

WOMEN AND IMPROVISATION: TRANSGRESSION,
TRANSFORMATION AND TRANSCENDENCE

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This feminist study examines women's use of improvisation in discovering, creating, and articulating various self-identities. To create a theory of identity formation, two feminist theoretical positions, essentialism and poststructuralism, are analyzed and merged. This hybrid theory addresses the interplay between the self and society that women must recognize in order to form satisfying identities. Improvisational practices, involving bodily awareness and movement, are demonstrated to have the potential for helping women to actualize themselves in these various identities. For this study, the writer uses her experience as an improviser and interviews three women who use improvisation in their choreographic processes. She also discusses performers whom she has seen and performers about whom feminist performance critics have written.

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**WOMEN AND IMPROVISATION: TRANSGRESSION,
TRANSFORMATION AND TRANSCENDENCE**

THESIS

**Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
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By

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study examines improvisation in dance and performance art from a feminist perspective. I clarify what improvisation entails and, by doing so, illustrate how improvisational movement in dance and performance art can enhance the lives of women as viewers and performers. Through exploring improvisation from this feminist perspective, I demonstrate the psychological insights I have gained from practicing improvisation and document performances that have been improvisationally inspired by women who feel dissatisfied with the manner in which this society shapes and limits their identities.

As it has for many women, dance has served me in times of crisis and transition by giving me a physical method for expressing my feelings. I first began to connect with dance as a facilitator for growth once I was formally introduced to improvisational movement in a modern dance class. I immediately responded to improvisation because it allowed me to let go of my fears about whether I was a “good” dancer or not, something which I was unable to do in regular technique classes. In ballet classes, for example, I worried about whether I was graceful or elegant enough; many times I would compare myself to the other female students whom I perceived as being more feminine and, therefore, more accomplished dancers than I. In improvisation, however, because I had

only to follow my kinesthetic instincts while improvising rather than worrying about my performance or what I looked like, I felt more confident and encouraged in my movement abilities. It was a great release for me to do whatever I needed to at the moment. In the improvisational courses that I took later, I became more aware of my body as an integral aspect of myself. My body's sensations, which I had ignored or tried to control for so many years, were brought to my consciousness, enabling me to realize how they influenced my actions and feelings. Occasionally during a class, I reached moments of transcendence, where my inhibitions disappeared, freeing me to discover new parts of myself. These moments gave me the energy and motivation to continue finding out who I was and where I was going.

My interest in feminism stemmed from similar anxieties as the ones I faced in the technique classes. Being a woman and a student, I often find it difficult to reconcile the images of women this society depicts with my own aspirations. I have been deeply disturbed by how much sexist portrayals and stereotypes of women have shaped my identity, sometimes to the point that I turn my energies into self-destructive directions. Slowly, I am coming to an awareness of how much images generated by our society cause me to either divorce myself from my body because it is what I label as "woman," or to attempt to control my body so that it fits within parameters this society deems acceptable for women. Through practices like improvisation I have realized that these images are destructive because they tend to freeze the self into a consumable package, i.e., as if one were a photograph in a fashion magazine. The body/self becomes an image that can be

objectified. Improvisation, however, teaches me that my identity is constantly in flux and has far more depth than a surface image could convey. It is this conviction that has motivated me throughout this study.

As I continued my interest in dance, I observed the growth of other women who were introduced to improvisational movement in a course on improvisation. Most of these young women had experienced dance as an art form meant for other's pleasures, for example, many of these women had performed in a dance team that entertained sports fans during half-time. Others were trained mainly in ballet, jazz, and tap. These students were used to perceiving their bodies as instruments to be shaped into precise, aesthetically pleasing designs. Few had encountered dance as a medium for discovering the self and for shaping an authentic identity, which could then be communicated to others.

I noticed several changes among these women as they explored improvisation. They became more open and varied in their movement vocabulary. They were less inhibited about what could be construed as right or wrong in their movements. I also noticed that they became more confident in speaking their opinions and in differing from one another in class. At the same time, they became more sensitive to each other's artistic growth. These women inspired me with their increasing understanding of themselves and greater clarity of purpose in their creative work. From my experiences watching these students and charting my own growth, I began to formulate a belief that improvisation

can provide women with tools that will aid them in developing into full people within a society that often discourages them.

In addition to noticing the practical results from studying improvisation, I found as a feminist that I was in agreement with the ideas promoted in the teaching of improvisation because these related to values I consider to be feminist. Improvisation is a form which is process-oriented, collaborative, and nonhierarchical, and improvisational performances further communion between the artist(s) and the spectators/participants. I consider these traits feminist because they encourage the liberation of each individual while also respecting group harmony. My feeling that improvisation has so many positive, feminist aspects led me to embark on the study of improvisation as a feminist art form.

I began my study with many questions about improvisation and how it can be used as a feminist art form. I wanted to research why and how an individual can develop a positive identity through improvisational techniques. I also wanted to find out the ways different women artists have used improvisation to accomplish self-discovery. In exploring women's creation of their identities through improvisation, I came across a question, articulated by several feminist thinkers, that disturbed me: how can a creative woman form her identity in an environment which is discouraging and traditionally controlled by masculine discourses? This question led me to research more fully into the issue of identity as discussed by feminist writers and to observe how feminist artists use their creative processes. Through this research I recognized that the body was a recurring source of creativity for many feminist artists. I suspected that this use of the body had to

do with women coming to terms with their bodies as the most visible site of their difference from men. In addition to this tendency to express themselves via the body, I found that other women performers were going in an opposite direction by rejecting gender definitions and playing with the markings of gender. This second artistic choice, I conjectured, might be related to these women's belief that gender codes limit their self-concepts rather than liberating them as the previous feminist artists had thought. These two artistic choices coincided with two feminist theories of performance, essentialism and poststructuralism respectively.

After delving further into the subject of women's identities as a central question of feminist theory, I began to realize that in order to fulfill my intention for this study -- to elucidate the relationship that exists between improvisation and feminist goals, I would need to examine how women use improvisation to find their own, authentic identities, if such identities do exist. This study proves that improvisation can enhance self-discovery because its practitioners have the potential to connect with their bodies and to access parts of the self which have been repressed by their culture. My findings suggest that improvisation addresses a combination of the two approaches to artistic expression that I observed, body-centered and gender deconstructing, and therefore, aspects of both essentialist and poststructuralist theories are articulated in improvisational performances. I also assert that improvisation gives women tools that can help them to interact within their environments successfully.

This study is important because establishing improvisation as a potentially feminist art form can encourage others to use improvisational techniques within their creative endeavors as well as in classes, therapy, and daily life. I believe that by knowing

how improvisation involves the whole person--intellectually, emotionally, and kinesthetically--others will perceive its possible benefits. In addition I hope that, through demonstrating the link between feminist performance theory and improvisation in both the creative process and as a concert form, more critics and theorists of dance will address improvisation in their writings.

To further my goal of making improvisation more accessible to critics and dancers alike, I illuminate the feminist implications of improvisation by discussing the two feminist theories, essentialism and poststructuralism, which are germane to the issue of identity. I also demystify the process of improvisation by interviewing improvisational creators, asking them why they use improvisation and what improvisation means for them. In addition, I explore two important aspects of identity, the body and gender definitions, which I discovered in my research, to determine what improvisational formation of the self entails. My study contributes to the literature on feminist performance by discussing identity issues in relation to performances by woman artists and by defining improvisation and illustrating its feminist aspects.

Identity formation, as I am using it in this study, is a person's understanding of his or her past experiences and how these have shaped him or her. This process involves a psychological understanding of the self as a mind-body system, with this realized system acting as the source of self-knowledge. At the same time, identity formation involves the person's recognition that the culture has a profound effect on how he or she perceives him or herself. For example, one must come to terms with the fact that such seemingly natural labels, like male or female, are actually constructs created by the culture. To form his or her identity and come to self-actualization, then, the person must, in a sense, re-

form his or herself with the knowledge that these cultural labels are arbitrary and potentially detrimental. This study will attempt to reconcile two feminist theories on identity formation, essentialism and poststructuralism, and link them to improvisational practices.

The identity question articulated above asks whether people can transcend their social and cultural conditions. I have struggled with this question under the philosophical guise of “determinism versus freewill” for many years now. Improvisation has been one key in helping me to unlock this puzzle because it was integral in my liberation. I believe one can transcend their cultural and social conditions; however, one must first have the awareness of these conditions and why and how they have affected one’s life. Improvisation aided me in finding this awareness by revealing to me parts within myself which contradicted my social identity and which told me about what I had been repressing. These parts I call the different selves or potential selves that can be played out through improvisation. By studying these woman artists who also uncover varying selves, my intuitions on these matters were affirmed. In addition to realizing the multiplicity that resides within, one can reach transcendence through listening to the body-self with a minimum of preconceptions. Once one has learned how to tune into the body’s processes through movement and meditation, as many woman artists have been doing, then a more authentic self, one that is grounded in physical reality rather than based on outside images, emerges. I believe it is the knowledge of these multiple possibilities combined with an honest relationship with one’s body that can lead to a more universal understanding of what it is to be human.

Why Women Performers?

My interest in studying women performers, in particular dancers and performance artists, springs from my sense of solidarity with women who use dance, speech, movement, costumes, and props to transgress normative notions of what women should be and, by doing so, transform themselves in order to create an alternative cultural reality for their viewers. In this society, which socializes its women and men to behave in stereotypical, sometimes destructive manners, these female performers uncover realities which are deemed perverse or unspeakable because they step outside of normative notions concerning femininity, thereby transcending the socially constructed sign of "woman." (Hunter 9, 14, 16). Since women performers have been manipulated by male-generated codes and conventions for most of dance and theatre history, these performers challenges to mainstream gender assumptions are especially powerful (Hanna 30; Kestenbaum 3).¹

Many women performers use improvisation as a starting place and/or performance technique to explore new, more satisfying ways of expressing themselves. Throughout this century, beginning with Isadora Duncan, women performers have been creating and adopting new performance forms which suit their needs better than previous performance conventions, such as ballet (Highwater 25, Cohen 119) and concert ballroom dance (Kestenbaum 1-22). I suspect that those dancers/performance artists who go beyond conventional technique in their performances have found improvisation to be a particularly advantageous form. When improvising, the choreographer/performer has the opportunity to find her own movement style and technique. Improvisation expands the

amount of choices she can make. Improvisation also frees dancers and performers to create dance and theatre performances that fulfill their individual creative needs.

Even before this century, connections existed between feminist values and improvisational performances. Kathleen McGill, a dance historian, discovered in her research into Commedia dell'arte of Renaissance Italy that the female creator/performers were determining factors in the formation of this improvisational theatre form. These women used improvisation to fuse their troupes into working collaborations. McGill explains why these troupes used improvisation:

the choice of social rather than autonomous expression heightened diversity. . . . the choice of a highly collaborative methodology made competition resolutely nonproductive; alert cooperation is key to improvisation This social diversity and collaborative methodology refused to enact difference in oppositional terms; instead difference became multiple, inclusive, and highly adaptive. (69)

McGill's findings illustrate some of the major aspects of improvisation that I believe are consonant with feminist ideology. Improvisation can both allow for individual expression and celebrate difference. At the same time, improvisation, by dispensing with a controlling director, fosters group consciousness and gives members of a group the opportunity to work cooperatively, rather than in a hierarchical manner. In addition, improvisation, even when done in a solo work, is conducive to unity between audience and spectator. This mutual experience of kinesthetic freedom creates an environment which is potentially liberating to all.

Liberation for the feminist artist has meant struggling against sexist representations of women in life and art. The feminist artist's ability to challenge conventional gender identities requires that she be conscious of how traditional dance and theatre have reinforced these roles, a task that is not as easy as it may initially seem. Sexism has continually hid under the benevolent guise of idealizing women: "Camouflage is possible, as when hostility of one sex toward the other is dressed up as love"(Hanna 30). Because all forms of art have been controlled to a large extent by the male perspective, the feminist artist's job is made far more difficult: in her attempt to create authentic works of art, she must navigate a labyrinth filled with unseen traps. From internal and external censorship to appropriation by the dominant consumer culture, the dangers are many (Klinger 196-7).²

It is not surprising that "madness" has been the artistic woman's greatest strength and most devastating debility if she fails to find an outlet for it. The myth of the mad artist, of course, is as cliché as the legends that surround Edgar Allen Poe and, more recently, Vincent Van Gogh. For the feminist artist, though, madness, may be defined as women's inability to flourish in a society which does not encourage women's self-actualization:

Women find themselves, objectively, in a nonadjusted condition because the world is not a world made to a woman's measurements So many women don't fit in it, and the damage that it does to some women is so severe that some go crazy. . . . You could say that it is actually the most sensitive who go crazy, the ones who feel the most strongly this violence that is being done to their psyches (Maraini 150)

Precisely as a consequence of the extreme anger and isolation these sensitive women experience, they frequently turn towards art for solace because it provides them with a safe place to release their repressed energy.

Many female performance artists and dancer/choreographers, for example, Karen Finley, Lydia Lunch, Carolee Schneeman, Juliana Francis and Rachel Rosenthal, found their strength and creativity from a place of “madness” or emotional frustration. Because improvisation allows the female performer to delve into repressed parts of herself and free herself from cultural inhibitions, it is a form that can fulfill her need to understand, express, and communicate to others her true feelings and beliefs. This intimate connection between performer and the creation of her art rejects the modernist aesthetic which posits that the art object is more important than the act of production (Forte 257; Klinger 196-197).³ That these women have been censored and/or criticized by art and social critics and politicians should not be alarming; their messages are ones which the dominant society does not want us to hear. Feminists need to become aware that this censorship is taking place in all arenas from academia to national funding agencies. In addition, artistic forms which can liberate women, like improvisation, should be encouraged in all stages of human growth.⁴

Outline of Chapters

In organizing my subject, I found it most useful to begin by discussing the variety of theoretical positions which make up feminist theory as this relates to my topic. Feminism is very complex because it has branched in many different directions, some of which directly oppose one another. Since I am attempting to describe improvisation as a feminist art form, I needed to understand these theories to determine from what

perspective I was viewing feminism. In Chapter Two I describe the two major feminist theories that are relevant to this study, essentialism and poststructuralism, and conclude that each have something to offer in understanding improvisation from a feminist standpoint. I then use these two theoretical positions as lenses for viewing certain feminist issues, particularly in Chapters Four and Five.

Once I have investigated these feminist theories, I define improvisation and outline its development as a technique and a performance form in Chapter Three. My aim is to provide a better understanding of what improvisation entails. Improvisation is not a widely understood artistic phenomenon; therefore, little attention is given to it in most dance texts. As a result of this lack of information, I was unaware that this form has a particular history and that many of its practitioners use aesthetic rules in creating improvisational performances. By discussing some of the purposes improvisation has served in dance and the theatre and describing how improvisational artists view their work, I hope to clarify the term improvisation. In Appendix B, I include a timeline listing some major choreographers of the twentieth century in order to put improvisation within the context of dance history.

Chapter Four considers the importance of the body in both improvisation and performance. I discuss how the body has been placed in the position of object throughout Western history and what this has meant to women, especially women in the performing arts. I also give some background about somatic theory, a theoretical position which includes the body as an integral part of human identity. I then assert that improvisation foregrounds the body as active subject, reversing the dichotomy which has kept it

objectified. In considering the body's position in relation to performance, I borrow from essentialist theory because it embraces the body's part in our self-definition.

Chapter Five serves as a counterpoint to Chapter Four by examining the issue of identity, particularly when dealing with gender roles and sexuality. I analyze different performers who play with identity in their works and define themselves without regard for their biological sex. Rather than foregrounding the body, these women put emphasis on the performative nature of identity. In this chapter I elaborate on many of the ideas that I brought up in the chapter on feminist theory. I use poststructuralist ideas to prove how improvisation is a technique which is valuable as a feminist art form because it heightens our understanding of the self as multiple.

The final chapter merges the essentialist and the poststructuralist positions to create a theoretical perspective which treats the performer as both lived body and site of multiple identities. I address how these two perspectives actually represent different facets of the same phenomenon, the re-forming, performing woman. I then re-focus on how improvisation helps women to create fulfilling identities and is a valuable art form for this reason.

Review of Literature

The literature I used to substantiate this study has been varied as befits an examination of this scope. Throughout my review I encountered numerous approaches to feminist performance theory, complicating an easy solution to my research proposal. In the process I confronted conflicting theories about women's identities. The question of identity can be closely related to improvisational performance because the feminist improvisational performer is engaged in a self/body experience which requires that she

attend to herself in all aspects, kinesthetically, emotionally, socially, and culturally. Another aspect of identity involves understanding the body's place in the creative process. Attitudes among feminists relating to the body differ widely; therefore, it was necessary to analyze the various positions about women's identities and find commonalities, if any. I also looked into performance theory from other perspectives besides strictly feminist criticism. I incorporated theories addressing the "lived body," dance in relationship to therapy, Laban Movement Analysis, play, and the ritual aspect of performance. Finally, I researched theories from other artistic fields, such as visual art, as I found that an interdisciplinary approach is most profitable for such a wide-spanning subject as improvisation because it enabled me to address different aspects of the improvisational dynamic. Since I do mention some performance artists, who are commonly considered to be visual artists, it was important for me to use the theories of art critics and historians.

Although I use many sources throughout my study, I found several which were most helpful for me in coming to an understanding of the question about identity I was pursuing. In Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism, Josephine Donovan outlines the different phases of feminist theory beginning with Enlightenment and liberal feminism and moving through cultural feminism, essentialism, feminism and Freudianism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism and postmodern feminism. She discusses the evolutionary process of the Women's movement and helps to clarify complications I found surrounding the term "feminist." Through consulting this source, I realized how splintered and multi-layered the movement is, to what extent the movement has responded to new challenges from society and the intellectual community.

For information strictly on feminist performance studies, I referred to A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage, edited by Carol Martin. This collection of essays included interviews with cutting edge female performers and theorists who are shaping a new performance aesthetic through their writings. I used several of these essays in my chapters on the body, identity, and feminist theory in performance because these essays directly address the issues about identity with which I was grappling. The essays in Performing Feminism: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre, edited by Sue-Ellen Case, discuss some similar ideas about performance. I used these essays particularly in the chapters on identity and feminist theory in performance because they considered how performers have or can create performances which subvert cultural norms. Another source I used which pertains to feminist performance criticism is Acting Out: Feminist Performances, edited by Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan. This collection was helpful for me because it contains essays that treat performance as a potentially radical feminist art form. Many of my suspicions about why women were defying gender definitions in their performances were confirmed by these sources. With these three sources (incidentally, they included many of the same theorists) as guides, I felt able to articulate feminist performance theory and relate it to improvisation.

Susan Bordo's work, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body, clarifies the problems that women have with their bodies in twentieth century America. She illustrates that media images of the female body have influenced the ways in which women approach the world and their own self-images. She goes underneath these media images to find that they echo the values of a capitalist and patriarchal society,

and she provides a framework which analyzes the relationship between the female body and these sociological, psychological, and economic factors. I was able to integrate her ideas into my chapter about the soma and body as active subject because she addressed the problems women have developing their self-identities within a patriarchal culture.

Another book that was influential on my research is Susi Gablik's The Reenchantment of Art. In her understanding of the shift from modernism to post-modernism (of which there are many different paths), Gablik sees a movement away from the artist as creator/god towards the artist as receptor of environmental processes. Gablik argues that artists must begin to take responsibility for the world in which they live by addressing ecological and economic concerns in their works. I agree with Gablik that artists and the works they create will have greater resonance for their viewers if they communicate issues of vital importance. The alienation between artists and their audiences that has been one result of the modernist movement can no longer exist if art is to have an impact in our world. Gablik's eco-feminist belief that artists, by returning to nature for inspiration, could create a ritual form of art helped me to formulate my own ideas about the ways in which improvisational performances connect with ritual and articulate feminist aesthetics.

I also consulted Jamake Highwater's books on the artist and ritual creation. His two books The Primal Mind and Dance: Rituals of Experience develop his philosophy that art should act as more than entertainment or a conveyer of philosophical ideas. He argues that the arts in Western culture began as rituals yet moved away from rituals when civilization became more complex and compartmentalized. He calls for a renewal of ritual in the arts, focusing on dance in particular. These two books gave me greater

insight into what Highwater refers to as the “primal” way of thinking and how this thinking connects to ritual and a totally different type of aesthetic appreciation from that found throughout most of Western civilization. Highwater’s books along with Deborah Hay’s book Lamb at the Altar: The Story of a Dance and Anna Halprin’s book Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance, clarified for me how performance can be a ritual, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5.

Methodology

In addition to consulting secondary research sources, I use primary sources to enrich my study. I interviewed two internationally acclaimed choreographers and performers who use improvisation in their works, and I attended their performances and master classes they conducted on the subject of choreography in order to gain a greater insight into their beliefs about improvisation. My primary goal in interviewing these choreographers was to demystify the improvisational process for myself. Even though improvisation is an important choreographic tool, I rarely hear it discussed in depth in dance history, aesthetic texts, or interviews with choreographers; therefore, I felt that I needed to know whether these two female choreographers used improvisation and to what extent it shaped their choreography. Through these interviews, I determined some of the more important aspects of improvisation for these women, these being starting with an image and following it, being open to exploration, and letting go of the rational mind. The interview questions are listed in Appendix A. I was also able to view their ideas concretely when they performed and taught their master classes. The two choreographers I chose, Margie Gillis and Clare Porter, both exhibit improvisational techniques in their

choreography. I chose them for this study because, I intuited, from the reviews I read and things I heard about them, that they would have some important insights into the improvisational process.

I also interviewed Dr. Mary Lynn Smith, University of North Texas instructor of Dance and Theatre Arts, because I was curious to know about her choreographic processes and experience with improvisation. Again, I wanted to establish the importance of improvisation within her work and to get a clearer picture of how she used improvisation in regards to images, her relationship with her body, and in working with her dancers. She also clarified for me how improvisation can be connected to ritual. It was important for me to see this connection because I wanted to illustrate that by perceiving dance as entertainment, a medium for the exchange of ideas, an aesthetic object, or a story, we blind ourselves to the potential dance has to heal and/or express archetypal knowledge about the self. Because the creation of one's identity is a powerful emotional and cultural process, the art forms that aid in this process should, I believe, have ties to ritual. I elaborate on the importance of ritual in Chapter Five.

In addition to these women, I use examples of other performers, some whom I have seen in live venues, to help illustrate my points. I also refer to my own experiences within a women's dance therapy group, as a member of dance improvisation classes, and as a choreographer. By using this eclectic methodology, I hope to offer a more personal account which will relate how my involvement in the improvisational dance/movement dynamic has profoundly affected my growth as a woman.

Notes

¹Although male choreographers, theatre directors, and performance artists also use improvisation in their art forms, this study will only investigate women artists' use of improvisation in confronting their particular artistic challenges. I believe that men can also benefit from using improvisational practices but to elaborate on how they can is beyond the scope of this study. In addition, I wish to make it clear that there is no essential category of female artists, i.e., all female artists are interested in finding their identities. However, within this study, I will be discussing female artists who are grappling with identity issues and who I am categorizing as feminist because of their interest in searching out alternatives to the masculine discourse.

² The artistic woman who is concerned with finding an authentic identity confronts the fact that art has been under the control of males for most of Western history. Because of this fact, accepting conventions becomes problematic. Feminist artists and theorists question to what extent women can "speak" in a discourse that they had no part in creating. Besides dealing with these difficult questions, women artists face censorship on many levels. Within the artist herself, for instance, she may not even approach a topic that is deemed unacceptable for women. Some women artists in the past avoided this problem by taking on masculine names in order to be taken seriously as artists. In the past and present woman artists who do breach subjects that go outside of normative values often suffer from censorship by conservative critics as happened in the NEA funding crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts, edited by Richard Bolton, is a source containing articles

and letters that relate chronologically the NEA crisis. Co-optation by the mass media is another potential threat to the artist's integrity. While many artists welcome exposure, others, such as many feminists, fear commercialization because it undermines their goals. Susan Rubin Suleiman in her article "Feminism and Postmodernism" discusses how feminists approach postmodernism and some of the difficulties they face:

Even the 'Third World' and 'women of color,' those brave new banners under which (together with feminism) the postmodernism of resistance has sought its political credentials, can be shown, if one is so inclined, to be caught in the simulacrum and in the economics of multinational capitalism. (178)

Suleiman's quotation demonstrates the complications with which feminist artists contend in making their art works.

³ In response to the modernist emphasis on the art object, dissenting artists of the seventies began to highlight the process of making art. Their belief was that the act of creating art is of equal importance as the resulting art object. In particular, these artists admitted that the artist has moral obligations to fulfill, for example, by using recycled materials or by addressing social concerns (Levin 1-9). Those who adopt this anti-materialist belief encounter obstacles because of the increasing commercialization of art. Within the marketplace, those who create art objects which can be sold are given the prestige, power, and visibility necessary to gain a place in the competitive art world. Suleiman, however, gives some examples of feminist artists who are creating new strategies for entering the marketplace while still retaining their feminist values.

⁴ I must emphasize at this point that improvisation is potentially liberating. As

with any other form of art or thought, improvisation is only as progressive as its practitioners are willing to let it be. In my study I chose to focus on those who use improvisation to better understand themselves and/or to communicate to others.

CHAPTER 2

APPLYING FEMINIST THEORY TO PERFORMANCE STUDIES

In my attempt to apply feminist theory to performance studies and improvisation I have confronted the fact that those calling themselves feminists hold widely varying beliefs. Feminist theory is multidisciplinary in nature and borrows from many other schools of thought, for example, psychoanalytic, Marxist and semiotic criticism, making it difficult to pin down its proponents to one, specific goal or conviction. Feminism as a political movement has never been monolithic, though during the early 1960s and 1970s many of its adherents maintained that it was so. This phase of the Women's movement was fueled by the assurance that all women share a similar experience as the oppressed sex (Walker and Weedon 40-41). Conflicting opinions about women's identities began to fragment the feminist movement in the late 1970s. Women of color, women from different class backgrounds, and lesbians challenged this belief in women's shared identity, which is referred to as essentialism, as overly simplistic (Donovan 156). Those who opposed essentialist views often used poststructuralist theories to support their position that the identity category "woman" is constructed and contains within it an enormous variety of human experience (Canning 531-534).

The material body has often served as the locus or starting point for feminist theory, as anatomy is believed to be the most concrete difference separating men from

women. Feminist artists and theorists during the Women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s discovered their philosophical/theoretical viewpoint through bodily experience:

The movement's motto, "the personal is political," urged women to publicly assert their difference as a means to greater understanding and, ultimately, to unbiased recognition. In line with this feminist discourse, many women artists chose to engage in a strictly feminist art practice aimed at expressing their difference from men through visual imagery The initial source . . . were those practices that had made women different in the past, as well as what made them different physically, their bodies. (Jones, Leslie 33)

Because of the body's primacy in the creation of feminist theory, it has also been the site of conflicts between essentialists and poststructuralists. The clash between those two positions involves those who believe that the body is the space where women's truth can ultimately be known (essentialists) and those who regard the body as a text which is constantly subject to change and is fluid in its construction (poststructuralists).

Whether one subscribes to one particular theory over the other affects how one reads and articulates feminism in relation to performance studies. To argue effectively that improvisation can be understood as a feminist art form, I first analyze the philosophical underpinnings of the essentialists' and poststructuralists' beliefs about identity. Then, I sift through the contentions of their arguments to create a theoretical

position which combines points from both theories. I assert that improvisation is simultaneously essentialist and poststructuralist because in lived performance which is spontaneously enacted, the performer is aware of her bodily experience. This awareness helps her to create a stable sense of self, yet she is also able to adopt varying identities depending on the situation she is addressing.

Essentialism

The original thrust of the American Women's movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was for women to gain equal footing in society, the right to vote being the most celebrated example of the movement's objectives.

Throughout this time another system of thought, called cultural feminism, was developing the belief that women should form a utopian society based on feminist ideas:

Underlying this cultural feminist theory was a matriarchal vision: the idea of a society of strong women guided by essentially female concerns and values. These included, most importantly, pacifism, cooperation, nonviolent settlement of differences, and harmonious regulation of public life. (Donovan 32)

This strain of feminist thought has continued through the twentieth century. In some ways, one may regard the essentialists as the heirs of cultural feminism, because both ideologies are formed on the basis that women have virtuous, even superior, qualities to men that have been denied public and artistic expression (61). Cultural feminists, however, do not believe in essential, biological differences between men and women.

It was the writings of the French feminists which defined essentialist theory to a great extent. During the 1970s these writers, among them Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous, called for the liberation of women from masculine discourse: “. . . French feminists believe that Western thought has been based on a systematic repression of women’s experience” (Jones, Ann 361). Irigaray, in particular, emphasizes how women have been controlled by male conventions; consequently, they have “no way of knowing or representing themselves” (364). The only place for the woman to turn for self-knowledge, then, is in the pleasures of her own body (364). Irigaray posits that women’s experience of sexual pleasure is entirely different from how sexuality has been described and understood by men throughout western history: “Women’s desire most likely does not speak the same language as man’s desire, and it probably has been covered over by the logic that has dominated the West since the Greeks” (324). For Irigaray, the woman, unlike the man, feels sexual pleasure throughout her entire body; therefore, she is “indefinitely other in herself” (326). Because her sexuality is not located in a definite place, her identity cannot be either. Irigaray ultimately believes that women should separate themselves from men in order to reclaim their “auto-eroticism,” releasing them from the male-controlled marketplace where women are treated as sexual possessions (328-329).

For the French feminists, men and women’s biological differences create the situation of oppression. Kristeva theorizes that humans form their identities by accepting some experiences as “myself” and others as not. These rejected parts she calls “the

abject” (Shimakawa 367). The French feminists argue that Western society views women and all they represent as abject or “other.” They use the psychoanalytic theories of Freud as interpreted by Jacques Lacan to identify the causes behind sexist behavior. According to Freud’s theories, women are perplexing to men because they lack a sexual organ, the penis, which can be concretely known. Freud clearly describes how disturbing this lack is for young males, who create psychological defenses, which they use throughout their lives, to deal with this anxiety (Donovan 91, 94-95, 112-113). Freud’s perspective details how women epitomize castration, what men fear most (Showalter 256-7).

Since feminists who subscribe to essentialist beliefs consider men and women as fundamentally different, they are particularly interested in exploring how women’s creativity varies from that of men. The essentialists believe that for women artists, the body is the primary source of their creativity; these theorists even exhibit this notion in their own writing: “Feminist criticism which itself tries to be biological, to write from the critic’s body, has been intimate, confessional, often innovative in style and form” (Showalter 251). Essentialists claim that rather than erecting a barrier between brain and body as male artists do, female artists embrace their bodily existences (251). One possible cultural reason for women’s connection with their bodies in their artistic creation is a result of Western culture’s attempt to keep women from expressing themselves artistically; therefore, the body may be the only “canvas” that women have had available to them (Gubar 296). Another reason is that women are trained to view their bodies as

commodities within patriarchal capitalist cultures and would, therefore, be more likely to use their bodies as their artistic material (Bordo 251-3).

In history and criticism of the arts, essentialist theorists are interested in recovering women artists who have had difficulty being recognized by artistic establishments. Because women artists with essentialist views represent themselves outside of established codes and conventions, their artistic achievements are not considered as aesthetically valuable by mainstream critics (Aston 397). Feminist critics point out how art has been traditionally constructed to fit the masculine perception of the world. For instance, the Aristotelian theory that the dramatic action of a play must rise towards a climax and then fall towards a denouement symbolically represents a masculine sexual experience. Female performers and writers have tried to experiment with other ways of performing life which echo their experiences, rather than following dramatic codes created primarily to reflect the reality of men (Tamblyn 57). Consequently, many of these women artists are criticized for ignoring formal conventions (Aston 397).

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralist feminist theory criticizes essentialism for creating a false, all-inclusive definition of women which fails to account for the varying situations that women face (hooks 77). Developing out of the linguistic theories of Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Julia Kristeva, poststructuralism refutes the structuralist linguistic argument that "language reflects a world outside itself" but rather "language constructs meaning" (Walker and Weedon 41-

42). This radical shift in view places emphasis on the manners in which discourse is constructed, since it is no longer taken as a precept. From the poststructuralist perspective, identity varies according to the situations faced. A person's identity will change depending on the institution or structure with whom he or she is relating:

"(I)identity is constantly recreated, coming forward or retreating to the background in response to the politics and relations that characterize changing social situations"

(Davidson 4). Poststructuralists are primarily interested in how power relations affect our self-definitions. As we negotiate varying positions in our lives, we change and adapt. For example, one's role as a parent creates certain expectations quite different from one's role as a teacher or student: "(T)he selves we create are embedded in disciplinary relationships laced with power and meaning"(4). Because identities change according to one's position, self-definitions cannot be adequately based on sexual status alone.

Poststructuralism stresses that cultures create meanings, forming the structures within which the members of those cultures will live. Although these structures do not dictate how people within the culture will act, they do set up expectations of how they should act, thereby socializing people to behave in certain manners (Davidson 5). Deconstructionists push this position further by positing that the dominant discourse in Western Culture has separated the world into "hierarchical binary oppositions" such as good/bad, white/black and man/woman (Walker and Weedon 42). By exposing these oppositions as culturally constructed and, therefore, subjective, feminist deconstructionists attempt to reduce their influence (42).

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deepens the Women's movement. Women of color who find value in their cultural backgrounds, by emphasizing the profound, positive influence of their female role-models, challenge radical tendencies which would do away with all of the past because it is perceived as tainted by patriarchy.

Poststructuralists reject the notion that the body acts as the source of female creativity and contend that this view confines women into the very positions men have been putting them in for centuries as mother, wife/sexual partner, and domestic laborer (Jones, Ann 367-71). Sexuality is not something inherent and unmitigated by societal forces; rather, it is the result of familial dynamics that the child is exposed to and upon which she/he models her/himself (367). From this perspective, the male child's obsession with the female's lack of a penis, which Freud observed, would have more to do with the phallus as symbol of power in our culture than with the penis as a superior sexual organ to the vagina. By calling the body the voice of the self and the true place of one's essential being, the French feminists and essentialist theorists ignore the immense power that social and psychological factors have in forming identity.

While essentialist feminist performance theory is concerned with finding and championing women performers, directors, choreographers and writers who represent feminine virtues in their art, poststructuralists point out that dramatic and social structures influence our interpretation of what is performed on stage. Poststructuralist or postmodern theorists are dedicated to generating "theatre and performance strategies that will create new meanings at the site of representation, which has historically outlawed or

silenced women” (Dolan, Defense 97). Following the poststructuralist belief that conventions should be examined, deconstructionist performance theorists have turned their attention towards the audiences’ readings of the performances, the arbitrary nature of conventional theatrical structures, and how different techniques can be used in the performance venue to awaken the audience to new perspectives. In her discussion of Anna Deavere Smith’s performance Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities, Carol Martin lists some techniques, “pastiche, appropriation, multivocality, discontinuity, quotation, gender changes, lack of closure,” Smith borrows to engage her audience’s intelligence and imagination (92). These techniques create gaps in the dominant discourse, giving the performer/artist the opportunity to play with the standard depiction of relationships between men and women as they have been realized in traditional productions.

Poststructuralist theorists of performance emphasize the constructed nature of gender by analyzing feminist artists and performers who eschew the attributes of traditional femininity, such as nurturing qualities, in their art. Whereas essentialists focused on the body as the source for women’s understanding of themselves and their artistic identity, the poststructuralists concentrate on how costumes, makeup, and shifting roles call attention to the artificial nature of femininity: “For deconstructionists, ‘women’ is a sign, not an essence; womanliness is a masquerade . . .” (Hunter 9). Poststructuralist female artists often enact aggressive, even disturbing characters and play up the idea that any role is just a mask created by societal conventions. In her writings, theorist Judith

Butler addresses the constructed nature of gender identity: “. . . the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (274). Butler’s analysis illuminates performance theory by conflating the acts done by a performer to everyday actions. Performers who call attention to their parts as self-conscious roles demonstrate to their audiences that they, themselves, are playing roles.

Queer theory is a branch of poststructuralist theory created by mostly gay and lesbian critics to describe the performances of these artists (as well as male artists) who bend gender definitions. These critics and performers find their identities in the “death of the ‘I’” and through the rejection of normative values in art (Hart and Phelan 277). Queer art is “an allegiance to the radicality of unknowing who we are becoming . . .” (277). Letting go of gender definitions and the stability they provide for one’s identity is the intention of queer art and theory.

The Gaze Theory

Any feminist involved in performance studies must deal with an issue brought up by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema”. Mulvey’s essay has dramatically affected how feminists understand the performance viewer dynamic. In this article Mulvey makes the claim that the observer of the film is automatically perceived as male and, hence, cinema is constructed strictly for the male viewer’s pleasure to the detriment of females. In her psychoanalytic approach she describes how the viewer’s gaze is contrived:

Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. (qtd. in de Lauretis 58)

Mulvey determined that the only way to undermine this situation, where the male viewer's desire is catered to, was to abandon the Hollywood conventions that had dominated American cinema. Teresa de Lauretis takes up where Mulvey left off to struggle with Mulvey's view about the destruction of visual pleasure by arguing that it is better to reconstruct the cinema so that it reflects the desires of the female rather than those of the male viewer (de Lauretis 8). She articulates strategies the feminist film maker may use to disrupt the traditional, masculine centered method of viewing (69).

Although the stage is different from film because of the lived quality of the stage performer, conventions within the theatre can manipulate the viewer's gaze, resulting in objectification of the women. Feminist theorists and performance artists alike have concerns that the female performer is often perceived as "object" by the viewer:

In theatre, as in the rest of culture, woman as speaking subjects are missing from representation. In their place, "woman" appears as a construction that signifies a (feminine) essence intrinsic to all women. This

construction is anathema to women as historical beings and social subjects because it reduces them to “nature,” mother,” and ultimately the object of (male) desire. (Davy 141)

The female performer who acts within a certain, scripted role places herself into a position of potential objectification. This situation is especially true if the performer is acting within a script which does not treat its female characters as active subjects of the narrative. These scripts are tailored for the male viewer’s pleasure because they maintain the patriarchal order in which women are subservient to men.

The history of choreography for concert dance has been dominated by males who “project fantasies and longings as they conjure women into existence or exorcise them into oblivion” (Hanna 30). The female performer’s role as the object of display or the victim of the narrative closely follows the traditional views of women as passively acted upon by society. In ballet, for example, women are often depicted as objects of beauty. In partnering they are physically presented by the male, conveying to the audience that females are to be protected and controlled by males. It is telling that only ballerinas dance on their toes, which further alienates them from reality (xiv). Even when the woman may at first appear to be the active subject, she is fetishized as an ideal. During the Romantic age, the ballet plots indulged in images of ethereal, other-worldly women, Le Sylphide, for instance. The oft-used scene of the wandering hero who seeks the desired female through a maze of ballerinas all dressed alike exemplifies the “Romantic dilemma” (Jowitt, Time, 34). Within this dilemma the hero must look beyond the

deception, represented by the other females, towards the true object of his desire. This *cherche la femme* motif underscores the concept of the prima ballerina as an abstract, unattainable ideal to be pursued, rather than a flesh and blood woman (Kestenbaum 19).

In live performance space the performer has the opportunity to escape this fetishized state by emphasizing the “three-dimensional” nature of her lived presence (Davy 142). To undermine the gaze phenomenon, the feminist performer must be conscious of how she can be “flattened” by a narrative or position within the performance space, which reduces her to a symbol. Her intention is to find ways to present herself as a complex, living being or to subvert conventions that would objectify her.

Poststructuralist performers, like Anna Deavere Smith, have developed and used techniques which make it impossible for their viewers to possess them as art objects. Smith’ multiple characterizations frustrate the gaze by splitting the viewer’s perception. Another performance artist, Karen Finley, was censored during the NEA controversy by the right wing. She was most likely censored because she did not perform herself in the role of sex object:

Karen Finley has used her body as the site of transgressive (some might say counter-pornographic) acts: by arousing the mechanisms of disgust in her audience, her performances parody and subvert the associations between the female body and its role as sexually evocative signifier. (Geis 291)

It is telling that Finley was labeled pornographic by conservatives who would rather her have been safely pornographic than transgressively anti-pornographic.

Death of the Author

One major point of contention in the debate between essentialism and poststructuralism is related to Michel Foucault's theory which declares the death of the author. His belief is that the author can no longer act as the point of departure for the theorist's criticism because he or she is not a single unitary subject or authority from which the true meaning of the text can be derived. Instead, the author is considered to be a collection of influences and, hence, her or his work is really the creation of a variety of contributors (particularly this is so in theatre where no one person is sole controller of a production's meanings) and can contain contradictions within it. Some feminists despair at the idea of the author's death because they claim this theory coincided with the recovery of female artists. They believe female artists will get no credit for their artistic achievements since the author is no longer considered the authority on the text (Klinger 189-99). Because poststructuralists subscribe to Foucault's belief, essentialists feel that they are betraying the feminist cause. This issue, along with criticisms that semiotic language alienates many women and aligns those who use it with patriarchal discourse, has led essentialists to charge that poststructuralism threatens the feminist movement.

Essentialism and Poststructuralism in Relation to Improvisation

Coming to terms with these two theoretical positions, essentialism and poststructuralism, involves looking beyond the either/or dichotomies and, in a typically feminist fashion,

finding places of overlap. It might be helpful to observe one performer, Carolee Schneeman, who has been approached theoretically by both sides. Some critics read her works as essentialist because they appear to locate the body as the source of insight into women's differences from men. In her famous performance, Interior Scroll, Schneeman pulled from her vagina a scroll upon which was written a dialogue between herself and a sexist male artist discussing her role as a legitimate artist. Dianne Hunter writes that Schneeman's work reveals her belief in the union of her "material body" with the "universal femaleness that can transcend historical conditions" (10). According to this reading, Schneeman was literally saying in this performance that the female body knows its difference from men, its "primary knowledge" (Schneemann 73), and his inability to comprehend the depth of her experience:

Essentialists believe women have an essence, a nature, based in sexual biology. This "essential nature" is believed . . . to have the capacity to expressively go beyond and as an antidote to patriarchally-imposed conventions and male-dominated images and definitions of women.

(Hunter 9)

Similar to the idea that women have powers of intuition which men do not, the essentialist claim creates a barrier between women and men by positing that the experience of being a female by sex automatically tends one towards certain traits, i.e., being nurturing, sensitive, non-violent, natural.

Other feminist theorists, however, read postmodernist tendencies in Schneeman's work. These theorists argue that Schneeman upsets traditional ideas of what women should be by presenting the female body in a state of nudity: "Schneeman was well aware of the taboos associated with the nude female body and chose to expose them as a means of transgressing gender specific norms . . ." (Jones, Leslie 49). In this particular interpretation of the performative act, the body is linked to the abject, the site of chaotic, repulsive expression. Here the line between the body as speaker of essential gender truths and the body as potential transgressor of socially constructed truth is blurred.

It seems that the act of performance obscures distinctions between these two positions. For example, although they are primarily put into the essentialist camp, both Irigaray and Kristeva find that mimesis can be an effective method for undermining gender and racial definitions. By representing the abject, the performer removes it from its initial position as "not-to-be-looked-at" or identified with: "For Kristeva, *mimicry* is a means of 'poetic purification'; and its purifying power lies precisely in the space between 'original' abjection and its representation" (Shimakawa 375). The performative body as a space of both identity and the dissolution of that identity creates a situation that is reminiscent of definitions of the Tao, that which can be known only as unknowable, i.e., beyond containment. Performance theorist Jill Dolan has expressed the unique position of performance: "Perhaps the theatre really is the place to reinhabit subject positions that seem evacuated by theory, because it creates a space of danger without quite the same consequences; it becomes a space of play and potential" ("Peeling" 50). Unlike theory

which presumably has discrete arguments, performance allows for multiple interpretations. Choreographers and performance artists who are aware of this capacity can create highly complex performances straddling both theoretical contentions. Pina Bausch is one such choreographer who has created original and stimulating performances by dealing with gender issues from varying approaches: "Bausch's productions are a riot of diversity. . . . Her use of the body, particularly the female body, as the site of performative acts, suggests not only gender as culturally inscribed artifact but also gender as irreducible difference which discloses itself through the imagery" (Price 328).

Improvisation as feminist form could be read from either one of the positions examined. One could argue that in an improvisatory mode of creativity, the woman artist touches the essential feminine self that masculinity has repressed. This interpretation of improvisation suggests that any woman who is given the opportunity to be within a socially unmediated state would find this same, primal self, regardless of her social and cultural background. A poststructuralist reading of improvisation would assert that the artist can never be in a state free from societal and cultural influences. Therefore, the improviser who is aware of this fact can uncover a variety of representations of potential "selves," some of which correspond to what has been labeled as masculine and others to what is considered feminine by the dominant society. I will argue for an understanding of improvisation as a feminist form that borrows some of the points of both theories. Through these two theoretical lenses, I will address different aspects of improvisation which I feel one or the other is better equipped to address.

From my research and own experience, I believe improvisation is a poststructuralist form of art because it expands the amount of choices that one can make and frees dancers and performance artists to create works which fulfill their individual needs. By dispensing with traditional gender codes and conventions, improvisatory performers have the opportunity to challenge essentialist claims of what a woman can or cannot be. Improvisation can be a very useful tool for discovering other selves or identities which were not permitted to grow because of societal factors. Improvisation can aid in the recognition that all identities are fluid constructions rather than rigid, predetermined states of being (Banes, Writing 221, 224, 230). I will expand upon this aspect of improvisation in Chapter Five when I discuss feminist performers who transgress gender codes.

At the same time, I agree with the essentialists that the body can be a source of self-knowledge, an idea the poststructuralists reject. Unlike essentialists, however, I do not necessarily feel that the body's gender is of as great an importance as the fact that the body is a source of wisdom. Because the improvisational performer must attend to her body while performing, improvisation enables her to focus on her body and to hear the messages it has to say to her. These messages are often the ones that have been buried from her conscious, socialized mind as the body is a storehouse for repressed feelings. Those who engage in the space-time dynamic of improvisation experience reality differently than they do in normal, daily activities because they are listening to their bodies. This new awareness of the body's importance in how one relates to the world

leads to a greater understanding of the body as essential in defining the self. Therefore, improvisation viewed from this perspective can be articulated as feminist because it rescues the body from its abject place as “non-mind.” In Chapter Four, I elaborate on these feminist views which reject the mind-body dichotomy.

I also assert that improvisation, besides addressing identity issues as expressed by the essentialists and poststructuralists, articulates many of what I see as over-arching feminist objectives. Improvisation empowers the performer as active agent in the creative process and deconstructs traditional, patriarchal hierarchies, favoring harmonious group interactions. In relation to performer-audience interaction, improvisation creates a performance situation which discourages the gaze phenomenon. The performer engages in a two-sided communication with the audience, who are responsible for using their own imaginations if they want to understand and/or appreciate the performance. Because improvisation fulfills many of these feminist goals, it must be considered as a form which has much to offer for those who are interested in feminism and performance studies.

In Chapter Three, I define improvisation and outline its development as a concert form in its own right. Then, in Chapters Four and Five, I expand upon the two aspects of identity formation, I introduced in this chapter, self-awareness through listening to the body and understanding the socially constructed nature of gender identities, to create a theory of improvisation which takes into account the complexity of the identity question for feminist artists.

CHAPTER 3

UNDERSTANDING IMPROVISATION

Many choreographers use some degree of improvisation in their choreographic process. In dance, improvisation is the process of using the body to spontaneously create movement. The improviser is present in the moment while he or she is moving and is aware of the space, whether public or personal, within which he or she is moving. He or she makes choices that are unplanned; improvisation involves constantly deciding how to attend to oneself or the surrounding environment. If others are dancing as well, the improviser is conscious of this fact and chooses spontaneously how or if or when to interact with them. Likewise the dancer has awareness of the accompaniment, if there is one, and does not necessarily move with the rhythm or melodic line. Instead, the dancer could allow the music and dance to create two, separate qualities that they share within the performance space. In addition to these traits, improvising involves having an intent that is motivating the movement. This intent can be a kinesthetic one or an internal image off of which the dancer is working. Knowing how basic improvisation is to the choreographic process makes the totally analytical choreographer, like Petipa, who, apparently, used chess men to create his ballets, seem farfetched indeed. However, the degree of improvisational techniques used to create a piece will differ from choreographer to choreographer (Cohen 91).

Improvisation is significant because it is the ability to reach authenticity in movement. Authentic movement is movement reflective of an individual's inner drives, fears, and desires: "... the externalized movement pattern is congruent with inner sensing" (Levy 93). When one moves improvisationally, one does not copy other's movements or try to reproduce certain steps. Instead, one reaches into one's own reservoir of feelings and experiences to generate movement (66-8). Contemporary dancers and choreographers, like Margie Gillis, use improvisation in order to discover and express emotions that many people find difficult to access.

There can be no doubt that humanity's first experience with dance was improvisational. Before a movement pattern can be learned and performed, it must be created by someone who is willing to choose between one type of movement and another. When examining the court dances of the early Renaissance, for example, one realizes that the choreographers chose material from an already existing repertoire (borrowed from peasant folk dances) and organized it in ways which would be most visually interesting for an audience to watch. We can surmise that these early choreographers did the steps themselves and found cadences which felt natural and looked pleasing (Cohen 7-9).

As a consciously invoked movement practice, improvisation is a dynamic state of the mind-body in which the improviser is constantly making choices. The performer has an awareness of the many different movement and vocal possibilities available to him or her and must decide, based on intuition, which of these to carry out.¹ He or she is attending in various ways. In attending or listening, the performer is experiencing his or her own body/self and is also aware of space, time (metered or non-metered), and

possibilities of interaction with others. In Susan Foster's book, Reading Dancing, she delineates what she has found to be Deborah Hay's view of dance, an interpretation which seems close to my own definition of improvisation: "Dancing is the activity of being present in and consciously aware of one's own movement as part of the flux" (7). Foster specifically defines improvisation as "... the spontaneous choice in performance of a particular vocabulary and an ordering for that vocabulary . . ." (95). Obviously, improvisation entails more than just getting up and dancing; it requires a specific, learned attitude towards how one is moving within the environment through time.

One can find improvisation in any of the art forms, not just the performance ones. Writers, musicians, and visual artists can all use improvisation. Susan Griffin, a writer, describes how improvisation informs her work:

Because each time I write, each time the authentic words break through, I am changed. The older order that I was collapses and dies. I lose control. I do not know what words will appear on the page. I follow language. I follow the sound of the words, and I am surprised and transformed by what I record. (112-3)

Griffin's description acknowledges the importance of letting go of the need to control the artwork. The artists I refer to who use improvisation seem to share this respect for a deeper, almost spiritual, inner drive, which many refer to as the imagination. James Hillman writes on the subject that the voices of the soul (the archetypes) speak to us through the imagination and that the person who wishes to commune with the soul needs to be able to listen, uncritically, to what it (they) have to say (88). Giving this deeper self

free reign is difficult for people in this society, which values self-control and subjugation of creative urges, to achieve. I believe that a child's curiosity and willingness to learn new things is an imperative trait in reaching the improvisational state.

During my personal interview with Claire Porter, a New York performer and choreographer, I heard her describe improvisation in relation to her art as "play." When I asked her to explain why play is an important aspect of her choreography, she replied, "It keeps me alive." Several times in our interview Porter brought up the words "play" and "experiment." Evidently for Porter, having an improvisational attitude is an integral part of the choreographic process. When I asked her if she ever surprised herself while creating, she replied quickly that she did all the time and that she loved those moments because they caused her to laugh at herself.²

Porter's experimental approach to choreography is evidenced in her resulting performances and in how she leads her master classes in composition. During two of her performances I attended, the audiences responded to Porter's quirky choreography with sympathetic laughter. In one of her pieces Slipping into Weather performed as part of her greater work Portables, she impersonated the character of a weather reporter who became increasingly obsessed with embodying the weather reports she delivered. Porter created a structure (the weather report) and repeated it while simultaneously changing her character's behavior until the report was rendered absurd. Each time she did the weather, the character became more physically demonstrative, using up greater amounts of the stage space. The humor came from viewing a once perky, "on top of things" career woman evolve into a person who completely abandons herself to free expression.

According to dramatic theorist Henri Bergson, one of the chief plot devices found in comedies is the repetition of events (743). It appears that Porter has created many of her works by allowing herself to explore the variety of ways just one situation or idea could develop through the structure of repetition. As she put it, "I need to dig into something; I'm just seeing where this stuff can go."

I was also able to view Porter's improvisational process at work when she led a master class. Throughout the class, Porter encouraged the students to find their own way of interpreting the movements given to them. Several times she demanded that the dancers change the phrase to fit their particular needs. Porter's trust in this method's effectiveness for producing interesting choreography proved to be justified. After working together in duets using movements adapted from the class, the dancers came up with a variety of showings for the whole group. We were treated to dances with impromptu titles such as "Lost in Swan Lake" and "Gargoyle Sex." Porter was obviously pleased when she remarked on the wide range of dynamics she saw.

Porter's beliefs depict improvisation as a childlike play-state where the performer is so uninhibited that he or she is able to move from an intuitive and authentic self. For a child, play serves more than as a time to have fun. Play is an important part of a child's development where he or she is able to explore various identities and to investigate problems in a safe manner. Theorists of play have described play as being potentially "transgressive" and as "the most effective way to unsettle given cultural priorities and hierarchies. . ." (Slethaug 146). Improvisation is like play in that the mover is also in an exploratory mode where choices are made intuitively, rather than intellectually or on a

socially inhibited level. Most adults lose this ability to listen to their intuition and must re-learn how to engage this sense through improvisation and somatic listening.

One misinterpretation which has haunted improvisational dance is the belief that it is totally formless and is done without motivation or intent from the dancer. In practice improvisational dance does not necessarily allow the performer to do anything he or she wants. Quite often the choreographer and/or performers have certain constraints put upon them. Trisha Brown, a performer at the Judson Church, began choreographing her early improvisational pieces by giving herself certain movement tasks to do, for example, sitting or lying down (Banes, Terpsichore 78). Although the performer may be restricted as to what to do, the freedom lies in the performer's choosing how to get from one task to the other; with what dynamics to do these movements, i.e., whether quick or slow, strong or light, direct or indirect, with free flow or with bound movements; what body parts to involve; how to use the positive and negative space, and what spatial designs to make in space. Sometimes, an improvisational problem might be about exploring one or more of the elements of dance. In the improvisation class that I took, for example, we were supposed to come up with movement problems which we could give to our classmates to solve. For example, I had a group of students perform an improvisation simply based on the cue, "follow your vision." Some improvisational choreographers have used outside, random events, like audience responses or music, to trigger certain motions or attitudes from the performer, thereby inspiring them to do more innovative movements (80). Improvisation, then, encourages its practitioners to develop problem solving skills.³

Modern Dance's Connection to Improvisation

Because improvisation can only happen when performers or students are comfortable deviating from technical restraints--that is, those restraints dictated by a particular technique--it is extremely important that they be given the chance to find their own movement/vocal language. Providing a safe place for students to explore should be an improvisation teacher's primary goal. According to the accounts of Mary Wigman's students, Wigman, one of the pioneers of modern dance, was an excellent facilitator for improvisation because she was willing to allow her students the opportunity to realize themselves through improvisational techniques (Manning, 96). In a handbook Wigman developed for her students, she wrote, "From the happenstance of improvisation there flowers the final, reality of composition" and "... the creative moment . . . remains a mystery even to ourselves . . ." (qtd. in Manning 95). Clearly, Wigman held a view of the creative process which made her sensitive to the imaginative and psychological growth of her students.

Helen Tamiris was another female modern choreographer who allowed improvisational processes into her choreography. Part of the Federal Dance Project of the 1930s, Tamiris infused her works with her socialist political views. Her treatment of her dancers differed from her contemporaries; for example, the dancers who worked for Martha Graham had to willingly "submit" (Foster 30) to Graham's rigorous technique. Graham strongly believed that "(f)reedom is discipline," which means one will only find freedom once one has mastered the technique (qtd. in Horosco 138). She used her

dancers as tools to represent emotional states of being (Foster 30). In addition, Graham's artistic decisions often remained mysterious to her dancers. Dancers involved in a piece by Tamiris, however, were encouraged to engage in the choreographic process as active participants and decision makers: "She believed that the choreography would be richer in depth if the dancers were involved in its creation . . ." (Tish 341). By allowing the dancers to share in the creative process, Tamiris fostered a sense of community among the dancers as well as strengthened their investment in the piece. Tamiris had a more inclusive view of her dancers' potentials than her modernist contemporaries.

It is telling that the "mother" of modern dance, Isadora Duncan, was an advocate of both women's liberation and freedom from technical restraints in dance. Duncan rejected the formal elements of ballet, asserting that the dancer should be liberated from constraining toe shoes, ballet positions, and costumes, which she felt subjected her to rigid, often injurious codes (Cohen 119). Her aesthetic rested on the belief that the body, freed from these conventions, would be able to express itself naturally and, therefore, beautifully (Duncan 125-129). Unlike many other early modern dancers, she never developed a formal technique with which to teach her students. Instead, she emphasized the importance of giving freedom of choice to the individual dancer. Duncan's greatest legacy, then, is her connection to improvisational movement as a meaningful form of dance.

Margie Gillis, a contemporary Canadian performer and improvisational choreographer, has been termed the "modern Isadora Duncan," and having viewed her works and a workshop with her and participated in an interview by Mary Lynn Smith, I

can understand why. Gillis's solo works were especially liberating to observe. In her solo piece Variations, she communicated to the audience her vitality and lived presence by allowing us to experience her ecstasy, both visually and aurally. Far from displaying herself to us as a beautiful, albeit lifeless, object, Gillis emanated a savage, almost animal energy, causing visceral reactions in me. The energy she generated throughout her solo pieces could only have been accomplished by a performer living in present time, and being in present time while performing is one of the keys to reaching the improvisational state.

When the concert ended, I was reluctant to move back into "normal time and space," where, habitually, my thoughts race back and forth between the past and the future so that my body's sensations and relationships to space are ignored and neglected. The kinesthetic sensations in myself which Gillis awakened made me feel enriched, excited, and real. Like a dream which seems more true than life, Gillis's solo dances held my entire attention; I felt as if my whole self was concentrated in that moment to the extent that my other concerns fell away. I believe that this sensation of total engagement in the present is the same sort of feeling which viewers of Isadora Duncan had and is indicative of the improvisational dynamic.

The Importance of the Image

During a choreography workshop Gillis conducted, I gained insights into the beliefs behind her choreography and performances. I noted that she emphasized the importance of starting with an image and allowing it, not one's logic, to tell one which route to take in developing that image. She repeatedly advised the students to keep their

energy in a state of potential and to “respect the thing (image) itself.” Gillis’s concern that the students find a kinetic image and let that image create the choreography revealed her anti-analytical approach to the choreographic process. From viewing this workshop I knew that Gillis’s transcendent on stage performances came from her willingness to trust that her intuitive sense and kinetic vantage point would serve her.

Having an image with which to work, which does not necessarily mean a visual image, seems to be a common point of departure for many improvisational choreographers. Simone Forti, a contemporary improviser, defines improvisation for herself by relating it to the everyday actions we do extemporaneously “it’s not miming, its closer to the gesturing we do when talking, to the movement mirroring that naturally happens In subtle ways, one embodies images” (qtd. in Sandla 71).⁴ Forti emphasizes that the mover is responding to an inner image when making these gestures, for example, making a horizontal motion when speaking of the horizon. The image the performer uses can be as simple as evoking the sensation of walking on wet grass. It is how the dancer expresses this internal image which makes the dance unique.

The Benefits of Improvisation

Theatre directors and choreographers have realized the benefits of using improvisation as a tool in the rehearsal process. The Group Theatre of the 1930s used improvisation extensively in their rehearsals to create more authentic characters and to stimulate the performers’ imaginative faculties. Lee Strasberg, the director for many Group productions, gave his actors improvisational exercises which were loosely based on the script they were studying. By allowing the actors to find their own words to

articulate the script's plot, Strasberg helped the performers to become more connected with the feelings and motivations of their characters (Gordon and Lassiter 7-9). This technique is also used for dance; a choreographer will sometimes teach his or her dancers a movement phrase and then ask them to "make it their own." Even though the dancers are not involved in the initial decision process, they are able to elaborate upon what they are taught or twist it into a new form. In other cases, the choreographer may simply give the dancers images with which to work and then see whether any fruitful choreography takes place. In both instances, the dancers have a greater investment in the dance because they have put something of themselves in it. For both dance and theatre rehearsals improvisational practices have proved to be useful because they enrich the experience for the performers, who have the room to breath their own life into the artistic creation.

In my interview with choreographer and professor Mary Lynn Smith, she described how she uses improvisation throughout the choreographic process:

It is through improvisation that I find out what I want to say.

Improvisation gives me a way to tap into my imagination. As I move, the muscles fire my imagination. The images are not only visual; they can be kinetic or emotional. I don't look for a meaning in the choreography until it is almost finished. Instead I am looking for experience.

Because Smith usually does not have a pre-set meaning for her works, she encourages her dancers to find their own way of relating to the movement. When I asked Smith about whether she used improvisation to achieve particular goals, she surprised me by discussing how she uses improvisational ways of thinking not only in her choreography

but in her teaching and writing as well: “In teaching I have a plan or objective, but if I see that the students are not ready for the material, I can change. I always allow space for change in the format. I’ve learned to listen to the students to hear where they are in the learning process.” Smith’s statements demonstrate how engaging in improvisational ways of being can be beneficial in other aspects of life besides within the artistic environment.

The Development of Improvisation as a Concert Form

Although improvisation as a creative tool has been around as long as people have made dances, improvisation as a performance art is a relatively new phenomenon in Western concert dance, developing once choreographers began rejecting modernist, expressionist claims that dance should always tell a story. This adoption of new attitudes towards dance coincided with the beginning of the postmodern movement in dance in the early 1960s. The first part of the break from expressionist dance took place when some modern dancers, such as Erick Hawkins, renewed primal connections between ritual and the body in dance. These choreographers took their inspiration from Native American culture (Highwater, Primal 150) as well as Eastern philosophy and religion and African American music and dance. Erick Hawkins was a dancer/choreographer who observed the ritual dances of the Hopis and the Navajos and allowed their aesthetic to penetrate his own (Hawkins, “Why” 344). He influenced following generations of dancers by moving focus away from narrative meaning in dance towards movement as meaningful in itself. He valued dance for its own sake and believed that dance’s function is to “heighten perception” (Hawkins, The Body 70). Dance aesthetician Harvey Rochlein calls

Hawkins's dance "Theatre of Perception" (14) because of Hawkins's interest in conveying "the bedrock emotions of wonder" (16) through "movement that is especially purely sensed as compared to movement expressing some thesis, emotion, or visual diagram" (19).

Hawkins's concept that the body alone communicates spiritual or philosophical meaning was echoed in the beliefs of dancers and improvisers who followed him. It is not uncommon to hear dancers from the next generation using words connotative of spirituality in describing their efforts to reach bodily awareness through the harmonious working of the body and the mind. In the sixties and seventies, this emphasis on the process of creation and improvisation as a valid performance form became a popular trend among the new dancer/choreographers emerging at that period (Banes, Greenwich 6-8; Richardson and Sheets-Johnstone 63).

Dance historians typically cite Merce Cunningham as the instigator of postmodernism (Cohen 194). Cunningham gained insights from philosophical viewpoints, such as existentialism and Zen Buddhism, which were concerned with getting beyond meaning in the traditional, Western sense towards a more open-ended view of reality (Sorrell 410-15). Using movement alone, Cunningham attempted to give dance the opportunity to express the chaotic and ambiguous (Tomkins 262). He replaced the traditional composition of the soloist dancer backed by supporting dancers with the ceaseless shifting of bodies in motion, creating multiple points of reference for the viewer (Cohen 194). This change and his introduction of chance dance reflected existential

dilemmas about free-will and determinism and gave the individual audience member the choice to interpret his or her own meaning in the dance (Fraleigh, xxvii).

Cunningham used chance in his choreography to create a unique experience every time that a dance was performed. Typically, choreographic choices were made randomly, giving his dances an unplanned feeling. Sally Banes argues that Cunningham's so-called chance dances might have freed up some aspects of choreography but often led to Cunningham's greater need to contain the dancers within technical restraints: "In giving up control (via chance techniques) over such elements as timing, spacing, and sequencing, Cunningham needed to assert even more careful control in a different direction over his dancers" (Writing 109). Banes emphasizes that Cunningham's choreographic methods, far from being improvisational, were antithetical to the dances created by the next generation of choreographers because he did not give his dancers the opportunity to make decisions as to how or when to do their movement phrases: "By contrast, improvisation allows for the spontaneity that was prized by the younger generation, but only through totally conscious control, residing anarchically in each individual -- the exact opposite of the surrender to fate implied by chance techniques" (109). Cunningham's decision to not give a degree of control over to his dancers marks him as somewhat modernist in his aesthetic, modernist in that he still valued the individual author/creator as the primary motivator of the artistic creation; although the form of chance dance does limit his role as sole molder of the artistic creation. His new form of dance, which rejected the narrative, did free the way for alternative creative practices in dance.

The rise of the avant-garde (or postmodernism) in dance in the 1960s gave expression to new ways of envisioning dance which borrowed some ideas from its predecessors and abandoned others. Inspired by African American jazz musicians (who were in turn influenced by traditional African music), those in the avant-garde associated improvisation with liberation, both social and cultural, and the ability to move and speak with greater sincerity (Banes, Greenwich 6-8, 156-7). The avant-garde found improvisation attractive because it “. . . relied on the wisdom of the body--on the heat of the kinetic intuition in the moment--in contrast to predetermined, rational decision-making . . .” (211). Their trust in the body’s ability to move meaningfully without being controlled by the logical centers of the brain departed from the modern dancer’s insistence that the body is an instrument which must be developed through rigorous technique (Horosco 138; Foster 30)

Deborah Jowitt’s reviews for the Village Voice of the Grand Union, one of the most famous improvisational collectives of the time, provides readers with the unique opportunity to discover how a contemporary critic tried to understand and appreciate this nascent, often puzzling art form. In most of her articles, written at this period, Jowitt is open to viewing improvisational dance as worthy of investigation. She is also clear that certain rules or standards should be followed:

I’ve seen improvisational work in dance and in theatre and been turned off by a lot of what I’ve seen. But although the Grand Union may at times become “self-indulgent”(a critic-ese expression usually meaning that the performers explored an event for longer than you want to watch them

explore it), they avoid a lot of improv pitfalls. They didn't try to top each other's acts under the guise of providing contrast; they don't always play copycat as a means of arriving at group unity; they don't play the loud the way some actors do when improvising, making every word and gesture a potential for confrontation. ("Pull" 132)

From Jowitt's description, we gain insights into the ideals which improvisation was meant to extol. These performers who improvised together needed to be aware of how their part in the dance fit into the larger whole, requiring that they be highly awake to their own and everyone else's rhythm and energy. Individual egos (meaning the performer's ambition for star status or glory) had to be submerged into the group. This rule by no means prohibited the performer from using his or her own personal, eclectic movement style. Rather he or she needed to learn how to converse and complement the rest of the movers. Improvisation, then, became a perfect model for delving into the egalitarian/democratic ideals which this generation was extolling (Banes, Greenwich 1-11). Ultimately, the improvisational performer had to tune into the group's intent and intuitively determine how his or her movement contributed to the development of this intention.

The Development of an Improvisational Ethos

Scholars of improvisational dance as it developed in the 1960s often mention the link between improvisation and American values, such as individualism. It seems fitting that improvisation as a dance phenomenon flourished in 1960s America because of the strong interest among the youth in the individual's freedom to choose. At the same time,

improvisation within a group requires communal awareness, a trait with which young people of that time were also experimenting:

On a symbolic level, improvisation in American dance is seen by its proponents as the unification of the opposites of individual and group activity. Theoretically, this unification occurs through the collaborative and egalitarian nature of making dances in which the individual experiences self-awareness and self-discovery. Improvisation also symbolically unites the opposites of nature and culture through both the emphasis on spontaneity (natural) and on the creation of dance art (cultural) and the emphasis on the joining of behavior (natural) with presentation (cultural). (Novack 191)

Because improvisational dance as it was developed during the 1960s, requires one to balance these political, social, and cultural extremes, as well as negotiate between the individual and the collective and between nature and culture, it proves to be a fascinating form for those who understand the dynamics it encapsulates to observe and perform. As Novack relates, this balancing between values is responsible for disagreements between practitioners as to what improvisation is or should be (191-2).

Anna Halprin is a movement performer/choreographer who has nurtured ideas intimately related to improvisation for decades, beginning in the 1960s. Halprin's affiliation with eco-feminist values were first demonstrated when she created works which took place in natural environments rather than within the theatre. She also looked towards kinesiological motivations in movement and encouraged her dancers and

students of dance to do the same (Banes, Introduction 3). As an extension of this natural approach to dance, Halprin used nudity in her performances (Halprin 6). Her choice of movements tended towards the pedestrian, eliminating the illusionist qualities found in concert dance, and she experimented with sound, objects, and words in her performances (189). She also branched out to involve people from backgrounds outside of dance, people who would have been overlooked in the past, to create a fluid definition of dance as poetry, music, and acting. With these ideals she forged an aesthetic which embraced the dancer as whole person, spiritually, emotionally, physically, and mentally (xi). Closely tied to this belief in the dancer as fully existing in the dance was her increasing interest in addressing real-life experiences in her choreography. She states:

We began to work with real-life themes, so now the dances we made had a real purpose in people's lives. We were tapping into our own personal stories, and the dances we made had transformative powers. I began to call them rituals and identified the materials that created them as myths The . . . aspect of my work and, the part that has challenged and nurtured me all these years, has been the ways dance has been instrumental in developing community through the expression of these myths and rituals.

(xii)

Halprin's experience with cancer deepened her commitment to the healing powers of dance and to the body's ability to connect with the community and nature through movement (xii).

While improvisation enjoyed enormous popularity by the choreographers of the sixties, it fell into disfavor in subsequent decades. Part of the reason must be attributed to dancers and dance scholars ambitions to be taken seriously by the art establishment. Improvisation, with its connections to Happenings and alternative lifestyles, was deemed too flighty to warrant critical attention (Novack 112). Banes has seen a resurgence of improvisation in the late eighties and nineties especially coming from African American choreographers who are reaching into their African cultural past, where improvisation is often at the heart of dance and music, for artistic inspiration. She mentions Jawole Jo Zollar, the artistic director of Urban Bush Women, as a contemporary advocate of improvisational dance: "Zollar believes that improvisation can be empowering to those who have been disenfranchised, for it can teach people how to be independent" (Writing 343). Banes differentiates between improvisation of the sixties from that of the nineties by looking at the motivation behind the form. She finds that in the nineties, improvisation is characterized by "fierceness and urgency"(346) which contrasts with the more cooperative, "calmly organic" improvisation of the sixties (345). The nineties improvisational choreographer/performer also appears more interested in displaying his or her technical skills than in highlighting pedestrian or minimalist movements (346).

Some original members of the sixties improvisational movement are still choreographing, using improvisational methods to generate works which echo their earlier values. As mentioned above, Anna Halprin has continued to expand upon the ideas she developed in the sixties. Deborah Hay, another 1960s choreographer and performer, now creates large group dances in which the individual dancers are given

guidelines within which they can work. In addition, she makes solo pieces, developed on the group material, which reflect her improvisational aesthetic (Banes, Writing 350).

Improvisational Movement in Therapy

As well as being a creative dance form, it is obvious from the dancers and choreographers mentioned that improvisation has served people socially, emotionally, and physically. Improvisation with a group can be an exciting social event. Because awareness of each other is of paramount importance in improvisation, the practitioners are encouraged to interact and share themselves. Many dancers and non-dancers like to get together for an improvisation “jam” just for the enjoyment of releasing their usual inhibitions in a social atmosphere. Dance and movement therapists often rely on some form of improvisation to aid their patients in communicating their emotions. Improvisation is particularly useful in the therapeutic setting because it allows the patient some autonomy in the movement experience, boosting his or her self-esteem and lessening anxieties about doing movements incorrectly.

Dance therapists who use improvisation as a major part of their methodology refer to the body’s ability to generate unconscious images through movement (Levy 73). In the 1960s dance therapist Mary Whitehouse that in authentic movement the body’s movements are not rationally directed (67). She called body movement which is not consciously ordered, active movement:

The core of the movement experience is the sensation of moving and being moved Ideally, both are present in the same instant and it may be literally an instant. It is a moment of total awareness, the coming together

of what I am doing and what is happening to me. It cannot be anticipated, explained, specifically worked for, nor repeated exactly. (qtd. in Levy 67)

In the therapeutic setting, Whitehouse encouraged her patients to relegate the rational aspects of their selves to the role of passive, non-judgmental observers so that they could later look back on their experiences and analyze them. Whitehouse's method worked to privilege the actual experience itself, keeping it unhindered from the dictations of the rational part of the brain (68).

Another influential dance therapist Blanche Evan began by teaching creative dance to children in the late 1940s (33). She developed the belief that improvisational movement could help neurotic people to move in the ways they would have normally had environmental influences not restricted them. By giving these individuals the opportunity to express themselves physically, Evan hoped they would release feelings which they had repressed and re-learn how to relate naturally to their bodies. Ultimately, they would adopt more positive images of themselves: "Evan's goal was to re-educate individuals to the natural unification and identification with organic bodily responses and needs . . ."

(37). Evan pointed out that in most cultures children are taught dance as a natural part of life. In modern, Western civilization dance has been mostly considered as only a particular skill which is taught in special, often exclusive, settings. This situation, Evan felt, contributed to the neuroticism which she observed in her patients who had been denied opportunities to move improvisationally in their early lives.

Contact Improvisation

In one form of improvisation, contact improvisation, the lines between dance and

movement as social activity have blurred considerably. Contact improvisation, like improvisation as a concert form, developed out of the sixties. Contact improvisation involves physical connections between movers and the giving and taking of weight. In this form it is imperative that the mover be sensing the body in the act of motion. Contact improvisation is sometimes considered a “lifestyle dance form” (Ryan 22) rather than a concert form because many of those who do contact improvisation are not interested in putting their work on stage to be judged. Even when contact improvisation has been put on stage, many audience members do not know how it should be judged. Contact improvisation pioneer Steve Paxton, in an interview with Peter Ryan, explained how audiences are used to seeing dance that they can label as either technically good or bad. Contact improvisation, however, does not lend itself as easily to such judgments because it is an aesthetic which encourages acceptance of the dancer as a human. Paxton relates, “(b)asically you just have to say you’re looking at a natural thing and you have to accept that . . .” (qtd. in Ryan 23). This anti-critical attitude often makes contact improvisation performances difficult for dance critics to pin down.

One interesting aspect of contact improvisation is that it is a form which older dancers, who are no longer able to do other forms of dance, and disabled dancers can do. In contact improvisation the dancer moves with “lines of force, both inside and outside the body”(Ryan 24), reducing stress on the joints which other forms of dance can cause. Contact improvisation also has ties to therapeutic dance (Novack 51-52) and has been used to help people with physical handicaps. Steve Paxton, for instance, has used contact improvisation to work with visually impaired individuals. Because contact improvisation

relies so much on touch as the primary means of communication it is an ideal form of movement expression for those who can not use their sight to guide them (Gale 159).

Contact improvisation also has therapeutic value because the performer learns how to release his or her weight, relaxing muscles which have become tense through stress. After my first experiences doing contact improvisation, I wrote in my improvisation journal about the intense effect it had on my physical/emotional state:

“Contact improv, since it involves my full body (especially when I am on the floor poring and pressing), seems to be an ideal form of dance for me because I can release my tension and lose my intellect. I feel much more instinctive and intuitive doing contact improv.”

In the poring and pressing exercises with which we started our contact improvisation lessons, we learned how to give into gravity in a controlled (not constrained, however) manner and to feel the floor pressing against us and us against it so that we had a living connection with what we were using to move ourselves upwards.

My classmates and I began to get a better feel for improvisation in general through doing contact work. We became much more equipped at listening to one another because we had to in order not to injure ourselves or each other. We began moving with greater deliberateness and care while we became even more creative as a result of being put into unusual physical situations. Sometimes, because we were so physically connected, it was difficult for me to always know when myself and the other person began or left off. This increasing attention to ourselves as co-existent made us better improvisers even when we were not physically touching. Our lessons in contact improvisation were an important stage in learning how the whole self works as an integrated brain-body system.

Improvisational movement, in general, encourages the mover to become more conscious of him or herself as a mind-body totality, which is opposite to how the body is usually treated by our rationally-oriented society. Individuals who belonged to counter cultures in the nineteen sixties experienced a new understanding of the self, encouraged in part by feminist beliefs and the acceptance of non-mainstream cultures. During this period improvisation developed as a concert form and dance critics and other performers began to gain a greater appreciation for improvisational practices. I will expand upon the idea of the integrated mind-body in the next chapter and examine more closely how improvisation and somatic theory are linked and why this belief system facilitates a feminist performance experience.

Notes

¹ Intuition may be defined as “body wisdom” (Knaster 11). Intuition is the body’s communication, through physical sensations, of its knowledge about a particular situation to the conscious brain. Because intuition has been downplayed in our society, we are less likely to listen to our intuitive sense of self.

² I must emphasize at this point that the two choreographers I interviewed, Claire Porter and Margie Gillis, do not use improvisation in their performances themselves. They do, however, use improvisation extensively when choreographing. I would also argue that, because they are so comfortable with moving improvisationally, they have the ability to be in the present while performing, rather than merely going through the motions by rote memory. It is almost as if they are creating the performance at that very moment. I believe my intuition is correct on this point because of the quality of their performances I viewed, which were charged with energy that comes when dancers embody the movement and are in the present moment. I frequently refer to this quality as the improvisational state.

³ Anna Halprin, a performer and choreographer, has made a distinction between what she calls improvisation and exploration, which would be the structuring of a situation and exploring within it: “. . . ‘exploring’ was much more focused and controlled than ‘improvising’” (Halprin 191). Halprin’s contention is that exploration forces the performer out of habitual movement patterns and causes him or her to invent new ways of moving, while in improvisation, because the mover goes into the body and lets it dictate

the movement, the performer is more likely to fall into comfortable patterns. She finds that while exploration does involve development of an idea, improvisation does not. Even though her method of distinguishing between these two attitudes towards moving is valid, I would not make such a distinction as she had but would see these two as points on the continuum of improvisational dance. It would seem that improvisation done in a choreographic frame of mind involves the conscious understanding on the mover's part that he/she is exploring new ways to move. In a different setting, such as in therapy, innovative movement may not be the primary goal. Therefore, these are merely differences of motivation rather than totally different forms of movement.

⁴Forti's use of the word natural to describe the improvisational process once again underscores the intuitive nature of improvisation and the potential that every person has to tap into this improvisational way of moving. The term natural is problematic for poststructuralists because it assumes that all people would respond in the same way regardless of their cultural and psychological background. I will use the term to refer to the sense one has when following an impulse, which may be influenced by cultural determinants. We can understand improvisation knowing that these outside factors have been internalized, but that the mover is accessing them, in the form of images, from an attitude of openness: "Improvisational dancers believe they are making art while being spontaneous, a contrast to the worked-out, predetermined nature of traditional and modern dance. Spontaneity signifies that the dancing is 'real,' 'playful,' and 'natural,' joining the making of art to everyday action" (Novack 191).

CHAPTER 4

PERFORMING THE SOMA

At the same time that the postmodern generation of dancers was exploring improvisation as a concert form, young people were discovering alternative methods for healing and understanding the body. The sixties and early seventies was a period of experimentation and the rejection of the previous generation's attitudes and anxieties about sexuality and the body. Western medicine, as representative of authority, became suspect. Those who wanted to search for their own way of approaching health embraced new forms not sanctioned by Western science. Particularly by looking towards Eastern cultures, American youth found differing views about the body as a source of wisdom and enlightenment. The Women's Movement was also concerned with changing perceptions of women's bodies. In reclaiming the body from the control of the scientific community and politicians, women were acknowledging that sexism reached into the private as well as the public sphere (Bordo 182; Treichler, 121).

The mind-body dichotomy has acted as an ideological wedge between men and women since the concept first appeared in Western culture, beginning as early as the Old Testament. Feminists argue that this dualistic belief has dominated Western thought in part because it can be used to discriminate against people the dominant society does not want to recognize as human (Bordo 11). In this dualistic system, the mind is coded as

active subject and the body as passive object, these dualities representing masculine and feminine attributes: "male as active, striving conscious subject and female as passive, vegetative, primitive matter..." (12). Women have been associated with the body partially because birthing and child raising processes are either biologically determined or socially delegated activities for women (5). In addition, since they are perceived as active, men are justified in their role as primary agent in the home and in society. It is no coincidence that those oppressed both in the past and present, African Americans, Native Americans, women, and immigrants are said to be animal-like, non-intelligent, and ruled by bodily desires. By dividing the world into two parts, mind and body, or human and animal, those in power were and are able to justify atrocities that would be unthinkable otherwise.

Women who focus on the body as a central part of their performances also question the Judeo-Christian myth, strengthened by Cartesian philosophy, that argues that the mind and body are discrete, even opposing entities. The association of the body with femaleness and, ultimately sin, and the mind with masculinity and purity is an essential part of this dichotomous belief system (Bryant-Bertail 4, 8; Fraleigh, "Spiral" 14-18). Female performers who work graphically with the female body are trying to erase the shame and dirtiness that typically surrounds the subject of women's sexuality. Although body shame is rampant throughout American culture, it is particularly targeted at women and homosexuals (Miller and Romàn 184). American society propagates body shame, causing many women to perceive themselves, subconsciously, as lesser than men. For example, the blaming of women abused by men for having bodies that can

be read as sexual demonstrates that women's bodies are considered innately evil in our society (Bordo 6).

Origins of the Mind-Body Split

To understand why the body has been relegated to an inferior position in relation to the mind, one must look at what the body has represented for Western civilization. As early as the Old Testament, one finds a pattern relating the body to sin and ultimately death. Adam and Eve are punished for their rebellious acts by being subject to bodily discomfort and death. Evidently, Westerners maintain an intense distrust of the body because it is susceptible to disease and decay after death. Behind this aversion to the body is the fear of losing control (Bordo 189). It is disturbing that the body, the closest, most intimate aspect of self can behave in ways one would rather it not. When one is sick, for instance, it is much more difficult to rally oneself into action, even if there is something important to be done. The sense of impotence this situation creates for the sick or wounded individual accurately describes the human condition. Rather than accept this inevitable destruction as humanity's lot, however, Westerners have attempted to separate the self into two, dichotomous parts. The mind, what is sometimes referred to as the soul, is considered to be immune to the deterioration the body undergoes and, therefore, acts as humanity's salvation. Conversely, the body is regarded as the betrayer of humanity, transforming over time from being healthy and energetic to sick and weak. Trusting the body, from this perspective, then, is analogous to trusting in death. The fear of the body is ultimately the fear of mortality.

In Julia Kristeva's analysis of the body as representation of the abject, she examines the theories of anthropologist Mary Douglas. Douglas demonstrated how societies organize themselves around the concept of order versus disorder. Kristeva continues with this theory by positing that the body, because it expels substances that are considered polluting and, therefore, threatening to the social order, is considered to be closer to disorder. The female's body is particularly defiling: "One sees everywhere the importance, both social and symbolic, of women and particularly the mother. In societies where it occurs, ritualization of defilement is accompanied by a strong concern for separating the sexes, and this means giving men rights over women" (70). Kristeva goes on to point out sections of the Old Testament that vigorously deny those faced with bodily afflictions the right to serve in ceremonies to God: "Any other mark (besides circumcision) would be the sign of belonging to the impure, the non-separate, the non-symbolic the non-holy" (102). The corpse is the ultimate taboo because it is matter that was once human, base matter divorced from spirit (109). In the corpse, the body is most noticeably "other."

In addition to the body's tendency to decay and death, the body's connection to the emotions and the unconscious, as well as its ability to achieve a direct kinesthetic communion with the world through dance made it difficult to comprehend intellectually, and therefore, dangerous to the rational Western mind (Langer 169, 180; Highwater, Primal 145). It is significant that traditionally the only state sanctioned dance form, ballet, literally bound its performers in crippling toe shoes while having them portray sanitized, and, therefore, non-threatening unearthly beings (Duncan 125). Western

culture has primarily relied on verbal language to understand the world, neglecting other forms of communication which are equally valid. In contrast primal peoples understand that the mystery(ies) underlying life cannot be prodded at until it is taken apart, revealing an ultimately knowable fact. Instead, they worship that which is ineffable, and the body is the primary vehicle for communion with the ineffable (Highwater, Primal 65).

Throughout history whenever Western culture's classification and organization of life have been threatened by the possibility of differing interpretations, it has repressed, ridiculed, or in the case of the Native Americans, eliminated those who viewed life from multiple perspectives.¹ Rigid hierarchical systems, which separate life into good and bad, were invoked to disparage these alternative views: "... the 'civilized' viewpoint is inclined to turn ambiguity into certitude and orthodoxy" (144). The body was suspect because it does symbolically represent multiplicity of desires, desires which the Western Culture, particularly Puritan-based religions, could not resolve.

Realization of the Soma

Somatic theorists attempt to repair the mind-body rift by treating the human being as a holistic system. Somatic approaches to health and wellbeing have become increasingly influential in American society in spite of opposition from traditional medical practitioners who label these approaches as quackery. Meditation, acupuncture, Tai chi, and yoga are just some of the many non-Western based practices which are gaining popularity, partially because many Westerners, in this age of technology, feel increasingly alienated from their bodies and, hence, themselves. Although "(i)n our culture, we seem to have cultivated, and even valued, the capacity to dissociate from

physical sensation" (Ogden 41), people are beginning to realize the negative effects of denying the body, for example, stress. Alternative practices which help people to regain a sense of their physical beings are based on paying attention to the body. In meditation, for example, the meditator slows down the thoughts and focuses on the breath. Within this state the brain and body, or soma, come into present time, meaning the meditator avoids thoughts of future worries or past problems. This state is in between being totally active and totally passive; the meditator is engaged in passive awareness. Simple relaxation techniques, such as releasing the muscles, sensing heat and coldness, focusing on the breath, and listening to the individual body parts are all conducive to meditative states.

Somatic theory developed its popularity in large part because it involves the patient in the healing process. Where Western medicine treats the patient as a passive object, somatic medicine is based on the belief that the patient's state of emotional and mental being has an enormous influence on his or her health. Patients who feel more empowered through being a part of their healing are less likely to succumb to apathy and depression. Practitioners and proponents of alternative medicine also believe that it is better to aid the body in its natural ability to heal itself than to introduce foreign, sometimes dangerous medicines or technologies. Much of somatic theory developed in response to the AIDS crisis. Because AIDS is a disease of the immune system, researchers who are interested in the connection between the effects of the emotions on the body's health have been working to find out how people living with this disease can better their health through alternative healing practices (Lindway 54-7). In an attempt to

fill the hole left by Western science, alternative practitioners have pioneered new methods for dealing with this as well as other health issues (Williams 1193-1203).

Research into the effects of stress on the body has been another factor in the surge of interest in somatic theory. Through this research scientists have come to believe that the emotions are linked with the body's responses and, ultimately, illness. One article in Stress Medicine takes into account the importance of rethinking the effect of external energy on the body's energy: "the human energy field interacts with other ambient fields . . . endocrine glands. . . act as transducers which convert external energy . . . into electrical then chemical energy . . ." (Wisneski 259). Even those scientists who are skeptical of alternative practices are receptive to the fact that the body is affected by psychological determinants:

The relatively new field of psychoneuroimmunology studies how psychological variables affect the nervous, glandular, and immune systems in ways that might affect susceptibility to and recovery from disease If thoughts, emotions, desires, beliefs, etc., are physical states of the brain, there is nothing inherently mystical in the notion that these neural processes could affect the glandular, immune, and other cellular processes throughout the body. (Park 31)

Although these Western-based scientists accept some aspects of somatic theory, they are unwilling to fully adopt the idea that the brain-body are one and the same. As the above quotation indicates, the neural processes are still considered separate from the body

In a recent issue of Somatics Magazine-Journal of the Mind/Body Arts and Sciences, Debra Greene in "Assumptions of Somatics, Part II" outlines the major underpinnings of somatic theory. Three that she mentions which specifically relate to the concerns I am addressing here are the acknowledgment that "existence is wholistic," that "... the mind is not located in the head, mind is adaptation, intention, and effort toward the future," and that the mind can be found in each cell in the body (51). In particular, Greene's belief that the mind exists within the body's cells transforms the body from a passive object into the active subject of our lives. Greene's assumptions affirm that the body is intrinsic to our being, a belief that goes far beyond what Western philosophers have henceforth allowed.

Phenomenology and the Lived Body

Some contemporary philosophers have begun to consider questions about the body and challenge earlier positions made by their predecessors. Drew Leder in his book, The Absent Body, breaks new ground by bringing the body's lived experience into the philosophical realm. Leder argues that the body is usually perceived as absence because, although it is central in how we negotiate life, it is not "a homogenous thing" but rather "a complex harmony of different regions, each operating according to indigenous principles and incorporating different parts of the world into its space"(2). Western medical observations of the body involve compartmentalizing the body based on its different functions, such as the circulatory system and the digestive system. In addition because much of the body's processes take place without our conscious understanding of them, for example, "the autonomous, rhythms of breathing and circulation, the stilled body of sleep, the mystery of the corpse"(2), we commonly forget that the body is part of everything that we do. From this

experience of bodily absence, Leder posits, such systems as Cartesian dualism developed. Leder challenges these systems and suggests that an understanding of the lived body as “integrated being” is crucial (5). In addition he asserts that the lived body should be understood both from the subjective, first person perspective as well as the third person, objective perspective; that bodily understanding should involve approaching the body scientifically as well as corporally; and that the sensomotor faculties should be given equal importance to the cognitive faculties (4-5). A combination of these approaches, he believes, will lead to a fuller comprehension of the human experience.

Because women have been traditionally associated with the body, some feminist thinkers devote their scholarship to theories pertaining to the lived body. Phenomenologist Sondra Horton Fraleigh is one such thinker who asserts that the lived body is the source of human wisdom: “Through the new phenomenology and somatic practices, we understand that the body is minded, besouled, and spirited” (“Spiral” 15). Along with other feminist phenomenologists, Fraleigh believes that the body is “performative” because it “can express and does speak its truth (its problems, secrets, and intrinsic powers)” (16). By teaching bodily awareness, Fraleigh’s purpose is to make people conscious of the body’s wisdom and ability to heal itself. She also points out that our culture has defined what our bodies can do: “New phenomenology is examining how our cultural milieu influences and even fixes the limits of our bodily capabilities” (16). Fraleigh recommends that people relearn intuition as a valid intelligence and come to awareness of the body’s sensations in order to reverse some of the effects of cultural training.

Body imaging, is one way that the body's presence may be experienced. Using imagery, the mover can sense his or her bodily functions, from the circulation of blood to the cerebral-spinal fluid to the behavior of the cells. Those who use body imagery report a greater sense of connection with their bodies. In my own experience, kinesthetic imagery has focused me on my interior space, the space between my joints, organs, and muscles. Once this interior space is recognized, I become more aware that it is related to spatial pulls outside of my body. Interior lines of energy coming from my body project into the external space, uniting inside and outside and creating a spatial understanding which is subjectively known. My body becomes a part of the architecture that is involved in all of life. Self is no longer disembodied or detached; it is felt reality (Bainbridge-Cohen 96-7; Ogden 40).

Laban's Contributions

Somatic theory owes a great debt to Rudolf Laban whose movement studies in the teens, twenties and thirties, which culminated in Laban Movement Analysis, are still used to codify and analyze movement today. Laban's view that the body is simultaneously a formal and an expressive entity was revolutionary: "For Laban . . . tension changes in emotional or thought processes are visible in emotional or thought processes in the body" (Bartenieff 17). By creating a systematic approach to interpret emotional states, cultural characteristics, and intellectual processes, Laban opened up the fields of dance, psychology, anthropology, and kinesiology to a wider range of research possibilities.

Perhaps one of Laban's greatest contributions was his understanding of space and the architecture of the body. Laban was able to connect the voluminous nature of the body (that it has depth, width, and height) with the body's relationship to space in movement. His belief

that “(a)ll movement tends into space, both the space around us and the space within us”(Laban 54) and that “(b)esides the motion of bodies in space there exists motion of space in bodies . . .” (23) illuminates for the mover just how much the body is related to all that surrounds him or her. With this new awareness, the mover becomes more conscious of dance/movement as a complex coalescence of varying dimensions in space and time.

Dance anthropologists and aestheticians have applied Laban’s theories to the study of dance’s origins and artistic significance. All of their findings focus on the body as starting place for an understanding of dance. Suzanne Langer is one aesthetician who uses Laban’s ideas to propose that dance, like all of the arts, is a symbolic representation of human feeling and sentience (40). In particular dance is symbolic of power, what she terms “virtual powers” (184). The virtual powers are expressed in the gestures the dancer uses. Anthropologist Roderick Lange also uses Laban’s theories to discover how the formal concepts of weight, space, and time are expressed by rhythm: “The concept of rhythm stems from our experience of basic bodily actions with use of weight, space, and time”(Lange 29). Lange sees the body as a source of information which shapes our perceptions of the world.

Soma and Performance

Several feminist performers use their medium as an ideal place for the mind-body duality to be examined. The body has always been intimately linked with performance because the body has been considered the performer's tool. Some phenomenologists, dancers, and movement artists of the 20th Century, particularly those of the sixties postmodern generation of dancers, challenged the idea that the body is merely an instrument of the mind. These artists and thinkers assert that the body is existentially lived, i.e., the

person's being is contingent upon the existence of the body. Because the body's sensations and communications with the brain link it to the brain, it is an indispensable part of the human experience. To call the body an instrument, these artists and philosophers argue, is to misrepresent the self as a hierarchy of functions, some being more essential than others (Bartenieff 6-13; Fraleigh, Dance 13, 115; Sheets-Johnstone 128-130). Some feminist performers use techniques, like improvisation, which show this dichotomy to be unfounded.

Improvisation liberates the body from a position of subservience to the intellect. Engaging in the improvisational state ultimately means letting go of the rational mind and giving over one's control to the body. This idea, that the body's wisdom should be consciously invoked, is one foreign to some dancers trained in formal techniques, like classical ballet. The body as it is commonly understood in these formal styles of dance serves as the instrument the dancer uses to create aesthetically pleasing designs and shapes in space. André Levinson, a dance critic of the 19th century, expresses this point of view, "The accomplished dancer is an artificial being, an instrument of precision and he is forced to undergo rigorous daily exercise to avoid lapsing into his original purely human state" (117). The body as machine, subject to the brain's will, is an integral part of the dualistic theme which plays throughout Western history. Improvisation, because it treats the self as an integrated system, is an art form which demonstrates this split to be an arbitrary creation of Western philosophy and not an actual reality. Improvisational practitioners are comfortable with subjectively perceiving the world. Mary Lynn Smith said in our interview, "in the objective, analytic mode of thinking you are separating yourself from the data. In improvisation you are the data." Recovering forms of body knowledge constitutes a break with masculinist reality.

During improvisation, the body is in a state of awareness to new stimuli. The soma does not prejudge what comes to it; instead it treats even the old and familiar from an attitude of curiosity so that they become totally new and interesting. Loss of a controlling influence allows the improviser to tune into bodily sensations that are commonly neglected. This loss of control is part of what makes improvisation seem frightening to those who are not used to letting go. Improvisation requires that the mover adopt a different perspective than that which is used when planning and working towards a particular goal: "The lack of conscious compositional focus in the form represent(s) spontaneity in life, a literal 'going with the flow of events. . .'" (Novack 132). The soma experiences itself as fluid while improvising.

Improvisational performers attend to their bodies while performing and focus on what their bodies tell them. During my interview with Claire Porter, I became aware that my own dichotomous wording of a question collided with the manner in which she sensed reality. I asked Porter whether her body "ever told you things your conscious mind did not know," and she looked at me with a puzzled expression. After a few seconds she said, "but your mind is your body." Clearly, for the seasoned improvisational practitioner such distinctions seem ludicrous. For many others, however, the body is the burying place of unwanted emotions and memories. Perhaps, because the body has been associated with the abject, these repressed emotions find expression in the tissues, cells, and organs. The body takes on emotions that have not been processed or worked through. I maintain a Jungian perspective that the body is a storehouse for archetypes and myths that have been passed down from our ancestors but have mostly remained unrecognized:

Primitive man's inclination toward the mythic and the supernatural was not, as Freud (and others) have claimed, the result of cognitive inferiority, or wish-fulfilling delusions that we have now outgrown. Rather it was an alternative mode of consciousness that understands the world in a sacred manner.

Because it corresponds to something universal in the collective unconscious, it remains with us, even though our own cultural response has been to deny and repress this mode. (Gablík 50)

The improvisational performer allows herself to enter deeper modes of consciousness by tuning into the body as a source for information.

Improvisational performers who use their own journey into themselves as shamans or healers would open the wounds of these hidden places in order to explore and/or heal them (Finley 43; Lunch 107). This type of performer is aware that her audience is watching her journey, and, therefore, the catharsis she invokes is meant to be experienced kinesthetically by them. Those artists who are delving into their bodies to recover repressed memories and/or desires in their performances would need to be in a semi-improvisatory state in order to reach these deeper emotional places. An observer of performance artist, Karen Finley, has described it as a trance-like state (Carr 147). Improvisational techniques help the performer to enter this precarious, psychological territory. Dance therapist Franziska Boas describes what needs to take place for expressive dance to happen: "One must be willing to allow the laws of motion to control the body and carry it where they will. . . . This requires the courage to lose oneself in the happenings which are going on within the body and the mind" (qtd. in Levy 108). The performer who improvises reveals a willingness to take risks in order to

confront her fears and desires, to imaginatively embrace them, and to reach a transcendence of meaning by communicating them to others.

One such performer, Fern Shaffer, engages in rituals that mark the passing of the seasons. In these rituals she loses her sense of time as we commonly experience it and enters into a new reality through her relationship to nature: “. . . I possess no expert training or special knowledge, only the ability to open up and channel the intuition of my own self What the world lacks today is not so much knowledge of these things of the spirit as experience of them. Experiencing is all” (qtd. in Gablik 45). Shaffer’s belief that direct experience is the best way to reach the spiritual is radically different from Western science’s objective stance towards analyzing data. For this very reason, Western science is suspicious of the idea that the body, as it is subjectively experienced, can be a valid source of knowledge.

In Margie Gillis’s solo performances, I witnessed her exploration into aspects of herself through her body. During her interview with Mary Lynn Smith and me, she discussed how dance helped her to work through her grief over her brother’s death: “To be sincere, artists should get in there and deal with it (pain). They should spend time with it.” One of her solo pieces, Torn Roots, Broken Branches, vividly communicated the emotional fire inside of her. In this piece, I felt like Gillis was channeling her pent up emotional energy. Her strong use of weight and her bent over posture pushed the energy downward as if she were simultaneously pressing her rage into the earth and calling up more energy from the earth. Engaged in this dynamic emotional-motional cycle, Gillis appeared to touch the ritual aspect of anger. The more she became driven by this energy, the more circular her

relationship to space became. As in her other pieces, Gillis initiated from her core (the pelvis and ribcage areas); I believe this preference on her part has much to do with her choreographic belief to move from the inside out.

It is important to clarify that the performer involved in the improvisational mode is conscious of where she is and is not being manipulated by outside forces, as in a drug-induced state. The performer is intentionally engaging in a time and space dynamic, which differs from how one normally experiences space and time. This state is what dance anthropologist and phenomenologists have termed embodiment or the lived body because the person is focused upon the sensations of the body (Fraliegh, Dance 13). Following Laban's theories that the movements of the body are a vital expression of the human being's inner states and his or her relationship with the rest of the world, the proponents of the lived body call attention to how meaning exists in the movements of the body alone (Bartenieff 17; Lange 29; Sheets-Johnstone 133). The improvisational state may reach a point of being trance-like, but it is a conscious choice on the part of the performer. Smith described the feeling of being focused only on her kinesthetic sensations when she performs in present time: "I'm not thinking about the future or the past, I am watching my breath or feeling the surge of a headlong run. I am being guided by momentum and listening to my body's rhythms." For Smith being in the improvisational state is all about being sentiently aware.

Some performers may choose to reach the improvisational state in order to enter an altered realm of consciousness which will allow them to perceive reality in a new manner: ". . . when the ego-personality is temporarily displaced, the mind experiences another world from the everyday world, where inside is not separated from outside. . ." (Gablick 4). This break

down between what is considered “me” and “not me” gives the performer the chance to experience living beyond our basic constructs of reality. Deborah Hay describes her experience of dance: “Dance uses the limitation of the physical body to expand the quality of attention one brings to the world. At its peak it defractionalizes the moment for the dancer and its audience” (84). Hay's description emphasizes the heightened awareness that bodily expression can give for both performer and viewer.

The Body as Active Subject

The female performers of the 1960s and 1970s created alternative readings to the Western dualistic system by showing the body in a positive light. They associated the female body with the earth mother, regeneration, and the powers of creation (Dolan, Feminist 83-88). It is not coincidental that the rise of nudity and the bodily images in women's performances began during the late 1960s and 1970s when women were advocating for more positive, even spiritual views of the female body (61-63). At this time the female performer seemed to be liberating her body from the destructive images which had henceforth chained her.

Many contemporary feminist performers subvert the convention of the Western narrative by simultaneously focusing on the female body, what has hitherto been the representation of object, and making it into the active subject (O'Dell 96-98; Forte 218, 220, 224, 228). Inherent in the definition of feminist performance, especially improvisational performance, is the idea that these performances are not meant to be recorded precisely so they will not be objectified. Art and performance critic Peggy Phelan has written on this issue:

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. (Unmarked 146)

The living body is preeminent in defining feminist performance; therefore, any live performance cannot be truly understood if the body's function as active subject within it is not addressed.²

From my research into feminist performance, I have come across several feminist performers, who consciously and unconsciously, begin from the body in creating their works. Although some of these performers could be perceived as essentialist because they place emphasis on the body, I do not believe that their decision to start from the body necessarily means that they believe the female body is innately different from the male body. Rather, I would posit that these women performers are starting from places which seem real to them in a world where outside conventions appear to be dominated by the masculine, rationally constructed discourse. The body, then, although certainly mediated by cultural influences, is a place which the dancer can tune into to receive messages about herself.

In an interview, Robbie McCauley, an African-American, feminist writer and performer, related her experience of creating by referring to the body's significance: "What I want to write comes about first. I write on my feet. I dance and move around, I sit down and I talk to myself, do scenes. I do it until I feel like writing" (230). McCauley's choice to let the movements come prior to the written work reveals how profoundly connected her body is to her expression. In her performances, as well, her body is foregrounded as part of her

subjective experience. Vivian Patraka, her interviewer, points out that McCauley occupies her body even when she is nude on stage, depicting herself in an object role, a situation which could potentially lead to the possession of her body by the male gaze:

Even if you (McCauley) are enacting objectification, that is precisely the point, and the power of that body belongs to you when you enact it. Because saying the female body can never be shown is almost acceding to a sense of powerlessness. There's a kind of ownership of that body in performance that's made very clear in your work. (231)

This ownership that Patraka speaks of is, I believe, McCauley's knowledge of her body as herself, a self that can never be given away.

In Finley's performance, The Constant State of Desire, she creates from her body; the stories that she tells revolve around physical actions related to her body, and she uses words which are bodily centered. At one point, for instance, she covers her nude body with chocolate syrup to depict the rampant sexual abuse (of both men and women) and the degradation of the female body, in particular, by this society (Carr, "Telling" 153). She can be described as pornographic (and has been by those who have heard of her performance second-hand); however, she does not "offer herself as a passive object" because she is the one who controls how her body is perceived (Dolan, Feminism 66-67). People only misconceive and control her image when they either willingly do so (if they find her message threatening) or they have only read descriptions of her performances and make their judgments based on these descriptions. In her actual performances, her intention is to awaken her audience to the violence people do to each other everyday, not to sexually arouse them.

Redefining the Female Body

Performing the body as subject enables the female performer to redefine her position on stage. For most of theatre and dance history women were under the control of the masculine gaze, and males, following the convention of the woman as to be-looked-at, have dictated how women should be visually represented. Feminist performers overturn this convention by questioning what we consider beautiful or ugly. Because feminine beauty has often been limited to certain women who happen to fit a particular type, given value by the media and arts, many different types of women have been discluded or ridiculed when appearing on stage. Particularly in dance, the physical proportions of the female are often meticulously observed. Since most directors and choreographers do cast according to type, it would be difficult for theatre-goers to accept that a woman who did not fit into this type could be attractive and/or of value as a human being. When females who are not considered attractive by societal standards perform in roles which connote attractiveness, they subvert the social order and can potentially cause their viewers to examine their own codes of beauty (Dolan, Feminist 110).

The control of female representation on stage is closely related to the obsession with controlling the female body in our society. Many anorexics, for example, suffer from the delusion that by controlling their bodies, they become more masculine, therefore, more powerful. Women who diet, exercise, undergo plastic surgery, etc., share a profound distrust of their bodies (Bordo 171-173). The body is considered the enemy, the female self which must be contained: "The ideal here is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, 'bolted down,' firm; in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose

internal processes are under control” (190). Women's fear of their bodies is related to their need to keep their desires within socially proscribed bounds. Letting the body go is tantamount to moral laxity and rebelliousness against society (95, 203). Once again, the loss of control which improvisation entails, directly resists such societal constraints on the female body.

The female body in a position of power is a highly transgressive image within American society. Women who have power are expected to conform to societal dictates of beauty: slender, firm, and desirable, without being soft or maternal in appearance. In conforming to these beauty requisites women acknowledge that they will not disrupt the workplace environment:

From the standpoint of male anxiety, the lean body of the career businesswoman today may symbolize neutralization. With her body and her dress she declares symbolic allegiance to the professional, white, male world along with her lack of intention to subvert that arena with alternative “female values.” (Bordo 208)

The fleshly woman's association with these female values marks her as potentially threatening, hence women's desires to firm their bodies in order to climb the career ladder.

Women on stage have potential for power because of their “lived presence.” By being live while performing, these performers make it more difficult for their audience members to deny or reject their existence. Therefore, these performers have the opportunity to challenge stereotypes more potently than do film characters who may be disavowed as “not real.” Several feminist performers have called attention to their appearances in order to

challenge normative notions of beauty. Older women, women with body types labeled as ugly by society, and women of color have asserted their own ideals of beauty by creating performance works which go against the dominant assumptions of beauty. Susanne Lacy, for example, explores the issues that surround visibility and the body through her performances. In one performance she had herself made over as an old woman in a hotel lobby. She then sat in a section of the lobby with several older women (who were performing with her) in order to draw attention to the fact that older women are invisible within our society because their bodies are no longer considered desirable. By presenting an image of older women unified in a common goal, Lacy intended to get more older women to network together and enter into the active dialogue of public life (Gablik 109-111).

Spiderwoman, a theatre ensemble made up of Native American sisters, parodies Western ideas of beauty, and its members perform their own bodies, which are conventionally non-visible, as beautiful (Schneider, "See" 227-255). In one section from a performance at the University of North Texas Studio Theatre, Lisa Mayo performed herself as the "Fat Lady Goddess," who revels in her sexual power over the minor male deities. The confidence, humor, and expressiveness that Mayo exuded during her performance all mark her as a woman to be listened to and respected. In her presence, one cannot ignore the defiant assertion that fat is beautiful because it is powerful and life-affirming.

Female performers who focus on the body are attempting to reclaim and assert their reality in the face of the distorted imagery used in contemporary depictions of women in the arts and media. Performers throughout the world have dug through the mythology of many civilizations to recover female archetypes that have been twisted to reflect masculine versions

of the truth. In their search for their own representations, performers have argued that whoever controls the images of women the culture is exposed to also controls women politically. This control is particularly relevant to issues involving the power to make laws concerning women's bodies (Bordo 82-88).

This chapter has illustrated what might be considered an essentialist approach to feminist performance. I have outlined why women with feminist intentions are interested in portraying the body as integral to their identities. These artists call attention to the body because they believe it has been neglected or misunderstood throughout much of Western history. Some of these artists explore the relationship between nature, the body, and ritual. Many of them engage in improvisational practices to connect with the body. My intention has been to discuss the ways these particular women artists use their bodies to express their feminist beliefs.

While some feminist performers and critics I have mentioned have been attacking sexist depictions of women and creating positive bodily images of women, other feminists wish to dispel the image of woman as principally nurturer and bridge to nature (Case 291-5; Dolan, *Feminist* 68-69). Performance critics who maintain a poststructuralist perspective focus on performers who address the multiple identities they contain within them and use techniques to emphasize performance, and by extension life, as a masquerade. In particular, these performers challenge gender as a biologically determined category. The deconstruction of all types of hierarchies, including those which exist within the self, and the performance of multiple ways of being marks the poststructuralist style of improvisation.

Notes

¹The experiences of the Native Americans is just one example of domination of a primal culture. Urbanization, centralization of knowledge, and the institutionalization of education, medicine, and law are all processes of modernization which have eroded the folk epistemologies of peasant peoples. One example of this erosion is the rejection of folk remedies in favor of modern medical treatments. One may find more information on this dynamic in George Spindler's book, Burgbach: Urbanization and Identity in a German Village, which analyzes the effects of modernization on peasant peoples. In addition to this example, policies dealing with the immigration of peasant peoples into the United States often reveal prejudices against these peoples' differing world views. For instance, the majority of Americans were threatened by the waves of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe in the early twentieth century because they saw their folk traditions as backward and unclean. A source which demonstrates how theatre was used to assimilate immigrants is Patrick Yuite's article, "Assimilating Immigrants Through Drama: The Social Politics of Alice Minnie Herts and Lillian Wald."

²Those who attempt to control female bodies in performance by describing them in objectifying language, for example, the conservative critics who took offense to the performances of Karen Finley, distort the reality of the lived performance (Evans and Novak 208-209; Phelan, Unmarked 23). For these conservative critics, the woman's body is automatically objectified; consequently, the performance is perceived as a pornographic attempt to sexually arouse the audience. When the female performer depicts herself in

combination with violent imagery, these critics will often over-look the issues about violence being presented and will focus on the perverse nature of mixing violence with sexuality.

Instead of viewing the performers as subjects of their narratives, these conservative thinkers and critics have endeavored to possess, control, and objectify these images, thereby reinstating the division between subject and object these performers were trying to erase.

This example demonstrates how much the patriarchal view of women in performance persists in spite of women's differing attempts to reverse such a view.

CHAPTER 5

TRANSGRESSING GENDER IDENTITIES

Feminists who adopt poststructuralist theories reject the belief that one's biological sex determines how one acts and creatively expresses oneself. Instead, these theorists claim that gender is socially constructed. The label "female" has become a reality only because it has been believed to represent natural law for so many years. Judith Butler describes the dynamic that has reified gender roles: "Gender is . . . a construction that regularly conceals its genesis. The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production" (272). Butler's analysis rightly demonstrates how every person helps to keep this system going by acting as if these gender roles were real: ". . . gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again" (277). Given that we have the choice to decide what our gender is, Butler implies that we are not determined to be feminine just because we are biologically female. Awareness of the scripted nature of gender, then, is necessary if women are to fulfill themselves as human beings.

Through improvisation the performer can explore gender as a social construct rather than a biological reality. Freedom from formal theatrical and dance conventions can be

translated into freedom from social codes. The improvisational performer is able to find new ways of identifying herself which may or may not coincide with society's perceptions of what a person of a particular gender should or should not be like. Transgressing boundaries by adopting multiple identities or by "wearing" identities which contradict stereotypical notions of women is a poststructuralist feminist act because it emphasizes the constructed nature of gender, i.e., gender is defined by sociocultural forces. When Butler states, "(g)ender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (278), she underlines the extent to which performing one's life or art can either subvert or affirm the dominant paradigm.

Not only does society prefer men and women to maintain particular gender roles, but also, society, on the whole, prefers that people adopt stable identities that are easily recognizable and serve a particular function within the social structure. A woman who is both a mother and an overtly sexual being, for instance, is not tolerated by the majority of society because women who are mothers are expected to subsume all of their other desires in acting out this role. Our society fears that the sexually active mother will damage her children by exposing them to her "sinful lifestyle." In addition, most believe that mothers should act as the support for their children, which means that they cannot have needs of their own which may distract from this one role (Bordo 82-85). As this example illustrates, women have been positioned within roles that deny them the opportunity to discover other parts of themselves.

Although stability of identity in itself is not an evil, it becomes so when the identity is one which the person did not consciously choose for herself or by which she feels

restricted. If a woman has been in one role and it is no longer satisfactory, she often finds that society does not willingly support her attempts to adopt a new identity which would step outside the bounds of femininity (Hanna 10). Poststructuralist feminists agree that the gender category female is very confining and destructive to human growth. From reading the writings of Lacan and Kristeva, feminists became more aware of just how limiting gender identities are for women. Elin Diamond discusses what the process of gender identification does to the person:

Not only do we suffer primordial loss when biologically sexed, we endure differentiation and splitting at every stage of infant development, culminating in the Oedipal phase with the entry into language--what Lacan calls the symbolic order. Entering language, we are positioned in a system based on fixed hierarchies; we become not unique selves but speaking subjects, our individual expression shaped by a pre-existing field of social practices and meanings. ("Refusing" 92-93)

This splitting into proscribed roles creates a hierarchy within the self. Ironically the female's interior hierarchy typically includes the "weak," feminine position at the top, while the masculine, aggressive side is positioned at the bottom, virtually negated as a reality for the self. Within the larger, social structure, however, the masculine gender is at the top and the feminine gender is placed below. Throughout their lives, women are expected to play the feminine role, which often means effacing those parts of the self which do not conform to this role. Idealization of women in art has been one way that society has kept women obsessed with the idea of reaching the feminine ideal, thereby, diverting their attention from

discovering within themselves that which is not feminine. The sad aspect of this feminine ideal is that, ultimately, by limiting women to being the passive objects of masculine desire, it represents lifelessness; the true female must “kill herself into art . . .” (Finke 229).

Women who restrict themselves to this idealized behavior will find that many other parts of themselves cannot be expressed.

Because improvisation encourages its practitioners to solve problems by adapting and adopting new ways of being, it is an ideal form for expressing the idea that one person can define herself in multiple ways. Improvisational performance, which steps outside of the bounds of traditional drama by involving the use of multiple identities, is the key to exploring a new understanding of society because it focuses our attention on the scripted nature of identity. In performing many, differing identities, the performer upsets the viewer’s expectation of the actor as a representative of a ‘real person’: “. . . conventional mimesis—with the actor laminated to the character, reproducing the notion of a unified subjectivity, a constant identity—is doomed to subsume differences under some presumed monolithic sameness” (Hart 113). Performance artist, Karen Finley, constantly challenges her audiences to look beyond her as one person who can be easily defined: “. . . Finley never loses the ability to self-consciously perform the unconscious, which enables her to abandon the unity of the humanist ‘I,’ to shift around, between, and among subject and object positions . . .”(112). By using improvisational techniques in her performances, Finley allows varying personas to live through her; from the victim to the victimizer, Finley has explored a range of human potentialities.

Improvisation is a technique which can lead to confrontation with the “other” or the abject. Encountering taboos, that which our culture has marked as unsafe, takes place when the performer drops usual inhibitions and passes through boundaries that once enclosed her.

While improvising, the mover can release herself from social bonds in order to unlock repressed emotions. The confusion between self and other or the acknowledgment of oneself in that which one has considered to be “other” previously are possible outcomes of improvisation when it is done within therapeutic settings and as a performer or student.

When I have improvised in a group, for example, I have found my identity merging with those of the other movers, which has led me to adopt ways of being which I had shunned, not ever recognized, or avoided before as possibilities for myself.

Hermaphroditus and the Performer

Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Jungian theory, often revolves around approaching one’s life as a story to be interpreted. The self is perceived to be made up of multiple parts, rather like a split personality, which is held together by the myth of a unitary identity. In James Hillman’s analysis of psychotherapy he makes an interesting connection: “the ‘discovery’ of the unconscious occurred simultaneously with the ‘uncovering’ of bisexuality” (101). He specifically mentions the archetypal figure Hermaphroditus, who represents a merging of feminine and masculine traits. That these two phenomena were synchronistically brought to public consciousness represents an important stage in the understanding of the human psyche.

In improvisation, the improviser is like a Hermaphrodite because he/she is open to wearing the traits of either gender, as they have been conceived of by our culture, and

combining traits of both to create new self-concepts. This openness to a variety of gender options is the same openness which queer theorists advocate in their writings: "Gender must be conceived of as a field of experience, socially constructed, constantly changing, not a pair of bi-polar opposites inevitably fixing the subject in relation to an either/or cultural practice" (Reinelt 51). The use of masks, with make-up being considered a mask, and gender coded paraphernalia, and the switching of gender identities are all techniques available to the transgressive performer. In Holly Hugh's Dress Suits for Hire, for example, the characters' use of costumes helps to communicate the sensation that they are acting as performers in their own lives: "... there's an infinite flexibility suggested in the role-playing--in the scarves and the boots and the different things that they put on, like the frames of past and present they slip in and out of" (Schneider, "Polymorphous" 247). Hughes's use of dress up in this performance underscores the place that fashion has played in the creation of women's self-concepts. For centuries women have been associated with artifice, possibly as an attempt to mask their connection with the abject, which our culture feared, and to keep them within an object position (Finke 229-30). Dress Suits's emphasis on the scripted nature of women's performances of their lives conveys to what extent women have struggled to find themselves as subjects in a society which would rather them fit into a neat, socially acceptable gender category.

Dress Suits is an interesting performance because it plays up the butch-femme (masculine/feminine) roles between the two lesbian characters and points out that these roles are not sexually proscribed (Davy 139). The costumes enhance the performative quality of gender and the ease with which the characters can go from butch to femme:

“Opening the performance with Shaw dressing on stage, literally putting on femininity, foregrounds gender as ‘man-made’” (142). Rather than pretending that these characters were biologically programmed to be masculine or feminine, the performers play butch-femme as roles invented by society (Case 291). Within the masquerade the performer constantly shift personas: “The butch-femme roles at the center of their ongoing personalities move masquerade to the base of performance and no narrative net can catch or hold them as they wriggle into a variety of characters and plots”(294-5). This willingness to step outside of conventions is part of the improvisational mind-set and necessarily means the performer is comfortable enough to be vulnerable when adopting new, sometimes unsettling, self-concepts.

Porter’s Personalities

Improvisational techniques can lead to the creation of female characters who are more unusual and sexually ambiguous than those portrayed in much of conventional drama. When I saw Claire Porter’s performance, I was able to relate to her portrayal of different characters because each one of them had quirky personalities and strong presences. Even though all of her characters were coded as biologically female, they had an androgynous aspect to them, which made them intriguing. I could tell that Porter felt a connection to the characters, which she simultaneously parodied and humanized with great sensitivity. How a love for one’s character comes across is a subtle phenomenon, which can only happen when the performer has fully embodied and recognizes herself in that person. In her piece, Piano, Porter, dressed in a long, flowing , royal blue gown and a matching turban bedecked with sparkling jewels, portrayed a piano diva who exhibited her mastery in grand flourishes and

swooning, full-body sighs. In this performance, I could sense that the pianist was obviously driven by her passion, a passion that was thwarted by the unfortunate loss of the piano on which she was meant to perform. Even without the piano, however, the character could not restrain herself from performing. Her whole body, from her fluttering hands to her swooping, elongated frame, was immersed in the performance she created for us. Porter's humorous, yet sympathetic character portrait captured the spirit of this exotic yet very human persona.

I recognized Porter's particular genius when she metamorphosed into the earthy aerobics instructor in Fitness Digest. Clad in a bright, tacky leotard and speaking in a loud, cheerful voice, the aerobics instructor served as an inspired opposite to the passionate pianist. Instead of jumping up and down while leading us in a routine, the instructor gave us a workout of the digestive and respiratory systems. The most humorous aspect of the piece was the manner in which Porter matched the words, movements, and sounds to create a holistic workout. When she began to exercise the digestive organs, for example, her word, "secreete," became gurglings that twisted her body into contortions. It seemed as though these digestive juices were being squeezed out of her organs and were spreading throughout her body in an orgasmic release of tension. Porter also created contrast between the peppy nature of the character and the words she used, for example, "grow old gracefully" and "waist away." Both phrases connote decay, creating an ironic situation which foiled audience expectations and reminded the audience of the foolishness of trying to escape old age (Figge Fox 9; Lewis 94; Tobias 95).

An aspect I particularly saw in Fitness Digest but which almost all of Porter's solo pieces share was the presentational situation in which she placed her character. Having the character interact with the audience works for Porter because she can create a rapport with her audience. As the aerobic instructor, she gave us commands and offered us praise for blinking our eyes and repeatedly swallowing. Because the instructor involved the audience in the workout, I could feel her movements within my own body. Often, I found my body involuntarily responding to her instructions. The character was obviously communicating with us. At odd moments, she would tell us something that was completely out of the blue, yet, when looked at more closely, perfectly corresponded to the situation. For instance, she asked the audience what we like to eat and then confided to us that "I like prunes." Since prunes are known for encouraging the digestive processes, the character's remark had a humorous effect. What makes Porter different from a stand-up comedian is that she comes on stage in character and never steps back to make comments on that character. Instead, she allows the character to reveal herself to the audience through slips of the tongue and telling movements.

In Green Dress Circle, Porter, attired in a smart green outfit, proceeded to explain to us the geography of the theatre, the lobby, the parking lot, and the major city streets, until she had mapped out the whole universe, making references to circles, dresses, and green as they popped up in the seemingly stream of consciousness monologue she spoke. Her words were matched by pointing gestures which shifted our focus from taking in the cosmic (I could almost feel comets swishing by as her body propelled forward to direct our attention from one area to another) to zooming in on the specific, the hem of her dress, the green of

her earrings. The piece was an amazing illustration of the macro's relationship to the micro. Somehow, in a paradoxical way, the fluid circling of an arm became the spiraling motion of a galaxy and an earring became equal in magnitude to a planet. Porter's ability to show these parallel universes illustrated to me that she has an understanding of the many in the one and vice versa.

Porter used repetition and exaggeration to create a humorous situation in her piece Slipping into Weather. Porter appeared as a perky weather woman. Behind her sprawled a vista of blue sky and cumulous clouds. The character appeared authoritative. The weather reporter is someone whom we put our faith in (to some extent); we expect him or her to live up to standards of professionalism. At first, the weather reporter seemed "on top of thing" in the friendly, pleasantly polite manner that television personalities have. With a confident gesture towards the map, the character strode towards it to give us an in-depth look at how the weather was progressing. She made the usual hand gestures we associate with the television weather report, bending over to indicate a formation, for instance, and once her spiel was over, I wondered what she could do next.

At this point Porter's use of repetition came into play. The weather woman began to do the weather just as she had before, yet the expressions and gestures became more convoluted and exaggerated. The character became infused with a manic energy as she was more and more physically affected by the weather. Her original feigned enthusiasm for the job evolved into an obsession, especially when she wanted to convey the stifling heat of a warm front or the bone chilling cold of a cold front. Now, she covered the whole stage space and involved her whole body to fully express her report. It seemed that her report was

no longer a job but a mission. The reporter transformed from a trite example of a television personality to a wholly embodied person.

In Lost in the Modern Porter depicted a confused person who started out with the relatively simple problem of having lost her keys in the Modern Art Museum and ended up not knowing what she was even looking for. Porter relayed to me in our interview that she wanted to show how the character was affected by looking at the artwork: "She is moved by the art and loses herself, which is what is wonderful about art." I could definitely see how, throughout the piece, the character became more interested in seeing and appreciating the art than in her initial goal. Porter embodied the confusion that being lost feels like, when one's usual identity is no longer reflected by one's surroundings. The character would stop in the middle of one movement and train of thought to switch to an entirely different track. One moment, for instance, she would be peering at a work of art from between her legs and the next she would be staring straight at us asking, "Has anyone seen the lost and found?" These slips and starts made me feel almost schizophrenic and, although, it was jarring to be in one state and then another, it also made the piece more puzzling and, ultimately, more fun. Like the character, then, I found myself accepting and valuing the different angles from which life and art can be viewed.

Although Porter was not explicitly dealing with gender issues in her works, her interest in creating, improvisationally, characters who were forced to face loss of identity (the pianist lost her piano, the museum patron lost her keys, the weather reporter lost her mind) reveals a poststructuralist concern with finding the gaps that exist in everyday life. Porter choreographically works towards following the image/character and allowing it to

take her to its limits and beyond. She does not seek to create a coherent identity for her characters; instead she accepts, even welcomes, the odd twists and turns a particular creation might take.

The Examination of Roles

Other performers have more intentionally dealt with gender as performative. The women who performed at the WOW cafe, a Lesbian bar in Manhattan, from 1982-1984 used gender in their performances to playfully parody socially acceptable gender types. These performers often worked improvisationally, creating a collaborative environment for their audiences who sometimes dressed up in butch-femme costumes themselves (Dolan, Feminist 68-69). For these performers and their audiences, dressing femme (very feminine) had the same effect of a man dressing in drag: "Femininity in the lesbian context, is foregrounded as drag, the assumption of an 'unnatural' gender role . . ." (69). Their performances emphasized the outrageous lengths to which some people will go to prove themselves as the correct gender. Because these women were sexually attracted to those who are biologically female but not necessarily gendered as such, they were able to see that gender and one's biological sex are not one and the same.

Besides being used to point out the performative aspect of gender, improvisation can also give its practitioners the opportunity to interact with men in ways that society does not usually allow. Contact improvisation is one form of improvisation, which is especially helpful for dismantling gender barriers. In her book, Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture, Cynthia Novack articulates how contact improvisation has affected its practitioners' self-concepts:

In my interviews and conversations, dancers . . . discussed the implications of touching and weight-bearing activities that are inherent in contact improvisation. They often related touching to a freedom from the restrictions of gender roles and from accompanying expectations about what kind of movements suits men and women and what parts of the body can and cannot be touched. (168)

Novack goes on to state that the female participants felt empowered by being able to lift or support the male participants, and the males felt comfortable in expressing sensitivity physically towards both males and females, a comfort which our society has not encouraged (168-172). The ability to actively move in the manner of the opposite gender from that which one has been assigned is liberating, especially when one is moving with a member of the opposite sex.

Although queer theory is specifically related to questions of gender, women of color use similar techniques to address racial and ethnic prejudices. It is important to acknowledge the works of these artists because they are confronting the issue of identity as it relates both to their position as women and as members of marginalized ethnicities.

Adrian Piper is one performer who has used her bi-racial heritage (African American and white) to jar her audiences out of their complacent, stereotyped beliefs about ethnicity.

Even though Piper would be considered racially African American, her features and skin color make her appear "white." Piper uses her appearance to point out the anxiety created by those people who society cannot label, the implication being that society labels people in an attempt to control them:

Piper has concocted a number of complex devices to let people know that she knows who she is. Her uses of masks or disguises is as complex as her analysis of her situation By simultaneously emphasizing her difference and dissolving the usual means of communication between herself and a viewer of her art, she discovered a destabilizing strategy, a way of subverting social behavior to make it reflect upon itself. (Lippard 43)

As well as confusing racial and ethnic identities, Piper also uses her fluid identity to question gender norms. In the seventies, for example, she dressed as a character she called the "Mythic Being" (44) who was a somewhat feminized male of either African American or Latino ethnicity: "The Mythic Being was often hostile or threatening. He offered his creator a way of being both self and other, of escaping or exorcising her past and permitting her to re-form herself" (44). I would suggest that Piper's performance of these characters is basically improvisational because she is adopting them not as scripted roles to be mastered but as possible identities to be explored.

Anna Deavere Smith is another performer whose embodiment of varying personas destabilizes audience's expectations. Smith uses her chameleon-like ability to represent others in order to re-enact situations of racial and ethnic strife. In her performance, Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities, she acts out, in monologues, the characters of the different people involved in an ethnic dispute caused by the death of a young African American. Smith works with members of the two feuding communities, Jewish and African American, in order to reach the heart of the issue and, more importantly,

to portray the different perceptions as to what happened and why. Her adoption of multiple identities in her performance disturbs notions of stable identities because her skill at convincingly embodying different people's personalities proves that society bases its definitions of race, gender, and social class on what is really a fluid, not a solid, foundation: "Slippery identity and morphing are very powerful because they conjure the extreme fluidity of social and personal identities and the fears such fluidity arouses. This fear forms the bases of some types of fundamentalism and racism"(Martin 82-83). Because ethno-centric and racist sentiments are founded on the belief that one group is inherently different and, therefore, superior or inferior to another, Smith's explorations into the basic unity of all people through her own ability to personify different people is an extremely powerful statement. At the same time, Smith does not gloss over the varying perspectives that we have, instead she embraces the idea of difference as possibility. Carol Martin describes how Smith moves beyond simplistic answers in her performances:

Something more fluid and complex, more performative, was needed: a process of discovering who we might be as social, personal, political, and historical circumstances unfold within and around us; and as we accept our agency in relation to these circumstances, neither really being their author or their subject. (89)

Smith and other performers who question the notion of a unitary identity for each person radically re-conceive how our society should view itself.

The Performer-Audience Relationship

Viewing improvisational performances can aid in the understanding that society's

construction of self versus the other is an artificial boundary created to protect and control certain aspects of society. During conventional performances, women performers are objectified as the “other” because they typically do not control the narrative action (Davy 141; Hanna 30). In performer-audience interaction of improvisational performances, the performer is not the object of the viewer’s gaze because she is the active subject; therefore, a two-sided communication between the audience and the improviser is established. The audience must be able to use their own intuition and kinesthetic imagination in order to relate to what the performer is doing. Audience members and performers meet in a space created by the intersection of each other’s energy. The dancer/performer projects energy lines from within her body, which must be met by the audience members’ own energy for aesthetic apprehension to take place. The audience member who engages him/herself in this dynamic becomes a participant instead of a passive spectator. This communal experience of time and space lived by both the audience and the performer(s) is the renewal of ritual and brings about the understanding that past, present, and future can be lived simultaneously, that there is no one truth but a multitudinous number of truths connected, and that movement is a vital force which all of us relate to as living beings.

When replying to my interview question, how do you know when the audience is “with” you, Smith described the shared consciousness she experiences when the audience is attentive: “I feel them moving with me. It feels like I am a part of them. I let them into a window of myself that they chose to enter. With their support, the energy is enlarged.” When the audience is not with her, Smith says she feels separated from them. That the performer is aware of the audience’s attentiveness proves how vital the audience’s part is in

the performance dynamic. Both sides need to be present, i.e., in an improvisational state, for the performance to come alive. This improvisational state is the ability to suspend other thoughts about the past and future and concentrate on the unfolding moment.

The notion of the audience as a group of observers who use their imaginations to create the meaning of a performance is a postmodern idea, influenced, in part by the theories of Bertholt Brecht who advocated for the creation of critical audiences. Following Brecht's theories about the epic theatre, many feminists have chosen to use techniques which will keep the audience from passively accepting the stage as reality, just as they may accept societal forces as predetermined forces of nature (Dolan, Feminist 84-85, 101, 106-107). The allowance of multiple readings frees the spectator to participate by imagining her or his own conclusions to the questions that are posed, unlike in realist theatre, which pretends to accurately represent life and provides an answer:

Realist theatre imposes a conservative sense of order by delivering its ideology as normative. The transcendent pose of illusionist theatre makes the society it reflects appear to be incapable of change. Realism naturalizes social relations imposed by dominant ideology and mystifies its own authorship. (106)

Theatre that renounces the conventions of realism becomes a space where truth is not monolithic; instead many facets of truth are encouraged to coexist. Accordingly, each audience member will find different aspects to which she/he relates.

As an artistic technique and as an understanding of human psychology, I find that theorizing the existence within every person of multiple selves, or archetypes, is very

compelling. It seems that often these archetypes are disturbing or troublesome aspects of the self which we try to contain or disregard. By doing so, however, we often act out those parts inappropriately and/or limit ourselves and what our society could be. Performance can reveal these archetypal aspects of the self either by bringing the audience members into the realm of ritual, in which they leave their safe place as objective observers and must question themselves in the process of questioning the performance, or by having the performers present the self as a shifting, constantly changing site of meanings. Some performers will use both to deconstruct audience expectations. Improvisation is a technique that can be used within the ritualistic performance and in the performance of multiple identities in order to unsettle the audience and make them reconsider how they define themselves.

Performance as Ritual

In the ritual form of performance, the performer is in a position of watching herself being watched (Dolan, Feminist 114). In my improvisation class, we discussed this aspect of improvisation, that is, the performer's awareness of herself observing the audience as well as herself being observed by them, generating the cyclical energy I referred to earlier. The performer is involved in a "triangular relationship" (114), involving herself, as the performer, the character/image she is playing, and the spectator. This creates a situation where the performer is intermediary between the audience and the god/archetype (character/image) she is embodying. Because the performer is acting as a channel for this archetype, she is not an object to be possessed (Highwater, Primal 61). This situation subverts the gaze and empowers the performer: "This break in the narrative forces the

spectators to confront themselves *as* spectators, participants in the act of looking” (Dolan, Feminist 114). When Claire Porter speaks to the audience in a spontaneous manner during her performances, for example, mentioning some attribute of the auditorium or place she is performing in, she is acknowledging them as complicit in their part of the relationship between performer, audience, and character (or image). Within this dynamic state of performance, all parts are in the position of subject (114).

In an article on the subject of the male gaze in relation to traditional Indian dance, Uttara Asha Coorlawala attempts to prove that Mulvey’s Freudian and Lacanian based theory cannot be applied to all performance phenomenon equally. Her argument is significant because it stresses that gender identities are culturally scripted. Coorlawala describes how in the Indian dance form *abhinaya* a different sort of performer-audience dynamic exists where the performer and audience members are using the performance to transcend material existence. Those who watch the *abhinaya* are involved in a religious exchange of energy. In this form of Hindu religious experience, all of the worshipers, male and female, are in the position of Radha, the human devotee. While they worship Krishna, they expect to both see and be seen by him, and through this process, called *darshan*, be transformed: “The inner activity of the devotee seeking communion is thus different from that of the voyeur in the darkened theatres of commercial films”(24). Because the viewer is also being seen as he or she observes the performance, he or she cannot be an anonymous voyeur: “An observer who aligns with the dominating male gaze which claims possession . . . is unlikely to experience transformation”(24). Thus, the performer and audience approach

this art form with a very different set of expectations than does the viewer of conventional theatre, dance, or film.

In Robbie McCauley's work, she breaks boundaries between performer and audience in order to stimulate a ritualistic experience. In her work, Sally's Rape, she puts herself on the auction block to be sold as a slave. The audience is encouraged to participate in the scene by shouting "Bid 'em in" (212-213). McCauley welcomes this participation because it reifies the experience, making it less a performance than a communal re-enactment: "... it means sharing the ritual. I'm not on exhibition, I'm doing it as part of a ritual and so it's (the audience's participation by shouting) like helping the drummer by dancing" (213). McCauley's approach gives the audience a unique perspective from which to view a phenomenon that has haunted the American psyche for centuries. Any audience member who is sensitive to the role he/she is playing in the drama will better understand the role the actual participants of the past played and may realize how slavery was made acceptable by the community. Most importantly, the audience member will be more likely to question whether he/she would have acted in a similar manner within that situation, which could cause him/her to see how individuals create realities, such as racism.

It seems that performance as ritual must be embedded in the improvisational. Even though the performer may be acting out or dancing a set piece of material, she must embody it as new in order for the ritual to be real. McCauley describes how her own works are performed, mentioning the newness of each performance: "I invite them (the audience) to participate and the ritual happens differently each time. Your part in it may be to listen, but that is certainly a participatory listening that I'm asking you to do because you're in it"

(215-6). This attention to the present brings the performer into a transformative state, where she is vessel for whatever the rite will facilitate within her. If the performer is simply going through the motions, she misses the opportunity to experience the performance as a process involving energy exchanges between the audience, herself, and the character/image that is being expressed. In the rituals of primal peoples, they do not attempt to imitate reality, rather they try to get at its essence (Highwater, Primal 61). They accomplish this by being able to “transform” themselves into that which they are experiencing (61). During the transformative process, the primal person delves into the interior life of that other being, whether it be a rock, a bird, or the sky, and re-creates the thing’s existence through the art work (62-63). The improviser, like the primal person, can inhabit this position of speaker for the images with which she connects. Through this experience, the improviser and spectators are made aware that they are creating reality by enacting the ritual together and become more cognizant of themselves as the authors of the processes they set in motion.

In the performance space, the performer and audience undergo a transformation. In our interview, Smith referred to Victor Turner’s theories when she expressed her belief that performance has “everything to do with liminality” because it “is a ritual which takes you in between two worlds. In performance you experience yourself in different ways, and when you warm up before a performance, you are shedding your everyday self.”¹ Like a rite of passage, the performance puts the viewer and performer into a place which relates neither to the routines of the immediate past nor the immediate future: “Beginning with the body, the self is transformed because all of its senses are heightened” (Smith, Presence 82). One’s awareness shifts and so does one’s sense of self: “(w)ithout identity, known practices

become dissolved or diminished. One's point of reference to the world is switched or altered and the possibility of experiencing the world in new ways becomes available" (77). As in Porter's piece, Lost in the Modern, the viewer of art is transformed, to the point that he or she temporarily loses the sense of everyday reality.

Engaging the Trickster

Feminist performers have been embodying socially unacceptable personalities by delving into their repressed feelings. Within this type of performance, archetypes emerge from within the performer and upset the conscious mind that would have them remain under control. Karen Finley uses improvisational techniques in her performances to bring out these repressed parts within her: "(d)uring a performance I try to let all the different voices going on inside my head be heard. I say what is usually left unspoken in a performance--what is on my mind at the moment" (qtd. in Reinelt 55). Again, the performer acts as a channel for archetypal energies, though this time, she highlights her own mercurial nature. The audience is unable to pin the performer down to one identity or easily understood image because she is showing them herself in process; she is not a pre-packaged product to be consumed.

When I have embodied an improvisational image or character, I allow its reality to take over. I may be conscious of the fact that an image is being encountered, but the image speaks its reality for me. I do not apprehend what it may represent fully at the time. Through my movements the image grows from a stirring into an overwhelming surge of energy which my body responds to. This is an extremely powerful and exciting state to be in because I become a channel for new feelings and sensations. After I have performed this

image or character, I feel enriched to an ecstatic point. I realize to a greater extent that there is much more to me than I previously thought. My experience of embodying images leads me to believe that I can access different parts of myself through improvisational movement. Smith describes the process of embodiment: "The dance-maker taps into these images through the kinesthetic sense during the moment-to-moment experience of the body moving through space" (Presence 86). It is through this interplay between movement and image that the dance comes into being (87).

Audiences viewing a performer who inhabits a shifting persona can also be awakened to the possibilities hidden within themselves. Sometimes this realization is a painful one, causing the audience member to look away from the performer and deny that such aspects of the self can exist. At other times, however, an image embodied by the performer, like the archetypal "trickster" character who shows up in the folklore and myths of many cultures, cleverly pops up, announces its presence, and sinks into the viewer's psyche. Such was the experience I had viewing performance artist, Juliana Francis, during the 1997 London International Festival of Theatre. In her work, GO GO GO, which I saw performed at the ICA in London, Francis primarily deals with her experiences of being sexually abused as a child. She plays out different parts of herself that were generated by these experiences. I saw, for example, how she, as the abused child, absorbed the feelings of the abuser even as she was disgusted by them. This knowledge that contradictory aspects of the self do co-exist is often difficult to accept. A performer, like Lydia Lunch, who improvisationally plays out autobiographical stories about her abuse and its effects can be

very disturbing yet enlightening to watch because she helps to clarify how these experiences complicate one's sense of self and often lead to the perpetuation of abuse (Lunch 105-117).

When I saw Lunch perform in Austin several years ago, the people I went with, two young men, were confused and unable to label the performance they had just witnessed. From their loss of words and incredulous expressions, I had the feeling that they would have liked to peg her as "pornographic," yet her honesty and real anguish would not allow such a reading. For myself, I felt as if I had met a secret accomplice, another person who felt the threatening, scary feelings that often accompany sexual abuse. At this point in my life I was unable to tell my friends that I too felt as she did; however, I did hold onto the memory of her performance for having revealed to me a part of myself I could not ignore.

Interpreting the Performance Work

Postmodern creators relinquish power over their creations and do not seek to brand their audiences with a specific meaning. Instead they hope their work of art will act as a springboard for the audience's imagination. In a sense, each viewer has a chance to improvise a meaning for him or herself. Holly Hughes, for example, trusts that people will be able to read meaning into her performance of Dress Suits and reveals that the audience member does not need to be a lesbian female to enter into the struggles of her characters :

I don't think there is a correct reading People will approach my work in different ways I really believe in art and I believe in allowing the audience to have their own personal subjective view. I give the audience a lot of credit--I think people are really bored with a straight white male perspective in theatre and can relate to the story in a lot of

ways. A lot of people have experienced being an outsider. Everybody feels queer in some sense of the word. (245)

Rather than disempowering men, I believe that Hughs's statement is very liberating for both women and men because she is advocating for the "queerness" of all people, queerness being the existence of many possibilities for the self.

McCauley also trusts that her audience comes to see performances not just to be entertained or given answers. Instead, she advocates for performances which create a dialogue between artist and audience: "My work is more of an opening than a closing; more like 'if I show you mine, then you can show me yours,' and we can move together with our imperfections, with our wounds" (222). Her creation of an honest relationship between audience and performer moves the performing arts in a new direction where artists and audiences are equals; neither side is put into an inferior position. Within this egalitarian community of audience and performer, insights are to be shared and differences valued.

From a poststructuralist feminist view, improvisational techniques aid in dismantling conventions that subordinate women. Hierarchies of all kinds, within the self and the community, are destroyed when performers adopt multiple identities and create a bridge between themselves, their audiences, and their performances. For the improvisational performer herself, the engagement in a process which liberates her from the structure of everyday life gives her the opportunity to discover powerful aspects of herself which had previously been hidden. In Chapter Six, I reaffirm my belief that improvisational practices can enable women, both dancers and non-dancers, to satisfactorily form their identities by combining aspects of essentialist and poststructuralist theoretical positions.

Note

¹Turner develops his ideas on liminality in The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure. He describes liminality on page 95:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to the eclipse of the sun or moon.

Turner’s definition can, Smith believes, be broadened to include the performance experience in contemporary concert dance. She argues this point in her dissertation, “Presence and Copresence: Embodiment of the Self and Other in Contemporary Concert Dance.”

CHAPTER 6

FORMING THE SELF: PERFORMING WOMEN

My aim in studying the subject of women's performance and improvisation has been to focus on those aspects of improvisation that can be healing for women who feel unfulfilled within this society. I have looked at both sides of the performance dynamic, the audience and the performer's view, to demonstrate how improvisation affects each. I have also addressed improvisation outside of strictly performance situations in order to illustrate its therapeutic values. My major point was to illuminate the potential benefits that can be gained from using improvisation in performances, classes, and therapy.

Throughout my research I found that the question of forming an identity seems to be one of extreme importance for women who are trying to actualize themselves. Two feminist positions, essentialism and poststructuralism, which address the question of women's identities from differing perspectives. Rather than seeing these theoretical positions as competing, each perspective articulates a significant part of the identity equation. In discussing the place of the body in performance, I borrowed from the essentialist position because it embraces bodily existence as part of our self-definition. When examining the question of gender identities as they are shaped by our society, I found the poststructuralist theories more convincing because these theories emphasize the

cultural construction of identity. By focusing on each side of the equation, I came to a clearer understanding of what women face in forming their identities.

There are some feminist thinkers who have articulated ideas that bridge between these two positions. When bell hooks discovered that neither one was serving her needs as an artist, teacher and woman of color, she came up with a solution. She points out that essentialists often treat women homogeneously, by saying that they share common experiences as the oppressed sex, yet poststructural criticisms of essentialism can also deny experience as an important factor. Poststructuralists may reject the significance of experience because they believe that it privileges some people over others as the authorities of that experience, for example, that only if a person is an African-American woman can she discuss issues pertaining to African-American women. She denounces such a hierarchy of experience. Rather, she feels we can all learn from and respect each other's unique experiences (82-91). She devises the phrase "passion of experience" to convey the significance of the individual's own background:

When I use the phrase "passion of experience," it encompasses many feelings but particularly suffering, for there is a particular knowledge that comes from suffering. It is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience. This complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from a distance. It is a privileged location, even as it is not the only or even always the most important location from which it can be known. (91)

hooks, by highlighting the importance of experience, allows some aspects of the essentialist position into her theory. At the same time, she does not develop this concept into an overarching theory about all women. She contends that both essentialism and poststructuralism can provide feminists with important ideas with which to work; however, they must be tempered by one another.

Her argument helps to clarify my position, that improvisation both honors the individual person's experience of her or his body-self, or soma, and that in improvisation the performer can create a communal artistic experience between herself and the audience where self-definitions are allowed to shift and roles (audience member, performer, character) are more fluid. Therefore, in improvisational communication the differences between people are acknowledged, yet no hierarchy of experiences exist. At the same time, experiences do not become labels that are inalterable.

The creation and maintenance of a flexible identity is a problem many women face as they navigate their way through the complicated situations of contemporary life. Women can learn by engaging in the improvisational dynamic how to adapt to varying circumstances. In improvisation the practitioner varies in the roles that she enacts, for example, from supporter to the one being supported. Improvisation helps us to understand that the self is in process; we are, in fact, a "continuum" of selves that we can call upon to assist us in varying situations (Fraleigh, "Spiral" 17). We can realize these potential selves in the improvisational process.

In order to be comfortable enough to shift among different identities, one must have a secure sense of self. A core self, as it has been termed by some writers, is built from the person's understanding of his or her experiences, which goes back to the body's experience of itself (Fraleigh, "Spiral" 16). The body becomes a place of reference, telling us how we may really feel about a situation when our rational minds cannot. bell

hooks explains how she balances an understanding of identity as multiple with her knowledge that experience is a valid basis for self-definition: "I know that experience can be a way to know and can inform how we know what we know. Though opposed to any essentialist practice that constructs identity in a monolithic, exclusionary way, I do not want to relinquish the power of experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory" (90). hooks's argument on this point relates to identity formation and corresponds with my own belief that improvisation validates the self as bodily experienced, giving the improviser insights into her or his "body history" (Fraleigh, "Spiral" 17).

The concept that experience is integral to identity formation dismisses the belief that people are like consumers with empty grocery carts who can pick and choose whatever identity they want. Instead, people's experiences will have a part in the decisions they make. According to this definition, individuals who want to form a self-actualizing identity must understand how these various experiences have influenced who they are thus far. With this knowledge, they can begin to discover alternative identities by exposing themselves to different experiences. In improvisation the practitioner willingly puts her or himself into exploratory situations because she or he feels secure enough to do so.

Because our experiences do shape how we perceive reality and the forces which shape us are not universal but culturally contingent, no one can be totally impartial. Feminists demonstrate that the objective view of the world which Western rationalism champions is actually no less subjective than any other view: "If feminist criticism calls anything into question, it must be that dog-eared myth of intellectual neutrality" (Kolodny 163). Many feminist thinkers have been working to uncover the political agendas which lurk behind so-called objective thinking and to assert that we must recognize how much

this dominant version of reality has influenced women's self-concepts: "... ideas are important *because* they determine the ways we live, or want to live, in this world" (163). Women who have based their self-definitions on biased versions of reality can re-define themselves using their subjective viewpoint. Realizing that they have been shaped by societal influences, women can begin to trust their own senses and reject what is personally limiting to their growth.

By merging the essentialist and poststructuralist positions, a theory of identity formation which addresses the interplay between society and self results. Feminists are now creating more sophisticated theories of identity formation to account for the variety of experiences women face. Teresa de Lauretis describes experience as being "a complex of habits resulting from the semiotic interaction of 'outer world' and 'inner world,' the continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality" (qtd. in Alcoff 342). de Lauretis's definition of experience reveals that the self is involved in a constant interaction between inner and outer forces; therefore, neither side is the sole source or cause of a person's identity formation.

I believe that improvisational practices can help women to actualize themselves because they teach women how to interact with their environments while listening to themselves throughout the process. I consider improvisational performing to be a forming or re-forming of the self-concept based on the person's own experiences, not on outside codes or conventions. When improvising the practitioner has the opportunity to be autonomous, making her own choices in relation to what, if anything, has been given to her. Improvisational processes are exercises in learning sensitivity to oneself and others. Engaging in improvisation, then, facilitates growth and gives women the necessary tools to live fully. Because improvisation has these potential benefits, it must

be considered as an art form that has much to offer for feminist artists, teachers, thinkers, and therapists.

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. How do you understand the term “improvisation” in your choreography?
2. Do you use improvisation to achieve a particular goal?
3. Do you improvise during a performance, only while choreographing, or both?
4. When you are performing, do you feel that you are in present time, that is, is an exploratory mode?
5. What must you do to arrive at an improvisational state of being?
6. Do you feel that performance has or can have a connection to ritual? If so, how?
7. How do you know if your audiences are “with” you?
8. Where do you want to take your audiences?
9. What does your body tell you when you listen to it? Has your body told you things your conscious mind did not know?
10. In what ways has engaging in improvisational movement changed how you define yourself?
11. How has improvisational movement helped you to bridge the brain-body gap that our culture has created?
12. What is your understanding of feminism (or gender concerns) in relation to your choreography?
13. What is the relationship between feminism and improvisation?

APPENDIX B

Selected Time Line of Modern and Postmodern Dance and Performance Art

- 1902:** Isadora Duncan, often called the “Mother of Modern Dance” writes “The Dance of the Future,” which rejects the ballet aesthetic. Duncan was inspired by Classical Greek sculpture and develops her own vision of dance as an expression of the self and the dancer as a reformer of society. (Siegel 8-10).
- 1913:** Mary Wigman goes to learn rhythmic movement with Rudolf Laban (Sorell 370). After WWI Laban begins conducting his movement experiments and codifying the efforts involved in movement as well as the shapes the body makes in space (Cohen 122).
- 1914:** Wigman performs Witch Dance, the first performance of her choreographic career (Cohen 149).
- 1928:** Labanotation, a notation system of movement, is established (Sorell 385).
- 1926-1939:** Martha Graham, trained in the Denishawn school of dance, begins to choreograph, teach, and perform. Her first landmark work of note Lamentation, demonstrating her interest in portraying emotional states abstracted, is performed in 1930 (Siegel 37-41).
- 1937:** Helen Tamiris’s How Long Brethren, based on Negro spirituals, is performed. Tamiris is a staff choreographer of the Federal Dance Project (Siegel 42).
- 1940-1948:** These years are considered by Marica Siegel to be Graham’s “Epic” period when she choreographed her psychoanalytic and symbolic works such as Deaths and Entrances (175-176).

1950s: Merce Cunningham and Erick Hawkins, both ex-Graham dancers, form their own companies with new, contrasting aesthetics to Graham's psychologically-based dance. Influenced by Zen and the existentialists, Cunningham begins to create performances that reject meaning as a basis (Sorell 410-16). Cunningham collaborates with composer John Cage, a graduate of Black Mountain College (Jowitt 314).

1960s: Continuing from Cunningham's "rebellion," the dance avant-garde or postmodern dance is born. Dancers eschew training, use nondancers, everyday movement (found movement), and minimalism. One of the most famous collectives of the time is the Judson Dance Theater. Another collective (meaning a group without a company leader) is The Grand Union, which is an improvisational group of performers. Choreographers Anna Halprin, Deborah Hay, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, and Steve Paxton began their careers at this point (Cohen 195). Another important aspect of this period was the blending of dance, music, and art. Artists, like Robert Rauschenberg performed in dances, for instance (Sorell 422). The Living Theater a "radical theater of improvisation, whose prime aim was to change the world" was another, very influential product of this time (Sorell 425).

1963: Carolee Schneemann's Lateral Splay, which "celebrated raw physicality and playfulness" is performed (Jowitt 327).

1964: Carolee Schneeman's Meat Joy is performed. The dancers, partially nude, caper amid animal parts in an orgy of the sensuous (Jowitt 331).

Late 1960s through 1970s: Simone Forti creates pieces which explore the movements of animals, "the primal motions of crawling, rolling, swaying . . ." (Jowitt 336).

- 1970s:** With the rise of the feminist movement, we also see the beginnings of performance art as a form in its own right. Female African American artists are especially active in this form by performing along with their exhibits to expand the artistic experience for the viewer (Lippard 92-93).
- 1972:** Steve Paxton, formerly a Cunningham dancer and member of the Judson Dance Theater helps in the foundation of Contact Improvisation (Matheson 217).
- 1973:** Pina Bausch creates the form tanztheatre (dance-theatre) which mixes music, dance, spoken text, and visual elements. Her performances deal with “the treatment of the body in space—nakedness, dress and dress coding (especially in relation to sexual stereotypes), body processes . . .” (Matheson 218, 239).
- 1980:** Deborah Hay runs her first large group dance workshop in the performance of HEAVEN/below (Hay 3). Foster describes how Hay uses the technique of cellular consciousness to help her dancers to “dissolve as the dance progresses” so that they seem to “become the very movements being performed” (13). Foster also points out that Hay continually claims that “she is not ‘herself’ when she dances. Nor is she herself impersonating someone or something else. Dance for her is ‘self’ – transcendent” (13).
- 1984:** Meredith Monk’s production of The Games is performed. Monk described by Highwater as a “a magician of the unexpected She understands something about the ancient process of ritual that allows us to know the unknown through its countless mythic disguises” (Dance 218).
- 1988:** Performance artist and actor Robbie McCauley performs her work Indian Blood, which addresses her mixed Native American and African American heritage. She speaks

about her art saying: “. . . I form my theater out of those spontaneous storytellings creating characters right at the moment, but it goes back to the oldest tradition in Africa -- the telling over and over” (qtd in Lippard 58).

1990: Urban Bush Women use “drama, music, speech and the visual arts” in their performance Prairie House, based on the life of African American artist Minnie Evans (Highwater, Dance 214). In this piece the company uses ritual “to turn a life story into a ceremony of gesture and metaphors that explores that illusive juncture of the self and the world” (Highwater 216).

1990: During the NEA furor surrounding Andres Serrano’s Piss Christ and the exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe’s “The Perfect Moment,” NEA chairperson John Frohnmayer is told to consider vetoing grants to performance artists Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, John Fleck and Tim Miller (known as the NEA four). Later that year, Frohnmayer does veto these grants and the artist respond by filing suit against him and the NEA for using political reasons to refuse giving them grants that were panel-approved (Bolton 357, 360).

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