

Meaning: The Elephant In The Studio

Kirsten Kaschock

Isn't it always the heart that wants to wash
the elephant, begging the body to do it
with soap and water, a ladder, hands,
in tree shade big enough for the vast savannas
of your sadness, the strangler fig of your guilt,
the cratered full moon's light fuelling
the windy spooling memory of elephant?

(from Barbara Ras's "Washing the Elephant"
as it appeared in *The New Yorker* on March 15, 2010)

Contemporary modern dance is poetic—poetic in its relationship to narrative meaning and in the ways it communicates both its narrative and non-narrative meanings to audiences. Several contemporary poetic practices embrace ambiguity and mystery, sometimes at the cost of their legibility to a non-poetry writing public: their strategies include refusing normative syntax, eschewing a singular speaking subject, sampling from overheard dialogue and non-poetic texts, and valuing sound and/or image over paraphrasable content. The resulting criticism of willful obscurity is one often leveled at post/modern choreographers. Because the body, like language, is used for everyday communication, contemporary dance that uses evocative gestures, symbol-laden props, and even elements of language as part of its performance practice can blur the boundary between significant (signifying) movement and abstraction—the combination often eliciting from viewers the comment “I don’t get it.” Notably, this utterance presupposes that there is something to get and that the something is singular (“it”).

Kirsten Kaschock is the author of three books of poetry: *Unfathoms* (Slope Editions), *A Beautiful Name for a Girl* (Ahsakta Press), and *The Dottery*, winner of the Donald Hall Prize for poetry from AWP (University of Pittsburgh Press). Her debut novel, *Sleight*, a work of speculative fiction, was published by Coffee House Press. She has earned a PhD in English from the University of Georgia and a PhD in dance from Temple University. She is on faculty at Drexel University and has worked as a free-lance choreographer and master teacher in the Northeast. She is currently editor-in-chief of thINKing DANCE, a consortium of dance writers in the Philadelphia area.

In her series of lectures on aesthetics, *Problems of Art*, the twentieth-century philosopher Suzanne Langer warns against beginning—as I have just done—with commonality: “If we start by postulating the initial sameness of the arts we shall learn no more about that sameness.”¹ But as a dancer and a poet, I believe deeply in the parallels I have experienced in my chosen fields. Specifically, I see in poetry’s insistence on the materiality of language (the specificity of word choice and organization) a parallel to dance’s inextricability from specific human bodies. The experience of dance is dependent on its performance by distinct individuals with their myriad histories, personalities, and systems of training. Choreography is altered in each and every performance, by performers, by changes in venue: these facets are not incidental to but constitutive of the art form, making dance *events* distinct from other artistic *objects*.

During the latter half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, Western concert dance’s compositional models have shifted in some cases to become more collaborative, more dependent on individual dancers not only as interpreters but as active developers of choreographic material. This complex interaction between self and other during the creative process is one of the crucial ways dance can differ from poetic expression.

How does a choreographer bring into focus an idea not reachable in straightforward language? How can dance communicate imagined and ideal images—what the poet Mallarmé called “the flower absent from all bouquets”—to audiences and performers willing to engage with sometimes ambiguous strategies? How is meaning developed during an act of non-narrative choreography, and how might “meaning” be redefined by a creative process whose setting, unlike the site of the poet’s notebook/keyboard, is collaborative in nature?

Following Hubbard Street 2’s tenth annual National Choreography Competition from its call for submissions through the choreographic process and performance, I investigated the multiple standpoints available during the creation of a single dance piece. I collected materials from the application process, then travelled to Chicago in April 2010 to observe the choreographic residency of one of the winners. I took notes five hours a day during the second week of the two-week residency and conducted interviews with six dancers, two understudies, the choreographer, and the director of HS2 (Taryn Kaschock Russell—my sister and a primary resource for this project).

As an opportunity for an emerging choreographer to create a work with an internationally recognized group of professional dancers—a work that would be performed and toured the following season—this competition offered a unique, discrete process to document. Hubbard Street 2’s dancers are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, and HS2 is often their first professional position.

¹ Suzanne Langer, *Problems of Art; Ten Philosophical Lectures* (New York, Scribner, 1957), 78-9.

Hubbard Street 2 prides itself on the technical proficiency of its dancers, who are often trained in several styles and who take daily ballet classes to maintain their strength, flexibility, alignment, and sense of line. The contest winner, choreographer Gabrielle Lamb, had not previously worked with an ensemble on a regular basis and never before with these dancers. The resulting context was one in which dancers and choreographer were confronting the unfamiliar, relying more heavily on language to bridge the gap between them than might be the case in longer-standing dancer/choreographer relationships.

The twelve-minute piece created for HS2 was eventually titled *Never-DidRunSmooth*. The phrase is taken from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Early in that play, lovers Lysander and Hermia discuss the numerous ways love affairs can be thwarted. Lysander claims love's path is fraught with such difficulties as mismatches in class, in desire, or in age ("misgraffèd in respect of years"). In this passage Shakespeare compares love to both a river and a tree, employing multiple metaphors to make the same point—that a force, like love, that resists constraint may nevertheless encounter impediments that can affect its flow and growth.²

Lamb's intelligence and artistic ambitions are wide-ranging. In addition to being a choreographer, she performed with the Finnish National Ballet for three years and with the Les Grands Ballets Canadiens for nine. She is also a talented filmmaker who, since the Hubbard Street residency, has been commissioned to create work for Philadelphia's Ballet X and for the Dance Theater of Harlem. Lamb's choice of this title and the way she chose to string the words together without spaces point to her broad interest in the arts and to her understanding of the materiality of language—that meaning adheres not simply in words' content but also in their presentation on the page. Although this Shakespearean passage was not source material for this work, its later adoption provides an audience familiar with the quote with information: the piece may concern itself with romantic relationships and engage with some of the fantastical imagery the setting of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* comprises (including the conflation of human and nonhuman).

I would argue that the work has become readable as a meditation on the procedural difficulties of relationships, although the subject, like the title, was not at first fully articulated. Instead, this content emerged from Lamb's multiple desires for the piece, and was echoed at every level of the process—in her communications in the studio, in the relationships she helped create between and among the three couples in the work, in her own descriptions of choreographic intent, in the visual aids she chose to share with the dancers to elicit movement and movement qualities from them, and in what narrative became manifest in work's performance.

² William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I.i. 132-40.

Lamb described the time leading up to the residency in terms of apprehension, a fear that the images she had collected as source material would not cohere:

I knew for a year beforehand that I was going to do this, and I have to say that I was kind of terrified for a whole year and dreading it... I had images in my head: I had this collection of images, but they seemed so disconnected. And I was just, I kept on, I would work really hard and do more research on movement and ideas—I'd write and look at pictures. So I had this collection of ideas and images, *but I didn't know how any of this connects to anything else*. I was actually very upset by it, especially the few days leading up to the first day. And the night before I sort of had a melt down... I was just like "I don't know what I'm going to do." (emphasis mine)³

The images Lamb discusses—stop motion photographs of a running man, studies of animal movement and the pathways of smoke, a painting of the entwined limbs of a human tree, among others—do not tell an obvious story. They do not represent a unified narrative, although they may loosely suggest narrative in several ways that resonate, conflict, and compete with one another. Many of the images are indices: static representations of movement disrupted or disturbed. Compelled to gather these images, Lamb felt unable to express what had driven her to do so. As the time neared for her to bring her research to the dancers, her anxiety intensified:

[My boyfriend] is a software architect, so he said, "You have to look at it this way, and you have to sort of make a diagram of progression from beginning to end, a storyboard." And it made me feel even worse, because that's not how I approach things. So I just felt—like when I came in here the first morning—I thought, "This is going to be just mayhem, just complete bedlam."

I am fascinated by Lamb's language. The word *storyboard* suggests several images in her collection, which are, quite literally "diagram[s] of progression." Two other images—one a painting and the other, a collage—could easily be described by the terms "mayhem" and especially "bedlam," a word which comes from the nickname given to London's Bethlem Royal Hospital for the mentally ill.⁴

The women represented in these images are surreal and beautiful and disturbing, encumbered by excess limbs and fabric, or by skirts of dead animals and questions of selfhood. It is difficult to ascertain which of the corpse-like limbs obscuring her body and face belong to the central woman in Fig. 1, and despite the title, *Self Portrait as Spill*, Fig. 4 seems less a portrait of an individual personality and more a symbol of "harvest" or "bounty"—the woman's slim beauty an ironic comment on the slaughter and excess surrounding her.

³ Gabrielle Lamb, interview by author, Chicago, March 6, 2010, transcript.

⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, 1971 printing, s.v. "bedlam."



Fig. 1 (top): *Untitled*, 2008. Collage, Balint Szako. Reprinted with permission of the artist.
Fig. 2 (below): Photographic gun, housed in Musée des Arts et Métiers. Photograph by David Monniaux, 2006. Used with permission.

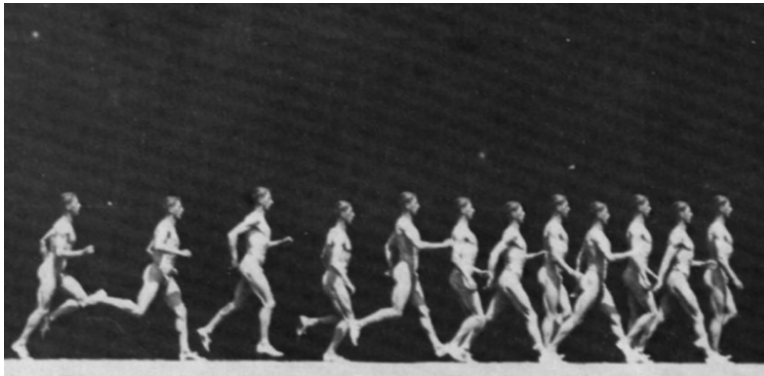
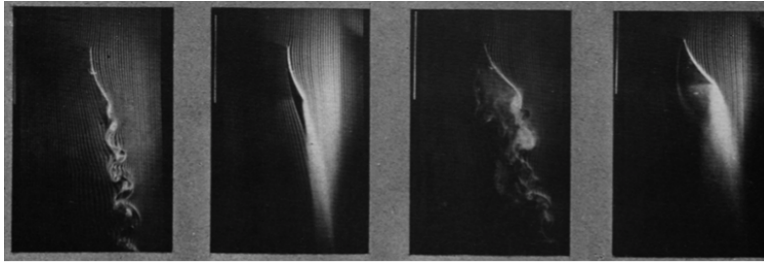


Fig. 3 (top): "Changing from running to walking," 1885. Photograph by Jules-Etienne Marey. Fig. 4 (below): *Self Portrait as Spill*, 2007. Oil on canvas, Julie Heffernan. 68 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York.



Figs. 5-7: Detail from “Schlierenaufnahme” (top), 1900; “Flapping Herons” (center), 1886; “Dismounting a Bicycle” (below), circa 1904. Photographs by Jules-Etienne Marey.

The Images

...

when we forget the circus
 the tickets to see her die
 in the name of progress
 and Edison and the electric chair
 the mushroom cloud will go up
 over the desert
 where the West was won
 the Enola Gay will take off
 after the chaplain's blessing
 the smoke from the Black Mesa's
 power plants will be
 visible from the moon
 the forests will be gone
 the extinctions will accelerate
 the polar bears will float
 farther and farther away
 and off the edge of the world
 that Topsy remembers.

(from W. S. Merwin's "The Chain to Her Leg"
 as it appeared in *The New Yorker* December 13, 2010)

W. S. Merwin's poem (above) commemorates the electrocution of Topsy the circus elephant at Coney Island's Luna Park on January 4, 1903. The death, witnessed by 1500 paying customers, was orchestrated and filmed by Thomas Edison in a failed attempt to discredit Westinghouse and Tesla's alternating current electricity as too dangerous. The cloudy bulk of a placid Topsy collapsing amidst the smoke arising from her own charred flesh is startling. Perhaps even more shocking than Edison's motivation to film the spectacle was the public's desire to watch it, both live and in the short film entitled simply "Electrocuting an Elephant."⁵

During the early days of photography in the 19th century and film in the 20th, macabre subject matters were commonplace. Portraits of the dead—sometimes in the arms of the living—or of the near-expired holding court on their deathbeds, films of cattle being led to slaughter and boys leaving for war, postcards of lynchings, industrial accidents, gross anatomy specimens: the bor-

⁵ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002). 145-7.

der worlds between life and death did not repulse seminal photographers and filmmakers. In fact, many artists and scientists, united in their enthusiasm for the new technologies, were drawn to document precisely those liminal spaces, to capture those brief instants of crossover and transformation.

Jules-Etienne Marey was a French doctor and photographer credited with influencing the artists Edward Muybridge, Thomas Eakins, and Marcel Duchamp, as well as pioneering developments in cinematographic technique. A student of movement, his medical specialty was the circulation of the blood. In photography, he developed a chronophotographic “gun” that allowed him to take twelve frames per second and record them on the same film (Fig.2). His photographs of animal and human locomotion and his recreations of the same using skeletal models and sculpture are remarkably exact.⁶

Lamb’s collection contains several of Marey’s images. These photographs no longer seem produced by magic, but they still document the uneasy borders between—if not life and death—then self and self, human and animal, what is living and what machine. His vivisection of movement produces a segmented and mechanical diagram of activity normally experienced as fluid. The skin of time has been broken, and—with scalpel-like precision—moments have been pulled out of the continuum and pinned next to one another on the page. The result is disconcerting and eerily beautiful. The work reads as a Frankenstein-ian experiment: remnants of what has passed collected for potential reanimation.

The philosopher, literary critic, and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, in her book length essay on abjection, *Powers of Horror*, discusses the moment in subject formation (our ever-developing social understanding of self as individual) when persons and societies establish a border between human and animal, between accepted modes of behavior and those discarded: “by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.”⁷ Abjection is the negative affect that prompts society to repress taboo actions and the substances that accompany them—rot, blood, human waste, and the physical evidence of death. Abjection becomes a societal force by being played out over-and-over in the subject formation of individuals. According to Kristeva, artists—among others—are drawn to these abject borderlands, and much of artists’ work is the ritual replaying of these scenes of transgression until they are manageable through a process she dubs *purification*. The abject, Kristeva writes, “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.”⁸

⁶ Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1850-1904)*, (Chicago, University Of Chicago Press, 1995). xvi-xx.

⁷ Kristeva, *Powers*, 12-13.

⁸ Kristeva, *Powers*, 2.

Marey's images, by dissecting human movement (both a choreographer's area of study and source of his/her artistic identity) alongside similar studies of animal movement, make an argument that transgresses the border between the two. The added implied violence of using a "gun" to "capture" the images of often naked human subjects might trigger a feeling of abjection in those whose artistic practice is already the sequential organization and display of movement. These photographs suggest a stripping away from dance the personal/human artistry that differentiates it from other kinesthetic action. The humans in these images are produced and reproduced as meat-and-mechanical-bodies at once rather than as persons.

Lamb was haunted by these images for nearly a year. By offering them to dancers at the beginning of her process, Lamb is revisiting a site of social rupture—a time when the mechanistic and reductive study of humans was arguably one of the contributing factors in their large-scale devaluation (as cogs in the industrial revolution, as fodder in two world wars, in the twentieth century legacy of genocide, and in the eugenics programs and unethical medical experiments that these photos particularly bring to mind).

Lamb's collection of images includes two figures that resemble human trees among photographic and diagrammatic depictions of birds and jellyfish, starfish and smoke, men and the mechanisms that record their movements (Figs. 2, 3, 5, 6, 7). These two portraits of women (Figs. 1 and 4)—partially-visible among fruit, animal corpses, excess fabric, and dismembered human limbs—suggest something beyond Lamb's own fascination with early imaging technology. These portraits offer a critique of the other images, asking what such techniques have to offer beyond scientific knowledge. The figures gaze directly at the viewer as the photographed men do not. Their enigmatic self-awareness prompts further questioning. What might it mean to perceive the self as non-separate from the natural world? As existing simultaneously with earlier and later selves? How is the pathway of the self interwoven with others' pathways? The human trees also suggest a method for presenting multiplicity without the use of technology—by incorporating more bodies, others' bodies.

However, and notably, these images (Fig. 1 and Fig. 4) do not themselves provide a sense of intersubjectivity, of living with or existing in relation to others. Beyond the implied presence of an observer—the person who would meet the women's gazes—these pictures do not feature others. None of the images Lamb chose for her collection has more than one subject. Each figure is multiple yet isolated: compounded by the fragmentation of time, by the accumulation of dismembered limbs, and by the externalization of human consumption (the corpses and the fruit of Fig. 4 are food stuffs shown in the state prior to incorporation). In *Self Portrait as Spill*, the artist shows us that any sense of separation from what we would abject from ourselves is illusory: like all other animals, we continue to exist only by ingesting what is dead and what will rot.

Merwin's poem suggests that the celebration of technology divorced from meaning and memory have, in part, led to some of the horrors of the past century. The early photographs and first films unquestionably enhanced human understanding of physiology, but they also opened a gash in the human perception of time and distance. It was now possible to witness, in a single photograph, the mechanics of a man changing from running to walking, the unexpected wing-positions of a bird taking flight, and—in an endless loop of film—the six seconds of an elephant's execution, whether or not a person witnessed those events in the flesh. What is lost in Marey's micro-investigations is perhaps intersubjectivity itself, the social presence once required for observation of others. Lamb's collection and her resultant choreography use these images as a starting point from which to ask questions, among them: What does it mean to progress alone? Among others? What does it mean to connect? To fail to?

The Participants

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind...

from "The Blind Man and the Elephant"
by John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887)

John Godfrey Saxe borrowed a story to write this poem—one told in many countries and interpreted variously. The basic tale: blind men experience an elephant by touching its several parts (the tail, the legs, the trunk, etc.), they discuss their impressions, they argue. In some versions, a sighted man overhearing them laughs at how all the men are both right and wrong—the elephant being a totality they cannot perceive at once.

Like the sighted man, observers of art—audience members, critics, and scholars—often perceive their understanding of a work to be more complete than that of its creator and/or performers. I would like to suggest that if, instead of correcting the blind men, the sighted man had simply listened to the attention paid to each aspect and the commitment to that aspect each blind man avowed, he would have been enlightened. The sighted man may never have touched an elephant, run his hand along its bark-like skin, felt through movement and pressure the strength that inhered in its legs and trunk. A sighted man may be just as blind as blind men—blinder, even, because he does not understand the incomplete nature of his knowledge.

I compile and comment on the interviews I conducted with the dancers mid-process (during the second week of the two-week workshop), but I refrain from offering information during analysis that I did not possess at the time. What follows, then, is not a sighted man's overview of the dancer's experience. My reflections do not presuppose the finished work but attempt to remain, although imperfectly, within the factual knowledge I had at the time of the interviews in order to convey the emergent sense of the meaning-making process they describe.

Lamb did not initially present the dancers with a story. She offered them her images and then asked them to perform improvisational tasks that related to them. The dancers described the first few days' process as discontinuous (much like the photographs themselves). They used terms that overlapped. Each dancer had his or her own perspective, but all agreed with Lamb that the initial days of the process were more non-linear discovery than definitive direction.

Two dancers I asked to "describe the beginning of the choreographic process" began by detailing exploratory tasks they were asked to perform on the first day in order to generate movement:

DAVID SCHULTZ: There were a couple parts where she told us to use the phrase she's just given us or scratch it all. "Partner up with this person and describe an elephant" was one of [the tasks]... to spatially play with an idea, something that is not there.

YARINET RESTREPO: We would improv a little bit with some directions — but not a lot... We did the evolving-into-thing from the ground up, like living evolution, and that was pretty much the very beginning of the process.⁹

These dancers were concerned with the mechanics of studio work, but also stressed the freedom those tasks involved — not just from over-direction ("a little bit... but not a lot") but also to "scratch it all."

These movement experiments and the phrases and relationships that emerged from them were not approached by Lamb chronologically but as episodes that might be linked together in several ways. By the second week of the process, Lamb had begun to specify the order of some materials. For some dancers this was a relief, as the initial freedom from definitive ordering was linked to a difficulty in meaning-making:

STACY AUNG: We didn't even know what order everything was in so we didn't even know the context of each section... It's hard to find meaning without the context.

⁹ Unless otherwise specified, the dancers' comments came from transcriptions of separate one-to-one mid-process interviews conducted between 5/3/2010 and 5/5/2010, during the second week of choreography.

ETHAN KIRSCHBAUM: She showed us some pictures of her idea of graduated movement and she wanted to come up with a movement, and then she started putting it in a possible [order], and I guess it has progressed...¹⁰

Even in a dance understood to be non-narrative, the time-order of movement sections was seen as essential to their interpretation. Only after Lamb began sequencing the episodes did the dancers feel comfortable discussing what each might mean. I was reminded of the film-noir, *Memento* (2000), in which the main character's short-term memory loss (and the non-linear presentation of the backstory that mimics this loss) impedes both the audience's and the protagonist's understanding of events as they transpire.

Eduardo Zúñiga conveyed his sense that, throughout those first days, the piece had moved toward a *feeling* of narrative:

ZÚÑIGA: It has progressed. In the beginning, she had a lot of small ideas that didn't really connect... There is a fine line of being literal, but yet—like the music—you kind of feel like it's going to be about something and then it's not. So I feel like there is a line, not story, but a line of continuity.

In Zúñiga's estimation, literalness was not a desirable end, but the creation of something that would mimic narrative—that the audience or the dancers could hold onto throughout the piece—was.

Two HS2 apprentices participated in the first days' improvs and movement tasks. Afterwards, they sat at the front of the room much of the time, observing, like me. Their description of Lamb's process differs from that of the dancers learning the work. I interviewed them together, and, unlike the others, they saw in her process a determination to realize a definite vision.

ISAIAH ALATORRE: Gabrielle knows what she wants. She finds a way to make it work... Some people will just cut it, but she knows what she wants, and she will get what she wants, which is nice.

EMILY NICOLAOU: She knew what she wanted from the beginning. We came in, and she was "Alright these are the photos, they inspired me." I loved them. She showed us—did she show you?—some of the photos... I could see where she got her inspiration from, by looking at the photos of the running movements. I can definitely see that in her piece.

Their emphatic commentary suggests that an observer/participant binary does not emerge only after a piece reaches the stage. Once these dancers shifted from developing the material alongside of Lamb to watching the process from the front of the room, it is possible that their perceptions also shifted. Unlike the dancers who continued to develop movement in the studio, they felt comfortable asserting Lamb's intentionality—that she knew where she was heading—although they refrained from describing any overarching narrative.

¹⁰ From a joint interview with the two dancers, Chicago, May 5th, 2010.

The director of HS2, who observed the process sporadically throughout, occasionally conferring with Lamb about strategies for movement execution, provided the following perspective:

I watched her first doing a collaborative process with the dancers, coming up with movements and having them work with different material, seeing the possibilities of creating movement generated by ideas, then watching her find a story in there—a narrative... I think that it's still unfolding for her.¹¹

The participants (dancers) spoke of *what it was like* building the piece. The observers (myself, the understudies, the director) were more analytic about its evolution. We were confident that Lamb was realizing a vision; we were also shy about articulating its trajectory. We sensed a definite “aboutness” to the work, but we were hesitant to define that content.

While speaking with and observing Lamb, I gained the impression that the piece was not a fully formed idea to be transferred to and through the dancers to an audience; rather, the dancers shaped the concept for the piece—air currents to her smoke. She gave them the information she had gathered, but if they at first perceived the process as “without... context,” “fairly abstract,” or “pretty open,” it may have been because she was enlisting them to be partners in the creation of the piece’s emergent meaning.

When I first began interviewing, I was using the word *meaning* to indicate thematic content, something ultimately readable by an audience. It soon became apparent that my interviewees had a wider-ranging understanding of that term—one that could include “aboutness” but also might be defined as “importance”—and their use did not necessarily reflect the communicability of that meaning beyond their own experience.

Lamb approached the term with a similar flexibility. Asked to describe a previous choreographic experience and its meaning, she described a piece that juxtaposed grief and humor:

There is a piece that I made for three dancers about five years ago, and it was the first time in a long time that I’d done anything that was not on my own body. And whenever I start working on anything I kind of have no idea when I start out... I just have some tiny little clue. It was right about the time of my grandfather’s death, and he was someone who had a great sense of humor and so, even though I started it at a very sad time, it ended up being a very funny piece... I was taking some open adult classes, and there was a man that took these classes that took himself very very seriously and he would warm up in this very funny way, scurrying around... And as I was watching it, it kind of became my—the first clue about what I was going to do, although it wouldn’t have been obvious if you’d seen this piece... So that was the first time I really let myself start something without knowing what it was going to be, and that

¹¹ Taryn Kaschock Russell, interview, Chicago, May 5th, 2010.

was kind of a revelation to me—that I didn’t have to know everything that was going to happen before I started.

Lamb relays her change in process as having more *meaning* for her than the audience’s ability to fully grasp the work. The piece’s relationship to her grandfather’s passing and to her daily life in the studio dominates her description. The audience’s reading of the work is relegated to a single clause that assumes non-transferability of her sources (“it wouldn’t have been obvious if you’d seen this piece”). She realizes that ideas could be transformed during the choreographic process—“I didn’t have to know everything that was going to happen”—and not merely transmitted. This revelation occurred, if not because, at least in the presence, of other dancers: “It was the first time in a long time that I’d done anything that was not on my own body.”

The HS2 dancers had several ways of approaching the question of what Lamb’s developing piece “meant.” For Alice Klock, the emotional meaning of a duet was derived from its physicality: “The duet I do with Ethan is a struggling relationship basically, but it’s not an uncomfortable struggle necessarily... One of us is always supporting the other or we are counterbalancing each other and that purely physical thing has also become the emotion—that idea.” In this comment, Klock reverses the idea that dance is the vehicle of pre-articulated concepts. Instead, movement and gesture (much like words) have associations that can suggest meaning that was not initially present. In this way, Klock is offering a reading of meaning that emerges out of physical material rather than being communicated by it.

Schultz describes a section that resonated with him because of his affinity for the movement concept:

SCHULTZ: For one of the movements—the kind of progression-evolution idea of a movement being sort of segmented... I went right to bugs. I love insects. And I love the way they move. They are very disjunctive and very much have that aspect. Just being able to kind of take every day movement or even dance movement and trying to figure out what are the different A-B-C-Ds, what makes it happen.

Again, disjointed movement suggested an image to the dancer (one that Lamb had not specifically brought in—insects), and that image further prompted a conceptual framework for the work being done in the studio. Schultz’s comment reconnects the machine-like discontinuity of the Marey photographs and the movement that developed from them back to the animal world—although insects remain in many ways far-removed from human self-perception, and notably a common object of loathing and disgust (in some cases because of their perceived proximity to both human waste and death).

Yarinet Restrepo developed an emotional interpretation of Lamb’s imagery and how it grew out of the physical representation of a community of dancers interacting during the recreation of the image of a human tree:

RESTREPO: At the end, like, when we all come together, at one point we are all in our way growing from the ground up and somehow we intertwine with our own duets, but we don't really interact with other people until the very end [when] we come together... the image of a tree wrapped around with vines.

These moments and others became keystones for the dancers, nodes around which they developed a sense of the work as a whole. Two dancers I interviewed together passed an idea of what the piece might signify back and forth between them, looking to one other, conferring, before turning back to me:

KIRSCHBAUM: Well, I feel like *the whole thing* is kind of a struggle for Eduardo and Yarinet to be together?

AUNG: Yeah, I think so. Or at least to know each other. [to me] They want to be together but they get pulled apart and we are obstacles and sometimes we aid them in coming back together, sometimes we get in the way. [to Kirschbaum] I don't know if that makes us community members or members of the other group that are trying to get in the way?

Although dancers were drawn into Lamb's process in different and sometimes tentative ways, her presence in the studio encouraged personal engagement with the work and with one another. By not titling the piece, by not declaring a narrative, by working in a non-linear manner, Lamb resisted entering the studio as expert and casting the dancers solely as instruments of her vision/story. The studio atmosphere was far more like a collaborative laboratory setting. Lamb was certainly the primary investigator, and always the final word—that hierarchical structure remained intact throughout—but she was constantly watching, listening, allowing the dancers to take time to work through difficulties both alone and in groups, refining her ideas based on the results she was witnessing. She spoke, in retrospect, about how she had been heartened by the dancers' response to this approach:

I had enough tasks to fill up the first day, and I got some encouragement from the tasks... And then I taught them a phrase or two and gave them some tasks to do—to alter the phrases—and I was encouraged enough from looking at that to see they would really be able to add elements into it that I didn't have in my own dancing. I saw immediately that it is a total waste of time to try and teach them how to move the way that I move because in two weeks, that's not going to happen. And yet they can add so much—more interesting things, moving the way they do—so it really has to be an intersection of the two.

The language she used in the studio echoed this sense of shared exploration. She used first person plural pronouns (*we*, *us*, and in the form *let's*) more often than second person (*you*).

Lamb could be incredibly specific about musicality, shape, and energy: at one point she worked through a partnering section twelve times in a row—each

time making a small suggestion or noting a quality she liked. Yet she also asked the dancers to suggest transitional movements and to problem-solve, especially in partnering or group sections. She posed questions, then stood back as the dancers worked out movement, calling them back when she saw something she liked. Her language invited dancer input.

Probably something that doesn't turn. We need something very low to the ground. (Kirschbaum tries something.) Yeah, maybe a roll like that, yeah, I think so.

What would be the alternative? (Kirschbaum shows movement.) Okay, yes.

Sorry—you guys were good—it went too quickly. (Schultz: Should the [physical] conversation take longer?) Maybe, what else do you have to say? (Schultz shows something.)¹²

Both Lamb and the dancers discussed interactions in the studio as give-and-take. The duets, especially, developed along conversational patterns and rhythms, with one partner often pausing during the other's movement phrases.

The dancers commented on Lamb's strategy of pulling movement from them with images and then refining and directing it. Aung and Kirschbaum, interviewed in tandem, stressed the way Lamb's methods taxed them mentally as well as physically.

AUNG: It has been mentally exhausting.

KIRSCHBAUM: Yeah, I would say the same thing. She showed us some pictures of her ideas... and she wants us to...

AUNG: Integrate it.

KIRSCHBAUM: Yeah.

AUNG: Entangled. She has the really strong images that haven't been worked on bodies; you can't work out a six-person tree in your head. You have six people, all with ideas on how we can all accomplish this image so it can get... we can get short with each other. It can really work—really flow—but it takes a lot of mental presence. She is kind of... the conductor.

KIRSCHBAUM: Yeah, and then adding the musicality to it too, when we're the ones making it up, it is hard, for me—I don't know—it is hard to go to the timing that she wants and for it not to be different every time.

Balancing collaborative movement development with exact specificity of line, phrasing, and dancer synchronicity is clearly one of the challenges of this choreographic model.

Other dancers, describing the same process during separate interviews, specified which aspects of Lamb's choreographic style appealed to them. For

¹²Recorded in my notebook dated 5/2/2010.

Klock, mixing ballet and modern idioms was a pleasurable conundrum, Schultz was fascinated by the transformation from play to product, and Zúñiga appreciated the respect Lamb offered them by welcoming input and responding to it candidly (emphasis mine):

KLOCK: It's very interesting because she is balletic and I really relate to her movement on that level because I was definitely more classically trained. At the same time she doesn't want any of the ballet affectations... That's where it gets confusing—because it is grounded stuff that also needs a somewhat stylized presentation. *So it has been really fun for me to work with her because it is an interesting balance to play with.*

SCHULTZ: [There] was a lot of play. She gave us a phrase maybe, a floor phrase, and then... she just kind of let us run wild with it... She'd come by and sort of tweak things and maybe focus on certain aspects of it, but for the most part, it was very collaborative amongst the dancers for many hours... *It was fun to watch her give an idea, and then watch her watch us play, and you could kind of see what she was soaking in or taking in and then how that has played [out] in the past week...*

ZÚÑIGA: I think dancing-wise or physically it's been hard... Putting my ideas out has kept me more into the piece, more aware of what's going on. *[I] like all the freedom we get to have.* She lets us say whatever we want to say. Sometimes it might not work at all, but she's like, "Let's try it—No, that doesn't work." *That's nice.*

Lamb honed the choreographic material in three notable ways: 1. She asked for the dancers to perform a task and then clarified verbally what she did and did not want to keep. ("Hmm. Not bad, not bad, but I think we can make the distance shorter.") 2. She began to offer a verbal instruction only to truncate her own language by specifying her desire physically; these movements were not fully demonstrated—they were suggestive rather than exact. ("Make sure it's not there [arm gesture] so much as there [altered arm gesture].") 3. She used metaphorical language. Metaphors she chose (birds, smoke, trees) either echoed her image collection or—as in the case of life-sized puppetry—evoked the carnivalesque music for the piece (a collage of work by Mark Orton, Carla Kihlstedt, Tin Hat Trio, and Rob Burger¹³). Occasionally, the figurative language had no obvious referents.

Metaphorical language was often used to synchronize intention. These cues offered common referents to a group of dancers who had not been working together for long and who had met their choreographer only a few days before. They often came after the choreography was in place. Image served as a way to consider the execution of the movement, as well as providing an initiation point

¹³ Hubbard Street official website. <http://www.hubbardstreetdance.com/repertoire>. Accessed June 15, 2012.

or “originating idea.” Metaphor and image entered Lamb’s process not only as concepts to be physically represented, but also as impressions to be qualitatively conscious of as movements were refined.

Lamb never suggested that a narrative be explicitly communicated to the audience. Discussion of the piece’s eventual production was nearly non-existent in the studio. During the process, Lamb only consulted on that issue with the director of the company, who occasionally observed rehearsals, discussing how the movement was developing as a product, how it was “reading.” The images offered to the dancers were not necessarily ideas that Lamb wanted related in the same way, or at all, to an audience. The source materials, the metaphorical language, even the vague narratives the dancers were developing; these locations of “meaning” were internal to the work done in the studio. What an audience might receive from the materials was moot. Rather, Lamb herself, the director of HS2, and even the studio mirror served as surrogates for an unknowable but clearly-positioned audience.

Although mention of external viewers was wholly absent from the process I witnessed, they were at all times implicit. The piece, when it was observed, was observed from the front (the mirrors). Dancers sought to achieve certain aesthetic corrections with that viewpoint in mind. Costuming, lighting, and other staging details Lamb dealt with that week may serve to inspire performers but were primarily discussed in terms of their effect on an imagined audience. The dancers themselves were never directed verbally to consider the people beyond the proscenium.

Consequently, the meanings the dancers were drawing from the multi-layered and ten-day-long process seemed separate, perhaps richer, than the meanings any audience could hope to draw in twelve minutes’ time. It strikes me that, in discussing the piece eventually titled *NeverDidRunSmooth*, there are at least two acts of artistic transmission to consider: 1.) the choreographic process, during which Lamb brought seeds to the dancers, enlisting them in the long term cultivation of the work; 2.) performance, during which audiences were/are invited to briefly enter this garden in different states of tending.

The Work

Q: Why is an elephant big, grey and wrinkly?

A: Because if it was small, white and hard it would be an aspirin.

Q: Why are golf balls small and white?

A: Because if they were big and grey they would be elephants.

Q: What is gray and not there?

A: No elephants.

(Traditional “elephant” jokes are absurd riddles, usually told in a sequence that changes the rules of engagement as it progresses.)

NeverDidRunSmooth begins with crossings.¹⁴ Six dancers—four in gray, two in white—travel across the stage. They enter close to the floor and they exit upright. Each dancer seems to follow his/her own evolutionary path, although their proximity suggests couplings. Some journeys are insect-like, some acrobatic. Some of the dancers move with circularity and fluidity, as though they are moving through water, and some are earthy—more weighted, more punctuated, like the percussive and reverberating piano music that accompanies them.

A series of duets follows: a gray couple, a second gray couple, the couple in white. The first pair are a near-equal partnership of stances taken, lines and turns echoed. The next two are codependent—constantly off-balance and supporting one another, as they first make it across the stage and then reverse their pathway in a devolution that includes upside-down steps taken across the underside of a partner’s arm. The third couple, in white, have markedly different physical presences from one another. The woman draws imaginary plans with her index finger on the stage and in the air. Her focus is eventually drawn away from her partner and to these schemes. She is committed (her drawing takes the effort of her full body), and his dancing drifts further from hers until his tightly-wound spinning, his reaches and clutches wholly fail to catch her attention. They end at opposite corners of the space.

The four dancers in gray enter. They are suddenly extensions of the man-in-white as they build a progression to the drawing woman. Each runs to a successive point in the trajectory toward her and freezes in a position of running. They have created a three-dimensional cubist painting: not Marcel Duchamps’ *Nude Descending a Staircase*, but “man running to woman”—a living chronophotograph. When the couple in white move near one another again, the other dancers puppet the man, working his arms and legs—becoming forces that urge his interaction with her (he draws as she draws)—before they initiate a graduated retreat to the upstage corner.

The woman-in-white performs a convulsive solo. Her movement—at first guided by her hand following invisible lines through the space—begins to move beyond her kinesthetic sphere. She loses control, and the loss of control looks like an emotional *loss*. When she climbs the other dancers’ bodies toward the man-in-white, the gray dancers suddenly turn her from him. They lift her, in a different type of puppetry, carrying her in a circle around the stage as they alternately make her run through the air, then undulate her like a New Year’s

¹⁴ The following description is derived from my notes, taken upon multiple viewings of the piece during its creative process and also from an archival full-stage video of the piece in performance, kindly provided by company director Taryn Kaschock Russell.

dragon—or like one of Marey’s images from Lamb’s collection: a rippling wing of manta ray.

Once she reaches the ground, she and the others walk into the stage, as if descending a circular staircase, reaching one hand and then the other into the floor, their strange crouched gaits perhaps simian, or else ponderous as large birds. Once they are completely down, a dancer rolls onto her back, lifting her legs to provide a perch for the woman-in-white. It is dark but the woman-in-white remains lit. She is slowly rotated as she balances atop the gray dancer’s feet, her gaze scanning the horizon. Behind her, in a separate spot, the man-in-white’s body is laid out like a corpse. The music for this section twangs: the reverb from an amplifier and an eerie steel guitar.

When she sees him, she descends, he rises, and they move toward one another, but the other dancers form a set of mechanistic revolving doors that leave them always on opposing sides. Eventually the formation morphs into a triple duet—the couple-in-white separated, dancing with other partners. The new couplings move toward the audience, using the drawing motif, creating passageways with their own bodies for their partners to pour and dive through until the duets dissolve and the dancers-in-white find one another center stage. He curls himself around her trunk, her torso, and the dancers in gray creep toward them, the living roots of a human tree. The woman-in-white extends her arm upward—it is like smoke, describing an air current in the fading light.

The Abject

“They’re lovely hills,” she said. “They don’t really look like white elephants. I just meant the colouring of their skin through the trees.”

(Ernest Hemingway, from “Hills Like White Elephants”: a short-story about a couple discussing abortion—one he would like her to have—without ever mentioning the word.)

The abject, as described by Kristeva, is the border-world between self-and-other and self-and-death that is manifested in the repulsion one can feel while encountering bodily wastes, a corpse, or events that transgress divisions held to be inviolate. The abject is what must be excluded in order that a person remain *propre* (a French word that means both “clean” and “one’s-own”). This repulsion is not located in *things* or *events* but rather in the *encounters* with them. Abjection is always tethered to both fascination with and the desire to return to the site of disturbance: “The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I... [the abject] draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Kristeva, *Powers*, 2.

Hal Foster, in his 1996 essay on the photographic work of Cindy Sherman, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” notes a particular difficulty in discussing Kristeva’s concept: “A crucial ambiguity in Kristeva is the slippage between the operation *to abject* and the condition *to be abject*. For her the operation to abject is fundamental to the maintenance of subjectivity and society while the condition to be abject is subversive of both formations” (italics in original).¹⁶ In the application of Kristeva’s term to Lamb’s choreographic process, I will be speaking of the operative term. This emphasis distinguishes this analysis from other explorations of abjection (the condition) in film, fine art, and literature.

Most art theorists and/or critics find themselves grappling with Kristeva’s concept when they perceive subjects or subject matters that might be said to exhibit the condition or when the work itself elicits an abject response in the critic as audience member.¹⁷ By witnessing the bulk of a creative process (and not simply gleaning clues about that process from its product), I was able to recognize the less discussed—yet potentially more prevalent—operation of abjection that does not result in a piece classified as “abject art.” The performance of *NeverDidRunSmooth* does not re-present its source materials nor make transparent the permutations Lamb pressed her material through before its public premiere. Nevertheless, Lamb’s process itself exhibited aspects of the operation of abjection, providing me with the opportunity to witness abjective transformation rather than its more commonly discussed transmission.

I have long wondered if other artists begin their projects (poetic or choreographic) with the intense feelings of both dread and obsession about an indefinable *something* that needs to be *gotten out*. Conversations with several literary colleagues over the past two decades have convinced me that, as a writer, I am not alone in this experience. Although some of my poetic work might be said to exhibit the condition of being abject, much of it does not, although its roots in that experience are palpable to me. When I interviewed Lamb, her descriptions of her obsessive research and her insecurities about communicating its unsayable import to the dancers were uncannily familiar. While transcribing her interview, I pulled *Powers of Horror* off my shelf. In it, I found Kristeva’s description of the encounter with the abject:

[I]t cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire...

¹⁶ Hal Foster, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” *October*, Vol. 78 (Autumn, 1996), 114.

¹⁷ An example of the former might be the reviled character of Joseph Merrick in David Lynch’s *The Elephant Man*, while an example of the latter might be the mixed media artwork *The Holy Virgin Mary* by Chris Ofili—a black Madonna “smeared” with a lump of elephant dung and surrounded by images of female genitalia cut from pornographic magazines.

When I am beset by abjection, the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*.

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection *but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite* (emphasis mine).¹⁸

A psychoanalyst as well as a philosopher and cultural critic, Kristeva connects abjection to certain crucial moments, social and personal: when society establishes a boundary between human and animal, when a child violently separates from the mother to become an individual, and when the self slips from subject into object at the moment of death. Abjection is a process through which humans continually reject what they claim not to be—not part of another body, not contaminated by waste or death, and not (or no longer) nature, no longer animal. It is the exclusion of the abject (which inheres in no specific object but can be felt in anything conceived of as opposed to the self) that Kristeva says “sets up” the sacred. It also eventually lays the ground for art: “The various means of *purifying* the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art...” (italics in original).¹⁹

In “The Elephant’s Graveyard: Art, Abjection and the Abyss,” her keynote speech for the Adelaide festival in 2012, film theorist and Kristeva scholar Barbara Creed suggested a connection between Kristeva’s abject and the philosophical concept of the abyss—the void often conflated with a horrific encounter with one’s own mortality. Creed goes on to suggest that the confrontation with an evolutionary past as well as a mechanized future (the border-worlds between human-and-animal and human-and-machine) are other experiences that can trigger culturally specific feelings of abjection.²⁰

Abjection is slippery not only because it is culturally specific, but also because it can be overcome (undertakers and physicians do not live in a constant state of abjection) or elicited by singular, personally determined occurrences. Kristeva describes one:

In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children’s shoes, or something like that, something I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree, for instance, dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crimes reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills

¹⁸ Kristeva, *Powers*, 1-4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰ Barbara Creed, “The Elephant’s Graveyard: Art, Abjection and the Abyss,” Keynote Speech from the Adelaide Festival, Adelaide, Australia, March 2, 2012. Accessed June 15, 2012: <http://www.adelaidefestival.com.au>

me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things.²¹

For Kristeva, the shoes have power because they evoke the memory of something that does not belong in the scene: a quintessential memory of childhood. The image is not in itself horrific—the ideas it conjures are. The experience is of a violent juxtaposition of things that should not coexist. It is the collection of these oppositional images, images of what is *not proper* (the refuse of children's lives brutally ended) alongside her own childhood memories, that elicits from her the feeling of abjection. Memory, as a key ingredient in identity, becomes enmeshed with the abject. Humans encounter the abject when and where they experience a transgression that threatens their sense of self.

Because of the intense training and management of his/her own body, not to mention the constant interaction between that body and others' (sweat, skin, odors, etc.), a dancer's sense of the self's physical boundaries may differ from a non-dancer's. I would like to suggest that feelings of abjection may inhere when and where the specialized intimacy a dancer feels with her/his body is somehow deformed. Lamb's images display just such deformations—they are visual conundrums that would have exceptional significance for a dancer/filmmaker. Marey's scientific representations of movement are not movement. In fact, their uncanny multiplicity suggests death: they resemble the cryosectioning of animal corpses (frozen animals fixed in paraffin sliced thin for the examination of tissue), only now it is time and movement that are dissected and then affixed to the page. The mechanical study of human movement beside similar studies of other species makes the argument for continuum—not distinction.

In her speech, Barbara Creed articulated the double nature of abjection (positive and negative), saying that "an encounter with the abject offers a renewal of our sense of self," and that the abject "reminds us that we are separate... and [also] that we are no longer separate... the human animal."²²

When Lamb takes movement that has been segmented and re-imagines it on multiple living bodies, she is in the business of reanimation. She is Edison with his flickers, Frankenstein with his monster. But Lamb's piece undertakes this work with persons rather than with technology or dismembered corpses. She creates movement from images robbed of movement. She reverses the violence done to kinesthetic flow, to the perception of time and movement as continuous and unable to be captured. *NeverDidRunSmooth* recreates not only what has been lost between the still images on single pages, but connects seemingly unconnected images to one another. In this respect, Lamb's work with Marey's images is not only restorative but alchemical. She asks not only what movement takes us from running to walking, but from human to animal, from animal to mechanical,

²¹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 4.

²² Creed, Keynote Speech.

from mechanical to smoke. This continuum between human and non-human movement is an intrinsic part of her choreographic investigation in a piece that begins with couples traveling from the floor-bound to the upright and ends with a single woman extending her drawing hand upwards and away from a community of bodies. The limbs and torsos surrounding dancer Yarinete Restrepo are not her own; she is intertwined with others.

NeverDidRunSmooth acknowledges its source materials (the disarticulated movement and dismembered limbs and animal corpses) by beginning with the segmented progression of humans crawling or sprawling toward the vertical, by creating a graduated image of a running human—frozen at multiple points in the journey to reach a partner, and by offering as its closing tableau the image of a living human tree. This final image of the dance takes the single-body-made-multiple seen in Marey's work and reconfigures it in a figure of multiple-bodies-drawn-together. Yet none of these are the concepts Lamb began with. That image appeared to her in a dream rather than out of her research:

The first thing I actually created was Zúñiga's solo... I remember when I came here to look at the company back in March... he was the one [who] really struck me the most immediately, and then I had a dream about him that night—that he was being restrained by a vine and by a sheet of ivy. And I try to really pay attention to anything that I dream about, so I [thought] "I don't know what that means, but that is where I have to start."

At the end of the solo Lamb created for Zúñiga, he is encumbered with excess limbs as other dancers reach for him. In the images Lamb initially showed to the dancers, that same excess was represented by dead animals, plant-life, fabric, and disembodied arms. In the images, the boundaries between self and other were transgressed, but no others were actually encountered. Lamb took static images of isolated figures, then created physical episodes that referenced them and strung those together through communal choreographic action.

So where has the abject gone? In this case, it was re-formed through movement and by community. For a choreographer, abjection may present itself in the cessation of movement (death) required for its detailed analysis (as called to mind in the dream of *a restraining vine and sheet of ivy*—like the tubes and wires of a hospital or laboratory). The question lurks behind Lamb's choreographic action: must trying to understand and order movement also kill it? Can the reimagining of the Marey images through and with the engagement of others salvage the strange beauty of these photographs—rehabilitating them from the clinical sterility and the positivistic, dissecting gaze inherent in their construction?

This rehabilitation, the purification of the abject, is noted by art theorist Hal Foster to be ultimately conservative, protecting society from sites of abjection. He notes a particularly thorny distinction between the act of abjection (which maintains order repressively) and the state of being abject/ed (which subverts it

and—in some avant-garde work—may do the social work of addressing sites of oppression and persecution).²³ In *NeverDidRunSmooth*, Lamb does not reproduce a site of abjection for an audience or even during her work with the dancers. She does not plumb the most disturbing aspects of the images she chose; instead, she rescues them. Yet I did not experience her work as conservative. It is the nature and manner of this act of purification I find to be compelling and ultimately liberating. In the creation of a performance event, by enlisting dancers in the transformation of isolated anxiety and stasis into connection and flow, Lamb creates a site of artistic action with different, parallel goals from any potential goals of performance.

NeverDidRunSmooth does not exhibit abject-ness to its audiences; it is in no way grotesque. After viewing the piece multiple times, I would instead call its performance melancholy. Like the photographs that inspired it, the piece has an eerie, unnerving beauty. The movement, occasionally gesturing toward the animalistic and at other times toward the mechanical, reads as an exploration of a troubled relationship between the mis-matched couple in white. But the piece slips often into places deeper and darker than lost love. In the depicted relationship, one member (the artist?) obsessively seeks to circumscribe the invisible—a movement motif that Lamb, in an offhanded reference, called “that chalk outline thing,” a phrase that conjures the image of an absent corpse (as in a murder investigation). Near the end of the piece, the drawer’s partner is found lying briefly in just such a lifeless pose. The abject, if it has been retained in the piece, is but a shadow presence—a trace.

But abjection is not only found in artistic products. Kristeva herself questions if abjection might not be the instigator of most if not all contemporary writing (the artistic expression she most often analyzes), even when the art produced does not exhibit its source. At the conclusion of *Powers of Horror*, she asks: “Does one write under any other condition than being possessed by abjection, in an indefinite catharsis?”²⁴ In this moment, she suggests that the need to create art—most art, any art—may be fueled by the endless need to define and redefine the borders of the self, to cast off what “disturbs identity.” The process of purification can transform the abject subject matter into something more palatable, even pleasurable. Kristeva first mentions the mechanics of purification in their relation to religious rituals but then revisits them in their poetic formulations:

The abject, mimed through sound and meaning, is *repeated*. Getting rid of it is out of the question... one does not get rid of the impure; one can, however, bring it into being a second time, and differently from the original impurity. It is repetition through rhythm and song, therefore through what is not yet or is

²³ Foster, 112-116.

²⁴ Kristeva, *Powers*, 208.

no longer “meaning,” but arranges, defers, differentiates and organizes, harmonizes pathos, bile, warmth, and enthusiasm.²⁵

“[R]epetition through rhythm and song” describes a creative process common to dance as well as to the poetic language Kristeva so often addresses; additionally, in much contemporary choreographic practice those reiterations are extended and expanded through improvisational work with others. In Lamb’s work during the triple partnering section, I witnessed a passage of rhythmic repetitions with small differences—gestures dropped, partners frozen. This part of Lamb’s process, more than any other, seemed to me a dark reflection of the gashes in time the Marey photographs suggest, hiccups in the film that exposed the missing frames and lost connections. But Lamb refused to allow the work to linger in these moments.

On the first day of Lamb’s process, she exposed the HS2 dancers to images that had fascinated her for months: images that challenge the concept of self as whole and proper, as being absolutely separate from animal/nature, from death itself. The mechanistic and static aspects of the photographs transgress boundaries particularly crucial to dancers’ work: they compromise movement in the action of recording and re-presenting it. In separate responses to a question I asked the participants about watching themselves on video, they expressed over and over the feeling that what film/video captures is alien to their lived experience:

KIRSCHBAUM: I don’t like to watch myself dance.

AUNG: It definitely doesn’t look like how it feels when I see it, and I think certain things that I’m feeling don’t translate...

NICOLAOU: It looks so easy (laughing).

ALATORRE: It looks so easy but when you are learning it is so hard.

RESTREPO: It is kind of weird, because you are watching yourself, so then the first thing you [think] is “Did I do this right?” or “This didn’t look right,” or “I didn’t like how my body looked there.”

Only one dancer described the gap between the felt experience of dancing and its video representation in a positive light:

KLOCK: So it felt a very specific way and seeing it, it was on this really large stage so it was very, or I was, such a small part of a bigger thing... [It] kind of took me out of myself—because it was a very self-absorbed performance experience—and it was amazing to see that absorption contributing to a bigger feeling.

²⁵ Kristeva, *Powers*, 28.

In all cases, the dancers experienced a disparity between the work they had done and its video capture. Acclimated as they may have been to this gap between self and representation of self (most had seen countless videos of their dancing by this point), when confronting that chasm they exhibited palpable discomfort and a difficulty speaking to it. Lamb and Russell (the director of *Hubbard Street 2*), both with decade-or-longer careers behind them, expressed similar feelings of inarticulate dis-ease.

RUSSELL: Oh, it didn't compare at all (laughing)... It was hard to then watch things that I had felt, and [I] became critical, looking at myself on the outside, because anytime you are outside something you are not feeling it.

LAMB (describing a performance experience): I mean on video it is always... it's hard.

Marey's photographic work prefigured early film, and it casts in relief some of the issues dancers may have with representation. He displayed movement in stasis, he *shot* the living (with the aptly-named chronophotographic gun) in order to study them, he attempted to investigate the invisible visually (the smoke pathways), he chopped up time into disjointed bits (evidenced by the multiplication of bodies). He did not distinguish human from non-human subjects.

Such scientific probing and dismantling of the dancers' major field of concern—movement—may have prompted one of the everyday encounters with the abject (the border between self and not-self) that Kristeva suggests powers many art processes. Leaving aside for a moment the question of whether intensive dance training itself is an act of abjection (casting off from the body all that the rules of a specific discipline define as “excessive” and repeating ritual actions to purify movement), I am suggesting that the particular post/modern choreographic process Lamb used to create *NeverDidRunSmooth* engaged in an attempt to redefine the self in the midst of others—to make communal rather than isolated sense of the multiplication of bodies and limbs—the excessive-self present everywhere in her collected imagery.

Kristeva posits the ritualized, repetitive actions of art-making as “a substitute for the role formerly played by the sacred.”²⁶ When the purification of the abject is encountered in dance as opposed to writing it is frequently entered into with others, as it was/is in religious rites. But what does it mean to share the unsayable source (indicated here only by the ghostly-materials of Lamb's collection) in the act of meaning-making? What happens when the boundary between self and other is blurred during the very act of confronting that boundary?

I believe that when the operation of abjection is entered into with others (as it often is in dance), it may be foundational of not only the subjectivity that Kristeva posits but also intersubjectivity—the understanding of one's existence in

²⁶ Ibid., 26.

relation to others—even as the border between self and other is being established and navigated. Phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses the importance of dialogue to the establishment of intersubjective experience (an experience that allows I and the other to coexist as consciousnesses without the I constantly questioning the other’s knowability):

In the experience of dialogue there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator.²⁷

Lamb’s choreographic practice was conversational. She provided as source materials her images (visual and metaphorical), music, and improvisational exercises. She allowed space for response, and then she further elaborated her subject matter by incorporating the input of others. The fact that these conversations were carried on both verbally and kinesthetically only offers the resultant dialogue multiple, synchronous common grounds. Merleau-Ponty, who famously states “I am my body,” takes that sense of embodiment further, “If my consciousness has a body, why should other bodies not ‘have’ consciousnesses?”²⁸ Incorporating others’ movement as well as others’ language in the dialogic field would suggest an intensification of the intersubjective experience rather than a lessening of it. Additionally, Lamb’s choreographic process was not merely a conversation but simultaneously the creation of a work of art; it was a physical dialogue that brought into being Lamb’s unsayable vision.

There is nothing but a vague fever before the act of artistic expression, and only the work itself, completed and understood, is proof that there was something rather than nothing to be said. Because he returns to the source of silent and solitary experience on which culture and the exchange of ideas have been built in order to know it, the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout, whether it can detach itself from the flow of individual life in which it originates and give the independent existence of an identifiable *meaning*... (emphasis in original)²⁹

In Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the painter Cézanne, he emphasizes the solitary nature of artistic work. Although I would agree that Lamb’s work began in “vague fever,” she did not return to “the source of silent and solitary experience” in order to bring her concept about. I see in Lamb’s process a potential for a feminist subversion of certain creative/interpretive dynamic patterns—

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 413.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 409.

²⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” *Sense and Non-sense* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964). 19.

specifically, the direct and top-down transmission of narrative meaning first to performer and then to audience. *NeverDidRunSmooth* was not born in isolation: it was actively midwived by the dancers.

Lamb did not have these men and women replicate her own movement idiosyncrasies. (“I saw immediately that it is a total waste of time to try and teach them how to move the way that I move because in two weeks that’s not going to happen.”) Instead, she began with the common post/modern choreographic strategy of assigning the dancers improvisational tasks developed out of the materials she had collected. She engaged them in the very work of “bring[ing] it into being a second time, and differently from the original impurity” that Kristeva calls the work of purification—artists’ work. One of the tasks was created from a poem Lamb had read a few weeks prior to arriving at Hubbard Street:

I gave them some different tasks... the one that had the most interesting results was I taught them a phrase and asked them to make one thing, one element of the phrase bigger and one element of it smaller, their own choice, and then I told them to insert in it the idea of washing an elephant which is something I’d read a poem about in *The New Yorker* several weeks ago that particularly struck me, so I asked them to do whatever that meant to them.

Although Lamb does not mention any conceptual connection between the elephant poem and her collection of photographs, the image presented in the poem offered a startling reversal to her images. In an inversion of the Marey chronophotographs, this task used movement to describe a static, immense, and invisible presence rather than using fixed images to plumb the mystery of movement. Similarly, in the act of enlisting others to recreate and re-sequence images of fragmented time and self, Lamb helped to briefly create a community of artists working toward a collective goal. This ritual of collaborative meaning-making confronts the abject but does not necessarily aim to re-establish the discrete-and-proper self; instead, it underscores the connection, the continuousness, the intersubjectivity of self and other—reaffirming the human desire for that connection.

This is a crucial difference in the processes of choreography (on others) and writing (non-collaboratively): whatever purpose a communal choreographic work may have—be it healing or exorcism or infection—it is not completed in isolation. The creation of abject art (the re-presentation of the abject) in an act of choreography would require others to physically re-enact the site of trauma. It is no surprise then that many practitioners of abject art choose to work alone, even or especially, when bodies are at the core of their work.³⁰ Lamb’s method of working did not seem to me to be conservative—a mere covering over of what disturbs and troubles—but rather a modest and ethical investigation of what working through the abject might require of a community. In the case of *Never-*

³⁰ I am thinking of feminist artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Carolee Schneeman, Kiki Smith, Marina Abramović.

DidRunSmooth, Lamb felt compelled to suppress her own ego (“And yet they can add so much—more interesting things, moving the way they do—so it really has to be an intersection...”) as well as to offer up a certain amount of interpretive freedom (“so I asked them to do whatever that meant to them”) in order to negotiate the materials into a coalescent whole, the performance event.

Collecting

Lamb gathered photographic images, a dream of vines, and the elephant poem into a choreographic conversation, never fully articulating the associative logic that led her to make the choices she did. The piece grew from images of segmented locomotion and body multiplication to encompass and describe a troubled relationship. It became, over time, readable as an investigation of self, other, and the forces that both aid and impede their connection. The development of this material through the culling and refining of image-prompted movement from and with dancers was, I propose, integral to its emergent meaning. I believe the collaging of these images, the music, the process, and the choice of the title *NeverDidRunSmooth* to frame the work reflects a series of profoundly *poetic* choices made by Lamb (etymologically: “of creation”).³¹

Enlightenment philosopher Edmund Burke defines the power of imagination as a force of arrangement: “The mind of man possesses a sort of creative power of its own; either in representing at pleasure the images of things in the order and manner in which they were received by the senses, or in *combining those images in a new manner, and according to a different order*” (italics mine).³² Collection and collage are inherently creative acts. Immanuel Kant further qualifies this idea: “[Symbols] do not... represent what lies in our concepts of the sublimity and majesty of creation, but something different, which gives occasion to the imagination to *spread itself over a number of kindred representations that arouse more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words*” (italics mine).³³ It is not just the collage, the juxtaposition of image or word or gesture, that finally makes art happen; it is what may arise from or hover around that amalgamation, as Mallarmé wrote—*the flower absent from all bouquets*. Or maybe, this time, the elephant.

³¹ Oxford English Dictionary, 1971 printing, s.v. “poetic.”

³² Edmund Burke, “from A Philosophical Inquiry into the origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,” *Critical Theory Since Plato*, Hazard Adams (Editor). (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971). 306.

³³ Immanuel Kant “from Critique of Judgement, Second Book.” *Critical Theory Since Plato*, Hazard Adams (Editor). (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971). 297.

Cultural theorist Theodor Adorno states:

In each genuine artwork something appears that does not exist. It is not dreamt up out of disparate elements of the existing. Out of these elements artworks arrange constellations that become ciphers, without, however, like fantasies, setting up the enciphered before the eyes as something immediately existing.³⁴

Cipher means both “code” and “empty space,” and in Lamb’s process, the organizational principle at work (the code) remains unsayable—the invisible presence that structured the creative act.³⁵

None of the philosophers I have quoted above wrote of artistic representation that comes about collaboratively—from gathering together not only images and material but persons. In fact, I believe the continuing lack of aesthetics writing using dance as its exemplar stems from the difficulty of taking into full account the multiple points of access and transmission of choreographic process and product. However, the dearth of aesthetic writing on dance may also be instructive: audiences may share the difficulty (“I don’t get it”) that comes from attempting to assign singular meaning to a communal process. Perhaps there is too much there there.

The comment “I don’t get it” suggests a singular potential reading of a dance rather than a herding of ideas around an invisible immensity combined with an invitation that others physically imagine that presence with you. This is the process that produced *NeverDidRunSmooth*: Lamb conducted and directed but did not fully script the parameters of the encounter with her unsayable. I have attempted here to articulate the contours of the unspoken nature of the *encounter*—the fascination that both disturbed and compelled her—by running Lamb’s words, the words of the dancers, the words of poets and philosophers and my own words like soap and water around and around its form.

...often one love-of-your-life
will appear in a dream, arriving
with the weight and certitude of an elephant,
and it’s always the heart that wants to go out and wash
the huge mysteriousness of what they meant, those memories
that have only memories to feed them, and only you to keep them clean.

(from Barbara Ras’s “Washing the Elephant”
as it appeared in the *New Yorker* on March 15, 2010)

³⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). 82.

³⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, 1971 printing, s.v. “cipher.”



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