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Julia Martina Piper '18

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introduction

My ideas about this project ignited much like the start of a campfire. Ever since beginning my studies in dance and environmental studies, people have been surprised of curious how they go together. When I decided it was time to build this campfire of a thesis project, I had realised that other people were not thinking about dance and the environment like I was, and that my interest in education could play a strong role. I set out to expand what people consider to be dance and what we care about in terms of environment. This realisation was like the kerosene-soaked newspaper that bursts into flame instantly and brilliantly, hoping to catch the kindling as you throw it on the capfire's frame.

Luckily, the kindling was abundant everything I read at the time seemed to reiterate my point that dance and environment are inextricably tied. We always exist in an environment, not a vacuum, and there is always motion in the world. Sure, these are about the most open definitions of environment and dance you can think of, but when I began to view it

this way, the overlaps became clear. I began to understand dance more simply as patterns and interactions through space and time and, suddenly, everything I encountered was exposing itself to me as a potential movement score. The world that bodies create in space and time serves as an allegory for worlds both physical and imagined; one piece of kindling caught the next on fire until a hearty flame was in its first stages of life.

As a campfire grows, it has a stalling moment where the small flames, once so brilliant in comparison to the nothingness that precluded them, find themselves weak contenders with the staunch logs stacked in place. They burn away slowly at the logs, progress marked only by a growing circle of scorched wood. In much the same fashion, I chipped away at my research and found my once strong ideas quivering under the task of holding up as a legitimate piece of simultaneous art and academia. My advisors constantly questioned me, not out of doubt, but as a source of encouragement that can only be felt through a healthy amount of skepticism about ones ideas. Slowly, the myriad inspirations- the burning twigs and dry leaves- took force on the large logs and formed an entity as one fire.

abstract

We live in an abstracted, and urbanized form of nature where the connection of person and their environment is easily disregarded. Connection to geographically distant, or non-existent, places is increasingly possible through technology, while care for our immediate surroundings simultaneously diminishes. This lack of connection can be attributed to the pacing of society, and the narrow way we are trained to consider and feel time. Through increased awareness of environmental rhythms, and shifting our own rhythms more readily, individuals benefit from reduced stress and heightened fulfillment. In turn, society and ultimately the state of the environment, benefit from this mindfulness.

Through art, anyone can have a voice, and movement has an especially visceral impact on audiences through the use of ephemeral imagery. The transformation a movement artist has on space and time is perhaps the most direct way to demonstrate ideas of society's impact on the earth. Dance is able to create a microcosm wherein we can act out, abstractly, potentials and realities at once. Art is an ideal vehicle for connecting what the general public understands about an issue to what scholars are discussing within an exclusive circle. I actively sought to circumvent the media's sensationalism, and address the

ideas directly from my standpoint as an academic and artist. The work is not centered on one environmental problem, rather the crisis of how we are complicit in a rigid experience of time. Environmental destruction is the consequence of our life rhythm.

In my project, through dance, I am trying to bring attention to crises of accumulation; environmental problems that are so dispersed over time that we ignore them.

Environmental problems intersect every field of study, and define our most fundamental area of concern; life. Throughout this research process, my collaborators and I increased mindfulness of our ability to manipulate time and shift rhythms, and sought to more fully experience and honor our environments and overall lives.

literature review

An essential portion of this project was the research process which took place from the summer before my project, throughout the experience. This reading took me deeper into the key areas which informed the project; environmental toxicity, dance composition and contemporary art theory, and environmental art as a field.

Toxicity has been a subject of concern in many of the environmental studies courses which comprised my environmental studies minor at Goucher. The most essential courses to this particular project were Women and the Environment, and Environmental Justice. I took readings directly from these syllabi as starting points, for the first branch of research. I also happened upon a text, *Sustainable Planet: Solutions for the Twenty-first Century* edited by Juliet B. Schor, which included a pivotal essay for this project by Stephan Rechtschaffen. This essay entitled "Timeshifting" in essence captured how time is an important factor in our interactions with the environment.

According to Rechtschaffen, society's obsession with saving time has led us to necessitate environmentally destructive products and processes. The provoking realization of his research was, as he states, the fact that "we're surrounded by labor- and time-saving devices undreamed of by past generations, yet few of us have any time to spare (p. 175)". He goes on to uncover various ways in which humans can function within society beyond linear time, and concludes with a list of ways that society could perhaps alter its paradigm about time. The essay served as a concise yet insightful summation of ideas about navigating time. I used it in my movement research by extracting imagery and movement

patterns such as entrainment, accumulation, and acceleration. Each of these processes became subjects of discussion as well as physicality in my work.

A defining moment for me that my research could really be pertinent was upon learning of research on slow violence. Slow violence is a type of environmental injustice which relies on appearing benign to perform its evils. As anthropologist Chloe Ahmann states, it manifests in “forms of delay, deferral, attrition, and accumulation whose ordinariness *is* their violence” (Ahmann, 2). It is the unseen violence of shirked responsibility, toxic exposure, systemic injustice, zoning, exportation of problems, unpredicted system interactions, and the like. “Neither spectacular or instantaneous, and often proceeding at a speed that decouples suffering from its original causes, slow violence can be difficult to represent, even to perceive” (Ahmann, 3). Seeing this last sentence as a challenge, I began to wonder how I could in a relatively short time make my audience feel time in a slowed down way, such that they were able to open their eyes to the seemingly benign changes occurring. Then, how could I highlight those changes destructive and productive qualities?

Historically, many dance artists have used their works to address political topics, the coupling of art and political message is a powerful one. So I became curious about the ways people are moving politically in order to address the issues I had been reading about. Ahmann’s text offered detailed examples of how people in Baltimore are dealing with these delays and accumulations of slow violence through intentional manipulation of time as a political strategy. If manipulation of time can be used as a successful political strategy to work against slow violence, it has a place in dance.

While I found the research I was doing fascinating enough to write about, I wondered who my audience would be, and if I would be aiding to the field of research by doing so. Unlike published studies and books, dance is an ephemeral form of communication which I argue better mirrors audience’s experience of life. I decided that given the parameters of my experience with slow violence, I didn’t have new evidence to report. Instead, the means through which I addressed the problems would target a new audience in order to broaden the discussion. I see education as a vital contact point between scholars and the general public, and all too often there is a disconnect between these parties which creates a breeding ground for false truths to be disseminated through media and popular culture. I

aimed to connect art and culture with accurate portrayals of what is being studied in the field with the purpose of expanding the audience of environmental scholarship.

process summary



I was interested in the movement concepts that came out of environmental literature, with the purpose of translating them into an experiential event. I understood my work not exclusively as product-oriented however, due largely to the nature of the particular research I was doing. The concepts discussed in my literature review impacted the way I was orienting myself to the future, allowing me to be obsessed with the current moment; this resulted in a movement score that was centered not around exactitude of placement, but around motivations and sensory experiences within the dancers. This importance placed on the process can be confusing to navigate, because in the back of our minds, my collaborators and I knew that the audience would come into our space and perceive what happened as a product. I therefore aimed to make the processes clear but the pathways

and interactions somewhat open. This allowed my dancers to have agency within the piece.



As a spectator of my own work, I could tell when the dancers were trying to be correct, and when they were experiencing the moment. It took some work to find the latter every time, but when we focused on process-based meditative activities in rehearsal, I could see the authenticity come out more and more.

I sought improvisational activities to do in rehearsal that would help center our minds around reacting to the present moment. We tried authentic movement exercises, contact improvisation, free writing, meditation, and improvised responses to verbal cues. Each of these exercises challenges the value we typically place on product, and allowed us to practice letting go of moving with an intended outcome. My work ended up being impacted by things we experienced in each of these activities, both directly and indirectly.

For example, we used the free writing to compile phrases and create free-form poems which were painted on the mirrored wall of the performance space. The process began with individual free writing in response to a quote I found in one of my texts. The quote I used was intentionally void of context and explanation. I hoped this would inspire

non-linear and abstract thought. I asked my collaborators not to try to decipher meaning but to expand freely on any aspect of the text. The quote from Rob Nixon's text "...for many speed has become a self-justifying propulsive ethic that renders uneventful violence a weak claimant on time..." produced the following responses:

1. *Slow violence - casualty*
2. *Speed - ethic*

Speed speed speed speed speed speed speed speed speed [sic]. I think of a little race track and I'm running around it. Everyone else (maybe my friends, my peers) are running too, in their own lane. And some are behind and some are ahead... I'm in the middle. It's really hard to keep up, I've found.

Finding. Blinding. Binding. Minding. Minding your own business. It is what everyone tells us to do, but I don't believe that. If you mind your own business truly and completely, wouldn't you have lost all of your human connection? Your business is the business of those we have relationships with and vice versa... we share this earth so we have to share SOME business...

To me, this particular response demonstrated how something abstract, the prompt, produces concrete ideas in the listener's mind. I was able to uncover my collaborators' reactions to the subject matter in a honest way because the process of thought was documented. The last two sentences of this particular passage revealed to me something about why I personally care so much about environmental issues and the irony of our inattention on others. I used these responses not only to augment the space, but as feedback into how I had been relaying my ideas thus far in the process. I helped me to see what my collaborators were thinking about, and in most cases affirmed that they were subscribing to the ideas that were driving my project, which was good information to receive.

I did the work of translating the ideas into movement mostly consciously, by utilizing concepts that were interesting to me as frameworks of movement. I say mostly consciously because many of the gestures came out subconsciously through dance improvisation and only have meaning to me in the context of the form of the work, not as individual physical gestures of meaning. I have found in my movement research that when I pressure myself

to have each movement mean something, it slows down my process. It stunts my ability to create phrase work because I become caught up on the details of the individual gestures' meanings. I have come to recognize that less experienced dance audience see movement in larger chunks than I do, and that the form is probably their biggest reference for meaning making in the work. Therefore, I freed myself up to move however I felt compelled to in the moment, intending to manipulate whatever occurred into something that made sense to my work.



The concept of accumulation appeared in all of my environmental as well as art focused texts. I ended up dealing with this in multiple ways because it felt of such importance to the research. Environmental problems are the result of a compounding of seemingly benign causes due to the interconnectivity of all of Earth's cycles. Accumulation could reference accumulation of waste, toxins in the environment, or diseases in the body. I knew however, because I was dealing with time in my work that I could not have those types of accumulation represented in just any form. The narrative form for example was

inappropriate seeing as I didn't have a focus on one story. The form of the composition had to match temporally and physically with the idea of accumulation.

I had seen an accumulation form done in Trisha Brown's work *Accumulation* which I have seen performed and on video in a few iterations. The ways I dealt with it were inspired by the way Brown scaffolded the accumulation process. The form can be described as one movement (1) followed by a second (2) and so on, performed in the following sequence: 1 12 123 1234 12345 123456 etc. This results in the effect of an accumulation in space, time, and energy, which is foregrounded for the audience due to the repetition. My cast and I took an improvised phrase I created and broke it down into 10 movements and applied the formula in order to perform them as an accumulation. We later added four more movements to create a satisfactory phrase, and thus the movement and timing were decided.

What remained undecided was how to use the space during this phrase, as only one of the 14 movements propelled the dancers out of their personal space. Here, I decided to introduce the idea of entrainment and rhythm matching described in my environmental studies text to create the spatial form. I hypothesized that if each dancer started in their own space and performed the phrase in whatever tempo or rhythm they please, the dancers would eventually start to congregate. Upon getting in close proximity to another dancer, I wanted them to try to synchronize until ultimately everyone would be physically close and performing the same movements in unison. This did work but only under certain conditions which we spent the semester exploring, questions like how close is "close" enough to start the synchronization, and how do we know who to follow came up. It became clear to me that I, now an outsider to this phrase, no longer had the answers to these questions. We had to test every possible answer multiple times until the group was able to determine the exact conditions under which both the accumulation phrase and the spatial accumulation could succeed. This was an exciting process and I enjoyed being able to experiment, it felt like clearly a scientific type of research. I had created a structure but had little idea of exactly how one needed to behave within it in order for it to function.



Outside of the process I engaged my collaborators in, I had my own experience as the researcher and director of the project. Upon reflection, I can see how comfortable I am in a research process. Collecting information is my utopia, and having to narrow down ideas is the inherent contradiction that leads to its downfall. I collect information for the purpose of utilizing it, yet utilizing it was my ultimate struggle in this process. For a while, I had nothing to show of my final idea. Things weren't manifesting, yet I remained ultimately calm about that. I let Rechtschaffen's text affirm my choice to stew in process, but perhaps a little too long. After claiming this need to tie movement to the ideas I had been reading about, I remained rather heady and allowed the movement to stagnate. Whether this was due to outside pressures and distractions it is hard to say. What I can say is as the process came to an end, the production of elements accelerated such that I had less time to experience the piece. Having to make snap decisions, I was employing the very improvisational ideas that I imposed in my rehearsals. Every decision I made I can tie, sometimes indirectly, back to the purpose and research concepts. However, I would not make the same decisions if I returned to this material. If I could have trusted myself earlier in the process, I might have had time to judge the entire product before the presentation.

In the future, I can see myself using the multimodal rehearsal process I employed again. However, as the researcher and director, I learned a lot about my own process which rests on procrastination and excessive deliberation. Going forward, I aim to find ways to train cerebral Julia into someone that is comfortable playing with messy physicalities in addition to messy ideas. I seek to be able to wrangle movements and objects and organize them in even more precise and poetic ways.

presentation reflection



Along with this summary, I am publishing a video of the dress rehearsal and public presentation of my project. Overall, I am pleased with how the event turned out. In all honesty, some of the strongest parts of the way the experience was curated were unintentional. At the same time, elements I had painstakingly designed and thought through manifested in highly successful ways. I will briefly recount examples of both.

Part of having this work presented to an audience which was not physically separated from the performance in a traditional way, was expressly embracing the unknown. Happy accidents were welcomed, and I personally felt great relief in the fact that I did not have to plan exactly, and that whatever experience occurred was what was meant to happen. This took some time to convince my collaborators of, who were understandably nervous about the success of every element. By the our dress rehearsal on the day of the event, I shut down all the what-ifs, and insisted that we had done our part and the rest was up to the audience. We, myself and the people that knew what was “supposed” to happen made up

less than a fourth of the people who were in the room. Therefore, I felt that in a way we no longer owned the event. We had given it up to the audience to manipulate however they like.



Out of the happy accidents, the most satisfying was the way the audience entered the space. They waited outside the space, which was of course necessary in order for the performers and tech crew to prepare. I was told this anticipatory experience created a special kind of satisfaction within the audience when they were finally allowed to enter the space. I specifically curated the installation to block of the most direct entrance onto the dance studio floor, in order to force the audience to walk through a tunnel like entrance. What I did not expect is that they continued to file in a spiral like formation around the perimeter of the space. Described as a sombre processional by one of the audience members, they again created a an experience for themselves that I did not necessarily prescribe. I enjoyed participating in the processional and seeing my work through new eyes; as a sequential process of things being revealed to me.



In the talkback session I held after the performance, I divulged details about how I approached certain decisions in my process. One of the decisions I am most proud of was the sound score, which proved to be a constant struggle over the course of the entire year, and only allowed itself to be conquered the week before the event. What I came to realise while searching for music and sound was that I did not want to prescribe one experience over the entire space. I felt that it stagnated the experience for me as I walked throughout the space. My solution was to insert localised sound making devices (cell phones) into the installations that surrounded the dancers during the exposition. This way the sound invited the viewer to approach the source, and get closer to the dancers. It also created a unique atmosphere around each dancer. The sound I chose was a combination of driving cars sound effects, and a composition entitled *Hyperchromatica Romance Postmoderne*. This composition satisfied my need to have non-metered and unexpectedly melodic sound, while matching the artistic quality of the rest of my work. This piece proved to be highly academic in that it twisted what the listener expects to hear by diminishing anticipated intervals and producing an eerily awkward sound that matched the aesthetic qualities of

my movement and physical structures. Had his composition not been so intentionally crafted, it could have created the wrong idea that what was happening in the space was ambiguous.



conclusion

After four years at Goucher I was certain I could write a good paper, but that it would not be able to capture my ideas about the physicalities of environmental time. I could claim that I chose to do this project because the only way I can transmit my ideas in my truest form is through dance, but that is not the entire truth. Much of the reason had to do with my realisation that none of my peers were going to sit down and read a 30 page thesis paper. And it all comes back to time, nobody has it! Most college students don't even have time to reread their own papers, let alone read a lengthy one about these interesting but overwhelming topics. I discovered that there's a distinct way that art is able to transcend a lot of our weird ideas of time. Attending my show and sharing in the art probably took longer than it would to read a paper, but the promise of release from time and outside pressure is so much more concrete when it is captured in an intentional experience.

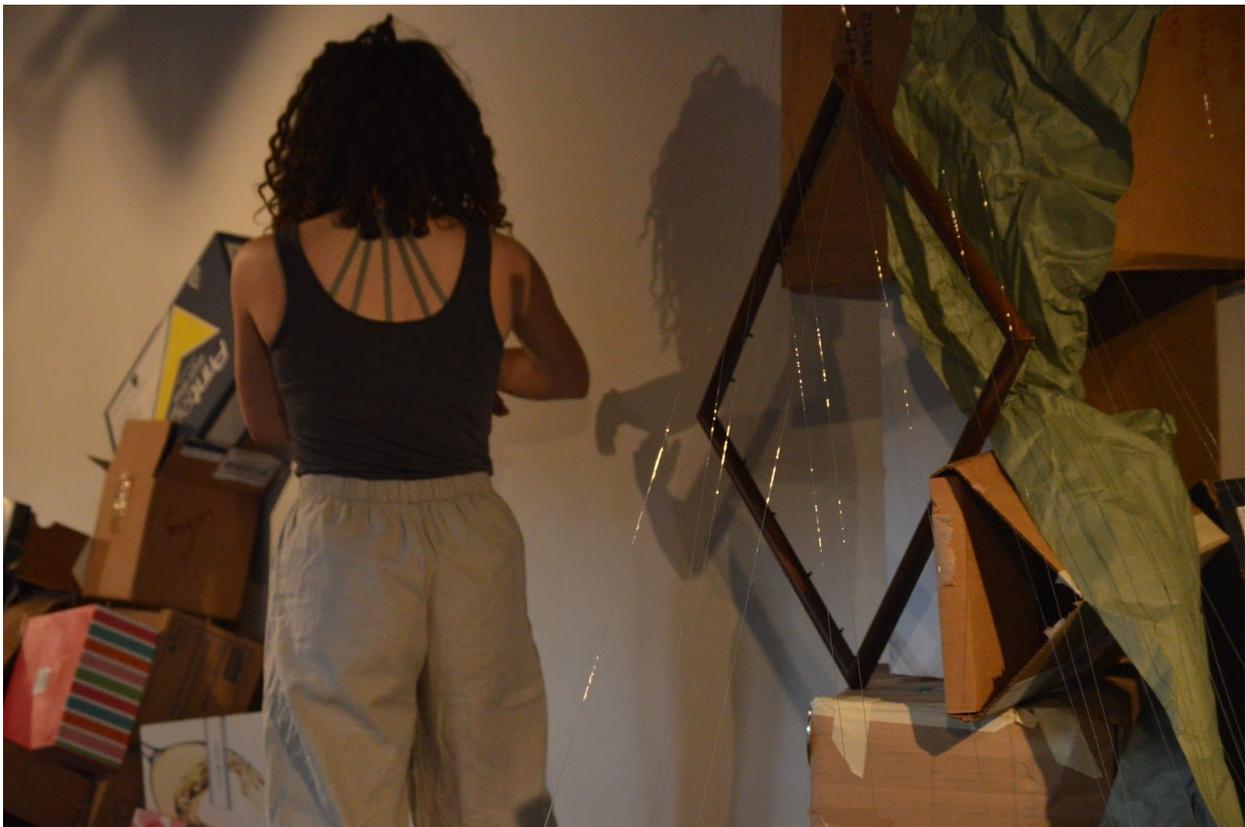
A common misconception about dance is that there is a right or wrong way to perceive or experience it. It doesn't have to hit you over the head to have meaning and that's part of what is so special about it. I hope to continue this exploration I have started of slowing down and shifting rhythms. It is hard, sometimes painful, but part of what makes it so hard is peer pressure. If more people were willing to praise, and bask in nothingness, accept messy and slow solutions as valid, and release this need to sensationalize, then it would be easier for us individuals to commit to. I propose that performance is a way to get an audience to listen, think, ponder; at minimum they experience relief from the rapid pressure of their day, and at best the artist has ignited thoughts of actionable change.

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photography

Event and rehearsal photography courtesy of Victoria Awkward '18.















































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