

Spring 2024

Sensual Container: The Body in Theory, the Body on Stage

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Recommended Citation

Herschend, Hannah Rosa, "Sensual Container: The Body in Theory, the Body on Stage" (2024). *Senior Projects Spring 2024*. 126.

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Sensual Container
The Body in Theory, the Body on Stage

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Hannah Rosa Herschend

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2024

Acknowledgements

I have so many to thank for their incredible help throughout this process.

To Yebel Gallegos, thank you for being a wonderful advisor. Your work has inspired me; your teaching in the studio and *convivencia* shared learning spaces in the classroom have shaped me tremendously as a mover and as a thinker.

Thank you Maria Simpson and Tara Lorenzen for teaching technique and principles of composition that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

To Justine Florence, I am endlessly grateful for your inspiring work, your feedback, and your friendship!

Thank you to Adelaide, Ilán, Zoë, Liz, Alyssa, Mieke, and Audrey for your time, artistry, and dedication in bringing this work to life.

Thank you again to Zoë Guzin, for a long and lovely second semester of rehearsals and research.

Thank you to the entire production team at Luma theater for bringing the work to life on stage.

To my family, thank you for inspiring me and for your love and support.

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Artist Statement

This process, and the resulting dances and writing, have been about ways of dealing with the physical body. The body thinks but often I do not understand. I'd like to have some privacy but I do not want to be too opaque. The writing that follows accompanies, but it won't explain.

I mistake what I am already thinking for what I am reading. I mistake someone else's body for my own. I'm searching this in-between space that's left behind, and the only way to show what I've found is through the body.

Performance is a spectacle, but it's also a negotiation. The body is social but it is also deeply private. Sometimes ideas swallow the body, sometimes the body swallows ideas. It has some agency. I have some agency. You have some agency from where you are observing.

Introduction

This written accompaniment to the two choreographic works, *Sensual Containers* and *Sunbathers*, has been a yearlong project. I began preliminary research—both theoretical and physical—last year in Berlin. I was busy with questions of material surfaces, theories of iconicity, beauty, Bauhaus, fascination with specific paintings and the sculptures of Louise Bourgeois, the lines of classic Modern dance & Graham, the dramatics of my own love life, placement of pelvis in ballet, space as material, and listening and precision in tango.

The question that plagued me most pressingly was the age-old question of how to deal with the dilemma of the body and the mind. Although I reject the idea of a clean Cartesian split, the intelligence of the body fails to fit into the logical system, and this point of friction—sometimes grating, sometimes euphoric—makes up the central well of questions at the center of this research project.

Bataille writes: “Each being is distinct from all others. His birth, his death, the events of his life may have an interest for others, but he alone is directly concerned in them. He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity.

This gulf exists, for instance, between you, listening to me, and me, speaking to you. We are attempting to communicate, but no communication between us can abolish our fundamental difference. If you die, it is not my death. You and I are discontinuous beings.”¹ This issue of

¹ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, 1st City lights ed (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 12.

discontinuity between people, and the fact that ideas may be shared but bodies remain fundamentally separate, also brought up hoards of questions: Is this miserable? Is this true? Does this feel true all the time? What, really, is the body for? Of course, these will not all be definitively answered here. But, because dance is an art form that lives in the physical-body realm, it is especially well equipped to explore these questions.

The structure of my research mirrors the structure of my physical practice in the studio. In the studio I spend a lot of time improvising, working from a place of impulse, from a place of desire (to move). I repeat what I thought I had done, without precision, allowing the movement to modify with my changing state, changing body, changing ideas. I like to remember imperfectly. What feels important stays in my body; what bores me, I let go of. As I read and write, I reread and rewrite. I write out passages from texts to ‘try them on’ with my hand, to put them into my body. I read on impulse, I let myself be guided by curiosity. I’ll write the same thing over and over again. I write to find out what stays important over long periods of time and what questions keep pressing me. In this way, I link my research to my body—literally to my writing hand, but also to my wandering mind as a function of the body.²

² This methodology is inspired by queer Chicana theory: Gloria Anzaldúa calls writing a gesture of the body; Laura Rendón describes *Sentipensante Pedagogy* as a practice that involves feeling as a form of thinking. Gloria Anzaldúa, “Preface: Gestures of the Body -- Escribiendo Para Idear,” in *Light in the Dark, Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015), 1–8. James Rhem, “Sentipensante Pedagogy,” *The National Teaching & Learning Forum* 18, no. 2 (February 2009): 1–6.

This written research is divided into three sections. The first section is a general overview of the theoretical research I've done throughout the year, which has fed both projects. The second and third sections each accompany the process behind each work of performance. The writing is disjointed, and meant to reflect the elements and research that went into the dance making process. To make these elements coherent would create a separate work that would have nothing to do with this dance, because writing demands clarity and dance is allowed to be opaque.

THE BODY IN THEORY

The body thinks but often, I do not understand it. This section overviews my attempts to make sense of the thinking body, to put it in theoretical, personal, and experiential context.

The surface of the body, the skin, and the bulk of the body, the flesh, bones, fascia, fluids, thoughts, and emotions are engaged in an infinitely complex dance. As an art form, dance is especially well poised to investigate the tensional relationship between the surface of the body and its depth of meaning. The curious hand, the feeling skin, the bones that take impact, the heart that squeezes, the gut that shouts impulse, and their infinite arrangements explode with possibilities.

Stewart writes that it is the body which anchors us in this world, and it is through the body that we know the self (apart from, or compared to the other); it is our mode of perceiving both time and space.³

The way I move is the way I think. The body is more fluid than any other medium, you cannot divorce it from training, from personality, from body-habits.

I have a fear that I will slip out of my own body, beyond the confines of my skin. This could happen poetically; I might feel my soul slip out of my body and embark on one of the ghostly

³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 1st paperback ed (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

wanderings my grandmother used to experience in middle age. One day, it will happen with my death—my body will decompose, its borders will break and become fragmented. I have been continually fascinated by the borders of the body, and by the hard limits of the skin (which nevertheless, offer some yield). Lacan describes the ‘erotogenic zones’ of the body, where there are cuts and gaps on the surface of the body associated with our organic functions: the lips and eyes, for example. These are the taboo zones, they are at once inside and outside. The grotesque body involves a hyperbolization of these zones: bodily fluids, genitals, bowels. There is something unnerving and publicly unacceptable about the threshold to the inside zone of the body.⁴

Bataille writes, “Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self — possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable individuality”⁵

Body thinking is unclear, elusive. Logic, stemming from the Greek tradition, has long involved a rejection of the body. The social and political history of the practice of logic reveals its close ties to the retention of power. Muñoz’s work in queer theory discusses how ephemeral matters, because they refuse to be pinned down concretely, are often considered ‘not real’ or ‘frivolous’ knowledge.⁶ Scott shows how ephemeral events, which he calls ‘hidden transcripts’ (these are any acts of small, covert resistance and may take shape as jokes, rumors, or even physical acts

⁴ Stewart, *On Longing*.

⁵ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 17-18.

⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (January 1996): 5–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709608571228>.

such as working slowly or clumsily on purpose) are the ever-present tools of resistance.⁷ Taylor, using Scott's concepts of '*Hidden Transcripts*,' shows how dance has often been a tool of resistance.⁸

Foucault argues the main problematization of the body for the Greeks in the development of logic was the body's capacity for 'spontaneous movements of thought'. Discussions around sexuality clearly reveal the way the body was understood, and the way the thinking body was feared. Illusions and resemblances, argues Foucault, plagued the chaste thinker. The entire body is a suspect in the persecution of erotic thinking. Foucault writes:

A whole economy of these pleasure flows must be constructed by focusing one's attention on the boundaries of the body and the outside world, on these organs of perception and what they may perceive. An economy of the gaze, which mustn't be directed haphazardly to everything the eyes can capture; an economy of hearing, which mustn't attend to everything that is said, but to what it would be useful to learn. What is recommended, in short, is a selective closing off of the body to the external world, in response to a danger intrinsic to the pleasure urges that disturb and in a certain way, "sexualize" the soul.⁹

It is the interaction between the body and the outside world which compels the mind to wander. The body is constantly sensing—it hears, it feels, it sees, it tastes, it smells—and this is more or less out of our control. With each sensory input there is a possible thought. In this way, thinking with the body is unpredictable, uncontrollable, at the mercy of the environment. Where logic

⁷ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁸ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh: Volume 4 of The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 4, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2021), 185.

rules the mind, the sensual world becomes its enemy. Foucault points out that Basil of Ancyra found the sense of touch in particular to be the most culpable and suspicious out of all of the senses:

...the sense of touch functions as the general form of all the senses. In each of them, it is touch that imprints the soul with the image of the external things whose different kinds touch the body; it is what makes them spread through the body and trouble the soul. The sense of touch constitutes the general medium, as it were, of the whole corporeal sensitivity. It is more or less present, more or less active, more or less determinant in every form of sensation. So if one intends to control the movement of the pleasures that stream through all the sensory channels, one should pay the most attention to touch. "Avoid contacts": a precept that must be understood in the precise sense of the word.

The sense of touch was the most problematic as it was understood as the sense of the body as a whole. After all, it is the body that presents the biggest problem, and the other four senses are limited to the zone of the head.

Breton writes on positivism: "By contrast, the realistic attitude, inspired by positivism, from Saint Thomas Aquinas to Anatole France, clearly seems to me to be hostile to any intellectual or moral advancement. I loathe it, for it is made up of mediocrity, hate, and dull conceit."¹⁰ For the Surrealists, the mind's capacity for spontaneous movements of thought was a thrill. Breton argues that it is precisely this capacity of the mind which reveals a whole intelligence which is hardly tapped into, and the foundation for the surrealist school of thought. An example from Elaine Scarry: "...whenever Augustine touches something smooth, he begins to think of music and of God."¹¹

¹⁰ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1969), 6.

¹¹ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Nachdr., Princeton Paperbacks (Princeton, N.J. Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010), 4.

Foucault argues that the practice and technique of confession functions to do exactly the opposite: to control the wandering mind and put its musings into the world of logic so that the philosopher may control them. Confession, Foucault argues, hurdles over the barrier of shame to externalize private thinking, to make it less powerful.¹²

In a way this written accompaniment has threatened to be a confession of my own process, taking agency away from my subconscious. The design of confession is a brilliant one and not one recommended so enthusiastically by the church for lack of effectiveness in overpowering the back of the mind. Bataille writes: “I do not think that man has much chance of throwing light on the things that terrify him before he has dominated them.”¹³

Throughout this writing process it has caused me great distress to drag my fresh, tender and deformed ideas out of their incubating Cenotes¹⁴ and observe them, misshapen and completely nonsensical lying pathetically on my writer’s plate. Once viewed dead on, they had to be discarded, as they failed to delight me with the same charms they had once possessed when glimpsed glittering in the periphery.

Of course, writing is not the only way to organize knowledge. De la Fuente discusses the way in which art “springs from the human need to actively give form to things by coordinating inner

¹² Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh: Volume 4*, 79-110.

¹³ Bataille, *Erotism*.

¹⁴ This word comes from Gloria Anzaldúa’s name for an underground well of memories, the place where knowledge and memories take on a body and a life. From: Gloria Anzaldúa, “Flights of the Imagination: Rereading/Rewriting Realities,” in *Light in the Dark, Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015), 23–46.

image with outer reality.”¹⁵ The sensual world is connected to feelings: sight has an obvious link, as does sound— but even smell, taste, and touch give way to possible thoughts. One of the roles of art is to coordinate feelings with sensuous forms to compose acts & objects. Art arranges what cannot be arranged logically or even discursively. So here, I offer the parts, but it is the work’s job to arrange them. When I arrange them here, the writing necessitates a different conclusion.

Oscar Wilde writes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “I have grown to love secrecy. It seems to be the one thing that can make modern life mysterious or marvelous to us. The commonest thing is delightful if one hides it.”¹⁶ Take this as an explanation as to why I refrain from explaining everything at great length.

A method I am quite fond of involves repeating what I think I know over and over again, loosely—letting it change—until I arrive somewhere that feels more or less right. In the studio I’ll sometimes set material, but more often when I am researching I will dance the same thing again and again, dancing what I thought it had been, adjusting, revising, until I end with something completely different than what I had started with. In the end it always seems like something substantial—worn in some places, fresh in others. I do the same thing when I write: I write for the sake of writing, for the sake of putting what I am reading or thinking into my body. I copy passages to try them out with my hand. I write the same thing day after day—sometimes,

¹⁵ Eduardo De La Fuente, “Why Aesthetic Patterns Matter: Art and a ‘Qualitative’ Social Theory,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 44, no. 2 (2013): 168–85, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12036>.

¹⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Penguin Classics (London ; New York: Penguin, 2003), 8.

it does not change, and sometimes it does. Scarry writes that the impulse toward beauty is the impulse toward both reproduction and clarification.¹⁷

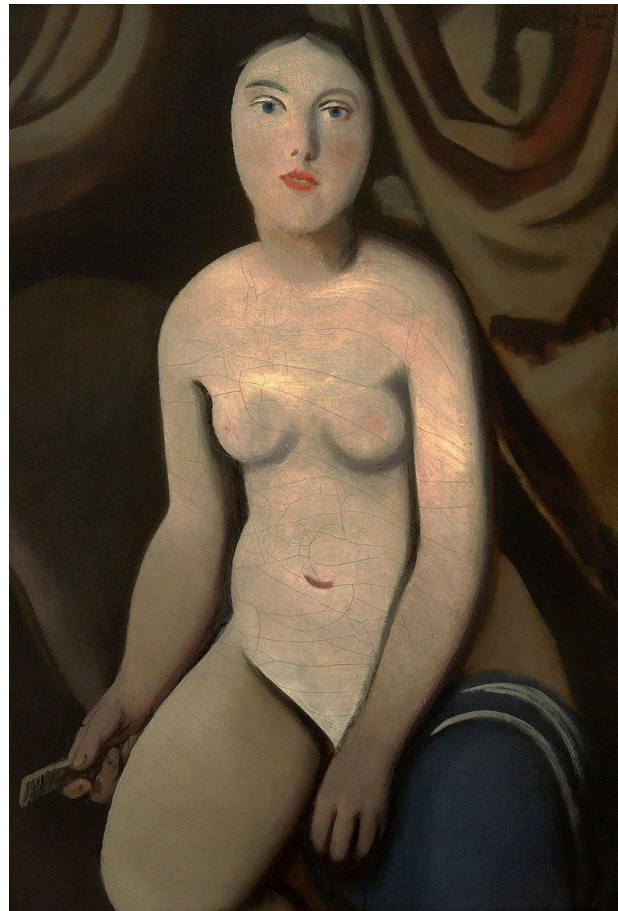
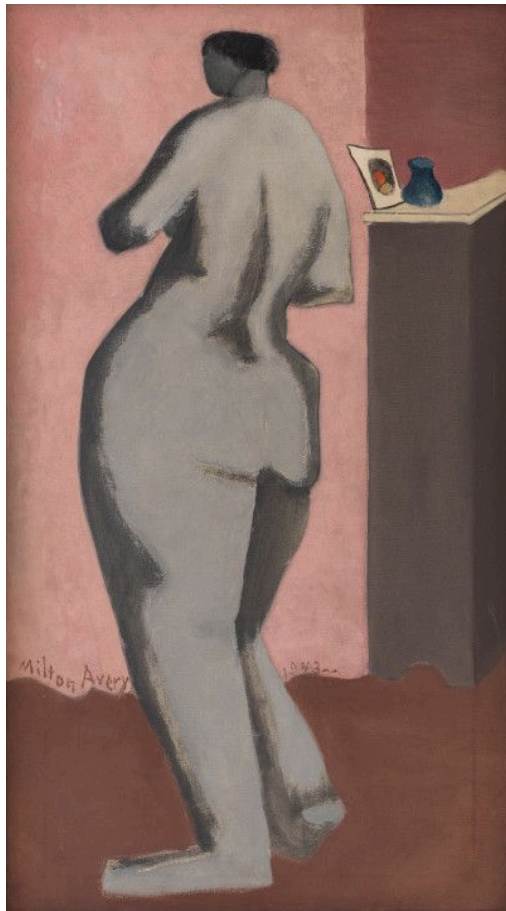
In this way things are always rearranged, meanings shift, things become extremely important or they recede into the background, although never without a trace. I can jump between theory and gut feelings, I can understand one day but not at all the next. This research has privileged the subconscious processes but aimed to keep tabs on their evolutions. The next sections offer fragments from each process.

¹⁷ Scarry, *On Beauty*.

THE BODY ON STAGE, FALL WORK

Stewart writes, “The body presents the paradox of the contained and container at once”¹⁸

The original impetus for this work came from a lumpy disco ball I saw in Los Angeles. I remember having found it grippingly tragic. I liked the idea of the disco ball because it was performing, because it almost certainly had a meaningless styrofoam core, and because all of its cultural and emotional meaning was attached to its glittering surface. Nevertheless, I was sharply ashamed (on behalf of the lumpy disco ball) when I watched it shine and turn. It reminded me of these paintings:



¹⁸ Stewart, *On Longing*, 104.

This work then turned into an attempt to make sense of a few elements which I found to be connected: this lumpy disco ball (I had also found it quite funny), a series of nudes I had seen in a museum in Prague which had moved me deeply (two of these, Kremlicka's *In Front of the Mirror* and Avery's *Gray Nude* are pictured on pg. 12), some early sculptures and drawings by Louise Bourgeois, and questions I had about the relationship between physical surface and meaning, especially when it came to putting meaning onto something or someone.

a. SHAMEFUL OBJECTS

There is something profoundly confusing about this tension between expressing some sort of dignified posture and being the object. It is hard to figure out who the joke is on. These images arrested me because I could not figure out how to read them.

I took Susan Sontag's writing on Diane Arbus's photography as my guide. I found it deeply informed the way I read these paintings, and the subject of the female nude in general:

The authority of Arbus's photographs derives from the contrast between their lacerating subject matter and their calm, matter-of-fact attentiveness. This quality of attention—the attention paid by the photographer, the attention paid by the subject to the act of being photographed—creates the moral theater of Arbus's straight-on, contemplative portraits. Far from spying on freaks and pariahs, catching them unawares, the photographer has gotten to know them, reassured them—so that they posed for her as calmly and stiffly as any Victorian notable sat for a studio portrait by Julia Margaret Cameron. A large part of the mystery of Arbus's photographs lies in what they suggest about how her subjects felt after consenting to be photographed. Do they see themselves, the viewer wonders, like that? Do they know how grotesque they are? It seems as if they don't.¹⁹

¹⁹Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Picador, 1977).

Mulvey writes, on cinema, that one of the pleasures of cinema (scopophilia) is the pleasure to look and look shamelessly. The viewer takes a higher position than the viewed. In cinema, Mulvey argues, this operates along a hierarchy which mirrors a patriarchal system of power: the male/looker is positioned over the woman/observed.²⁰ But in images like the ones of Arbus, the viewer is not allowed this basic photographic pleasure, thus marking the images as off-putting and morally bizarre.

Freud notes that an obscene joke, especially directed at a woman, ceases to be funny when she goes along with it. The fun is in putting her in an uncomfortable position.²¹ Mackinnon writes, in her critique of pornography, that revulsion is erotic.²² In this way images which incite some sort of moral panic by the refusal of the subject to ‘let us have the joke’ are not purified of their pornographic potential. Paintings such as Kremlicka’s *In Front of the Mirror* and Avery’s *Gray Nude* are, for me, charged with this feeling. The sitter does not quite give in, but also seems to not quite understand. How can she not realize she is the object?

There is something in the posture of the figures depicted in *In the Mirror* and *Gray Nude*, which is, for me, particularly poignant. They seem to pose as if there is some part of their body that is aware of this power imbalance, aware of this hierarchy in their position as the observed subjects, although they themselves may not know it. They do not confront us aggressively, nor do they directly challenge our view. But I feel that in looking, I am hyper-aware of their nudity, of their

²⁰ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1, 1975): 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (New York: Norton, 1905).

²² Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Not a Moral Issue,” *Yale Law & Policy Review* 2, no. 2 (1984): 321–45.

bodies which are completely on display. I am aware that I am looking. In the gallery I have the right to stare.





The first part of this piece—the tableau of moving sculptural bodies for several minutes across the stage—became an important part of this research’s physical praxis. I gave the dancers the task of creating shapes inspired by these paintings. The glacial pace as the dancers scrape by invites the audience to take the position of the viewer. The dancers are looking but they do not really look at you. I want the audience to be comfortable.

Some of the positions are seductive. The dancers should not enjoy them, but they should also not suffer from them.

b. POSTURES AND MYTHOLOGIES

Wayne Koestenbaum writes on Barthes: “Love, Barthes proves, is not a feeling we take raw, but a condition that passes through the mediating scrim of plots, prejudices, and assumed positions. We get love through proxies; we can’t apprehend the thing itself, only the stylized miasma it stumbles through.”²³

I remember quite viscerally the first time I stood somewhere miserably (actually, this was only a year ago). Perhaps I have stood miserably somewhere before, but I had never named it in this way. Either way, this first and specific time I had been standing miserably I leaned into it. I took note of how it felt in my body. In rehearsals for this piece, we played with adopting certain poses miserably, longingly, or as if on some horrible display, and I was stunned by how I was able to feel these emotional states off of the bodies of the dancers with complete clarity.

c. BELOVED OBJECTS

Alexander writes, in his social theory of iconicity, that icons work as symbolic condensations of meaning. It is their material dimension, he argues, that makes them available to us. It is through the senses that we know them. He writes: “The surface, or form, of a material object is a magnet, a vacuum cleaner that sucks the feeling viewer into meaning.”²⁴ In this way they function aesthetically and sensually as well as intellectually. Icons allow for a circling between abstract ideas and concrete objects.

²³ Wayne Koestenbaum, *My 1980s & Other Essays*, First edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

²⁴ Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Iconic Consciousness: The Material Feeling of Meaning,” *Thesis Eleven* 103, no. 1 (November 2010): 10–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513610381369>, 11.

Throughout this process I wondered—if iconicity and meaning is only attached to the surface, what does this mean for the inside? Can we know it? I wondered; I worried: is this export of deep emotions onto material surfaces pathetic? I decided: sometimes yes, sometimes no.



In Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, Christ is carried across town in a helicopter.

Sontag writes: “To look at something that's "empty" is still to be looking, still to be seeing something — if only the ghosts of one's own expectations.”²⁵



Similar icons in this piece

Standing in the face of something beautiful or some strong idea I feel the need to be physically exhausted. I want to be sure my body has been moved.

²⁵ Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence,” in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Picador, 1979).

THE BODY ON STAGE, SPRING WORK

“Furthermore: desperate readers are like the California gold mines. Sooner or later they’re exhausted! Why? It’s obvious! One can’t live one’s whole life in desperation. One can’t live one’s whole life in desperation. In the end the body rebels, the pain becomes unbearable, lucidity gushes out in great cold spurts. The desperate reader (and especially the desperate poetry reader, who is insufferable, believe me) ends up turning away from books. Inevitably he ends up becoming just plain desperate. Or he’s cured! And then, as a part of the regenerative process, he returns slowly—as if wrapped in swaddling cloths, as if under a rain of dissolved sedatives—he returns, as I was saying, to literature written for cool, serene readers, with their heads set firmly on their shoulders. This is what’s called (by me, nobody else) the passage from adolescence to adulthood.”²⁶

After the fall concert, I was fed up with angst. I wanted, with this work, to move out of the social world. I grew tired of theories about the body being seen, tired of theories of sex and philosophical musings on love, and tired of the idea of the self as something to be exported, shared, or possessed. I wanted this literature written for cool, serene readers that Bolaño describes. I had spent the winter thinking about the sun.

Toward the end of the process, I arrived at the question: How is it possible to be on display without spilling out of yourself, without being seen-through? I suspect this was the question all along, although it took the entire semester to find the words for it.

The technical form of this piece—working with just one other dancer—meant that I had to spend quite a bit of time dealing with the distance or lack of distance between us. Zoe was not me. I had to account for this. At first, this seemed incompatible with my desire to give up on this question of ‘discontinuous beings,’ (to borrow Bataille’s language). I could not understand how

²⁶ Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 208.

to deal with our being separate without dipping into some dreadful territory that I wanted to stay far away from. It also seemed out of the question to ignore this issue.

This issue, and finding ways to deal with it, led me down several rabbit holes. How deeply each influenced the process is almost completely dependent on the length of time each managed to capture my attention. I am sure traces from all of them remain in the dance. I've tried to map this process in the next section. I'll outline the elements here.

a. VIOLENT SEPARATION

After rewatching Bergman's *Persona*, I was once again consumed by the issue of separation. Elisabeth (seems to) split in two in *Persona*. I imagined Zoe as myself. Zoe told me about a dream she had where everyone on earth was her.

In *Persona*, Elisabeth suffers from a lack of motherliness. She had become terrified of pregnancy. She gives birth and she hates her child. Elisabeth is silent, she refuses to speak. Sontag writes that her silence is a species of sadism.²⁷ Elisabeth's official reason for her silence is that she refuses to lie or to misspeak. In doing so, she also refuses to be understood.

I attended an event where a person I did not know had his heartbeat live-amplified for the attendees to hear. We sat in silence. I mistook his heartbeat for my own. I was horrified by this mistake. I did not want this intimacy.

²⁷ Sontag, *Silence*.

Bataille writes on discontinuous beings. He says, although we cannot hurdle over this gulf of separation, we can grow dizzy at its depth together.²⁸ I don't want to do this. Barthes writes on succumbing to love: "This is how it happens sometimes, misery or joy engulfs me, without any particular tumult ensuing: nor any pathos: I am dissolved, not dismembered; I fall, I float, I melt."²⁹ He continues: "The crisis of engulfment can come from a wound, but also from a fusion: we die together from loving each other: an open death, by dilution into the other, a closed death of the shared grave."³⁰ This disgusted me. I decided I do not want to be in love.

b. TENDER SEPARATION

When I feel the sun on my skin I become completely aware of where my body ends. It feels uncomplicated and obvious. I know it through my senses. I can feel it on my body.

The way the rocks sit atop one another, and the way the cactuses stand next to each other in Joshua Tree park felt like another way to deal with this issue of separation, of discontinuous beings. Here it is no issue. It just makes sense. I look at them and it makes sense. Standing in Joshua Tree, the question feels resolved. I took some photos to help me remember:

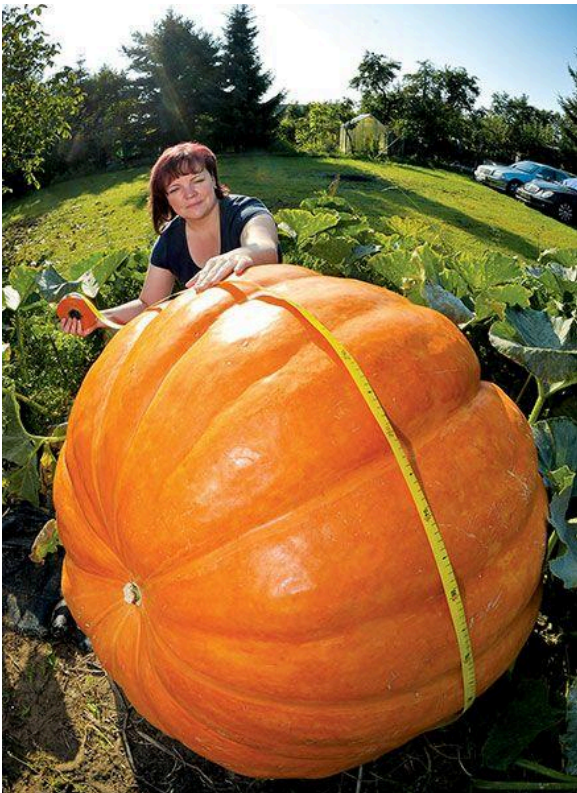
²⁸ Bataille, *Erotism*, 13.

²⁹ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Paperback edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 10.

³⁰ Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 10-11.



Here I began to think also about gigantic vegetables. I became fascinated by gigantic vegetable photography. There seems to be a certain serenity, a confidence about the difference between the grotesque vegetable and its proud handler, but, at the same time, a tenderness between them. The way they lay their hands gently on the vegetable is awkward, but also very friendly.



Stewart writes that the kitsch object (I see the gigantic vegetables as being either kitsch or kitsch-adjacent), “...offers a saturation of materiality, a saturation which takes place to such a degree that materiality is ironic, split into contrasting voices: past and present, mass production and individual subject, oblivion and reification.”³¹ The terms *kitsch* and *camp*, according to Stewart, imply: “the imitation, the inauthentic, the impersonation. Their significance lies in their exaggerated display of the values of consumer culture.”³² Stewart argues that they function as a mime to the male discourse of productivity, authority, and predication. The feminine realm of kitsch and camp, by contrast, serves as a parody. The gigantic vegetables somehow fit into this picture: much too big, grown to the point of tastelessness, in the end useless for consumption.

But it is their inability to be used which fascinates me. They become a friend to their grower, I imagine. The way the vegetables sit reminds me of the nude women in the paintings; I think of Songag’s description of the grotesque subject and wonder, or worry, that these vegetables don’t know the joke is on them. But the way they are handled is different– vegetables, after all, cannot be ashamed.



³¹ Stewart, *On Longing*, 167.

³² Stewart, *On Longing*, 168.

c. SOLITUDE

I read *The Wall* by Marlen Haushoffner; I watched my Grandmother sitting content by herself. She told me she never gets bored.

I asked a friend how he dealt with heartache, and he told me he simply refrains from contemplation. I found this fascinating. I experimented with this for several months, and the results were incredible.

One morning, I suddenly remembered Silverstein's book, *The Missing Piece*. I remembered it because I knew it had dealt with stacking shapes and the feeling of stacking, something Zoe and I had been working on for a long time in rehearsals. In Silverstien's story, the missing piece, after spending some time trying to fit into the other, softens his edges and rolls along by himself, happily, contentedly, in company.³³

d. SPECTACLE OF PERFORMANCE

The question that plagued me next was, why put this on stage? I could not trust my own rhetoric: If I was so content, what is the need to show it? How is it possible to have agency while being seen?

I had begun to have the suspicion around one year ago that stiffness and lack of technique could be seen as a technique of privacy. I made the crude and generalized observation that extraversion

³³ Shel Silverstein, *The Missing Piece* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

and introversion seem to each, respectively, involve a posture of the body which points to how much the person likes to share. In dance, I see techniques such as *gaga* and ballet as styles which spill out meaning from every direction. Although the way of moving in each style, respectively, is completely different, both techniques are far removed from the patterning of the everyday body. Each movement, in being unquestionably dance, seems designed to be shared. Nothing feels like it should be private; everything is available and recommended for me to look at, to take meaning from.

Watching early modern dance, however, especially the dances of Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, I was struck by the pedestrian texture which allows for the dancers to retain some privacy. Not everything feels on display. There is some meaning to be shared, but there is also some meaning to be kept for themselves.

Similarly, in the magic show, the magician holds the audience but he also conceals. He captures the attention so that he may hide something behind him, up his sleeve, between his fingers. I attended a magic show in Los Angeles and was captivated by this quality, this autonomy.

Right now, I want to show only a little bit, and keep the rest for myself.

Conclusion, Note on Process

Dealing with making my process legible has been impossible. There is no way to make sense of the process other than this, or the work itself. This being said, here I can offer notes I made throughout the process.

FALL WORK TIMELINE

1. I see the Lumpy Disco Ball in the bar in Los Angeles
2. I decide I'll have the piece be about getting ready for a night out at the disco, in the rain: I thought to separate it into four sections: The duet of the lumpy disco balls, The duet of the perfumes, The trio of the wet jackets, The solo for the sore ankles.
3. Disorientation: Pleasure in letting go and nipping fear that something could be not right. Do I like this? Does everything feel good all the time? Am I feeling too much or not enough? (in relation to: 'going out dancing')
4. I listened to Pascal Comelade's album: *Détail Monochrome*; I decided that this would be the new form.
5. The idea of 'getting ready' for a night out reminded me of the paintings, Kremlicka's *In Front of the Mirror* and Avery's *Gray Nude*. Suddenly the concept was saddening.
6. I let go of the disco idea.
7. I remembered the clown scene from Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*.

8. I watched Rafaella Carra's music video, *A Far L'Amore Comincia Tu*. I thought about stiff movements and agency. We watched it again in rehearsals.
9. It kept getting colder and darker.
10. I read Susan Stewart's *On Longing* and thought about miniatures and freak shows.
11. I thought about Louise Bourgeois' early sculptures.
12. After the piece was finished I worried I had only made 'The Diary of a Teenage Girl' (the film) into a dance

SPRING WORK TIMELINE

1. Desire to have it be removed from the social world: inspired by Haushoffner's *The Wall*, inspired by the older characters in Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*.
2. I waited eagerly for sun, spring, and warmth.
3. Bergman's *Persona*: Zoe and I as the same person, mirroring concept (this became too angsty).
4. Newborn baby photography of twins informs our stacking in the studio.
5. I look at giant vegetables at the state fair.
6. Back to *Persona*, concept of pregnancy, and to drawings of Louise Bourgeois (pregnancy drawings).
7. Based on feedback, investigating the power dynamic between Zoe and I, leaning into it.
8. Strong desire to make the piece completely asexual, completely unerotic (back to the giant vegetables) (back to *The Wall*).

9. Marveling at the flirtatious nature of spring, leaves squeezed shut, buds squeezed shut.
10. Disgust at hearing a stranger's heartbeat.
11. Reading Dorian Gray, wanting privacy, wanting secrecy. Frustration at the provocation of privacy, exciting tension of leaving things unsaid. Wanting this to not be the case.
12. 70's conversation pits, postcards from the Madonna Inn hotel, shag carpet bathrooms.
13. Fascination with early modern dance, with magicians and magic shows and the state fair.
14. Back to Joshua tree with costume design.
15. Grandmotherly contemplation, *The Wall*, overwhelming desire to remain autonomous, deciding to never be in love.
16. I reread Shell Silverstein's *The Missing Piece*.
17. Seeing the piece on stage, the original concept of being in the sun comes back full force.
18. The piece is named, Sunbathers.

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APPENDIX

The Bard College Dance Program Presents:

BODY CONCEPTS

Senior projects in dance by:
Hannah Herschend
Justine Florence



Thursday, December 7th - 7:30pm
Friday, December 8th - 7:30pm
Saturday, December 9th - 2pm & 7:30pm

LUMA Theater
The Fisher Center
at Bard College

Free and open to the public
845-758-7900 | fishercenter.bard.edu

The Bard College Dance Program Presents:

I CAN'T REMEMBER ANYTHING EVER HAVING ENDED

Senior projects in dance by:
Hannah Herschend Justine Florence



Thursday, May 9th - 7:30pm

Friday, May 10th - 7:30pm

Saturday, May 11th - 2pm & 7:30pm

LUMA Theater
The Fisher Center
at Bard College

Free and open to the public
845-758-7900 | fishercenter.bard.edu