

Poetics and Perception: Making Sense of Postmodern Dance

Dissertation

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Abstract

Postmodern dance demonstrates characteristics and choreographic conventions that differ radically from those of the commercial theatrical dance that pervades our culture. In this study, I address the question of how people—dancers and choreographers, but especially audience members—make sense of this sometimes arcane and inscrutable dance form. Centering on the April, 2012 performance of choreographer John Jasperse’s *Canyon* at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, I use interviews with Jasperse and his dancers and with audience members as well as my observations of *Canyon* rehearsals and performances to begin to answer this question.

While audience members make the performance meaningful for themselves in diverse ways—social, emotional, intellectual—I focus on the aesthetic sense they make of *Canyon*. That is, I examine the strategies and codes they employ to interpret the work, to determine its “aboutness.” I find that the codes that are most successful, that allow the viewer the most satisfaction and the least frustration, are, like its characteristics, unique to postmodern dance. For example, viewers who are not overly concerned with the choreographer’s intention and who employ a logic of metonymy rather than one of metaphor or narrative make sense of *Canyon* with relative ease.”Dance insiders”—those who are involved in the world of dance themselves and attend concert dance often—employ these strategies more fluently, but I find “dance outsiders” also calling on them in varying measures. In addition, I find that underlying all successful aesthetic meaning-making of

Canyon is an ability to discern the formal elements of dance—its spatial configurations, actions, timing, relationships, qualities, and choreographic structures.

The implications of this study resonate in concentric circles. They are important for the choreographers and presenters who bemoan the size of the audience for postmodern dance. Awareness of how a dance performance “works,” for whom it works, and by what means, affords a better understanding of how audience members connect to their product. Dance scholars and historians may benefit from the data and analysis in this study as a snapshot of a specific, situated instance of postmodern dance in our time while the study’s focus on the means of understanding will be of interest to scholars of visual culture and of semiotics of the theater. Outsiders to the world of dance may find that the study provides an entry point into a sometimes arcane form. Finally, a postmodern dance concert is temporal, visual, immediate, musical, kinesthetic, and essentially ambiguous—diverse modes of expression that are shifting, variously, into and out of the foreground of our culture. As such, this study has implications for how we process a spectrum of contemporary experiences.

Dedication

For my parents, Richard and Maria Dittman,
who have never stopped supporting me through all sorts of endeavors.

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Fields of Study

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

My investigation originates from the question, “Why do so many smart people feel mystified by, frustrated with, scornful of, and ultimately alienated by postmodern¹ dance?” I have seen countless dance concerts in the company of intelligent, arts-interested companions who could only throw up their hands at the experience. They had no idea what to make of the events onstage. The undergraduates I teach in dance history survey courses, coming from many departments across the university, almost unanimously echo those sentiments. I still sometimes find it inscrutable myself.

When as a young adult I first saw postmodern dance, with its eight-minute light cues that revealed two earnest young women slowly, slowly spinning in their brown skirts to the sound of lapping waves, I was outraged. I found it self-indulgent, boring, and pretentious. I am an admirer of sweaty, full-bodied, intelligent dance and postmodern dance seldom displayed those characteristics I craved. Then, in college I learned that this style had a respectable history rooted in Judson Dance Theater and its artists’ ideas about eroding boundaries between art and life, testing the concept that any movement can be dance, and democratizing the form. In downtown New York in the 1990s I started taking dance class from Judson-influenced teachers and dancing for choreographers whose work was not so far removed from all that, and I found it conceptually and physically satisfying to rehearse and

¹ I define “postmodern dance” as that which has inherited ideals, practices, choreographic conventions, and choreographic characteristics from Judson Dance Theater. I explore this inheritance in Chapter 2.

perform. However, my friends who came to watch me dance did not find such satisfaction; they were politely, or not, flummoxed by what they saw. They found my performances frustrating, and perceived a distinct lack of *dancing* in them. Their reactions were like mine had been before I learned about the historical context for this work, before I started physically participating in it.

Evidently, I had crossed some sort of divide; I was now complicit in the creation of these dances I had loathed and, sitting in the audience, sometimes still did. Had I acquired an enlightened eye enabling me to see the riches on display in a postmodern dance, or was there really just a naked emperor prancing around all those small performance spaces? I couldn't help but notice that the greatest enthusiasts of postmodern dance—in fact, the overwhelming majority of its small audience—were “dance insiders” themselves: choreographers, dance teachers and students, dancers and former dancers, people from within the community of postmodern dance. I am not alone in this observation; sociologist Howard Becker notes, “Look at the audience at any dance event. No equivalent sample of theater- or concert-goers displays such erect carriage, such self-conscious placement of feet and legs, such well-maintained bodies” (53). Jan Van Dyke, a North Carolina choreographer and scholar, adds, “...I have noticed that almost everyone present in a given audience is a friend or supporter of one or another of the performers. The general rule seems to be that the audience for modern dance² is other dancers and their friends—and thus the more local dancers in a cast, the bigger the audience will be” (211). I hypothesized that the disconnect between postmodern dance and its larger, potential audience of intelligent “outsiders” had to do with an obscure and arcane dance language, developed within the postmodern dance

² I believe that here Van Dyke is using “modern dance” as a blanket term covering all sorts of contemporary dance, including postmodern dance.

community, that only insiders understood or cared about. In a roundtable discussion with non-dancers for a 1999 issue of *The Dance Insider*, participants made the following comments that confirmed my suspicions:

“I think dance is really cool, but incredibly inbred. I don't know any other creative pursuit that is so insular and free from commercial or pop culture ramifications. Eccentric or really out-there pieces I think are interesting, but they seem to form the bulk of the dance I've seen.”

“I always feel like I've been introduced in the middle of the second act, like I'm not privy to what's going on socially and artistically.”

“Dance that makes me want to see more dance has full-out movement. One of the most frustrating things about going to dance with [my boyfriend, a choreographer] is I would see ten performances and maybe one I would relate to. I was like, ‘God, I wish they would just *dance*. Stop standing around in your slip and *do* something’” (Dittman 1A-2A).

This was the general tone of the conversation where it addressed postmodern dance, with very little dissent.

My observations about the insularity of the postmodern dance world are echoed and dissected by authors such as Van Dyke, who questions the academic bubble surrounding postmodern choreographers' work, and Thomas Wartenburg, who addresses the social elitism of dance. Studies by large organizations such as the NEA and by individuals such as Leila Sussman confirm that the audience for dance, and particularly contemporary dance, is miniscule and comprised of educated, middle- and upper-income urban dwellers. Perhaps this is analogous to the small section of cinema-goers who choose experimental film or the concert-goers who favor avant-garde music—just a matter of taste, and there's no

accounting for it. We could leave it at that with no further analysis, but I am curious about the mechanisms that separate the small subsection from the rest. How come my dance-outsider companion at choreographer Tere O'Connor's *Lawn* back in 2003 assessed it as ridiculous and boring, but a dancing friend thought it was really smart, admiring the choreographer's skill at balancing groups of people on stage? Another insider thought it presented disturbing but powerful images. Are dance insiders speaking the same language as the performers and choreographers, and if they are, what are the rules and history of that language? For those who find satisfaction in postmodern dance, what are their entry points into it and the strategies for meaning-making they employ? And what of the outsiders, those who feel stymied by the performance? For my concert-going companions who blurted out in annoyance, "I just didn't get it," I question that slammed door. Their experience can't really have been null. When we witness a conversation in a foreign language, from a culture that is completely alien, what do we get? Not nothing. We watch and listen to the exchange. Even understanding nothing of the spoken language and little of the cultural codes embedded in the speakers' body language, we get *something* from the experience. We make some meaning of their encounter based on whatever elements we can latch onto: clothing, facial expression, intonation, gesture. Similarly, the outsider audience member "reads" bodies and body types, clothing, visual components, movement, and music: elements that are accessible in an otherwise alien situation. The understanding that outsiders take away from such alienating experiences may be inappropriate or misguided—they may read the clues with difficulty or experience a frustrating sense of cognitive dissonance—but nonetheless they make meaning. I want to uncover the specific mechanics of this sort of meaning-making as well. *How* do

we—all of us, enthusiastic insiders and dubious outsiders—make sense of postmodern dance?

My intention at the start of my dissertation was to investigate the insider/outsider divide as I perceived it. I wondered how differing backgrounds and experiences affected audience meaning-making of postmodern dance—what were insiders doing differently from outsiders that enabled them to receive it successfully? I also wanted to identify the characteristics of postmodern dance that limit its access to novices; both the “text” and the “reader” would be scrutinized at their intersection. I conceived of this study in which I would interview the makers of a postmodern dance as well as both dance-insider and -outsider audience members and—using their talk and my observations of the dance itself—attempt to divine answers to these questions. The study centers on choreographer John Jasperse’s 2011 work *Canyon*, as performed at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio in April 2012. My original concerns with how *Canyon*, as a postmodern dance, might at times be difficult to access and how some audience members (not necessarily the ones I had originally pegged as “outsider”) had difficulty processing it are still present in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. However, the interviewees themselves redefined the shape of my study; many of the issues they raised are not specific to postmodern dance but have to do with concert dance in general. My inquiry into how we understand this esoteric subcategory called postmodern dance is embedded in a larger one of how we understand the supercategory of western theatrical dance—itself a perceptually complex, semiotically multi-layered phenomenon that has many systems in play at once. How does anybody go about making sense of it? All of this is present in Chapters 4 and 5.

Through the processes of interviewing, analyzing transcripts and videos, and writing, I found that indeed there are codes for understanding postmodern dance, ones that allow for a rich appreciation of it. These codes were readily at hand for the dance insiders I interviewed—and obviously, for Jasperse and the dancers—and the dance outsiders expressed varying degrees of familiarity with them. One outsider was a master of these codes, such that her “outsider” status, in the final analysis, is only legitimate in as much as she has not seen much postmodern dance nor made a vocation of it. More common among the inexperienced viewers was an understanding of at least some of the non-normative rules to this game, an awareness that there were still more rules in operation that they did not grasp, and in some cases, a learning curve over the course of the performance that allowed them to understand some of those alien rules. This research also revealed another, more fundamental requirement for making sense of dance on its own terms: the viewer must be possessed of certain perceptual skills that allow him or her to *see* the dance. This is not a competency to be taken for granted. We have to learn to “read” the physical world around us (Chandler 152), and seeing what is salient in dance—its formal properties of timing, use of space, dynamics, relationship to gravity, action, and relationships among bodies—does not come naturally to everyone. Elliot W. Eisner calls it “perceptivity”—the ability to differentiate and experience the interplay between qualitative aspects of a thing—and considers it the fundamental prerequisite for appreciating any complex sensory phenomenon (63-64). One of my interviewees could describe only three or four of the events in the 60-minute long performance of *Canyon*; the rest she could not refer to or remember. These competencies—familiarity with postmodern dance codes and a basic ability to perceive the

formal elements of dance—proved crucial to interviewees’ ability to make aesthetic sense of the dance.

Epistemology

If these findings are to represent new, valid knowledge, some epistemological undergirding of my study is required. I base the study on a series of premises: that dance has meaning, that dance-makers and audience members make meaning from dance in a variety of ways, that their meaning-making is present in their talk, and that by examining the talk in their interviews I can glean new understanding about how people make sense of dance.

Epistemology: Defining “meaning”

Dance means something. A dance performance is not a random, disconnected occurrence. It is intentional, and directly connected to many other processes, practices, and institutions. It affects us and therefore is meaningful, in so many ways. To make such a statement requires a broad definition of “meaning:” as how a thing pertains to what we have experienced so far and what it implies for the future. In a nutshell, “What does it matter to me?” Mark Johnson articulates this definition: “Things, qualities, events and symbols have meaning for us because of how they connect with other aspects of our actual or possible experience. Meaning is relational and instrumental” (268). A dance concert then might mean a transcendent sense of empowerment, a social opportunity to reconnect with friends and a larger community, an emotional catharsis, a challenge to our world-view, or something as mundane as an inspiration to get in shape. In this view, questions such as how does *Canyon* work, what does it mean, and how do people make sense of it are all getting at the same thing: rendering the experience somehow coherent or satisfying or relevant to oneself, by whatever framework an individual may call upon.

Brown and Novak's study *Assessing the Intrinsic Impacts of Live Performance* provides useful vocabulary for articulating some of the ways a dance can mean. The study refers to types of "impact" that a performance might have on audience members and enumerates some of these impacts such as intellectual, aesthetic, emotional, spiritual, and social. I view these impacts as, essentially, ways that performance can be meaningful. My data does not fit Brown and Novak's model neatly—for instance, none of the people I interviewed about their experience watching or performing postmodern dance reported a spiritual impact, while I would add other impacts such as "sensory/kinesthetic" to the list—but their study does provide tools for thinking. Importantly, their multiple types of impact reiterate the idea that performance—dance, in this case—is meaningful in many ways beyond the aesthetic.

For example, all the people I interviewed found the performance of *Canyon* meaningful as an essentially social phenomenon, understood in terms of our relationships to other people and cultural forces. The dancers discussed their working relationships with each other, and how the economic realities of the dance world affected rehearsals and touring. The choreographer talked about dancers who had previously worked on the piece and what they contributed, and how he interacts with his collaborators. Audience members spoke of a dancer resembling an absent friend, of how they recognized people in the audience or how the audience was comprised of certain types of people, of this particular dance company's reputation in the world of dance, of their companions for the evening and what else this outing to the theater entailed, of their journey to the theater and where they parked, and countless other things that evidence the dance performance as inextricably embedded in a social fabric. Any consideration of how dance means socially must be balanced with a recognition that its social meaning is interwoven with how it means aesthetically,

emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, politically, and more. A dance performance is a dense, multi-layered text. Semiotician Yuri Lotman writes, “Just as, by sticking together individual steaks, we don’t obtain a calf, but by cutting up a calf, we may obtain steaks, in summarizing separate semiotic acts, we don’t obtain a semiotic universe” (“On the Semiosphere” 208). He is actually referring to a much greater scale, but I find his statement meaningful for dance. The dance performance is a universe, and while I focus on a certain semiotic layer of it, that is merely a small part of a much grander whole.

Epistemology: Approaches to aesthetic meaning of dance

While dance means in social ways and political ways and intellectual ways and many other ways too, this study deals primarily with its aesthetic meaning. Aesthetician Terry Barrett maintains that artworks have “aboutness”—“Very briefly, this principle holds that a work of art is an expressive object made by a person, and that, unlike a tree or a rock, for example, it is always about something.” He goes on to assert that because of this, artworks demand interpretation (Barrett 71). *Interpretation* is a subset of Johnson’s big, encompassing “calf” of meaning. Film scholar David Bordwell finds that interpretation is concerned with revealing that which is hidden or nonobvious (2). While he identifies two types of interpretation—explicatory and symptomatic—it is the former that is more relevant to my study. The principal goal of explicatory interpretation is to ascribe implicit connotative meanings to a work of art (Bordwell 43). This is the type of interpretation we use when we tell each other what we thought the dance was about, and “aboutness” becomes another term for this type of interpretive meaning. It requires the interpreter to make salient one or more semantic fields and to map those semantic fields onto the artwork (Bordwell 41). That

mapping of semantic fields onto the artwork becomes part of the definition of *interpretation* and makes this a decidedly intellectual approach to meaning.

With dance there is another sort of aboutness at work; it is immediate and sensorial, and it is about something at a pre-interpretive, or peri-interpretive level: “Dance ‘speaks’ by means of the perceptual mechanisms through which we apprehend movement as well as by semiotic translations of them” (Vincs 135). There is aboutness here, but we often don’t make it explicit in our talk. Mark Johnson’s work, inasmuch as it finds meaning to be grounded in the experience of the body of the individual, informs this aspect of my study. Ellen Dissanayake is among the writers who also find meaning in this way, relating an individual’s early mother-baby physical experiences to the more complicated cultural interactions that follow. Approaching the arts through anthropology and cognitive science, Dissanayake finds that ceremonies and performing arts are sensorily and emotionally gratifying because they create an avenue of communication through the senses that is intrinsically pleasurable. She speculates that many people find it harder to grasp or find meaning in the abstract and rational and that this felt, sensed approach to performing arts is more easily accessible (147).

Bordwell’s interpretation and Dissanayake’s pre-reflective sensory perception are both ways of aesthetic meaning-making, ways that I liken to the semiotic concepts *connotation* and *denotation*. With connotation, the meaning of a sign is the socio-cultural and personal associations it carries (Chandler 140). Connotation is the implied meaning, the inference; it is to what we usually refer when we discuss what a work of art *means*. Partner to connotation is *denotation*, the definitional, literal, obvious, commonsense meaning of a sign (Chandler 140). In Barthes’ analysis of a photograph from a Panzani ad he finds that, before connoting Italy,

the still-life, and a fresh market culture, the picture denotes the simple fact of vegetables in a string bag (*Rhetoric* 39). In applying semiotics to dance, I consider connotation to be interpretive and denotation to be perceptual; dance denotes through Dissanayake's non-reflective, immediate sensory experience of it. This is not to say that denotation is neutral or universal; dance may denote differently to different people as perception itself is shaped by individual experience. Vegetables in a string bag is only a "simple fact" for one; someone else sees simply groceries. The experienced ballet-goer may perceive the string of named, codified maneuvers in the Sugarplum Fairy's dance while a novice viewer may see twinkle-toes flitting about.

Making meaning from immediate sensation could be allied with denotation and making meaning through semantic mapping allied with connotation, but they do not stand in opposition to, or even necessarily distinct from, each other. Johnson proposes that conceptual meaning (of which connotation and interpretation are examples) is grounded in sensation and emotion: "meaning is grounded in bodily experience; it arises from our feeling of qualities, sensory patterns, movements, changes, and emotional contours" (70). According to Johnson, all our understanding of concepts arises from, is in fact the same as, the understanding we gain from our embodied experience. He finds the connection between our physicality and our conceptual knowledge in body-based metaphor—the way we shape our thoughts about abstract concepts in terms of the body and its sensations (135-167). While connotation and denotation do not constitute a neat binary, they are helpful tools for thought in this examination of dance's aesthetic meaning.

Epistemology: Identifying meaning-making in the interviews

Both connotation and denotation are present in my interviews. Connotation is easy to spot; the speaker proposes an interpretation for some aspect of *Canyon*. Connotation answers the tacit question, “What’s it about?” Denotation answers the question, “What is it?” Therefore, it is in interviewees’ straightforward descriptions of the dance that I find denotative meaning-making; in description they are simply telling me what they saw. Meaning is embedded therein in three ways. First, the ability to identify and describe some aspect of the dance, to differentiate it from all the other visual, aural, and kinesthetic stimuli present in performance, signals meaning. The speaker was able to make some sense of the phenomenon; it wasn’t just an incomprehensible bedlam but rather something discrete that could be named and described. Second, the speaker chose to talk about that particular thing rather than all the other things he or she might have. This element of choice is present not only in answer to my open-ended questions such as “What really stood out to you about the performance?” but also to my more specific questions. When I asked audience members to tell me how the performance began, there are infinite aspects of the *beginning of the performance* they might relate. Their choices about *what* to tell indicate that those things are the meaningful ones. Finally, the *how* of their accounts carries meaning. Their choice of words, their emphasis and order—all are unique and indicate what the thing described meant to that individual. Each audience member described what they perceived to be the salient features of the dance.

As such, each description represents a unique way of making meaning of *Canyon*, and thereby reveals denotation’s sham implication of objectivity. Giving an account of the facts of what happened in the dance is a subjective act. Audience members responded to different

aspects of the dance and framed their descriptions of the same moment in entirely different terms. Deborah Jowitt maintains that interpretive meaning is not the adversary of description. Rather, “description asserts the interdependence of content and form” (“Beyond Description” 7). That is, description carries with it the spirit of a dance’s content, or interpretive meaning. Far from being neutral or a mere reporting of events, descriptions reveal how formal properties were received by an individual’s senses. By “formal properties” I mean the stuff of the dance, that which can be reported in terms of who, what, where, when, and how—action, use of time, space, gravity, dynamics, human bodies, relationships, and compositional devices. Description addresses dance’s unique, non-verbal meaning, approaching the poetics of dance as delineated by Kim Vincs:

While dance may be partially interpretable using textural analysis, the poetics of dance in fact lie within the organization of the body and its movement—an organization that takes place spatially, in the materiality of the relationship between body parts, and temporally, via the trajectories of the body in space/time, rather than through the mere naming of movement after the fact. Dance operates via a spatiotemporal logic, not a verbal one, to create an image of a person ‘being in the world’ (133).

Description, then, through the fact of its existence, through its subject, and through its means, constitutes meaning-making just as surely as does an explicit aboutness statement, but does so through different channels. For example, one audience member, Natalie, described some of the dancers’ partnering, done primarily sitting and lying on the floor: “It was as if they were butter, or rubber bands or something, that were just back to the earth and they would pull up and they would turn a different way and go back down. And when

they used that, [a partner's] back for that, they slid off the back a lot. The first time the girl did it and slid over the back, it was wonderful.” This description doesn’t merely report the events that transpired. Natalie noticed the partnering and wanted to talk about it. Of all the potential ways she could have perceived it—as horizontal relationships, as playful or sexual or weird, as a series of shapes, as a rhythmic activity with suspenseful pauses, to name a few—she understood it in terms of both a stretchy, pliable connection and a sliding over. These aspects of the movement define it for her and furthermore, were satisfying and enjoyable—“wonderful.” And what might it mean, if we had to translate it into the terms of connotation and interpretation and semantic mapping? To make such a translation requires the same subtle abstraction as telling what a dream “means.” Natalie perceived a people who were connected to the earth but not restrained by that connection; they could rise and turn and go back down with a rubbery resilience. Furthermore, they repeatedly slid over each other’s backs—a concept that contains the fun and potential danger of sliding, the support required for bearing another person’s weight, and the interpersonal relationships that allow a group of people to touch torso-to-torso. This is a world characterized by connections to gravity and to one another that are closer, more fluid, and perhaps more trusting than they are in a more quotidian lived experience. I investigate more fully how dance can be meaningful in this perceptual, non-conceptual way in Chapter 2, and how audience members’ descriptions carry denotative meaning in Chapter 4.

Note that both types of aesthetic meaning-making discussed here—explicit meaning-making through interpretation and implicit meaning-making through description-as-denotation—rely on the speaker’s sensory perception of the formal properties of the dance. The dance’s potential meanings reside in its formal properties, and the dance asks the viewer

to notice and take them in. When Natalie described the movement as buttery or stretchy like rubber bands, she was describing formal properties of the dance—the movement’s resilience and the dancers’ pliable connections with gravity and with each other—that were meaningful to her. She did not go on to make an explicit interpretation. She might have posited a metaphor: that the dancers were in butter or that they were made of rubber or that they were children playing in the mud. She might have spoken of those qualities and relationships in terms of metonymy, finding the close connections among the dancers contiguous with something else whose parts are closely connected. All of these strategies of making meaning would lead her to differing understandings of that part of the dance, but all of these understandings—denotative and connotative—are grounded in the formal properties of the dance and Natalie’s sensory perception of them. If she did not notice these properties, or could not discern them from a general blur of activity on stage, she could not make aesthetic meaning of the dance. In that case, she could still make aesthetic meaning of the *performance* if she perceived the costumes, set design, lighting, or music, and she could still make intellectual or social meaning depending on the aspects of the situation she did perceive and deem salient. That is, the performance would not be meaningless. However, to make aesthetic meaning of the dance requires perception of its formal properties.

Epistemology: Making meaning through talk

This discussion of audience descriptions and interpretations implies the final premise upon which this study is based, that interviewees’ understanding of *Canyon*—their meaning-making—is communicated in their words. This is one of the cornerstones of this study’s epistemology, but it is not a particularly stable one. Talking about dance requires a translation from non-verbal experience to verbal expression, a translation that some

audience members and dance-makers are not proficient in making. They may not have the vocabulary or the practice in such analysis to do it adequately, such that their words express what they know. We think in movement differently from how we think in words, and we understand movement often in ways that words can't express (Sheets-Johnstone 45-51). While in some cases I have video footage of interviews, allowing a parallel means of expression through physical gesture, this is only the flimsiest buttressing of the essentially shaky medium of conversation. I fully acknowledge that what the interviewees said is a problematic, partial representation of what they understood.

At the same time, their words are a wholly sufficient data source inasmuch as they are creating meaning, on the spot, through their talk. The interviewee holds the facts of his or her experience, but in the process of offering them as a response to my questions transforms the details and performs a creative act; meaning is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter (Holstein and Gubrium 68-70). I assume that this is true, that audience members are constructing meaning in the act of speaking. This premise is present in many forms of discourse analysis (for example, Wetherell et al) and is grounded in Edwards and Potter's discursive psychology. Their approach centers on the social interactional work that speech does; they examine interviewee statements "...as situated and occasioned constructions whose precise nature makes sense, to participants and analysts alike, in terms of the social action those descriptions accomplish" (Edwards and Potter 2-3). In this view, my interviewees are producing a version of their experience of *Canyon* that they deem appropriate and productive for the particular context of speaking to me, a doctoral student in dance studies. Talking to me in a formal interview will lead a speaker to make sense of *Canyon* differently than he or she would in another situation, however, that fact in

no way compromises or handicaps the data. While, say, chatting in a café may seem more spontaneous, less “staged” than my structured interview, both situations are staged to some extent in as much as we are constantly presenting slightly different versions of ourselves according to the context.³ Furthermore, I consider our interviews to be a version of what we do after performances, in the ways that matter—we talk to each other about the experience, try out various understandings in our talk, and let the talk engender new understandings. The meaning-making that interviewees constructed for my benefit is valid and fully adequate for answering my research questions.

So my interviewees’ meaning-making is spontaneously constructed and situation-dependent, and therefore fluid and subjective. Despite these unstable qualities, their meaning-making also indexes, or is an important version of, two important realities. The first is their understanding of *Canyon*. This is a contradiction of Edwards and Potter’s theory, which states that interviewees’ talk does not express any underlying cognitive state. Instead, I think that what they say *is* a representation of what they think, albeit modified or qualified by the context of talking to me in our particular interview situation. Interviewees’ talk also references the facts of *Canyon*, a physical event in time and space that has certain knowable characteristics. My interviewees’ talk then approaches two realities—their underlying cognitive state or understanding of the dance as well as the reality of the dance, its physical facts. I say “approaches” because just as talk-as-expression-of-understanding is conditioned by the circumstances of our interview, talk-as-account-of-reality is unreliable. The interviewees’ accounts of the dance differ from each other, are not internally consistent, and in some cases are not even consistent with the dance when I check the video recording of it.

³ The idea that all human practices are performances of self, attributed to Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), informs not only my theorizing here but also the field of Performance Studies.

On the one hand, these differences constitute the spine of my study. I want to know how individuals understood this dance, uniquely; and am not concerned with their reliability as narrators. Never mind that their stories shift and are not in accord with the facts; their experiences are irreducible to the level of fact (Watson 380). For example, one audience member was deeply touched by how a particular dancer struggled but “never made it to the other side.” He actually did make it to the other side; I checked the video. Whether the viewer didn’t notice this, forgot it, or ignored it doesn’t matter; what is relevant is that for her, his dance was defined by futile struggle. On the other hand, while my observations of the dance, the video records of it, and audience and dance-maker accounts of it may be inconsistent with one another in their details, there is a large place of overlap where they converge on an independent reality of the dance.

Thus, I receive interviewee statements in two imperfect but useful ways: as stories expressing their unique understandings (as constructed for my benefit) of *Canyon*, and as reports that (taken in conjunction with many other sources) get at the facts of *Canyon*. In this way I am adopting Denzin and Lincoln’s “critical realism” or the “discursive realism” of Schröder and her colleagues which consists of the belief that there is a social reality that exists independently of language, but we access it through language (Schröder et al 45). Like a critical realist, I agree with the positivists that there is a world of events out there that is observable and independent of human consciousness (Denzin and Lincoln 13). The reality of *Canyon* as mediated by all these constructions of it but essentially independent is important because analysis of its formal properties is part of this study. In the tradition of audience reception research, this study examines both the “text,” *Canyon*, and the “reader” at the point where they converge (Schröder et al 126). As such, I am interested both in the fluid

spontaneous accounts my interviewees gave and in the physical facts of the dance. Only by accounting for both sides of the coin—*Canyon* itself and participants’ understanding of it—can I hope to answer my questions about postmodern dance’s relative accessibility.

Study Description

This investigation is grounded in historical, semiotic, and cognitive science premises and assumes a qualitative approach, seeking to understand the lifeworlds that come together at a postmodern dance concert. Two studies have been particularly influential in constructing my approach—*Conceiving Connections* in Australia (2002-2004) and *Watching Dance: Kinesthetic Empathy* (2008-2011) in England—in that both are informed by cognitive science and incorporate a qualitative component. I have accessed *Conceiving Connections* primarily through Catherine Stevens and Renee Glass’s report and through Glass’s dissertation, and *Watching Dance* through its website and Dee Reynolds’ article in *Dance Research Journal*. Following Josselson, I hope that my study will be read in conversation with theirs. While I consider the Australian and English studies jumping-off points for my research, I employ a model that elicits in-depth individual responses in an attempt to connect audience understandings to larger networks of meaning-making, rather than Lickert-type scales or short answers. Furthermore, I explore individuals’ understanding from both sides: dance-makers⁴ and audience members. While some of these elements are present in Stevens and Glass’s and Reynolds’s studies, my research is distinguished by its combination of qualitative approach, investigation into the strategies and codes through which dance-makers and audience

⁴ I use the term “dance-maker” to include both choreographer and dancers. Dancers are co-creators of a dance; this is obvious inasmuch as they instantiate it on stage, but true also in that they are active in its creation in the studio. This is especially true in a choreographic process like Jasperse’s, and it is important that the dancers be acknowledged in the authorship of the dance.

members sensibly construe the events onstage, and the connection of those strategies and codes to other cultural forces.

I conceived of this study as an exploration of the insider/outsider paradigm in postmodern dance, exploring dance-maker ways of meaning-making and laying them side by side with audience meaning-making. I expected that dance insider audience members—those involved in the world of dance themselves—would employ strategies and codes similar to those of the dance-makers, affording them a satisfying experience as watchers. I wanted a postmodern dance—that which has inherited characteristics and conventions from Judson Dance Theater—to be the centerpiece of this study, and informally queried a few choreographers working within that aesthetic about their interest in participating in this study. I imagined accompanying the choreographer and his or her dancers closely throughout the creative process, observing all rehearsals so that my outside eye could note the processes—seldom explicit—through which meaning was embedded in the formal properties of the dance. These rehearsal observations would be complemented by regular interviews with the dance-makers. I would become intimately familiar with the dance and its strata of meaning. Then I would interview both dance insider and outsider audience members about their experiences of the work, and compare their ways of constructing meaning with the dance-makers'. The asymmetry of this proposed study reflects the asymmetry of the participants' experience—the dance-makers who live with the work over a period of months and the watchers who get one shot at it, a single performance to make sense of it.

Study Description: Participants

Early in 2012 the chance arose to center this study on John Jasperse's dance *Canyon*, and he agreed to participate in my study. This was an irresistible opportunity as Jasperse is a postmodern choreographer of international reputation whose work does embody many of the characteristics in which I am interested. However, the creative process for *Canyon* was over; the dance had premiered in New York a few months earlier (Brooklyn Academy of Music, November 2011) and I would only have access to him and his dancers for the single week they would be in residence at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio during April 2012. Their rehearsals there would be largely practical ones, adapting the work to a different space and altered cast, rather than generative ones. The decision to carry out my study around Jasperse's *Canyon* at the Wexner Center significantly changed the study's shape, substituting the long period of immersion in the dance-makers' creative process with interviews with Jasperse and the dancers and observations of a few "tech" rehearsals and performances. If the proposed study privileged dance-makers' ways of making meaning, the actual study certainly levels that imbalance; I don't have the deep, longitudinal understanding of how meaning is embedded in *Canyon* that I had originally imagined. Ultimately, this study explores audience members' meaning-making more deeply than it does the dance-makers', and I hope to redress that in future research that is immersed in the dance-makers' process.

Jasperse consented to be interviewed, as did the four dancers who also perform in *Canyon*. One of the dancers, John, joined the cast one week before the Wexner Center residency, an extremely last-minute replacement for one of the original cast members who did not come to Ohio. The cast had already been reduced from its original six-member configuration at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) because of a dancer injury. The

current cast was comprised of Lindsay Clark, Kennis Hawkins, Burr Johnson, John Sorensen-Jolink, and Jasperse himself. Jasperse and the dancers agreed to be interviewed, and to let me attend all their rehearsals in Ohio. I hoped to attend the rehearsals in New York the week before the Wexner Center residency to observe the incorporation of John into the work, but this did not happen.

Having secured Jasperse's participation and thus established the time frame for the project, I turned my attention to recruiting audience member participants. The insider/outsider paradigm was at the forefront of my considerations at this point in the study. While my study results ultimately erode the notion of separate groups of insiders and outsiders—which I alternatively refer to as “experienced” and “inexperienced” viewers, or “experts” and “novices” because of the terminology used in cognitive literature—I must briefly address it here. Just as those with musical training listen to music differently from those who don't play an instrument or sing themselves (Kreutz, Schubert, and Mitchell; Pitts), so do experienced dancers watch dance differently. The phenomenon of a dance insiders' world is real, and there is an abundance of theory explaining why the insider—one who has studied dance, practiced dance, and seen a lot of dance in performance—has an advantage sitting in the audience. Sometimes the very act of taking in a continuous stream of movement can be overwhelming. One study using fMRI comparisons revealed that expert viewers activate a semantic network and extract symbolic units when they watch dance, while novices see it simply as motion stimulus of a complicated variety (Lee, Kim, and Woo). Cognitive research over the past twenty years points to neural mechanisms that allow a stronger response in audience members who are watching movement they have done themselves (Calvo-Merino et al, “Seeing”). Additional cognitive literature indicates that

repeated exposure to dance sharpens viewers' expectations, allowing them to process it more expertly (Opacic, Stevens, and Tillman). This is salient, as some aestheticians (Leder, Belke, Oeberst, and Augustin; Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman) maintain that more fluent processing leads to a more rewarding aesthetic experience.

Some consider the most basic requirement for an aesthetic experience of dance to be the skill of "noting or observing separate movement components of the dance and being able to perceive them as related or unrelated happenings" (Adshead et al 12). That is, at the perceptual level it can't be just "motion stimulus of a complicated variety." To discern separate movement components is a particular way of seeing, a perceptual skill that cannot be assumed for all viewers. Eisner calls it "connoisseurship:" the ability to see rather than to merely look. For him this is not something effete or elite; anyone who is highly perceptive in some domain is a connoisseur in that domain (6-7). Then, many scholars of dance and of art in general further stipulate that a rewarding aesthetic experience hinges on the ability to interpret the artwork, and that without knowledge of the codes and conventions of an art such as concert dance, the viewer's ability to interpret the artwork is diminished (Efland 85; Elam 84; Foster, *Reading* 53-59; Leder, Belke, Oeberst, and Augustin 500; McFee 67-68; Sparshott 364-365).

In addition to dance codes, the viewer benefits from an awareness of dance history and contemporary work; these furnish the dance's context and the references it may contain. Experimental or avant-garde works, such as postmodern dance, require the "spectator to possess a range of encyclopedic, intertextual, and ideological competence which is anything but standard," thus drastically limiting the number and type of spectators who can successfully join in a semantic actualization," i.e., interpretation (De Marinis, "Dramaturgy"

104). The dance is “not decoded but *inferred* on the basis of co-textual and contextual information, and genre-bound in that the genre serves as ‘instructions for use.’” (Adshead-Lansdale 17). The consensus is that without experience and exposure and familiarity and fluency—without insider status—the novice viewer faces a bewildering sea of stimulus at a postmodern dance performance. All of this theory and research gives credence to my personal experience of watching postmodern dance with dance outsiders who were flummoxed by it.

With a focus on the divide between these perplexed outsiders and the privileged insiders, my proposed study called for a “polar” sample—that is, audience participants from opposite ends of the insider/outsider spectrum. However, by the time I had both confirmation of Jasperse’s participation and approval from The Ohio State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), there were only a few weeks remaining before the scheduled Wexner Center residency in which to recruit audience members. With this heightened sense of urgency, I fell back on recruitment pools that included, to be sure, dance insiders with experience seeing and doing postmodern dance and dance outsiders who probably lacked that experience, but more importantly, people who were likely to say yes to my call for participants. I did not cast a very wide net, staying within one or two degrees of my own personal acquaintance, because of the necessity of securing audience member interviewees in time for the performance. I feared that a broad, public recruitment effort would be time-consuming and perhaps not even fruitful. As such, I recruited audience members in two separate populations with which I was familiar, The Ohio State University (OSU) Department of Dance and the community of parents of public school children in the middle-class Columbus neighborhood of Clintonville. I did this through an open recruitment

letter which I circulated electronically in the Department of Dance and among parent groups, encouraging all recipients to pass the letter on to anyone they thought might be interested. In this way, I also recruited non-parent dance outsiders—acquaintances of people who heard about the study and wanted to participate.

The twelve people who agreed to be interviewed about *Canyon* in exchange for a ticket to the performance and compensation for parking costs do not represent the polar sample I had envisioned. While my pool of interviewees does indeed include people who have plentiful experience seeing and doing postmodern dance and people who have none, absent is the person who is completely unfamiliar with the arts, the total alien. While none of the six participants who were recruited as “outsiders” had seen a postmodern dance concert, two of them had taken dance classes as children, two had taken dance classes as adults, five of them had seen a ballet or modern dance performance at some point in their lives, and all were deeply invested in some other art—theatre, literature, music, film, or visual art. They are spread across the middle of the spectrum of experience, tending toward the expert pole rather than the novice pole; they are not total outsiders to dance. However, in that way my sample also reflects the reality of the dance audience inasmuch as people who responded to my email are interested enough in the arts to find participation in a study like mine worthwhile. In addition, their social class and education are typical of dance audiences. As such, none of the outsider audience participants was completely out of his or her element in a setting such as the Wexner Center; they had a lack of experience watching postmodern dance, not a complete unfamiliarity with dance or the arts.

The pool of dance insider audience participants is also skewed. By resorting to the OSU Department of Dance for recruitment, I naturally ended up with insiders whose

dancing lives are associated with the university in some way. The dance insider who is, say, steeped in the world of ballet is not represented; instead, I have this very particular, academic species of dance insider. Here again, this can be construed as a weakness in my sample pool or as a reflection of the reality of the audience for postmodern dance at a venue such as the Wexner Center. A ballet dancer, depending on his or her other experience, might find himself or herself as befuddled at a performance of *Canyon* as a dance outsider; the codes for the two dance forms are that different. Furthermore, both Sally Banes (“Institutionalizing”) and André Lepecki have pointed out the symbiosis between contemporary dance and the university. The tendrils that extend from postmodern dance and university dance departments, curling around and penetrating each other, are evident inasmuch as most postmodern dancers and choreographers are college-educated and find a portion of their livelihood in university teaching and residencies. In fact, the Wexner Center sits on the OSU campus. As I scanned the audience of about one hundred at each of the four performances of *Canyon*, I could account for nearly every person by their association with the OSU Department of Dance. There were current and former students and faculty members and their companions, as well as at least seventy-five students from other departments in the university who were enrolled in General Education courses in the Department of Dance that required them to attend *Canyon* for class. I asked a friend if he knew the few members of the *Canyon* audience I couldn’t place, and he identified many as faculty members and spouses from other Arts and Sciences departments. My six dance insider audience members’ associations with OSU’s Department of Dance actually make them quite representative of the *Canyon* audience in general; people who see dance events at the Wexner Center tend to be connected not only to dance but to the university.

The number of audience member participants was logistically restricted by the importance of interviewing audience members fairly soon after the performance. Especially for inexperienced dance viewers, the memory of a live performance fades quickly; discussions about it even one or two weeks after the event will yield fuzzy or uncertain impressions. I conducted all the interviews myself, most of them within two days of the performance (see Appendix B), and twelve was the maximum number I could undertake within that compressed time frame. In fact, a smaller and more select pool of interviewees might have been preferable as the quantity of data from twelve conversations about *Canyon* was at times excessive.

These twelve, then, were my sample of dance insiders and outsiders. Contrary to my expectations, the outsiders were not so different from the insiders in their processing of *Canyon*. Unlike my companions over the years, most of my novice interviewees enjoyed the performance and made some sense of it, often in ways that resembled the expert viewers. (I explore possible explanations for the disparity between the expected novice viewer reactions and the actual ones in the Conclusion of this paper.) The two groups were more alike than different; however, the novices distinguished themselves from the experts in two key respects. The first is their unfamiliarity with the postmodern dance concert *in situ*. A key construct in Brown and Novak's study on the impacts of live performance is audience members' "readiness-to-receive." Part of this construct is the degree to which the audience member is comfortable in his or her theater seat—is it a familiar feeling, or does the person feel like a fish out of water (Brown and Novak 9-10)? Some performance conventions that are typical in the world of postmodern dance were surprising and puzzling to inexperienced viewers, giving them just that feeling of being out of their element.

For example, the configuration of the Wexner Center Performance Space for this performance and the resulting immediacy and intimacy was an issue for many novice viewers. Space was tight; chairs for the audience were set up on low risers on three sides of the room, and dancers entered and exited between these chairs, nearly grazing viewers' shoulders as they did. Limbs occasionally swept within inches of those seated in attendance. Furthermore, the edges of the space were not masked with curtains, and with audience members on three sides of the central performing area this meant that there were many dancer "exits" that didn't actually take them fully out of view. That is, the dancer was technically "offstage," not actively dancing, but really was standing at the dimly lit edge of the space in full view of many audience members. Dancers in this situation adjusted costumes, drank water, and shook or stretched out their limbs.

These uses of the performing space are not unusual in the world of postmodern dance. It is often presented in "black-box" spaces or nontraditional performance spaces that are quite small, with audience members seated on folding chairs very close to the dancers. Furthermore, such spaces often lack the wings and upstage scrim curtain that traditionally obscure an offstage area and demarcate the stage as special in a proscenium setting. Seasoned audience members are familiar with this set-up and suspend disbelief for the dancers' "exits," to some extent disregarding dancers who are "offstage" in this way. In turn, performers in these situations sometimes take on a neutral aspect to their appearance, trying not to draw audience attention when they are supposed to be offstage. Jasperse and the dancers commented on how interesting it was to not only have a smaller audience, but also to be so much closer to them than they had been at BAM; that is, the tight space was noted

but not especially remarkable. Furthermore, Jasperse speculated that people crave immediacy, not remove, in artistic experience.

The experienced dance-goers among my interviewees expressed familiarity with the set-up in the Wexner Performance Space inasmuch as they also didn't find it remarkable. One experienced viewer simply noted that he likes to be up close to the dancers so he can catch small details and see them sweat. Another commented that, coupled with other aspects of the performance, the ability to watch the dancers in their "down" time at the edges of the space gave her a sense of being introduced to them as individuals. By contrast, many of the interviewees who came from outside the world of postmodern dance expressed surprise, amazement, and sometimes dismay at their proximity to the performers—"Do you want me to go into how I felt when I bent down to pick up a Chapstick and a dancer breezed past my ear?! I was just like, *ewah!*"

The dancers as shadowy presences at the side of the space—not obviously performing but still visible—added an element of confusion, or the sense of not knowing how to take this, for some dance outsiders. One, who had performed as a musician when he was younger, said "When they would leave the stage, it struck me too because they would leave the performance white floor, but then they were just standing there. Which, as a performer, having been on stage shows, once you're off stage, you're off stage and we don't see you. But they were just, they were like [wipes brow with forearm] whew." For another novice viewer, the situation represented an annoying flaw in the production: "I mean, I wanted to look, I wanted to see what the people were doing offstage...And sometimes they were offstage but I think they were supposed to be on, 'cause they were still moving. That

didn't really bother me. It's just irritating at the time: not knowing where they want me to look. What do you want me to see, as a director?"

This feeling of being present at a game where the rules are somehow different from usual was evident among the inexperienced viewers not only in their talk about the dancers' use of space but in the many instances they asked me questions or let me know that the performance was in some way difficult or challenging for them. This sort of talk was quite rare among the experienced viewers. I have stated that the novices who participated in my study were substantially similar to the experts, but the presence of this feeling of unfamiliarity is one key area in which the two groups differ. The other difference is that almost all the audience "brown-outs"—instances of non-comprehension, confusion, or questioning—that I address in Chapter 3 occurred among the novices. In that way, Chapter 3 represents the part of my study in which the novices responded to *Canyon* as I hypothesized they would.

There is an imbalance in the way this study cites dance-maker participants and audience participants. Jasperse's *Canyon* at the Wexner Center is a matter of public record and its details can be retrieved by anyone who is interested. Because of this, he and his dancers are identified in this study. However, I have given pseudonyms to the audience members who wished to keep their identities confidential. Audience member backgrounds, interests, and professions provide important context for their interviews, so I have included this information, changing or blurring small details for those individuals who did not want to be identified. Furthermore, I refer to only Jasperse by his last name while everyone else is present on a first-name basis. While it is conventional to refer to artists in formal writing by their last names as a matter of respect, his dancers are due the same respect and yet I use

their first names. I made this choice for several reasons. First, because I draw on other interviews with Jasperse—for instance, Gia Kourlas’s in *The New York Times*. He is referred to by his last name there (actually, “Mr. Jasperse”), so I do it too, for consistency. Second, because while the dancers collaborated in the creation of *Canyon* and I identify them as “dance-makers” too, Jasperse is the executive in charge of the final product; his seniority and status afford him a different title. Third, because if I demoted Jasperse to “John,” it would not only feel wrong but would be confusing as one of the dancers is also named John. Fourth, because if I referred to the dancers by last name as well, it would set them at a remove from the audience interviewees who are referred to by first name, creating an “us versus them” feeling that does not fit the tone of the interviews. Calling the audience members by their last names also ill-suits the casual, friendly tone of our interactions.

Below are short biographical sketches of the study participants—a cast of characters including the dance-makers, the dance-insider audience members, and the dance-outsider audience members. Because there are so many of them, I don’t expect the reader to be able to associate an identity with a name every time one of the study participants is quoted or referred to. Although I give reminders of the details of a speaker’s identity when it is relevant, I am afraid that the individuality, the uniqueness, of each of these participants will be lost, blurred by the abundance of names floating around. While the interviews of four of the audience members are examined in depth in Chapter 5, I wish that the scope of this project allowed for similar attention to all of the participants. Instead, these pages list the cast of characters so they can be an easily accessed reminder of who these many people are; an interested reader can connect names as they appear in this study to apposite identifying information by referring to these pages.

Study Description: Participants: The *Canyon* dance-makers

- Jasperse, choreographer and director. His dances have been presented nationally and internationally, and among many other important awards he has received a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and a New York Dance and Performance “Bessie” Award in recognition of his body of work.
- Burr, dancer. A graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University, he has danced in other works of Jasperse’s and in the work of other New York choreographers. His own choreography has been presented in various venues around New York.
- John, dancer. He learned the dance in under two weeks, replacing a cast member who did not come to the Wexner Center residency as planned. This is his first work with Jasperse, but since graduating from New York University’s Tisch School, he has danced in several projects with other choreographers and presented his own choreography. He also designs furniture.
- Kennis, dancer. This is also her first work with Jasperse. Conservatory-trained, she makes her own work and dances for other New York choreographers. After *Canyon*’s run at the Wexner Center, she planned to dance in a project in Germany for several months.
- Lindsay, dancer. She performs in other Jasperse works and choreographs herself, as well as doing administrative work and house management. She holds an MFA from Hollins University.

Study Description: Participants: The dance-insider audience members

- Alyssa is a former ballet dancer who is now a graduate student in the Department of Dance, with a focus in choreography.
- Manisha is a former dancer and now a videographer whose work often includes documenting dance. She takes some classes in the Department of Dance. She has a new baby.
- Kristin is also a graduate student in the Department of Dance, interested especially in hip-hop and other urban dance forms. She danced when she was a teenager, but an injury forced her to stop.
- Michael is a PhD candidate who teaches in the Department of Dance. He maintains a regular yoga practice.
- Nell is a former faculty member in the Department of Dance. Before teaching in the department, she danced for high-profile choreographers in New York and herself choreographed for professional and student companies. She and Nancy are a generation older than the other dance-insider audience members, who are in their twenties and thirties.
- Nancy is a choreographer and adjunct instructor in the Department of Dance. She is also a vocal advocate for dance in the Columbus community and has two college-age children.

Study Description: Participants: The dance-outsider audience members

- Ramona works in advertising and is the mother of two small children. She has a Master's degree in English and is an avid reader.

- Ginny teaches courses in film history and cinema at a small liberal arts college near Columbus. She has a visual arts background, and two children as well.
- Jim is a graduate student in OSU's School of Music with a background in chamber music performance. He also waits tables in a popular gourmet restaurant and volunteers at a local soup kitchen.
- Meg once aspired to an acting career in New York and still occasionally participates in amateur theatre productions. Most of her time is consumed with her three children and her work as a personal trainer.
- Natalie is Meg's mother; they attended the performance of *Canyon* together. Natalie has a PhD in Theatre Studies, focusing on Italian theatre history.
- Shelley is a graphic designer who sings and plays lead guitar in a local band. Her family moved to the U.S. from Trinidad and Tobago when she was a baby.

Study Description: Interviews and observations

I planned for interviews with dance-makers and audience members to last about an hour; they ranged from twenty minutes to over two hours (see Appendix A for exact times). My interview protocols are included as Appendix C here but, as is common in qualitative research interviews, they represent a potential script to which I sometimes adhered and sometimes did not. These specific questions reflect the meta-purpose of my interrogation; they were meant to elicit talk from the dance-makers about their experiences making and performing *Canyon* and from the audience members about their experience watching it. When those questions were not fruitful, I used other ones or, if there was an aspect of the performance that someone really wanted to talk about, we pursued that. There were, however, certain consistencies among the interviews. I asked all the dancers how they came to be in *Canyon*, since Jasperse does not have a standing dance company. I asked about the beginning of the process and the origins of its movement, about certain sections that came up in the rehearsals I observed and seemed to require particular attention, and about how they train and what other work they do. Among the dance-makers, Jasperse's interview is understandably unique; although his choreographic process includes collaborative input from the dancers, the impetus to make *Canyon* and the vision for it was his. I also conducted a follow-up interview with Jasperse via Skype late in my writing process, to fill in a few outstanding gaps regarding his understanding of the work.

For the audience members, the interviews always started with questions about arriving at the theater. Answers included information about what they had been doing immediately before the performance as well as their impressions of the Wexner Center and the audience, creating some context for their experience. I asked about the beginning of the

performance, aiming to elicit descriptive narrative from the interviewees: *Tell me about how the performance started. What happened?* I also always included questions about the end of the performance. In between, I asked about what caught their attention, what stood out about the performance. Asking about the beginning and the end of the performance not only created entry points for narrative, but also exploited cognitive science's insights into short-term memory, which demonstrate that the first and last items in a series—in this case, the sequential events that comprise a performance of *Canyon*—are most readily recalled (Murdock). The effect of an item's position in the series is socially affected, however; items that are unique or salient to an individual will be recalled regardless of their position in the series (Roediger and Crowder 233). By asking viewers what stood out to them in the performance, I was counting on them to remember and talk about the parts they found meaningful. In almost every case, these three types of questions elicited ample narrative in my interviews. After the first few interviews I also began asking for the speaker's impression of two particular moments: the improvised arm and upper body movements in a diagonal line after the opening section, and the "black hole" moment when the dancers stand and make eye contact with audience members. I did this not only because those two moments had been coming up fairly frequently anyway among speakers and it seemed to present an opportunity for comparison, but also because observation of rehearsals and interviews with the dancers had afforded me some insight into those sections of the dance.

At no point did I ask anyone what they thought *Canyon* meant, or what it was about. In response to my more open-ended questions, interviewees talked about all sorts of ways that *Canyon* meant for them—social, emotional, intellectual, as well as aesthetic. Had I asked what *Canyon* was about, I might have received rich answers, but in my experience that

question is restrictive; the respondent often feels that a certain type of answer is expected and that he or she must address that expectation. In addition, many viewers think that an artwork's meaning is determined by the artist, and where they encounter uncertainty or ambiguity, they become reluctant to discuss what a work means. Even in the absence of a direct solicitation, there was no shortage of aboutness statements in my interviews; despite the fact that I asked description-centered questions, audience members found occasion to talk about what was important to them, including their interpretations of the work. I did not employ a protocol like Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology because although the types of questions it asks about a performance experience—What insights did you come to? What confusions did you experience? Did it relate to your sense of self in any way? (Foreman-Wernet and Dervin 71)—address various types of meaning-making, they don't seem to elicit the type of experiential, qualitative talk in which I am interested.

I audio-taped all interviews and, in an attempt to offset the heavy reliance on the verbal, I videotaped interviews as well. Some interviews were not videotaped because of participant choice of interview location or because of technical difficulties. I consider the interviews with audience members and members of Jasperse's company—the participants' accounts of their experience of *Canyon*—to be the mainstay of my data, and this data would be incomplete if it were solely verbal. Together, movement and speech create a "multi-channel redundancy" (Birdwhistell 107), and I relied on the videotapes to enhance my understanding of the speaker's meaning. I noted interviewees' gestures that complemented their words, adding dimension, or that replaced words entirely, a regular occurrence when talking about dance. In several cases, the speakers' gestures were vital to the meaning of their

statements, and I consider it a great loss that I do not have video footage for all the interviews.

I transcribed all the interviews. My transcripts of these interviews are the artifacts that I have scrutinized and analyzed and as such, I think it is particularly important that the non-verbal information found on the videotapes be included in these transcripts. In an interview transcription, “Things become fixed that would otherwise be lost. What is apparently inconsequential becomes visible” (Watson 379). Lest the understanding I gain from interviewees’ gestures be lost, I included a detailed description in the interview transcript of the gestures I found salient. I transcribed all the speakers’ utterances, including their false starts and pauses. The interview quotes that are included in this dissertation have been minimally edited. I have pruned out excessive “like”s and “you know”s where I thought they were too distracting, and the exact details of their pauses, and I have imposed punctuation that I believe represents the spirit of their speech. In general, I have attempted to preserve the speaker’s conversational nuance as much as possible. I believe that I have edited with a responsibility both to the integrity of the speaker’s statement and to the readability of this document.

I observed and took notes on all of the rehearsals for and performances of *Canyon* at the Wexner Center, as well as the master class that Jasperse taught to OSU dance majors. These notes I “wrote up,” much like ethnographic field notes. I do not refer directly to my observations of rehearsal very often in the dissertation, although they surely inform my understanding of Jasperse and the dancers’ process preparing *Canyon* for performance. My observations of the performance, on the other hand, are critical in this dissertation; the performance is the “text” to the interviews’ “reading,” and it is represented here as my

descriptions of the performance itself. Jasperse also gave me access to video footage of *Canyon* at the Wexner Center and at BAM, a resource that has been invaluable when my memory of the dance has fallen short.

Study description: Data analysis

Observations of *Canyon* in rehearsal and performance, my observations of Jasperse's master class, and especially the recordings and transcripts of my interviews constitute my data set. Making some sense of all this was certainly—like qualitative research in general, as described by Denzin and Lincoln—an act of *bricolage* in which I called upon formalized methods of analysis but also pieced together and invented new tools as needed (4). My consideration of what approach to take to all that data was informed by the concepts of “looking for” and “popping out” as articulated by Jablonko and Kagan. *Looking for* uses a focused lens, seeking particular themes in a mass of data. Of course I was *looking for* evidence of an expert/novice divide and an indictment of postmodern dance's inaccessible characteristics; these were the issues that begat my research. *Popping out* seemed more promising—using an open lens, taking in everything and then noticing recurrences and interrelationships, allowing the relevant bits to make themselves known. On the surface, *popping out* seems like the most promising path to discovery, but its implication of neutrality—that the object under scrutiny will present itself objectively to the viewer and its salient features will become evident—is misleading. What pops out for me is determined by my own background and experience. I have spent time researching and thinking about experts, novices, and postmodern dance characteristics, and their grooves in my brain have become worn, familiar, preferred. I have a theoretical divining rod in my head that draws me to those themes even when I am trying to just let the data speak to me, to allow its salient

features to “pop out.” I can’t ignore those themes; they pervade my research questions. Piecing together a satisfactory method of data analysis meant balancing the magnetic power of what I was looking for with an openness to that which might pop out. Another type of balance characterized this process—that between systematic method and intuition: “Either construal of the research process—as unitarily subjective or objective—misrepresents the actual process of progressive problem-solving in data construction and analysis” (Erickson 486-487).

First, I indexed and annotated the interview transcripts. The index is a summary, noting chunk by chunk, what the speaker talked about. This is a reduction in the service of manageability of data, but is not reduction to a code. Coding—assigning labels and categories—seemed like a too-strong methodological confirmation of what I was already looking for. After all, from where else would these code words emerge, if not my existing understanding of the situation? Once indexed, I annotated the material—a process of making notes on and about my field notes and interview transcripts. “This is an iterative process, because you make notes about your notes as you go over the material again, and again, and notes on those notes, etc., all with the purpose of trying to understand what is going on...” (Wagner). Through this process, my understanding of what was going on in this vast field of interrelated data was both confirmed and subtly redefined.

Indexing and annotation constitute something of a bottom-up approach to the data, starting with the small chunks of data and experimenting with various configurations thereof. I also employed Erickson’s top-down approach (491), starting with the whole and working towards its parts. To do this, I tried to identify the broadest categories of things interviewees discussed and then subdivided those categories into successively narrower ones.

While the insights gained through the process of annotation were cumulative and difficult to pinpoint, identifying the broad categories in interviewee talk, top-down, led to a discovery which is discrete and describable. For most interviewees, their talk fell into the three big categories of 1) *Canyon* and their experience of it, 2) themselves, and 3) social or cultural phenomena related to one of the first two categories. However, a fourth category of talk was evident in Jasperse's interview and in two or three others. I haven't come up with a better word for it than "theory"—reflecting on ways of construing reality, referring to existing models for organizing experience and in so doing, citing various writers and thinkers. I explore this phenomenon in the profile of expert viewer Michael in Chapter 5.

While top-down categorization and endless annotation moved data analysis forward, neither enabled me to see how to stitch all the disparate data of seventeen dense interviews into a coherent written presentation. I finally was able to do this by creating big visual "data maps." Like mind-maps, these data-maps reflect the vast complexity of the study; they are webs of information in various colored circles and squares, connected with lines and arrows (Appendix D is a sample excerpt of one of these data maps). There are seventeen centers that represent each person I interviewed, and radiating out from each of these are the things that they talked about, their topics. These are things like "partnering," "the beginning," "I could do that," and "pairings are interesting," and they are circled on the maps. On the line from the speaker to the topic I noted whether I had asked about it specifically or whether they had volunteered the topic in answer to an open-ended question. Radiating out from each of the topics are the things the speaker said about that topic. Topics that are questions or reflect non-comprehension or confusion on the part of the interviewee are colored

brown; they are “brown-outs” in understanding. Down the center of each map is a spine that is the dance itself, the named sequential sections of *Canyon*.

In the first map I did, I attempted to connect with lines the speaker to the section of *Canyon* he or she was talking about. I also tried to connect speakers to other people’s topics that they shared, simultaneously conceiving of both speakers and topics as potential centers. Neither of these strategies was effective, because often speakers did not perceive the dance according to section—that is, they might talk about “the women’s faces” but not connect that to a specific moment in the dance—and because it resulted in so many cross-map lines that the whole thing became tedious to read. To be sure, the maps are still dauntingly complicated when I look at them as a whole, but the act of creating them enabled me to discern the structure that would undergird my dissertation. Furthermore, they present an all-at-once picture of the interviews, organized around topic, which complements the transcripts which are organized around time and need to be taken in sequentially; the two formats enable me to contextualize speakers’ statements in two different ways. Although the maps are at first glance visually complicated, I am familiar enough with them that when I want to consult them, I can zone in on the bits I need.

The maps have allowed me to extrapolate concepts from the interviewees’ topics—a degree of abstraction—but at the same time they are a persistent visual reminder of how those concepts are connected to individuals, embedded in their talk. Continually referring back to the words surrounding the topics-centers—what exactly did an interviewee *say* about that thing?—enabled me to understand dimensions of the concept to which a given topic related. For example, I noticed that many people talked about “differences among the dancers,” and began to speculate about why difference among the dancers is remarkable—

maybe postmodern dance disrupts expectations of uniformity that are raised by more popular forms of dance in which there is a uniform look to the dancers? However, looking at those statements about difference contextualized to the individual speaker allowed me to see that although they shared the same topic name, they were only superficially similar. Some people made sense of the difference among dancers according to a choreographic logic that juxtaposed the dancers; for some it created a brown-out regarding why this person but not that in a given moment; for some it was a distraction, probably based in expectation of uniformity across the cast; and for many it implied a statement of preference, that this dancer did it better. “Differences among the dancers” recurred enough to trigger a *So many people talk about difference, it must be an important concept!* response. However, by continually relating topics to the talk in which they were embedded, I realized that they did not actually index a single concept.

In making the maps, I also had to be scrupulous in my naming of topics. The different ways that each person’s map took shape becomes a representation of how they made sense of the performance uniquely, and I had to resist the urge to label things for consistency—to call this an apple just so I can compare it to someone else’s talk about apples. Similarly, I had to be careful not to circle as a topic-center something that was only mentioned in reference to something else, again so that I’d have apples to compare to someone else’s apples. For example, Ginny talked about how when the dancers were in the diagonal line they were breathing heavily and I rushed to circle “diagonal line” because other people have talked about this formation and it’s satisfying to see a salient topic, the diagonal line, recur. However, more careful consideration of her talk reveals that her focus is really on how the dancers were breathing heavily as they stood in the diagonal line. Changing Ginny’s

circled topic to “heavy breathing” put her talk in relationship to Jim’s, where there is a topic called “breathing heavy.” For Ginny, “diagonal line” is still an item related to “heavy breathing,” helping me to keep Ginny’s comments in the mix when I discuss people’s responses to that diagonal line. Furthermore, Nancy has talk around the topic “going to the point of exhaustion” and although she cites the change in the quality of the dancers’ movement when she talks about it, not their heavy breathing, I can infer that Ginny and Nancy are talking about the same part of the dance. In fact, the different terms in which they discuss it represent different ways of making sense of it. Being scrupulous in making the data maps preserved the difference and the nuances among the interviewees, and also allowed me to see that there *were* things that came up across the interviews, creating ground for comparison.

Study Description: Review

I have a bias about this case—that postmodern dance is arcane and unintelligible to those who are not members of the dance world. I hope to mitigate this bias through the process of peer review, enlisting Meghan Durham Wall and Karl Rogers as readers. These colleagues are enmeshed in the world of post-modern dance as choreographers and performers and their comments on my writing provide effective counterpoint to my bias, as well as valuable insight.

Study Description: Organization

Chapter 2 is a report of the theoretical premises that undergird this study, reviewing the literature that has informed each of those premises. Chapter 3 is an analysis of audience brown-outs, the places where speakers did not understand what was going on. It springs from the conspicuous brown items on the data maps. Chapter 4 examines how audience

members made sense of dance in non-verbal ways. It springs from my awareness of audience member satisfaction as they talked about the dance, and my attempt to explain that satisfaction because they did not. Chapter 5 is comprised of four in-depth explorations of audience member interviews. It springs from the people, prioritizing their individuality. Chapter 6 is the conclusion.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Premises

J. Clyde Mitchell asserts,

The single case becomes significant only when set against the accumulated experience and knowledge that the analyst brings to it. In other words the extent to which generalization may be made from case studies depends upon the adequacy of the underlying theory and the whole corpus of related knowledge of which the case is analysed rather than on the particular instance itself (203).

With that in mind, I lay bare my corpus of related knowledge, the theoretical premises that together create a matrix in and around which I conduct my study.

Making meaning: Two views

What is the nature of the transaction between dance-makers and the audience?

Authors across disciplines concur that the reader, listener, or audience member is active in the co-creation of meaning in an artwork, each interpretation resulting in a new construction of the text (Adshead et al 116, De Marinis 101, Dewey 108, Elam 85). Rancière describes an “emancipated” spectator who doesn’t passively receive the performance: “The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place [sic]. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her” (13). This fits comfortably within a postmodern view of the world wherein meaning is conditional and fluid, and for many scholars it replaces an older, communication-based model of how an

artwork means. The communication model—whereby the artist has a message that he encodes into an artwork and the audience member receives it, decoding the message however he can—feels old-school. It also feels dangerously complicit with the intentionalist fallacy, the notion that the only true meaning of the work is the one intended by the artist. I agree that the communication model is not useful if it focuses on accurate reception of content, on assigning various degrees of correctness to an interpretation depending on how nearly it approximates the artist's intended meaning. There is some truth to the communication model, though, inasmuch as the dance-makers *do* have intentions that they imbed in the work, even if only subconsciously through their choices of this movement rather than that, through their shaping of the work's formal properties. A theory of reception must balance the audience's active contribution to meaning production with the discursive power emanating from the text (Hoiyer 293).

The reality of meaning-making in dance combines both models. The dance-makers communicate something in their work through its formal properties; those properties place boundaries on what that something might be; the audience creates meaning from the work within those boundaries. This combined model is acknowledged in audience reception research, which insists that the media text has an encoded meaning potential which may constrain the readers' meaning production in various ways but which remains to be actualized by readers in everyday life, according to their individual interpretive repertoires (codes) (Schröder et al 124). In that way dance, like music, embodies a “connotative complex,” a suite of related possible meanings (I. Cross 34). For example, during a section of the dance that Jasperse and the dancers call “black hole,” they stand still and sweep the fully lit audience with their gazes. Those are the “black hole's” formal properties: stillness, vertical

stance, direct visual address. One dancer said she feels fully present in that moment and that she is sharing her experience with the audience. Elsewhere in her interview she noted a bit ruefully that during “black hole” the audience is “either asleep or they’re doing things that make me think that they think I can’t see them;” that is, her understanding of that moment goes beyond empathetic feelings of shared experience to include, possibly, disdainful judgment and disappointed expectations. Audience reactions to “black hole” varied; some viewers were excited when the dancers looked at them while others found the dancers’ gaze invasive, confrontational, and uncomfortable. One audience member noted that whereas before that moment the dancers had just been executing movement, when they looked out at him the dance became participatory; a connection was made. In fact, the formal properties of stillness and direct visual address support a connotative complex that comprises all of that: sharing of experience *and* an expectation of reciprocal attention *and* an uncomfortable confrontation *and* a shift from performance to participation *and* much more.

The communication model also includes the very useful concept of *codes* as the means by which meaning is made, by both dance-makers and audience members. The concept of the code—like *connotation* and *denotation*—is borrowed from semiotics and is one of the cornerstones of my analysis. More important to this study than *what Canyon* means to various individuals who encounter it is *how* they construct that meaning, and the code accounts for that *how*. Umberto Eco’s writing is my starting point in semiotics, and I use his definition of code; it is a system of signification, the set of rules that allows signs to carry meaning (*Theory* 8-49). Restated, “since the meaning of a sign depends on the code within which it is situated, codes provide a framework within which signs make sense” (Chandler 147). Eco also configures the relationship between an artistic or creative text—usually

literary—and its audience, and has referred to both communication models with codes and to co-construction models. I am using his paradigms when I envision *Canyon* as both an act of communication wherein the dance-maker-as-source sends a message, the dance, to the audience-as-receiver (*Theory* 8) and an invitation from Jasperse to the audience to make *Canyon* anew, to imbue it with a wide range of possible readings (*Poetics* 63).

Where Eco primarily addresses signs and codes in a linguistic framework, Daniel Chandler and Marcel Danesi extend his work, and semiotics, further into the realm of social semiotics. They apply semiotic principles to other sign systems beyond language, enabling semiotic investigations of diverse fields, with the guiding principle being the study of how meanings are made and how reality is represented (Chandler 3). This social semiotics explores how and why things make sense within shifting codes of culture (Smith-Shank 3) and, within this context, writers such as Marco De Marinis and Keir Elam apply Eco's theories specifically to the theater and audiences. It is in this tradition that I use semiotic ideas in the field of dance.

The original question—*How do people make sense of postmodern dance?*—can be restated as *What codes are they using?*⁵ On what terms are artists and audience members communicating? Are they entering into the transaction with similar understandings and references? Where codes are shared, it is likely that a viewer will “get it”—glean a meaning from the work that

⁵ Alternatively, we can frame the question in cognitive terms rather than semiotic ones and ask how a dance fits within an individual viewer's *schema*, a complex cognitive structure that represents a generic social experience or cultural phenomenon (Höijer 287). Employing schemas allows a viewer to economize on mental energy, interpreting an everyday experience according to an existing frame of similar experiences that share characteristics. An individual holds a culturally acquired schema for “dance.” If that schema is rigid, he or she will have difficulty with a phenomenon that doesn't have enough shared characteristics with the dance schema, whereas if the schema is flexible and dynamic it can accommodate the variation (Höijer 288). Some audience research proposes that for its purposes “code” and “schema” are virtually interchangeable (Schröder et al 133). I will continue to focus on codes, but the concept of cognitive schemas is also relevant.

is consistent with the dance-makers' meaning; however, the purpose of this study is not to compare meanings but rather to compare the codes for meaning-making. Chapters 3 and 4 address the convergence and divergence of codes—where and how dance-makers and audience members used the same means, the same logic, to make sense of *Canyon*, and where those logics differed. Sometimes they used the same *how* but not in the same *where*; for example, both Jasperse and audience members employed metonymy for meaning-making, but whereas several audience members did so in reference to set design elements, none of the dancers discussed the design elements in terms of metonymy. Nonetheless, I consider the use of metonymy a code that the dance-makers and some audience members shared.

Eco has posited a near-perfect convergence of codes with his “model reader,” one presupposed by the text to share the knowledge and competence of the author (“Introduction” 6-7). This idea has been translated into a model spectator whom the text anticipates (De Marinis, “Dramaturgy” 102-103) and who is “endowed with a sufficiently detailed, and judiciously employed, textual background to enable him to identify all relevant relations and use them as a grid for correspondingly rich decodification” (Elam 84). Foster adapts the model reader to dance as follows: “In order to express their concerns, each choreographer designs dances with a specific viewer in mind, or more precisely, with a sense of what the viewer’s involvement in the dance should be. And in many ways this model viewer’s experience is similar to that of the dancer in class and in rehearsal” (*Reading* 53). The six dance “insiders” of my case study are, or are close to, model spectators. They have the textual background and they know the references that are operative in the world of *Canyon*; in Foster’s terms, they know how they should be involved in the dance. They have danced themselves; they have first-hand experience with dance in class, rehearsal, and performance.

Such a viewer, whose experience is similar to the dancers', is unusual. Much more common are viewers like my six dance outsiders, whose available codes and textual background have less overlap with that of the dancers'. My hypothesis going into this study was that postmodern dance traffics in rarefied codes, ones that are foreign to most people whose experience of dance is defined by the codes of the much more prevalent commercial theatrical dance found in musicals, movies, advertising, and reality television. Because of this, I perceive a divide between the form and the audience with whom it might communicate, rendering it arcane and inscrutable to all but an elite audience of dance insiders. This theory was born entirely of my personal experience in the dance world, but I have found that Pierre Bourdieu's model of a "restricted field of production" articulates the phenomenon insightfully. Using his model, I can position postmodern dance as a restricted field and *Canyon* an example of one of this field's products. Bourdieu enhances, refines, contextualizes, and gives a vocabulary to that about which I had already speculated.

Postmodern dance as a restricted field

Following Bourdieu, postmodern dance is a restricted field of production because of the principle of legitimacy that regulates it; recognition is "granted by the set of producers who produce for other producers, their competitors, i.e., by the autonomous self-sufficient world of 'art for art's sake,' meaning art for artists" ("Field" 50). The restricted field of production turns upside down the dominant principle—the operative one in the not-restricted, general field of production—whereby success is defined commercially. As a restricted field, postmodern dance success is defined by the approval of others in the dance world; Jasperse is a successful postmodern choreographer not because he has achieved widespread celebrity and can command extravagant commissions, but because the dance

world identifies him as talented, as someone to watch. Dance also abides by Bourdieu's second principle of legitimacy whereby recognition and status are bestowed by institutions such as salons and academies ("Field" 50-51). Publications such as *The Village Voice* that review cutting-edge performance or high-art presenters such as the Wexner Center or the Brooklyn Academy of Music that consistently support Jasperse fulfill this legitimizing function. Nancy, an audience member with a long history in the world of professional modern and postmodern dance, unknowingly but neatly connected Bourdieu's principles of legitimacy to the world of postmodern dance. Referring to the Wexner Center and its influence within the national dance community, she mused about "...the presenter secret club and the 'in' group [of dance-makers] that gets bestowed with the magic wand by the likes of Chuck Helm [Wexner Center Director of Performing Arts], which has always been a very powerful posse, I think—these sort of special presenters who choose who gets to tour and who gets presented, who's in and who's out."

Art from a restricted field, such as postmodern dance, is not accessible to a broad public because they do not know its codes and conventions. Products from the restricted field require knowledge of and fluency in codes other than those already mastered by the cultivated public (Bourdieu, "Market" 123). Furthermore, the restricted field has inverted the dominant values, so not only does it revel in the inaccessibility of its products; their inaccessibility is the hallmark of their distinction and the guarantor of their value. "...Works of restricted art owe their specifically cultural rarity and thus their function as elements of social distinction, to the rarity of the instruments with which they may be deciphered" (Bourdieu, "Market" 120). The codes for appreciating postmodern dance are privileged property, and the rarity of those codes lends a cachet to the people who possess them.

Jasperse and his work are featured by high-art presenters affiliated with universities and concert halls. The Wexner Center for the Arts, with its reputation for cutting-edge content, brought him to Columbus and presented him in the intimately-scaled Performance Space; it was not a commercial presenter such as Columbus Association for the Performing Arts that brings touring Broadway shows to the large theaters in the city center.

Finally, institutions that produce postmodern dance seek out and rely on edginess or an avant-garde quality to signal their rarefied product. Postmodern dance is like the “weird” look of “editorial,” high-end, *Vogue* fashion models. It is not meant for the masses—“...not to entice them into consumption, nor to turn them on, nor even to make sense to them. That is because editorial looks are meant to appeal to the high-end fashion consumer and other elite producers; they are a wink and a nod to each other’s cultural competencies to appreciate coded avant-garde beauty” (Mears 29). Audiences for and producers of postmodern dance likewise nod to each other in appreciation of their shared sophisticated taste for a dance form that many outsiders would hardly consider dance at all.

What are these expressions of coded avant-garde beauty, these aspects of postmodern dance that insiders appreciate but outsiders do not? To answer this question, it is easier to look first at the danced products of our general, unrestricted field: the commercial theatrical dance found in music videos, commercials, reality TV programs such as *So You Think You Can Dance?* and *America’s Got Talent*, and Broadway musicals. This is the dancing that creates and abides by prevalent codes, codes to which access is so easy as to be practically involuntary. While ballet is not part of the general field of production, it also follows these codes. I find that dance in these forms is coded by virtuosity, clear structure or design, and expressiveness—the dancers portray emotion or tell a story through their

movement. In addition, these types of dance are *presentational*; that is, they have a sense of a polished product, provided for consumption. Virtuosity is part of this presentationalism, as is a frontal orientation—generally facing the audience or in profile, but seldom turning one’s back to the audience—deliberate stage “presence,” and a measure of exaggeration in all movements. Furthermore, partnering consists of men lifting and supporting women, and movement is primarily upright, with weight supported on the feet. Dee Reynolds identifies an overlapping set of characteristics in popular theatrical dance including the use of narrative, popular music, humor, glamor, sex appeal and a sizable measure of virtuosity, which she describes as impressive displays of physical prowess and skill meant to “wow” the audience (Reynolds, *Glitz* 22). This raft of characteristics shapes the code for “dance” in popular, easily accessible settings. The code enables us to identify the movement we see in those venues as dance and furthermore, it provides us with the means to make sense of it.

These elements that comprise the code for dance in the general field of production are not absent in postmodern dance; however, when they are employed it is often with an irreverent postmodern sensibility. For example, a postmodern choreographer may use the same upbeat pop song found in a music video, but would probably not take it at face value. Rather than choreographing in a popular style to match the music, he or she would probably treat its phrasing, rhythm, and tone with tongue in cheek, perhaps mixing the pop song into a sound collage, juxtaposing it to some decidedly not upbeat activity on stage, or incorporating it ironically. In addition to this nontraditional treatment of elements of commercial theatrical dance’s codes, postmodern dance has characteristics that are entirely absent from commercial theatrical dance. These include:

- pedestrian, unstylized, or found movement;
- works that can be performed with no dance training;
- objective clock time rather than theatrically condensed or musically abstract time;
- movement quality that is often nonexpressive;
- the use of inanimate objects as partners;
- the use of chance techniques, scores, and rule games;
- prioritization of process over product;
- the use of collage and a preference for non-linear, non-narrative structures;
- radical juxtaposition;
- commitment to a democratic or collective process through improvisation and chance procedures;
- elevation of formal compositional problems over technique and its perfection;
- attitude that anything can be dance;
- examination of movement for its own sake;
- embodiment of multiple perspectives on time, space, and orientation to gravity;
- breakdown of a distinction between art and life;
- reflection upon the nature and limits of dance;
- and an anti-illusionist stance (Banes, “Choreographic” 212-215; Banes, *Democracy* xvii-xviii; Banes *Terpsichore* 15-17; Banes and Carroll, “Cunningham” 50; Burt 59-60; Copeland 31-32; Feck).

These characteristics shape the code for postmodern dance, dance from the restricted field. Bourdieu posits that when those who are unfamiliar with the codes for art from the restricted field confront it, they must rely only on the codes of everyday life (“Outline” 215-218)—in this case, the code for dance in popular, commercial settings. Consider the sharp contrast between that code from everyday life and the one for postmodern dance. A viewer unfamiliar with the latter may experience some cognitive dissonance when, having bought a ticket for a dance performance, he or she sees some very un-dance-like activities onstage.

For instance, Deborah Jowitt’s review of Jasperse’s “wonderful” 2007 work *Misuse liable to prosecution* includes description of Jasperse speaking into an orange highway cone propped on a broom, or lying on his back to knit hanging orange electrical cord with his legs; other dancers hurl each other violently into a mattress, allow plastic bottles to fall out from underneath their t-shirts, and tumble in zany configurations onto a semi-deflated beanbag chair (Jowitt, “John Jasperse”). For the uninitiated viewer, such a display could lead to a feeling of *What IS that thing up there? It defies categorization according to my known world*. Jim, an audience member I interviewed, alluded to such a reaction when he said, “...to me it was just a lot of flailing around, and this gets into the whole thing of what is dance, to one person, to another person?” Asking the question *What is dance?* is another way to investigate dance codes; we can identify dance as itself according to the codes it employs. The answer to the question reflects then what semiotic codes are in operation. As such, when one 1996 study (Francis) probes the question of what is dance, its results ultimately illuminate the characteristics of a code or schema for dance. Because of the types of dance used in this study and the cross-section of participants’ dance backgrounds (it appears that none of them

was a dance insider), the code or schema that is revealed is the one for dance from the general field.

This study by Sandra Francis, done within the context of cognitive anthropology, asked viewers to consider ten videotaped samples of human movement, including clips of fire-fighters in action, a marching band on parade, an aerobics class, *The Nutcracker* ballet, a tap dance scene from a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movie, and an MTV video featuring MC Hammer. Viewers were asked to ascertain the relationship of these activities to dance, stating whether the sample was definitely dance, definitely not dance, or somewhere in between. The make-up of the group was not weighted for expertise; some participants had taken dance classes, some had social dance experience, and some had no dance experience at all (Francis 52-53).

Participants were then asked to define what it was that caused them to respond as they did. In other words, what *about* this movement made it dance, or not? The factors that most frequently swayed respondents in the direction of a “yes, this is dance” rating (called “plus-dance factors”) were:

1. movement
2. having rhythm/moving in time with the music/moving to the beat of the music
3. music
4. presence of a pattern/choreographed movement/planned movement
5. expressive of self/expressive of emotion/expressive of the music
6. quality of movement, must be flowing/graceful/coordinated

Conversely, the factors that most frequently caused respondents to judge that a given activity is not dance (“minus-dance factors”) were:

1. purpose (e.g., work, sport)
2. inappropriate quality of movement: sharp, jumpy, athletic, jerky, ungraceful, mechanical, boring, too repetitious, rigid, too much like walking, or too violent
3. absence of an expressive element
4. nothing was communicated (no story told through gestures)
5. absence of rhythm
6. absence of music (Francis 55-56)

This configuration of requisites for what movement must do and must not do to be considered dance helps shape my understanding of the code for dance from the general field, and it compares tellingly with the characteristics that comprise the code for postmodern dance. Postmodern dance's reliance on stillness and repetition, its minimalization of expressivity, its use of unskilled or "pedestrian" movement and improvisation and nonlinear structures, and its absence of traditional music-dance relationships constitute a nearly point-for-point example of minus-dance factors. Postmodern dance codes are manifested specifically in *Canyon* through its moments of prolonged stillness and extreme slowness, collage, stumbling and off-balance movement, rolling and lying on the floor, lack of story, and same-sex partnering using nontraditional supports. While there is only a little pedestrian movement, there is a pedestrian, non-presentational performance quality throughout the work. As a result of this constellation of restricted codes, most of the novice dance-goers I interviewed—five out of six—described some degree of difficulty or challenge in their experience with *Canyon*; the watching required effort. Of those five novices, three expressed an awareness that there were unusual or non-

normative codes at work and that it was their task to try and assimilate those codes and adjust to the unfamiliar situation.

Historical Context

It is not surprising that a postmodern dance such as *Canyon* presents a challenge to many viewers; its codes are from a restricted field and differ radically from those of commercial theatrical dance and ballet, and even from traditional modern dance. Jasperse's *Canyon* comes by these restricted codes because of its place in a particular avant-garde lineage stretching back to the middle of the twentieth century, from Judson Dance Theater, a collective of artists, musicians, and dance-makers. In fact, I define "postmodern dance" as the dance which has inherited its codes from Judson Dance Theater, and I attribute the laundry list of postmodern dance characteristics and conventions that appears above to its influence. Postmodern dance established its status as a restricted field of production inasmuch as the Judson artists 1) had at the top of their agendas the dismantling of traditional theatrical dance, that is, the intentional employment of unfamiliar codes and 2) worked in the relatively secluded artistic incubator of downtown New York. Jasperse is the heir to Judson's legacy both in his adoption and updating of their aesthetic codes and in the geographic and social isolation that his sphere of dance occupies.

Historical context: Postmodern dance and the establishment of restricted codes

Village Voice writer Jill Johnston identifies the founding principle of Judson Dance Theater as "annihilation of all preconceived notions about dance," and states that Judson's most revolutionary proposition was that any movement, by any body, was dance ("Which Way" 116). In fact, the Judson choreographers' use of pedestrian movement embodied

multiple ideological tenets of the group. First, it echoed Yvonne Rainer's—one of Judson Dance Theater's founders—"no" to virtuosity, refusing the audience the possibility of being seduced by mere skill (Banes, *Terpsichore* 17). It implied that a major subject of dance is the exhibition and perception of movement for its own sake, and that the movements that count as dance need not look like those bequeathed by tradition as "dancerly" (Carroll, "Philosophy" 94). It defamiliarized the familiar, putting ordinary movement on stage and asking audience members to view it in a performance context, that is, as art (Banes, *Gulliver* 6). In so doing, it blurred the boundaries between art and life (Banes, *Terpsichore* 16). It typified these choreographers' anti-illusionist stance, demystifying what happens on stage (Banes, *Terpsichore* 17). It was a means to accomplish the upending of codified techniques and the cult of imitation prevalent in the world of established American modern dance (Banes, *Democracy* 59-60). Finally, it treated ordinary movement as "found," like the found objects Marcel Duchamp had used in his Ready-mades (Burt 28).

Dance scholar Ramsay Burt traces Judson Dance Theater's artistic lineage in a clear line back to Duchamp and Erik Satie and the historical avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth century, and he positions Merce Cunningham and John Cage—the Greenwich Village neo-avant-garde of the 1950s—as a direct link between Judson Dance Theater and Duchamp (26-27). Cunningham and Cage represent that bridge on several levels. Cage and Cunningham used chance procedures as Duchamp had (Tomkins 33-34), a method taught by Cage's colleague Robert Dunn in his composition class that initially brought the Judson choreographers together as a group in the early 1960s (Burt 45; Banes, *Terpsichore* 30). Judson choreographers' work also reflects the Cunningham/Cage/Duchamps lineage in as much as it undermines the idea of the artist as the skilled master of a medium (Burt 29), positing

instead that anyone can dance. Cunningham and Cage exerted a direct influence on the Judson dancers in that many of them danced in Cunningham's company, and in fact Dunn's workshop took place in Cunningham's studio.

While Judson Dance Theater's inheritance from Duchamp by way of Cage and Cunningham is clear, Judson artists' work also testifies to the aesthetically related yet distinctly not-New York stream of influence from Margaret H'Doubler through Anna Halprin. Halprin was a student of H'Doubler's at the University of Wisconsin, and like H'Doubler, she came to view dance as a means to access "a fully awakened contemporary individual" (Ross, *Moving* 134). H'Doubler prioritized the experience of *doing* for her students, exploring movement experientially and always from an anatomical perspective (Ross, *Moving* 143). Attending to simple movements such as crawling allowed students to discover movement potentials in their own bodies as well as awaken connections between intellect, feelings, and movement (Ross, *Moving* 151-157). Not surprisingly, H'Doubler de-emphasized dance as a means to a polished product in performance; rather, the processes of discovery, integration, and self-expression dominated her teaching (Ross, *Moving* 154-176).

Halprin's work in the 1950s was aligned with Cunningham's insofar as she chipped away at the modern dance rules that regulated repetition, theatricality, and illusion; allowed disparate elements to coexist in her work, regularly collaborating with other artists; and abandoned narrative continuity (Ross, "Anna" 29-35). Unlike her New York colleagues, she made overtly political dances, often with a rock 'n roll sensibility (Ross, "Anna" 35). However, her most striking contribution to the Judson lineage that eventually includes John Jasperse is, from H'Doubler, her replacement of traditional dance training's imitation and repetition with a prioritization of direct physical experience of simple movements, and a

quest for personal movement expression through improvisation (Ross, “Anna” 27-31).

Halprin worked in California and held workshops there that Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, and Yvonne Rainer—all Judson Dance Theater artists—attended in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Forti 53; Banes, *Democracy* 12, 20), thereby creating the conduit by which Halprin’s ideals migrated and nested in downtown New York.

Jasperse is a turn-of-the-twentieth-century heir to the Judson Dance Theater aesthetic tradition. *Canyon’s* extended periods of slowness and stillness, its use of collage and rejection of narrative, its incorporation of pedestrian, non-dancey movement such as stumbling and staggering, and its use of partnering techniques based in contact improvisation—a movement practice developed by Judson artist Steve Paxton—are all testament to the abiding influence of Merce Cunningham and the Judson Dance Theater in Jasperse’s work. He comes by these inherited characteristics through direct contact with artists associated with that tradition. For instance, although he describes his relationship to it as “tortured,” he did study Cunningham technique in college, and certain elements of Cunningham’s process—such as the use of clock-time in choreography—are present in his choreography. Original Judson Dance Theater artist Trisha Brown’s work was also a powerful influence on Jasperse’s dancing and choreography. However, also notable in *Canyon* are characteristics that are more aptly attributed to Jasperse’s association with Movement Research, the downtown New York institution that I see as the bridge between Judson Dance Theater and the present, carrying on and evolving especially Halprin’s theories and practices. Jasperse was involved with Movement Research as early as 1989, and in our interview he referred to it as a “touchstone organization for me.”

Founded in 1978, Movement Research is explicit about its connection to that history, citing its “founders’ connection to artists of the seminal Judson Dance Theater and to the workshop teachings of Robert Dunn, Anna Halprin and others whose work encouraged a new direction away from established dance practices” (Movement Research 19). The Judson ideals that I see as crystallized most notably at Movement Research are the prioritization of process over product, the focus on community and collaboration, and the advancement of non-traditional dance practices and techniques. The organization calls itself a “laboratory for the investigation of dance and movement-based forms,” sponsoring classes, workshops, performances, and town hall meetings as well as publishing *Performance Journal* and promoting discourse on dance through its *Critical Correspondence* project (Movement Research). In our interview, Jasperse cited Movement Research’s investigative approach toward movement practice, the way they relate the theoretical to actual dance practice, and their integration of somatic practice into technique as specific reasons why it has been a seminal force in his career. In particular, I see Movement Research principles prominently realized in *Canyon* in two ways: 1) in Jasperse’s creative process, characterized by investigation and discovery and 2) in the somatics-based aesthetic that includes the use of non-vertical movement such as rolling, kneeling, and lying as well as an easy, casual, non-presentational energy.

Historical context: Movement Research and the creative process

The creative process that brought *Canyon* into being, as described to me by Jasperse and the dancers, is characterized by physical exploration and experimentation rather than fulfillment of a predetermined structure. His use of improvisational scores—skeletal frameworks for movement that the dancers explore through improvisation, thus manifesting a concept in multiple ways—is an excellent example of this process. One score that the

dancers used in rehearsal for *Canyon* involved the dislocation of attention, intention, and action. That is, the dancer's attention (where he or she was looking), desired outcome, and actual physical action "floated independent from one another." Jasperse described the concept behind the score: "I could be paying attention to *that*, and doing something over here and, and the thing that I wanted to accomplish, it would be [something unrelated]." The purpose in trying to pull apart those layers, he explained, was to create new and unanticipated movement: "Well now, what is that going to look like? I have no idea. Particularly in this work, it wasn't about what it looked like, or the product. It was more about placing us in a generative kind of state and seeing well, where does that go? What comes out of that?"

Similarly, the dancers described to me a score that is used to generate movement spontaneously in each performance of *Canyon*, when the dancers have finished the fast, propulsive opening section and are standing side-by-side in a line. Kennis said, "We're trying to open our focus super-wide [arms to her sides, indicating that "wide" is to the sides of her, toward the other dancers standing in line] and receive information from the outer reaches of the space, and match what we think and what we feel that the rest of the group is doing." Burr articulated, "What we're doing is, we're all receivers and no one is a transmitter... We're trying to focus so hard on that wall or on that point [in front of us] that we become more aware of our peripheral vision. So if we see some movement, we try to kind of copy it or match it, but in reality, the breathing kind of starts it. Like the heavy breathing, we all start breathing heavily together. You see little movements and you try to catch them. So it's all about receiving information and not emitting any information, but the way that I have interpreted it is by trying to follow something that isn't there, or that possibly isn't there, you

actually are transmitting information.” The resulting movement of course varies from performance to performance, but generally involves the dancers standing and looking straight ahead, engaged in arm and upper body movements that are similar but not identical to one another.

These scores—the dislocation of action and attention in *Canyon* and the receiving-information score—exemplify the Movement Research tenets of an investigative approach, and of the theoretical embodied in practice. Beginning with a concept and exploring the ways it can be realized in the body is a process used both in classes at Movement Research and by choreographers associated with the institution. “Playing with” or “exploring” a physical concept generates movement material for these choreographers. The use of scores also signals the avant-garde lineage; Judson artists used scores, as did their predecessors. Cunningham and Cage both created elaborate scores for their work and Halprin used them as well, but Jasperse’s scores more closely resemble Halprin’s structured improvisations. Simone Forti, an early Judson choreographer, compares a Halprin structured improvisation exercise to an art school assignment where the student is given a point of departure for exploration, such as the line. In Halprin’s improvisations, the point of departure was an anatomical concept; within the assignment one found a physical solution for the assigned “problem” (Forti 54). The Halprin-influenced Judson practice of improvisation is distinguished by its particular use in composition: “indeterminate choreography” or “situation-response composition,” that is, structured improvisation used to create spontaneous yet structure-bound performance. Such a process leaves the choreography perpetually indeterminate and susceptible to change with each performance, as it is in the line in *Canyon* where the dancers are trying to receive information from each other. In other

instances, such as with the dislocation-of-action-and-attention score, Jasperse uses scores in an exploratory, process-oriented way, but ultimately renders them into set choreography that is then rehearsed.

Historical Context: Movement Research and somatic practice

Through choreographic processes such as these, Jasperse demonstrates how Movement Research's investigative approach is evident in his work. Also evident in *Canyon* is Movement Research's somatics-based aesthetic. While the dance classes offered there do not include any codified technique such as that of ballet or Cunningham, there has evolved a dance aesthetic associated with Movement Research that, if not exactly codified itself, is certainly recognizable, and it is grounded in somatic practice. In their book *The Body Eclectic*, Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettle-Fiol underscore the role that somatic training has assumed in contemporary dance. "Indeed, the last twenty-five years have seen a burgeoning of practices within the dance training arena that offer methods for repatterning, finding movement efficiency, or ridding the body of unwanted habits of movement. These practices fall under the umbrella term *somatics*..." (Nettl-Fiol 85). Somatic practices have been contingent to dance training and eventually integrated into it since the 1960s (Nettl-Fiol 85-86), coinciding with both Judson Dance Theater's interest in an untrained, "everyman" sort of body rather than one that had been pressed into the mold of a specific dance aesthetic, and with Halprin's attention to personal discovery through movement.

The dance classes I took at Movement Research in the 1990s drew heavily from somatic practices such as Bartenieff Fundamentals, as well as from yoga, Klein technique, and various permutations and reinterpretations of release technique⁶. A glance at Movement

⁶ Klein technique, developed by Susan Klein, incorporates Bartenieff Fundamentals as well as other somatic practices. Release technique is an elusive, sometimes controversial, label that generally includes the idea of

Research's website today (November 2012) reveals that two of the three daily classes offered this week are Barbara Mahler's "A Re-Education – Klein Technique" and an untitled class given by Irene Dowd (*Movement Research*), who for decades has integrated Lulu Sweigard's ideas about neuro-muscular re-education and kinesthetic anatomy into dance training. Classes like these illustrate how efficiency and ease based in anatomical principles did and continue to inform classes at Movement Research. In addition, they are characterized by exploratory processes of self-discovery and by undoing codified dance training. Although some classes there adhere to a more traditional format of dance training—proceeding from a warm-up that targets specific parts of the body, to exercises in strength and coordination, to longer dancer phrases incorporating technical skills—many are structured partially or entirely out of investigative improvisation around particular anatomical themes.

Jasperse himself is a regular instructor at Movement Research, and he incorporated just such anatomical exploration into the master class he taught to OSU dance majors during the week he was in residency at the Wexner Center with *Canyon*. He led them into improvisation around a score that explored three nested triangles within the body: head to hips, head to knees, and head to feet. With the students lying down, he began this score by addressing the smallest triangle, from head to hips. Jasperse supplied spoken directives all the while as the students explored the movement possibilities of his words: "Any one of these three points can move into a role of leadership. Any one of these three points can send information into this supple body...Now expand the triangle, from two knees to the top of the head. Let this dance take you farther from the floor...We're on a journey to standing. Connect to another triangle, from the soles of the feet to the top of the head. Every time

releasing from many things—old habits, old styles, tension, holding patterns—as well as the idea of movement efficiency—using momentum rather than force (Bales 157).

you step, there is an opportunity for the sole of the foot to soften into the floor. There are opportunities to articulate the foot in relationship to space; begin to play with that as well...Arms can go for a ride, but they're not driving the car...If you notice it leads in a particular way, ask how can I play with this? Play with quality. Always return to the sensation of the triangle." This sort of process-oriented, personal, experiential, investigative, anatomy-based dance class—hearkening back to Halprin and all the way to H'Doubler at the University of Wisconsin—is typical of Movement Research training, and it is this type of training that creates what I see as the Movement Research aesthetic.

This aesthetic dictates a particular *what* and a particular *how* for dancing. The *what* includes movement off the vertical, supporting the body's weight on hands, hips, sides, shoulders, heads, and elbows, in infinite combinations. When it leaves the floor, it does so minimally and easily. It favors slippery, flowing movement that cooperates with gravity. As for the *how*, the ease and efficiency that define somatics training become a casual, non-presentational movement style in performance. Ease and efficiency oppose muscular excess and extra effort, the very excess and effort that a ballet dancer or a dancer in Alvin Ailey's company is trained to employ. Such a dancer strives, reaches; some movements "pop" and others are "punched." This push and extra muscular engagement are part of what defines the ballet or Ailey aesthetic, and they are exactly what somatic training seeks to break down and re-educate; these are some of the bad habits that should be expunged. Somatics-based training aligns in this way with Judson Dance Theater's dismissal of a heightened, rarefied, "special" look for dancers as well as its "no" to virtuosity.

Notably, *Canyon* is a postmodern dance—a product of the restricted field employing restricted codes—not only because of the *what* that comprises *Canyon's* choreography but

also because of the *bow*, evident in the dancers' execution of it. Jasperse's dancers move in this easy, efficient, pedestrian way that is markedly different from ballet dancers, from dancers in established modern companies like Alvin Ailey's and Paul Taylor's, and certainly from dancers in commercial theatrical dance. These dancers don't train for multiple turns, soaring leaps, and legs extended high above their heads. In fact, while all the dancers have classical training in their backgrounds—ballet or Cunningham technique—their current training regimens are decidedly eclectic. Lindsay and John sometimes take ballet class with Zvi Gottheiner, a downtown⁷ choreographer and teacher whose class caters to contemporary dancers. Kennis and John practice yoga, but John said that sometimes his daily movement practice isn't dance-related at all, consisting of, say, "running around the city sourcing old wood" for the furniture he designs. Burr commented on the prohibitively high cost of dance class in New York (eighteen dollars per class) and said he hasn't taken class in a year, using his warm-up for rehearsals as his training. He said, "I improvise. I spin. I do Laura Dean spinning, and listen to music. I do whatever I want to do in that moment."

In many ways—its choreographic processes, its movement vocabulary, and its dancers who work in ways that do not include highly presentational, virtuosic dancing—*Canyon* exemplifies postmodern dance work in the Movement Research style. This in turn embodies the turn-of-the-21st-century developments of a tradition that can be traced back to Judson Dance Theater and thence to Cunningham, Cage, and Duchamp as well as to Halprin and H'Doubler. As a final piece of evidence in the case I have made for *Canyon's* status as product of this particular, historically defined restricted field, I note the stir caused by *Canyon's* opening section. In it, the dancers leap, run, and hop in complicated, repeating,

⁷ The label "downtown" has implications that are explained on the following page.

interconnected patterns across the stage. This choreography is so similar to familiar choreography from the general field of production, so surprising in its use of traditional leaping and running, that it provoked comment. Nancy and Nell, the older and more experienced dance insiders among my interviewees, both commented with surprise and delight that Jasperse had included this uncharacteristically dance-y movement in *Canyon*, Nancy saying, “I was like, oh my god, they’re dancing! I turned to [my companion] and I said, ‘They’re jumping!’ No one ever jumps anymore!” Dancer Burr, in comparing his experience dancing in *Canyon* to two other Jasperse works he’s done, said, “This is the dance that’s like I feel (a pause) tired, and I sweat a lot. I don’t really do that in the other two dances.” For dancers working in the general field of production, getting tired and sweating a lot are a given, not worth commenting on.

In my interview with him, Jasperse implied that the opening section was artistically risky for him: “We’re moving through space and we’re making patterns and like, it’s really old school! I had to consciously say, I’m gonna release my—not only *my* but a *world* kind of notion, in my little sub-world—of some serious criticism about that [type of dancing] as just really (a pause) done.” He went on to say, “We’re doing these things that feel like very much were explored in a particular moment in ballet and in a certain portion of modern dance....and I wanted to acknowledge the connection to a history and not feel somehow like I have to protect myself, and be like oh, I’m cooler than that. Like, to actually have a sincere relationship of pleasure, to that sense of that.” This leaping and patterned movement through space that is unproblematic—unquestioned—in the general field of dance production was a radical proposition for a choreographer like Jasperse positioned in the downtown, postmodern, Movement Research world of dance. *New York Times* writer Brian

Schaefer observes, “Whether it’s helpful, accurate or even necessary, there exists a distinction in dance between ‘uptown’ and ‘downtown,’ referring to geographic location as well as aesthetic interest and philosophical intention.” “Downtown” is associated with experimentation and nontraditional approaches; for Jasperse to explore with sincerity this dancing that has historical antecedents does indeed carry the risk of criticism within that milieu. Furthermore, as explored in Chapter 4, the opening section proves to be risky in another way, inasmuch as it “sets the stage” for *Canyon* by establishing—or at least serving as a referent for—the theatrical dance rules that the piece otherwise discounts.⁸

Historical context: Postmodern dance and isolation

Judson Dance Theater work established a new restricted field for dance because its creative processes, choreographic conventions, and ideologies blatantly flew in the face of both the established concert dance and the commercial theatrical dance of its time. In addition, the Judson world also defined a restricted field through its insularity and geographic isolation. Cunningham and Cage were near the center of an avant-garde, intellectual universe that included many experimental artists and musicians—an elite group defining this new field. Referring to Robert Dunn’s composition classes that initially drew the Judson artists together as a group, Sally Banes writes “Dunn’s classes, both in their heritage from Cage and in their eclectic assimilation of various cultural preoccupations of the 1960s...were a microcosm of New York’s avant-garde art world. It was an art world small enough for poets, painters, dancers, actors, and musicians to know each other and each other’s work” (*Democracy* 3).

⁸ I am indebted to Meghan Durham Wall for her articulation of this concept.

Judson Dance Theater's actual geographic and social location in the 1960s is a bellwether for where that influence has extended. Judson Church, for which the group is named, is located in New York City's Greenwich Village and had been the site of Happenings and Pop art exhibits. Its minister, Al Carmines, maintained a church policy of aiding artists and supporting the avant-garde without censorship (Banes, *Democracy* 36-37). The audience for performances at Judson Church consisted of "artists, painters, musicians, dancers, writers, film makers, intellectuals, people who live in the neighborhood of the church, in Greenwich Village. It was an audience acutely aware of the crises in modern art and knowledgeable about the history of alternatives to art traditions, eager to be surprised, shocked, provoked" (Banes, *Terpsichore* 13). Choreographers working in this atmosphere such as Trisha Brown were aware of the avant-garde nature of what they were doing, of being part of a group of like-minded dancers and visual artists in downtown Manhattan (Burt 70).

Movement Research, as the bastion of contemporary postmodern dance, occupies a similarly isolated site in the larger landscape of American dance. The teachers who offer classes at Movement Research are also the choreographers and dancers who make work that is presented by The Kitchen, Dance Theater Workshop (now part of New York Live Arts), Danspace Project, and Performance Space 122—the theater spaces that Jasperse cites as buttressing his downtown community of contemporary dance. Movement Research sponsors a performance series at Judson Church. Jasperse teaches at Movement Research. Jasperse's dancers choreograph work that is shown in these theaters, and they dance for other choreographers who are also part of the Movement Research constellation. The community is intra-connected in many ways. It is true that since the 1990s the decimation of the arts economy has forced postmodern dance to disperse in two ways, seeking both

financial security in university dance departments and rehearsal space in the outer boroughs of New York City. However, this rarefied field with its interlocking systems of training, creative exchange, and presentation still has very little overlap with other parts of dancing New York, let alone the rest of the country. Its aesthetic tradition has not infiltrated popular culture at all; it remains isolated in avant-garde, high art, and academic settings. Hardly any of the characteristics of postmodern dance are discernible in the products of the general field of dance production where there is no pedestrian movement, no prolonged stillness or slowness, no casual everyday demeanor, no easy and efficient movement, no full-bodied same-sex partnering.

By contrast, elements of the aesthetic of ballet are present in commercial theatrical dance, as are elements of modern dance. Evident in *So You Think You Can Dance?* and danced segments of movies or Broadway shows are ballet's emphasis on verticality and lightness, extended lines and extremely high leg extensions, frontal presentation to the audience, symmetry and unison, courtly or erotic heterosexual partnering, geometric group formations, and thrilling multiple turns and high jumps. At the same time, *ballet* is present in the popular consciousness as the pinnacle of achievement in Western dance. This combination of overlapping codes and general awareness of the form imply that an audience member familiar only with dance products from the general field could find himself at the ballet and be all right. He may not care for the style and he may be uncomfortable with the formality of the setting, but there will be no cognitive dissonance, no problem decoding the events on stage, and certainly no question that the spectacle before him is in fact dance.

Similarly, although modern dance is not revered in the popular consciousness the way that ballet is, it has made inroads into the general field. Martha Graham's emphasis on

emotional expressiveness and Doris Humphrey's attention to musicality and group forms have influenced Broadway musicals directly. Hanya Holm, Helen Tamiris, and Agnes de Mille were all part of Graham and Humphrey's world of modern dance and choreographed for the Broadway stage as well, thereby rendering that style familiar to viewers of dance in the general field. There is enough awareness of Graham and her status as titan of American modern dance that at least two separate advertising campaigns have been based on her identity. A 1997 Apple computer print ad featured a photo of Martha Graham accompanied by only the words "Think Different;" the ad relies for its effectiveness on a general understanding of Graham's reputation for creative innovation. A print ad promoting art in the schools, from the advocacy group Americans for the Arts, bears the headline "No Wonder People Think Martha Graham Is A Snack Cracker." A photo of Graham and a description of her accomplishments and their importance underpin the ad's message. Notably, no corporation has featured a Judson choreographer or postmodern dance figure in an ad, most likely because the name and image would resonate with almost no one.

Making meaning: Beyond Bourdieu

If a dance work is a message encoded by the dance-makers, delivered in performance, and reconstructed by the audience according to codes that may or may not coincide with the dance-makers', Bourdieu posits that there are those who will find the work devoid of meaning because it exceeds their deciphering capabilities. This is because, unfamiliar with the codes and conventions of the restricted field of production, these viewers will be left with the codes of the general field upon which to base an interpretation (Bourdieu, "Outline" 215-218). "The work of art (like any cultural object) may disclose signification at differing levels according to the deciphering grid applied to it; the lower-level

significations, that is to say the most superficial, remain partial and mutilated, and therefore erroneous, as long as the higher-level significations which encompass and transfigure them are lacking” (*Outline* 218). Again, there is broad agreement that without knowledge of the codes and conventions of an art such as concert dance, the viewer’s ability to interpret the artwork is diminished (Efland 85; Elam 84; Foster, *Reading* 53-59; Leder, Belke, Oeberst, and Augustin 500; McFee 67-68; Sparshott 364-365). In other words, the not-model spectator has an impoverished experience of postmodern dance.

Given the rarity of the model spectator for dance—the overwhelming improbability of artist and audience member sharing the same codes—most likely, viewer codes will overlap only a little with the dance-maker codes. There is a truth in Bourdieu’s notion of a mutilated and erroneous experience for those who lack the proper codes, but I temper it with Yuri Lotman’s model of meaning-making. According to Lotman, if the goal is for the receiver/audience member to receive the artistic “message” as nearly identical to the one embedded in the text by the sender/artist, then a poetic language such as dance fulfills its function pretty poorly (*Universe* 12-13). However, as Lotman points out, that is not the function of a poetic language; its primary functions are the generation of new ideas—creativity—as well as the condensation of cultural memories (*Universe* 13-18). From that point of view, the model spectator is overrated. The *not*-model spectator, the one who is not theatrically competent and who brings codes from other domains into the performance, also serves the creative and cultural memory functions of the text. Borrowing an idea from mass communication research: when alternative realities—those with codes other than the dominant ones—are brought to bear on the text, it can be considered an enrichment rather than a distortion (Schröder et al, 14). So, the person witnessing a conversational exchange in

a foreign language creates a meaning from the verbal and visual information he sees, and that meaning may well be a brand-new one, different from the ones held by the participants of the exchange.

Throughout this study I examine ways that audience members successfully made sense of *Canyon*, and I lay those side by side with dance-maker ways of sense-making. However, following Lotman, I maintain a solid respect for meaning that audience members generated that sharply diverges from dance-maker meaning. For example, novice audience member Ramona said that when John was writhing on the floor it looked as though the floor was moving him, like an earthquake. Such an idea is not present anywhere in the dance-makers' talk; it seems that Ramona has generated a new meaning for John's floorwork. Her meaning is both highly individual—dependent on her unique perception in that she said “..if you kinda don't pay attention to anything else”—and grounded in physical fact, in the movement's formal properties of a particular use of gravity and particular rising and twisting actions. As such, Ramona's understanding of what's happening in that movement is within the bounds of the dance's connotative complex. It also demonstrates how the poetic language of dance engenders creativity; Ramona created new meaning in *Canyon*.

Recourse to cognitive science

Throughout this study I refer to research in cognitive science. It provides a different type of answer to the question *How do we make sense of postmodern dance?* In a scientific approach, theory must be falsifiable (McConachie 9), whereas falsification is not at all part of the logic that guides my analysis of the interviews. That logic assumes multiplicity, that my interviewees can each claim his or her own viable truth. My recourse to cognitive science

provides a theoretical counterbalance to that, and one that is not in fact so diametrically positioned. While this study is at base sociological, it is a sociology that, following Dorothy Smith, examines a world that is put together in determinate ways prior to my thinking it, and seeks to discover just how that is done (122). The way that we make sense of postmodern dance is part of the world and its relations and I want to find out how that world functions, actually, such that the assessment of my study should ask, “Has she got it right? Is this how it really works? Is it accurate? Faithful to the character of the organization and relations investigated?” (Smith 122). In my attempt to get at how this sense-making really works, I do not want to ignore information that is beyond that which I can observe, but rather to include what might be going on with my interviewees internally. As such, I include findings from the fields of cognitive science and neuroaesthetics throughout my study, wherever relevant to the topic at hand. In many cases, I extrapolate studies of art and music to dance. Including this evidence encourages the resolution of different interpretations and explanations, a process that theater scholar Bruce McConachie notes may lead to the accumulation of knowledge (13). Tempering what might look like a restrictive positivism, McConachie also notes that a scientific process allows room for creative disagreement, as there may be different fair readings of available evidence (McConachie 14-15).

I acknowledge the trend toward “neurohumanities”—wherein the arts and humanities call on neuroscientific research—and am aware that my study may be part of that trend. In an article for *The Nation*, Alissa Quart writes, “Neurohumanities, then, is an attempt to provide the supposedly loosey-goosey art and lit crowds with the metal spines of hard science.” I hope it is clear that I don’t think science’s hard answers trump my study’s soft ones; I use them all as evidence in the case I am constructing. However, my study does align

with one aspect of the neurohumanities trend; it uses neuroscience as an alternative to critical theory, which Quart identifies as the dominant mode of academic thought for the past few decades. McConachie rejects not only poststructuralist theories but Freudian and Lacanian ones as well because they rely on logic and argumentation rather than scientific or historical evidence. Furthermore, they defy any protocols that might stabilize knowledge (9-11). While I can't take such a hard line as McConachie, I find that cognitive science provides a more useful tool for my interests than critical theory.

While evidence from the field of cognitive science is included throughout this study, it is particularly well-represented in sections that address embodied knowledge. Much of the research cited in these sections uses fMRI, functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging. fMRI produces a picture of the brain that is sensitive to the blood oxygenation levels indicating neuronal activity. Research using fMRI rests on the fact that the brain is spatially segregated; special functions are localized at various sites, allowing fMRI to identify areas of the brain as the neural basis of their corresponding mental behaviors (Ogawa and Sung). For example, Beatriz Calvo-Merino's research identifies aesthetically sensitive areas of the brain that are relevant for processing dance, and makes inferences based on fMRI studies of these areas done on people watching dance ("Toward"). However, there are numerous shortcomings in both the acquisition and the analysis of fMRI data (e.g., Haller and Bartsch, Poldrack). As compelling as it is for someone like myself to be able to point to images of the brain and note how, say, a sensorimotor area is active under such-and-such conditions, fMRI evidence is not untroubled. I acknowledge that future refinements to fMRI research may change the study results to which I refer in this dissertation.

Embodied Knowledge

One of the premises of this study, especially relevant in Chapter 4, is that there is knowledge and understanding that is not linguistic in nature. I understand the phrase “the language of dance” to mean that dance communicates and can be understood, like a language, not that it has direct correlations to verbal language. As Graham McFee puts it, a language of dance is like a language of math; learning these languages amounts to learning that thing itself, to understanding its ideas (119). Howard Gardner’s concept of multiple intelligences—mathematical, kinesthetic, musical, as well as verbal—is contiguous with the non-linguistic knowledge considered here. Theorizing the language or the intelligence of dance—*how* dance means and communicates—almost always centers on movement of the body and the senses that perceive that movement. Embodied meaning (variously referred to as embodied knowledge and embodied cognition) quickly emerges as a concept that requires unpacking. It assumes that our understanding of the world is present throughout our bodies, not just in our brains.

This is all but self-evident in dance practice, particularly in contemporary dance. While some choreographers may plot out the movement patterns of their dances with chess pieces before rehearsals as Classical ballet choreographer Marius Petipa reputedly did, in most postmodern dance rehearsals there is a tacit understanding that the body has knowledge of its own. This is evident in a reliance on the body for movement innovation; for example, in the way choreographer Trisha Brown refers to the body and the mind choreographing together, saying, “First of all, I don’t think my body doesn’t think. My body has a strong voice and it does things that I observe” (Morgenroth 64). Jasperse’s creative process similarly relies on the body’s knowledge inasmuch as he and the dancers improvise

around a score and this movement sometimes becomes the stuff of his choreography. He likens this generative process to the dancers entering a dark room and feeling their way around it, not knowing what they will find; that is, the choreography arises out of the body's sensations and discoveries, not out of a predetermined plan. Knowledge—specifically danced, choreographic knowledge—is revealed through the movement of the improvising body. How that knowledge can be transmitted through the body—how dance means for a watcher in ways that are body-based and unique to dance—is the focus of this section. I explore it in detail here, and the concepts are revisited as they become salient for audience meaning-making in Chapters 3 and 4.

Selma Jeanne Cohen wrote in 1962 that dance is for percepts, not concepts (20); that is, dance is sensed through the body, not intellectually decoded. The scholarship on embodiment that I explore here maintains instead that concepts are *grounded in* percepts—i.e., perception—(Lakoff and Johnson 35-36), and I believe that as semiotically complicated as dance is, it certainly accommodates both concepts and percepts. However, Cohen's identification of sensory perception as the salient process in dance is important. Although certainly not the first to do so—Hämäläinen cites dance educators, therapists, and choreographers throughout the twentieth century who explored embodied knowledge in dance (56)—Cohen articulated well its nature, locating the site of understanding in the perceptual, in the body. A cavalcade of dance writers explore this idea (e.g. Foster, *Corporealities*; Montero; Parviainen; Rouhaianen; Sheets-Johnstone; Thorndike). Meanwhile, there is a body of literature in cognitive science that also addresses notions of bodily knowledge, and I think it's important to note the differing natures of the two investigations. Cognitive science investigations of embodied knowledge focus on how sensorimotor areas

of the brain are implicated in conceptual thinking—that is, in thinking that is not directly sensory or motor in nature—often as an alternative to theories of conceptual representation in the brain (e.g. Brooks). By contrast, dance scholarship on embodied knowledge centers on philosophical, phenomenological, educational, political, and intersubjective implications, often as a rejection of Cartesian dualism of mind and body and its twentieth-century version that opposes brain to body.

Embodied knowledge: The view from cognitive science

Despite their differing agendas, dance research sometimes relies on selective evidence produced by cognitive science, exactly as I am doing in this dissertation. The body of cognitive science literature on the topic is vast, and I use Margaret Wilson’s article “Six Views of Embodied Cognition” as a guide for which aspects of embodied cognition are most plausible. I then consider these in light of their applicability to dance. Of the six theories she considers, only two are both robustly supported with research as well as relevant for dance. The first of these claims that “cognition is for action,” that our thinking is directly related to our interaction with the environment around us (631). In support of this theory, Wilson cites several studies, including ones that identify a system of “mirror neurons” in the human brain—a neuron network involved in both the performance of action and in the perception (sight) of that same action, even when there is no motor response (631-632).

It is the discovery of this mirror neuron network that has caused the most excitement in dance scholarship. In as much as it represents a cognitive confluence of action and perception, it seems tailor-made for the relationship between the acting dancer and the perceiving audience member. It can be construed as evidence of a body-to-body communication, something like what dance writer John Martin proposed in the 1930s with

his concept of kinesthetic empathy. The idea is that somehow, through our mirror neuron systems, when we observe dance we are also on some level feeling the action of dancing ourselves—a sensorimotor response that bypasses conceptualization: “Observing a dance is activating the same neuronal circuits I would use to dance myself—I am dancing along in my head: perceiving is a way of re-enacting the watched dance” (Cruse and Schilling 53). I find that leap from the identification of a mirror neuron network to a Martins-like kinesthetic empathy, wherein we feel—in every sense of the word—what the dancer feels, problematic. There is no explanation of how mirror neuron activation affects the observer’s conscious experience of the dance—how does mirror neuron activation feel? Nonetheless, the connection between mirror neurons and kinesthetic empathy is the premise of much research on dance in the past fifteen years (e.g., Foster, “Movement’s”; Reynolds, *Kinesthesia*; Bläsing, Puttke, and Schack). I do accept that the mirror neuron network may somehow be involved in a kinesthetic empathy, and refer to mirror neurons in that capacity in Chapters 3 and 4. I rely most heavily on the research of Beatriz Calvo-Merino and her colleagues, cognitive neuroscientists who have studied mirror neurons specifically in relation to dance. In a separate article, Wilson cites Calvo-Merino’s work with dance perception, but is nonetheless cautious with claims about how a mirror neuron network ultimately functions in humans (Wilson and Knöblich 462).

The sixth and final view of embodied cognition is the one that Wilson finds most promising: that many centralized, allegedly abstract cognitive activities may in fact make use of sensorimotor functions in simulation. “Mental structures that originally evolved for perception or action appear to be co-opted and run ‘off-line,’ decoupled from the physical inputs and outputs that were their original purpose, to assist in thinking and knowing” (633).

As an example, imagine counting very deliberately on your fingers. Then imagine that activity reduced such that the movement was barely a twitch, only perceptible to you. Finally, imagine the counting on your fingers completely internalized, without actual motion; you would be using a motor simulation in your negotiation of a mathematical concept (Wilson, “Six” 632-633). Wilson describes how such sensorimotor simulations are implicated in abstract areas of cognition such as mental imagery, memory, and problem-solving, but particularly relevant for dance is her attention to implicit memory (633-634). Implicit memory consists of a perceptual or procedural fluency, allowing us to automatize what was formerly effortful (633), be it the performance or the watching of dance. In the embodied view, this automatization depends on predictability; we become fluent at dancing or watching dance by building up internal representations of the regularities of a dance situation, the aspects of it that are consistent from one time to the next (634). Then, the process comes “naturally” to us, without so much conscious effort.

Within this sixth view of embodied cognition, Wilson also points to two promising areas of research that are particularly relevant to my study. One is into perception of stimuli (sight, sound) from another human that results in a mental representation of that other that is structured the same as the representation of one’s own body (Wilson, “Perceiving” 546). That is, we represent other people in our brains the same way we represent ourselves. Furthermore, this research finds that perceiving the body movements of other people activates imitative motoric representations in the brain, a “covert imitation” that doesn’t include actual movement—something like the final, completely internal permutation of counting on your fingers, described above. We don’t usually act on these covert imitations of

other people's movement and actually parlay them into *overt* imitations, although this is one of their functions (Wilson and Knöblich 460).

Wilson notes additionally that covert imitation might possibly play a role in our ability to understand other people's actions, leading to a theory of mind (Wilson and Knöblich 463). Such a theory would help substantiate claims of the kinesthetic empathy Martin espoused. However, it would have to include an understanding of the goal or reason for the action, and in fact a full-blown representation of the mental state that drives the action. She posits that these inferences would be possible if the observer's brain not only reproduced the motoric patterns of an action but also the sensory consequences—the kinesthetic and tactile feeling—that normally accompany that action. Only then could the observer access the reasons for the action, the actor's intention (Wilson and Knöblich 463). Vittorio Gallese, one of the first researchers to identify the mirror neuron network, and his colleagues claim that mirror neurons already do this—that there are neural underpinnings for simulation-based understanding of others' emotions and intentions (Gallese, Iacobini). This missing connection would fill in the unsatisfactory hole I find in a theory of kinesthetic empathy based on mirror neuron activation, even providing an explanation of emotional contagion. While I am not sure that either theory—the congruence of self/other representation with its attendant concept of covert imitation, or the activation of a system of mirror neurons—is developed enough to fully account for an audience's embodied, kinesthetic understanding of dance, they both seem equally plausible. I refer to both theories throughout this study as candidate explanations for kinesthetic empathy.

The second area of research into sensorimotor functions recruited for abstract thinking that Wilson addresses regards the use of physical metaphor for understanding a

variety of concepts. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson elucidate embodied metaphor, showing that meaning and concept are grounded in the body; we understand even abstract concepts by drawing on our experience of our bodies in the environment (Johnson 27-31). For example, when we conceive of the concept of *more* as *up*, as in “prices have gone up,” we have a judgment of quantity conceptualized in terms of the sensorimotor experience of verticality (Lakoff and Johnson 47). We acquire so-called primary metaphors automatically by functioning in the everyday world, then build these into complex metaphors that we use for reasoning (Lakoff and Johnson 48-65).⁹

Jay Seitz also implicates embodied metaphor in abstract thinking, but articulates it in ways that make its application to dance more apparent. He notes that four types of metaphor are mapped into the brain, pre-wired and universal across human populations (75). They are perceptual metaphor (spaghetti as worms), enactive metaphor (a spinning top as a ballerina), cross-modal or synesthetic metaphor (music as bright), and perceptual-affective or physiognomic metaphor that attributes emotions to non-human sources (front of the car as smiling) (78-79). All of these metaphors are present in dance, some more obviously than others. Further, Seitz finds that this type of metaphorizing is so automatic that it’s linked to intuition, which he defines as conclusions reached through nonconscious reasoning (77), a process that sounds a lot like the way we form our impressions of dance. Finally, he states

⁹ The global scope of Lakoff and Johnson’s claims about embodied metaphor is disputed (Aldama and Hogan 74), as are their theories on how primary metaphor is acquired and developed into complex metaphor (Seitz 88-90) and the restrictive nature of their analysis (Grady 207-210). However, Seitz, Grady, and others (e.g. Barsalou, Gibbs) accept the premise of embodied metaphor and agree with the central tenet that at least some conceptual thinking is based on physical experience. Furthermore, much of the dispute with physical metaphor seems to be rooted in a specifically linguistic application. Bearing in mind that research into embodied metaphor quibbles over the details but not the central idea, and that it thus far has not directly addressed dance, this paper proceeds from a basic understanding that the lived experience of our bodies is integrally connected to our thinking, and that embodied metaphor is an important aspect of how we understand the world.

that we build more sophisticated metaphors on these four basic ones (79), which could account for our ability to construct the danced metonymies¹⁰ that figure so prominently in both dance-maker and audience understandings of *Canyon* and that I explore in Chapter 3.

These, then, are the premises from cognitive science's understanding of embodied cognition that I carry forward into my investigation of how we make sense of postmodern dance: 1) that there is the possibility of a kinesthetic empathy either through mirror neuron activation or through a perception of other humans that activates a motor representation—covert imitation—in our brains, and 2) that our sensorimotor experience is inextricably linked to much of our understanding, including that of abstract concepts, and that this is accomplished through physical or embodied metaphor. How do these premises play into our understanding of dance? In making this transition, I rely heavily on the work of Catherine Stevens, a cognitive psychologist who has extensively researched contemporary dance, particularly dance that has characteristics and creative processes that I identify as postmodern. Her research explores choreographic cognition in general, encompassing both the creative process and audience reception, and as such is particularly applicable to my study of how dance-makers and watchers make sense of postmodern dance. However, I limit my discussion of her work to the audience side in the interest of maintaining a manageable scope, even as I recognize that her extensive writing on creative cognition in dance is relevant to Jasperse, his company, and the process of creating *Canyon*.

Embodied knowledge: Embodied understanding of dance

Stevens and Shirley McKechnie outline three compatible ways in which dance-makers communicate with audience members: through direct perception of movement,

¹⁰ Note that in this taxonomy “metaphor” is a super-category containing the sub-category “metonymy.” Everywhere else in my study, “metaphor” and “metonymy” are separate, equal categories.

through sympathetic kinesthesia, and through recognition of patterns (246). Their explanations are tantalizingly brief and I attempt to expand each of these notions here, incorporating the cognitive principles explored above, as a rudimentary map of how dance communicates through the body. I am not addressing modes of representation in dance such as narrative or mime sequences based on resemblance to familiar gestures, as these are completely absent in *Canyon*.

“Dance as the motion of bodies through space and time embodies dynamical principles of the physical environment and, we contend, can be understood by direct visual perception,” write Stevens and McKechnie (246). That is, audience members understand dance in terms of its formal properties, the physical facts of how it uses time, space, and gravity. Stevens and McKechnie add that there are certain fundamental patterns of human movement’s timescales and dynamics that humans enjoy and understand (246). As I have identified postmodern dance as a restricted field—that is, an arena of human movement that not all humans enjoy and understand—I need to qualify that statement. Is movement understanding universal, or culturally determined? The most plausible and commodious answer to this question lies in the model proposed by Bruce McConachie. He acknowledges cognition at a species level—for example, we all share our experience of a vertical relationship to gravity—as well as at cultural-historical and individual levels (4-6). Then indeed there can be an intrinsic, non-arbitrary relationship between movement and its significance (Davis 9), but the origin of that relationship and its significance—biological or cultural—can vary from case to case.

To explore how “direct perception” of formal properties in dance works, I begin with some of the thinking on how the same process functions with music; I will then

translate this into dance terms. Mark Johnson says music “...can present the flow of human experience, feeling, and thinking in concrete embodied forms...” (236). These concrete, embodied forms are the music’s formal properties of rhythm, pitch, and intensity, and Johnson finds them analogous to patterns we have felt in our bodies: for example, “When the music builds up tension (for example, as it moves pitchwise from the lower through the middle to a high range), *we* experience that tension *in ourselves*” (239). Johnson is describing an embodied experience that, like the metaphors Seitz investigates, is synesthetic (associating sound with kinesthesia) as well as unconscious and automatic.

While Johnson’s explanation focuses on synesthetic metaphORIZING, I believe a physiognomic metaphORIZING—that which attributes affect to a non-human source—is operative as well. Some music perception research recognizes emotion as an important element in the process, often examining musical communication of emotion specifically. This research finds that music communicates emotion through different configurations of musical elements such as tempo, harmony, and pitch (Juslin 95), the same sorts of formal properties of music that Johnson uses in his explanation of how music is meaningful. There is substantial agreement among listeners, and between listeners and composer, as to the emotional content of music (Juslin 92). Furthermore, listeners perceive intended emotions through these same musical elements even in unfamiliar music from a different culture—for instance, increased tempo and melodic complexity are particularly predictive for joy (Balkwill and Thompson 54)—implying that tempo and melody have emotional resonance cross-culturally.

If certain elements of music—its formal properties such as tempo, melodic complexity, intensity, and pitch—are wired to certain emotions, I can extrapolate that formal

properties of dance might be similarly wired.¹¹ Maxine Sheets-Johnstone maintains that motion and emotion are of a single dynamic piece, inseparable (207), and indeed, some studies show that this is the case. Using point-light techniques—in which a dancer’s image on film is reduced to points of light on her major joints, thereby removing the influence of facial expression or dancer characteristics such as sex or race—researchers found that novice and expert viewers consistently perceived happiness and sadness from dance movement alone. Speed and energy level were the cues that distinguished emotion for these viewers, with a “happy” dance being faster and more energetic¹² (Brownlow and Dixon). Another study found that children recognized psychophysical cues for emotion in the use of particular body parts and the direction in which they moved. Frequent upward arm movements indicated happiness, and directional changes in the face and torso as well as the tempo of those changes were cues for angry movement (Boone and Cunningham). Particular combinations of how much the limbs extend from the body (the size of the “kinesphere”), duration, tempo changes, and dynamic tension are also predictive of certain emotions (Camurri, Lagerlöf, and Volpe). Taken together these studies indicate that a constellation of formal properties—body parts, tempo, duration, kinesphere size, dynamics—are cues to emotion in dance in the same way that tempo and melodic contour are cues in music.

¹¹ While expression of emotion may not be one of Jasperse’s intentions, nonetheless emotion figures prominently into our perception—from a psychological perspective, “The emotions make up a very important part of one’s subjective phenomenal field of awareness for they determine in large measure how one perceives and responds to all phenomena,” (Izard, C. and B. Izard 254) as well as from an audience reception perspective, “Audience responses are always *emotionally charged understandings* and *educated emotions*. That is to say, there is no way of separating out the cognitive and the emotional responses, regarding them as separately shaped or driven” (Barker 126). Stevens also notes the importance of affective meaning and how a viewer’s emotional engagement affects their response. (Stevens, Malloch, and McKechnie; *Moving* 61-62). As such, a consideration of the emotional aspects of perception is important, even for a postmodern work like *Canyon*.

¹² Discussion of a “happy dance” seems painfully reductive, but the theoretical premise behind this research is important.

Adding this emotional element enhances Johnson's explanation of how music means, and my translation of that explanation to danced meaning. First, music relies on synesthetic metaphor to map the *sound* of, for example, its pitch, tempo, and rhythm onto *felt sensations*. Then, those same formal properties are also linked to emotions via what amounts to a type of physiognomic metaphor, allowing the listener to map happiness onto quick tempo and melody. Watching dance, there is the same synesthetic metaphorizing; based on the evidence of some sort of motor response—mirror neurons or covert imitation—to the sight of another human moving, we find the *sight* of movement mapped onto the *felt sensation* of it. Then, based on the evidence of perception of emotion in human movement, I believe that we also employ physiognomic metaphorizing when we watch dance. The identification of “physiognomic” metaphor—affect in a non-human source—is tricky when the source is human movement. However, it is valid inasmuch as the perceived emotion is mapped onto the formal properties of the movement—such as size of kinesphere, speed, or dynamics—not the human mover herself. I am asserting that quick + buoyant = happy, a different equation from she = happy. Since Seitz has shown with developmental and evolutionary evidence that synesthetic and physiognomic metaphorizing are automatic and unconscious (78-82), such a process is pre-reflective; it amounts to Stevens and McKechnie's “direct perception” of dance, an embodied cognition.

A separate avenue of research, cross-modal infant-mother affect attunement, enriches this picture, positing that we rehearse direct perception of movement from infancy. Mothers and babies match each other's intensity, timing, and shape in a type of proto-conversation that employs both sound and motion (Stern 138-161). That is, an infant can mimic with his or her actions a pattern initiated by the mother vocally, and this interaction

has been found in diverse cultures. This phenomenon is both synesthetic, in that we can translate qualities of one type of sensory experience to another sense, and communicative in that we can translate our perception of another person to a feeling in ourselves. These qualities of infant-mother affect attunement indicate to some that it builds fundamental skills at the source of music and dance (Malloch 21). Furthermore, the cross-modal mirroring between infants and parents prefigures the relationship between performers and audience members (McConachie 81). A viewer's understanding of dance grounded in this type of affect attunement becomes another plausible version of "direct perception" of dance.

Stevens and McKechnie's second proposed method by which dance communicates—sympathetic kinesthesia—seems by this point *de facto*. They assert that this phenomenon of feeling what the dancers are feeling is accomplished through motor simulation. Based on the evidence above, this could be the mirror neuron network or could be the congruence of self- and other-representation found in covert imitation. Or, we could find sympathetic kinesthesia embedded in direct perception, in the synesthetic and physiognomic metaphor explored there. Through one or some or all of these candidate processes, audience members somehow access the feeling of the movement they are seeing. A combination of direct perception and sympathetic kinesthesia grounds not only much dance analysis and interpretation, but also more general assumptions about how the body and its movements are meaningful. When Bourdieu refers to *straight* and *direct* as physical markers of male qualities (*Logic* 70-72); when movement theorist Rudolf Laban associates spatial aspects of movement with thinking and organizing (Maletic 101); when dance critic Marcia Siegel explains that the dancers in a Paul Taylor work are neurotic if their movement is tense, jittery, or misshapen but that the light-hearted ones dance in released big spirals and

jumps (34); when scholar Richard Dyer notes that the couple in a movie musical duet moves side-by-side and mirrors each other's movements, imparting a sense of equality and instinctive rapport (52-53)—they are all calling on direct perception and sympathetic kinesthesia for their assumptions of how movement means. Their interpretations spring from metaphors inherent in dance's formal properties—quickness, slowness, strength, ease, lightness, heaviness, relationship between bodies, and countless more—and from a sympathetic kinesthesia, understanding in one's own body how that movement would feel.

I must note that many postmodern choreographic practices are at odds with these principles of direct perception and kinesthesia. Consider how philosopher Albert A. Johnstone understands the meaning of a leap: "...a succession of joyful leaps given by a dancer are not aptly construed merely as a conventional act or as a caricature of such an act. The lightness and buoyancy are symbolic of the light soaring dynamics of the feeling of joy" (182). He maps the leap's formal properties of lightness and buoyancy onto the experience of an emotion, joy, mobilizing the physiognomic metaphor inherent in direct perception as well as a sympathetic kinesthesia for his meaning-making. To a great extent, his claims are valid. Indeed, dancers in a reconstruction of Helen Tamiris's 1941 *When the Saints Go Marchin'* believe that they communicate the piece's ecstatic joy and celebration to the audience through upward energy in the chest; arms extended up and out; smiles and exchanged focus among performers; and up-tempo, springy skips and leaps (Hanna, *Performer-Audience* 89). Furthermore, audience members at a performance of *When the Saints Go Marchin'* from various professions perceived joy in the same movements the performers cited (Hanna, *Performer-Audience* 93). However, in a postmodern choreographic process, leaps could be an investigation of space, or the dancer's individual response to a choreographic assignment, or

the means of accomplishing a particular path on the floor. They might even be an ironic comment on joyful leaps. In other words, a postmodern leap may have nothing at all to do with joy, but if our direct perception and sympathetic kinesthesia are automatic and unconscious, watchers may experience a leap's light, soaring characteristics as joy anyway. Note that the leaps in the opening section of *Canyon* were not buoyant or soaring, and they did not include uplifted chests or arms reaching up and out. They covered space laterally but did not particularly emphasize the "up," dancers' foci remained at the horizontal, and the arms were mostly functional and minimally shaped. Appropriately, neither dance-makers nor audience members referred to those leaps as joyful; their formal properties did not support such a physiognomic metaphor.

While Stevens and McKechnie's first two avenues of choreographic communication—direct perception and sympathetic kinesthesia—overlap and intersect, their third—recognition of patterns—leads to a separate sphere of inquiry. Postmodern dance doesn't have a recognizable vocabulary, like ballet or Graham technique, yet during the course of a single work or across a series of works viewers can become attuned to a given postmodern choreographer's movement lexicon. As with learning the grammar of a language, they become familiar with the movement vocabulary and the syntax, with the "permissible combinations" of movement that that particular danced grammar allows (Stevens and McKechnie 248). Thus,

...while watching a performance of contemporary dance observers learn implicitly features of a particular choreographer's movement vocabulary, as well as the grammar or relations between identifiable patterns—the systematic way patterns are structured, sequenced, and related to one another

in a piece. If this is the case then it should be possible to demonstrate learning during a performance that is akin to implicit and long-lasting learning of complex, artificial grammars... (Stevens and McKechnie 248).

It is easier to imagine this acquisition of grammar after viewing a series of a single choreographer's work, perhaps over a period of years, but the same implicit learning happens over the course of a single performance, through the use of repetition and redundancy (Stevens and McKechnie 248) and also through variation and transposition, as I discovered in my audience interviews. One study found, based on measurement of eye saccades and visual fixation times, that experienced watchers of dance have rapid perceptual processing of dance: "Akin to highly skilled pilots, athletes, and drivers, dance experts are adept at abstracting and extracting key information from complex movement material" (Stevens et al 23). Visual and experiential knowledge of dance in general and different choreographic styles in particular enable these experts to process the stimuli of the dance performance more efficiently (Stevens et al 23-24). However, this study found that on the second viewing of a dance, novices' perceptual processing begins to resemble experts'. A single exposure to a short dance work appears sufficient to establish perceptual reference points and sharpen expectations for that particular work¹³ (Stevens et al 24). Additional research finds that indeed viewers can learn the "rules" of various dance styles implicitly—unconsciously—with repeated viewings, just as they would grammars (Opacic, Stevens, and Tillmann; Vincs, Schubert, and Stevens). That is, by the end of *Canyon*, even novice viewers have had the opportunity to see its vocabulary repeated and varied and to become familiar

¹³ Likewise, I speculate that *Canyon's* set design—characterized by asymmetry, collage, and irregular lines, and experienced before the dance even began—may have on some level primed expectations for the dance, implying the "rules" that allowed for asymmetric groupings of dancers, for instance.

with its syntax. This implicit recognition of patterns at the perceptual level, in addition to direct perception and sympathetic kinesthesia, are the ways in which our understanding of dance is embodied.

The premises reviewed here—meaning as both communicated and co-constructed, postmodern dance as a restricted field, postmodern dance as part of a historical lineage, and embodied cognition as a way of understanding dance—are the ones that underpin my study. While *Canyon* and the people involved in it comprise the objects of study, revealed through interview and observation, thinking about the theoretical concepts in this chapter preceded the actual fieldwork of the study and critically informed my approach to it.

Chapter 3: Dancing Obscured

In this chapter and the next I examine aesthetic meaning-making—the realm of both explicit and implicit interpretation that queries *Canyon's* aboutness as an art object. I call on the combined communication/co-construction model for meaning-making defined in Chapter 2. *Canyon* is communicative in that the dance-makers encode meaning in the dance, then share it with the audience, and the audience in turn decodes meaning. It is co-constructed in that meaning is present in and bounded by the formal properties of the dance. These properties allow many, but not infinite, interpretations. In this chapter, more important than the message is the *means* by which it is construed, what codes are in operation. This chapter is an exploration and comparison of some of the codes used for encoding and decoding the dance. I have offered the definition for a code as the framework within which meaning-making is accomplished, and in analyzing these interviews I often found myself using the word “logic” in place of “code.” In many instances, I tried to discern what sort of *logic* a dance-maker or audience member was employing to make sense of the dance. I also came to view this as a “way of seeing.” While these three terms—code, logic, way of seeing—are not exactly synonymous, they all refer to the same type of mechanism: a means through which meaning is made.

As most of this chapter traffics in the realm of Bordwell's interpretation—that conscientious, connotative meaning-making we do when confronted with a work of art—some picture of that work of art is required. It becomes necessary to at last offer a discrete description of *Canyon* itself—a chance for you, the reader, to imagine what the performance

was like. Here then is a skeletal overview of *Canyon*, chronologically, with individual sections to be fleshed out later.

The Wexner Center Performance Space is buried deep in the Wexner Center for the Arts, a building whose distinguishing characteristics are a paucity of right angles and an ability to hide in plain sight. The bulk of its public spaces are underground, and its “main” entrance nestles covertly between the university’s School of Music and the Mershon Auditorium. To attend *Canyon*, audience members located this unassuming door and immediately went downstairs, then passed the café, gift shop, and galleries closed for the evening and proceeded up a wide sloping corridor, the length of a short city block. As they reached the end of this ramp, neon green tape adorned the walls here and there in angular, assymmetric designs. Ramp behind them, they turned left and presented their tickets; ushers then directed them down a stairwell to the entrance of the Performance Space wherein the neon green tape proliferated on walls, ceiling, floors, equipment, and even seats. The space has a balcony with one row of seating, and chairs were set up in rows two or three deep on three sides of the floor of the black space below, which is an irregular quadrilateral—no right angles or equal sides. A large rectangular swath of white marley—a thick, slip-resistant material commonly installed on the floor of dance studios and stages—lay across the center of the space at an angle that corresponded to none of the room’s angles. The edges of the marley were secured to the floor on three sides but the fourth side, the one farthest from most of the audience, was a roll. That is, it appeared that this maybe one-foot-thick roll of marley had been partially unfurled from a back corner toward the audience so that dancers who moved toward that back corner ascended a gentle slope as they got nearer to the roll. It was possible to walk along the length of the roll just like walking on a log, or even jump

down to the other side of the roll and be hidden from the audience from the calf down.

Tape designs scrambled across the marley floor as well, but there they were red-orange instead of green. Triangular red-orange caution flags stood in a line across the space.

The show began abruptly with no announcement about turning off cell phones or the use of flash photography, and no dimming of the “house” lights above the audience. The dancers, wearing street clothes such as dresses or pants with a shirt, entered one by one accompanied by pulsing electronic music; they swooped, ran, and leaped across the space. One of the men, John, had an orange caution flag on a slender flexible pole sprouting out of the back of his shirt. The dancers sometimes moved in unison with one or two other people, only to veer off moments later and pursue their own courses. Their entrances and exits took them between the rows of seats, and they sometimes ran behind the seating to their next entrance at a different corner. After perhaps ten minutes of this relentless momentum, they one by one came to stand in a diagonal line, their backs to the roll of marley, and were still. They stayed there for a while, only moving their arms and upper bodies, slowly, until the line dissolved into smaller groupings and John cleared the rest of the flags from the space; the flag he was wearing disappeared too. A series of duets, trios, solos, and quartets followed, some of them simultaneous. A lyrical, arcing duet for the two women; a jolting, spasmodic unison duet to strident music for two men; a slow duet for Lindsay and Burr with a lot of full-body contact on the floor while Kennis rolled, arched, and coiled on the floor; a stumbling and knocking trio that gathered momentum and players, evolving into a brief swirl of the entire cast: these and more brought the dancers into constantly varying relationships with each other. Much of the movement was characterized by off-balance movement; much of it was slow and perforated with stillness.

After recombining into more duets and trios and splintering off into more solos, there came a moment when the flags had been gathered in a grove in a corner of the marley close to the audience. Four of the dancers stood there in orderly lines facing Kennis, whose back was to most of the audience. As the lights became startlingly bright—in fact an entire bank of them shifted, causing this brilliance to spread—and the music became excruciatingly loud, the dancers simply stood. The four gazed out at the audience, shifting focus steadily and taking in all the seated people. In rehearsal, Jasperse and the dancers referred to this moment as “black hole.” When this period of watching was complete—the bright lights receded and the hyper-amplified sound dampened—the dancers set about clearing the space; they pulled up all the red-orange tape from the marley, took away the flags, and wiped up the sweat marks with a towel. In the emptied landscape, Burr and John lay on their backs, crowns of their heads nearly touching, and began a duet in which they were almost always in contact with each other, evolving from horizontal on the floor to wheeling around the space. The women joined them and the four pushed with their hands, reached with their legs, spun, and rebounded, their considerable force and energy often propelling them into moments of unison with one or two other dancers. The women collapsed and lay supine on the marley roll. The men resumed their inexorable duet, full of brief lifts and off-balance tilts tethered by clasped hands. Then they too abruptly slid down to the marley roll and the piece was over.

What were the dance-makers’ understandings of what they were doing, and upon what logic did those understandings hinge? Put into the terms of the communication model, how were their messages encoded? How were viewer codes for understanding compatible, or not, with dance-maker codes? As a starting place for this analysis I examine the instances

where communication was unsuccessful, where audience members lacked the necessary codes or called upon a logic that wouldn't work. These are the places where they said things like, "I don't know why they were doing that," places where they tried to make sense of *Canyon* but couldn't. This analysis starts from these brown-outs in understanding—they are actually colored brown on the interview data maps—and considers not only what aspects of the dance were opaque to a viewer but also what sort of logic he or she was using to try and illuminate them. The brown-outs discussed here happened far more frequently among the dance-going novices, and represent instances in which the viewer mobilized a logic that was ill-suited to understanding *Canyon* and thus yielded no satisfaction

The logic of authorial intention

One such brown-out occurred when viewers felt frustrated that they didn't get it, and wanted to know what Jasperse intended. Ramona, a mother of two who works in advertising, expressed a frustration that was centered in her inability to interpret *Canyon*, to figure out what it meant. She asked me bluntly if I would tell her what it was about. When I told her I didn't know, and jokingly commented that no one ever told me, there was a stunned silence. Then she asked, "Really? Did the dancers tell? Generally?" Toward the end of our interview she pressed, "What do you think it was about? Do you even know? Do you have any clue?" Also expressing a desire to discern the dance-makers' intentions, personal trainer Meg said, "I wonder; I mean I'd like to talk to them about what they think it means, you know? Or what the creator thinks it means because I'm not really sure." Jim, a graduate student in music, expressed a near-constant frustration in trying to figure out what various aspects of the piece were supposed to mean. These viewers called upon a logic that dictates that there is one valid interpretation of the piece and that one interpretation is Jasperse's. A

corollary to this logic is that the dance-makers' meaning should be clear and explicit so that they, the viewers, can get it.

Transmission of the choreographer's singular, cohesive meaning and a resulting satisfying sense of understanding for the viewer are not, however, part of *Canyon's* logic. Wimsatt and Beardsley dismantled the intentional fallacy, the notion that the only true meaning of the work is the one intended by the artist, in 1946, claiming instead that a work of art belongs to the public. The idea of an active audience member has since become prevalent, not only among scholars and critics but also among many artists, evident in the way they conceive of their own work. Jasperse himself explicitly embraces this concept of meaning-making, saying, "You can't really talk about meaning without talking about the spectator, and their agency inside the construction of that. ...I as a maker create a format for you to perceive, inside of. You are much more empowered." The premise of an active audience member rather than a passive receiver underlies his work; he expects viewers to take in his dances creatively, dynamically. This expectation is evident even in the basic mechanics of *Canyon*; most often, there are two or three dance events happening simultaneously onstage, requiring the viewer to make choices about where to look. None of the expert viewers remarked upon this split focus, but several novice viewers questioned it. One assessed it as poor craftsmanship, saying the director should have made it clear to her where he wanted her to look, one worried that she was missing something, and a third was initially uncomfortable with it but decided she was empowered to look wherever she wanted.

In ways such as this, Jasperse deliberately pushes authorial intent away from the foreground of his meaning-making. Viewers who approached the piece with the idea that he will deliver his meaning clearly and unequivocally were frustrated. Put another way, they

were attempting to decode *Canyon* based on an ideal communication model; they wanted the dance to be a single, explicit message from the dance-makers and this desire was thwarted. By contrast, audience members who were familiar or complicit with Jasperse's open-ended way of meaning-making voiced no irritated iteration of "What was that supposed to mean?" In not attempting to ascertain a definitive or correct meaning, a partial and wholly personal one was satisfying for these viewers. For example, experienced dance-goer Alyssa said, "We're reading about post-humanism and the whole cyborg thing, and so the flags and the tape brought up this whole thing about boundaries for me? And kind of moving beyond them...I don't really think that's what he meant for it to mean." In this way we see how the logic of the communication model is present, but inflected with some of the co-construction model's logic. The uni-directionality of sender-to-receiver shifts; the artist-as-sender is not sending a singular, explicit message but rather providing a baseline on top of which, or boundaries within which, the viewer can create meaning. *Canyon's* tape lines and flags can sustain an interpretation like Alyssa's, but not, say, an interpretation of a mother-daughter relationship. Such a thing would be outside the boundaries of Jasperse's message.

One assumption inherent in this logic that is simultaneously communicative and co-constructed is that the choreographer's intention will not be made explicit, but rather left open-ended, and this is indeed borne out by Jasperse's current choreographic practice, which he perceives as happening in a "space of poetics." Where legibility was once his foremost concern, as with a work like *Waving to you from here* in the early 1990s, he now speaks about his interests in terms of honoring the ambiguous nature of the dance medium. He described a desire to find an alternative, untraditional way of understanding that doesn't involve lighting upon a fixed notion of what a dance means, and spoke of the common expectation

that “...we’re eventually going to understand, and come to a place of precision where we can say *this* is what this is. To me, poetics is not about *not* having any of those aspects, but resisting the experience of closure.” He distinguished poetics—and his dance-making—from a “way of analysis or interpretation [that] becomes definitive and there is *one meaning* or *one understanding* that emerges as the winner. If it closes into that space where we *know* what it is, it no longer is art.”

Interpretation, for him, is fluid; as such, the interpretive code for *Canyon* does not include presenting the viewer with an explicit, definitive meaning. Furthermore, Jasperse acknowledges a certain amount of opacity in the work, a premise that carries with it the assumption that the viewer’s understanding will be partial. This idea is drawn to a fine point in his choice to orient the marley flooring at an angle to the front of the stage, and then have that angled edge of the marley be the new “front” for the entire choreography. He explained how in “corner duet,” which takes place upstage right between Lindsay and John with Burr mirroring Lindsay’s movements to the side of her closest to offstage, some audience members sitting far to the left in the audience might not even see Burr: “If you’re that last person, you’re just seeing it as if Lindsay is leaning up against a wall that isn’t there because he [Burr] happens to be in line with the proscenium¹⁴... I’m not interested in trying to render that and make it legible to eight hundred and fifty people. But the idea that that could be a little private performance for one person is really fascinating to me.” Not every audience member has all the same information at the same time. This is true in any theater setting

¹⁴ He is referring to the proscenium space at the Brooklyn Academy of Music where *Canyon* had been performed. The Wexner Center Performance Space has no proscenium. Likewise, BAM, not the Wexner Center, seats more than eight hundred people.

because of the slightly different perspective afforded to each seat in the house, but Jasperse is specifically embracing that partiality in his choices.

Canyon's codes dictate that the viewer's understanding will be not only partial but also speculative; audience members are expected to accept a measure of not-knowing. Dancer Lindsay described a section of *Canyon* in which she is standing still, simply regarding the audience, and becomes aware of her connection to them: "It's just a feeling of, 'I don't know what this moment is, but we're doing it together.' I guess it's a little bit of compassion that probably most of the people in the audience don't know what's going on." She goes on to explain that she doesn't know, either, but that she's okay with that.

Dance-insider audience member Manisha was okay with it, too; saying, for example, "I didn't know if I was supposed to get any kind of idea of what the set design was *about*, necessarily, other than like texture and landscape, and terrain. And that was all right with me." This not-knowing was very difficult for outsider viewers Jim and Ramona. Not surprisingly since they are new to watching postmodern dance, they are unfamiliar with that aspect of its code for interpretation and instead mobilize the code that prevails in our culture. The idea that the message is not necessarily supposed to be clear is contrary to the assumption inherent in most aspects of our daily life—that we can get the message. As competent participants in the culture, we will understand what *it* means, whether *it* is a campaign ad or conversational turn in our personal lives, a movie or a billboard or a song. The maker of any of these messages communicates something to us that we can understand; not to get it reflects an inadequacy on our parts. Of course Ramona and Jim were peevisish about the insistent ambiguity and elusiveness of *Canyon*; who wants to feel like the person who missed the boat, who was incapable of understanding what a thing meant?

Interestingly, at one point Ramona herself explained a co-constructed meaning-making, saying, “Well, isn't that the idea of art, that you're supposed to figure it out yourself? (a pause) Ideally. This is where my English literature bias is showing, because I think you can get whatever you want to out of a piece of art or literature. It's up to you, and the artist presents it, and you make sense of it how you will. And that's okay.” However, there is a disconnect between this theory of meaning-making with which she is evidently familiar and the way she approached *Canyon* in actual practice—perhaps her practical desire to understand what is going on overpowered the academic ways of meaning-making she learned pursuing her degree in literature. While scholars and artists in the restricted field may embrace the idea of co-constructed meaning, the intentionalist fallacy is alive and well in the general, non-restricted field. Jasperse mused over how words like “lost” and “confusion” represent generative, pregnant concepts for him, but acknowledged that they carry negative connotations for most people. Outside of the Wexner Center and the world of *Canyon*, it is indeed bad to be lost or confused; we're supposed to get the message, as intended, loud and clear. By contrast, audience members at a postmodern dance must not only be comfortable with and confident in the specificity of their own interpretations, but also, like Lindsay and Manisha, be okay with the countercultural idea that they don't always fully know what's going on.

The logic of metaphor, and its alternatives

Another brown-out in understanding occurred, most often with novice dance-goers Jim and Ramona, when they attempted to figure out what aspects of the performance—specific dancers, movements, or elements of the set—represented. Jim was fairly tortured by this: “And I thought, what does that mean? What does that mean? ...What's happening?”

Okay the lighting changed; maybe that's the sun, or the devil because that's a red light. I'm constantly going (whispers) what does this mean? What does this mean?" Likewise, Ramona, when I asked her how she experienced the partnering sections of the dance, related that the dancers rolled on top of each other and clutched at each other, and then speculated about this movement: "Then I was like okay, is this *sexual*? Are they trying to simulate, what are they trying to, what is this? Are they rocks moving over each other? It's a canyon. Is it *water*? Is it sex? I mean my mind was just like, okay, what is this?"

Attempting to find a metaphor in the dancers' movement often led to frustration with *Canyon*; metaphor is not part of the logic with which it is constructed. A dance metaphor, borrowing from Charles Peirce's semiotic taxonomy, is like a symbol; it is substitution by resemblance. The resemblance is, at least at first, an unconventional one that requires the viewer to draw connections across domains, to make an imaginative leap, as Chandler explains in his distillation of Peirce's work on signs (Chandler 127). Ramona tried—creatively, intelligently, doggedly—to find a metaphor from other aspects of her experience for what she saw in that duet and in other sections of the performance; she tried to substitute across domains. If these bodies rolling on top of each other are not sexual bodies, what else might they represent that also rolls across something of its own kind? She used the title *Canyon* as a clue to what metaphor might be appropriate. However, speaking of *Canyon* Jasperse told *The New York Times*, "I'm not particularly interested in Southwest desert blah blah blah" (Kourlas "Body and Brain"). In that case, the rolling bodies are not meant to represent a canyon's rocks or water, or even sex in a canyon.

That particular duet is between Burr and Lindsay, and both of them talked about it in their interviews, offering clues to what sort of logic might be in operation. Burr described

how it was made: Jasperse gave him and Erin, a cast member who did not perform at the Wexner Center because of an injury, a score around which to improvise. They were to “dislocate action from attention,” that is, to have their visual focus—where they were looking—be different from the focus of the actions of their bodies. Their improvisations were videotaped, and the duet constructed out of the videotaped material. Lindsay explained how Jasperse was “loose” about transferring Erin’s part in the duet to her, how she doesn’t do exactly what Erin did. She said, smiling, that she wasn’t entirely sure of some parts of it and allows Burr to kind of push her around then. Jasperse discussed the dislocation-of-action-from-attention score too, but in his telling there were three elements: action, attention, and intention. Both Burr and Lindsay talked about the duet in terms of formal dance elements: the mechanics and logistics of its performance. Although Jasperse did not specifically discuss that duet, he did talk about the process from which it arose, a process characterized by discovery rather than intentionality. None of them hinted that it was created to represent something, or that it became a metaphor for something as it evolved in rehearsal and performance. Metaphor—substitution across domains—does not seem to be part of the dance-makers’ logic for this dance.

The logic of metaphor, and its alternatives: Metonymy and a connotative complex

How then to make sense of it? If those rolling and clutching bodies are not sex, and they are not rocks or water, and they may have nothing to do with actual canyons, how can an audience member make sense of them? How can they be rendered coherent, something other than non-sequitur nonsense? It is possible; some interviewees made interpretations of it that they found satisfying, even intensely pleasurable. To understand how they

accomplished it, what codes they mobilized, it may be helpful to have a fuller picture of what this partnered section looked like. What follows is my description of it, after repeated viewings in rehearsal and performance:

It begins without dignity, Burr prone on the floor and Lindsay perched on his butt, her legs spread wide. The first part of their duet is beyond weighted, beyond heavy; it's as though they inhabit a planet whose gravity is several times that of our own. Their bodies drool, ooze, and seep. They roll on, over, and beside each other, sometimes crossing over into a perpendicular relationship with one body stretched across the other's middle, sometimes parallel with lines of spines or legs mirroring each other. Occasionally one or the other manages to sit, or a butt climbs up into the air leaving chest, elbows, and feet on the ground. Before long, though, the body part that has triumphed over gravity topples back into it. They make it up to hands and knees and then suddenly Burr is fully taut, standing on one leg with his arms and fingers spread wide and his other leg bent behind him. They limp and mince around the stage, orbiting along separate and mostly disconnected trajectories, but ultimately end up downstage, exactly where they began.

Shelly, a graphic designer and musician, also referred to the duet specifically, describing it as "the epitome of surrender." She said, "Intense. So good. That for me was probably the climax of freedom. Just completely surrendering. It was beautiful... That's how I want to feel all the time." Michael, a PhD candidate who teaches in the OSU Department of Dance, offered a similar explanation of the duet: "It's something about the excess of control. Which might be exhaustion: exhaustion exceeds control. But it might also be

something like surrender, like giving one's weight to someone else." Michael and Shelly did not rely on metaphor for their interpretations, but rather on something more like metonymy. A danced metonymy, like Peirce's indexical sign, "points" at its meaning; it is substitution by contiguity.¹⁵ It may call on a relationship such as cause-to-effect, an attribute, or a suggested sense to substitute for the whole (Chandler 130). The rolling gait of a sailor is indexical as it suggests his profession (Elam 19). The ways in which an index, or a danced metonymy, may be connected to its meaning are myriad, but in this instance I believe that the way in which Burr and Lindsay released, or gave up, their weight into the floor and into each other was for Shelly contiguous with a releasing or giving up of will—surrender. Michael perceived it as a decreased control over movement, which could be surrender but also could be exhaustion. The metonymy functions by substituting an attribute—released weight—for the whole; in that way, the dancing can stand in for surrender or exhaustion by way of the attribute they all share.

Viewers successfully used metonymy to understand *Canyon*, and it is a way of making meaning that they share with the dance-makers. For instance, Jasperse referred to the long, propulsive opening section as a place of "orientation"—of knowing where we are and where we're going. From there, he said that orientation breaks apart: "We never return to that same level of orientation and patterning that you have. Or the way in which it emerges is more fractured and more contrapuntal and more fleeting... There's a shift, you know. And it returns in a certain kind of way, but a very different kind of way at the end; I don't feel like we ever regain that sense of oneness that starts the piece." He described in detail what

¹⁵ In this taxonomy, as in Chandler's, "metaphor" and "metonymy" are separate. In the discussion of embodied metaphor in Chapter 2, "metaphor" is an umbrella category that holds both "metaphor" and "metonymy." That is, embodied metaphor can account for our perception of both dance metaphor *and* dance metonymy.

constitutes his concept of orientation in the opening section: moving quickly through space, surging, direct spatial intentions—“I’m going *there*”—that are nevertheless capable of twisting and redirecting, a unity and continuity in the dancers’ relationship to space, and a flow of energy that—in conjunction with periodic moments of unison choreography—allows them to move like a flock of birds. Radically reduced, his logic in conceiving of the opening section as a place of orientation relies on the dancers’ speed and energy, their direct attack on space, and on the choreography that calls for occasional unison moments in their swift locomotion. The shift to which Jasperse refers happens when the dancers stand still in a diagonal line after the expansiveness and momentum of the opening section. After that point, much (but not all) of the movement has an indirect relationship to space or de-emphasizes spatial aspects all together, and finds the dancers in counterpoint to one another rather than in unison. Furthermore, much of the movement is slow and done sitting or lying on the floor or teetering through off-balance states, a noticeable contrast to the opening section’s moderate to fast tempo in a vertical orientation (the dancers are upright, on their feet). Later, shortly after the dancers have cleared the tape off the marley and not long before the end, many of the same movement characteristics that were present in the opening section reappear in a brief quartet. Dancer Burr speaks of that quartet in the following terms: “We’ve just taken up all this tape off the floor so it’s like reclaiming the space for ourselves, like we are dancers, we are here...we’re making it happen, so that’s a dramaturgical thing that I connect to. The power of the dancer in space.” Burr’s experience of that late quartet is contiguous with Jasperse’s concept of a sense of orientation that returns in a different way at the end.

In a *New York Times* interview with Jasperse before *Canyon* premiered in New York, Gia Kourlas noted, “But, as the title suggests, there are some open sections as well, where stillness and spaciousness—like that found at the bottom of a canyon—take over. Mr. Jasperse is exploring disorientation and fractured states that occur after an outpouring of extreme energy. As the dance continues, he said, ‘it becomes less and less tangible what the glue is that’s somehow holding us together’” (“Body and Brain”). Fracturing and coming unglued are concepts made manifest by an absence of the movement characteristics that were present in the opening section, and in this absence the unity and clarity—the “orientation”—of the opening section become apparent. We recognize echoes of that unity and clarity when we finally arrive at the quartet near the end.

To reiterate, this is not the only or the conclusive way that Jasperse conceives of *Canyon*; it is one that he discussed in our conversation and elsewhere. Pursuant to the communication model of meaning-making, this message is about a place of orientation lost, the lost-ness explored, and the orientation then only partially regained. According to Jasperse, the message is encoded in the quality or energy of the dancing, the dancers’ direct approach to space, and the fleeting moments of unison in the choreography. I add that the tempo of the movement and its relationship to gravity—vertical or sitting or lying on the floor, on balance or off—are also part of the code here. The relationship between all these movement characteristics and orientation/disorientation is a metonymous one; it relies on the association of direct spatial intent, speed, moving together, and on-balance vertical movement with orientation—knowing where one is and where one is going. Then, conversely, a de-emphasis on space, slowness, moving in counterpoint, stumbling off-balance, and lying or sitting all become contiguous with not knowing where one is. Again,

this is an explanation of a message and its encoding that while true, has been stripped of its nuance for the sake of discussion.

To understand this message on the same terms that it was sent requires employing a metonymous logic that incorporates those same formal properties of dance: quality, relationship to space, unison movement, speed, relationship to gravity. Did audience members do this? Among the less experienced dance-watchers, grandmother and Italian theater scholar Natalie referred broadly to two sections in the piece, the first in which the dancers resisted or overcame the force of earth's gravity and the second in which they yielded or connected to it. This is not exactly the message as sent, but her conception of two polar states is compatible with it. Of the opening section, another novice audience member, Meg, said, "Their movement was kind of flow-y and just, here we go, we're just moving, but it seemed like it was, you know, purposeful and kind of driven, like they kinda had to do it." She spoke of the dancers being in a "new world after the break [the end of the opening section]." After that break, "when they all were down on the ground, I felt like they were failing at what they were trying to do. They couldn't stand up." Then, "There was definitely at least one section toward the end where I felt like okay, now they kinda got it. They're moving through space more comfortably and they're stronger." Meg noticed the dancers' energy, their approach toward space, and their relationship to gravity, and construed a message for the piece that is consistent with the one described by Jasperse and Burr, if not complete in its details; she "got" that particular aspect of *Canyon*, using some of the same logic as the dance-makers.

Many insider interviewees associated the set design—the flags and the tape—with ideas of place; words like "location," "map," "terrain," "environment," "district," and

“neighborhood” peppered their talk. They talked about the flags as staking claim and the tape designs as arteries and topographical elements. That is, they did their decoding by way of metonymous associations with the physical objects used in the set design and arrived at ideas associated with *place*, an interpretation that is of a piece with Jasperse’s, who spoke of “pioneers,” “surveyors,” “boundaries,” and “demarcations and landscapes,” in his discussion of the flags. One insider audience member—Alyssa, a former ballet dancer—integrated the logic of movement elements discussed above—relationship to gravity, dynamics—into her talk of the set design elements to enhance this interpretation. She described how the flags made her think of a moon landing and that the dancers’ off-center movement, almost like drunken walks (she was dissatisfied with calling them “drunken” but couldn’t think of a word she liked better) seemed as though they were responding to “not earth’s gravitational pull.” She arrived at an overall impression of the dancers having arrived “someplace new” and not altogether stable, an idea that is compatible with Jasperse’s disorientation or a fractured state.

Although Meg and Alyssa were the only interviewees who talked in terms related to Jasperse’s theme of orientation and its loss, to say that only Meg and Alyssa “got it” is false. While the relative silence among the interviewees on the matter of Jasperse’s theme may indicate that it was not successfully communicated, more likely it is a function of the fact that I never asked the interviewees outright anything like, “What do you think the meta-structure of this piece was about, and why?” This discussion serves as an example of how the interviews can be analyzed by comparing interpretive codes, not as a means to quantify audience responses.

Meg's and Alyssa's interpretations, in comparison with the message as sent by Jasperse, illustrate something about the nature of the danced message and its communication. Their decoding process reveals a similarity to the interpretation of music, as analyzed by music scholar Ian Cross. He makes several observations about how music carries meaning, all of which are borne out in Meg's and Alyssa's interpretations. First, he notes that music has a "floating intentionality" or aboutness, gathering meaning from its context and in turn contributing meaning to that context (30). Also like music, Jasperse's dance both alludes to its own formal properties (relationship to space and to gravity, dynamics) and to things beyond itself, weaving a "connotative complex" (I. Cross 35) wherein exploring off-balance states, dealing with an unfamiliar gravitational pull, disorientation, and a moon landing all become contiguous. Finally, Cross finds music to be essentially ambiguous, requiring of the listener the ability to transfer ideas flexibly from one domain to another (I. Cross 35), just as Alyssa connected the disparate domains of choreographed movement and its quality, visual images of space travel and the icon of staking claim with a flag, and the theme of arriving somewhere new. Her ability to mobilize all this at once enabled her to understand some of Jasperse's message in *Canyon*; although Jasperse never mentions landing on the moon, I understand their two versions of the message as part of the same connotative complex, with metonymy as its scaffolding. Furthermore, metonymy and the resulting connotative complex constitute a meaning-making strategy that is compatible with Jasperse's conception of *Canyon's* inherent structure: "Phenomena like ambiguity and contradiction and all of these different things where you have opposing forces that remain in tension in relation to one another but are not

resolved... those things somehow continuing to push against one another is part of the inherent structure of what the thing is.”

The logic of metaphor, and its alternatives: Meaning-making without connotation

Arts scholar Ellen Dissanayake notes that many people access the performing arts through a felt, sensed approach: “...we respond cross-modally and emotionally to the swoop and exuberance of a dance movement, the sense of hesitation or resignation and defeat in an actor’s gesture, or the thick guttural innuendo in a jazz singer’s voice, usually before recognizing or assigning symbolic ‘meaning’ to the dance style or the spoken or sung words” (147). Indeed, some audience members side-stepped connotation altogether and derived denotative meaning from movement instead, a strategy that, like metonymy, proved more fruitful than metaphor. That is, they noticed certain parts of the dance—spontaneously choosing to talk about them rather than responding to any specific question of mine—and they described them in terms that were unique, constituting individual ways of making sense of them. This denotative meaning-making is evident in the way that audience members noticed and described Burr and Lindsay’s duet, discussing it specifically or just talking about partnering and floorwork in general (so I infer that this could include that duet). Speaking broadly of partnered floorwork, Meg said “I like to see bodies working together, sharing weight and space and stuff.” While Meg said she liked that part, dance instructor Nancy assessed it as being “kind of precious,” saying it “didn’t hold” her. Not surprisingly, Nancy’s description reflects a different understanding of this movement from Meg’s: “the slow, the waits, the stops...a section where they were laying on the floor and rolling onto each other a lot.” Meg saw it in terms of cooperation—working together and sharing—while for Nancy

the pacing of it was a deal-breaker. Its slowness and many pauses caused her to lose interest and dismiss the whole duet with very generalized terminology; “rolling onto each other a lot” is uncharacteristic of the rest of her talk wherein she described movement in nuanced detail. Although neither Meg nor Nancy made an explicit aboutness statement regarding the partnered floorwork, their descriptions of it convey what it meant to them.

Also discussing partnered floor-work in general, dance-going novice Natalie referred to “the slipping down over the thing at the end (the marley roll), and the slipping down over the body.” Sharing some of Natalie’s perception, Michael described Burr and Lindsay’s duet specifically: “[They] had kind of a contact-y thing where they were hip to hip, rolling on the floor, kind of using their hips to manipulate one another’s weight in really beautiful ways, that had a similar sort of released weight to what was happening when they slid down the ridge, and they just happened to be sliding down one another.” His words—“hip to hip,” “rolling,” “manipulate one another’s weight,” “sliding down one another”—reflect a different understanding of that duet than do Meg’s words or Nancy’s, and stand on their own as meaningful, separate from his interpretation of an excess of control and exhaustion and surrender. These descriptions demonstrate a non-interpretive way of making sense of the dance that will be explored more fully in Chapter 4.

This denotative meaning-making somehow preserves the poetics of dance; it speaks of it in a way that acknowledges dancing as its own math-like or music-like language (Acocella). There was yet another non-connotative way of making sense of *Canyon* that stripped dance of its poetry, a perception of it that, Centre Pompidou-like, recognized the work’s practical, nuts-and-bolts underpinnings and found a profundity and glory in them. Some audience members found that *Canyon* heightened their awareness of the various real

elements that comprise it, and that heightened awareness was satisfying on its own. Kristin, a graduate student in OSU's Department of Dance, was both interested in how the floor didn't behave like a normal floor—that is, it didn't lie flat but rose up to the crest of the marley roll—and surprised that the dancers used the space behind that roll. She said, “That created this whole other depth, and this spacey-ness of the space was very real to me, as opposed to maybe sort of the abstract space or the open space of a proscenium setting, that's just sort of like a no-space.” She went on, “So the floor has a fold in it (the roll), and that's like (a pause) *Whoa!* I mean it does really call attention to sort of the materiality.” Kristin's experience is like an inversion of theatrical suspension of disbelief; her attention to the mechanisms at work underneath the theatrical veneer, rather than robbing the piece of its magical illusion, led to a separate kind of magic.

Nancy also had a deeply satisfying experience, the only route to which was awareness of the real: “One of the choreographic structures of it was to get as far as you had to get to actually see the effort of the human doing the movement, in real time and real space and really in front of us, depleting their capacity... There was something really sort of human, and it was a contrast between sort of the expectations of, ‘I'm dancing, and I'm really beautiful dancing and I'm step-hopping and it's slightly balletic and it's pretty and it's flowing and it's with music’ and ‘I'm still doing it and [it's] really not anymore about being pretty and lovely; it's really about being exhausted and just how far can we go and be practicing and doing it and doing it and doing it and we're gonna stay very (a pause) yes! and I really can...’ You know what I mean? It shifted, from being kind of about the choreography, to being really really really really the dancers, in the space.” This confrontation with the really real had, itself, meaning for her; she commented, “And there was something really touching. I

really liked that.” Michael’s experience of *Canyon* was almost entirely grounded in awareness of the really real, and is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

The logic of story

Just as the search for metaphor in *Canyon* was largely unsuccessful, so were viewer attempts to construe the dance as a story and the dancers as characters expressing story-driven motivations and emotions. Dance outsider Jim said, “And I thought, what does that mean? What does that mean? ...It went on for a long portion of the performance; I kept trying to wrap my mind around, well what's the plot? What does it mean?” Having repeatedly chided himself to let go of the idea of a plot, he finally concluded, “Well, you know, it wasn't *Swan Lake*. To me it *didn't* tell a story. And because I consciously halfway through stopped trying to figure out the story, and just tried to say okay...these people are moving and these people are moving, and the dynamic changes, and I'm not sure I understood that. And that's okay. Because maybe I'm not supposed to.” He gave up the non-functional narrative logic he had been pursuing, and along the way reconciled himself to a state of not-knowing. Dance outsider Natalie reported a similar turning point at which she had to abandon her search for a story, “I was interested in the expressions, because two of the dancers in the first section had this faint smile on their face and the other three had none, ever. So I started watching that. ‘Cause again, I’m a theatre person; I’m looking for a plot. I want some kind of story, which there wasn’t. At least not that I got...” Both Jim and Natalie recognized that a narrative logic wasn’t appropriate for *Canyon*, and with varying degrees of ease, ultimately moved away from it, but I use their talk, and others’, to help understand how a narrative logic for dance works, and how it *doesn't* work for *Canyon*.

In peering at it, trying to deduce its plot, Jim again used metaphor to try and solve the riddle of *Canyon*: “What does that mean?” is tantamount to “What theme or concept does that thing before me represent?” He tried, as did others, to impose a plot on *Canyon* by stringing individual metaphors into a coherent sequence. Meg, for example, construed the opening sequence of the dance as a representation of adult life and its busyness: “I pictured them in a city...they’re busy running around doing their own city thing, making everything happen.” Then, “When they stopped in the line, they took a pause, and then they went through this experience with their hands where they were seeing something, or reaching out. My first initial feeling was oh, they’re having kids... All of a sudden this earth-shattering thing comes; it’s totally new and they don’t know what to do, you know what I mean? Like oh, that’s what happens to you when you have a child. All of a sudden you stop and you’re like, oh my god! What is this thing?” Meg made sense of these two sequential sections of the dance in a way that was grounded in the formal properties of the dance—quickness, “doing their own thing” in non-unison movement, and assertive or directed energy (my paraphrase of “making everything happen”), followed by stillness, watching, and reaching out—and had personal resonance for her. Here she made sense of the dance through a story.

However, that chunk of story-telling was ultimately both unstable and unsustainable. Embedded in her talk about how she pictured them in a city was an admission that the image of a city was troubled for her: “but then there were some jungle sounds back there, and the way the [tape] lines were blurry and sharp, it was like they could be anywhere.” As she relayed the next events of the dance, her story became vaguer, “And then they all collapsed, and then they were all on the floor and they couldn’t do anything anymore, so I continued to have that feeling of well, maybe either some tragic event stopped them, or

some wonderful event or something completely took them out of that. Whatever driven issues they were having before, something completely stopped them and they were starting all over again, in an unknown situation.” Meg’s story worked for a while, but it became less and less viable as the dance continued; she described the ending like this: “They all just collapsed. I guess I felt like they started to get back up but they didn’t quite get there, and then yeah, it just ended with them, like they died or something [laughing]. But it was over. I don’t know.”

The sections whose meaning she specifically questioned—the flag in John’s shirt, the “black hole” section in which the lights brightened and the dancers stood and looked out at the audience—were ones for which she couldn’t conceive of a metaphor that was consistent with her story. *Canyon* resists a representational, metaphorizing logic, and it certainly cannot sustain consistent, rationally and sequentially linked metaphors throughout its duration—what a narrative logic requires. The code for postmodern dance that includes metonymy and a connotative complex carries the inherent assumption that, as dance writer Deborah Jowitt observes, the viewer should not hold too tightly to any association elicited by a single element of a dance, as that would inhibit other possible associations that might arise later (Jowitt, “What Are They Up To” 59). That is, the sight of those quick and busy dancers coming to stand and reach and look may initially elicit associations about city people being stunned by the arrival of a new baby, but the work cannot be accountable to those images throughout its duration. For the piece to make narrative sense, the arrival of a new baby must be part of a suite of linked ideas that includes wondrous and tragic events resulting in big changes.

Indeed, at no point in interviews or rehearsals did Jasperse or any of the dancers refer to the work in terms of story. In fact, concern for story is so absent in Jasperse's work that I don't think it would cross his mind to discuss it. To approach some idea of his stance on story-telling, I refer to his statements about the polar relationship of dance and language. He said, "[My interests] had to do with ideas about poetics and ideas about engagement that was alinguistic, that was not centered in these concepts that we could really describe in traditional notions of meaning, which are largely linguistic. When we think about what something *means*, we think about what it means in words. And so, is there a way to be engaged in something, without 'understanding' [he makes air quotes with his fingers], in the traditional way that we use that word? Or, is there some other way to think about what 'understanding' could mean? Because if we think about it in those [linguistic] terms, we're screwed."

Jasperse restated this nearly antagonistic relationship to language in an interview with Columbus critic Jay Weitz, and dancer Kennis recounted, "In the time leading up to the performance at BAM, he didn't *want* to give a press release. He had this idea at some point, for the press release to be a video. 'Cause he was really interested in taking language out of the frame that's provided, but it's *required* by presenters, that language. But he was really, I think, trying with this work to not offer that verbal explanation for people." When Jasperse spoke of his reluctance to surround or explicate his dance with language, he also rejected a "fixed notion" of meaning, thereby aligning himself with the modernist thinking that perceives "language as dangerous to art because it could control through its power to define," according to Gay Morris (19). Morris's analysis centers on a dichotomy of rational and irrational; language is associated with rational thought, which in turn is linked to the

market and the ruling order ideology, while avant-garde dance is positioned as irrational and resistant to the dominant ideology. Language is also, obviously, linked to story-telling and to narrative. As Morris points out, narrative makes dance more accessible to spectators. Although the early modern dancers, particularly Graham, sought to embody rather than represent in a literal sense, in the 1950s narrative became an element in modern dance's assimilation into the mainstream (Morris 31). Morris locates a modernist distrust of language—because of its associations with rational thought—not only in Graham's champion, John Martin, but also in writers historically and aesthetically closer to Jasperse: "What Martin, Denby, and Cage were all saying in different ways was that an authentic dance could only be absorbed, at least initially, on a corporeal level between bodies and free from the tyranny of causal logic" (85). Jasperse's talk about dance embodying a mode of understanding polar to language positions him in this lineage, one that eschews literal meaning-making for dance.

Yet, several interviewees relied on the literal, if not necessarily on story-telling, for their sense-making. Some audience members turned to the actual words available around the work, the verbal discourse surrounding it that Henry Sayre calls the "verbal frame" (68-97) and that Jasperse hoped to avoid. Natalie said, "And I had read what he said in the program about being connected to the earth and the first part was obviously about getting *away* from the earth..." Interestingly, Jasperse offered no "aboutness" statement in the *Canyon* program, regarding connection to the earth or otherwise, and the statement included in the Wexner Center's web page on *Canyon* included no such idea either. Wherever Natalie read this idea, however, it powerfully shaped her meaning-making; much of what she said was framed in terms of whether the dancers were connected to the earth or escaping that connection.

Much more common, though, was a more fundamental reliance on the verbal: the incidences of audience members using the title “canyon” to frame their meaning-making. Most did so by associating what they saw with an actual canyon. Manisha, a dance videographer, said that looking down from the balcony at the dancers swooping about reminded her of being in the canyonlands of Utah; Ramona tried to reconcile the tape lines with the shape of a canyon and the movement of the dancers with rocks or water in a canyon; Kristin referred to the far side of the marley roll as a canyon, adding, “And you have that great sort of canyon, I guess, which interestingly I don’t think I would have referred to as such if it weren’t for the title, but you have that sort of drop-off...;” and more abstractly, choreographer Nell said, “Canyon’ is a term for a *space*. A psychological space, possibly, but for sure, a space. It’s topographical.” Critic Claudia La Rocco’s review of the dance is full of imagery of sheered-off rock, yawning desert, and snaking water. This is a legitimate way of making sense of art; Sayre writes, “The title is the first verbal clue that you are given about the meaning of the work” (70) And yet, for Jasperse “canyon” is not meant to evoke images of an actual canyon. He spoke of the title in figurative terms—of an opening in space, of a majestic consequence of the mundane process of erosion, of “the extraordinary that originates in the ordinary” (*wexarts.org*), and of “questioning states of wonderment” (Kourlas “Body and Brain”). He said he is not particularly interested in the desert or the Southwest; in other words, he does not make sense of this title literally.

The logic of story: Character

Jasperse resisted the verbal frame around his work and likewise, the work resists literal ways of meaning. Nonetheless, audience members called on them by way of the title, the verbal discourse surrounding the work, and a story-telling logic. Even those who did not

talk about a coherently linked sequence of metaphors—a plot—for *Canyon* did try to make the work function according to a premise ancillary to that of narrative: that the dancers represented characters whose emotions and motivations would drive the action. Natalie did this first by attending to emotions that their faces might show, as did Meg. Meg, however, was uncertain how to interpret their facial expressions, saying, “A couple people smiled a few times but I wasn’t sure if they were smiling just ‘cause they were having fun dancing or if it was intentional. Because it wasn’t very often at all, and just kind of in the middle of them moving around.” Ultimately, she was dissatisfied with how little their faces revealed of their inner states: “I was curious about their *feelings*. You know, I felt like I didn’t quite know how they felt about everything.”

Several audience members also inferred unique, meaningful identities—characters—for the dancers hinging, for instance, on a costume or on a given action or interaction that dancer performed. Jim asked, “What does this mean? Why is her hair in a ponytail? Why is she in a green skirt? Why does [that] man have on a wife-beater [man’s tank-top undershirt like the one Marlon Brando wore as Stanley Kowalski] but the red-head had on a yellow shirt?” For some audience members, their troubles with perceiving the dancers as characters arose when there were expectations of consistent, logical, character-based behavior over the duration of the performance. *Canyon* defies not only the sustained, sequential logic of storytelling but also character, with its expectations of consistent, meaningful identity and psychologically based motivations. Natalie demonstrated this through her talk about John and the flag he initially wore in his shirt: “You know I wasn’t sure why that one guy was wearing the flag, because he didn’t seem to be either ignored by the others or the focus of the others. He seemed just a part, only he had this strange (brief pause) thing, so I’m

thinking why is that?...Everybody doesn't hate him or everybody doesn't love him; there's nothing to do with that." Similarly, Meg said, "He had the flag at the beginning in his back. And I wasn't quite sure what that meant. I felt like it was going to mean something but it didn't really mean anything in the moment, but then he took it out and so then I didn't know. I was kind of curious about him and what his role was and what that meant." By contrast, Alyssa allowed her understanding of the flag on John's back, and any implications it may have about his identity, to be fleeting. She noted that at one point John was in line with the other dancers, but also stood at the juncture of an intersecting line of flags. From this she understood him as "a subject and an object in the line all at the same time...[He] was a cyborg." This was a satisfying interpretation for Alyssa in the moment, but it quickly would have become frustrating if she had tried to permanently pin a cyborg identity to John. He does not play the character of a cyborg in the dance and, as Jowitt advises, it is better not to hold too tightly to these associations.

Notably, trying to perceive the dancers in *Canyon* as characters in a story almost always resulted in a brown-out in understanding; character is not part of the dance's logic. While Meg, Natalie, and Jim—the audience members whose interviews revealed them trying to relate to the dancers as characters—are novice dance-goers, one of the seasoned dance-goers, Manisha, also spoke with confusion about the dancers' identities. In particular, she questioned the role of Jasperse himself as a dancer in the piece, starting with a moment in which his joining with Kennis was the catalyst for a new mood, what Manisha called "a change in scenery." She said, "I was wondering why he was the person that went towards her to change the scenery. Why was it him?...What makes him so special to change this? To make this transition? And why, if he's so special *there*, why isn't he there at the end?"

Manisha's comments reflect an expectation of a logical, sequential coherence to his actions, related to his identity on stage.

Even this is not part of *Canyon's* logic. Lindsay said, explaining how she and another dancer were interchangeable in a certain moment of the choreography, "The piece is really not about giving people specific roles, or powers." Likewise, John related how at one point in the extremely compressed process of teaching him his part in *Canyon*, Jasperse himself took over some of the dancing that was supposed to be John's, simply because it was more efficient to do so when John had so much to learn. Nell perceived this lack of specific roles, and judged it to be a shortcoming in the structure of the work: "[There was] no sense of character, except what they had on...Okay fine, we're all the same person wearing pedestrian clothing. So am I caring that the dance is actually between *those* two? He didn't set that up for me, to care about that. Oh! That the dance is between *those* two. I didn't get invested in them as dancers at all...Oh he could've been doing her part. Oh she could've been doing his part. (pause) So one wasn't understanding development on a relational level."

Empathy, and its variations and alternatives

Not characters, not even roles specific to the individual performer: the nature of the dancers' identities and how the audience can understand them is ambiguous. Sometimes the choreography lays bare the dancers' humanity and there is an expectation of fellow feeling from the audience, for example, in the moment Lindsay described when she simply stands, regarding the audience, and arrives at a feeling of togetherness with them. Similarly, all the dancers discussed the "black hole" section of the dance in which they stand and shift their gazes across the audience, connecting face-to-face with many of the audience members. In addition, Jasperse and several of the dancers discussed the logic of their standing formation

during the “black hole”—four of them aligned and facing out to the audience while Kennis has her back to the audience, facing the other four—in human, empathetic terms. Kennis explained part of the intent behind that formation: “I know for John my position being away from the group or being other from the group, he was looking at that as me being the person on stage who's representative of the audience, the people who are watching.” These moments call for the audience to perceive the dancers on stage with a sense of them as fellow humans sharing this experience.

Of a piece with Kristin’s and Nancy’s attention to the “really real” marley and dancers’ exertion, both expert and novice audience members expressed in their interviews a sympathy with the dancers themselves—not characters but the actual people-as-dancers, the individuals whose biographies appear in the program. Ginny feels shy and projected that nervousness about being on display onto the dancers; Manisha worried about John’s flag falling out of his shirt; Meg thought the dancers seemed nice and was concerned that they were getting too tired; Michael was sexually attracted to one of the dancers; Jim noticed the dancers catching each other’s eyes and possibly cuing each other. This may be a function of the extreme proximity of the dancers in the Wexner Center Performance Space, or it may be inevitable in any live performance that the audience would be aware of the performers as actual people. The dancers themselves speak of how they use exchanged looks as cues, how much they like each other as friends and colleagues, and how exhausting certain sections are. Lindsay spoke delightedly of how in the previous night’s show Burr had become caught on her costume during their duet and they’d had to reckon with that extemporaneously; this real-life situation unfolded in front of the audience and they watched Lindsay, an actual person, deal with it. As present as all this is in the dancers’ consciousness, and with no

presentational or character-related intentions, it's not surprising that their actual identities sometimes draw the attention of the watchers. Perceiving them as the real people they are—dancers, having real experiences onstage—is a logic consistent with the dance-makers'. It is viable, and it functions better in *Canyon* than a character-based logic does.

At other times, however, empathy and shared humanity seem to be contested in the dance-makers' talk. For example, Lindsay recounted how corner duet was made: "That duet was made in regards to the relationship that James [a dancer no longer in the cast] and I had, to the nature of us being in the room together. Just like everybody has a nature with somebody else in the room...There was something about this pushing and pulling and like, getting into a machine groove." The formal properties of push and pull, and a machine-like dynamic, are rooted in an actual interpersonal relationship between actual Lindsay and actual James. However, Lindsay also said, "I remember John being worried that what James and I were doing was too lovey, too humanly mushy." Apparently, Jasperse did not want to foreground emotional implications their duet might carry. Should we see James and Lindsay not as people with a personal relationship to each other, but rather as bodies whose actions and interrelationships have formal properties like push and pull—that is, abstractly? The dance-makers' interviews indicate that often that is their perception; much of their talk around the partnered sections was strictly in anatomical and logistic terms with no mention of dramaturgy or social, emotional relationships. The emotional, interpersonal, personality-based aspect of that dancing is not in the foreground for them, at least not in the piece as they currently inhabit it, at some remove from the initial creative process.

John's solo provides a different field in which to investigate the dance-makers' differing conceptions of the dancers as empathetic or as abstract entities. Recounting how he

learned his solo on the marley roll, John tells how when he first saw the solo on video, he understood it as being about a “low energy state,” that the dancer is “super-exhausted.” However, Jasperse didn’t teach the solo to him in terms of either the concept or the sensation of exhaustion but rather in purely anatomical terms, defining the sequence by what body part initiates each movement. John explained, “He said, ‘You engage with your knee here, and then your shoulder pushes through.’ And then, and as we were repeating it he’s just saying, ‘Knee, shoulder, head.’” John speculated that this may just be the most efficient way to teach the movement, not an indicator of its “aboutness” for Jasperse. I asked if once the movement was learned, it was then discussed in terms of how the dancer feels, exhausted or otherwise? John replied, “The words that he said to me are things like, ‘dropped into the floor.’ (pause) Now that I think about it, they’re all words that still reference a physical, body state. And nothing that he’s ever told me has to do with an emotional state. Or, I would say physical exhaustion or tiredness is not something that he uses to describe this state. It’s more something that *I* see, or that I can relate to.” In his conversation with me, Jasperse spoke of that solo in terms of the body and its relationship to the space around it, referring to “...the [marley] hump that’s less a plane that you’re pushing against and more a plane that is sort of like a distorted plane, so it creates some level of verticality that you can push laterally against. So we were kind of playing with that but also because it was curved, that kind of morphed that whole material into some kind of spine response to flatness that isn’t flat.”

There is, then, evidence of more than one type of meaning-making logic at work in this solo. The choreographer, Jasperse, speaks of it in formal, anatomical and spatial terms, but the person who realizes that movement on stage, John, relates to it as a low-energy state of exhaustion. Audience members also employed more than one logic in making sense of

this solo. Shelly saw Sisyphean defeat, understanding it on an emotional, empathetic level as John did, but Natalie spoke of her satisfaction with how the dancers slid down over the ridge (I presume that she might be referring to John's solo, since sliding down over the marley roll is a recurring motif in it). Like Jasperse's, Natalie's description is grounded purely in movement terms with no overt emotional implication.

Consider the ability to disentangle "pure" or "abstract" movement from connotation, or to divorce perception of dancers from empathy. In this dissertation I will contend that the formal properties of John's movement on the marley roll—his horizontal orientation, his release of weight, his slow progress, his rolling and twisting and reaching and the fact that these actions repeat—carry imminent, pre-reflective, directly perceived meaning. Is that meaning not as inevitable as I think? When Jasperse speaks of it as a sequence of anatomical initiations, is he wholly oblivious to or disregarding the exhaustion and defeat that movement connotes for the doer and some watchers? Is he aware of these, and possibly other connotations, but they aren't as interesting to him—as worthy of discussion—as the movement's formal properties?

How *Canyon's* lack of metaphor, story, and character are challenging

Jasperse's and Natalie's way of seeing movement abstractly—foregrounding its formal properties over both the medium of those properties, a fellow human being, and their potential implied aboutness—is, at least theoretically, hard to do. While we may be able to see the movement's formal properties abstractly—to discuss it in terms of its slide over the marley roll or its initiations—it is a skill that not everyone possesses. We are inclined to project emotion and psychological motivation on the dancers, whether as characters in an onstage drama or real people who take off their costumes when the show is over. As Scott

McCloud explains in his discussion of the universality of comics, we humans see ourselves everywhere, even in inanimate objects: “The fact your mind is *capable* of taking a *circle*, *two dots*, and a *line* and turning them into a *face* is nothing short of *incredible!* But still *more* incredible is the fact that you cannot *avoid* seeing a face here. Your mind won’t *let* you” (McCloud 31). The tendency to attribute affective, human properties to objects we see—for example, seeing the front grill of a car as a smiling face—is prominent in both children and adults (Seitz 79). If we can’t look at a three-pronged electrical wall outlet without seeing a face, how much more difficult is it to look at Lindsay and Kennis and Burr and John and not see humans with personalities, desires, and worries like our own rather than the clarity of joint initiation?

Theater scholar Bruce McConachie partially explains our predisposition to perceive the dancers as people who are exhausted and surrendering, or who have possibly lovey, mushy inclinations. He maintains that we simulate, usually unconsciously, the actions we see in others, which leads us to experience their emotions empathetically, which in turn activates our own emotions (67). According to this theory, the sight of a person on stage triggers an empathetic emotional reaction. As with McCloud’s thinking, we perceive ourselves in the people—or electrical outlets—we see, and project our emotions onto them. McConachie’s model is potentially supported by neuroscientific research that shows we do have a form of kinesthetic empathy that might allow us to translate the sight of a dancing body into kinesthetic sensations. A system of “mirror neurons” in the brain is active both in the observation of an action and in the execution of that same action (Calvo-Merino, “Neural Mechanisms” 157). That is, the same network of neurons fires if we execute an action ourselves, or just watch someone else do it. Discouragingly for the novice, the network is

highly sensitive to the viewer's own motor repertoire—that is, a viewer who has actually danced herself will experience neural activation greater than that of a person who has only passively observed (Calvo-Merino “Neural Mechanisms,” Calvo-Merino et al “Seeing,” Calvo-Merino et al “Action”). Furthermore, there is a greater activation when watching an action that has been seen before (Calvo-Merino, “Neural Signatures” 8), here again affording experienced dance viewers an advantage. However, all viewers, regardless of their motor repertoire, experience broad activation across the mirror neuron network when they observe dancing (E. Cross 191-189). Dancers and non-dancers alike report varying levels of “inner mimicry,” kinesthetic projection, and empathy when watching dance (Reynolds, “Kinesthesia” 62), phenomena probably grounded in the mirror neuron network. In that way, the network represents a common space between seeing and doing, theoretically narrowing the gap between dancer and observer (Calvo-Merino, “Neural Mechanisms” 156). While mirror neurons potentially provide a neurological grounding for kinesthetic empathy, there are gaps and glitches in the theory. These are addressed in Chapter 2, as are alternative processes that might explain kinesthetic empathy. When I refer to mirror neurons in this chapter and the next, I do so unconditionally in the interest of readability, but I hope that the reader will recall that mirror neuron theory as an explanation of kinesthetic empathy is not untroubled or uncontested.

If the mirror neuron network is to provide a grounding for McConachie's empathy, linking what we see with what we feel, then the viewer who sees John rolling and writhing on the floor must at some level feel himself or herself rolling and writhing as well. What is that sensation, and with what emotions or motivations is it associated? Most adults seldom have occasion to roll on the floor, perhaps so seldom that to do so would feel like failure

and surrender or, perhaps more likely, uncomfortable and weird. Only a dancer, and a dancer who had trained in a Movement Research-related style, might associate the sight of rolling on the floor with the feeling of “knee, shoulder, head,” or “[weight] dropped into the floor,” a feeling described purely in physical, anatomical terms. It follows that most people, who haven’t learned this way of moving and thus this way of seeing, would be inclined to first experience an emotionally empathetic response to that same sight of rolling on the floor.

Just as we seem to be predisposed to see the dancers as emotional humans with inner lives rather than in terms of abstracted movement, we may be wired to see the dance in terms of metaphor, as representing concepts or a story or at least a character. We have a “cognitive bias,” a habit of first identifying objects in a scene before us. In everyday life, this bias serves to find useful objects that will help us fulfill our goals; however in aesthetic situations, it pulls our attention to the subject, to the *what*, of an artwork, obscuring sensory, visual, or stylistic elements: the *how* (Cupchik 167). The everyday, default way of seeing that the cognitive bias dictates inclines inexperienced viewers to perceive art in terms of metaphor; they first identify the salient figures or objects in a situation, then ask, “What is that?” or “What is that supposed to be?” For example, an inexperienced viewer might be satisfied with the recognition of the train station in Monet’s *La Gare St Lazare*, because he likes trains and it reminds him of travelling (Leder et al 499). Indeed, one study found that inexperienced viewers’ approach to art is an extension of everyday perception; that is, there is an emphasis on object recognition and identification, and an urge to perceive art in terms of past experience and compare it with more familiar entities. As such, these viewers prefer representational art and find it more meaningful; the cognitive bias is a veritable prescription

for a logic of metaphor. Conversely, experienced viewers show an ability to decommission the cognitive bias and appreciate the medium itself—visual effects such as color, line, texture, and composition—and often prefer abstract art (Cupchik and Gebotys 38-39).

This research into aesthetic processing of visual art is easily translated into a danced context; a dance that represents story, character, or emotion is analogous to representational art and thus more easily accessible, with the cognitive bias in full effect. Danced elements such as dynamic quality, spatial arrangements, and rhythm are analogous to color, line, and texture, those abstract or formal elements that require experience to perceive. Just as John Berger posits that perception of paintings or of film calls for two separate ways of seeing, so does it take a special eye to recognize in John's solo a body in relationship to gravity—"dropped into the floor"—that is repeating certain actions with a certain dynamic. It is an eye that takes some effort to acquire, not the one most people use by default. With everyday perceptual competencies, a viewer can see the solo and ask, "What's that? What's he supposed to be?" and there is the possibility of a representational meaning-making. With less than that, he or she is unable to perceive the weight, repetition, actions, tempo, or any other aspect of John's solo; it is only another human moving in complicated ways, and the solo is not very meaningful. However, if a viewer does have an eye for the *how* and can discern all those formal properties of the solo, he or she is positioned to both appreciate those formal elements in abstraction as well as perceive the imminent meaning they carry.

Seeing in this way is not the default setting for most people; we humans seem to be predisposed toward emotional empathy, and toward identifying objects and associating them with familiar entities. An interpretive code that relies on metaphor coincides with and reinforces the mode of everyday perception that seeks representation of familiar figures and

situations. Furthermore, this way of seeing underpins the interpretive code for the general, unrestricted field of production. Metaphor is a prevalent way of making meaning in the coded productions all around us, from pop songs to political cartoons. Metaphor and emotional empathy are lynchpins of not only the commercial dance that surrounds us on television commercials and reality shows but also the theatrical dance—musicals and Classical ballet—to which novice viewers Ramona, Jim, and Ginny referred in their interviews. In all those forms, dancers wrap their arms around each other in loving embrace, skip and leap joyfully, crouch and cower in fear, and perform stylized versions of recognizable gestures. A duet on *So You Think You Can Dance?* might be about sadness or about springtime, and the audience knows how to identify the danced metaphors that communicate these themes. Identifying the salient features of the dance and relating them to familiar emotional states or metaphoric themes serves the viewer well; it is part of the interpretive code that is all around us. Respondents to one survey of concert dance audience members interpreted the dance primarily according to the representation of themes, the presence of symbols, and the discernment of storyline (Glass, “Observer Response” 115-116). It is small wonder that audience members might have an inclination to see *Canyon* in terms of metaphor, story, and character when these ways of seeing pervade our culture.

We have tendencies toward perceiving in terms of emotional empathy and representation/metaphor, and the skill of seeing in terms of abstract formal properties of an art may require some cultivation, but the audience members I interviewed did not mobilize these codes for understanding strictly along an expert/novice divide. Manisha, who tried to understand Jasperse’s role according to a logic of consistent character motivating his actions, is a dance insider, while Natalie, who perceived sliding over a ridge on its own terms rather

than as a demonstration of feeling or a metaphor, is a dance outsider. Michael Parsons found in his study of viewer responses to paintings that there are several stages of understanding centered around, respectively, a childlike pure pleasure, beauty and realism, expressiveness, style and form, and autonomy (22-27). However, people are not “at” any one of these stages; they use one or more stages to make sense of a painting (11). I likewise found dance-makers and audience members of all stripes using one or more logics, or codes, or ways of seeing, to make sense of *Canyon*. That said, dance insiders and the dance-makers themselves used a logic that relied on the style and form of dance more often than did dance outsiders, who used a logic of emotional empathy and metaphor more often than the insiders. Furthermore, the dancers sometimes spoke in terms of empathy and human motivations whereas Jasperse did not.

Silence and stillness

On the visual “data map” I used for analyzing the interviews, questions and statements of not understanding are colored brown; these gaps in understanding were the jumping-off point for this chapter. I find there is another type of non-comprehension that the data maps reveal. Across the center of each map, I wrote in chronological order names of the sections of the dance—some of them were names the dancers had used, some were names that were generated in conversation with audience members, and some were just pragmatic names I devised to fill in the gaps to create a continuous, unbroken sequence of *Canyon* from beginning to end. Whenever an interviewee—dance-maker or audience member—talked about a particular section of the dance, I wrote his or her initials next to the name of that section. Some sections were only talked about by experts and some only by novices, but, most provocatively, some were only talked about by dance-makers and not by

audience members. Does this silence on the part of the watchers indicate something they couldn't make sense of, or possibly couldn't even see, and therefore didn't discuss?

There are other explanations for not talking about any given part of the dance. Maybe they just didn't get around to it in the course of the interview, or forgot to mention it. There were only two sections I ever asked about specifically—the diagonal line and the black hole—and my querying usually yielded some discussion; that is, had I prompted audience members about any given section, perhaps they would have talked about it. There may have been memory issues; it was a full hour of performance and it's possible that something that made sense to a viewer in the moment was nonetheless not remembered, lost out to something else more salient in the competition for short-term memory space. It also may be that viewer comments about the performance in general were in reference to a specific section but were not pinned to that section in the viewer's talk. For example, Kennis and Lindsay share a duet which they refer to as “mermaids.” None of the novice viewers talked about that duet. However, one novice viewer noticed how Lindsay watched the other dancers and that sometimes immediately thereafter, a moment of synchronicity would occur. Was that in the opening section or the quartet near the end, or could it have been in mermaids? Cued moments of synchronicity happened in all those sections. Another novice viewer particularly enjoyed the two women's performance styles—did she notice this in mermaids or elsewhere? Novice audience members may not have perceived mermaids as a discrete duet at all, but that doesn't mean they didn't make sense of that dancing; it just doesn't show up in their talk in a way that I can connect definitively to mermaids. Therefore, there are several possible explanations for audience silence around any given section of the dance.

There were, however, two sections which figured prominently into rehearsal or a dancer's interview and about which almost no audience members spoke, and this raises my curiosity. The first happens about halfway through *Canyon* when Lindsay stands alone in the "forest" of flags that the dancers have placed downstage. Jasperse spoke of that section in terms of the group-ness having fractured into small constellations wherein, "You're in these individuated private space moments where maybe the big world goes away and you're looking at an individual who sort of like, gets fascinated with their toenail." Lindsay explained the particular motivations and sensations that underlie that section for her: "I was more interested in the reality of this piece having a lot to do with not knowing. And so that moment for me I guess is mostly about sharing this feeling of not knowing with the watchers. And so the thing that I do in my head in general, is something like recognizing the fact that we're the same, that I am seeing an audience of me, or I can recognize certain aspects of myself in the people that are watching me, and that we are all experiencing the same thing. All, you know, obviously through different lenses but that thought generally sends me into like, the awe of humanity [little laugh] which is kind of fun." Again, there were no direct references from audience interviewees to this moment. Ginny, a film history instructor, said in general that it made her uncomfortable when the dancers looked at her. Natalie said that she liked looking at the expressions on the women's faces. Nell said, "They were condescending. It was like, standing there. Like that's meaningful. It's not meaningful; it's boring. You stand there and stare out into space and I'm supposed to say, 'Oh. That's so meaningful.' Wrong!" Any of these comments might have referred to Lindsay in the forest of flags, but none addresses it specifically.

The second section in question here is Kennis's, when Lindsay, Burr, and John are involved in the so-called "corner duet" upstage. Kennis is alone downstage, tentatively stepping, losing her balance, and catching it again. Some time in rehearsal was spent clarifying this movement and when I asked her about Jasperse's coaching for it, she explained, "He provided one really clear image for me, and that is thinking about the surface of the ground being sand, like being something that has give to it. And so the relationship of that surface with the surface of the foot, and falling so deeply into that experience of those shifting surfaces that my body is not preparing itself for the moment that it falls off the edge of the boundary of my foot. And so for him then that creates this sort of stumbling dynamic that's a counterpoint to the more fluid trio that's happening up in the corner." Kennis was elated that Jasperse clarified that intention in rehearsal: "...which is *great* for me because [little exhale laugh] there was not information for me at that point before, which was deeply frustrating. It was one of those points in previous performances that I would get to and be like, I really don't know what I'm doing here. And as a performer I *hate* that feeling. I don't wanna *not* know what I'm doing on stage in front of a ton of people." She needed to understand the nuance of sensation in this moment to fully and specifically embody it, and feel as though she was performing it well. Yet, this carefully honed moment seems not to have made an impression on most audience members I interviewed. Only Michael and Nancy referred to a stumbling or staggering dynamic in the piece, and as Kennis is prominently downstage center during this moment, their observations about this dynamic might have been in reference to her and are relevant here. Notably, both Michael and Nancy are experienced dance-watchers.

While these two moments are so pregnant with specific intentions for Lindsay and Kennis, I have little evidence of those intentions being successfully communicated. Why didn't any viewer speak of sharing some of Kennis's experience of shifting surfaces, or Lindsay's heightened awareness of not-knowing? Or, why didn't these moments generate some metonymy-based connotative complex as so many other sections did? Why wasn't any audience interviewee drawn to describe them? I hypothesize that these moments did not stand out for many viewers because they are spatially and energetically so minimal; while Lindsay's and Kennis's experiences in those moments are rich and specific, the viewer sees relatively little. It may be hard for many audience members to stay engaged when there is not much activity. One study on audience attention patterns found that all viewers are attracted to action on stage; they turn to look at movement, dialogic turn-taking if it is a play, and lighting changes (Fitzpatrick and Batten 19-22). This fairly commonsense notion, that our eyes are drawn to movement, implies that audience members would probably turn away from Lindsay—relatively still in the forest of flags—to look at Burr and Kennis in their slow duet or John in his solo on the hump, events that took place at the same time. Furthermore, scholars across arts disciplines (De Marinis, Glass, Juslin, Ramachandran and Hirstein, Whitfield), refer to Berlyne's theory of an optimum level of complexity that corresponds to an optimum level of arousal. At this optimum level, an artwork is neither too simple nor too complex; it holds our attention and it is pleasurable (De Marinis, "Dramaturgy" 106-109). It is possible that audience members found Lindsay's and Kennis's moments too simple rather than profound, and their attention wandered away.

However, I believe that there is more going on here, that these two instances exemplify postmodern dance's status as a restricted field, on a couple of levels. As a

restricted field according to Bourdieu's taxonomy, it is important to remember that postmodern dance is countercultural in its acknowledgement of stillness and staggering as legitimate expressions of concert dance; this code differs radically from commercial theatrical dance. Recall that many audience members do not identify movement that they perceive as ungraceful as "dance," maintaining instead that dance must have movement (i.e., not stillness), music, and a choreographed pattern and be graceful and coordinated (Francis 55-56). Some of the novice dance-goers I interviewed may have tacitly shared this definition of dance and perhaps politely or unconsciously disregarded Lindsay standing still and Kennis staggering as moments in a "dance" concert that did not appear to be actual dancing. Put another way, codes mediate perception and we might liken novice viewers who don't attend to stillness and staggering in a dance concert to members of a primitive island culture who don't perceive the people in photos, seeing only smudges there (Danesi, *Quest* 93). A symmetry emerges in *Canyon*: the usually invisible audience is exposed, and the performer on stage seems not to be seen. Lindsay said of the sometimes inattentive audience members, "they're doing things that make me think that they think I can't see them," even as she was doing things—like standing still—that may have rendered her all but invisible to some watchers.

In addition, the interviewees' apparent disinterest in Lindsay's prolonged gaze and Kennis's stumbling speaks to an audience limited not only by interpretive codes but by kinesthetic experience. This line of thinking originates with an idea that these movements may be more satisfying and meaningful to do than to watch; something to which the more seasoned dance professionals I interviewed—Jasperse himself, Nancy, and Nell—alluded. Nancy, for example, said, "I've done it in my own work. I think as makers and as dancers,

we can get to this sort of psychosomatic place. It's a sensing in the body that's really compelling, and we spend hours and it's real and it's transformative, experientially. I can do a practice or a piece or a dance or an improv that I'm completely captivated by. I've never done LSD trips but I can imagine, hearing about it, it's like, 'Whoa! [looking at her slowly arcing arm] Cool, man! Look at that, and the way that shapes and the way that goes there! Oh man!' You know. I think we get completely captivated by the experience of it." She speculated that movements that are slow and soft and go on for prolonged periods of time engage the doer or maker more than they do the viewer. Even when Jasperse, in a separate conversation about *Canyon*, stressed that the visceral guides this project inasmuch as he imagined a vicarious sense for the viewer of another person's physical experience, he was referring to the bigness and the rushing sensation of the opening section. It may in fact be easier for most audience members to mobilize a kinesthetic response to such adrenaline-infused expansive dancing than to the smallness and subtlety of Kennis's and Lindsay's solos. There is support for this theory; slow, soft movements, and ones that are spatially contained or minimized, are unlikely to catch and hold the attention of many viewers. One fMRI study found that viewers with no dance experience prefer whole body movements and ones with significant displacement of the body in space—big leaps and jumps—and that aesthetically sensitive areas of the brain were activated when they watched these big movements. Furthermore, this neural activation correlated with viewers' accounts of the movement they liked the best. These viewers liked movement involving only one limb the least (Calvo-Merino et al, "Toward" 916-918). I can extrapolate then that for the novice audience members I interviewed, the limited range of Lindsay's and Kennis's movement may not have adequately stimulated their interest.

However, I go a bit further and expand Nancy's theory; I think slow, minimal, prolonged movement engages the doer or maker more than the viewer *and* probably excludes viewers who have never made or done such movements themselves. Both Kennis's and Lindsay's solos in question require the audience to translate what they see—a woman losing her balance and regaining it, a woman standing and looking—into sensation in order for them to be meaningful. Jasperse said of his dances in performance that the best experience he can create for an audience member is “the one where I figure out how to bring somebody into *some* version of that experience that we have in the doing.” This in itself is not so unusual; lots of dancing asks for just that cross-modal impulse. Many people may have stood still, lost in thought and reflection, and may be able to bring themselves into Lindsay's experience doing the same thing. However, that experience of deeply investigating a movement as Kennis did with the edge of her foot, interrogating its sensory and qualitative and spatial nuance, is one that only a very limited segment of the population—dancers who have worked in the postmodern idiom such as some of my dance-insider interviewees, Jasperse, and his dancers—has had. It becomes problematic when most of the audience has never done such an intense experiential movement interrogation; the sight of Kennis stumbling then might not cue ideas of testing the boundaries of one's relationship with gravity. Some fMRI research specifically examining perception of dance shows that there is greater mirror neuron activity in dancers when they watch movement from their own motor repertory compared with movement they have seen frequently but never performed. That is, the brain's response to seeing an action depends on previous experience doing that action (Calvo-Merino et al, “Seeing” 1905-1907). The implication here is that those people who have done a particular movement themselves will have a stronger reaction to and richer

experience of watching it. Appreciation of Kennis's staggering as an exploration—of precarious footing and of the relative instability of a simple act like standing—becomes the nearly exclusive domain of postmodern dance experts. It's not surprising that only Michael and Nancy, steeped in the world of postmodern dance, expressed appreciation for *Canyon's* stumbling and staggering.

I note that the exploration of sensory minutia, stillness, and introspection is a part not only of *Canyon* but also of much downtown dance. At the time of this writing, I found evidence of it with a quick glance at dance reviews in the *New York Times*. A recent performance—*Eden as We Recall*, choreographed by former Trisha Brown dancer Stacy Spence for himself and another Trisha Brown alum and given as part of the *Platform 2012: Judson Now* series at Danspace Project in New York—was described by dance writer Gia Kourlas as “a dance about space: What does a room feel like? What influence does the environment have on the body?” (“Delicate”) Kourlas remarks upon Spence's “barely-there movements—crossing a leg, adjusting the position of an upturned palm, shifting the weight of a hip” and notes, “The details you normally gloss over—the way a wall juts out or ordinary background noise—are brought to the forefront in ‘Eden.’” However, she concludes her review saying that the dance has its fair share of dullness, and “At its heart, ‘Eden’ is a sensory trip for two” (“Delicate”). That is, she is aware that the work yielded more to the performers experiencing it than to those observing it. It, like *Canyon*, is part of a school of postmodern dance that honors experiential exploration as a choreographic device, possibly excluding the viewer to some extent.

Jasperse himself is aware of this split between dance for the doing and dance for the watching, and clearly stated that he makes dances that favor the audience's rather than the

performers' experience: "Dance is one of these funny forms where some of the people that get engaged in dance get engaged in dance because of *dancing*. They get engaged in it as a dance practitioner because of the experience of dancing. That's a very different experience than the experience of *watching* dancing. And they're interrelated, but I really want to see them as distinct and separate. Or, to not get confused about when I'm doing the one and when I'm doing the other and what I want to do with my decision-making in relationship to a public, knowing that they're going to experience it from that one side." In that way, Jasperse answers Parviainen's call for separate assignments for the dancer and the choreographer—one to interrogate the meaning of movement in the body and the other to interrogate the meaning of its appearance, bridging the gap between the felt and the visible (*Bodies Moving* 135). Why, then, viewers were silent on the matter of Lindsay in the forest of flags, and Kennis stumbling, and many other slow and contemplative sections of *Canyon* is an interesting question. The silence may have a methodological cause, attributable to the interview process in any of the ways posited above. It may be a viewer-side issue, code-based because some audience members didn't consider stillness and stumbling as legitimate manifestations of "dance" and thus disregarded them, or perception-based because some audience members had neither the attention span to stay engaged with the minimal movement nor the first-hand experience necessary to mobilize the "inner mimicry" variety of kinesthetic empathy that would in turn allow those movements to resonate. I consider any of these viewer-side explanations in light of Jasperse's explicitly stated respect for the watching public and conclude that either my silent interviewees do not possess the dance-viewing competencies that Jasperse thinks they do, or that he has a different public in mind.

Chapter 4: Dancing Emerges

In this chapter, rather than looking at where communication broke down resulting in brown-outs in audience understanding, I now consider successful communication, and successful communication of a very particular sort. This chapter takes as its starting points two of Jasperse's statements that I think have far-reaching implications. The first of these was introduced in Chapter 3: his belief in dance's poetic power that works in ways separate from language. Jasperse's definition of poetics—as that which keeps the interpretive space open rather than closing it down with a single, definitive meaning—and his simultaneous expression of a desire to distinguish meaning in dance from linguistic or literal meaning are compatible with Parviainen's theorizing wherein, referencing Heidegger, “poetising” is that in which all forms of art find their essence (*Bodies Moving* 136). I find the essence of dance, that which makes it itself, to be comprised of the human body in motion: its use of specific body parts, its use of time, its relationship to gravity and to space and to other bodies and objects. That is, the essence of dance, its poetics, is found in its formal properties. Former Graham company dancer and choreographer Jean Erdman seems to concur when she writes that dance as a “non-verbal poetical image” is properly received by attending to dance's rhythm, movement texture, and composition—basically, its formal elements.

The second, related, starting point for this chapter is Jasperse's answer to my question about the creative genesis of *Canyon*. He spoke of the piece he had just finished, *Truth, Revised Histories, Wishful Thinking, and Flat Out Lies* (2010), recounting how in it he had explored tricky concepts of what we believe and what we don't, but that the process had

culminated in a dance that made him question whether he could make something just beautiful: "...as problematic as that word has become in *my* consciousness through late twentieth-century discourse. But how do you even resolve what that is? But we still have some experience somewhere deep within that hasn't completely dried up, and there's a moment when even though we may not want to speak that word, we have something that *touches* us, and then, I just went for that...And that was actually my favorite point in the piece." He found that, "...after all of these images of that's-connected-to-this-history and da da da da, and that-plays-with-this-idea-in-this-way da da da da [speaking quickly, intentionally creating a busy-ness] and then suddenly you get to this space where you're like [inhalation, stops the busy-ness] it's dancing. Dancing emerged. And it gives me chills and I don't know why." He wanted to explore that dancing further with his next project, *Canyon*. Although he relayed this to me in a discussion about the opening section of *Canyon*—and indeed he may only have been referring to the opening section—this chapter centers on our experience of that dancing throughout *Canyon* that touches us, where interpretive, analytical words come to an end and we swiftly inhale.

In this chapter then, I address the dancing that emerges and distinguishes itself from intellectual busy-ness. I consider its recourse to the body and the senses and its essential media of people and time and gravity and space, and I attempt to chart how meaning-making happens there, even in the absence of explicit aboutness statements. We have the sense that, in addition to the conceptual understanding that produces such aboutness statements, something else is going on. Joan Acocella, in her article "Imagining Dance," acknowledges an intellectual meaning-making for dance—tantamount to the connotative complex I have discussed—but then shifts to a different realm in her analysis: "No, dance is

not...in the language of reason and morals. As everyone knows, the mind can operate in completely different languages—dream, music, higher mathematics—and dance is one of those languages” (12-13). This way of understanding that is distinct from reason echoes Jasperse’s talk, and comes up explicitly here and there in some of the audience interviews. Both Kristin and Nancy spoke of the times when they were thinking and analyzing *Canyon* as they watched it, and relayed how that was a sign that the piece wasn’t working. Somehow, the dance was at its most effective for them when they were not intellectualizing it. Erdman seems to echo that sentiment: “Many a member of the contemporary dance audience is comparable to a radio operator trying to pick up a short-wave program on a long-wave set. When nothing is heard and the brain is left with its own vacuum, the cry goes up: ‘It’s beyond me! I don’t get it!’ The poor man is ashamed of his brain—as though that were the organ he should be using!” (48). Unlike that poor man, Kristin and Nancy were able to “pick up” the dance with more success when the intellect was not engaged, by calling on other organs of reception.

Acocella maintains that, separate from our reasoning, dance accesses something deep in our experience; she refers to a “biochemical” level, to an understanding that bypasses the intellect and resides in our bodies. Jasperse seems to indicate a bodily understanding, too, with his inhalation that changes the tone of his talk and with his reference to the physical sensation of getting chills. Scholars of visual art, music, and film (e.g. Arnheim; Dewey; Grewe, Kopiez, and Altenmüller; Sobchack; Zeki) write of an understanding that is grounded in bodily experience, specifically in the senses. As explored in Chapter 2, such an embodied knowledge is certainly operative in dance, functioning through direct perception of movement, through sympathetic kinesthesia, and through recognition of patterns. In his

writing about the relationship between meaning and the body, Mark Johnson offers an explanation for embodied knowledge that is easily translated to a dance context: “According to the view I am developing, meaning is grounded in bodily experience; it arises from our feeling of qualities, sensory patterns, movements, changes, and emotional contours” (70). Johnson maintains that there is no separate area of the brain for conceptual knowledge. All our understanding of concepts arises from, is in fact the same as, the understanding we gain from our embodied experience. Johnson finds the connection between our physicality and our conceptual knowledge in body-based metaphor—the way we shape our thoughts about abstract concepts in terms of the body and its sensations and relationships to space (135-167).¹⁶ As an example of such a body-based metaphor, Yuri Lotman speculates that the relationship between human weight, gravity, and the vertical position of the body leads to a universal opposition of up and down, such that the expression “he’s reached the top” can be understood by anyone in any culture (*Universe* 132). If this is so, then he has provided an example of how the use of levels and of vertical relationships of dancers on stage—formal properties of the dance—could carry immediate, inherent, pre-reflective semantic content. A dancer above another dancer means something when we see it, before we think about it. That is, its meaning has not been translated through a process of conceptualization; it is immanent.

Immediate, body-based understanding resists verbalization for all but the most articulate of dance-watchers; as Jasperse asserted, dance has a way of meaning that is polar to, or at least separate from, the verbal. That’s a challenge for a study that both relies on

¹⁶ While Johnson, and Johnson and Lakoff’s, theories on embodied metaphor are not untroubled, there is general agreement in cognitive science that sensorimotor experience informs our thinking, and embodied metaphor provides a plausible explanation for the mechanics of this (see Chapter 2).

information from verbal sources and presents its findings in a verbal format. What does this sort of meaning-making sound like in an interview? It is not talk of aboutness, interpretation, or connotation; rather, it is just description of what the senses perceived. To review the premise described in Chapter 1, description constitutes a denotative meaning-making inasmuch as 1) the viewer could describe the dancing at all, as opposed to being at a loss for words in the face of an incomprehensible sea of stimuli, 2) the viewer noticed *that* particular thing, choosing it from the many other things in the dance he or she could talk about, and 3) the viewer framed his or her description in particular terms, constituting a unique way of seeing and thus a unique meaning inferred. When audience members describe the dance they saw, their words disclose a personal understanding of it. In their straightforward descriptions of their experience of the dance, these audience members do not attempt to explain what the dance might mean interpretively, but their words give a sense of what that moment *is* for each of them, its denotation. I think that truths about meaning lie in their simple accounts of the experience, evident in the aspects of the dance that they choose to include in their description—indicating that those are the important ones—and in the words and gestures that they use. Furthermore, the sensorial, immediate, and somewhat ambiguous nature of this descriptive meaning-making is appropriate for dance, getting at the poetic and nonverbal to which Jasperse refers.

In the interviews, there are abundant instances of audience members' descriptions carrying this sort of innate meaning. Shelley's description of John's solo provides an excellent example. She offered an interpretation of his solo—as connoting an “infinite loop” of trying and failing, one that she ultimately found heart-breaking—but if we examine only her description of this solo's formal properties, disregarding her interpretive words, we find

that it reveals the same meaning as her explicit aboutness statement: “He rolled on [the marley roll]...but slipped back down, and scooched around, seemed to be dragged, and pulled, and then slumped back down. And then did it over again like five times...he just kept on doing it...He’d just slide slowly, and the rhythm, the pacing was exactly the same...the two other people, they made it to the other side. And did beautiful things behind it, came back, but like, he never, he never got to the other side.” Her interpretation is readily available in her description, in the way he slipped back down and slumped back down—“back” indicating a return to something and “slipped down” and “slumped down” indicating surrender into gravity, into down-ness. He “scooched around,” which doesn’t sound comfortable or particularly productive, and she described the quality of his movement as outside of his control, as though an outside force were dragging and pulling him. He did this repeatedly and slowly, always returning to the same surrender, the same discomfort, and the same lack of control. There was a boundary over which other people crossed (I admit that her words “made it to the other side” carry an interpretation), but never John. Her description of the formal properties tells everything about what the movement meant to her. Here is dance at its most powerful: perceived in its own language, without translation. Here is dance doing what only it can do, embodying a world and showing it to us so that we too can experience it.

As an example, Shelley’s account of John’s solo is particularly useful first because although she ultimately found a metonymous connection to surrender, she grounded her meaning-making in the movement’s formal properties: the body and its action, timing, spatial aspects, and movement qualities. As John himself talked about the solo in terms of its weighted quality and anatomical initiations, her description becomes evidence of a way of

understanding shared between dance-makers and audience members. Furthermore, her meaning-making gives us additional insight into empathetic emotional responses because she linked her description both to an explicit interpretation of the infinite loop of failure as well as to an explanation of why it affected her so deeply: “I’m tearing up right now. It was so, it was such a reluctant (long pause) He was *at the end* of his rope. He was trying and just didn’t, couldn’t. Over and over again.” Finally, Shelley’s description is interesting because it does incorporate so many different formal elements, whereas other viewers made sense of a given section of the dance in, say, only spatial terms or only qualitatively. It is a particularly rich understanding of the dance, according to dance’s own language or logic. It is also a neat demonstration of direct perception and sympathetic kinesthesia, two of the permutations of embodied cognition discussed in Chapter 2.

Viewer descriptions like this, that make meaning through a dance-specific logic, are scattered throughout all the audience interviews. Unfortunately, the value of description in meaning-making was not clear to me when I designed and executed the dance-maker interviews. My audience interviews are full of description; I solicited it often in my questions as a way to coax the interviewees into talking about their experiences with *Canyon*. Very seldom, however, did I ask Jasperse or one of the dancers to describe a part of the dance for me in that straightforward way. I asked the dance-makers to describe *their experience* of the dance, in the creative process or in performance—“What’s that like for you?” “How did you start working on that section?”—but not to focus on the dance itself, to describe the dance rather than their experience in it, perhaps betraying my own conception of a dancer’s felt way of understanding dance as opposed to a viewer’s seen way. For that reason I am missing swaths of information from the dance-makers that would lend richness to this study. I find,

however, that Jasperse and the dancers talk most often about *Canyon* in pure-dance terms. They referred to the dance's kinesthetic aspects, its spatial aspects, and its choreographic devices—the formal elements—much more than they did to interpretation or connotative meaning-making. When description of those formal elements surfaces in audience members' interviews, I consider it an instance of shared codes; both dance-makers and audience members are conceiving of the dance according to the same logic.

Kinesthesia, space, and choreographic devices are certainly not the only languages in operation in *Canyon*, but they are prominent in these interviews. Likewise, the kinesthetic and the visual are not the only senses involved. That this is a whole-body affair is obvious with regard to the dancers, but it is also true for the audience members; we are hearing, seeing, smelling, and sensing dance in our muscles and nerves when we perceive it. However, in this analysis I explore that about which my interviewees spoke; the sound and the smell of the dance just didn't come up in their talk. I reiterate, though, that just as denotative meaning-making and connotative meaning-making are constantly entangled, just as there are many logics at work at once, so are the various sensory impressions constantly informing our understanding of the dance.

Kinesthetic logic

Broadly speaking, "kinesthesia" is the sensation of movement. In shaping my analysis of this aspect of viewers' meaning-making, I refer often to Dee Reynolds's interview-based project *Watching Dance: Kinesthetic Empathy*, as described in her article, "Kinesthesia, Empathy, and Related Pleasures: An Inquiry into Audience Experiences of Watching Dance." Reynolds identifies several kinesthetic responses including enjoyment of dance's virtuosity, pleasure in imagining oneself dancing, sensual responses to dance's effort, and escapist

responses through the up-lifting feeling of watching graceful movement (71). Reynolds maintains that this broad range of responses springs from a viewer's empathy with the performers, and thus they are forms of a *kinesthetic empathy* in which viewers respond to the sensation of the performers' movement. A subset of this type of response is what Reynolds terms "inner mimicry": the viewers' feeling of moving along with the performers, or of imagining how the performers' movements would feel.¹⁷ As discussed in Chapter 3, Jasperse says of his dances in performance that the best experience he can create for audience members is the one that brings them into a version of the dancers' experience. This inner mimicry, communicating the dancers' experience and sensation to the viewers via their sense of sight, becomes pivotal for *Canyon*, and if we question how it might work, returns us to a discussion of mirror neuron activation and covert imitation. It is not clear from fMRI studies how activation of the mirror neuron network translates into our conscious experience of dance. How does it *feel*? Is it pleasurable? How does it play into our understanding of the performance, and how might we identify the influence of mirror neurons in an audience member's account of *Canyon*? While these questions remain unanswered, I consider the theory of mirror neuron activation to hold the most plausible explanation for how viewers experience something of what the dancers do.

There are very few explicit references to feeling the movement of the dancers in my audience interviews—the inner mimicry that Reynolds also describes as viewers imaginatively "trying on" the movement they see. Ramona demonstrated this type of imaginative, empathetic projection when she related her experience dancing with friends at a club to what she saw Jasperse's dancers doing: "It [dancing at the club] was so much fun. It

¹⁷ In other taxonomies, kinesthetic empathy *is* inner mimicry, but like Reynolds I use "kinesthetic empathy" to mean a wide spectrum of sensation-based responses.

was almost cathartic. I think that's [why I feel] envy; that looks so cathartic, what they do on the dance floor. So expressive, and they're so at home in their bodies and I *know* it's choreographed but, they're into it." She imagined that the dancers were "into it"—that they were feeling catharsis and expressiveness—in the way she had in her recent dancing experience. Furthermore, Ramona's "trying on" of the dancers' movement is evident when she mused about some of the partnered floorwork, "I wonder if that hurts." Meg experienced it when she expressed her concern for the performers after the opening section—"oh my god, they have to rest." Having watched them exert themselves without respite for a long period of time, she imagined how that would feel and concluded they must be near the end of their endurance; they have to rest.

Again, such accounts of feeling what the performers were feeling—experiences of inner mimicry—are rare among my interviews. Furthermore, I find few of the other kinesthetic responses, such as escapist pleasure, that Reynolds did. This may be because, unlike Reynolds, my study was not designed specifically to investigate the kinesthetic, or because the types of dance that Reynolds used in her study—ballet, bharatanatyam, and contemporary dance with a strong ballet base—have differing codes from postmodern dance. Instead, I find my interviewees describing bodies and body parts and faces, sensations of weight and lightness, momentum and speed and frenzy, sensuality and occasionally sexuality, effort and ease. They described actions—run, leap, scooch, slip, collapse—and they described qualities of movement such as fluid or strong. All these types of descriptions I consider kinesthetic—reactions to the dance in terms of the body itself rather than relating the body to a spatial pattern or an interpretation.

Audience members' perception of kinesthetic aspects of the dance surfaced not only in action words but also in accounts that highlight body parts, such as Natalie's description of a moment in the "corner duet": "...the other movement that I absolutely loved was, two of the guys and the girl in the blue and black dress were upstage right and she was leaning over the back of the guy in the yellow shirt, and she would like, touch her head [juts her head forward and then demonstrates her chin jerking up] and it would jerk up. It was like it wasn't connected to the rest of her. Like her chin would touch him and it would just, it was fascinating."

Canyon brought Ginny's attention to body parts in a way that was unexpected: "There was that one section where especially this one woman with the short hair was really heavily like [inhales with noticeable rise in chest, exhales] breathing, and you could see all their chests were... And there was another moment where the dark-haired woman with the braid, and the guy with the shorts were lying down right in front of me, and again, it was just, you were watching chests rise and fall." Her perception of rising and falling chests as the salient feature of these moments led her to other important ideas. First, it became a marker of how *Canyon* was off-code, relative to the dance she is familiar with: "Comparing it to the ballet where everything just seems clean, and no one sweats, and there's make-up, and I think of the dancers' legs, and arms. I don't think of their chests. And it's all about being graceful and beautiful, and this was totally not." She is acknowledging that ballet keeps the body at a remove from ours. The ballet dancer's body is meant to be appreciated visually, for the lines it creates; where kinesthesia does come into play, it is for emotional empathy for a character or for the thrill and glory of virtuosity. It's a different sort of dancing body that draws our attention to base human functions such as breathing. As Ramona observed, "Mostly dance is

kept *away* from the audience. Ballet, or that production that we went to [a recent showcase of contemporary dance]. It's far away [and] you're far away, but this, it's so intimate in the black box that you *can* make eye contact with a dancer, and you see their sweat. You see the strain on their faces or whatever.” The heightened awareness of the body that Ginny and Ramona perceived seems to bring their attention to the nitty-gritty, to sweat rather than to make-up and to labored breathing rather than to pretty arms and legs. This attention to the real and the functional and the immediate is certainly a part of *Canyon's* logic, and part of the inheritance from Judson Dance Theater that it shares with other Movement Research-influenced downtown dance. Ginny acknowledged “that the breathing and the exhaustion was a part of the piece for me, for sure.”

Interestingly, even as she noted the importance of the really real—the exhaustion and heavy breathing—to the piece, she questioned the authenticity of this exhaustion: “It got me thinking about endurance, and again, just about the physical body in space and...I didn't know whether it was being highlighted or exaggerated for effect, the breathing, or whether it really was like, oh shit, I'm really tired from all that running around! [laughing]” Was it genuine labored breathing, or staged? Jim too asked “Are they breathing heavy because they're really breathing heavy?...I mean, at least one time I'm thinking well, they weren't moving that fast, but their breath is *forced*.” For both Jim and Ginny, attention to the chests and to breathing led them to an awareness of how even things that appear real are suspect on stage. Nancy, a choreographer and dance instructor, understood exhaustion to be integral to the piece like Ginny did, but her more experienced eye picked out a sign of a dancer's exhaustion that is much less likely to be contrived than heavy breathing—not connecting through his “core:” “...particularly the one guy who was clearly exhausted. He was just not

connecting through his core as much; he *looked* really tired...he couldn't sustain it as long." Because she didn't rely on a physical sign that could easily be staged for effect—heaving chests—for her meaning-making, she didn't question the authenticity of the dancers' exhaustion.

Like noticing body parts, I consider audience members' remarks about the quality of movement—the way in which it was performed, the “how”—to be examples of kinesthetic meaning-making. Shelley remarked on a short section for two men, describing it as, “...a short quick electronic segment, and they came out and they just were like marionettes, and it was real quick and forced...” Her perception of that duet was entirely grounded in its quality—she described nothing of its actions or spatial relations, only that it was quick and forced. She used the image of marionettes to help the listener, me, visualize it but, notably, she did not conclude that the men were meant to represent marionettes. Rather, the quality itself resonated for her; she went on to say, “It seemed like how I feel on Sunday mornings sometimes. I just do not want to get up, but I have to.” Just as Jasperse wished for, she has experienced some version of what the dancers did.

Spatial logic

Dance intersects with art when we consider the visual; we can see the bodies and materials on stage as we see a picture, be it static or moving. There is light and color and the dancers' bodies make shapes and lines, the space of the stage is composed into groupings and patterns, and, through the flow of time, spatial paths and trajectories unfold.

Experienced and inexperienced audience members alike reacted to visual elements such as lighting and scenic design, including the lines of tape on the walls and floor, the costumes, and the triangular orange flags aligned in the space. Even though the way the tape designs

and marley roll shaped the space was intrinsic to some audience understandings of the work—and Jasperse's interest in structuring the space with these design elements is notable—it is on the spatial aspects of *Canyon's* choreography that I will focus here, keeping us in the realm of dance and its inherent language. This discussion of *Canyon's* visual side addresses the lines and shapes of the dancers' bodies, the relationships among bodies relative to the performance space, and the paths in space made by bodies and body parts.

As Jasperse and the dancers adapted *Canyon* to the Wexner space in a few short days of rehearsal, much of their attention was focused on these spatial aspects of the work. They had performed the piece in the much larger proscenium stage of the Brooklyn Academy of Music and in the tightly compressed space of Abrons Art Center in New York, but the irregular shape and medium size of the Wexner Center Performance Space required that the work be re-created to some extent. Furthermore, the audience was seated on three sides and above in a balcony, creating multiple sight-lines for the work.

In these rehearsals, Jasperse tweaked groupings of dancers, adjusting each one's spacing a foot that way, two feet back, and no, a bit over. He asked various backstage personnel to stand in for himself so that he could step out and see how all five dancers would look in the space. Dancers adjusted the size of their movements, the number of steps they took, and their paths across the stage so that they would arrive at specific destinations or preserve important spatial relationships among themselves. Keenly aware of *Canyon's* spatial composition, Jasperse oversaw all of these painstaking adjustments.

Most audience members responded readily to these aspects of the dance. I find that they employed a spatial logic in their understanding when they described groupings of dancers on stage, pathways through space, shape, or direction. Indeed, the spatial formations

of the dancers on stage provided an entry point for the many interviewees who readily described them and used them to identify sections of the dance such as “the part where everyone was in a chevron.” For some audience members, a spatial logic dominated their descriptions; they seemed to understand sections of the dance in terms of the pictures created. Audience descriptions of the diagonal line at the end of *Canyon*’s big opening section provide ample illustration of how spatial elements of the dance were salient for some viewers. This diagonal line follows the extended period in which all five dancers have been leaping and running, crossing and re-crossing the space with considerable momentum and speed. Michael described what follows like this: “They all found their way into a line, a diagonal line side to side. Not touching, but with space between them. And I could feel it coming; by the time there were three of them already in line, that’s when I saw the line...There was this anticipation of like oh, they’re about to find this geometric formation. It’s the *same* geometric formation that the flags were in at that moment, in the opening, but it’s not perpendicular and it’s not parallel; it’s kind of crossing the flag line at this oblique angle.”

Michael’s understanding of that moment is essentially spatial; he defined it by means of the linear configuration of bodies in space, and the way that configuration is realized over time. By contrast, a kinesthetic perception of the end of the big opening section is worded like Meg’s in terms of the transition from bodies quickly locomoting to bodies in stillness, a rest after a flurry of activity. Meg’s description did not emphasize the emergence of a line in space, but rather the end of the dancer’s exertions: “I think I had been getting to the point where I was like oh my god, they have to rest...So when the first person stopped I remember being like okay, something’s changing. And so to see them all stop was nice.”

Some descriptions of that diagonal line moment, such as Manisha's and Jim's, mobilized both spatial and kinesthetic logics, acknowledging both the line and the stillness after activity, as well as the conformity after disunity. Jim said, "It wasn't until the end of that first segment that there was a commonality to what they did. Kind of building to the end where two people stopped moving, then another one stopped moving, and in the end the final two people that were moving on the floor stopped and they were all in a line together." The importance of the emerging diagonal line to Jim's description was present in his words, but was emphasized by his very expressive use of his hands, which indicated the circling movement of dancers, their eventual coming to rest, and the resulting diagonal formation. There is a third kind of logic apparent in Meg's, Manisha's, and Jim's descriptions—and in Shelley's in the next paragraph—that I do not examine in depth here. It is a logic of anticipation and probable outcomes, evident in their statements about expectations of the diagonal line, and wondering what will happen next. The role that expectation plays is discussed more in the next section of this chapter, but here it is important to note again that seldom in our perception of dance is there only one logic or language mobilized.

Nonetheless, spatial composition dominated some audience members' descriptions of *Canyon*, and—as with the delight that kinesthesia provided to some viewers—provoked deeply pleasurable experiences. Shelley said, "And when they had landed head to head I was just like, please do something symmetrical. Please do something symmetrical [shout of delight]...and it *was symmetrical!*" Kristin also derived intense enjoyment from *Canyon's* spatial elements. For her, like Michael, that diagonal line moment hinged on the relationship of the single dancer, John, who wore one of the orange flags by means of a slender pole rising out of the back of his shirt, to the triangular orange flags already aligned in the space. More than

simply noting it, however, she found that relationship profound and satisfying: “People had been doing their own thing, carving through space or whatever, and then they come and they stand in one place and only when other people join them does it become clear that it’s a shape in the space [a line]. And then I realized that the flag guy was also in line with all of the other flags. So that there were two diagonals that bisected each other and the flag guy was the bisect... The flag diagonal was right in front of my face. So I think that that sort of changed my experience of it. And I was just like *WHOA!* That’s crazy!”

Kristin’s “*Whoa!*” is a passionate, inarticulate-but-telling reaction to a pithy, elegant bit of spatial choreography. The line emerges and when it’s complete, she sees that there was a second relationship there all along, waiting to be fulfilled by the completion of the line. She is squarely in Acocella’s realm, perceiving a danced, visual phenomenon and finding that it is profound in a way that resists words, that is not in the language of reason. In fact, Kristin’s explanation of her own experience of the diagonal line is framed only in terms of what it is not—not intellectual or analytical: “I am incapable of not being analytic because that’s just my current mode of existing...so then I guess the moments that I stop thinking about that become very salient, or they really stand out. So moments like that line—I mean I can’t not think about the fact that it’s two lines bisecting, but I didn’t so much think about like, what does that mean? It just *meant* the geometry, and to be able to just be interested in the bodies and the space just as that, if that’s possible. Those moments really stand out.” The moment can be translated into the realm of connotation—experienced viewer Alyssa understood “the flag guy,” John, to be a cyborg here—but for Kristin it is wholly satisfying without that extra semantic mapping.

If Kristin's understanding is not in the language of reason and analysis, how is she accomplishing it? Acocella offers an explanation, first with a description of a lone dancer who exits the stage just as a "great mass of dancers flies onto the stage behind him" (13). She then hypothesizes about why this is a thrilling moment:

I think it reflects all experience that our brains know and love, the experience of being overwhelmed by a huge rush of something. The sudden constriction or dilation of the blood vessels, the neurotransmitters flooding the synapses of the neural pathways, terror, wonder, illness: many things happen to us not evenly, but in a big flood...our very bones answer, 'Yes, we know' (13).

For her, as it seems to have been for Kristin, it is a visceral response, a "gut reaction." What Acocella describes poetically, Ellen Dissanayake approaches through anthropology and cognitive science., hypothesizing about how our bodies learn to respond to art without intellectualizing it. Like others (e.g. Malloch, Stern), Dissanayake finds that all mothers and babies engage in a conversation-like activity wherein both partners match the other's intensity, contour, duration, and rhythm cross-modally. That is, mother may express a rhythm vocally and baby will match it with movement (Dissanayake 35). Evolution favors this rhythmic attunement and the communication and "mutuality" it leads to, and ceremonies and performing arts are sensorily and emotionally gratifying because they elaborate on this early mother-baby exchange (Dissanayake 145). That is, we see the rhythm and contour of the dancers' movement on stage and attune our bodies to it, creating a mutuality, an avenue of communication through the senses, that is intrinsically pleasurable. The understanding that Acocella describes is also a cross-modal sensory one; the *sight* of the rush of many dancers replacing the lone one gives rise to *sensation* that is, perhaps

subconsciously, meaningful. Interestingly, this connection between sight and sensation is the assumption inherent in a theory of kinesthetic empathy based on motor neuron activation or covert imitation; Acocella's and Dissanayake's observations add another dimension to that neurological research.

If sight is the doorway into this meaning-making, one must have the eye to see the dance's visual composition, to recognize art-intrinsic, visual elements such as lines and groupings. According to gestalt psychology principles, we perceive form immediately following demonstrated rules of simplicity, similarity, nearness, and good continuation of the elements that make up a form (Goldstein 165-179, Sainte-Martin 72). To be sure, all of my interviewees were attuned to these patterns, to some degree, but this question of degree is important. That is, some used spatial composition as a primary language for understanding the work while others only referred occasionally to a spatial formation of the dancers on stage. The intersection of the diagonal line of dancers with the diagonal line of flags was critical for Kristin, Alyssa, and Michael, but I didn't even notice it. Why did some viewers perceive two intersecting lines while others perceived only a line of humans? Impressions of the line would surely vary depending on where the viewer sat, but what about those people for whom the line's line-ness didn't seem to register? Did Meg even notice that the dancers were standing in a line? When I said that the dancers were in a diagonal line she knew what part I was talking about, but she didn't mention their formation at all—only their breathing and exhaustion. The line of dancers and the line of flags have the same gestalt features of similarity, nearness, and good continuation, so what accounts for the differences in perception? It seems that discerning spatial patterning on stage may in fact require a special way of seeing, and that gestalt theory is troubled on a couple of fronts here.

First, the elements of the dance picture that form spatial patterns are actual humans, generating powerful forces to compete with gestalt principles. The cognitive bias compels us to identify people moving around a space within the visual display of *Canyon*, and to apprehend representational content therein. Meanwhile, our kinesthetic sense muddies the water further by attuning us to these people's bodies and perceived sensations and emotions. Multiple logics or codes operate here, and in some cases perhaps our understanding of *Canyon* in terms of its formal visual properties—its lines and shapes—may be eclipsed by our powerful inclinations to understand it in terms of representation and human action. Second, Jasperse employs a visual logic that is markedly different from that of commercial theatrical dance, orchestrating more sophisticated uses of space than those found in more widely accessed dance forms. For example, unison and symmetry dominate Broadway musicals, reality TV, and Classical ballet—the dance forms to which novice interviewees referred explicitly—as well as TV commercials and music videos, with which I assume some of those interviewees are familiar, based on their talk. In those forms, the dancers perform the same movements at the same time, or two groups of dancers perform the same movement on the opposite side, such that one group appears to be a mirror image of the other. Sometimes a soloist is featured in the center of these groups. In music videos that reach millions of viewers, such as those by artists such as Lady Gaga and Beyoncé, this visual formula appears again and again, creating and reinforcing one code for how viewers shall perceive the dance picture before them. By contrast, Jasperse crafts a counterbalance of groupings on the stage, sometimes dividing his group of five into two duets happening in non-symmetrical places on the stage, plus a soloist offsetting both duets. All three groups are simultaneously performing different movements.¹⁸

¹⁸ While Jasperse does at times in *Canyon* employ a visual logic that is more complex than more prevalent

How difficult is it to perceive this sort of visual complexity, for which commercial theatrical dance gives us so little practice? Among the dance outsiders I interviewed, some people discussed the dance in spatial terms more fluently and often than others. Even among the dance insiders, some consistently based their discussion on spatial aspects while others only mentioned them in passing, indicating that attunement to aspects of the dance that overlap with visual art is not a default mode of perception even among experienced dance-goers. It takes a special way of seeing to perceive, as Shelley did: “I really liked a lot of the two against three action [in *Canyon*], ‘cause there were five dancers...My favorite parts of the performance were when there would be two dancers doing some sort of movement and then one would section off and join the other three in like, a ‘V.’” This is deployment of a visual logic that is stronger than the urge to perceive dancers as emotional, psychologically motivated actors or as breathing bodies and sees instead elements that can be arranged or grouped in satisfying ways. Furthermore, Shelley’s way of seeing can appreciate asymmetric groupings despite their scarcity in commercial theatrical dance.

Like the ability to discern the formal properties of John’s solo discussed in Chapter 3—to see its scooching and twisting, its repeated elements, and its released weight, rather than having that view eclipsed by an empathetic response to him as a red-headed man writhing on the stage floor or by the cognitive bias that demands to know what he’s supposed to be—the ability to discern formal visual elements is apparently a special skill.

Turning away from *Canyon* momentarily, to William Forsythe’s *One Flat Thing, reproduced*

theatrical dance forms, I note that his attention to spatial aspects of the dance at all actually provides an entry point to the work that some postmodern dance lacks. Some solo improvisation, for example, gives little attention to the picture created, focusing instead only on sensation and energetic changes. By contrast, Jasperse’s concern for the visual aspects of *Canyon* can make it easier on the eyes of viewers more familiar with commercial theatrical dance; the recognition of spatial formations such as lines provides an anchor for many of the viewers’ talk.

(2000), affords a glimpse of how dance is described in the absence of that special skill, and how that skill can be acquired. A Seattle reviewer said of *One Flat Thing, reproduced*, “There seem to be rules about who engages and does what when, but the result is a baffling cacophony of organized motion. At its peak, all the dancers are up there, flailing around in rigorously defined ways” (“We Review”). In fact, the dance is structured around interlocking systems of organization, including movement “alignments”—short instances of synchronization among dancers in which their movements might share similar shapes or related timing—and “cuing”—in which individual dancers’ movements serve as triggers for other movements, which in turn trigger still others. The cuing is like an internal clock; the dancers watch each other for the cues for their next movements (Forsythe and Zuniga Shaw). Alignments and cuing are formal spatial and temporal structures in the dance that can be hard to see. Without the eye for them, the dance is indeed a cacophony of motion. However, the website *Synchronous Objects* includes animated annotations laid over video of *One Flat Thing, reproduced*, helping the viewer see where the alignments occur and how the cuing functions. Once these formal elements are highlighted and the viewer can discern them, the world of the dance emerges. The many students whom I have assigned to watch the alignment and cuing annotation videos on the *Synchronous Objects* website are amazed by what has been revealed, captivated by the workings of this machine they now are able to see. Many of them write that they never knew a dance could be organized like this, and that they don’t think they will be able to watch dance again without looking for alignments and cuing. I explain that not all dances are made like this, but am pleased that they will go forward with eyes peeled for formal structures.

Choreographic logic: repetition and transposition

In addition to making kinesthetic sense and spatial sense of *Canyon*, audience members also understood the piece in compositional terms. That is, they noticed and described some of the choreographic devices used, finding satisfaction in the structure of the piece without attempting to assign connotative meaning to it. Jasperse and the dancers described several improvisational scores that Jasperse used to generate material for the piece, such as the score that dislocated action from attention and resulted in a particular movement quality, but in this section I am referring to phrases of pure dance that became building blocks for *Canyon*. Kennis recounted how these movement phrases were used in the creative process: “The bulk of the material that I personally do in *Canyon* is movement-based [as opposed to concept-based, like the scores], and that was phrase-work that John made and then taught us, and we spent the first two and a half months of the process just working on the phrases, [all the way] through, the *complete* phrase-work. And we would just do it in unison, just in a studio without any kind of spatial arrangement.” Kennis went on to explain how Jasperse then spatially and temporally manipulated that material with which the dancers had become so familiar: “Then after that period of time, John came back in and just tore it all apart...He'll take a phrase, a phrase that we've all rehearsed, and he'll be like okay, you do the original phrase up 'til this point, and you do it here in space. And then he'll kind of stare off into space for a second, and figure out the timing of what he's just given you, and then turn to me and pluck from the phrase, and not necessarily in sequence, material that he'll then put in a specific location in space and then just kind of see what happens when they come together. And then if it doesn't quite work out, he'll be like, oh you need one more second. Or you need two more seconds.”

Kennis's account reveals Jasperse manipulating the movement, having various dancers perform it in various relationships in time and space. Other dancers expanded that picture, describing how Jasperse transposed movement material from one body to another, or extracted movement from one context and transplanted it to another. Some of these manipulations are imperceptible to the audience, such as in the moment that Lindsay tells as, "...after that, when I walk a little bit out of the forest [of flags] and I close my eyes, that's just an abstraction of the duet that James and I made." She admitted that the connection between those two bits of dancing is not readily apparent to the audience. However, the evidence of other movement transpositions is more available to viewers. For example, Burr drew my attention to the relationships between sections of his duet with John and movement that appears elsewhere in *Canyon*, saying "Well, that very beginning part, when we're doing these hand things, that's the phrase that right now Lindsay does behind the [marley] hump," and "We have the floor material that comes from a phrase called 'sphinx' which the women do earlier, and he [Jasperse] made a contrapuntal section [out of the 'sphinx' phrase] so that we're like weaving on top of each other." That is, Jasperse transposed movement in and out of Burr and John's duet—the hand movement that Lindsay does lying alone behind the marley roll is the same hand movement that Burr and John do in symmetrical unison at the beginning of their duet, and the partnered floorwork they do is an extrapolation of the women's rolling "sphinx" phrase.

I did not perceive these instances of transposed movement until Burr alerted me to their existence and none of the audience members I interviewed mentioned them. However, knowing that these echoes of other dancing are embedded in the duet now informs my understanding of audience descriptions of another choreographic manipulation: repetition.

Audience members recounted instances of repetition as a compositional device that they found satisfying on its own terms. For example, Manisha described a phrase containing a distinctive hip swing that the two women do together and repeat later: “I liked the duet with the two women because they repeated it later and I could recognize it. They have this little hip sway thing that goes on, but they don’t do it forever. So when you see it, it’s like okay, and then they go on to something else. And it was nice to see it come up again, later... [when] they’re all kind of doing this recap, in a way, of things that they’d done elsewhere, earlier, so, I really appreciated the recap.” Kristin also noticed that movement, calling it “this hip thing;” and likening it to movement that Beyoncé and Shakira do. Kristin described the repetition of the hip thing, saying, “So to have them do that very sort of interesting movement that was *different* from the other kinds of movement that had been done, and to realize that I had just seen that, and I had liked it the first time. That tuned me in to watch the rest of the phrase and realize that it was the same as they had just done. And then they did it at the very end, I think facing the opposite direction—so facing me—and that was a place where being aware of the composition was actually quite satisfying. Because I was like, *aahhh*, I saw that earlier.”

Manisha and Kristin discerned movement being repeated, and it gave them a sense of fulfillment which may be attributed to any number of cognitive effects. First, recognizing something known—a sensation of familiarity—is, by many accounts, a precursor for enjoyment, the so-called “mere exposure” effect (Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 370). Second, “Repeated exposure to dance is likely to build perceptual fluency. Such fluency becomes associated with a sense of familiarity, and ultimately heightens preference for movement material” (Stevens et al, “Perceiving” 24). This is a dance-specific application of

the theory that aesthetic pleasure in general is grounded in the perceiver's ability to fluently process an artwork (Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman). Third, when a complicated movement phrase is repeated, we have a better chance of successfully predicting its outcome. Evolution rewards correct predictions, so when an expectation comes to fruition, we experience a feeling of pleasure (Huron 2-3); correctly predicting the next movement gives the viewer a sense of satisfaction (Hagendoorn 98). Finally, seeing something more than once gives the viewer a better chance of remembering it and thereby a better chance of making sense of it. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, in her analysis of the work of Judson Dance Theater choreographer Yvonne Rainer, notes that dance is resistant to vision, and that memory is a problem in performance as the viewer's satisfaction relies on it (12-38); Rainer said, "Dance is hard to see" (qtd in Banes, *Terpsichore* 45). Lambert-Beatty maintains that the Judson choreographers were attempting to negotiate the problems inherent in our visual perception of dance through their use of techniques such as repetition, stillness, and slowness. Jasperse's use of repetition is on a much larger scale than the Judson choreographers'—Manisha and Kristin are talking about a hip swing within a phrase that takes a minute or two to complete—but it is interesting to contextualize the repetition in *Canyon* with Lambert-Beatty's observation. Like the Judson choreographers, Jasperse has employed a device, repetition, that helps counteract the "seeing difficulties" associated with dance.

Lambert-Beatty goes on to hypothesize that, "All the techniques that help viewers apprehend dance, to hold a picture of movement in the mind's eye, negotiate between a physical epistemology and a visual one: between a performer's and a spectator's way of knowing movement" (66). Here she raises again the idea of two separate ways of perceiving

dance—one for the doer and one for the watcher—that brings us back to the relationship between sight and sensation. Manisha and Kristin’s evident satisfaction with the repetition of the women’s phrase may be linked to increased probabilities of enjoyment through “mere exposure,” to heightened perceptual fluency, and to successfully predicting the outcome of the phrase. However, it may also be grounded in a second go-around wherein familiarity begins to mobilize the kinesthetic sense as well as the visual: a “performer’s way of knowing movement.” Seeing the hip swing again brings us incrementally closer to the dancers’ deep, many-times-rehearsed familiarity with it.

In considering the use of repetition in *Canyon*, Kristin’s description includes a detail that lends additional richness to the picture: when the women repeated the phrase, they were facing a different direction. The movement has been subtly transformed; the movement and the movers are the same, but the context is different (later in the piece) and so is the viewer’s visual perspective of it. Kristin still refers to it as a repetition, but we can understand it as lying on a continuum of transformation. What if one of the men had performed that phrase? What if the women had done that phrase in a minimized version, covering less space and taking less time? There are infinite ways that the phrase could be manipulated. At what point does it cease to be recognizable as a repetition and become a transposition such as the largely undetected one wherein the women’s rolling “sphinx” phrase became part of the partnered floorwork of the men’s duet? Even if most of us don’t perceive it as an altered repetition of something we saw before—or don’t detect the similarity at all—it becomes part of the “grammar” of the dance, affecting our understanding of *Canyon*’s language.

Some research likens various dance styles to grammars that viewers can learn implicitly—unconsciously—with repeated viewings (Opacic, Stevens, and Tillmann; Vincs,

Schubert, and Stevens). Just as native speakers of a language can tell if grammar is correct just by the sound of it, sometimes without being able to cite the relevant grammatic rule, viewers who have repeated experience with a particular dance genre or choreographer's work get a feel for what's "right" or "natural" in that type of work (Stevens et al, "Perceiving" 20). Though few audience members had the opportunity to view other Jasperse dances or watch *Canyon* more than once, the work's repetition and transposition work in the same way, allowing us to get a feel for what's right or natural for this work, tacitly teaching viewers the vocabulary and syntax—the language—of that dance. Seeing the women's duet again, but facing a different direction, helps us learn the grammar of *Canyon*. And even if we might not recognize the men rolling on each other as related to the women's earlier rolling in the sphinx section of the piece, that experience also heightens our familiarity with *Canyon's* language so that we can implicitly understand it on its own terms. Eco proposes that texts presuppose their model reader, one who shares the same knowledge and competence, and that the text itself helps build up that competence, giving clues to the assumptions inherent in its language and style ("Introduction" 7-9). In the same way, the dance itself creates a model viewer who can understand it, giving clues to its language through repeated and transposed movement phrases.

In a dance like *Canyon* whose movement vocabulary is unique—not part of a familiar lexicon such as ballet or jazz dance—the use of repetition and transposition guides the viewer through what could otherwise be a thicketed labyrinth of unfamiliarity. Furthermore, it provides pleasure on its own terms, for Manisha and for Kristin, and for Natalie, who said of a different repetition, "There's not much to get bored by. When I said the movement of the man and each of the two girls were some of the same, it was so different because it was

the other side. It wasn't like oh, they're doing that again. It was like oh, wow! That's the same thing they did over there only it's backwards and it's a different person!"

The opening section

Descriptive, denotative meaning-making turns up most often in discussion of the big, fast, leaping opening section and the duet between John and Burr that occurs near the end of the piece. Almost all the audience members I interviewed mentioned one or both of these sections, speaking about them readily and unprompted. These two sections become then fertile ground for discussion of denotative meaning-making; they are incidences when viewers most often found pre-reflective meaning in dancing, in the terms of dance's own language or logic. Only in a rare instance did any audience member offer an interpretation for either of these sections.

The opening section stood out for most interviewees, and they spontaneously identified it as a discrete, bounded section. Its speed and momentum and its reliance on a codified step vocabulary—run, leap, a version of ballet's *fouetté*—distinguish it from the rest of *Canyon*, and its firstness gives it a cognitive advantage (Murdock) as far as whether or not people will remember it. Here is my description of that section:

Canyon opens with a rush. With no dimming of the lights or announcements to turn off cell phones, the music begins and a man comes tearing into the space, running and leaping. He exits, but others swoop in. Soon all five dancers are criss-crossing the floor, sometimes in unison groups of two or three that dissipate or transform into solos or foursomes. There are lots of comings and goings, but the general feeling is one of momentum, of energy flowing and being redirected and flowing and flowing and being redirected again and flowing some more. This energy is an easy one; the skips, leaps, and

moments where one foot undercuts the other, sending a leg arcing out through space, are all accomplished with a minimum of presentationalism. That is, the lines the legs and arms create are not accentuated with a little extra stretch or reach to emphasize their line-ness, and neither the chest nor chin is lifted in acknowledgment of the audience's attention. Instead, the body's energy is efficiently used, not over-shooting the mark with conspicuous muscularity, and faces are calm, neutral. The dancers swing their arms to counterbalance the large movements of their legs and body, but are not too careful to arrange the arms into specific shapes. The unison moments are not perfect; individual dance trainings are evident and there seems to have been no attention to erasing the differences. As the section continues relentlessly for five, six, seven, eight minutes, the dancers' energy diminishes; even as they are fulfilling the structure of the choreography, they are no longer fulfilling the spatial and energetic demands of the movement.

My description was considered and revised over months with the intention of providing enough information for the reader to visualize it. Audience members' descriptions, on the other hand, were impromptu. They reveal that viewers understood the various logics at play—spatial, kinesthetic, choreographic—in varying measures. I use these three categories because, having discussed them in some depth, they now provide a handy way of organizing a mass of information. I acknowledge again, however, that few descriptions are purely spatial or purely kinesthetic and that there can hardly be a discussion of choreographic structure that doesn't include spatial and kinesthetic elements. Furthermore, there are other logics in operation here that I do not explore at all. For example, I am ignoring the complex of anticipation, prediction, and suspense as well as the relationship between the music and the dancing. Finally, even as I am focusing on denotation and

description, connotative interpretive meaning-making is also present in the interviews, as is social and emotional meaning-making—that is, meaning that has little to do with *Canyon* as an artistic product.

Most audience members perceived the opening section in what I consider kinesthetic terms. They used action words: leap, jump, twist, run, skip, float, hop, step. They also spoke of the quality of the movement: elevated, vertical, resilient, high-energy, like birds, flow-y, effortless, easy. Several viewers noted a particular driving quality that the opening section had, a combination of the speed, quality, and duration of that dancing. Manisha merely noted that the running and leaping went on for a long time, but Nancy and Kristin both referred to the section as driving toward an endpoint. Meg also used the word “driven,” but she perceived the dancers as driven by an outside force. A related quality that many viewers perceived was one of momentum and rush and adrenaline, in many cases heightened by the proximity of the dancers. Alyssa seemed to be getting at something that marries both the driven quality and the sense of momentum when she referred to the opening as a “barrage” of movement. Finally, I consider the audience comments on virtuosity and skill to be in the language of the kinesthetic, understanding the body in terms of what it can achieve.

Many of these kinesthetic aspects—the driven quality, the sense of momentum and rush, even the familiar leap and skip—have inherent in them a spatial aspect. To be “driven” implies a direction in space, either driven away from or towards something; momentum involves energy over time and through space; and leaping and skipping happen in space. There were a few viewers, though, who described the opening section in terms that were purely spatial. These descriptions centered on the dancers’ trajectories through space as well

as on their entrances and exits, which brought awareness to the different kinds of space, onstage and offstage.

Examination of audience descriptions, contextualized to the individual speaker, led me to speculate about how viewers' ultimate interest or disinterest in, approval or disapproval of, the opening section hinged on their previous experience and their expectations of dance's kinesthetic and spatial logics. As discussed in Chapter 2, the opening section is remarkable in *Canyon*—different in quality and structure from not only the rest of the piece but also from much downtown postmodern dance. With its familiar step vocabulary, momentum and adrenaline, assumption of virtuosity, and light quality, it is “dance-y” in a way that is traditionally associated with uptown concert modern dance and ballet and not with downtown postmodern dance. Furthermore, Jasperse approached this choreography with sincerity, not postmodern dance's typical irony—they are *doing* this type of traditional dancing, not *commenting* on it—and the dancers performed it with integrity. Those audience members who came to *Canyon* expecting the more avant-garde dance typical of the Wexner Center—the dance insiders—reacted in various ways to the opening section's overt danciness. For Nancy, the avant-garde has become old hat, and she was delighted with the opening section, saying, “I was like, oh my god, they're dancing! They're jumping! No one ever jumps anymore!...It made me go, wow! This is what we used to do way back. And then it got all dissed and that was like not cool to do pretty movement, and we had to kind of chop it up and be gruff and glum and blunt and gestural and amorphous and, yeah look! He's gone back to like run-run-step-hop! And run-run-leap! God bless him!” Nancy went on to express her surprise that the performance curator at the Wexner Center Performance Space would have selected a work like this, commenting that most dance she sees in this

venue has more postmodern, avant-garde characteristics. That light and precise, dance-y opening section surprised and charmed her.

For some other expert dance-goers, the nature of the opening section worked against their expectations of a Jasperse dance presented at the Wexner Center. Manisha prefers dance that is less traditional than the opening section; she explained that she was more invested in later sections of the dance and found them more interesting than the opening section because they were "...less like what you would see in a technique class, you know, the leaping and the jumping, very traditional kind of vocabulary." Kristin, another expert, also seemed initially turned off by the opening section's traditional nature, saying, "I also remember at the very beginning being like, I don't know if I wanna see *jetés* or little leap jumps. I was like, I've seen that before...I mean with those first moments of people coming through and that sort of movement phrase that they did a couple times, even though I was interested in an abstract way, I was kind of like, this is very traditional."

Although Nancy, Manisha, and Kristin are all steeped in the dance world and all either were presently or had been once connected to the OSU Department of Dance, their reactions to the traditional feel of the opening section obviously vary. Nancy is a generation older than Manisha and Kristin, and over decades has seen hours upon hours of dance performance of all types. She confessed to me that it takes a lot to impress her anymore, and that skill, musicality, craftsmanship, and virtuosity are much more likely to win her over than choreography that is merely high-concept. The way that Manisha and Kristin were politely dismissive of the opening section's traditional nature leads me to believe that they consider it old-school, what you have to do in dance class. There, however, the similarity in Manisha and Kristin's understandings of the opening section ends. Kristin was highly analytical

throughout her interview, both of the piece and of her experience of it, and having once gotten past her initial disinterest in the opening section, found a lot there that was satisfying. She described it kinesthetically and spatially, and was able to articulate how those two logics worked together. First, she observed an “organic” (She said, “I’m gonna make myself gag by using that word!”) connection between the upper and lower bodies, saying that it seemed to make efficient sense in their bodies, “Of course, not having done it I don’t know how it feels, but it visually looked like it made sense for the dancers to be doing what they were doing.” She went on to note that the piece covered a lot of space, that it was characterized by locomotion. She proposed that the efficient connection in their bodies was what in fact enabled the dancers to cover so much space. For Manisha, on the other hand, the opening section continually niggled at her. Throughout her interview she returned to her dissatisfaction with the way it was performed—that the women moved with a different attention to line than the men did, that Jasperse was different from the others, that style was not unified. She explained this dissatisfaction: “It’s hard not to have these expectations of that kind of movement at the very beginning, of how technically it’s performed, for me. I don’t know why. I guess because it is very recognizable. This is a leap; this is this; that is that. Why are they performing it kind of in a different way [from performer to performer]? It was just more noticeable to me.”

Manisha’s observations about the expectations that that type of traditional dance-y dance raises are relevant here. Difference among dancers doing the same movement is in fact a convention of postmodern dance—Judson choreographer David Gordon said, “I work to get those people to get up from the floor at the same *beat*, but I don’t work to get them up from the floor in exactly the same *way*, because I’m not interested in their turning

into David Gordon and the clones behind me. I would much prefer to have these people look like themselves in performance” (*Making Dances*). *Canyon*’s aesthetic is much like the one Gordon describes, however, seeing the opening section’s more traditional style of movement cues expectations of different conventions—specifically, the uniformity that characterizes ballet and most modern dance. Its tightly choreographed structure, recognizable dance steps, lightness, and high energy make it *resemble* dance done by a ballet company or by some established modern companies—all the dance insiders commented on how it was reminiscent of Lucinda Childs’s work, or Paul Taylor’s—but the fact remains that it is *not the same* as any of those. It is dissimilar in key ways, and although Nancy accepted the opening section at face value, as the dance-y dancing she craves, for some viewers like Manisha, the resemblance raised expectations of a certain very specific type of dancing that were then disappointed.

First, as Manisha noted, in *Canyon* the dance style is not unified; dancers performed the same choreography with different energy and created shapes with their bodies that differed slightly from each other. The presence of this difference was enough to disrupt the picture for other viewers, too, who couldn’t reconcile the dancers’ differing performance styles with their expectations of stylistic unity. Jim said that he didn’t care for the opening section, that it lacked “connectivity,” which he explained meant consistent elements of style. He also perceived the dancers’ movement in the opening section as just so much “flailing,” an assessment which he immediately followed with the comment, “...this gets into the whole thing of what is dance, to one person or to another person.” The dancers did not all fully stretch their feet and legs when they leapt nor did their arms consistently arrive at clear shapes in space. In these ways the dancing doesn’t prioritize lines in space, and I think it is

this decreased attention to line that Jim perceived as flailing and that made him question whether this was “dance.” Jim is a dance-going novice and had never seen postmodern dance before, so I hypothesize that his expectations were based on ballet, with which he has some familiarity. In a high-energy, leaping dance done by a ballet company or even the Paul Taylor company, the dancers would have all achieved the same lines in space whenever they leapt, and their extension of the feet and legs would have been emphasized. In addition, if the ballet were a Classical one like what Jim has seen, there would not have been so much simultaneous contrapuntal activity; although the opening section is tightly choreographed, there are only fleeting moments of choreographed unison. More often than not there is simultaneous, different action, dividing audience focus in an untraditional way.

Ginny, a dance-going novice who also referred to *Swan Lake* in her interview as well as to movie musicals like *West Side Story*, perceived the opening section’s kinesthetic and spatial logics in ways that betrayed her expectations of more traditional dance values. Throughout her interview she grappled with the “immersive” nature of the entire performance. She accepted that this was intentional, that the work did not play by rules of the theatrical fourth wall, but she was never comfortable with it. She was taken aback by the proximity of the performance, and found the dancers’ direct gaze at audience members to be unpleasantly confrontational. Certainly shaded by that sensation of uncomfortable closeness, even invasion, she described the opening section, “The dancers came out and it was kind of a frenzy. It felt very chaotic and they were sort of all crossing paths...they were running off stage, on stage, and seriously times when a foot would come out and the girls in the front row, it must have been *inches* away from them.” She perceived the crossing paths as chaotic, disorganized, possibly overwhelming. The dancers’ paths are in fact tightly choreographed to

ensure against collisions and to enable the occasional moments of unison, so I speculate that her perception of chaos comes from the fact that usually there are two, three, or four separate trajectories happening simultaneously in the space—quite a far cry from the unison and symmetry of a Classical ballet or movie musical. Furthermore, “frenzy” recurs throughout her interview. When she used that word, she went on to talk about how the movement seemed improvised, or how there were periods of activity and interaction and collision. The frenzy of the piece seems to be linked to disorganization, or to a surfeit of movement—too much going on to make sense of. This perceived unruly energy might have been intensified by her sense of it all happening in violation of expected boundaries of theatrical space.

The opening section, through its resemblance to certain ballet and modern dance, also raised expectations of a certain kind of technical virtuosity—the “wow!” kind that leaps far and high and does so with apparent ease. Several audience members, including Nancy, appreciated or admired the dancers’ skill; however, through many of the interviews there is a restrained undercurrent of skepticism about the dancers’ technical virtuosity. Manisha’s comment that it’s hard not to have technical expectations about this kind of dancing implies that the dancers did not meet these expectations. Similarly, when Jim and Ginny remark that the dancing seems unchoreographed, or describe it with words like “flailing,” or follow up their description by musing about how different people define *dance* differently, the effect is not particularly favorable. Less circumspect, Nell described the dancers as “really not good” and lacking in physical expertise. I think that these negative assessments of the dancers’ skill come from a comparison of their neutral energy and efficient approach to movement with the presentational energy and attention to shape and line that characterize similar dancing in

ballet and modern dance venues, a comparison evoked by the opening section's superficial resemblance to that other dancing.

The opening section, then, sits in an uncomfortable space of being too traditional and formal for some, and in comparison with the ballet and modern dance it so resembles, not traditional and formal enough for others. What Nancy perceived as a welcome return to full-out dancing and Jasperse constructed as a sincere embrace of such dancing, was not traditional *enough* for Jim, Manisha, Ginny, or Nell.

So far this discussion of the opening section has noted audience observations of its kinesthetic and spatial aspects, and situated those observations within a context of individual dance-goers' expectations of dance. It has inevitably included references to the section's choreographic structure, but here I turn specifically to that aspect of it. Structurally, the opening section is a finite set of movements, linked in a sequence which then varies and repeats. These repeating phrases not only propel the dancers across the space but are also distributed among the dancers in such a way that they usually pursue solo paths, but fleeting moments of unison arise and then disappear. Suddenly, two and then three dancers are leaping and running in unison and then just as suddenly, one and then another have splintered off and become soloists again. These unison alignments were salient to a surprising number of audience members; that is, many people talked about them, more than about any other single aspect of the opening section. Here is a straightforward cataloguing of audience members' perceptions of those moments of unison:

Meg: "There were a couple times in the beginning section they were all doing similar movement, but all at their own *time*, and then there were a couple times when they met up

with each other and they were moving together and I was kind of curious about that. I wonder; I mean I'd like to talk to them about what they think it means."

Kristin: "It seemed like the covering of space and the use of the different diagonals and sort of the different pairings and dis-pairings, seemed important in terms of the motifs or the way that the piece unfolded," and later, "There's just so much movement and people going in and out, and these pairing up and then passing and then, the spinning and the jumping and, there were those moments of stillness but just so much constant movement..."

Jim: "There was lots of independent [solo] work, full-body work, and then, in unpredictable moments you would suddenly see, oh, two people are in a pair [his two hands together inscribing a single arc in front of him]. And then a few seconds later, oh these two are in a pair [hands inscribing together a different arc]. Just for a little bit of choreography, and people for lack of a better word, would spin off and do their own movement again."

Alyssa: "Jasperse's use of small bursts of unison through alignments really caught my attention and really kept me interested, because once he divulged that information and showed me for the first time, I was so interested to see *when* the moments of unison would pop out and try and figure out how he was doing that. I didn't ever figure it out. I don't know if one can figure it out, from watching it once."

Nell: "I think he had a really good thing going where they have moments where they move into unison, two of them together, and then they move back out of it. So he had a bunch of things where oh, we're coming together in [two hands swirling together and then swirling away from each other] the unison and then we're going away. His notions about

space in that particular moving around were the most interesting. That they were coming into moments of togetherness in a way, I thought was a choreographic gold nugget.”

Nancy: “Structurally I really appreciated, within sections, I appreciated how there was, I guess now we would call it alignment. You know, where there were moments of unison or just various kinds of alignment between the dancers.”

Some of these audience members—Alyssa, Nell—offer explanations for why these unison alignments caught their attention, but here I turn my attention to the audience members’ descriptions to see if their words reveal something about why this particular aspect of the dance was meaningful. Why did it make such a favorable impression on so many people that, unprompted, they wanted to tell me about it? There are base elements of description that turn up in all of these audience members’ descriptions and that can offer clues as to why it resonated as it did. First, the descriptions include the idea of people doing the same thing together. Why, or how, does sameness resonate? I hypothesize that it catches our eyes because it has a clarity that surfaces in an otherwise very complicated and constantly shifting picture—that “simplicity” to which gestalt psychology refers. It is order glimpsed amidst chaos. Kristin offered further insight into dancers in unison (although in reference to a different part of *Canyon*), saying “...the relationship that comes by doing the same movement, even if it’s not a sexual relationship necessarily or even necessarily a friend relationship—you don’t know anything about the characters—just the fact of two people doing the same things puts them in relation to each other, right?” Seeing a commonality between two humans where before there had been none is striking; *those* two people now are in relation to each other. Then, all these audience members included something about the transience of this relationship in their descriptions, about how it arises and disappears, or is

momentary. Its very temporariness is conspicuous. Alyssa and Jim went on to characterize that fleetingness in terms of anticipation; it was interesting to them because of its unpredictability. For Jim, the surprise of those moments constituted a satisfaction of its own. For Alyssa, it was a puzzle—*How does that machine work? Why do its parts synchronize when they do?* Finally, most of these viewers (not Alyssa or Nancy) also included in their descriptions something of the context out of which these relationships arise—it is spinning and swirling, full of people coming in and going out.

There, in its description, lies the answer to how this bit of dancing is meaningful in dance's own language, without translation into an aboutness statement. "Relationships between people that arise unexpectedly out of a firmament and then dissolve back into it" is poignant all on its own. To paraphrase Acocella, our very bones understand.

The men's duet

Just as with the opening section, the extended duet between John and Burr at the end of the piece recurred with remarkable frequency in audience descriptions of *Canyon*. Again, I did not ask questions about partnering or that duet in particular, but most people—especially the dance outsiders—wanted to talk about it. The duet is based on contact improvisation, a practice in which two (or, less commonly, three or more) dancers improvise together while maintaining an ever-shifting point of contact between them. Momentum and response to gravity play a big part in contact improvisation as, influenced by aikido, dancers may choose to go with or redirect the flow of their partner's energy. The result is a movement form in which the default head-over-tail vertical relationship to gravity is toppled and dancers find themselves supporting themselves and their partners on shoulders, pelvises, sides, hips, elbows, knees, hands, and feet. In practice, contact improvisation is social—a

dance for the doing rather than the watching. One usually goes to participate in a contact jam, seldom merely to watch. However, the skills it engenders have become essential in postmodern dance as this sort of flowing, full-bodied partnering is now common in choreography.

Jasperse acknowledged the role that contact improvisation plays in his work, saying, “From contact improvisation there were all these skill sets that emerged and those skill sets are manifest in some of the partnering work, say, for instance between the two men at the end of the dance.” Burr described in detail how the men’s duet was created. The beginning of it is primarily floorwork, the section based on the women’s rolling “sphinx” phrase that Jasperse had made into “a contrapuntal section so that we’re weaving on top of each other.” There is also partnered material done upright—standing up, primarily on their feet—that Burr said he and Jasperse and a former cast member created together. Burr described some of the aboutness at work in the creation of that material: “The physical sensation was about giving each other an upper-body ride [he indicates a weighted arc with his head and upper spine], with a solid lower body. So there’s a lot of pushing each other around like this [he uses his hand spread flat on chest to initiate a half-circle with his head and upper spine] or grabbing someone’s head [his hand guides an imaginary head in a spiral in towards his body].” Burr’s description and his reliance on demonstration give a feel for how rooted in sensation the duet is. When Burr and John rehearsed that duet in the Wexner space, John having learned it only days earlier, Jasperse advised them to break it down—to inhabit each of the moments fully—in order to get back to that feeling. From Burr and that original cast member’s improvisation, Jasperse had selected material which he set, creating defined, repeatable phrases. John described how Jasperse manipulated the phrases to create the men’s

duet: “It’s an A phrase and then a B phrase, but the first time we do it we start the A phrase on the ground and then we get up and we go right into the B phrase, facing the front of the box [the white marley flooring].” At that point the men’s duet gives way to the quartet they do with the women, but the duet then resurfaces, as John explains: “We then go into the A phrase standing up, and then we do the A phrase again facing a different direction and then we do the B phrase facing a different direction. So it’s really just an A and a B phrase with the A having two different beginnings and the order changing and the facing changing every time we do it.”

Although the material that comprises the men’s duet is sensorial, felt, its repetition with a constantly varying facing gives viewers an ever-shifting perspective on the same movement—a compelling visual phenomenon. By crafting the material into this spatially evolving, repeated phrase, Jasperse has given the duet additional entry points; not only does it have its original aboutness rooted in sensation, it also has visual and compositional aboutness that unedited, spontaneous contact improvisation does not. Audience members responded to the confluence of these kinesthetic, spatial, and choreographic elements, including them in various measures in their descriptions. As with the opening section, I consider the use of action words—yank, slide, pull—to indicate a perception of the duet kinesthetically, in terms of the body. Kinesthetic descriptions of a body slipping over another’s back, of a body on the ridges of another’s hips and elbows and arms dot audience members’ descriptions of the duet. In addition, several viewers remarked upon the movement qualities inherent in the contact improvisation-based partnering, Meg noting that the men had a beautiful combination of strength and softness, and Natalie that it was fluid like butter. Ginny’s understanding of the men’s duet was almost entirely kinesthetic, and

framed in terms of its contrast to the rest of the piece: “It was totally mesmerizing to watch the two of them, because it was unlike anything else that we had seen that evening...Because it was more fluid and more graceful. I feel like what I had seen previously was more sort of angular, and pushing, and pulling, and while this was pushing and pulling, there were moments where you weren't quite sure where his arm ended and where the other guy's head began, because they were just (a pause) it was more fluid. I don't know.”

The duet's frequent use of full-bodied, close contact afforded an additional aspect to its kinesthesia; some viewers commented on its sensuality and sexuality. Shelley said, “It wasn't sexual, for me. I don't know if it was meant to be.” Jim also said the men's duet was more sensual than sexual, and then later, “[It] wasn't really sensual; it was more *athletic* [making fists and tightening his arm muscles to indicate strength]...,” noting that their bodies were lean and in-shape. Michael, however, said that the men's duet was one of his favorite parts, citing many reasons but among them, “There was the kind of homo-erotic thing like, oh thank *god*, the men are finally dancing together.” Later he described the ways in which he found Burr and John sexually attractive.

Michael also gave a detailed description of the duet's repeating phrases that vary in spatial orientation: “What was enchanting about it was the repetition, that they did the same phrase multiple times through. Every time they did it, it was slightly rotated, to the point where eventually I realized they were kind of perambulating around the stage space. Every time they repeated the phrase I was seeing it from another angle, so quite literally the repetition was revealing the difference that's inherent in repetition. Repetition is never repetition; it's always an approximation (pause) but this *choreography* very specifically revealed that to me by this gradual rotation on its axis. Like, look at it from these, I don't know, four

or seven sides.” Natalie too noted, “I love the parts where—the two guys did it at the end, and the man with the two women—a lot of that stuff was repeated, I noticed. The steps, or movements. And that was very interesting because on the one we were facing them [her hand up, palm facing away] and the other way it was [two hands up, palms facing herself], the other side of the same movement, so that was great.” For Natalie, Michael, and others as well, this shifting perspective—seeing many facets of the same event—defined the men’s duet, but some audience members did not remark upon it. Again, kinesthetic, spatial, and choreographic logics were mobilized uniquely, according to the individual viewer.

Viewers’ descriptions also reveal their familiarity or lack of familiarity with contact improvisation and contact improvisation-based partnering, reflecting viewers’ insider or outsider status. The experts spoke with familiarity about contact improvisation as a discrete and recognizable thing, Nancy referring to *Canyon’s* partnering “in the contact idiom.” Nell said, “I have seen contact improvisation-derived material for twenty-five years. I get it.” Manisha also watched the duet with an expert’s eye, bringing her first-hand experience as a practitioner of the form to it: “Towards the end, that was really interesting. I’m taking a partnering class now too, so, I was watching them technically figure all that out and seamlessly go through that...Just the way they were relating to each other was more interesting to me. *Watching* those different points of contact that they were discovering was more of a puzzle.” The construction and execution of the duet—with its shifting contacts and fleeting, unusual supports—provided her with an intellectual satisfaction. Understanding this type of partnering as being in a particular idiom is really the province of a particular sort of expert. Full-bodied partnering that disregards conventional gender roles wherein men support women, that honors neither vertical as the default orientation nor the hands (or

hands on waist) as the default points of contact is unique to postmodern dance. It has influenced some more traditional modern dance, but it is completely absent from ballet, *So You Think You Can Dance?*, television commercials, or musicals; people whose experience with dance is limited to the dominant field of production would find it novel. Shelley said, “Because I’m not a dancer I don’t know if that commonly happens between two men in that way,” as she grappled with the nature of the interaction between Burr and John.

Alyssa, an experienced dance-watcher, commented on the execution of the duet, as a recognizable “trope,” done well: “Do you ever watch [beginning dancers] try and partner and when it’s an actual manipulation of another’s body, they can’t wait for the actual push to come? They move their leg and then it’s this fake manipulation. But with them [Burr and John], they both knew what was gonna happen and how it was gonna happen, but they waited for it *actually* to happen....And that’s so beautiful to me, because I don’t see it enough.” Natalie, unlike Alyssa, expressed no familiarity with contact improvisation as a form, but also understood that a being-in-the-moment—waiting for the impulse to actually happen—was important to it. She said, “They were just so fluid, and when the one body touched the other in a part it would affect where the other one went. And you could tell they were waiting for the touch. I mean, I don’t think that the foot was *really* pulling the whole body over, but definitely it was noticed: okay, now the foot is there, now I can go.” She went on to say, “And it, as anything good does, it looks easy. They just look like butter. You *know* it’s not easy, but they make it look easy and that’s how you know it’s good, I think.” In addition to recognizing the importance of authentic action and reaction to this type of partnering, both Natalie and Alyssa admired the dancers’ virtuosity or skill. In ways that

reflect their relative familiarity with this type of partnering, they both understood that the people before them were doing something exceptionally well.

Jim found the men's duet, and all the partnering in *Canyon*, "completely engaging." His description of the partnering—long, and constantly accompanied by hand gestures—is particularly valuable because of the details it includes. In addition, it evidences his novice's eye; because he was telling of something new, he had to account for each action. He did not have the readymade vocabulary that a dance insider would use as shorthand to relay what he saw. Put another way, he was in an early stage of acquiring the grammar of contact-based partnering and had not yet formed any cognitive "chunks." He began rhythmically, talking about *Canyon's* partnered floorwork in general, saying, "I wanna say [it was like] pause, go, pause, go." He went on to describe, "They would start off kind of in parallel positions [lays hands side by side on table] and then move together, and then often someone would have an unpredicted move over onto the other person [one hand hovers above and perpendicular to the other], whether it's a limb or an arm. And there was lots of rolling, kind of over the other person and then back [hands parallel again, they roll together, then retrograde to undo that action, like a film playing backwards]. So forward and backwards movements: kind of like they would do a sequence, and then they would undo it [two hands arc together in to one shoulder, then they retrace that arc back away from him] in a way. I felt like that recurred a lot, kind of in rewind. And at first it was all floorwork, and in different sequences it kind of became more upright to where, especially when the two guys were together, full-bodied movement, one over the other, side-by-side, some not full lifting, so to speak, but kind of a *hop* toward the other person [brings one hand curled over the other, close to his chest], and then a placement away [both hands indicate setting something down on the table in front of

him]. Then they might trade positions, and then reverse it again [two hands orbit around each other, then reverse their paths].”

I discern in his description a duality applied to time, space, and action. Everything he mentions has its partner or opposite: pause and go, forward and rewind, roll on and roll off, hop towards and place away. This sense of alternation, of give and take, appears in other viewer descriptions as well, both expert and novice. Shelley said, “One man would pick up the other one and re-place him [using her hands to show picking up someone here and putting him down there] and then they would grab and repeat, and grab.” While Shelley’s give-and-take was rhythmic and spatial, Michael’s centered on the rebound of energy: “A kind of *yank*, but you can only go this far and then that’s gonna be our momentum into something else [torso sways to the right], into something else [torso sways back to left]...Like, things could only go so far, but in that only going so far [one hand shoots forward, pulling his torso forward too] there was a lot of power for what happened next [torso rebounds backwards and arms fold one at a time into his chest], and that was really rewarding to watch.” Some viewers perceived this twoness resolved into a oneness. Shelley referred to, “...the way that they lightly wrestled with each other, but peacefully, like they used to be one but they still are one, just not in the same way...” and Ginny simply said, “And they just felt almost like one body, which was really neat.”

Interestingly, all the interviewees’ descriptions of the men’s duet were positive despite the split between the insider’s recognition of the contact idiom and the outsider’s sense of seeing something foreign. Everyone enjoyed or appreciated it, some revealing their pleasure through their choice of positive words, and some stating it outright like Nancy: “The partnering for example, that duet the two guys did, with some nice lifts of each

other...I loved that; that was a very *pleasing* thing they did, two or three times I think.”

Somehow, this choreographically manipulated contact improvisation hits a sweet spot for optimal complexity—that level of complexity that is neither too simple nor complex, holding our attention and giving us pleasure—for viewers with a range of dance-going experience.

How does the duet attract the attention of and please so many people? The answer lies in the pages of viewer description I’ve laid out here. The duet speaks many languages at once; richly kinesthetic, visually interesting, and choreographically intelligent, it affords viewers multiple entry points into itself. It repeats, allowing even novice viewers the chance to learn its grammar. Its repetitions are presented from several angles, creating interest for those with the eye to see it. It is performed masterfully; the dancers perform difficult physical feats with an ease that is apparent to even those unfamiliar with the form. With its male-to-male full-bodied contact it has the potential to evoke both sensual and sexual responses. While not noted in viewer descriptions, I add the additional information that its moderate tempo and constant flow keep novice viewers who may have a low tolerance for stillness or minimal activity engaged.

What interpretive meaning can be extracted out of all these watchers’ words, so few of which are aboutness statements? Again I turn to all this viewer description as well as my own for the answer. We have two men, and their movements reinforce the sense of a balanced twoness where action engenders reaction and *here* is always counteracted with *there*. The men are connected; they remain physically touching and if they separate, it is only to come back together. They support each other, sliding over each others’ backs. Their action continues, and after the quartet’s interruption, continues some more, in shifting contexts. There is a sensuality, fluidity, and softness to their actions, but also strength; they yank and

grab each other, propelling their duet around the space. At times, they seem to become one body. These descriptive sentences render in dance's own language a potent, resonant image of two men. They fully explain what that duet meant to these audience members: balanced yet dynamic partnership that persists despite interruption, men whose contact is both fluid and exciting, a merging into one.

Everything else, and everyone else

I didn't choose the opening section and the men's duet for closer examination; they volunteered for consideration inasmuch as so many people spontaneously talked about them. Those two sections attracted audience members' attention and stuck with them; they were meaningful for many viewers. This raises interesting questions. Why these sections? What about the long sections of dance that no one talked about? Are the opening section and the men's duet the "best" parts, the strongest choreographically and the best danced? It may be because of the advantageous positions they occupy at the beginning and the end of *Canyon*, giving them some cognitive staying power. It may be because they are uptempo and rhythmic, bearing out Nancy's hypothesis that, "That's why a lot of popular dance is popular—because it's fast and it's rhythmic and strong, and it's repeated and it's replicable in some way, and you can kind of grab hold of it real quickly." Much of the rest of *Canyon* is indeed slower, softer, and less locomotive, but what about the brief duet for John and Jasperse himself that happens not long after the opening section—it's fast, jerky, interesting movement done in perfect unison. I wonder why only a single interviewee mentioned it? For some novices, it may be that much of the rest of *Canyon* is so different from dominant, familiar forms of dance that they are struggling to process it as "dance."

There are several reasons, then, why so many interviewees might have talked about the opening section and the duet but not some of the other sections in *Canyon*. This raises another, inverse question: if these sections are so compelling, how come some of the interviewees didn't mention them? There is no unified, generalizable answer. Each of the interviewees who *did* talk about the opening section did so differently, contextualizing it uniquely; likewise, each of the interviewees who barely mentioned the opening section, or disregarded it entirely, had unique, personal reasons for this. The process of organizing and writing this chapter—clustering viewer responses thematically and trying to draw conclusions from them—obscures those facts, homogenizing individual interviewee identities. Turning to the individual as starting point for analysis rather than the section of the dance reveals interesting answers, each one different, to the question of why some people didn't notice the opening section, as well as some instances where I have no answers.

For example, some interviewees mentioned the opening section only fleetingly, or only in response to my specific question about how the piece began. Jim described how the dancers bounded on and eventually came together in moments of unison dancing, but he didn't "care for" this section and having once fulfilled my request for a description of it, never returned to it. Much more salient to him was the partnering and floorwork, and the question of what it all was supposed to mean, so it was to those sections and ideas that he devoted his words. Again in response to my question, Ginny told of how it started with a jolt, and then recounted the frenzy and the chaos of crossing paths and the uncomfortable proximity of the dancers. These ideas—frenzy and chaos, immediacy—recurred in her interview, and the opening section seemed meaningful to her only insofar as those themes were present in it. Like Jim, it did not seem to engage her in terms of its conspicuous

danciness in contrast to the rest of the piece, and she didn't mention the moments of unison. Ginny and Jim acknowledge the opening section, but seem relatively disinterested in it.

By contrast, Ramona's interview is devoid of references to the opening section. When I asked her how the piece began, she said she didn't remember. Then she supplied that it began without hoopla, while people were still talking, and that there were two women and three men. There is nothing else in her interview that could be associated with the opening section. In fact, she was able to describe very little of the performance at all; her silence on the matter of the opening section is consistent with an overall fuzzy perception of the entire performance which I explore in detail in Chapter 5. I can speculate that Ramona did not talk about the opening section because, not well-practiced in seeing this type of dance, she had difficulty perceiving it, but my speculative explanation of Ramona's silence doesn't stick when applied to Shelley, in whose interview references to the opening section are also almost absent. In general, Shelley's account of *Canyon* was detailed and full of reference to individual formal elements; she could recognize spatial rhythms, repeating patterns, dynamic qualities, and relationships among dancers. The opening section is full of these—why didn't she talk about them? She was quite thorough, even checking her notes as we were finishing up her long interview to make sure she hadn't missed anything. Shelley did mention the dancers breezing by her so close and that it was nice to be able to recognize some ballet moves in *Canyon*, but those two instances—not tethered in her talk to any specific part of the dance—are the only ones that I can even surmise might address the opening section. I can hazard a theory about why the opening section did not engage Shelley: despite her interest in the formal elements of *Canyon*, often in abstraction, the parts that resonated most deeply with her were the more intimate solos and duets. She said, "I'm a

one-on-one person and so large groups of dance are wonderful, but there, in my heart, nothing wins over a duet.” Furthermore, while Jasperse and the dancers never spoke of an emotional register to the dance, Shelley inferred emotion into the solo and duets she talked about most. The opening section, with its cool, Apollonian formality, can hardly sustain such an inference.

Most interviewees talked a lot about the opening section and the men’s duet for reasons that, although diverse, form a constellation. A few interviewees all but disregarded the opening section for similarly diverse reasons that form a separate constellation. Within the constellations, the interviewees are present in the diverse ways they talked about *Canyon*, their reasons for finding meaningful what they did, and the contexts that inform those choices. Therefore, in these constellations lies the “text-reader nexus,” where the formal properties of the work—present through description—meet the uniquely situated individual audience members and meaning is made.

Chapter 5: Individual Perspectives

The inclusion of seventeen participants dictated the nature of this study—that it would draw conclusions skimming across the data set rather than going deeply into each interview. Still, in the process of investigating aspects of the interviews that popped out to me and attempting to weave them into broader conclusions, sketches of the participants emerged, scattered across the pages of the preceding chapters. When I review the interviews and the data maps, I find that I managed to include almost all of the spots I highlighted as important for a given interviewee; nonetheless, the individuals themselves as I came to know them through their interviews are only faintly present. Each interview is much denser than I have been able to indicate in the context so far. In this chapter I attempt to do justice to at least a few of the participants, examining four of the audience interviews here as discrete subjects. The research question shifts slightly; whereas the preceding chapters address how *people* made sense of *Canyon*—the audience brown-outs and successes are the starting points—here I try to address how this *person* made sense of *Canyon*—the individual is the starting point.

The four interviews I chose for this chapter are with audience members. I am not using Jasperse's interview or any of the dancers' for this more thorough investigation because to do so would be misleading. I think that most of the audience interviews are fairly thorough; they represent a good sample of the speaker's thoughts on his or her experience of *Canyon*. Except for one, the audience interviews went on for as long as the interviewee wanted and by the end of each, talk had tapered off. In instances where an interviewee got a

second wind and started talking again once the audio recorder was turned off, I turned it back on and we resumed the interview. By contrast, I'm sure that Jasperse's interview with me—and the other dance-makers' as well—contain only the smallest fraction of their understanding of and experience with *Canyon*. If I gave Jasperse's interview a thorough work-up here as I'm doing with the four audience interviews, it would imply a comparable comprehensiveness, that I have done a fair job of representing his understanding of *Canyon*. To even approach that for the dance-makers, though, I would need to have carried out the study as originally designed, accompanying them through their months of creative process with multiple interviews and rehearsal observations. Only then might I have a good sample of their understandings of the work. Instead, this study favors the audience members, and Jasperse and the other dance-makers are not included in this chapter.

The point of this chapter, then, is to do justice to these four audience interviews. These seemed to call out for more attention; they touch on concepts and experiences that don't come up anywhere else and that don't fit patterns that emerged from the rest of the data. Notably, they represent extremes of pleasure and displeasure, satisfaction and annoyance. Devoting this space to individual experiences—going deeply into single interviews rather than analyzing them in relation to other ones—illuminates new answers to the question of how people made sense of *Canyon* and gives the reader a glimpse of the broad, deep data set from which I have been selectively culling all along.

Michael

Michael is a dance insider; he performs locally and is a scholar with a cross-disciplinary focus in dance studies and queer theory. He teaches in the Department of Dance and maintains a regular yoga practice. His interview lasted over an hour; *Canyon* had clearly

made a big impression on him and in the day that elapsed between the performance and our interview he had been thinking about it a lot, writing in his journal about it as well. For him, it was an overwhelmingly positive and gratifying experience. There were only two minor brown-outs in his entire interview—questioning the purpose of the elaborate lighting changes in the “black hole” section, and wondering whether Jasperse’s execution of the movement in performance, so different from the other dancers’, represented the standard of correctness because he is the choreographer.

He was careful with his words, restating things and trying out different word choices. He was also careful to let me know throughout the interview what sort of dance viewer he is. He spoke disparagingly about discussing dance in terms of “liking it” or not; he believes that merely to say you liked a dance is meaningless and does a disservice to a dance-maker’s project.¹⁹ He likes to be close enough to see the dancers sweat, and so the intimacy of *Canyon* at the Wexner Center suited him fine; he added that he doesn’t need distance from the stage to perceive a dance’s spatial design. He stated outright that he is not interested in metaphor or representation in dance. Having described a particular way that the dancers moved through space as “wandering through wonder,” he said it was as though they were going somewhere they couldn’t quite get to. He then immediately added that he resists making a story out of the dance he sees, but if there *is* a story, it’s something like that. The smiles he saw exchanged among dancers, their apparent delight in dancing, caught his attention, but he explained that he doesn’t assume that these smiles necessarily reflect the dancers’ actual feelings. Finally, at the end of his interview, he confessed a “morbid curiosity” about how Jasperse and the dancers perceive *Canyon* and how their ideas about it correspond to his,

¹⁹ Experts Kristin and Manisha also treated “liking” as a too-simplistic response to dance, but novice Ginny noted with some surprise near the end of her interview, “You didn’t ask me if I liked it.”

knowing that I had interviewed the dance-makers as well: “I’m curious about what that correspondence is. In no way privileging one of those positions. Like, I don’t think the choreographer has the right answer or the dancers have the right answer or anything like that, but just, I’m curious.” When I asked why he would characterize this curiosity as morbid, he replied, “It seems kind of regressive, I guess, like to even care...I don’t normally care what the choreographer’s trying to accomplish.” All of these statements of Michael’s that comment on his own way of seeing dance—and this has been a complete cataloging of them—serve as a checklist proclaiming his rejection of commercial theatrical dance codes, denying metaphor, story, emotional expression, and authorial intention. He is a dance insider not only because of his experience doing, seeing, and thinking about dance but because of his thoroughly postmodern approach to it. In these ways, I think he may be *Canyon’s* model spectator.

Inasmuch as Michael is hawkishly observant, taking in every sort of detail of the performance, he is quite a good spectator for any dance. He was aware of and attentive to so much. As with all the audience interviewees, I asked Michael about arriving at the theater and his impressions thereof, and his response filled fifteen minutes. It was an engaging fifteen minutes, full of insight into many aspects of that situation. He described not only the conspicuous set design of tapes, unfurling marley, and flags, but also how the seating had been arranged unevenly with the overall effect of a swoop around the space. He also explained the logic of where he chose to sit and made observations about the rest of the audience—a type of social meaning-making. While the range of types of observations Michael made is indicative of his exceptionally rich experience as a whole, I must note that all the other interviews were also layered with talk indicating many different types of

meaning-making. This dissertation has been devoted to aesthetic meaning-making—what *Canyon* means as an art object—but in this chapter I have the opportunity to explore other types of meaning as well.

Michael's interview was laced throughout with references to the social aspects of the performance, indicators that *Canyon* resonates as an experience of our connections to other humans and the various relationships that organize our interaction. As part of his initial description of arriving at the performance space, Michael noted, "Especially at the Wexner, because they're the more important events somehow, they turn into such social events sometimes, about seeing who's here. And they're like, [in a snooty voice] there's the dance faculty but there's the art faculty and my goodness, [name of a Department of Art faculty member] is here!" He went on to identify several other people in attendance, contextualizing their relationships to the Department of Dance and the arts community. Michael's awareness of and connection to other people (whose names I have changed)—not just members of the audience—persisted while the dance was in progress. He remarked on the presence of his companion Lisa beside him: "Just this constant awareness of, she's never seen anything like this. And the moments at which she would literally exclaim, [whispered] 'Oh my god!' out loud, exclaim things because of what was happening." He found a freshness to this, observing that while he himself had a positive experience of *Canyon*, there was nothing so radically new in it for him. "There wasn't a moment of like, grand revelation as far as the dancing was concerned...I didn't have that with this piece, but Lisa was having that 'cause she'd never seen any of this before. That was exciting to have that be part of my experience."

I can construe both his recognition of the see-and-be-seen aspect of a performance at the Wexner Center and the contrast of his experience to Lisa's as evidence of Michael's dance insider status, but other references present in his interview speak to other registers of his social experience at *Canyon*. For example, Michael's awareness of gender implications lent the work a political dimension upon which few other interviewees remarked. He noted that he derived a homo-erotic pleasure from watching the men dance together, and a different pleasure from watching the women because of the close similarity in their dancing: "There were still some differences but they felt more closely in line with one another's movement quality, or dynamics, or body attitudes or something than the other three did... There was a unifying factor because of the way in which they moved. So that was rewarding in a way that was very different from this kind of like euuh [grunt] strong-sweaty-men-yanking-each-other-around-the-stage." One other interviewee, dancer Lindsay, remarked on some of the same differences among the cast, saying, "I feel strongly united with her [Kennis] as the other female in the piece... The physicality that the men represent in the piece is really different than the women. Johnny and John [Jasperse] have this, like a *fire* in them that the women never inhabit. There's a physical push between Burr and Johnny that the women never inhabit, and (a pause) so yeah, it feels really important to me that the material that we do have is given strength inside of it" However, while Lindsay pushed back against the man/woman divide in the piece by imbuing her dancing with Kennis with strength, Michael balked at the very idea of a divide. He chided himself for reinforcing a gender binary when he found himself attracted to the men, saying, "What makes these two 'men'? Get over yourself." Thereafter, he referred to Kennis and Lindsay as "the ones in dresses," and when I asked him why not just say, "the women," he replied, "Because there are people who fall

out of that binary and by reinscribing the binary I'm continuing to facilitate violence that's done to those bodies that do not fit within that binary."

Michael's social experience of *Canyon* had an emotional register as well. As Michael described it, his attention to the performance "was dispersed through loved ones" both present and absent. One of the dancers reminded him of another dancer he used to know, Muriel: "It was her face and her bone structure but it was also how she moved reminded me so much of Muriel, so there was kind of this inflection of this persona in this dance the whole time. Like, you're not Muriel, but gosh you reminded me of her the whole piece." In addition, "I could see Kim on the balcony, from where I was sitting, and it's just possible because I adore Kim, but I was constantly thinking, kind of projecting my perspective down from where she was sitting to think, not necessarily even consciously but just like, I wonder how Kim's seeing this same moment from up there?" Michael said that thoughts of these two friends colored his entire experience of *Canyon*.

Michael's persistent awareness of Kim can be attributed to the fact that the audience remained lit instead of being allowed a retreat into the anonymity of darkness that is typical in theatrical performance. He was intrigued by this choice; it reminded him of Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal's efforts to prevent audience passivity with his Theatre of the Oppressed: "How do you make them active participants? In a way that isn't audience participation? Something about seating us where we can all see each other and keeping the f***ing lights up, I felt like everyone was very attentive if for no other reason than because everyone could see them being either attentive or unattentive." This capacity to be seen by other audience members became relevant when Michael found he was sexually attracted to some of the dancers. Even as he described their individual characteristics that aroused him—

this one's apparent vulnerability, that one's conspicuous strength—he was aware that his interest in these dancers was probably legible in his face. He said, “And I was hyper-aware of the fact that (a pause), of other people in the audience with whom I've had romantic entanglements being able to see me examining these bodies, and kind of aware of their, not necessarily jealousy but just their sort of insiderness to this sexual energy thing that was happening.” Although he had initially characterized the phenomenon of a lit audience as a means of ensuring attention and engagement, it ultimately had more personal implications for him.

The presence of Kim and the phantom presence of Muriel had emotional overtones for Michael; they elicited tender feelings of affection from him. The dance itself also provoked an emotional response from him. For example, he said that it was an emotional pivot-point for him when the dancers pulled up the tape: “Because it was the first time that those bodies had moved along those paths in a sustained way, and as they moved along them the paths disappeared, so the re-marking became an un-marking simultaneously, and that's profound.” He also described how the ending of *Canyon* moved him to tears: “Then the duet with the two dancers at the end that kept changing its facing was just, energetic and beautiful and subtle and the music softened right about then so there was this kind of tug at my heart-strings, of like [slightly sappy voice] tenderness, oh. And then they collapsed, not together but side by side, at the edge of this topographical elevation of the marley [the marley roll], alongside these other bodies who had already collapsed. So, it took on a drama that wasn't narrative, but dramatic.”

As is true everywhere in this study, extracting a piece of an interview or a concept for scrutiny belies the dense, multi-layered reality of individuals' experience of *Canyon*. I have just

been focusing on Michael's emotional experiences in the performance, and his account of the men's duet at the end as an instance of emotional resonance, but he also made a pithy analysis of how the varied repetitions in the men's duet functions choreographically (quoted in Chapter 4). Like all the interviewees, he experienced the performance socially, emotionally, aesthetically, intellectually, spatially, kinesthetically, and more. Those layers of meaning are simultaneous and inter-penetrating; the dance was an and-and-and all-at-once experience. This fact is reiterated for me every time I consult either the sequentially organized interview transcripts or the thematically organized data maps, but it becomes obscured in my necessarily linear writing. I hope the reader will be reminded of it as I turn now to Michael's aesthetic experience of *Canyon*.

While interpretive and descriptive observations of all sorts peppered Michael's talk and some of these were random or disconnected, most cohered to an overarching structure around which Michael organized his experience. Michael began his explanation of this structure by describing the various systems that defined space in *Canyon*. The angle of the marley was juxtaposed to the angle of the room, and the marley itself was not level, creating a "topographical elevation." The tape lines created marks or traces across the floor and walls. The placement of the flags created a regular, rhythmic meter across the space. There were intentional areas of light and of shadow. The dancers carved the space with their movements and reorganized the space with their different configurations. All of these systems organized space differently, interrupting and disrupting each other, refusing to share each other's logic or rules. Michael referred to philosophers Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "territories," which he explained as systems of organization that cohere a thing as that thing. That is, the marley, Wexner Center architecture, tape, flags, lights, and dancers' movement all

territorialize space differently, and each is responsible for defining space as itself. Before it was defined as space, though, it was part of the raw “fullness of (a pause) fill-in-the-blank,” the “gestalt of everything.” He cited philosopher Elizabeth Grosz’s term “chaos” for this stuff-that-has-not-yet-been-defined, and coined his own: “beyond.” For Michael, the contradictory logics of all these different ways of territorializing space ended up short-circuiting each other and in so doing, gave him a glimpse of that beyond, of that fullness of experience before it has been earmarked as “space.”

Michael constructed a similar theory about Jasperse’s short-circuiting of time—how clock time and the duration of the performance and the repetition of movements and the rhythm of dance phrases all territorialized time differently—but *Canyon*’s profundity was for him located in his heightened awareness of the chaos resulting from the over-laying of these different territorializations of time and space. He found his “beyond” in the narrow private space on the other side of the marley roll; in the prolonged movement that took the dancers beyond their abilities into exhaustion; in their weighty surrender to gravity, to the floor, to each other’s bodies; and in their off-balance movement, when they stumbled beyond control of their own actions. “I don’t think any of this was metaphorical; it literally *was* those things. Like in very practical, material ways, there was a visual beyond: something that I could not see anymore [the space behind the marley roll]. There was an off-balance. It wasn’t like oh, this off-balanceness represents something else; it was quite literally the enactment of beyond. Moving beyond control, moving beyond balance, moving beyond stability...They were *showing* me stuff in very practical ways that had very profound philosophical implications, but not metaphorically.” As Nancy and Kristin had done (Chapter 3), and in a Judson-y anti-illusionist way, Michael found glory and profundity in the really real.

The way Michael conceptualizes or interprets *Canyon*—how it means for him aesthetically—is almost wholly unique; I can find very little overlap or similarity in any of the other audience interviews. Furthermore, my top-down data analysis—first identifying the largest umbrella categories of talk in the interviews and then dissecting those further—of Michael’s interview revealed a category that I hadn’t noticed anywhere else. All the talk I’d analyzed before fell easily into one of three categories: 1) *Canyon* and the speakers’ experience of it, 2) the speakers themselves, and 3) social or cultural phenomena related to one of the first two categories. Whole sections of Michael’s interview weren’t about any of these things. Instead, they were philosophical; they were about thinking how experience is structured or created or perceived. In many instances, they included references to other people’s thinking—Deleuze and Guattari, Grosz. I labeled this fourth category “theory,” surely an imperfect label. Having identified it, I went through all the other interviews to see if anyone else talked about theory, about ways of construing reality, and found only a few instances. For example, Kristin talked about “constructedness,” about how her experience as a dancer and a choreographer prevents her from being naïve about the apparent spontaneity of events on stage: “How aware are we of the constructedness of things? I’ve been reading a lot of film theory and stuff now that I’m working a lot on music videos, and how much are we made aware of the camera, for example. And even if we get a clue, or a reminder of there’s a camera here—it’s a film—nonetheless, we usually end up getting sucked into it, anyway.” While I located references to theory in Kristin’s interview, and in Shelley’s as well, they are fleeting, nothing at all like the way theory undergirds Michael’s entire aesthetic meaning-making, his interpretation of *Canyon*.

I found that theory infuses Jasperse's interview too, but it doesn't present itself as obviously as it does in Michael's. There, as in Kristin's and Shelley's interviews, references to someone else's thinking—Deleuze and Guattari, a nameless film studies theorist—announce the presence of theory. The citation or crediting of the source of the relevant theory is a signal that this talk is neither about *Canyon*, nor their own lives, nor society in general. In Jasperse's initial interview there is only one such citation; other than that, everything he said seemed to fall readily into one of the existing three categories, and yet I had the sense that theory permeated his talk. Indeed, much of Jasperse's talk is about his creative process and could therefore be about *Canyon* or his life. However, the *connection* between his talk and one of those two concrete entities is often obscure or tenuous, and the *nature* of that talk puts it squarely in the realm of theory as I have defined it. It is thinking about thinking; it is playing with how experience is structured or perceived. It's not about real events in time and space, but rather about ways of construing reality—what is “meaning” and how do we conceive of it? What is a non-linguistic meaning? What is the relationship between legibility and ambiguity? What is important about these examples of Jasperse's theorizing is that they precede and drive his work. Much of his choreography is what Maxine Sheets-Johnstone refers to as “thinking in movement” (28-63). First there is theory—a possible way of construing reality—and then that theory is explored in movement. He theorized attention, intention, and action as human drives that might not work together; the theory became a score around which the dancers improvised in rehearsal; their improvisations eventually comprised some of *Canyon's* choreography. He theorized choreography as capable of organizing time into different scales—micro, mid, macro; the theory is explicitly demonstrated in the duration and choreography of an earlier work he described in his

interview. He theorized the collision of a body with perpendicular planes, and that theorizing became John's solo.

I find Michael's and Jasperse's experiences symmetrical. In the beginning, there is theory; then there is rehearsal, then performance and an audience and perception and meaning-making, and then at the end there is theory again. Theory is at the center of Jasperse's creative process and at the center of Michael's interpretive process. So, Michael is the ideal spectator for *Canyon* in yet another way; he and the choreographer both go about their business fluently and integrally incorporating theory.

Nell

Nell was outraged by *Canyon*. Hers was the last interview I conducted, over a week after she had seen the performance, and talking about *Canyon* reignited her furious annoyance with it; she apologized for getting so "riled up." A former faculty member in the Department of Dance, she had danced for high-profile choreographers in New York before coming to Columbus. She also choreographed for regional professional and student companies. Her decades in the dance world, both in New York and in the Midwest, afford her a certain status in the Columbus dance scene, a status of which she became acutely aware as she realized that she hated the performance *and* that she was visible to the rest of the audience. She said, "I'm looking out, and I'm looking at everybody in the house I know. Because it's a small performance space, and we all know each other....and I'm feeling very exposed. 'Cause I'm tired and in the front row. And I can see that people will be looking at me...I'm telling you: from like after twenty minutes, all I could do was say, 'Please don't let [them] know that you are miserable.'"

Her extensive experience also indicates that her distaste for *Canyon* is an informed one. That is, unlike dance outsiders, her displeasure with the ambiguity, repetition, and stillness in the work are not possibly born of unfamiliarity with the postmodern dance codes that allow these conventions to function. She is well acquainted with them, but judged that Jasperse employed them poorly, compared to many other dance works she has seen, danced in, and created: “Really? I’m gonna watch you *stand* there with all these flags around? I mean, I was over this twenty-five years ago but I am way over it now. I don’t think stillness is boring. But *that* stillness was boring. I don’t think the stillness in *Einstein on the Beach* was boring, and I watched that for four and a half hours.” Or: “I think that there’s a way to use a minimal amount of movement material. I think we’ve seen a lot of people do that, beautifully. There’s a way to say that my material is gonna be limited, and that in having a limited amount of material, one makes connections for us, or one is exploring that very thing. I don’t think he did it. I think it was just, oh *that* phrase again.” Just as she has a broad basis for comparison regarding Jasperse’s use of postmodern dance conventions, so could she compare *Canyon* to other works of his, and his use of the Wexner Center Performance Space to other dances she has seen there.

Nell’s judgments of *Canyon* were seldom favorable, and the ways in which the piece annoyed her were concentric and overlapping. At the surface was her disappointment with the dancing itself. She found the dancers lacking in the brilliant physical expertise she expects from professionals: “I frankly think that a lot of dancers in the downtown scene, they just aren’t good...They’re not good at that [the dancing they do]! They’re actually not good at that. There’s not a *that* that they’re good at.” Her criticism of Jasperse’s own dancing was harshest. She conceded that some of the other dancers demonstrated skill, but that it

wasn't fully developed. Her observations about their abilities led her to question the future of the field if it is populated by dancers who are not brilliant, phenomenal at what they do. Not only disappointed with the dancers' fundamental skill level, Nell deemed that the dancers understood Jasperse's movement material only on a superficial level, that the "body view" it implies was not realized deep in their bodies. She said, "It was just a bunch of material that he didn't coach them in. The lexicon of the work was not clearly embodied by them."

Nell's indictment of Jasperse went deeper than this failure to impart a profound bodily understanding in the dancers; she also found an aesthetic point of view that would ground his choices of movement material to be conspicuously absent. She wanted his choices—"I pick this material. For this reason. I am picking this material for this reason."—to be visible, apparent. Instead, she found no such evidence: "I felt like it could have been entirely different movement material and it wouldn't have made any bit of difference. It was just a buncha dancing." For example, she enjoyed one duet between a man and a woman and recognized its contact-improvisation roots. However, she found that that particular type of partnering was not intentionally or comprehensibly employed: "I get what that [contact improvisation-based partnering] is; that's very interesting. What did it mean in this work? What did you do? Was this about (a pause) that? Well then make it about that; explore that; what is that? Is it about, oh we're all individuals and then we come together in these different group things? Or is it just, I need this section, let's do some floor material?" Unable to discern Jasperse's aesthetic point of view in the dancing—why he employed this particular movement and not some other—Nell became bored with *Canyon*, commenting, "I've seen that dance a hundred times."

Beneath Nell's disdain for the caliber of dancing presented, even beneath her unrequited desire to see Jasperse's aesthetic point of view made manifest in that dancing, sit twin nuclei of discontent. One is her perception that *Canyon* is all trees but no forest, that individual ideas do not add up to a whole. This idea emerged in our interview when I defended the work by describing a few of the sections that I found particularly effective or poignant. She accepted that those sections may work as vignettes, but she implied that an evening-length work demands a cohering logic: "It's interesting because if you're in the mode of looking at the whole, and then you see a part that doesn't connect to you as part of being the whole, you can't look at it as just a moment, either...What the heck is this dance about? You can't, *I* can't back away and just say, 'Well let me just look at this two minutes for what *it* is.'" That is, her expectation of coherence from the entirety of *Canyon* prevented her from looking for meaning on a micro level, interpreting individual sections on their own terms. Her disinterest in micro-meanings, disconnected from the whole, is in tension with the postmodern dance code that allows for collage or the juxtaposition of disparate events, and with Deborah Jowitt's injunction to the viewer not to hold too tightly to any associations that arise in watching a dance, instead allowing new associations of flow in. These ideas imply that postmodern choreographers are relieved of any responsibility to establish *thematic unity* for their viewers, the very thing that Nell craved.

Art educator Sydney R. Walker defines thematic unity as conceptually linking the individual parts of an artwork together through broad general ideas (80). Thematic unity usually represents a bounded or closed meaning system, and has been challenged by poststructuralist and deconstructionist theorists. Jasperse himself rejects it to some extent for *Canyon*, relating his response to a New York critic who said the work didn't add up or didn't

congeal as a unified entity: “She may have some validity to that statement, but there’s also a complex kind of question of like, well, was that the proposal?” That is, having the piece add up or congeal is not a priority in his own meaning-making for it. However, Walker notes that even self-described poststructuralist art critics who reject unity, totality, and closure of meaning in theory, do construct meanings for artworks around unifying themes in their actual critical practice. She also cites cognitive research that identifies “key ideas” as central to knowledge organization; these key ideas are tantamount to thematic unity and are necessary for constructing a global understanding of an artwork (81-82). Furthermore, for some cognitive learning theorists, this knowledge organization—also referred to as “connectedness”—is a significant factor in conceptual understanding. Some even equate connectedness to conceptual understanding, defining it as knowledge rich in relationships/connections (Walker 87). Finally, in Walker’s own research into student understanding of art she found the presence or absence of thematic unity to be crucial; student interpretations that lacked thematic unity were weak, incoherent, and fragmented (87).

So Nell was looking for this central organization, this forest of an idea, and found only trees. Whether her desire for thematic unity is appropriate—on code—for *Canyon* is an interesting question. I see now that I didn’t have expectations of thematic unity from the work. I accepted my own and interviewees’ understandings of individual moments and sections of the work at face value and didn’t seek connections among them, satisfied with meaning on a micro level. I never even asked audience members how they might connect their understandings of individual sections into a unified whole, and without that prompt, only Meg and Michael—in radically different ways—attempted to construct a global

meaning for *Canyon*. Apparently, that was my bias: that thematic unity is not important to viewer meaning-making of postmodern dance. However, in considering it now, I see that an expectation of thematic unity might be present in Jim's and Natalie's initial attempts to understand the dancers as characters who behave consistently and logically throughout the course of the dance, as well as in Jim's and Ramona's general frustration with trying to figure out what the dance means. I remain unsure as to whether thematic unity is off-code for postmodern dance, whether it is appropriate to look for it when interpreting a work like *Canyon*. I do find Walker's remarks on that topic persuasive, though: "Although I support the openness of meaning the poststructuralists advocate, concomitantly I advocate *temporary* closures for interpretation. If there is not closure at various junctures for an interpretive process, understanding remains fragmented" (81). As for Jasperse's position on the topic, he asserts that the poetics of dance call for interpretation to remain open and inconclusive.

Nonetheless, he did allude to ideas around which the work coheres: the shift from a place of orientation to one of lostness, questioning states of wonderment, the grandeur of openness or negative space, and the majestic consequences of the mundane. Apparently these global themes were not perceptible to Nell, and this was the second nucleus of Nell's dissatisfaction: her inability to find Jasperse's meaning—macro or micro—made manifest in the dancing. She is aware that Jasperse is "really smart," but couldn't locate that smartness in the dance itself: "It has to be embedded in the body of the work and the body of the dancers. Not all the talking around it. Theory is absolutely fine, but *theory is different* [beating the table for emphasis] from how it is embodied, on the stage at the performance moment...And everybody goes off to the coffee house talking: just *talk* instead. But the product of the dance has to be as smart as all the talking around it is." As an example of how

ideas did not translate into actual dancing for her, Nell explained how she thought the work might be about space: “I mean he calls it ‘canyon.’ ‘Canyon’ is a term for a *space*. A psychological space, possibly also, but for sure, a space. It’s topographical. That word is topographical, canyon. Likewise we see a topography attempted on space.” Like many other viewers, Nell gleaned a lot of her meaning from the evocative set design: “So now we’re on something that looks like a map...it looks like a system—a system of rivers, or arteries. Or it looks like a map. And (a pause) and people are really moving around. So now it could be about this thing about place, or about boundaries. Or something. And then there’s flags, so that they look like little pushpins. Or it looks like surveying maps. So now we’re locating, it’s about locating ourselves somewhere.” Initially Nell did find the importance of space that she discerned in the set design realized in the dancing: “I thought it started out with great promise, because that gobbling up of space, with...fairly simple locomotor patterns, around the space swiftly. I think he had a really good thing going where they have moments where they move into unison, two of them together, and then they move back out of it. So he had a bunch of things where oh, we’re coming together in the unison and then we’re going away. His notions about space in that particular moving around were the most interesting.”

However, after that opening section, Nell found the work’s initial promise of meaning unfulfilled. She concluded, “So, I think he’s at the edge of what his idea could be. But I’m not sure his movement vocabulary, or the way he begins to attempt to develop it, is addressing the idea as first presented to us, by the space. I don’t think it’s there.” At the core of her frustration with *Canyon*, then, lay both her perceived absence of a unified throughline and her disappointed expectation of ideas visibly embodied in dancing. She said, “A lot of what that piece was about, in fact, was *unavailable* to the audience.”

At her harshest, Nell called the work shallow, simplistic, and dull, and after her interview was over added that she wished she'd thought of the word "pretentious." This sort of assessment is totally unique among my interviews, and is connected to other ways that Nell herself is unique. She is the only one who has first-hand experience with the world of postmodern dance in downtown New York. She had been a part of that world, and spoke of it disparagingly: "This post-post-post-modern dance that happens south of 23rd Street, giving itself awards all the time, called the Bessie awards. This insular community that is making a lot of really terrible work but constantly congratulating each other about it..." Seeing *Canyon* and reading Jasperse's biography in the program stirred up memories, feelings, and opinions for Nell. While these included a sympathetic awareness of the working conditions for American independent choreographers such as Jasperse, who struggle for basic resources that are provided automatically abroad, her feelings about Jasperse and his world were primarily negative. She decried the Wexner Center's and Jasperse's "little teeny world that thinks it's important" and how that world was full of naked emperors, cloaked only in fake intellectualism and pseudo-meaning. Questioning why some dancers disappeared over the marley roll in *Canyon*, and in fact the very presence of the marley roll, she fumed, "There will be the assumption that because I don't get that (a pause) I'm not smart enough, for your work (a longer pause). That I don't get the theory of your work because I don't get [the logic of the marley roll], which I resent in this postmodern world." Nell positioned herself as outside that world, but her deep familiarity with it gives her a professional parity with Jasperse that none of the other interviewees claimed. With the exception of Nancy, whose years of experience are comparable to Nell's, I can infer that all the other audience interviewees felt a certain amount of reverence for this New York City choreographer,

presented by an institution whose reputation confers on its artists a mantle of the most high-art, the most avant-garde. For the dance insiders, Jasperse is a big name, a highly respected artist in the field. For the dance outsiders, Jasperse, the Wexner Center Performance Space, and even myself constitute a somewhat alien world about which they would politely reserve judgment. An awareness of their relative ignorance about the field and its players might dampen any urge they have to speak in negative terms. As a result, I speculate that none of the other interviewees except Nancy would have considered openly criticizing the work. If there is a power dynamic at play in talking about *Canyon*, only Nell and Nancy were not all awed by Jasperse's status, and only Nell was further incited by the work to push back against it.

Ramona

Ramona works in advertising and is the mother of two small children. She has a Master's degree in English and says she would much rather curl up with a book than do almost anything else. She is a fan of Broadway musicals and if her budget allowed, would love to have a week in New York just to see shows. Her education and interest in the arts—literature and theatre in her case—make her seem similar to the other dance outsiders I interviewed, but unlike them, her struggle to find a way into the work yielded almost no success. She asked me both at the beginning and at the end of her interview what the piece was about, and her talk was heavily laced with questions as well as expressions of not knowing, not understanding, and not being sure. With grimaces and gestures she often communicated how impenetrable she found the whole event.

I can account for at least three ways that this inaccessibility functioned. First, in the language of Brown and Novak's investigation into audience "readiness-to-receive," Ramona

was not in familiar territory. She recognized the foreignness of the situation, of the players and the codes, and actively tried to get her footing. She tried to measure Jasperse and his reputation and situate it within her experience, saying “So tell me about John Jasperse. I mean, is that his name? John Jasperse? Is he the best there is, kind of?...Who is? Who else is modern dance, that I would have heard of?” It’s unclear whether she had been in the Performance Space itself. It seemed to be a known quantity when, talking about the small audience, she said, “That's the black box; I mean, you're not gonna fit a lot of people in there.” However, the rest of her talk about the Wexner Center was in social terms, about going there to eat in the café or to meet friends. She shows it off to visiting clients as a Columbus cultural institution. She did not mention having seen any of its visual art, film, or performance offerings. Neither did her talk include references to any experience that might have prepared her for a performance experience like *Canyon*. Its alien nature had the particular effect of leaving her feeling dislocated in time. For her, the beginning of the piece was unexpected and the end uncertain: “It was like, is this the end? Abruptly maybe. Yeah, I didn't know. I waited for someone to clap.” While she said that time went by quickly, that there was always a lot going on to watch, she also checked her program during the performance: “I was looking for a chronology, so that I could tell where we were in the piece. But they don't give you that, so, [laughing] so I was thinking we could be here all night.”

Second, she seemed almost completely unable to take in the dancers’ movement, lacking in the skill Janet Adshead considers fundamental to having an aesthetic experience of dance: “noting or observing separate movement components of the dance and being able to perceive them as related or unrelated happenings” (Adshead et al 12). While many audience

interviewees relied on the design elements of tape and flags for their meaning-making—similar to the 2004 survey that found that around half of audience members at a concert dance base their interpretations on the set or props (Glass and Stevens 6)—Ramona’s reliance on the tape and flags is notable because they comprise most of her talk. She mentions little of the actual dancing; she seemed unable to describe, or even note or refer to, much of what the dancers did. There is not a mention or acknowledgement of the big, propulsive opening section or the men’s duet that figure so prominently in almost all the other audience members’ interviews. Although a few other audience interviewees confessed that they couldn’t remember parts of the performance—patches of darkness—Ramona’s telling of the performance was more like a large expanse of darkness punctuated with points of light. Not many of the events on stage “made it in” cognitively; like the novice viewers in one fMRI study, *Canyon* seemed to be a wash of motion stimulus of a complicated variety (Lee, Kim, and Woo).

Finally, her code for dance was through-and-through from commercial theatrical dance. She looked for representation and metaphor: “Then I was trying to figure out, is he a flag? Physically supposed to be a flag, or is he a person with a flag?” and “At first I thought, well, maybe [the tape] is like a cityscape...Then I was thinking, well maybe it could still represent that ‘cause the piece is called *Canyon* and you know, it’s supposed to make you feel like you were in a canyon I suppose. (a pause) Maybe.” and “Are they [the dancers] rocks moving over each other? It’s a canyon. Is it *water*? Is it sex?” It is easy to make hay of her love for literature, to blame a literary lens for her persistence in attempting to find meaning in *Canyon* through such explicatory means as metaphor and representation. After all, other dance outsiders attempted such literary meaning-making, but realized it wouldn’t function in

Canyon and abandoned or adapted it.²⁰ However, without having heard her talk more explicitly on the matter, I can't implicate her readerliness; again, metaphor and representation are ubiquitous in our culture.

Her immersion in codes for commercial theatrical dance was also present in her search for authorial intention. She wanted to know what the piece meant, what Jasperse *meant* it to mean, and at one point, frustrated with its opacity, exclaimed, "Screw John Jasperse!" Furthermore, she expected the dancers to demonstrate virtuosity, "I had the classic response every once in a while of, you know, anything modern art people say: 'Oh I could do that,'" and the design of the choreography to be apparent, "I was thinking, are they making it up as they go along?" She assumed a relationship between the music and dance which should have allowed the music to act as an entry point to the dance; she noted that the music started dissonant, got prettier, and ended dissonant again and tried to use that to jog her memory, to map the trajectory of the dance. I imagine Ramona would define dancing the same way the all-knowing computer in the 2008 Pixar movie *WALL-E* does: "...a series of movements involving two partners, where speed and rhythm match harmoniously with music." She spoke admiringly of the dancing on *So You Think You Can Dance?* and of how she would like to persuade her husband to take ballroom dance classes with her, to get really good at it. *Canyon* did not operate according to these codes for and expectations of dance, and remained inscrutable for her.

²⁰ I wonder whether a brief pre-performance encounter affected Ramona's meaning-making strategies. She and I talked together in the Performance Space before the performance began—not an ideal situation but one that couldn't be plausibly avoided. We were interrupted by a dancer who teaches in Columbus; I introduced her to Ramona as such. This woman asked me immediately, "What do you think the tape's supposed to be?" Here was a person, identified as a dance insider, setting an example for Ramona of closed, representational meaning-making. Maybe Ramona modeled her strategies after this woman's.

Ramona's was the response I was expecting from the outsiders—bewildered, frustrated, annoyed—but received only from her. She is the outlier here; the others made the performance meaningful for themselves by hook or by crook and characterized their experiences as generally positive. However, Ramona was both willing and persistent, tenacious in her search for hooks and crooks. Like the hypothetical witness to a conversation in a foreign language that I imagined in Chapter 1, she made some sense of the experience with the tools she had at hand. She made social and intellectual meaning of it, despite her difficulty with its aesthetic meaning. It is productive to look more closely at this difficulty, at her questions, as well as at the few places where she did make aesthetic meaning for herself through description and denotation. For example, her questions and speculations about the tape reveal some of the nuance of her experience. She tried to make logical connections between the tape design and the dancing, saying, "Well, at first ... I wondered to myself, I *wondered* if they were trying to hit certain points on the floor and that was like a map of where they were supposed to be, in relation to each other." Her search for a connection between the patterns on the floor and the dancers' movement is a creative attempt to make sense of the performance, resulting in the idea of a map. If she found no connection—and none is intended in the choreography—I wonder if she then logically rejected the idea of *map*, or if *map* continued to inform her understanding at all? *Map* as part of the connotative complex that includes Jasperse's place of orientation could have served as an entry point for her into meaning, but it seems to have been a dead end for her as it was for Nell, an unfulfilled promise.

The dancers' interaction with the tape on the floor also provided occasion for Ramona to contend with the (for her) off-code presence of pedestrian movement in *Canyon*.

She said, “Then, when they were taking it up, I was like, is there an order to this? Or are they just moving where it needs to be taken up? Like we would? Like if I was trying to take tape off the floor? That was oddly mesmerizing, watching them rip the tape up. The one woman with the braid particularly made a big deal out of it. The guys were a little more matter-of-fact about it.” Kennis, with the braid, did noticeably take the tape up differently, and said of that section: “It does feel like a game to me. I love [seeing that] this [stretch of tape is] a really long one! This is gonna be really fun. And then I like to see it like a ribbon through space come at me.” This playfulness was perceived by some viewers as artfulness, a performance in visible contrast to the other dancers’ task-oriented, straightforward way of pulling up the tape. Watching this contrast was mesmerizing for Ramona, a confrontation with the juxtaposition between people performing on stage and people who are just getting a job done on a stage. Her experience with it exemplifies Judson Dance Theater’s desire to blur the boundaries between art and real life.

This kind of meta-analysis of the performance—a stepping back and considering the dance as an example of “dance”—came up again for her during the “black hole” section, when the lights are very bright and the music very loud and the dancers stand still and scan the audience, looking at each person. She said, “I know there was a part where they stared at the audience. I thought that was interesting.” She asked, “What does this mean? What are they trying to get at?” but it also incited her to comment on how different this direct address of the audience is from ballet or from another dance performance she’s seen, and how “this, it’s so intimate in the black box that you *can* make eye contact with a dancer, and you see their sweat.” After repeating that she didn’t know what it means, she added, “Except it drew people in to the piece maybe a little more.” This simple statement indexes several related

ideas about the relationship of the audience to *Canyon's* performers: connected, confronted, called on to be engaged and active. Again, Ramona is contending with the Judson ideals that live on in *Canyon*; like the iconic Judson-era dance *Trio A*, *Canyon* may not be expressive in the emotive sense, but it is expressive in a broader, discursive sense inasmuch as it calls attention to hitherto unexplored (for Ramona) possibilities of the dance medium (Carroll, "Post-Modern Dance" 101).

Ramona's other comment on the "black hole" section was, "Again, I think it would have freaked me out a little more years ago." Her "again" refers to an earlier comment about the Wexner Center itself: "It's taken me a while to like the Wexner...I think it's more of a symptom of youth than anything else, but I think it sometimes feels inaccessible. Hard edges. Off-putting. Even the stairs." She added, "And I know they did that on purpose." There is a pattern in her talk that belies a suspicion that avant-garde art deliberately creates unpleasant or uncomfortable experiences. She said of *Canyon's* music, "The music was kind of off-putting, which I suppose was the point." She assesses the Wexner Center architecture and the *Canyon* music in the same way, as intentionally inhospitable or alienating. She's onto something there, recalling the definition of Bourdieu's restricted field that characterizes such avant-garde products as not for the masses, "...not to entice them into consumption, nor to turn them on, nor even to make sense to them" (Mears 29). However, she finds that with exposure she isn't put off anymore by something like the audience confrontation of the "black hole" or the hard edges of the Wexner Center. I infer in her talk both a recognition that this type of art is legitimate if not always pleasant, and an openness to the possibility of coming to like it.

With these questions and observations, Ramona steps back from *Canyon* and considers its nature, recognizing it as a different sort of machine and trying to reckon with *how* it works. Perhaps this type of meaning-making is rightly classified as intellectual; if it is aesthetic, it is different in kind from the aesthetic meaning-making wherein she attempts to figure out what the dance is supposed to mean, or hypothesizes that John might be a guy with a flag or a flag himself. Thus far I have characterized Ramona's aesthetic meaning-making as based in metaphor and representation and the search for virtuosity, order, and the choreographer's intentions. There were, however, two instances (not including her notice of the dancers who rolled on each other and therefore might be water or rocks) in which she described the dancers' actual movement evocatively and I discern denotative meaning. She said of the dancers' lying and rolling on the floor, "I liked how they used the floor; I like the parts where they used the floor. I always find that interesting. Where the floor is almost part, it *almost* looks like the floor is coming up...When they're writhing around on the floor, if you don't pay attention to anything else it sort of feels like the floor is moving them. You know what I mean?...That's what I picture in my head. Like writhing of an earthquake or something." While this was description of a general type of movement—floorwork—the other movement that she noticed and was able to describe was a specific moment, part of Burr's solo against the upstage wall: "There's that part that he was banging, like putting his head into the wall, too. Did you see that?...That caught my eye. 'Cause it was almost like his head was *in* the wall, like from certain angles, his whole body was just right in there." There is a similarity to these movements that captured Ramona's attention. They both involve the dancers in a relationship to the room that seems fantastical, impossible. The impression is of matter disobeying natural laws, of floors that rise up and move people and walls that are

permeable, allowing heads and even whole bodies to be inserted. If not fully impossible illusion, these images are related to highly unusual and extreme circumstances such as an earthquake. Seemingly unbeknownst to her, Ramona took away a unique meaning from the dancing: a glimpse of a world where ordinary physical rules are altered to allow for extraordinary physical experiences.²¹ These two instances of sense-making are descriptions from which I gleaned denotative meaning. They are also on dance's own terms as opposed to literary or linguistic ones; they employ a kinesthetic logic of action and sensation with words like "it feels like the floor is moving them." In fact, while her talk was conspicuously devoid of observations employing a spatial logic—no shapes, no group formations, no locations on the stage, no relationships between dancers, no paths of movement—there are several instances of the type of kinesthetic empathy Dee Reynolds calls "inner mimicry." For example, of the two rolling dancers who might be water or rocks she mused, "I wonder if that hurts." In addition, having described a recent time out with friends to a "ladies' eighties night" at a club as drunken, sweaty, and fun like it used to be in college, she immediately said, "I think that's what I envy, you know, it's like that looks so cathartic, what they [the performers] do, on the dance floor...so expressive, and they're so at home in their bodies."

²¹ Interestingly, Jasperse himself sometimes talks about dance in similar terms. For example, he describes the genesis of some of *Canyon's* floorwork as follows: "It was about inhabiting the space of the juncture between the floor and the wall. And the original concept for it was that there would be movement intention that would thrust into the space that was on the other side of the wall...Somehow I was trying to move into the space behind the wall and the wall was moving me back into the space of the room." Some of that original impulse might still be present in the movement's quality and relationship to space, and Ramona perceived that. The presence of similar imagery in both Jasperse's and Ramona's talk raises questions about the explicitness of meaning-making. That is, Jasperse talked about movement thrusting through the wall in reference to the concepts that were the source of some of the choreography; he didn't claim that these concepts are part of the work's current "aboutness." Are they, regardless of what he says? Likewise, Ramona said she didn't get *Canyon*; I imputed meaning into her descriptions of Burr's head in the wall and the floor pushing up on the dancers after the fact, because she noticed and remembered those moments and described them in the way that she did. If she is not cognizant of the work having that meaning for her, does it "count?"

In both of these instances, she is relating what she sees to felt sensations—her own, and ones she projects on the dancers. Similarly, she noted that some of the dancers’ arm movements resembled what she has done with her Pilates work-out tape. I wonder why these kinesthetic references, taken together with her interest in learning ballroom dance, didn’t in fact add up to *more* kinesthetic meaning-making. After she related her story of ladies eighties night and assumed that the dancers felt a catharsis similar to hers, I clumsily tried to suggest that where literary-style explication of the dance fails, there may be another way in. I referred to “the cathartic part,” hoping to imply that the kinesthetic experiences she had could themselves be used to make the performance meaningful on an aesthetic level. She said, “Right. That’s cool.” Later, to reassure me that she didn’t feel her time had been wasted with the performance she said, “It’s pretty.” I didn’t have words at the time to even begin to intimate that she had access to a non-representational, non-literary approach to *Canyon* that goes beyond cool and pretty, to a world where natural laws bend and allow the floor to push and the wall to open.

I have stated that with this study I wish to examine the “text-reader nexus,” taking into account both the formal properties of a postmodern dance as well as audience reception of it. The great majority of my data points to success—ways in which *Canyon* “works” according to dance’s own logics and ways in which audience members successfully received it. Nell’s and Ramona’s interviews stand as the shadow side of this shiny story. Nell’s talk draws attention to ways in which *Canyon*’s own characteristics can make it inaccessible, and Ramona’s talk, full of brown-outs, exemplifies an audience member trying to make sense of the performance and failing. Of all the audience members I interviewed, her talk was the most halting, the most fraught with uncertainty and dissatisfaction. Again, I attribute her

inability to make sense of the work to her inability to perceive discrete movement events, combined with an unfamiliarity with this world of dance, specifically with the restricted codes through which postmodern dance functions. Superficially, her profile is not so different from that of the other interviewees: educated, liberal, arts-interested, middle-class. How is it that, unlike them, she could neither infer some of postmodern dance's specific codes during her hour-long experience of *Canyon*, nor employ a kinesthetic or a spatial or a choreographic logic that would be appropriate to dance in general, nor even discern individual elements or events within the sea of movement? What distinguishes her from them? Over time, she has become familiar with the codes that define the Wexner Center. With no imperative for her to like postmodern dance, could she over time also adapt to postmodern dance codes? That is, would more exposure lead to a familiarity with its grammar, increased processing fluency, and perhaps a more satisfying experience?

This line of questioning situates Ramona within the field of my interviewees. However, equally provocative questions arise if I contextualize her among all the people whose lives and interests have no connection at all with postmodern dance or “high” art of any kind. They logically did not respond to my open offer to attend *Canyon* and be interviewed, or were outside the range of the offer entirely. The field is, after all, restricted—a concept that is somewhat obscured by the great percentage of my interviewees who had satisfying experiences with *Canyon*. While Ramona appears anomalous within this study, she is more realistically anomalous within Columbus; she is a person interested in attending an event like *Canyon* on Friday night rather than watching TV, socializing with friends, going to a movie, or participating in any of the countless more common leisure activities. She followed through on that interest only to find that the entire production was in a language

she didn't understand. John, one of the dancers in Canyon, commented that Jasperse is "...making work that isn't just spoon-feeding the audience, relaxing on their night after a long day at work. It requires some brain function to interpret, and it's not telling you how to interpret." He goes on to note, "For someone who doesn't necessarily see dance that often, it's a lot to ask of them." Without attributing any malicious or exclusionary intent to Jasperse, I recall the idea that art from the restricted field is not intended for the masses but rather for an elite population. Despite distinguishing herself from the masses through her education and especially through her interest in attending an event like *Canyon*, the work remained hostile and closed for Ramona.

Shelley

In a televised interview, Charlie Rose reminds chef Ferran Adria of his quote that food should satisfy on four levels: it should sate hunger, and it should also satisfy the senses, the emotions, and the intellect. Later, Adria, who is internationally renowned for his avant-garde cuisine, asks Rose to try and imagine eating as an art experience, as though it were not a physiological necessity. Adria also proposes the similarly mind-bending idea of eating a painting, taking it into your body, viscerally ("Great Food"). These are challenges for the imagination, and I propose a symmetrical one: what if seeing dance *were* a physiological necessity? What if seeing a dance concert answered an actual hunger? It's difficult to envision that nourishment separate from the sensory, emotional, and intellectual arenas already defined. Some audience members at *Canyon* were "fed" sensorily—visually or kinesthetically—while others found that they were intellectually or emotionally satisfied. Could there be something more, either apart from those categories or existing as a unique combination or result of all three? It would have to be a real bodily sensation, no less

tangible than the physical feeling of having eaten when one is hungry. There is a rare and glorious state of leaving the theater *transformed*, cleansed or awestruck or something else that is as real and tangible as having eaten and cannot be reduced to a solely emotional, or sensorial, or intellectual phenomenon. Shelley seems to have had that experience with *Canyon*, so infused with wonder and emotion was her whole interview.

Shelley is a novice according to my original expert/novice or insider/outsider paradigm; she is not a dancer by vocation and although she has seen some dance performances—possibly conflating them with theater performances—she did not elaborate on that. However, her ways of seeing are expert, almost perfectly on-code for postmodern dance. She perceived dance according to its own logic, never imposing metaphor, representation, or emotional expression on what she saw but instead offering lavish description of kinesthetic, spatial, and choreographic elements of *Canyon*. She did not express any concern for what Jasperse wanted her to take away from the performance. She allowed new images and associations for each moment or, to put it another way, did not seem to be seeking thematic unity. Noting the tape designs on the floor as she waited for the dance to begin, she thought, “This is going to be interesting... They’re [the dancers] going to interact subconsciously, or not subconsciously, with these lines. Or maybe they won’t and I’ll just subconsciously derive patterns, so that’s cool.” Her experience with *Canyon* was inspiring and deeply pleasurable; she said she wanted to see it again and again and exclaimed, “I was *way* lucky to see that!”

Shelley’s exceptionally rich, satisfying experience of *Canyon* is a direct result of her ways of seeing, codes for experiencing art in general rather than specific ones for postmodern dance acquired through insider status in the dance world. She went to art school

and is a graphic designer who sings and plays lead guitar in a local band. Furthermore, she had recently—within the past six weeks—fulfilled a dream from her childhood and begun taking dance classes herself. She spoke excitedly and passionately about this experience often in our conversation—“I wanna dance all the time. I love it so much. I feel like I have to make up for all the years that I didn’t dance... I just thought it would be this thing that I want to do for the rest of my life but would never get to do.” She drew connections between what she has begun to experience in dance class and what she saw in *Canyon*. For example, she discerned a similarity between her experience in dance improvisation class and Burr and Lindsay’s duet: “We did an exercise in class today and a few days ago where we had a duet with the floor. Where we acted as if the floor was our dance partner and our different body parts interacted with the floor. And they [Burr and Lindsay] were definitely both dueting with the floor and with each other.” She has also recently begun a ballet technique class, to which she attributed a heightened appreciation for the dancers’ skill. *Canyon* inspired her to pursue her own dance practice: “It made me want to be a dancer.”

Shelley’s life is steeped in arts—movement, sound, and visual. She referred to a base vocabulary with which she thinks about all the arts, and finds that their themes are interwoven: “Things like form, shape, color, rhythm, pacing—things like that are things that I’m always looking for in art in general...you start to see those patterns in every art.” This affords her not only a markedly synesthetic experience but especially a heightened awareness to the formal elements of art and dance and music—that expert’s way of seeing that bypasses the search for representation. She was interested in and genuinely excited by how these formal elements were treated in *Canyon*, and her talk about them is testimony to her stated practice of thinking about formal elements across disciplines. For example, she

conceives of spatial rhythms and musical rhythms without differentiation: “I really like in music when you subdivide a group. A group of beats or a group of notes or a group of rhythms, and I really liked a lot of the two against three action, ‘cause there were five dancers... Yeah I love the two against three.” Likewise, she could perceive the dancers both as actors who relate to each other and as spatial forms: “And the interactions with two people, and the shapes that they formed between the two of them, and then the negative and positive space. Oh my gosh. (a pause) It was so beautiful.” Her notes on the performance are themselves a beautiful visual rendering, including words, sketches, and musical markings such as *fermatas*, *staccatos*, phrasing bows, and accents.

Shelley notices formal elements of art, conceives of them without regard to disciplinary boundaries, and derives considerable delight from this process. In addition, she is able to form metonymies around these formal elements, allowing her access to facets and layers of meaning that were unusual among the interviewees. Noting the juxtaposition of curved tape lines to straight ones, she remarked “That’s like life; there’s something crappy at the same time as something good.” Shelley also related juxtaposition to cycles—the good and bad not only juxtapose, they are states through which we cycle—and noted that she finds cycles everywhere. Indeed, she conceived of cycles in several ways and discerned them in many of *Canyon’s* elements. She also related cycles to the nervous system and to patterns the body develops “and so that’s why I like patterns in dance, ‘cause it’s just like oh, you’re capitalizing on that thing that we do.” Based on the examples she then gave, “patterns” seems to be equivalent to “repetition.” She found her cycle or pattern in a recurring phrase: “I just really like when there is a set of small movements and it’s passed from dancer to dancer. So it started with black dress lady [Lindsay (like many other interviewees she

identified the dancers by their costumes)]...And she did this thing, this sequence that seemed to end with a backwards kick, but I saw that repeated throughout the night. So sometimes the circle would be really big, like it would take a while to get back to that movement.” In that instance, a phrase shared among the dancers and appearing throughout the performance constituted a cycle for Shelley. She also found “cycle” in an individual’s continuous repetition of movement material, and specifically related this back to her concept of bodily cycles: “Shorts guy [Burr] was in a corner reaching for something on the wall, and then he would do a few other things like explore that corner and just like not really be familiar and then get familiar, and then feel awkward and then reach again. And then he would just bang himself against the wall, and just that movement, and how often that came back, just exploring those patterns in the body in that theme was really nice.” Finally, Shelley found her cycles and patterns in Burr’s relationship to Lindsay during “corner duet.”²² “I also really like how then they would explore those themes with each other. There was this awesome part at the end where I think black dress [Lindsay] and shorts guy [Burr] were in one corner and were touching each other and making symmetrical movements with each other...And then they would separate, and they would come back together and it was just like [moans in pleasure] *Oh*, don’t do that!” Through metonymy, Shelley related elements of the dance—two types of repetition and a symmetrical spatial relationship—to cycles or patterns, a theme that compels her. Further, she found these dance events contiguous with her conception of the body; for her, themes repeated in time or across space “capitalize on that thing” that bodies do: namely, cycle through states of being. In these ways she

²² This section is, in the dance-makers’ telling, a duet between Lindsay and John with Burr as adjacent counterpoint.

constructed personally salient interpretive meaning using metonymy and in so doing, accessed pleasure as well.

The elements that comprise Shelley's unique and particularly successful way of seeing *Canyon* are a ring of keys, capable of unlocking all sorts of doors into the work. She has a recent personal experience of dance; this heightens her kinesthesia as she relates what she has felt to what she sees in performance. She has an eye for formal elements of dance and art in general and the ability to find metonymous meaning in those elements; this affords her an aesthetic satisfaction based in abstraction rather than representation. Although unfamiliar with postmodern dance codes specifically, she does not fall back on codes from the general field of production as Bourdieu predicts; instead, she successfully borrows an indifference to authorial intention and thematic unity from her codes for interpreting other arts. Jangling beside these is her oceanic capacity for empathy; she connected to the dancers as humans and all her impressions of *Canyon* had an emotional measure. At one point in the interview Shelley identified herself as an emotional person, and that was certainly born out in her narration of the performance. There were several instances of her reliving extremes of emotion while she told about *Canyon*. Her emotional meaning-making was usually accompanied by movement description, enabling me to connect her reactions to movement qualities or spatial relationships. For example, she was deeply moved by John's solo on the marley roll, saying, "Red-headed guy was against the slope, and he was stuck in this infinite loop. And he like rolled on, and then tried to get off the canyon [the marley roll] but slipped back down, and scooched around, like seemed to be dragged, and pulled, and then slumped back down. And then did it over again like five times, and I (a long pause) AAAAAAAAH. [laughing] It was *INSANE*. I couldn't get over it. Like he just kept on doing it." She called

John's solo her favorite part of the performance, and it continued to affect her not only in our interview ("I'm tearing up right now") but in a chance encounter she had with John on the streets of Columbus earlier that day: "Right before I got here I grabbed a quick meal, and I saw three of the people [performers from *Canyon*] walking down the street and I made eye contact with the red-headed guy and I started crying. Right there, in the restaurant. I started crying. Like, that's real. That I just saw some guy squirming, rolling along the ground, and I see him the next day and I cry at him? That's when you know you've really connected."

Connection—among performers, between the performers and herself, between the dance and life as she has experienced it—characterized the many sections that resonated with Shelley emotionally. Shelley's descriptions of the men's duet at the end of *Canyon* are included in Chapter 4, but her "take-away" from that duet vibrated with emotional connections: "What was that? What was that?" she asked, "If people watched that at any given point once a day, that could end wars." She summed up the duet's emotional power for her and other potential viewers, "Like they used to be one and they still are one, just not in the same way. Oh! That was (a pause so long that I conclude she was at a loss for words)." Discussing the strength of her emotional response to the dance, Shelley said, "I stepped into my house, after [my friend] dropped me off [after the performance], and I walked backwards into my living room, how the lady [Kennis] did. Yeah. I was definitely moved. It affected me in a very deep and personal way." She was not only "moved" to an emotional reaction but also moved to an overt imitation of a movement that had "moved" her; she walked backwards as she had seen one of the dancers do.

Finally, I note that Shelley also possessed "theory" among her keys to *Canyon*; hers was one of only two interviews besides Michael's wherein the speaker referred to, if not

exactly a philosophy, a way of perceiving and construing the world. She mentioned the Eames film *Powers of Ten* and explained its premise: “They start from very very small, like a cell, and enlarge it by ten, and enlarge it by ten, and they go out to the universe. And then they come back in. And just that concept of micro versus macro is something that I often think about in everything, whether it’s a small note or a *big* movement.” She referred to the film in the context of her narration of the “black hole” moment and how she was aware of the micro and macro occurrences within it.

Shelley’s interview was unique in its pervasive happy enthusiasm and in the variety of ways of making meaning it demonstrated. It surprised me because I thought such a full, positive experience of postmodern dance was only possible for a dance insider. Indeed, the codes for aesthetic meaning-making that she mobilized—including her acceptance of collage and lack of a search for thematic unity, her employment of metonymy rather than metaphor or narrative, her willingness to make sense of the work on her own terms without much concern for the choreographer’s intention—were those that I expect from an expert dance viewer. I assume that the codes she knows for making sense of visual art and music are comparable, and she was able to transfer them to a dance setting without difficulty.

However, the great success of her experience with *Canyon* is attributable to more than just the employment of appropriate codes. Her eye, her ability to discern formal elements of the work—spatial rhythms, negative and positive space, and movement qualities like “heavy”—as well as compositional devices such as repetition also served her well. Her appreciation for and personal participation in dance practice also helped shape her satisfaction, as did her considerable capacity for empathy. Finally, in the language of Brown and Novak’s study, she was definitely ready to receive *Canyon*; both comfortable in the Wexner Center setting and

happily anticipating the performance, she said of the ramp-like corridor that leads to the Performance Space entrance, “Coming through that long hallway it’s always a good preparation. You know you’re gonna see something really great because it’s this long, slow incline and you’re like, *yeah!*”

Chapter 6: Conclusion

How do people make sense of postmodern dance? This study has revealed two different answers. My audience member interviewees made sense of John Jasperse's *Canyon* using codes that are specific to postmodern dance, ones that, for example, assume co-constructed meaning and employ an unstable metonymy. Viewers were most satisfied with the metonymy they found when they allowed its meaning to be fluid; what an aspect of the dance meant in one moment was not necessarily what it meant later. These are surely not the only codes for viewing postmodern dance but they are the ones that were most clearly demonstrated in this study, and explored in Chapter 3. These codes became clear particularly in their absence, that is, when audience members who did *not* employ them—instead following the codes of commercial theatrical dance that call for explicit statements of the choreographer's intentions and rely on metaphor, story, or character—experienced brown-outs in understanding. Audience members also made sense of *Canyon* through poetic, dance-specific means. They found the dance meaningful according to kinesthetic, spatial, and choreographic logics, as explored in Chapter 4. These are “dance-specific means” in that they are unique to dance but also in that they apply to dance in general, not just postmodern dance. And again, they are certainly not the only logics at play in a dance; they are the ones that rose to prominence in this study.

Perceiving these kinesthetic, spatial, and choreographic aspects of the dance requires a particular way of seeing, and the audience interviewees demonstrated varying degrees of fluency in it. Ramona, in whom this skill was not very well developed, had difficulty

describing the dancing that she saw and struggled to find aesthetic meaning in the performance. For the viewers who could discern discrete elements of dance and note their qualities, a door was open, allowing them to make sense of *Canyon*. Meg was able to perceive the dance-specific elements of the performance; however, the sense she made was only partial because some of her strategies for meaning-making—looking for characters in a story and trying to discern the dance-makers’ intentions—were off-code for postmodern dance. Kristin, like most of the dance insiders, was both able to see the dance’s formal properties and was familiar with postmodern dance codes, and consequently had a very satisfying experience with the performance. Outsider viewers who were not as fluent in those codes did not go away empty-handed. They made social sense of *Canyon*, situating it and the people involved in it within larger social structures, and they made intellectual sense of it as well, treating its unfamiliar codes like a riddle that required solving or like a game with unfamiliar rules that they tried to deduce.

Limitations

The greatest limitation to this study was the restricted amount of time I spent with the dance-makers. Their understandings of how *Canyon* means could not possibly be conveyed in a single interview, nor could I hope to get an adequate impression of them from watching a week of technical rehearsal. Conversely, I think my interviews with audience members allowed for a decent sampling of each of their understandings of *Canyon*. As a result, this study is skewed toward the audience’s meaning-making strategies and does not adequately address the dance-makers’. The sample of expert viewers—the dance insiders—is also skewed, toward those in dance academia. While these are probably the “model spectators” for a work like *Canyon*, the study would be stronger if it included dance insiders

whose experience was not so strongly shaped by connection to a university dance department.

Finally, the importance of movement description did not become apparent to me until the data analysis phase. It hadn't occurred to me in the dance-makers' interviews to ask them to simply describe the movement in *Canyon*, but having that description would have provided rich grounds for comparison of their denotative meaning-making with the viewers'. In addition, the lateness of my attention to movement description has theoretical as well as methodological implications. I assert that description-as-denotation constitutes meaning-making as surely as explicit aboutness statements do, but I would like to have some measure of how the speakers understand their own descriptions. That is, if I pursued a discussion with audience members about, for instance, the opening section, would they articulate any of the themes that I perceive in their descriptions of it? Is the meaning I impart to these descriptions available to me because I took the time to reflect on them and analyze them, and if the speakers were to engage in such reflection and analysis themselves, they too would find they have something to say about what the opening section "means"? Does meaning-making "count" if it is not consciously recognized and articulated? These are issues that could be addressed in further research, with an appropriate interview protocol.

Discussion of findings

My audience member interviewees did not express the outrage and frustration that I have long associated with post-performance discussion of postmodern dance and that I predicted for this study. It was evident only in Nell's and Ramona's interviews. All of the other audience members I interviewed had a satisfying experience at *Canyon*, making sense of it in ways that paralleled the dance-makers' as well as generating new, personal meaning for

the dance. How can I explain this glaring, surprising difference between my expectations—rooted in so much anecdotal experience—and the results of this study? *Canyon* is an abstract, challenging piece, refuting most of the familiar codes of commercial theatrical dance. How come so many of the people I interviewed—both experienced and inexperienced dance-goers—found so much there to sink their teeth into?

One possible answer lies in these individuals' initial choice to participate in the study. Doing so indicates an openness to and interest in this type of dance, a "readiness to receive" in the language of Brown and Novak's study. Going out of one's way to attend a dance concert for the sake of the dance is different from attending a concert for the sake of a friend or loved one, as was so often the case with the dance-goers I talked to over the years.

Alternatively, my interviewees might have expressed such positive reactions to *Canyon* out of affection for me; I'm likeable, I obviously care about dance, maybe they just wanted to reflect back my own enthusiasm. There may have been a similar social decorum at work in as much as I provided their tickets; as my "guests" at the theater it may have seemed rude to disparage the performance.²³ I followed up all interviews with an e-mail asking if, upon reflection, there were any negative or confusing aspects of their experience that were overlooked in the interview. No, no, nope: only Jim responded in the affirmative saying the music was too loud and he would have liked it better if they just would have turned it down.

It is possible too that subtle issues of power factored into the interviews. For the novice dance-goers, they may have wanted to let me know that they were capable of "getting it," that they were competent audience members. Maybe they didn't want to be perceived, on

²³ Nell was the only person whose ticket I did not provide. She had been uncertain about participating and only after the performance was over did she decide she wanted to be interviewed. She refused compensation for the ticket she had already purchased. Given her outspoken nature, though, I can't imagine that her interview would have gone any differently if I had provided her ticket.

the record in a formal study, albeit anonymous, as being unable to appreciate fine art. For these interviewees, I may have seemed to have the power to expose some cultural incompetence, in which case it would behoove them to enjoy and understand the performance rather than throw up their hands as they might have been inclined to do in a more casual circumstance. A slightly different imbalance of power could have affected the responses of the experienced dance-goers. It is significant that four of them are young and, although they are intelligent and experienced in academia, none of them has risen very high in the hierarchy nor ventured very far in the breadth of the professional dance world. They may have been somewhat intimidated by Jasperse and his reputation, and by the clout that being presented at the Wexner Center carries, rendering them somewhat starstruck. They mused at parts of the performance that didn't make sense to them, but in a respectful, curious sort of way. By contrast, the two older expert interviewees have considerable experience themselves in the professional dance world and their talk reflected this broader perspective. They could contextualize Jasperse and his reputation within their personal experience of the larger national and international dance scene. Jasperse's identity as "New York choreographer presented at the Wexner Center" did not particularly impress them as it may have the other expert interviewees, and they bluntly pointed out the parts of the performance they thought didn't work.

An alternative explanation for why the audience interviewees in my study apparently experienced so little of the frustration and confusion I expected lies in the fact of the interviews themselves. The foreknowledge that they would be interviewed about their experience no doubt affected the way participants engaged with the performance, likely causing them to be more attentive and more aware and analytical of their own responses.

Furthermore, responding to my simple questions—*What was the beginning like? What stood out for you?*—and the follow-up thereon requires a degree of reflection that casual post-performance chat over a drink does not. They were impelled to come up with words to fill the silence that followed my questions. Educator James Britton calls this “shaping at the point of utterance,” articulating a thought which had not previously consolidated in the speaker’s mind (Mayher, Lester, and Pradl 5), and it is consistent with Holstein and Gubrium’s theory that meaning is creatively assembled in the interview process. Then, a process of untangling or clarifying their own experiences of the show is evident in several of the interviewees’ talk. Both experienced and inexperienced audience members circled repeatedly back in the course of the interview to aspects of the performance that were salient to them, refining their understanding of these aspects with each subsequent consideration. This combination of elements in the interview situation—a necessarily heightened attentiveness to the performance and one’s own experience of it, as well as the opportunity to reflect upon and analyze that experience—may be exactly what postmodern dance demands of the viewer. As one of the researchers in *Conceiving Connections*, the Australian study into audience reactions to contemporary dance, points out,

...people, when given the opportunity to reflect on their own experience with the work, enjoy being asked their opinion, and the freedom to interpret the work in any way they want. Perhaps it is not pre-performance information that is important, but the observers’ opportunity to reflect on their interpretation, understanding and connection with the piece. (Glass, “Observer Response” 120)

Finally, the nature of *Canyon* itself may account for the broad appreciation of it. While Jasperse's work has a reputation for being highly conceptual, and my personal experience with it had corroborated this, in fact *Canyon* embodies many more traditional theatrical dance characteristics than I had anticipated. There is a lot of "dance-y" dancing there.

Ramona alone among the dance-outsider interviewees expressed the confusion and frustration I expected from more of the outsiders. Although her reaction is unique among the other people in the sample, I suspect it would not be uncommon among most dance outsiders. While ten of my twelve interviewees had positive experiences at *Canyon*, I am haunted by a ghostly thirteenth, an amalgam of all the irritated non-dancers with whom I've ever gone to a postmodern dance concert. This frustrated and annoyed audience member has not disappeared; I encountered him and her again not only in Ramona but in the papers that my dance history students—undergraduates from across the university's disciplines—were required to write after attending *Canyon*. Although there were certainly issues of power at play as students, despite my admonitions to the contrary, may have thought that they needed to write positively of the experience, the papers contained both veiled and overt expressions of frustration and disdain. One student wrote, "The dancers didn't seem to have much focus; they would stare aimlessly with blank expressions on their faces. The main thing that disappointed me with this performance was the lack of storyline. I personally wasn't able to pinpoint what the dance was about, but maybe that was the point." Another wrote, "Everything about this performance screams utter chaos to me, from the meandering tape on the ground, to the performers' mis-matched clothes, from the dissonant music to the flailing of the performers' limbs. Disorientation was the one common thread I could find

between these elements of the dance. The music was loud and at some times frantic. Pauses in movement went on for what seemed like days, with no clear purpose other than to test the attention span of the audience, a battle I was determined to win.” In these papers I see some of the alienation that my previous experience with dance-outsider audience members had led me to expect.

John Jasperse said, “That experience of ‘I don’t get it’—I still have that as a spectator at dance. I *feel* their pain.” With *Canyon* he did not intentionally obscure the work’s aboutness or set out to vex the audience, as these students speculated. Nell would say that the dance was inaccessible—to her, to Ramona, and to the students—because of its own compositional weaknesses, but judging the choreographic merits of *Canyon* is beyond my scope here. I can’t address the extent to which *Canyon* itself may be at fault in instances where viewers were alienated by it. Rather, I can confidently attribute some of the not-getting-it to, in Ramona’s case, a difficulty in perceiving the dance-specific aspects, such as the spatial or the compositional, and in hers as well as the students’ cases, an expectation that commercial dance codes would apply to *Canyon*. Bourdieu states that access to these codes belongs intrinsically to a privileged class, that those with the right kind of education and upbringing immediately perceive art according to the appropriate codes while everyone else must confront art with only the codes from everyday life (“Outline” 215-218). He writes, “Since the information presented by the works exhibited exceeds the deciphering capabilities of the beholder, he perceives them as devoid of signification—or, to be more precise, of structuration and organization—because he cannot ‘decode’ them, i.e., reduce them to an intelligible form” (“Outline” 218). I agree that access to interpretive codes from the restricted field are a matter of privilege and education and think that the same is often,

but not always, true of the ability to discern formal elements of art. Many people need some guidance to be able to overcome the cognitive bias and see dance in a way that allows for noting its spatial composition or dynamic qualities rather than trying to figure out what it represents.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications in several quarters. They are important for the choreographers and presenters who bemoan the size of the audience for postmodern dance. An understanding of the challenges facing many potential audience members will not change any choreographer's creative process, causing him or her to make dances differently, nor incite any presenter to ask for such a change. However, awareness of how a dance performance "works," for whom it works, and by what means, affords choreographers and presenters a better understanding of how audience members connect to their product. Dance scholars and historians may benefit from the data and analysis in this study as a snapshot of a specific, situated instance of postmodern dance in our time. The study's focus on the means of understanding will be of interest to scholars of visual culture and of semiotics of the theater. Finally, outsiders to the world of dance may find that the study provides an entry point into a sometimes arcane form.

Furthermore, I hope that this research will not only resonate in areas that adjoin the field of Dance Studies but also in wider circles. A postmodern dance concert is temporal, visual, immediate, musical, kinesthetic, and essentially ambiguous—diverse modes of expression that are shifting, variously, into and out of the foreground of our culture. Thus the meaning-making I explore has implications for how we process many of the messages we receive. This evolving landscape is further complicated by the very factors that define

dance audiences, income and education. Insofar as the ability to make sense of *Canyon* relies on arts-specific meaning-making strategies, my study has implications for educational practice and policy, and for concerns about the politics of privilege.

Ruthellen Josselson, in her article on narrative research, writes that the aim of accruing knowledge through qualitative studies is not statistical prediction but attention to the suggested consequences of the interpretive reality revealed in the study. If this is what we understand, what does it mean for the kind of world we are building (9)? Having gained knowledge about how people make sense of postmodern dance and how they don't, some action is implied. The findings of this study compel me to call for the un-restricting of postmodern dance, creating circumstances in which more people have access to codes other than the dominant ones, and to ways of seeing that allow for perception of dance. Immediately, I clarify that I am not suggesting more people need to *like* postmodern dance—as Jasperse said of a challenging experimental film-maker he admires, “Those are really interesting things, but some people are not interested in that process...so I don't know that that says anything other than, (a pause) I like doughnuts or I don't like doughnuts.” I want to create an opportunity, to see that people have the codes and skills to find their way into postmodern dance, not to shape their preference once they are there.

This may seem like a frivolous goal. What does it matter if the audience for postmodern dance is miniscule, if many viewers throw up their hands at a performance like *Canyon*, dismiss it as bewildering or pointless and go on about their way? At the very least, this disgruntled majority has missed the opportunity to experience some of the profundity, the pleasure, and the intellectual provocation that my interviewees found in varying measures. Delving deeper into the matter, some view art as a form of play that exposes us to

fictional worlds (Gazzaniga 224) and renews our mental processes by engaging us in interaction that has no immediate practical implications (Thompson 8). More specifically, “Often the renewed or expanded perceptions we gain from artworks can carry over to and affect our perception of everyday objects and events and ideas” (Thomson 9). If this is true, the expanded perceptions offered in a dance like *Canyon* are stunning, and unlikely in any art form other than dance. Not only did viewers see the impossible realized—it looked like he had his head in the wall, it looked like they were attached by rubber bands—and thus conceived as possible, but they also saw many more quotidian aspects of life embodied in heretofore unimagined ways. They saw people who move quickly through moments of togetherness and then split off and go their own way; they saw moon landings and the habitation of foreign environments; they saw people experimenting with partners to see who can support them best; and they saw frustration incarnate in a man twisting and rolling. That is a vision of people, a vision of a way of being, that imparts new knowledge to us. When Natalie saw the girl whose chin jerks up off the guy’s shoulder and said it’s fascinating, she has glimpsed some new incarnation of the relationship between two people. All of these, and the many more impressions present in the audience interviews, speak to perceptions of reality that inspire new thought, that have that potential to expand understanding of the everyday. Again, the ability to incite these particular playful or impractical understandings is unique to the medium of dance; if Ramona had seen the floor rise up in a CGI (computer-generated imagery) movie, I reckon it would not have impressed her as it did in *Canyon*. The immediacy of those human forms—the medium itself—plays a part in how and why the image registered for her. Dance can incite expanded perceptions that are not possible in any other art; although I can’t guess at how that particular image may affect the way Ramona

contends with the events and ideas in her life, I am confident that it has caused her to see differently and to think differently. As a final plank in this platform that constitutes the intrinsic, compelling value of understanding dance, I submit that dance can itself embody new knowledge. Choreographer Mark Morris's dances such as *Dido and Aeneas* (1989) and *The Hard Nut* (1991), for example, invoke an understanding of the fluidity and performativity of gender that cannot be equaled in verbal theorizing. Likewise, choreographer Merce Cunningham's multiple spatial perspectives on the dancing stage, from both the performers' and the spectators' viewpoint, served to decenter space. This decentering has continued to resonate as an artistic premise (Lansdale 4) and as a cultural and political paradigm shift. These are instances in which unique, valuable knowledge is embedded in dance works, there for those who can access it.

Learning to dance and learning about dance have multiple cognitive and emotional benefits, well summarized in Judith Hanna's 2008 article, but the results of my study compel me to advocate for dance education²⁴ for the sake of access to the unique dance-specific understanding I have described here. While I have relied heavily on Bourdieu's theories throughout this research, here I have to part ways with him. He distinguishes between a "stereotyped" and a "genuine" culture; the former way of understanding art is shaped by schooling while the latter is absorbed incrementally over a long period of time. Genuine culture is imparted by one's family and perpetuates a hunger for more. Even art education in school presupposes an existing cultural competence, acquired by going to concerts and museums, presumably with one's family. Therefore, this model implies that only members of a privileged class that provides art to its children with the milk they drink can achieve a

²⁴ Given the assignment to unrestricted postmodern dance, I immediately think of education. Other minds would come up with other strategies, and I hope this paper inspires a voicing of those ideas.

genuine understanding of art from the restricted field. Art education in schools is not even accessible to all because of its assumed cultural competencies and anyway, it is inferior to art appreciation instilled from the cradle as a way of life (Bourdieu, “Outline” 227-233).

While Bourdieu seems to dismiss understandings of art that are acquired through school, I think that dance in the K-12 curriculum could go a long way toward equipping students with both a way of seeing that can discern and note dance characteristics, as well as codes for interpreting dance that differs from commercial theatrical norms. My own children, students in a decent urban public elementary school, are given multiple entry points into literary ways of thinking. They learn vocabulary and practice spelling and writing daily, but also are introduced to ideas of theme, imagery, development, and character. They are taught to look for supporting evidence for their claims in the text they have read, and they write poetry. Likewise, they are taught to “think like scientists”—developing hypotheses, testing them in experiments that control variables, and interpreting the results. There is even a fine music course integrated into their curriculum once a week; they sing, read music, experiment with rhythms on various instruments, and learn about music in other cultures. Each of these teaches them a different way of perceiving and thinking; they are learning how to see and hear, how to identify what is salient in each of those fields. A comparable dance class could teach them about movement, how to recognize and describe and experience the kinesthetic, the spatial, and the choreographic, opening up perception of dance and allowing them access to its unique knowledge. Exposure to non-normative interpretive codes could certainly be integrated into a dance curriculum as well, instilling an understanding that dance’s meaning is not necessarily representational and that viewers have a role in shaping it. Dance educator Mary Joyce advocates against teaching dance with images—a growing seed,

wild horses galloping—as it results in an understanding of dance as always literary, or emotional, or pretending to be something else. Instead, by teaching dance in its own movement terms children learn that dance is not about something else; it is itself the something (Joyce 21-22). My kindergartener is working on his version of a Picasso face in his weekly art class. If he can understand that verisimilitude does not need to drive his drawing, surely he can understand something comparable about movement.

In this imagined world where dance education is widely available—teaching how to recognize dance’s formal properties and how to make sense of dance using codes that differ from the most common ones—more students would have access to the pleasures and knowledge that are unique to dance. The limitations of this study have compelled me to focus on the audience, but I must at least address what such an un-restricting of postmodern dance would imply for dance-makers. What would they lose and what would they gain if such a shift were to take place? As it stands—with both the requisite ways of seeing and the codes for interpretation as privileged property—postmodern dance maintains an elite status separate from commercial theatrical dance. However, returning to Bourdieu’s model, postmodern dance is still subject to the economic and political laws of the larger cultural field of which it is a part (Bourdieu, “Field” 37-40); therefore, its artists must make a living in our society. With its current position as a product from the restricted field, dancers and choreographers are awarded cultural status—the cachet of being presented at a Wexner Center—but not a wage that allows them to devote all their energy to dance. Jasperse spoke of his responsibilities reserving the cargo van to transport the set design elements from New York to Ohio and arranging plane tickets and cab fares for the dancers, reminding me of the day-to-day reality for many postmodern choreographers. Even those with Macarthur and

Guggenheim awards do not necessarily have the financial stability to see past the next season. Many choreographers of a renown comparable to Jasperse's do their own grant-writing and administrative work, can't pay their dancers a living wage, scramble to rent scarce rehearsal space on a weekly basis, and take on teaching gigs to make ends meet. Likewise, the dancers I interviewed talked about their "day jobs," the work they do that enables them to continue dancing. On the surface, this situation may seem artistically stimulating—a DIY, rock n roll model rather than a complacent, state-subsidized or market-driven one—but over the long term, it is exhausting and hard to sustain. Admiration for Jasperse's longevity in the field comprises not only an acknowledgment of his artistic integrity but also his personal tenacity (Kourlas "Body and Brain"); he persists in an extremely inhospitable environment.

If access to postmodern dance were more widespread, its audience would theoretically increase and more money would flow into the field, relieving some of the current stress therein. The energy that dance artists currently devote to the scramble for funding and the multiple roles they must play could be used for making dances, and with such a dedication of resources, presumably the dances would get better and better, perpetuating a happy relationship between postmodern dance and its growing audience. However, the sheen of exclusivity, the cachet of being the object of a rarefied taste, would be gone. Economic stability would be attained at the loss of that certain cultural status that comes with being the product of a restricted field. Looking more closely at that hypothetical situation, unrestricting access to postmodern dance does not imply that it becomes indistinguishable from commercial theatrical dance. Postmodern dance would still be itself aesthetically, with its own characteristics and codes; accessibility would not require

homogenization. The goal of equipping more people with the eyes to see and the codes to interpret postmodern dance is to allow for the possibility of difference. If the avant-garde is defined negatively, by what it opposes (Bourdieu, “Field” 61-67), postmodern dance would maintain that aspect of its status inasmuch as its codes and characteristics would still be radically different from those of commercial theatrical dance.

My imagined scenario is of course wholly speculative; all the ramifications of such a shift in postmodern dance’s status are unknown. With any shift in fields of production, meaning changes (Bourdieu, “Field” 30-31) and I can’t project what those changes would entail or what the actual effects of the model I have laid out would be. Furthermore, both the premise of my hypothetical world and its implications vary in too many ways from the current reality to allow for any sort of predictability. It would require a broader cultural landscape that includes substantial funding for arts education, a situation that differs substantially from the current one. In 2000, 21% of public elementary schools offered dance instruction; in 2010, only 3% did (Parsad and Spiegelman 41). Then, it implies large audiences who do not balk at ambiguity and can perceive the formal elements of, say, a duet between two men that includes floor-work and full-body support. The imagined scenario is idealistic and far, far from the status quo. In reality, postmodern dance is likely to remain privileged property. The enthusiastic, profound, curious, and engaged responses of most of the audience members I interviewed, however, compel me to at least suggest that their experiences should be made more widely accessible.

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Appendix A: Data Census

This is an account of all the data used in this study.

Interviews, chronologic

Jasperse, 4-23-2012	audio recording (duration: 1:39:18) video recording transcript
Jim, 4-26-2012	audio recording (duration: 38:18) video recording transcript
Ginny, 4-27-2012	audio recording (duration: 46:34) video recording transcript
Ramona, 4-27-2012	audio recording (duration: 38:24) transcript
Kennis, 4-27-2012	audio recording (duration: 46:42) video recording transcript
John, 4-28-2012	audio recording (duration: 55:21) video recording transcript
Burr, 4-28-2012	audio recording (duration: 23:01) video recording transcript
Lindsay, 4-28-2012	audio recording (duration: 39:48) video recording transcript
Manisha, 4-28-2012	audio recording (two parts, total duration: 50:21)

	video recording
	transcript
Natalie, 4-29-2012	audio recording (duration: 23:53)
	video recording
	transcript
Shelley, 4-29-2012	audio recording (two parts, total duration: 50:33)
	transcript
Nancy, 4-30-2012	audio recording (duration: 30:00)
	transcript
Michael, 4-30-2012	audio recording (two parts, total duration: 1:10:36)
v	video recording
	transcript
Meg, 5-1-2012	audio recording (duration: 32:53)
	transcript
Kristin, 5-2-2012	audio recording (duration: 51:17)
	transcript
Alyssa, 5-3-2012	audio recording (duration: 20:51)
	transcript
Nell, 5-8-2012	audio recording (duration: 44:42)
	transcript
Jasperse, 3-6-2014	audio recording (duration: 37:59)
	transcript

Observations

Rehearsals, Wexner Center Performance Space

4-24-2012

4-25-2012

4-26-2012

4-27-2012

4-29-2012

Performances, Wexner Center Performance Space

4-26-2012

4-27-2012

4-28-2012

4-29-2012

John Jasperse Master Class, Pomerene Hall, The Ohio State University

4-27-2012

Other

Dance History student papers, Spring 2012

Appendix B: Data Collection Timeline, April 2012

Monday, April 23

3:30p	Jasperse interview
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Tuesday, April 24

4-7:00p	rehearsal
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Wednesday, April 25

11-5:00	rehearsal
7-10:00p	dress rehearsal

Thursday, April 26

2-4:30p	rehearsal
7:00p	warm-up
8:00p	performance
9:15p	Jim interview

Friday, April 27

9:15	Ginny interview
10:30-12:00	master class
12:30p	Kennis interview
5-7:00p	rehearsal—notes to dancers
8:00p	performance
9:15p	Ramona interview

Saturday, April 28

1:30p	John interview
2:30p	Burr interview
3:45p	Lindsay interview
6:00p	rehearsal—notes to dancers
8:00p	performance
9:15p	Manisha interview

Sunday, April 29

12:00p	rehearsal—notes to dancers
2:00p	performance
3:15p	Natalie interview
6:00p	Shelley interview

Monday, April 30

10:00p	Nancy interview
5:00p	Michael interview

Tuesday, May 1

9:30p	Meg interview
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Wednesday, May 2

10:30	Kristin interview
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Thursday, May 3

9:15	Alyssa interview
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Tuesday, May 8

12:30p	Nell interview
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Appendix C: Sample Interview Questions

Interview questions for Jasperse

- The choreography is credited to you, in collaboration with the dancers. I'm wondering about the genesis of the piece. Did you have concepts that you brought in to the dancers, or movement ideas that evolved into concepts, or...?
- Can you describe how early rehearsals of *Canyon* went?
- What's the process then? Can you give me an idea of how one section of *Canyon* developed in rehearsal?
- Now you're transposing this existing work into a new space, as well as incorporating a new dancer. Tell me about the things that you focus on at this point in the process.
- You dance in your own work. What does the work require of a dancer? How do you train for it?
- Tell me what it's like for you performing this piece.

Interview questions for dancers

I'm interested in hearing about your experience with this piece, and all the things that feed into it:

- Tell me about how you started dancing with John.
- How did *Canyon* start for you? Were you there at the beginning creating it?
- What was the process like in rehearsal at the beginning? Can you describe how it goes when you're generating new material?
- Tell me about your personal movement practice. How do you train for working with John? Do you take class?
- Describe what it's like performing the piece. Are there sections that you connect to particularly as a dancer?
- Do you make your own work? Do you dance in it as well? Tell me about that.

Interview questions for audience members

I'm interested in hearing about your experience with this performance:

- Tell me about your experience at the theater. What did you do before you came, and what happened as you arrived, and as you waited for the lights to go down?
- Describe for me how the performance began. What happened on stage?
- Tell me about some of the things that struck you about the performance. What really stood out?
- Describe how the performance ended, and what led up to the ending?
- Have you been to the Wexner Center before—for the galleries, or film, or a performance?
- What about other theaters, or clubs? Tell me about what sorts of things you enjoy seeing.
- Tell me about your own dancing life. (for novices) For instance, do you enjoy dancing socially? Did you ever take dance classes? (for experts) What is your movement practice, or how do you train?
- Describe for me your ideal Saturday-night leisure experience? How do you really enjoy spending your free time.

Appendix D: Sample Data Map Excerpt

