflects on what and how one is doing in response to the composition – and the choices being made by those in the room with one. She said, regarding this tension: “this is great. This is positive.” When creating together, encountering tension is not only unavoidable, but according to Isabel it is a necessary part of the Communal EPIC Fiction process. This tension experienced within one’s own nervous system, and the nervous system(s) of the collective group, means something is happening... and this tension is happening as a result of the internal/external not knowing, unsureness, hesitation... and whatever is happening, serves as the materiality, and ephemerality, of that particular communal composition. This circles us back to problems – problems as generative. Perhaps this tension as a result of creating with others is one of those deepest problems that cannot ever be solved... Isabel’s Communal Epic Fiction asks, can we, or rather, should we actually treat it then *as* a problem? Isabel does not deny the problematic sensation that tension can feel like; but instead, she chooses to experience this problematic sensation as a positive. It’s not that tension itself needs to feel good. It’s that this (tension) from not feeling good, (because of tension) is positive! Deleuze echoes here: “The positivity of problems is constituted by the fact of being ‘posited’” (Deleuze 1994, 266). Within Communal EPIC Fiction, this notion of Deleuze’s is experienced sensorially.

5.5. Three times Three times Three

“The trinity concludes: ‘I am so strong in my undividedness that no one can ever divide me or shatter me in all my eternity.’” – Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*

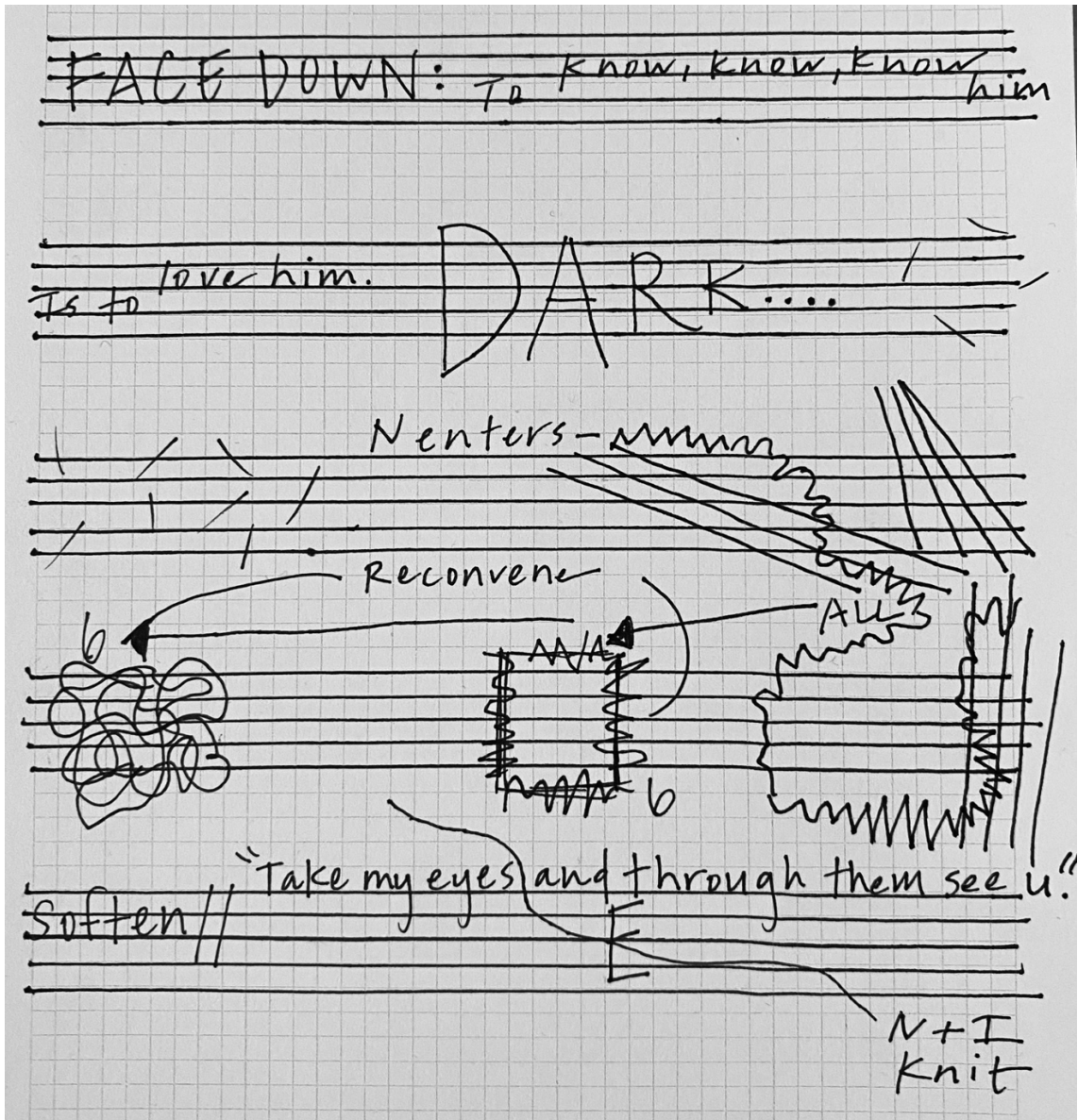
One of the most incredibly profound aspects of Isabel’s work is not only the kind of space that she hosts for collective creativity to emerge, but how the experiences one has within a Communal EPIC Fiction workshop translate over into the rest of one’s performance-going life. Even if one is confined to a chair in front of a big proscenium stage, there is still, some element of agency as to how one receives a live event. Of course, there are things that just happen to us, and we either continue to sit in meshes, or – we walk out. But if we don’t walk out, perhaps such questions start to bubble...what am I attending to? What am I amplifying or diminishing in this space? How is my attention being directed by the theatrical apparatus itself, and through that awareness, how can I re-direct

my attention in another way? What am I not noticing? What if I notice it? Snaza, towards the latter half of his book, relies upon novelist and philosopher Sylvia Wynter's 1971 essay, "The Ceremony Must Be Found". He writes: "Wynter articulates a complex ontology where storytelling, bodies, and relationality (spreading beyond the human) mutually co-compose each other" (Snaza 2024, 105). Through Communal EPIC Fiction, Wynter's ontology is cultivated, furthered, and embodied. Perhaps this trinity of storytelling, bodies, and relationality offers additional insight into these other three dissimilar similitudes: making, performing, and attending. When storytelling (making), bodies (performing), and relationality (attending), mutually co-compose each other within the live event, the live event *is* a transformational process – one that occurs through the continual, qualitative varying with itself – duration, according to Deleuze. And then, it closes. It ends – another variation with itself. Within Communal EPIC Fiction, one experiences many endings, as another essential role within the structure itself is that of the "time shaper". The time shaper decides how long each composition will last for – if the time shaper says three minutes, then the composition lasts three minutes. If they say "until everybody reaches the other side of the room" that's how long it lasts. The myriad of co-composed compositions are always framed through an ever-present ending. This variation, this end, as an intrinsic component of the composition(s) themselves, means that even as the fleeting, momentous acts that they are, they still occur inside of, and through, the duration of the workshop itself.

5.5.1. Postscriptum: Vision Rhythms, Decomposition and Reintegration

In artist and philosopher Eiichi Tosaki's essay *Rhythm as Schema*, he refers to art historian Susanne K. Langer's interpretation of rhythm: rhythm is the preparation of a new event by the ending of a previous one. (Tosaki 2007, 114). For rhythm to exist, the end is needed. And I would argue, an awareness, or sensation, that that which has just occurred *was* a fleeting, momentous act – it won't ever happen again *just* like that – can add a value, or importance, to the act itself. The heart beats a (un)certain number of times; and each beat counts. The end of one beat is necessary for the next one to occur...but it is not a certainty that it will. Ongoing process – duration – is not a given. And it is the ending, the fleetingness of each whole-part of that process, that constitutes it being a

process at all. Maybe a performance cannot transcend or lie outside of duration (Cvejić 2015, 25), but it can be a space where duration itself is questioned...problematized... where it becomes ungrounded and uncertain. Because there is no certainty that a performance will continue. What is certain is that it will end. Tosaki continues: “Langer also argues that a musical performer holds a matrix or ‘composition’ in mind when performing a piece of music, and that this is the ‘the basic form of the picture which is to be developed’ [...] if rhythm exists in a visual form as well as an auditory one at all, then this internalization of ‘the metre’ or its equivalent is crucial for the creator of a picture as well as for the viewer.” (Tosaki 2007, 114). Why do I say all of this in what is supposed to be a mystical postscriptum? Because, as philosopher William James points out in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, “Many mystical scriptures are indeed little more than musical compositions” (James 1982 [1902], 421). In my own choreographic work, this question of the preparation of a new event by the ending of a previous one is deeply intriguing, and fundamentally a mystical process. What are the rhythms here that need to be expressed? How do I make them and how do I share them? How does an ending of something constitute the beginning of something else? How does decomposition, allow for re-composition? Bynum echoes: “Scholastic theologians worried *not* about whether body was crucial to human nature, but about how part related to whole – that is, how bits could and would be reintegrated after scattering and decay” (Bynum 1999, 253). While I do not claim to be a scholastic theologian in any sense, I resonate deeply with this quote regarding how I make choreographic work.



from my notebook: composition/decomposition thoughts for production REV DIV LUV.

Choreographer: Kadence Neill, Photograph: Kadence Neill

6. IN(FINITUDE)

*“God’s time – where time and timelessness intersect – is the point, the instant, the twinkling of an eye [...]” – Simon Critchley, *Mysticism**

As both a summary of what has been written, and as a bridge to the final section, I’d like to write a bit about the medieval danse macabre. Depicted in medieval woodcuts, drawings and paintings, the danse macabre “is an eternal round in which the dead alternate with the living. The dead lead the dance; indeed, they are the only ones dancing [...] Death holds out its hand to the living person whom it will draw along with it [...] the art lies in the contrast between the rhythm of the dead and the rigidity of the living” (Ariès 1981, 116).

We are stuck in the process of duration that is our life, for as long as it lasts...perhaps when performance is viewed as a fleeting, momentous act – which is to say, it can never happen in exactly the same way again – we are ever so slightly reminded that our lives too, are fleeting... unreplaceable. Everything changes. Perhaps performance as a fleeting, momentous act can heighten, or amplify, the transformation process that it is, which occurs of and through duration. Because the transformation process itself relies upon its own ending.

As the old maxim goes, when one door closes, another one opens. The end gives rise to the beginning, which gives rise to the end, which gives rise to the beginning, ad infinitum. In order for this eternal process to inspire, rather than defeat us, in order to not only accept change, but actually create it, in our lives and in the world, we must honor the end. Things will end, whether one likes it or not. But sometimes, things *must* end, and we are the ones who must compose their ending. Author Vanessa Machado de Oliveira asks in her book *Hospicing Modernity*, “What if collective healing will be made possible precisely by facing – together – the end of the world as we know it?” (Oliviera 2021, 55).

Throughout this thesis, I have tried to write from a choreographic perspective, which of course has an inherent relationship to dance itself – dance and choreography themselves being: dissimilar similitudes. Within my choreographic practice, I have often articulated that dance functions as preparation for death... because dance is where I, and I believe

many others, have touched a profound sense of aliveness. Death is one form of an ending that I feel live performance has the potential to practice. However, the moment of death itself, cannot be practiced. It cannot be rehearsed... and yet... we practice it. It is a practicing of the unpracticable – preparation of the unpreparable. Art lies in the contrast between the rhythm of the dead and the rigidity of the living. It is within this contrast, or rather, within this companionship, that I make choreographic performances. To me, the premise of a stage serves as a spatialized location in which other dimensions of time, visuality, sensorially, and profound aliveness can emerge, and transform... The different rhythms of making, performing, and attending, along with the rhythms of the dead, (all the performances in that same location that came before, all the people we carry with us who are no longer alive) are present. Live choreographic performance is polyrhythmic. And maybe, through such a polyrhythmic experience, we can all, no matter what disposition one finds oneself in, soften the rigidity of our living... if only temporarily.

6.1. Process and Practice of Endings

“To grasp (in each thing) that there is a limit and that without supernatural help that limit cannot be passed (or only by very little).” – Simone Weil, Love in the Void

Perhaps we make, perform, and attend performances to practice endings, – because in our durational dealing with life’s many and various endings – sometimes, it’s too much, and sometimes it’s not enough. Within a live performance, all three dispositions (maker, performer, attender) are practically engaging with an awareness of the end – all three are *attending* to the ending. Endings, (decompositions) are, I would propose, another core constructional, transformational element of the composition(s) that is our life. We embody, perceive, and try to make sense of the world we inhabit through endings – both our own, and the endings of others. When composing a live choreographic performance, whether one is trying access the limit of the human and divine, (see section 3.9) or exceed a limit and enlighten the world (see section 2.4) or embrace limits and endarken it, or none of the above... there is no getting around ending(s); The creation of the ending(s), the performing of the ending(s), and the attending to the ending(s). Could the creation of endings (which is to say, creation itself...?) be thought of as the poiesis of limit(s)? Something that existed before (this performance), now, upon ending, no longer does. Perhaps, for all three dispositions performance is a means to practice endings, which is

to say, another mode of practicing life. Priya Parker rings in my head... “we gather to solve problems that we cannot solve on our own.” (Parker 2018, 1).

6.2. Gatherings of the Unsolvable

“But now you ask me, How am I to think of God, and what God is? And to this I can only answer, I do not know.” – Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*

In my life, endings are one of those deep, dark, mysterious problems that I fundamentally, cannot solve. And sometimes, a problem’s insolvability is not enough to change or affect the problem itself – it refuses to become anything other than what it is: a painful, durational problem. It doesn’t feel positive, or generative towards anything else at all, besides its own lack of generative-ness. The problem runs too deep, weighs too heavy on one’s heart... it refuses change... and by this refusal, only deepens itself. It is perhaps why I continue to work in, and with, live performance at all – to try and solve in my work, or at least deal with, what I feel I cannot in my life. But perhaps, this approaches the core of the problems that cause us to gather. We gather to solve problems that we cannot solve on our own... which is to say, for us alone, the problems are insolvable. These insolvable problems can be ours, our personal, internal or external ones, as well as those vast, insurmountable problems of *the* world. Throughout the past three chapters I’ve noted the capacity for all three of these dissimilar similitudes: making, performing, and attending, to act as a means of practicing life. Whether we are practicing agency, decision making, sensitivity, or endings, perhaps live choreographic performance are gatherings of the unsolvable. because while we alone cannot solve these problems, maybe, if only for a few, brief fleeting seconds, someone else’s movements, or voice, or smile, or gaze... can. If Reich was right – that fascism feeds on the twisted hunger for the mystical – then maybe this kind of choreographic work is an offering back to that hunger, not to sate it, not to solve it, but rather to sanctify it, to be with it, to gather for it.

6.2.1. Postscriptum: An Ending

This one takes the form of a singular quote from speculative fiction writer Octavia Butler. It is the quote I most often share with those I have worked with, on the last day of a performance:

“All that you touch
you change

All that you change
Changes you

The only lasting truth
Is change.

God
Is change.” – (Butler 1993, 7).

7. THE SHORT TEXT

Hi! again...! You've made it to the Short Text – less in word count, but maybe deeper in content. I think to myself, and to you: was everything that came before just...a warm up? A revving of the engine for the road trip to actually start? Or maybe, this is the after party, where the conversations get more honest, personal... more heart to heart. Here, I'll try to reveal a bit, practically, on choreography as a form of mysticism – through the medieval mystic body, and the body that is... mine. (Do I possess it? Does my body belong to me? Do I belong to it? Me and my body, their be-longing for each other... back and forth, back and forth) But enough about long; this is supposed to be short. It serves as an entry point, an opening at the closing, into my studio practice – in relation to my body. Bynum writes passionately on the female mystic's body in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, and how such visionary, ecstatic experiences – most of which are associated with women – were sourced from and experienced through, their bodies. She writes: “men write of ‘*the* mystical experience’ giving a general description that may be used as theory of yardstick, whereas women write of ‘*my* mystical experience’, speaking directly of something that may have occurred to them alone” (Bynum 2012, 190). This Short Text is a short attempt...to shift to *my*.

Throughout this writing, I have circled around the question, problem, process, and fleeting occurrence of *live*, in the context of the live event. (I wonder, in this moment, why is it not referred to as an *alive* event instead?). It is worth noting – as my supervisor Jana Unmüssig did – that throughout all of these meandering formulations of liveness in the Long Text, not once do I refer, explicitly, to the body. It is alluded to at points – the point of the elbow, specifically – but never is it truly discussed. This is somewhat problematic, given that mysticism, in every book I have read about it, is referred to as corporeal, somatic, fleshy, bodily, and physical. In fact this very well may be, above all else, medieval mysticism's most defining feature: its bodily-ness. Choreography too, while it can refer to many things other than the body, is tricky to discuss without including the topic of body at all. So really, I've ignored what is actually, the biggest relational aspect between choreography and mysticism to begin with. (Sigh). Why have I not touched the body until now? I'm sure I would enjoy speculating on this, but really, it is

not necessary. I struggle to talk about the body because the body is where we live, and the body is where we die.

My mother died of ovarian cancer on December 6th, 2020, which is, coincidentally the Finnish Independence Day. (I've often wondered if this synchronicity is actually a coincidence, or if it was somehow important that I come to this country in particular, to deal with my own form of painful independence.) After her death, my relationship to my body, the body as subject matter, art, life... everything changed... except the fact that I was, am, still alive. That remained the same. It is difficult, and at times seems futile to try and describe what happens to one's relationship to the body after one has attended to the dead and dying body of a loved one – particularly a mother. The difficulty is evident even in this sentence; I did not write *my* body, or *my* mother. It is hard not to distance myself from my/the body, when the body that brought me here is insolvably far away. Distance becomes something of a constant, and it permeates to other aspects of one's life, in ways that one cannot necessarily control. My life. That I cannot control. At the same time, the loved one lost is now, closer than they ever were before. They are in you. They are you. They're incorporated into you and accessed through you. Through me. Distance is both eradicated and perpetuated – a foundational contradictory premise of mysticism itself.

While my mother did not die of Covid 19, she died during the height of the pandemic; the situations that the pandemic engendered both surrounded, and deeply affected the nature of her dying. It is perhaps why I am so drawn specifically to medieval mysticism, which was born out of an era characterized by the plague – the understanding of the body was in response to massive mortality rates; people attended to death constantly. The rhythms of the dead, as previously stated, abounded.

Something that has stayed with and continues to perplex me: the days leading up to my mother's death, as well as the days that immediately followed, were characterized by a feeling of aliveness so unfathomably intense. This aliveness alternated between the insurmountably painful, and the overwhelmingly ecstatic – ecstatic here in the etymological sense, meaning "standing outside oneself" or "removed from oneself," from the Greek *ekstatikós*. This state of contradictory being, rooted in and from the body, is not something that I wish upon others; it is not a bodily state that I'm looking for the

performers or audience to achieve. I honestly don't know if it even can be achieved, outside of the context of the death of someone you love. But it is a kind of bodily experience that both informs and shapes my understanding of what a body is at all – what a body is capable of experiencing. It informs my choreography, my studio practice, and simply, my body itself. Endings... these incomprehensible sources of aliveness – a supernova, a wave crashing, a goodbye at an airport. We often touch profound aliveness at the end – profound in the sense that it is oh so complicated... Perhaps my greatest problem, the problem that begets a cascade of solutions in response to it, *is* aliveness. Live choreographic performance has been, thus far, a recurring solution, through which I'm trying, if only for a few moments, to transform the problem of aliveness into... not a problem at all.

This medieval mystic conception of body is additionally enticing to me because it comes from the past – but it's reactivated through the present. This attempting to find the past through the present, to rub them both against each other, to honor and defy, bend, and transform time itself, is very often present in my choreographic work... (which is the parts of my life that I need to work through). I think I am, consciously and unconsciously, always trying to presence and present, the past-ness of my mother. And it is not lost on me that I decided to write about the body in this short text. Perhaps it is because I feel that my mother's life, and my life with her, was cut short. But within the mystical realm of live choreographic performance, short can become long, long can become short. And sometimes, such conceptual measurements of time vanish altogether, and one is simply left... with aliveness.

Thank you for your time. Thank you.

7.1. The End: Fragment(s) of Aliveness

Write – just write it down – get out of your own way. The stuff im dealing with, the stuff I want to deal with, how to make this show – so funny, just now realizing at the end, I talked so f**king much about performance, what about a show?! I much prefer the word show. (Maybe, it's the show itself that is really the short text.) Julian of Norwich called the revelations she received *showings*...a show made of many showings, that no one can witness all of... we don't see all of it, we can't see all of it... we shouldn't see all of it. Dark side of the moon. We can never see the whole thing. Insist that part is whole unto

itself. Seeing...oh God the tyranny of vision in art – it’s definitely that for me, an interrogation of *vision*... these visions Julian of Norwich had... she saw them! But she didn’t like, see them... they weren’t ”real”, they didn’t ”happen”, but who am I to say they weren’t real? To her they were? They *really* happened to her. Sometimes the most real things are those which cannot be seen. The problem of this... I work from there. Julian of Norwich talks about two kinds of sight – bodily sight and ghostly sight – how will these emerge in the work? Generally speaking I imagine stuff first, then I test it in the studio and figure out if it does anything, whether it should remain imaginary or if it should be embodied, performed... Someone tap dancing a confession, two people flirting against a wall... what should they talk about? Or maybe the score is just, flirt? it often starts that way for me, the movies in my head that I’m watching of this piece, and sometimes I try them and I’m like, yes ok there’s something there... then I notice the problems – how will this person get from there, to there, to do this? Then I make some joke like, “what if you just try to disappear to get there?” Sometimes, the jokes are where the greatest stuff comes from. So, I try to have fun. Serious fun – a friction. And sometimes the movies emerge while rehearsing, while in the studio, things occur to me and try to watch, to share in what happens when we try them. And I read a lot. I try to read as much as I can about the themes, or topics, or stuff that I’m working with, I overwhelm myself and I overwhelm the work, and then I watch the movies in my head that the reading engenders, and then I test stuff, and then I try to strip away, chisel, form emerging through removal. Jenn Joy says that the choreographic is a metonymic condition, one that moves between corporeal and cerebral conjecture (Joy 2014, 1). I’ve always loved this definition. Then, I read from Caroline Walker Bynum about the medieval mystic disposition to assert the part to *be* the whole, (both in terms of bodies and objects), that when it comes to thirteenth and fourteenth holy people, ”synecdoche is more than a figure of speech; metonymy becomes miracle” (Bynum 1999, 285). YES! omg it is really the most ecstatic part for me when these little synchronicities emerge, when it feels like maybe I’m onto something... the path is unfolding... the choreographic as a metonymic condition... towards potential synchronous miracles... Pavol, your voice rings in my head – always trying to facilitate the occurring of miracles... you have. For me. How can I do this for others? Can I? Should I? Sounds like a real wanna’ be transcendent figure talking... so I turn to books. Don’t get cocky. More related to female medieval mysticism: Trances, levitations, catatonic seizures or other forms of bodily

rigidity, swellings of sweet mucus in the throat and ecstatic nosebleeds (Bynum 2012, 191). “Watching sisters” sometimes saw the bodies of mystical women elongate or levitate or swoon in ecstatic trances; but the visionary women themselves often did not bother to make clear where the events happened – whether in the body, heart or soul, whether in the eye of the mind or before the eyes of the body. The point was not to provide proof that one woman or a group of women received charismatic gifts, so as much as to communicate and share a piety in spiritual-somatic experiences. (Bynum 2012, 191). What intrigues me about these bodily, highly choreographic premises is that this kind of watching, was not about proving the real-ness, or legitimacy of these mystical physical phenomena... rather, it was to share... to share in the mystical aliveness of it all... in what part of the body or mind or soul this aliveness was occurring was not the point. It was the transformational process of experiencing and witnessing that mattered. How to levitate on stage, without trying to prove the reality/fantasy of levitation... what if the score is just *levitate*? My body... come back to that... it’s so hard, still impossible, to talk about my body without talking about my mother’s body, I draw the connection immediately. It seems I’m incapable of discussing me, without discussing her. My body... fragmented parts of a whole, made of fragments... fragment – from the latin *frangere*, to break, a part broken off... The holes that cannot be filled, the problems that cannot be solved... the fragments that make up my body compose, decompose, recompose... the poiesis that is my body all the time... how to incorporate, make present, the hole in the whole... going down, into the holes, into the dark, unknown terrain of making a show... my body, where I live, where I’ll keep living, and where I will die, my body: housing my life and my impending death. I started this writing with the notion that working with and from problems, feels like home. Uncertain, but home. My body, which bears this hole, this loss: irreplaceable...unfillable. Noticed to myself while writing: part, has *art* in it – just like whole, contains *hole*. The art of the hole. Ugh oh... is that the title of this?! It might have to be. The hole that cannot be filled, This problem that cannot be solved. What to do with it then? A home with a leak that can’t be patched up. Sometimes water drips down. I collect it in different ways, with different vessels. I try to use it, to pour this water back into the work, back into my world. Maybe it quenches thirst for someone, or something, for a few seconds. Maybe it doesn’t. Yes, The problem that cannot be solved. From where my work emerges, from where it arises, from where it starts.

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