

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: **CODE: A CHOREOGRAPHED ILLUSTRATION OF
RULES, BOUNDARIES, AND SOCIAL GUIDELINES
THROUGH DANCE, FILM, AND VISUAL ART**

Autumn Mist Belk, Master of Fine Arts, 2006

Thesis Directed by: **Professor Meriam Rosen
Department of Dance**

Code is an exploration of life's boundaries and the laws, guidelines, and customs that construct these barriers. Governments impose restrictions on the members of its community; these members then enforce additional limits through formalities, etiquette, and other social codes. Technology is constantly raising its own limits; however, technological devices still cannot achieve all that the mind can fathom. The programming code controlling these devices also presents boundaries of its own.

A sample of life's rules is illustrated through a formal concert, which incorporates live dance and prerecorded film components, and through a limited edition book of artwork related to the components of this concert. Each of six choreographed works presents one or more of the binding codes that shape our lives. This written documentation explores how these works function within four categories of codes: externally enforced boundaries, social structures within relationships, limits of technology, and the absence of rules.

CODE:
A CHOREOGRAPHED ILLUSTRATION OF RULES, BOUNDARIES, AND
SOCIAL GUIDELINES THROUGH DANCE, FILM, AND VISUAL ART

by

Autumn Mist Belk

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2006

Advisory Committee:

Professor Meriam Rosen, Chair
Lecturer Paul D. Jackson
Professor Anne Warren

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2006

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INTRODUCTION

“Hell, there are no rules here — we're trying to accomplish something.”

Thomas Edison

Code did not start as a personal assignment to create work about boundaries; in fact, it came about in quite the opposite way. As I begin work on a new project, I purposely strive to not limit myself to a particular idea or concept. The possibilities are endless until the need arises to take notice of what path my project has chosen for itself, and then I work within this path to clarify the message of the project.

Looking back at some of the dance works I had previously created and looking at those in progress about a year ago, I realized they had a common thread — all were somehow related to limits or rules — codes. After noticing this commonality the challenge then became fitting these codes together into a cohesive concert and expanding the project further without the theme becoming a hindrance to creativity.

This creative work (the live concert and the art book) is the substance of my research and thesis work while the following pages serve to provide some insight into the concepts behind the work. I do not go into great detail about the craft of my projects — the processes by which I create — in much the same way a painter does not go into detail about how he has applied each brush stroke. More paramount is the resulting statement of art.

I. EXTERNAL BOUNDARIES

“After having thus successively taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp and fashioned him at will, the government then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a network of small, complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided; men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting. Such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence: it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.”

Alexis de Tocqueville

What happens when an overbearing presence starts interfering in our lives? Individuality is squelched. We are controlled as if all people are a single unit. We are not treated as equals; we are treated as clones. *Into the Zoo* marks the path from individuality to a society controlled by the unseen forces of the government. What starts as an environment of frolicking animals soon is forced into a prison of hardened, beaten-down souls. The almost invisible “shadow” characters interact with the animals only to push and pull them into submission, finally creating the small, structured society they desire only to realize that place is full of dead spirits.

While *Into the Zoo* shows this transition, *Regulation* and *Monday Morning* (shown in three parts) present glances into these societies of clones by utilizing everyday rules we are all faced with. *Regulation* follows a group of exhausted brides as they deal with the laws and customs surrounding both sides (wedding and divorce) of marriage and yet they travel back to the rules of high school gym class to show their frustration. Run to the first line and back. Run to the second line and back. Run to the far wall and then sprint back to the finish.

Fill out this form. Call these people. Set up a meeting. Mail this out. Say these words. Sign these papers. While many can think back to the rules of gym class, we are reminded daily of rules we follow today at work. *Monday Morning* takes a “uniformed” worker and turns him into a chanting, robotic drone merely stomping through his daily routine. The sounds heard throughout each part of *Monday Morning* is “The Haka,” a traditional Maori chant whose first words translate to “I live, I live. I die, I die.” — unknowingly touching upon that tiny

part of each of us that dies a little as we trot off to a job seen merely as a way to make a living. No translation was given to the audience members at the performance of *Monday Morning* because I feel the atmosphere, movement, and intention of the dancers conveyed all that was needed. It is never necessary to give a viewer all the information; if you do, then they lose the ability to interpret for themselves. They become a type of clone as well — told how to watch a show and what to think about it.

II. SOCIAL STRUCTURES

“The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said.”

Peter Drucker

Moment and *Dinner* both observe how social codes — what is customary or accepted in society — squelch communication in interpersonal relationships. In *Dinner* this relationship is between husband and wife and in *Moment* it is between parent and child, but both cases share the existence of power — of dominance and submissiveness.

Who decides a woman's place? Feeding off of the stereotypical 'a woman's place is in the kitchen' mindset, *Dinner* shows this classic woman as only a partial being — being only partially dressed — traveling down a treacherous slope of frustration with the unresponsive partner of a man she finds herself forced to cater to. This woman finally looks outside the room she lives in to find herself face-to-face with an army of frustrated cookie-cutter wives; it is only then that she realizes the absurdness of her position in society in relation to her man. The piece ends without a change in society, but our main character has changed and leaves her tiny room with a new sense of her own identity.

Moment delves into the mind of an adolescent as she recalls a conversation she never got to have with her parents. There are some things you just do not talk about. Some things are not pleasant or polite. What makes these topics taboo? Medical problems are discussed and treated openly, yet mental diseases are socially crippling. The boundaries placed in one person's mind lead to the destruction of a relationship.

Moment stands alone in this collection of work as the only piece that had not yet been started before determining the theme of *code*. Seeing that all my previous work had some type of connection to my own life, I set out to build upon

this by creating a solo built entirely on my own personal experiences with boundaries, rules, and codes. Beginning with a very strong point in time and then developing text and finding the proper music, this piece was the hardest to find movement for. In the end, I broke the rule in my own head that movement needed to be choreographed and developed a score for an improvisation to take place on stage. *Moment*, therefore, was different each night of the performance as my relationship with the piece continued to grow.

III. THE REALM WITHOUT RULES

“We need men who can dream of things that never were.”

John F. Kennedy

Are dreams the ultimate frontier? Are they our only hope to exist without rules or limitations? That which cannot exist in real life can flourish within a dream and yet my dreams still show situations of power struggles — the individual versus the group. *FALLING* illustrates this struggle and yet can ignore traditional rules of enemies. Must one emerge the winner and one the loser? Must the fight ever actually end? During our ten-minute journey through the strange landscape of this dream, do we actually learn anything? Is anything accomplished? Can one even begin to understand what is happening in this environment?

Dreams run on their own fuel without rules and also without anyone having control over them. So then how can I recreate a dream without having control over its outcome? Obviously I did make some decisions during the development of *FALLING*, but I also relinquished control over some aspects of the piece. I developed movement phrases but then assigned these phrases to dancers in random order and arbitrarily determined entrances and exits. I gave some direction and ideas to the composer who developed the sound score, but ultimately she controlled the music. Portions of video were randomly layered on top of each other to create pieces of the final film projected during the live concert piece. One's subconscious cannot be recreated in performance but perhaps somewhere in *FALLING* exists just a bit of substance that surpasses the rules surrounding us.

IV. LIMITS OF TECHNOLOGY

“The only way to discover the limits of the possible is to go beyond them into the impossible.”

Arthur C. Clarke

It is hard to imagine that in today's technology-driven world there exist limits to what technology can do. Eventually, however, as we push the capabilities of the gizmos in our lives we run up against the boundary. There is only so far you can go — unless you can develop new technology to take you farther. You must play by the rules of that which you are working with. A video camera can only capture two dimensions of a three-dimensional object; the editing software has limits to the number of frames it can layer and render.

In the film components of *FALLING* and *Dinner* I face the limits of this software and also the limits of the performance space. The projector limits the brightness and color intensity of the films; basic physics limit where the projector can be placed in the theatre — helping to determine the size and angle of the projection.

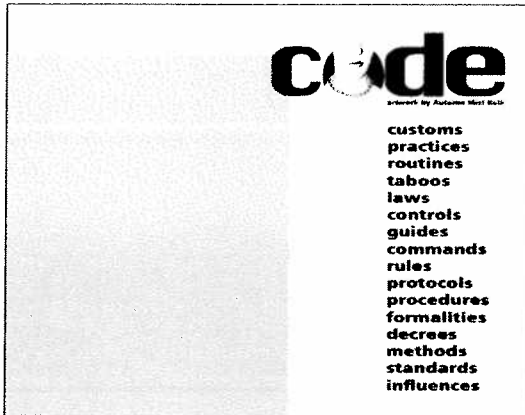
The artwork shown in the book, *code*, also faces similar codes. Each piece started as either a digital image or a still from a video — a collection of pixels in both cases. The technology of the image-editing software used limits the size and the sharpness of the images based on their original formats. Film stills are very small and of low resolution so in order to create a larger image from stills you must add layers of hand manipulation or purposely blur the image (such as in *FALLING #1*) to end with a smooth finished product. This is a limit of pixel technology but also leads to an artistic choice. The *Into the Zoo* images are also created from video stills, but the finished images retain some of the visible pixels that appear when enlarging the still. Though much manipulation was still

necessary to achieve the desired look, one of the limits of technology proved to be useful in the final outcome.

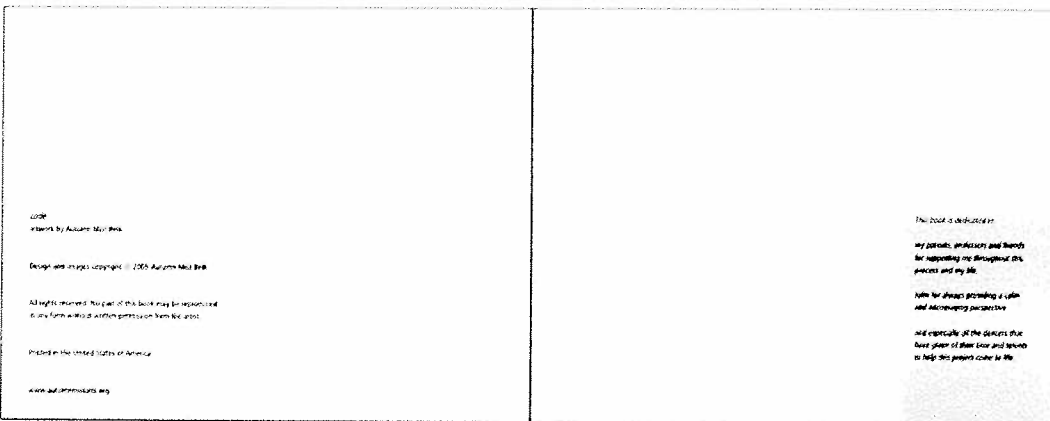
In any situation there will always exist codes we cannot overcome — rules to challenge, boundaries to cross, limits to push. It is the work of *code* to reveal these so that we can then decide for ourselves which to exist within and which to go beyond.

APPENDIX A. VISUAL ARTWORK

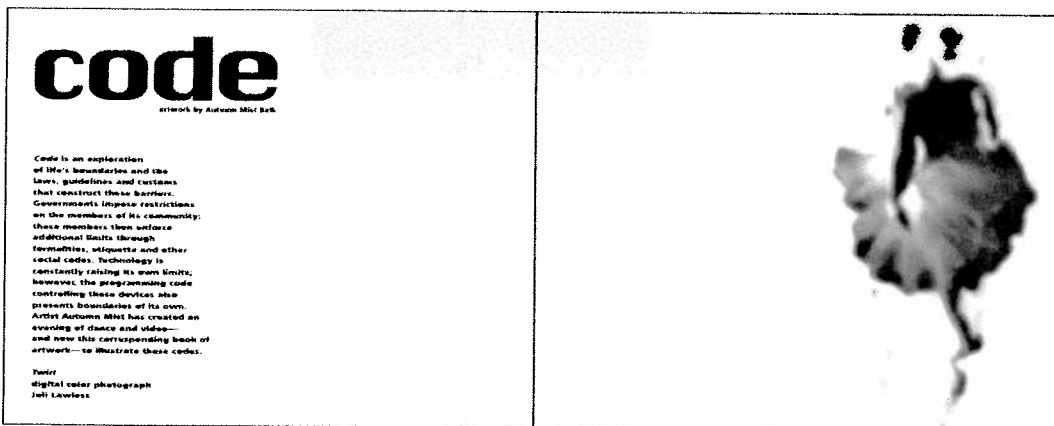
Visual artwork related to *Dinner*, *Into the Zoo*, *Regulation*, and *FALLING* was compiled into a limited edition art book; the following images are smaller-scale reproductions of the pages of this book.



Front Cover



Inside Front Cover and Page 1



Pages 2-3: Introduction

customs

Who decides a woman's place?
How are our human interactions
shaped by society?
The relationship between man
and woman is defined by an
ever-changing social code,
reinforced by the lack of
communication between the
couple. Dinner looks at
the power structures that
exist and have existed within
this relationship by dealing
with the basic human need
to eat regularly.

Dinner #1
digital color photograph
Rob Chappetta & Sarah Levitt



practices

Dinner #2
digital color photograph
Rob Chappetta & Sarah Levitt



routines

Dinner #3
digital color photograph
Rob Chappetta & Sarah Levitt



taboos

Dinner #4
digital color photograph
Rob Chappetta & Sarah Levitt



laws

What happens when
an overbearing presence
starts interfering in our lives?
Individuality is squashed.
We are controlled as if
all people are a single unit.
We are not treated as equals.
We are treated as classes.
Into the Zoo brings attention
to the hands of "Big Brother"
as they pull our strings
to control individuals
as a single, degraded unit.

Into the Zoo #1
Digital video stills & Illustration
Mónica Glamo-Mendoza &
Jonathan Rivlin



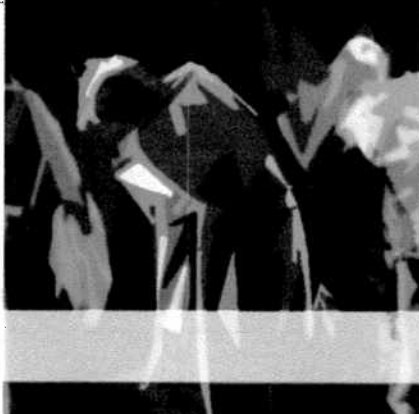
controls

Into the Zoo #2
Digital video stills & Illustration
Teri Anderson, Mari-Elen Gates,
Mónica Glamo-Mendoza,
Judy Kurjan, Juli Lawrence,
Sonya Melissa & Jonathan Rivlin



Into the Zoo #3
Digital video stills & Illustration
Teri Anderson & Sonya Melissa

guides



Into the Zoo #4
Digital video stills & Illustration
Teri Anderson, Mónica Glamo-
Mendoza, Judy Kurjan, Juli Lawrence,
Sonya Melissa, Diana Newson &
Jonathan Rivlin

commands





formalities

Regulation of
digital color photography
Megan Berkman, Amy Lammert,
Morgan Medsker & Sonya Medsker

procedures

Regulation of
digital color photography
Megan Berkman-Medsker

protocols

Regulation of
digital color photography
Megan Berkman, Amy Lammert,
Morgan Medsker & Megan Berkman

rules

Regulation of
digital color photography
Megan Berkman-Medsker,
Morgan Medsker, Amy Lammert &
Sonya Medsker
Run to the first sign and back.
Run to the second then and back.
Run to the third and then
stop! Back to the finish.
Call that person
out! The team
set up a meeting
Say those words
Sign these papers
Regulation follows a group of
unrelated links as they jump
through the hoops surrounding the
beginnings and endings of marriage
contracts. Are ordered to the way
outlines in gym class.

Are dreams the ultimate frontier?
Are they not only hope to exist
without rules or limitations?
Can the realm of video approach
the limitless utopia?
The almost unending variety
of video editing techniques
transforms what humans are
(at least on-screen) capable of,
but we cannot ignore the
underlying codes controlling
how these techniques function.
Existing within a recurring dream,
FALLING uncovers and transports to
a two-dimensional view an eerie,
unsettling environment of a
pale individual versus the
bright group power.

FALLING #1
35mm black/white photograph &
digital video still
Autumn Mitt Behl
John Pearson, videography assistant

decrees



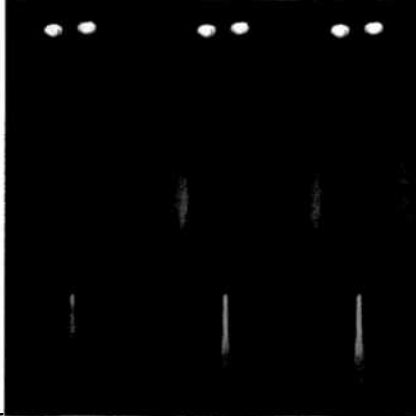
methods

FALLING #2
digital video stills
Jenni Frederick, Kristin Livingston &
Sonya Mallica



standards

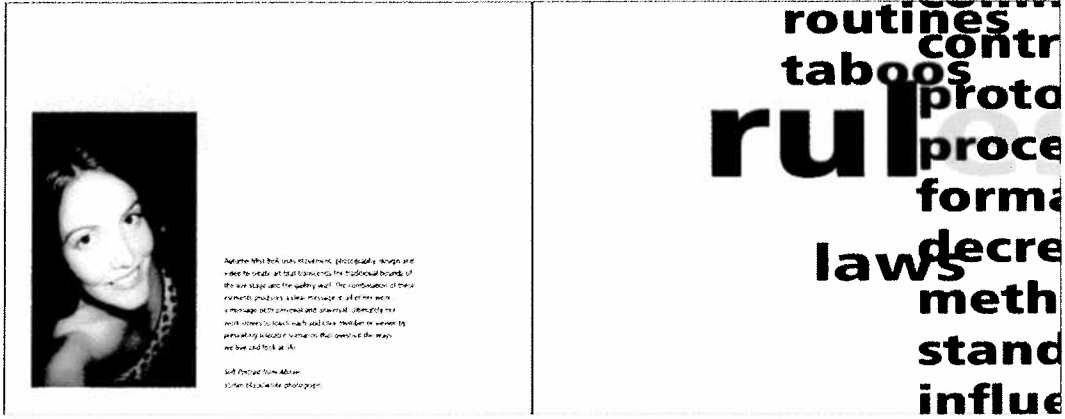
FALLING #3
35mm black/white photographs



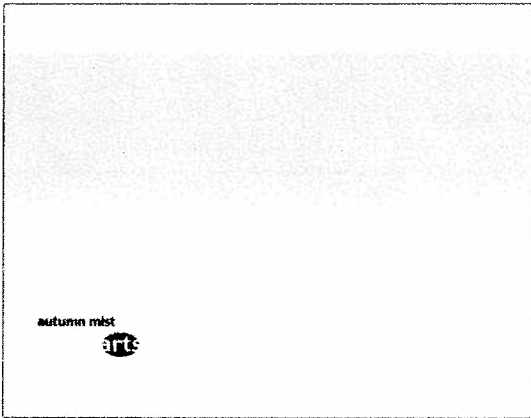
influences

FALLING #4
digital video stills
Monica Elaine Weidner





Page 36 and Inside Back Cover



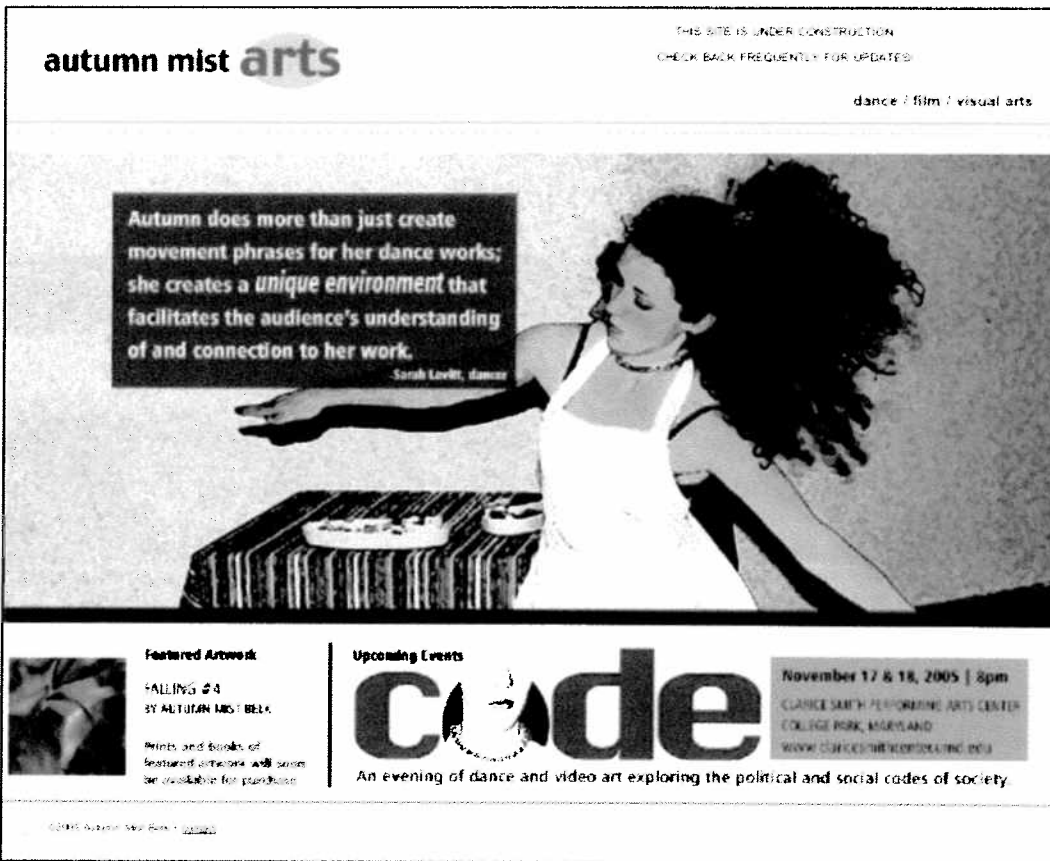
Back Cover

APPENDIX B: SUPPLEMENTAL CONCERT MATERIALS

The following images are smaller-scale reproductions of marketing materials and additional print media related to the concert.



Postcard Front and Back



Website Homepage

dance
film
visual art

code

THURSDAY & FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 17 & 18 | 8PM
UM Department of Dance - Making Dances/Taking Chances

code

codes of conduct
social codes
programming code

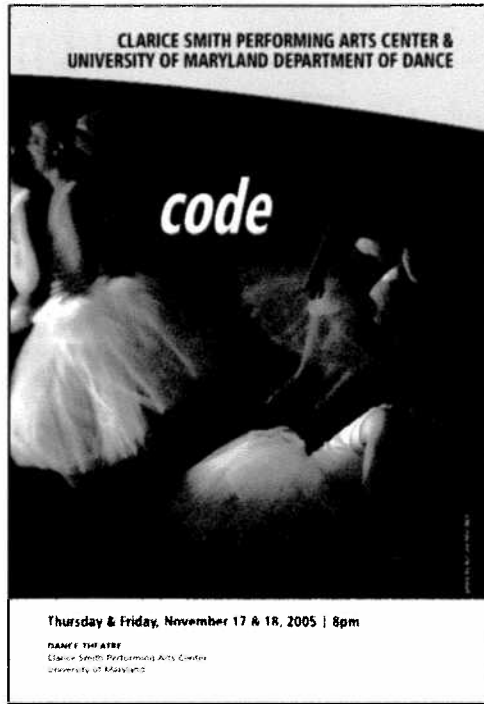
MFA candidate Autumn Mist Belk presents an evening of contemporary dance and video art that investigates life's boundaries and the laws and customs that construct these walls.

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Poster



PROGRAM **PROGRAM**

code
Artist: Direction by Autumn Mist Berk
Technical Direction by Paul D. Jackson

The production design has been carefully selected by the artist to complement the choreography. The artist will assume responsibility for the artist and content of production.

Into the Zen
Choreography by Autumn Mist Berk
Music by Tomislav Brnec, A. S. Hain, K. Sean, Stephen G.
Sound design by Autumn Mist Berk
Lighting design by Michael Thompson

Performed by Kaitlin Arnes, Rob Chappetta, Jennifer Hildebrand, Rachel Lupton, Kristin Lounsbury, & Nancy Shilpa

Monday Morning (part one)
Choreography by Autumn Mist Berk
Text: "The Muses" by traditional Masque chant
Lighting design by Michael Thompson
Performed by Rob Chappetta, Nancy Shilpa, Kristin Lounsbury, & Jennifer Hildebrand

Moment
Choreographed and performed by Autumn Mist Berk
Music by Tomislav Brnec
Lighting design by Michael Thompson

Monday Morning (part two)
Choreography by Autumn Mist Berk
Text: "The Muses" by traditional Masque chant
Lighting design by Michael Thompson
Performed by Autumn Mist Berk, Jennifer Hildebrand, Kristin Lounsbury, & Nancy Shilpa

FALLING
Choreography by Autumn Mist Berk
Sound design by Tomislav Brnec
Lighting design by Paul D. Jackson

Performed by Kaitlin Arnes, Stephanie Berk, Autumn Mist Berk, Rob Chappetta, Jennifer Hildebrand, Rachel Lupton, Kristin Lounsbury, & Nancy Shilpa

Video design by Autumn Mist Berk
Video design assistance by Autumn Mist Berk, Paul D. Jackson, Michael Thompson, John Frederick, Nancy Shilpa, Stephanie Berk, Jennifer Hildebrand, & Nancy Shilpa

Monday Morning (part three)
Choreography by Autumn Mist Berk
Music by Tomislav Brnec
Lighting design by Michael Thompson
Performed by Rob Chappetta, Nancy Shilpa, Kristin Lounsbury, & Jennifer Hildebrand

Regulation
Choreography by Autumn Mist Berk
Music by Tomislav Brnec
Sound design by Tomislav Brnec
Lighting design by Paul D. Jackson

Performed by Kaitlin Arnes, Rob Chappetta, Jennifer Hildebrand, Rachel Lupton, Kristin Lounsbury, Nancy Shilpa, & Stephen G.

Dinner
Choreography and video design by Autumn Mist Berk
Music by Tomislav Brnec
Sound design by Tomislav Brnec
Lighting design by Paul D. Jackson

Performed by Kaitlin Arnes, Rob Chappetta, Jennifer Hildebrand, Rachel Lupton, Kristin Lounsbury, Nancy Shilpa, & Stephen G.

Production design provided by the artist. The artist will assume responsibility for the artist and content of production.

www.claricesmithcenter.umd.edu **code**

Program: Cover, Title Page, and Concert Credits

VIDEO FILES

Code.mov

Footage of the entire live concert.

Credits:

code

Artistic Direction by Autumn Mist Belk

Technical Direction by Paul D. Jackson

Into the Zoo

Choreography by Autumn Mist Belk

Music by Tom Hambleton & Hair & Skin Trading Co.

Sound design by Autumn Mist Belk

Lighting design by Paul D. Jackson

Performed by Katie Artes, Rob Chappetta, Shannon Connell,
Yoko Feinman, Jenni Frederick, Mari-Elise Gates, Juli Lawless,
Sarah Levitt, Kristin Livingston, Sonya Melissa,
Megan Merchant & Jennifer Steiner

Monday Morning (part one)

Choreography by Autumn Mist Belk

Text: "The Haka," a traditional Maori chant

Lighting design by Megan Thompson

Performed by Rob Chappetta, Naomi Horak, Juli Lawless,
Sarah Levitt & Katerina Paramana

Moment

Choreographed and performed by Autumn Mist Belk

Music by Anthony VanPelt

Lighting design by Megan Thompson

Monday Morning (part two)

Choreography by Autumn Mist Belk

Text: "The Haka," a traditional Maori chant

Lighting design by Megan Thompson

Performed by Naomi Horak, Juli Lawless,
Sarah Levitt & Katerina Paramana

FALLING

Choreography by Autumn Mist Belk
Sound design by Asha Srinivasan
Lighting design by Paul D. Jackson
Performed by Katie Artes, Shannon Beck, Autumn Mist Belk,
Rob Chappetta, Jenni Frederick, Rachel Lubich,
Kristin Livingston & Sonya Melissa

Video design by Autumn Mist Belk
Videography assistance by John Pearson
Performed by Autumn Mist Belk, Rob Chappetta, Shannon Connell,
Jenni Frederick, Mónica Giaimo-Mendoza,
Kristin Livingston & Sonya Melissa

Monday Morning (part three)

Choreography by Autumn Mist Belk
Music by The Northstar Orchestra
Lighting design by Megan Thompson
Performed by Rob Chappetta, Naomi Horak,
Sarah Levitt & Katerina Paramana

Regulation

Choreography by Autumn Mist Belk
Music by Pachelbel & Wagner
Sound design by Autumn Mist Belk
Lighting design by Paul D. Jackson
Performed by Katie Artes, Jenni Frederick, Mari-Elise Gates,
Juli Lawless, Kristin Livingston, Rachel Lubich,
Sonya Melissa & Megan Merchant

Dinner

Choreography and video design by Autumn Mist Belk
Music by The Beastie Boys
Sound design by Autumn Mist Belk
Lighting design by Paul D. Jackson
Performed by Katie Artes, Rob Chappetta, Jenni Frederick,
MaryBeth Hanley, Juli Lawless, Sarah Levitt & Megan Merchant

FALLING.mov

The film component projected on the back cyc during *FALLING*.

Credits:

Video design by Autumn Mist Belk

Videography assistance by John Pearson

Performed by Autumn Mist Belk, Rob Chappetta, Shannon Connell,

Jenni Frederick, Mónica Giaimo-Mendoza,

Kristin Livingston & Sonya Melissa

Dinner.mov

The film component projected on the back cyc during *Dinner*.

Credits:

Video design by Autumn Mist Belk

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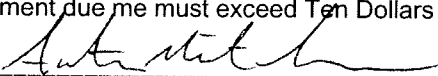
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