ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: CORPORA CAELESTIA: A MOVEMENT OPERA

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Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera is the written thesis prepared in conjunction with a performance that took place in October 2019. A requirement for the MFA in Dance at the University of Maryland, this performance crossed genres by blending dance and music. This paper outlines the performance from conception until completion, placing it within an experimental tradition of interdisciplinary work beginning in 1950s-60s New York. This written thesis articulates and engages two overarching concepts central to the thesis performance: dance as a practice of listening and dance as a path to transcendence. Each exploration surveys a history of its subject and uses the performance of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* as a site of analysis to support a claim. First, I argue that postmodern dance improvisation can act as a practice of listening. Second, I defend the claim that transcendent encounters are desirable and possible through contemporary dance performances.

CORPORA CAELESTIA: A MOVEMENT OPERA

By

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Introduction

Eyes Wide Open

In the summer of 2018 I was lying in bed, attached to a loathsome circulation machine. It was loud, clumsy, and forced me to spend six hours a day lying in bed in order to prevent blood clots after arthroscopic hip surgery. Sitting there, I found, scrolling through Facebook, a recording of a piece of music by Arvo Pärt. The piece took my heart. Set for organ and countertenor (a classical male singer singing in the mezzo-soprano range), *My Heart's in the Highlands* is both monotonous and effortlessly floaty and beautiful. The melody is sung on one pitch, creating a drone-like effect, and the supporting organ music is simple and plodding. Together the piece feels like a flag blowing strongly in the rain. It is hard to listen to, a little sad, but beautiful. I loved it. All day the piece bounced around in my head and in my heart. By the end of the day, I knew my thesis project had begun.

My Heart's in the Highlands (and all subsequent music) was a gift. It emerged out of the air for me to collect and arrange. The effortlessness of the first step of my thesis project felt so powerful and so sure that I determined from then on not to worry about or rush the creative process of making my thesis performance. I would trust that each next element would emerge in its time without forcing, and that is how it happened. Arvo Pärt once said,

> God makes man in his mother's womb slowly and wisely. Art should be made in a similar way. To be like a beggar when it comes to writing music. Whatever, however, and whenever God gives.[1]

[1] Lessthandust, "Arvo Pärt's Speech from his Musical Diaries," YouTube, January 29, 2018. Video, 6:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qh-kjp2hLCw.

Unlike creative projects I had produced in the past, my thesis project emerged naturally. I find myself, now that the work is done, feeling deeply grateful rather than proud or accomplished. Johann Sebastian Bach ended each of his musical compositions with *Soli Deo Gloria.* In my program note for my thesis performance I ended with the same text and feel it still deeply in my heart. To God be the glory.

This written thesis is meant to be a companion to my dance thesis performance, *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera*. This work, approximately 35 minutes in length, was performed at the University of Maryland's Kogod Theatre (black box) on October 4-6, 2019. The stage was set up in a thrust style with the audience on three sides. There were four performances total. *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* is a blended dance and music work featuring eight female performers who both sing and dance. Although the music is all set and rehearsed in advance, the physical movement is almost entirely comprised of improvisational "scores." These scores are tightly structured sets of rules, within which the dancers largely make up their own movement in the moment of performance. These dance improvisations are supported by an organ and organist (the ninth performer, also female) who are placed in the upstage center. *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* also features strong visual design by graduate students Channing Tucker (costume designer), Grace Guarniere (scenic designer), and Jacob Hughes (lighting designer). All of the music is performed live.

This written thesis has three sections: (I) *The Conception and Creation of a Dance Thesis Performance*, (II) *The Practice of Listening: Postmodern Dance Improvisation*, and (III) *In Pursuit of Transcendent Experience: Immanence, Noumena, and Contemporary Dance*. In Section I, I outline the process of creating and performing

Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera. I begin by connecting *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* to a historical lineage of similar work to provide a context for its materials and techniques. I then outline the primary concepts and symbolism that I developed and utilized. Following this, I describe the rehearsal process, including the embodied experience of learning, creating, and performing the work within a community of artists.

In Sections II and III, I explore in detail two metaconcepts that inspired the creation of this work. I call these "metaconcepts" because they are not referenced directly in *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* itself, but they underlie many of the artistic choices I made, including the fundamental choice to make art in the first place. These concepts are not unique to me, but rather they are based on historical aesthetic and belief systems. As such, I use these two sections to place *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* in a larger context of thought and belief.

The first of these metaconcept sections is *Section II: The Practice of Listening: Postmodern Dance Improvisation*. In this section I address a commonly held belief that dance improvisation exists primarily to express the self, specifically by resisting control through a "practice of freedom."[2] This belief is perpetuated by a particular strain of thought concerned with the political nature of dance, but I find it to be in opposition to my own experiences training and performing improvisation in a postmodern style. In this section I propose an alternative understanding of postmodern dance improvisation as a

[2] This phrase is taken from Michel Foucault, and it is used by Danielle Goldman in talking about dance improvisation in her book *I Want to be Ready* (2010). Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 17.

"practice of listening," demonstrating some ways that *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* models and perpetuates this practice.

The second metaconcept section is *Section III: In Pursuit of Transcendent Experience: Immanence, Noumena, and Contemporary Dance*. Here I look at historical transcendence in art, starting with early church music, examining how contemporary conceptions of transcendence differ from those of the past. Using theories of affect and emotion, I present the idea that immanence through abjection (a focus on trauma, death, and disintegration) has come to replace transcendence in some contemporary art and dance.[3] I explore some problems with this practice and propose a return to historical notions of transcendence. To do this I address the question, "is transcendence through art possible or desirable?" I conclude with a detailed exploration of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* as an example of transcendent dance.

[3] The word "affect" here is used as a noun and refers to pre-qualified emotions. This concept will be explained more fully in Section III.

Section I
The Conception and Creation of a Dance Thesis Performance

Artistic Influence

In 2012, I remember sitting in the larger of two lecture halls in my music conservatory.[4] It was the final day of my last required music history survey course, and the sun was streaming through the window making me sleepy as I dreamed of summer break. My professor put a video recording of *Einstein on the Beach* (a postmodern opera by Philip Glass and Robert Wilson) on the screen, and I felt the floor drop away beneath me.[5] Although pursuing a degree in music at the time, I was a trained ballet dancer who had experimented heavily with mixed-genre performance. Since I wasn't interested in formal dance technique, I entered college for visual art, eventually switching to music. Throughout my six years of undergraduate education (including two "gap" years), I continued to dance and make dances—experimenting with film, site-specific, and mixed-genre performances. When I saw *Einstein on the Beach* in 2012, it was as if I had found my artistic family. I had no idea such work existed. I had never heard of "physical theater" or "dance theater" or any other blended dance/theater form. In this class on contemporary opera practices, I saw what I had been trying to make for much of my young life. My ideas had a tradition! I felt like a lost artist come home.

Einstein on the Beach, an "opera" by Philip Glass (composer) and Robert Wilson (director) was already almost forty years old at the time of my discovery.[6] I put "opera"

[4] I graduated from the Lawrence University Conservatory of Music (Wisconsin) in May of 2013.
[5] Robert Wilson and Philip Glass worked closely with two choreographers to create their "opera." *Einstein on the Beach* has two formal dance "interludes." These were originally choreographed by Andrew deGroat for the 1976 version, but were remade in 1984 by Lucinda Childs and all subsequent performances have used her choreography. I don't list or mention the work of these important choreographers in this paper because it is the interdisciplinary nature of the body of the opera which was a revelation to me (and most of these were choreographed by the director Robert Wilson), rather than the specific dance sections.
[6] *Einstein on the Beach* premiered in 1976 and was most recently reproduced in 2012.

in quotation marks because this epic masterpiece (nearly five hours in length without an intermission) was almost fully detached from opera tradition, and intentionally so. Their opera foregrounded the body and used movement and abstract visual symbolism to create a platform for audience-generated meaning. When Glass and Wilson created this work, they were seeking to make something historically new—bringing a lively, grungy, experimental art scene that had been percolating in New York's downtown lofts for almost two decades into high relief in a fully produced, big budget, uptown, "high art" production. This "downtown" experimental art scene, taking off in the 1950s and 1960s in New York, was also responsible for birthing postmodern dance, Contact Improvisation, and a certain kind of experimental music and artistic minimalism. Nearly everything about this scene and its offshoots and influences was what I was hoping for my art to be. The art of this period was highly experimental. Often improvisational. Heavily embodied and extremely interdisciplinary. What Philip Glass and Robert Wilson called an opera was more like an extended performance art work. I knew immediately that this was the kind of work I wanted to make.

Like *Einstein on the Beach*, *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* blends dance and music together. Although *Einstein on the Beach* employs separate vocal and movement casts (and some actor/dancers), each of the performers in *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* both dance and sing. This means that the work is ambiguous from the start, never arriving at a genre that feels familiar or recognizable. Although half the cast is primarily skilled in singing and the other in dance, utilizing performers with both skill sets allowed me to blend seamlessly between a dance work and a classical music concert, making a work that *feels* similar to *Einstein on the Beach* without sacrificing movement

or musical quality. *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* also references the downtown experimental scene through the use of postmodern dance improvisation practices. Although *Einstein on the Beach* is tightly choreographed rather than improvised, the same experimental art scene that made *Einstein* possible also produced the more experimental side of postmodern dance improvisation and Contact Improvisation, the dance styles that I use in this work.[7] *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera,* like *Einstein on the Beach*, also utilizes musical minimalism and strong visuals from a minimalist art tradition. [8] These images include a glowing orb that is tossed back and forth between dancers in the dark and a giant steel pendulum that drops from the catwalk and swings the length of the stage, holding a larger glowing and smoking (hazing) orb. The work ends in snowfall—another minimal, yet powerful image.

Einstein on the Beach was my primary artistic influence, but I was also influenced by many dancers of the postmodern period, as well as contemporary dance artists who blend music and dance. Liz Lerman choreographed the University of Maryland Symphony Orchestra twice in recent years, directing them to stand, walk, and dance with their instruments.[9] Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, one of my greatest influences, also recently created a dance and music work by collaborating with the experimental early

[7] This is outlined in greater detail in Section II.
[8] I refer to musical and artistic minimalism several times in this paper. When speaking about musical minimalism, I am referring to the style that emerged in the 1960s that was typified by simplified rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic vocabulary. This musical style was closely related to minimalist art of the same period that similarly stripped down artistic materials and designs to the essentials. The downtown art scene in New York was an important center of innovation for both art forms. Keith Potter, "Minimalism (USA)," last modified, January 31, 2014, Grove Music Online, https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002257002?rskey=3A0pEU&result=1.
[9] In 2012, Liz Lerman (choreography) and James Ross (conception) set a fully choreographed version of Claude Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* on the UMD Symphony Orchestra. In 2014 the pair collaborated on Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, which the UMD Symphony Orchestra also performed.

music ensemble, *graindelavoix* in 2011. Simone Forti was another strong influence. Her *Dance Constructions* (1960-1961) were an early and formative inspiration. Throughout her career Forti has floated easily between dance and visual art, and she does so almost entirely through dance improvisation. Her use of improvisation to blend artistic traditions has been profoundly influential to my own development as an artist. These dancers and others, especially Contact Improvisors Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith, strongly colored the movement language of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera.*

Musically, I drew heavily from my great love of early church music in terms of thematic content (this is explored in Section III), but only one of the five musical compositions in *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* is actually from this time period.[10] The three primary musical works are organ pieces by the contemporary Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. Pärt, like Philip Glass, composes in a minimalist style.[11] However, Pärt's music retains a sense of sacredness through the composer's strong connection to the Russian Orthodox Church.[12] I connect profoundly with the spirituality of Pärt's music and will further explore the central role of spirituality in *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* in Section III.

[10] I am specifically referring to classical music of the Baroque period and some late-Renaissance church music. Tomás Luis de Victoria's setting of "O Magnum Mysterium" (which I used in *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera*) can be considered either Baroque or late-Renaissance, as it was composed in 1572 just as the Baroque period in music was beginning.

[11] Although widely considered minimalists, neither Arvo Pärt nor Philip Glass refer to their own music this way. In fact very few "minimalist" composers accept the term.

[12] Arvo Pärt believes his music is directly connected to his worship of God and that composition and the spiritual life are not separate practices. I connect profoundly with this ideology and also seek to merge my artistic and spiritual lives. In an acceptance speech Pärt gave at St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York (where he had just been awarded an honorary doctorate), he stated: "To be like a beggar when it comes to writing music. Whatever, however, and whenever God gives. We shouldn't grieve because of writing little and poorly, but because we pray little and poorly, and lukewarmly. And live in the wrong way. The criterion must be everywhere and only, humility." Lessthandust, "Arvo Pärt's Speech from his Musical Diaries," YouTube, January 29, 2018, video, 6:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qh-kjp2hLCw.

Although Pärt's music is a popular choice among dancers and choreographers, the organ pieces I chose are lesser known works, and organ music itself is seldom used as accompaniment for dance. The combination of these three organ pieces (performed live) in conjunction with two a cappella vocal pieces in contrasting styles (one an early motet, the other an Appalachian folk song) created a unique environment which immediately indicated that *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* was not a traditional dance work. The combined sonic landscape also created a sense of strangeness and sacredness that was essential in communicating the work's ideology and themes.

Another musical inspiration is the singer/composer/choreographer Meredith Monk. Monk blends the moving body into her musical compositions in seamless and powerful ways. She was a central figure in the second wave of artists following the postmodern scene in the 1950s and 60s, and, like Pärt, she believes deeply in the spiritual power of art and music. Although the aesthetic style of Monk's music and physical performances are not directly linked to my thesis performance, her influence is felt. Meredith Monk, Philip Glass, Arvo Pärt, and early church music all strongly influenced the sound of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera.* Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, and Nancy Stark Smith all strongly influenced the movement. All of these artists (with the exception of early church music) are directly related to the downtown art scene in New York in the 1950s and 60s, which I happily discovered that day in 2012.[13]

[13] Although early church music is not directly related New York's downtown art scene in the 1950s and 60s, it is related indirectly. Many minimalist composers (Arvo Pärt included) draw inspiration from early church music. Similarly, music in general (and especially music for the church) during this time period was highly collaborative and interdisciplinary. In this way early church music was very similar to the New York avant-garde.

Conception

The year immediately following my hip surgery was the year in which *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* was created, proposed, rehearsed, and performed. Although many of the specific ideas for the work were held loosely and changed with time, the work in general is rooted in a felt state of physical brokenness and spiritual longing. While recovering from surgery, my soul felt unfettered but I experienced a profound frustration with the body holding it captive in my bed, couch, and crutches. This paradox is illustrated beautifully in the music, *My Heart's in the Highlands,* which overlays effortless singing with effort-ful organ accompaniment.

In *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* I set out to create an artistic meditation on physical brokenness and spiritual longing through a mixed dance and music performance. I realized from the beginning of the creative process that I wanted physical frustration to manifest primarily in the dancing bodies on stage. This would include a frustration with physical limits, exemplified by physical exhaustion and the attempt and failure to achieve difficult acrobatic feats. It would also include a frustration with physical relationships—the meeting of body to body. The dancers fall in and out of sync with each other—sometimes manifesting healing synthesis, and other times exhibiting great tension bordering on aggression. These physical frustrations were present in me as I attempted to dance through a surgery healing process. But these frustrations are even more profoundly connected to what I believe to be a universal human condition: the trauma of impending death and a heart longing for something beautiful and spiritual.

The beautiful and the spiritual was most fully manifested in the five musical compositions around which the dancing was built. These are: *My Heart's in the*

Highlands, Pari Intervallo, and *Annum per Annum* (all organ music by Arvo Pärt), *O Magnum Mysterium* (an unaccompanied piece of early church music), and the shape-note song *Idumea* (also unaccompanied). This last piece was composed in the early 1800s and comes from a folk music tradition attached to Appalachia and the rural American South. Shape-note singing is simple and euphoric, utilizing strong, brassy tones, and the force of untrained community voices. The text is about death, and the fear of death and the afterlife. Like *My Heart's in the Highlands*, *Idumea* embodies the tension between spirit and body. Throughout *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* the music takes on a more polished and staged role than the movement, creating a beautiful framework that allows the very roughness and frustration of the physical dancing to shine through.

The final conceptual backdrop is the use of images and themes connected to the historical church.[14] These included the use of a physical organ and the texts of *Idumea* and *O Magnum Mysterium,* which were both originally sung in church settings. *Annum per Annum*, although primarily an organ solo, is also connected to the church through its structure which is derived from the Roman Catholic mass (with movements modeled after the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei). The visual design also draws from the church. The organ itself, extended to twice its size through scenic additions, is the primary visual image. A stained glass window effect was also employed in one scene. The final swinging pendulum, a glowing, smoking orb, is an abstract reference to the swinging

Figure 1

[14] Figure 1, an image of the organ and swinging thurible, is taken from a performance video of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* shot by Paul Jackson. The organist is Alexis Van Zalen (pictured).

incense burners (thuribles) used in many liturgical church services to symbolize the prayers being sent up to God. Alongside the more generalized themes of physical frustration and spiritual longing, this layering of church themes and imagery lent an aura of sacredness to the work.

Physical Process

I began the rehearsal process over a year before the performance date by improvising to a recording of *My Heart's in the Highlands*. I experimented with singing, dancing, and dancing and singing at the same time before finally settling on a rough, shaky (silent) improvisation that gradually grew in size and intensity. This created a lovely contrast with the simple, floating melody and labored organ arpeggios, and captured the tension between physical frustration and spiritual longing that I was looking for. A few months later, I began workshopping group movement with one or two dancers. We primarily explored roughness and smoothness through Contact Improvisation, leaning into failure so that the awkwardness of failed connections was highlighted. I recorded these experiments and layered different music behind the images until I found the flavor of contrast I was looking for, mostly with early church music and two organ pieces by Arvo Pärt.

Once confident about the centrality of organ repertoire, I sought an organ and an organist. Although initially interested in creating a site specific work in a church, I moved away from that idea when I learned of the high rental fees and the loss of my design team if I moved off site. The possibility of creating the work at the university emerged after I discovered a beautiful M. P. Møller portable organ owned by the University of Maryland School of Music which they kindly allowed me to relocate to the black box theater for the

show. I then reached out to organist Alexis Van Zalen, a musician currently completing a PhD in Musicology at the Eastman School of Music, who specializes in early organ music and would blend visually with the all-female cast. She was excited to join the project and, to my surprise, had an additional Arvo Pärt organ piece in her repertoire that I hadn't yet considered. Soon three organ pieces were chosen and set.

At about this time (eleven months before the thesis performance) I began working with singers on producing the ethereal early church music sound I loved so much. I was especially attached to the text of *O Magnum Mysterium* (Latin for "O Great Mystery"), because it married the physical and the spiritual through a description of the incarnation (God coming to earth as a man). I experimented with a few Baroque and Late-Renaissance settings of this text until I found one that could be transposed for women's voices and felt right within the context of the music and dance that had been selected thus far. Soon four of the five pieces of music were set.

At this point I had been working with doctoral candidate in voice, Jennifer Piazza-Pick, for a few weeks to create a performable duet of *My Heart's in the Highlands*. This duet featured both bodies as moving performers through simple walking patterns alongside the rough, shaky dance improvisation. In February (nine months before the performance) I set this work on my final vocal soloist, Mary Dinkler, and we performed it with piano accompaniment at a dance and music festival in Lorton, Virginia. By this time, full thesis rehearsals had begun in earnest. The rehearsal cast was divided between dancers and singers. Each week we rehearsed once with just the singers, once with just the dancers, and a third time with the dancers and singers combined. This rehearsal schedule continued until the performance date, with a break in the summer.

The separate dance and vocal rehearsals allowed me to really hone in on particular physical or aural techniques with specificity. This method worked really well to eliminate what has been called the "least common denominator" pitfall of interdisciplinary work: the tendency for each form to be simplified so much that it loses its unique beauty. The combined rehearsals were used for cross-training for all the performers and for the development of group scores that blended dance and music together. We also began workshopping some more acrobatic movement in these combined rehearsals, drilling throws, catches, climbs, falls, and other high intensity physical challenges. When creating the rehearsal schedule I was determined to hold both specialist and combined rehearsals in order to maintain artistic integrity. This worked really well and developed the work in a well-rounded way. I hope to continue this practice on future interdisciplinary projects.

In March (six months before the thesis performance), we integrated a few group scores to create a preview piece we called *Mysterium*.[15] This shortened work (about twelve minutes in length), featured a group dance score performed with a recording of organ music, followed by the cast breaking into a quartet of singers that accompanied an additional dance score performed by the remaining dancers. At this point we also had been assigned a lighting designer who experimented with stark color contrasts, and a hanging, movable light. Shortly after this performance, one of the singers and one of the

Figure 3

[15] Figure 3, an image of *Mysterium* (*Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* preview performance), is taken by Thai Nguy. The featured performers are Hannah Gross and Heidi McFall.

dancers dropped out due to rising commitments and were replaced by two new performers who were soon integrated into the cast.

The summer before the thesis performance I spent two months mulling over our work throughout the year, reviewing rehearsal footage and sound recordings, pulling out flavors and effects I liked, and matching sound with image. By midsummer I had created a thirty-five minute concept recording from rehearsal footage that was a thorough rough draft of the final thesis performance, matching general physical aesthetics to sections that hadn't yet received full dance scores. This concept recording was the jumping off point for the thesis intensive held at the end of the summer. During this intensive week we held dance, music, and dance/music rehearsals daily, as well as rehearsals with the designers.[16] By the end of the intensive week, we had completed two full run throughs of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera.*

Although the struggle with physical failure and embracing physical awkwardness was present throughout the year leading up to this point, the intensive week brought physical failure to the foreground. One by one, my performers began to break down, fatigued by long rehearsals, frustrated by physical or musical inability, and wrestling with personal struggles. One of my performers was even recovering from her own summer surgery.

Figure 4

Another performer was battling bronchitis. Each of us wrestled with our own unique inabilities, and many tears were shed. During this week we better learned to speak up

[16] Figure 4, an image of Jacob Hughes (lighting designer) and Heidi McFall working lighting units during the intensive week, was shot and shared by a cast member.

when we couldn't complete a movement or a score. We created "outs" so that, even in a run-through, a performer could exit the stage and re-enter when they were more able. These "outs" eventually became part of the performance itself and were built into the final work. The sense of physical vulnerability that developed over the summer intensive created a real sense of authenticity about the work. Failure lay at the root and heart of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera,* and it was truly present in new and unique ways in each performance.

Although I kept my commitment to letting the work evolve naturally, *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* maintained its central purpose as a meditation on physical failure and spiritual longing. The work accumulated gradually, and so very few substantive changes took place. The last piece to emerge was the opening. From the beginning I had a strong urge to work with a cast member who had a physical disability. Deafness emerged as a poetic metaphor in the work, and so I spent many weeks searching for an ASL (American Sign Language) poet with whom to collaborate. Unfortunately this never actualized, so I asked my performers to present ideas for an opening solo that was unusual, yet poetic and beautiful.[17] In our preview performance, *Mysterium,* one of the performers recited a portion of a French philosophical text. Eventually another performer (Hannah Gross) presented the idea of shape-note singing and the gorgeous text of *Idumea.* From there the final conceptual piece of the puzzle was in place.[18]

[17] Although I was never able to find a collaborator, I learned a lot about deaf culture by visiting institutions and events throughout Washington, DC where there is a vibrant deaf community. I posted signs at Gallaudet University and Streetcar 82 Brewing Company (a deaf-owned and operated brewery), and I attended an ASL poetry night at Busboys and Poets.

[18] Hannah Gross also arranged the version of the song we performed in *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* modeling the style off of shape-note source recordings.

Two other substantive alterations took place throughout the rehearsal process. The first was a simplification of my choice of settings of *O Magnum Mysterium.* Although we had been rehearsing with a beautiful setting by the composer Tomás Luis de Victoria, I had hoped to commission a new setting of the text by contemporary Iranian composer, Nima Hafezieh. Hafezieh even attended several rehearsals, contributing wonderful thoughts and feedback.[19] Yet eventually the funding for the commission fell through, and we reverted to our original choice of the Victoria setting. Although disappointing, Victoria's *O Magnum Mysterium* worked well and the rehearsal process was simplified by using a work the performers already knew.

The final substantive change was a change in title. Originally I used the temporary title *Bone Song: A Movement Opera* ("movement opera" remained throughout the process as my homage to *Einstein on the Beach*). Once Latin text was introduced, we explored several different Latin combinations that would evoke the mystery and sacredness of the work. We finally settled on *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera,* which translates as "heavenly bodies" (usually a reference to stars). I say "we," because I was actually out-voted by my cast. I preferred the simplicity of *Corpora: A Movement Opera*, but the strength of community co-creation was such that I bowed to group preference and embraced the longer title, *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera*.

The rehearsal process and creation of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* evolved naturally and without great surprise or emergency. My designers were incredibly involved from early stages in the process, and even the organist, added less than a week before opening night, integrated seamlessly and beautifully. The physical breakdown of

[19] Tomás Luis de Victoria lived from 1548-1611, composing *O Magnum Mysterium* in 1572.

my performers during the intensive and performance processes was difficult, but this felt like a necessary step in a meditative work about physical breakdown. When the final work was presented, I felt that the *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* had become what it was meant, from the beginning, to be.

Design Process

In keeping with my commitment to openness, I relied heavily on the input of my designers throughout the creation process of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera*. As an artist, I tend towards minimalism. So, I was initially reluctant to utilize either costume design or scenic design. However, the challenge of finding and maintaining clothing and shoes that could withstand the rigorous physical demands of the work encouraged me to request a costume designer along with a lighting designer in my initial project proposal.[20] This turned out to be a wise choice, as it took several drafts to find pants and shoes that allowed for the physical demands of each performer. Channing Tucker (costume designer) embraced the challenge of finding clothing that appeared natural, and unified the cast “look” by utilizing a color palette drawn from the organ. She also incorporated a gold leaf painted embroidery on each costume to imitate the text “illuminations” found in old manuscripts. This created a more professional look, and tied into the theme of sacredness.

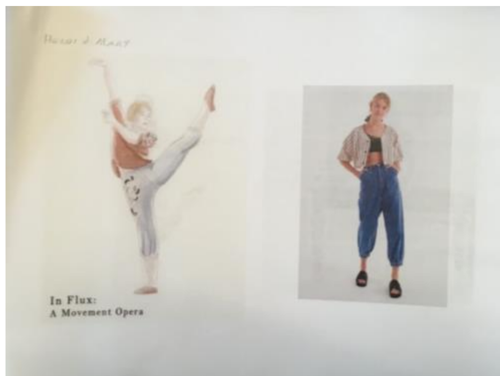

Figure 5

[20] Figure 5, an early costume design rendering for *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera*, was created by Channing Tucker (costume designer).

From the beginning of the creation process, I knew that lighting would be essential to the work. Because the set is minimal, lighting was primarily responsible for creating the visual landscape of each scene and specifically embodying the planetary imagery referenced by the title. Jacob Hughes (lighting designer) worked tirelessly with me from the earliest stages to create scenes that embodied the spaciousness, bleakness, and holiness that I was looking for. The use of stained glass imagery, chiaroscuro "shadows" (a look based in Baroque painting), and the giant thurible/pendulum were all concepts he added to *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera*. This last idea was developed in conjunction with scenic design, as indeed several scenes relied on "practicals" (light emitting props).

At the first few production meetings I was insistent that I did not want a scenic designer.[21] The bleakness and bareness of the stage space was important to me, and I wanted the organ itself to hold the full focus. Grace Guarniere (scenic designer) was politely insistent, eventually pitching a design idea along with the costume designer and lighting designer. Her design was brilliant, and in the end she won me over. Using shop-made materials, she extended the size of the physical organ to a towering fourteen feet, otherwise leaving the stage bare. She also crafted a steel rod and metal frame that housed the giant thurible and a hanging net which was used for the smaller lighting orb in the "Agnus Dei" scene. She

Figure 6

[21] Figure 6, an early scenic rendering for *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera,* was created by Grace Guarniere (scenic designer).

also happily accommodated my late request for snow, creating just the look I imagined for the final scene. The creative courage and expertise of all of my designers made it easy to be open and receptive in the visual design process. Many of the final images were not my conceptions at all, but rather ideas introduced and developed solely by the designers in conjunction with my initial concepts for *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera*. In this way, the development of the visual design mirrored the open and collaborative process used throughout the creation of the work.

Section II
The Practice of Listening: Postmodern Dance Improvisation

Introduction

In this section on listening, I look closely at postmodern dance improvisation history and practices, particularly those of Contact Improvisation, in order to propose an alternative *telos* for postmodern dance improvisation—one that highlights the central role of listening and reception.[22] In doing so, I have two aims. The first is to work against the commonly held view that dance acts primarily as a means of personal self-expression and that it is from this site of personal agency and assertion that the political power of dance is derived. The second is to paint an alternative picture of the ways in which postmodern dance improvisation is, or can be, political. To do this, I first lay a theoretical framework of current thinking about improvisation as a practice of freedom. I then provide an experiential account of a recent Contact Improvisation workshop in order to present a contrasting view, that postmodern dance improvisation functions as a practice of listening. Secondly, I introduce Contact Improvisation and postmodern dance improvisation briefly through history, demonstrating that a posture of listening has always been central to this kind of dance. Thirdly, I present how listening functions both within the self and with others. And, fourthly, taking my cues from within Contact Improvisation, I present listening and Contact Improvisation as proposing a new kind of relationality, one that can act as an alternative political practice. After addressing counter arguments to my claim, I apply this relationality to *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera,* demonstrating how this work uses Contact Improvisation to highlight a posture of listening.

[22] In philosophy, the Ancient Greek word "telos" is used to mean purpose or aim.

Theoretical Framework

In her book on dance improvisation (*I Want to be Ready,* 2010), Danielle Goldman considers to what extent improvised dance can be considered a "practice of freedom."[23] By freedom, she means specifically the ability to move creatively within constraints. She demonstrates how this takes place in three different improvisational dance contexts (Contact Improvisation is one of them). Like Goldman, performance studies scholar André Lepecki sees the political power of dance and builds on Goldman's theories to create a concept he calls "choreopolitics."[24] Here, Lepecki highlights the importance of planned resistance to policed conformity in order for dance to be political and hold political power.[25] Both scholars draw on theories of power and resistance put forth by Michel Foucault (where Goldman gets her term "practices of freedom"), Gilles Deleuze, Fred Moten, and Mark Franko.[26] According to Franko, the political power of the moving body is derived from the fact that a moving body inscribes a kind of subjectivity into the world (that is, subjectivity to power). By moving in new or transgressive ways, a body can inscribe a new kind of subjectivity into the world that can eventually force the reformulation of the power that it is subject to.[27] This is perhaps closest to Goldman's own view when she states,

23 Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 17.
24 Mark Franko also uses this term in his article published before André Lepecki's usage. Mark Franko, "Dance and the Political: States of Exception," *Dance Research Journal* 38, no. 1/2 (2006): 7-8.
25 André Lepecki, "Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, the task of the dancer," *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, no. 4 (2013): 13-27.
26 Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 9.
27 Mark Franko states, "When we speak of dance and politics, we speak of the power of dance to make and unmake identities. Because dance molds the body and its ways of moving, it cannot help but propose models of subjectivity in either an affirmative or negative sense." Mark Franko, "Dance and the Political: States of Exception," *Dance Research Journal* 38, no. 1/2 (2006): 7-8.

> I have come to believe that improvised dance involves literally giving shape to oneself by deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape. To engage oneself in this manner, with a sense of confidence and possibility, is a powerful way to inhabit one's body and to interact with the world.[28]

For Goldman, Lepecki, and Franko, dance is a political act to the degree that it actively resists conformity through a virtuosic and transgressive reformulation of the self. For Goldman, the political nature of dance improvisation seems to define its *telos*. However, as a long time practitioner of Contact Improvisation myself, this *telos* for dance improvisation does not fit well within what I know of postmodern improvisation practices. Dance improvisors in the field rarely speak of themselves as assertive individuals resisting conformity. On the contrary, the emphasis is often instead on yielding, reflecting, and above all, listening.

I encountered the scholars mentioned here at different stages in my academic training. André Lepecki was my professor of dance in the Performance Studies department at NYU, and Danielle Goldman's *I Want to be Ready* (2010) was required reading as I pursued my MFA in Dance at the University of Maryland. The scholars they reference were all assigned in one or both programs. Each of these scholars explores or contributes to the idea that the political potential of dance lies in the dancer's assertion of creative agency against and within constraints. As a dancer, improvisor, and practitioner of Contact Improvisation, this description of dance-as-politics makes sense to me intellectually, but it is far removed from my daily experience in the postmodern dance world.

[28] Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 9.

An Alternative View [29]

Figure 7

With the crown of my head glued to the head of the bent man before me, I slowly navigate a spacious dance studio. A light pressure point connects us as we walk and rotate, sinking to the ground, rising back up, changing our orientation to the room and each other but always staying connected, head to head. "Feel the energy rising up through your feet, cascading through your partner's body, and back into the floor where it began," the teacher intones.[30] With our heads touching it is nearly impossible for me to see my partner's face, but the connection of our sensitive skin allows a surprising amount of communication. We easily attempt and achieve several startling reconfigurations. He lowers himself to the ground, I remain standing, bent over to assist him. We rotate in opposite directions, despite a drastic difference in height. After 15 minutes or more of this attentive and sensitive concentration, the teacher suggests we really go all out and try something new, awkward, or embarrassing. "As opposed to all this other normal stuff

[29] Figure 7, an image of myself and Contact Improvisor Henry Wai, was taken during the 2019 Contact Dance International Film Festival in Toronto and is freely released by Kathlean Rea, the festival organizer.
[30] This quote and others are given in a narrative context are meant to convey a certain imagery and may not represent direct quotations from the people involved.

we've been doing," my partner mutters. We give in to a quiet fit of giggles, but we keep dancing—never once losing our concentration or point of connection.[31]

Although this was my first encounter with this particular Contact Improvisation exercise, years of training had familiarized me with the techniques of following a point of connection and reading subtle physical cues through touch—techniques that are common in Contact Improvisation practice.[32] These techniques are important because Contact Improvisation is a "shared weight" form. This means that dancers bear each other's weight, lift each other, and fall onto or with each other, often from great heights. A misreading of your partner's intention or center of gravity could result in serious injury from a collision or fall, so training often focuses on sensing and feeling a shared energy with your partner. My friend Shawn Stone, a dancer and meditation teacher, describes this attentive awareness as "one eye in, and one eye out."[33] This means that as you dance you maintain an awareness of your own center of gravity and inner impulses while also extending that awareness to another. Like many Contact Improvisors, I emphasize the latter in my own teaching, instructing my dance students that their movements should be comprised of approximately 80% listening and response and only 20% personal intention.

What is Postmodern Dance Improvisation?

As Sally Banes describes in her seminal text, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (1987), postmodern dance began in the early 1960s primarily as a reaction against modern

[31] The scene described took place at the 2019 Contact Dance International Film Festival in Toronto, Canada, in a workshop with Ariane Bernier (Canada) and Guru Suraj (India).
[32] My partner, Henry Wai, and teacher, Ariane Bernier, alluded to the head-to-head exercise as a "classic" Contact Improvisation training exercise.
[33] Shawn Stone earned his MFA in Dance from the University of Maryland in 2019. As a graduate student he taught an popular class titled, "Movement, Mindfulness, and Self-Awareness." I served as his TA in 2018 where I heard this phrase often used.

dance.[34] By the mid-twentieth century, modern dance (itself a reaction against the straight-laced strictures of classical ballet) was characterized and sometimes caricaturized by the expression of strong inner emotions and serious subjects or characters. Strong personalities, such as Martha Graham, dominated the performance landscape and the romantic notion of the choreographer as creative genius caused dancers to flock to these icons in order to learn from them and imitate their style. However, in the relative prosperity following World War II, many dancers became frustrated with the strict hierarchies and high dramatics of modern dance and began to experiment with alternatives.[35] Several of these dancers, including Trisha Brown, Simone Forti, and Steve Paxton (the founder of Contact Improvisation), began to take composition classes with Robert Ellis Dunn, a musician and dancer who worked with several important choreographers in New York at this time (including Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham).[36] Dunn was profoundly influenced by the experimental composer John Cage, including Cage's controversial technique of chance operations.[37] According to his friend, dancer Kenneth King, Dunn's revolution was, "NO RULES!"[38] These classes eventually led to a series of showings at the Judson Memorial Church in New York's Washington Square Park that launched over a decade of high experimentation in dance

[34] I am approaching Sally Banes through Danielle Goldman's analysis her as she outlines in the introduction to her book. Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 12.
[35] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 24.
[36] Robert Ellis Dunn was in fact teaching at Merce Cunningham's studios in 1961 and 1962. Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 10-11.
[37] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 53.
[38] Personal message from Kenneth King to Gretchen Dunn through the medium of Facebook messenger. Shared with me by Gretchen Dunn during an in-person interview on July 22, 2019.

that became known as the Judson dance movement, or, eventually, just postmodern dance.

The style that emerged was characterized by a celebration of pedestrian movement (that is, movement from everyday life), task-based dances (such as carrying and manipulating heavy objects), interdisciplinary performance, improvisation, and dance "scores" (that is, a set of rules or guidelines in place of fully structured choreography). The atmosphere was communal and inclusive, as many untrained dancers or artists from other disciplines were invited to perform alongside professionally-trained dancers.[39] To illustrate the stark difference between modern and postmodern dance, I like to show my "Introduction to Dance" students at the University of Maryland a parodic video of Yvonne Rainer (a central figure of postmodern dance) teaching a Martha Graham re-enactor (the drag performer Richard Move) her iconic postmodern dance solo *Trio A*. This solo typifies what Sally Banes describes as "pure motion."[40] That is, movement for its own sake without added drama or flair. In the video, Move (as Graham) tries to learn the everyday-style movements of *Trio A* from Rainer, but despite her best efforts, continuously overdramatizes the simplistic motions. Comedy ensues as Rainer grows in frustration!

The sharp line separating modern and postmodern dance styles began to blur by the 1980s when many of the Judson dancers went back to more mainstream work and modern dance began to embrace more experimental modes. Now the terms "modern" and

[39] Both Danielle Goldman and Cynthia J. Novack rightfully question how far the ethic of inclusivity actually extended in practical application. Many sources indicate that exclusion was still present despite the public face of communality and democratic creation. I will address this towards the end of this paper, but since the inclusive, communal nature of the form was a primary descriptor and attractor for many of the early participants, I will accept this designation at face value for this historical overview.
[40] Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 54.

"contemporary" are often used as blanket terms to cover both modern and postmodern dance styles. In this section I use the term "postmodern dance" in order to highlight the strong relationship that remains between postmodern dance improvisation (especially Contact Improvisation) and the early Judson-era experimental dance scene.

What is Contact Improvisation?[41]

Figure 8

Contact Improvisation is a specific type of postmodern dance improvisation that was started in 1972 by the dancer, Steve Paxton. Paxton danced with Merce Cunningham and was part of Robert Ellis Dunn's composition class and early Judson showings that birthed the postmodern dance movement.[42] Paxton's experiments began increasingly to involve bodies in contact with one another, initially colliding and crashing on wrestling mats, but eventually developing into a fluid and mostly continuous exchange of weight.[43] Cynthia J. Novack, a dancer and anthropologist who wrote the seminal text on Contact Improvisation before 1985 (the book was published in 1990), describes the dance form in this way,

[41] Figure 8, photos of three Contact Improvisation postcards belonging to Gretchen Dunn (second wife of Robert Ellis Dunn), were taken with permission during a personal interview I conducted on July 22, 2019.
[42] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 53.
[43] Steve Christiansen, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark Smith (Editors), "Fall After Newton: Contact Improvisation 1972-1983," (Videoda, 1987), videocassette, 23:00.

> Contact improvisation is most frequently performed as a duet, in silence, with dancers supporting each other's weight while in motion. Unlike wrestlers, who exert their strength to control a partner, contact improvisers use momentum to move in concert with a partner's weight, rolling, suspending, lurching together. They often yield rather than resist, using their arms to assist and support but seldom to manipulate.[44]

In the early years, Contact Improvisation was often practiced by groups of dancers living and working together. It was usually taught and shared in a non-hierarchical way among friends, and the showings were nearly always informal, often ending with the audience themselves dancing and rolling around on the floor.[45] Although the unstructured nature of Contact Improvisation has largely persisted, the rapid spread of the form in the 1970s necessitated some kind of communication among practitioners. In 1975 the dancers began to communicate via a newsletter that eventually developed into a magazine called *Contact Quarterly* in 1976.[46] Now a journal, *Contact Quarterly* maintains a strong connection to the (now global) Contact Improvisation community. The *Contact Quarterly* website also serves as a meeting place and sounding board for Contact Improvisation-related news or issues.[47]

As a dance form, Contact Improvisation exists in its most pure sense in regional "jams." These jams are gatherings of Contact Improvisors that happen weekly in major cities all around the world. The dance sessions are informal and relaxed, often involving about two hours of unstructured open dancing in the Contact Improvisation style. The informality of these jams creates a kind of unofficial structure. As a dancer I have

[44] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 8.
[45] Ibid., 69-72.
[46] Ibid., 80-81.
[47] "About CQ," Contact Quarterly: Dance and Improvisation Journal, accessed July 30, 2019, https://contactquarterly.com/cq/about-cq/index.php.

attended open jams in Wisconsin, Toronto, and Washington D.C., and each experience was remarkably similar. The dancers trickle in over an hour or so wearing loose cotton clothing and warming up quietly on the floor. At the designated start time the facilitator might say a few words, particularly if newcomers are present, and then the dancing just...begins, continuing for several hours—usually two. Often the dancing is in silence, though sometimes the dancers are joined by live, improvising musicians. The dancers come and go throughout, often taking breaks or watching from the sides of the room. There is almost never an audience. At the designated end time there might be a few words shared, or a closing circle, then the jam ends and the dancers casually disperse.

Although Contact Improvisation training is becoming more noticeable in contemporary dance performances worldwide, the form is not strictly a performance form and "pure" Contact Improvisation performances are rare and not necessarily desirable.[48] Although Cynthia J. Novack describes early audiences as riveted and enthusiastic, the lack of structure can often be wearying and disorienting for contemporary audiences. If performance is not the *telos* of Contact Improvisation, what is? To answer that, I examine improvisation as it exists in postmodern dance generally.

Postmodern Improvisation as a Practice of Listening

I never even think about the word intention. I'm not even sure I know what it means in terms of performance or practice or choreography. There's no time for intention. There's only time to notice what's happening now, and now, and now, and now, and now.[49]

- Deborah Hay

As noted earlier, dance is often considered to be political to the degree that it actively resists conformity through a virtuosic and transgressive reformulation of the self.

[48] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 105.
[49] Kent De Spain, *Landscape of the Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 70.

As André Lepecki clarifies, "actively resisting" is a key element and without intentional resistance a dance cannot be considered political.[50] This valuing of personal agency as the source of a dance's political power stands in stark contrast to the quote above, taken from dance scholar Kent De Spain's important book, *Landscape of the Now* (2014). In this book on postmodern movement improvisation, De Spain interviews what he calls "eight of the most respected practitioners/teachers" of improvisation living in the United States in order to understand more about what they are doing when they dance.[51] An emphasis on reflection, sensory appreciation, and listening to the self and others emerges throughout the book. The way that these dancers (including Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith) talk about their work is deeply familiar to me. I dance improvisationally by responding to my environment, whether that environment is music, the space around me, or another dancer or dancers. Dance, for me, is receptive and responsive. I listen to myself, my impulses and reactions, and through movement learn to understand myself in relationship to my environment. I listen to others and connect with them on a deep, empathetic and kinesthetic level, marveling at differences as well as similarities. This posture of listening is prevalent in postmodern improvisational dance as a whole and shows early roots in the teachings of Anna Halprin. In the following pages I outline how postmodern dance improvisation generally functions as a practice of listening in two ways. First, as listening to the self, and second, as listening to the "other."

[50] André Lepecki, "Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, the task of the dancer," *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, no. 4 (2013): 13-27.
[51] These dancers are: Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, Ruth Zaporah, Barbara Dilley, Steve Paxton, Deborah Hay, Lisa Nelson, and Nancy Stark Smith. Kent De Spain, *Landscape of the Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

Listening to the Self

Even Isadora Duncan, who stood silently still in the center of her studio waiting for a movement impulse, was working with this very particular problem she had given herself, of clearing the environment and listening for an inner impulse.[52]

- Simone Forti

To argue that postmodern dance improvisation is fundamentally attached to receptivity and listening, it is necessary to go back before the 1960s to the influential dance improvisation teacher, Anna Halprin.[53] Kent De Spain calls her "the founder of postmodern American movement improvisation" and rightly so.[54] Although far from New York (she continues to teach in California's Bay Area), Halprin has had a profound influence on New York's postmodern dance scene through her students Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, and others. Halprin's methods are very much rooted in ideals of receptivity and listening. Her early students were often instructed to go out into the woods surrounding Halprin's outdoor dance "deck" to observe and then embody stones, branches, or trees. But these observations were not merely of external objects. According to postmodern improvisor Simone Forti,

> A major part of our movement training with Anna was based on anatomical explorations: for example, understanding the bone structure of the shoulder area and then spending a half hour exploring its range of movement, engaging muscles or releasing them to the forces of gravity and momentum, pushing, taking weight, noticing the resulting dance as the whole body supported this exploration.[55]

Here we see that Halprin was not leading students in expressing some aspect of their personality, communicating some expressive or concrete idea, or resisting a power

[52] Simone Forti, "Animate Dancing," in *Taken By Surprise* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 55.
[53] Anna Halprin's cited name has changed from "Ann" to "Anna" over time. I will use Anna Halprin here, or just Halprin, as this is how she currently presents herself.
[54] Kent De Spain, *Landscape of the Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.
[55] Simone Forti, "Animate Dancing," in *Taken By Surprise* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 54.

structure. Rather, the dancers were *listening* to their bodies, *exploring* the ways they did and didn't move, and *understanding* the underlying compositional structure of their bones. And, importantly, this was not a preparation for dance but was considered a dance in and of itself. These explorations were dances of listening to the body, learning about it, and watching it move. Such explorations are still central to postmodern dance improvisation today.

In Contact Improvisation, specifically, listening to the self was emphasized in the keynote address given by Steve Paxton at a national conference titled, "Improvisation: Dance as Art-Sport" in 1980. Cynthia J. Novack recounts his speech this way: "He spoke about performance as behavior, a chance to "observe oneself" reacting spontaneously, as opposed to performance as pre-planned presentation."[56] In fact, all Contact Improvisation training revolves around developing an acute internal awareness that can then be extended into empathetic awareness of your partner. Novack describes the training process,

> Regardless of differences in approach from one teacher of contact improvisation to another, all teachers instruct their students to focus on the physical sensations of touch and the pressure of weight. Thus, in the learning process, the sense of touch and physical reflex actions assume more importance for the dancer than the sense of vision and consciously chosen actions.[57]

Notice that consciously chosen action here is deliberately subordinated to internal sensation in Contact Improvisation training. Clearly listening to the self takes precedence over intended action, but other kinds of listening are also central to the form.[58]

[56] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 100.
[57] Ibid., 150.
[58] Novack identifies "sensing through the skin" and "experiencing movement from the inside" as two of ten core movement values in Contact Improvisation. Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 115-125.

Listening to the Other

When you turn your awareness in toward yourself, you come into contact with a melange of flesh and breath and mind and desire and everything else that resides in there. When, instead, you turn your senses out toward the world around you, you find yourself bathing in unending stimulation from the space and people and sounds and energies that compose the life beyond your skin.[59]

- Kent De Spain

I have described above how kinesthetic awareness and attending to internal sensations have been, and continue to be, central to the practice of postmodern dance improvisation. But many other kinds of listening are also fundamental to the form. When Anna Halprin's students were sent into the woods to embody rocks or trees, they were listening with their eyes, their sense of touch, and embodying the environment through kinesthetic empathy. A deep awareness of the spaces where dance happens is also central to many postmodern dance improvisors. Postmodern improvisor Lisa Nelson describes space as her "major partner" when she improvises, saying, "Everything about space is giving instructions for how to compose myself. It's like the mastermind of the movement."[60] In addition to objects and spaces, sound and aural feedback are an obvious and commonly utilized "mastermind of movement."

In each of these cases we see postmodern dance improvisors giving away their agential role to sound, spaces, or even rocks and trees. I don't mean to imply that the dancer's choices and actions are entirely disregarded by postmodern improvisors, but rather the central posture of listening and reflection is more important to these dancers than agential choice. In Contact Improvisation, a specific iteration of postmodern dance improvisation, this goes beyond an attitude towards making a dance to become a central

[59] Kent De Spain, *Landscape of the Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 81.
[60] Ibid., 110.

dance technique unto itself. A solo "contact improvisation" is not a Contact Improvisation. Contact implies another, and, as I teach my students with my 80/20 formula (80% responding 20% initiating), Steve Paxton also teaches that intention should be minimal, and the sensing of intent, maximal: "The more the forms are understood, the more cooperation becomes the subject—an "it" defined by the balancing of the inertias, momentums, psychologies, spirits of the partners."[61] In a commonly utilized Contact Improvisation training exercise (often called an "A-frame"), two dancers lean against each other. With their feet far apart and their torsos or hips touching, both are off balance and the center of gravity has become shared. Neither partner can stand in this position alone. Each requires the other. In this posture of mutual support and awareness, the improvisers can begin a Contact Improvisation dance.

A New Kind of Political Dance

In contact improvisation, each person is conceived of as an individual yet cannot do the dance unless it is shared with another. Contact improvisation defines the self as the responsive body and also as the responsive body listening to another responsive body, the two together spontaneously creating a third force that directs the dance.[62]

- Cynthia J. Novack

Towards the end of her book *Sharing the Dance* (1990), Cynthia J. Novack addresses the tendency to view improvisation as an individual's heroic act of freedom, despite many dancer's experiences to the contrary. Due in large part to dance criticism, she claims that old ideas of expressive individualism (central to modern, but not postmodern dance) continue to cling to critical reception of dance forms despite the dancer's claims that what they are doing is something else entirely.[63] This view of dance

[61] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 182.
[62] Ibid., 189.
[63] Ibid., 192.

as expressive individualism is still present in the writings of Danielle Goldman, André Lepecki, and Mark Franko, when they call for the creation of a political dance that is a self-shaping agential resistance to policed conformity. As we've seen in the past few pages, postmodern dance improvisation, especially Contact Improvisation, is often explicitly about a kind of conformity. To dance this form, two dancers must set aside their own intentions in order to allow a shared dance to emerge. But this conformity does not necessarily remove the possibility for dance improvisation to be political.[64] Novack writes,

> Improvisational dancers share the dance with one another for aesthetic reasons, because they think the outcome is something exciting and fascinating to watch and experience. Often, they also share the dance for ethical reasons, because they believe they can model certain moral and social aspects of their lives on the noncompetitive, collaborative form of dancing.[65]

In a political media climate that often encourages the public to take sides against each other, the U.S. has begun to devolve into oppositional political groups, collecting into camps with only those who agree with the same political views. Through social media and selective viewing, individuals can curate their exposure to difference through selective news sourcing, following and unfollowing friends, podcasts, Twitter feeds, and political blogs. In this way an individual's opinion seems the majority opinion and rational for difference is reduced by linking with close knit groups of like-minded others. In this climate, the practice of Contact Improvisation, which minimizes intent in order to

[64] Danielle Goldman also recognizes the political potential of Contact Improvisation, though she locates this power in a different realm than conformity. In her chapter, "Bodies on the Line: Contact Improvisation and Techniques of Nonviolent Protest," Goldman compares the releasing and responding techniques of Contact Improvisation to techniques of nonviolent protest taught during the Civil Rights movement of the same era. Although she claims improvising under duress is a kind of political act, exactly how this functions in a dance context is unclear.

[65] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 191.

properly and correctly perceive the intent of another, seems a radical political act indeed. The reality of Contact Improvisation is that without sensing through the skin the physicality and will of your dancing partner, the dance itself will collapse into stillness or else escalate into injury. Only with a concentrated attending to another's experience can the dance continue. This empathetic stance towards difference is sorely needed in engaged political action of any kind.

How Far is Too Far?

The idea of a dance of conformity carries with it frightening possibilities. In Mark Franko's essay *Dance and the Political: States of Exception* (2006), the dance scholar cautions against the easy co-option of group dance movement by dominant systems of power.[66] If politics in dance is defined simply as an agential opposition to societal norms, a dance of cooperation would be an anti-politics. But Contact Improvisation dancers never fully lose their sense of autonomy, and the meeting of two bodies in an improvisational setting outside of a hierarchical system resists state control. Instead, there is a dialogue that exists in Contact Improvisation between two or more sets of desires, impulses, and actions, and the dance cannot function without first establishing an acute awareness of the self.[67] If one or both of the dancers is not properly attuned to either themselves or their partner, the dance will fail. What is practiced in Contact Improvisation is not conformity per se, but rather negotiation, empathy, and above all, a posture of listening to another without manipulation or control. And, indeed, individual

[66] Mark Franko, "Dance and the Political: States of Exception," *Dance Research Journal* 38, no. 1/2 (2006): 8.
[67] Cynthia J. Novack describes her own experience this way, "I began to understand that the technique of doing Contact Improvisation takes time and much practice to absorb and that a dialogue exists between sensations of activity and receptivity." Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 153.

action is not fully cut off but is rather reimagined within a complex community of difference.[68] Intention should be minimal, but the sensing of intention should be maximal. If embraced, this posture has the potential to create a renewed sense of understanding and cooperation in American politics.

Application and Conclusion[69]

Figure 9

In *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera,* I relied heavily on Contact Improvisation to both generate choreography and make up the bulk of the dancing in the work. Most of the choreography is comprised of dance "scores"— sets of rules within which the dancers improvise their own movement. Only a few of the scores I created for the dancers were truly "open," as I structured each section around very specific themes. To conclude this section on listening, I note two contrasting scores that appeared at crucial points in this performance. The first we called "Squid." This score emphasized fluidity, harmony, proximity, and a strong sense of interpersonal connection. In this part of the performance, the dancers move in duets with their eyes closed. Feeling through their skin the body of another, they slowly come together, finding a shared center of

[68] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 190.
[69] Figure 9, two images of *Mysterium* (*Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* preview performance), were shot by Thai Nguy at the University of Maryland. The featured performers are Adriana Alonzo, Brianna Nelson, Hannah Gross, Rachel Schrier, Krissy Harris, Grace Tietz, and Heidi McFall.

gravity and then "spilling" their weight from one to another. From this place of physical harmony, the movement develops into a choreographed partnered quartet that features a few virtuosic Contact Improvisation lifts, including a "helicopter" lift in which one dancer rolls and rotates across another's shoulders while in motion. The "Squid" score emphasizes harmony and represents Contact Improvisation as it is usually taught and practiced.

The second score we called "Pinball." In this score, the dancers are instructed to lean into failure. That is, to not allow the dance to "succeed." To do this, they jostle against each other like balls in a pinball machine, refusing to give weight, or else forcing their weight on other dancers. The resulting dance is awkward and almost aggressive. The dancers continue to engage each other, but never allow harmony to emerge. Despite exhaustion and discomfort, the dancers return to the dance again and again, striving for a connection, but never allowing that connection to emerge. In creating this score, I pushed Contact Improvisation to its limits in order to allow a full spectrum of engaged relationality to be presented.

Although each score represents a Contact Improvisation dance, the ways the dancers communicate with each other in each is vastly different. In both cases, however, the dancers must have an acute internal body awareness that allows them to remain balanced, active, and engaged while in contact with another dancer or dancers. More importantly, in order to participate in each dance score, the dancers must be highly attuned to the movement choices their partner or partners are making. This reliance on listening is heightened in both scores, since in "Squid" all of the dancers are blind (eyes closed), and in "Pinball" each dancer is actively working to thwart harmonious

interaction by working against the intentions of their partner and even their own instincts, making movements difficult to predict. Although the scores are different, each dance requires a kind of relationship between the dancers in which listening to others is more important than personal choice. This presents to the audience a kind of relationality that is quite different from the political stance proposed by Danielle Goldman and André Lepecki. Instead of asserting themselves in a way that restructures political power, the dancers instead focus on relational engagement through listening.[70]

Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera is about the difficulty of embodied living. It is about the feeling of being trapped in a body that is "subject to decay," and so marches you constantly towards an inevitable death.[71] *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* is about the ensuing tension between body and spirit, and the tensions that arise between one spirit/body and another spirit/body. The dancing in this work is difficult and frustrating, and intentionally so, but it *persists.* The dancers inhabit their own bodies with awareness and confidence, but it is not the assertion of their will or creative intention that makes the work. Rather, the posture of listening embodied by the dancers encourages reflection, connection, and understanding in the viewing audience, and among the performers themselves.

[70] Although the focus here is on physical listening between dancers, the music played an interesting role in establishing an environment of listening. "Squid" is very musically driven, and the dancers are focused intently on the sound produced by the singers who are set up in a circle around them. During this dance the dancers, whose eyes are closed, actually place themselves in a set stage spot almost entirely by listening to the singers to establish proximity. In contrast, "Pinball" is meant to contrast with the music (which is very calm and methodical) and so the dancers are instructed to ignore what they hear. This is easier than it seems since the dancers themselves produce a lot of noise in this section through loud breathing, yelling, and scuffling feet. Part of the tension here is created by a chaotic effect similar to two radios playing at once.
[71] The phrase "subject to decay" is a phrase used often in the Bible to refer to the human condition. For example, in Acts 13:34-37 (New International Version) the Apostle Paul uses this phrase to clarify that King David had died (or rather, stayed dead), while Jesus Christ was living and therefore not "subject to decay."

Much like how Contact Improvisation jams practice listening among the participants without the need for a viewing audience, my dancers and I grew through the rehearsal process of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* in ways we never imagined. We learned to say "no," when we felt unsafe or overly tired. We learned each other's movement tendencies, our strengths and weaknesses, and how we could each contribute to a cohesive whole. We learned to accept failure, and how to recover when the dance didn't go as we desired or planned. We grew as people by seeing ourselves in relationships with others and letting others reshape ourselves. This is why I practice Contact Improvisation and attend Contact Improvisation jams. To reframe Danielle Goldman's words for my own purposes, the practice of listening can indeed be "a powerful way to inhabit one's body and to interact with the world."[72]

[72] Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 9.

Section III
In Pursuit of Transcendent Experience: Immanence, Noumena, and Contemporary Dance

Introduction[73]

In the opening of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera,* a young woman walks to the center of the stage. The large pipe organ looms behind her. She is calm and unconcerned, but physically present in mind and body as the audience gradually stops talking and turns their attention to the stage. As the silence settles around the room like a blanket, the woman takes a breath and begins to sing. Her voice is folk-like, and sounds strange unaccompanied. Alone on the stage, she sings of death and a deep fear of the afterlife—of the terrifying fragility of life and hope for eternal happiness. As she sings, the stage lights, left bright for intermission, fade until the woman stands in a soft pool of light. The audience has faded into the blackness. Yet as she sings the last chorus of her song, voices begin to join her, one by one, out of the dark. All female and surrounding the room on every side, these invisible voices layer in a complex three-part harmony. Only one singer is visible to the audience, indeed to the singer herself, but as the wave of sound rises around her, her voice climbs higher to a descant (counter melody), lifted and held by a choir of invisible voices.

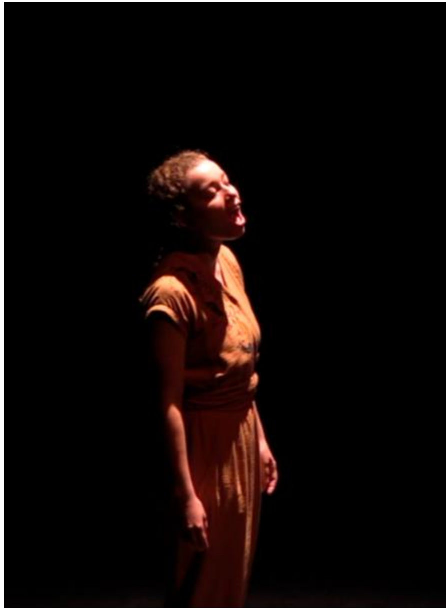

Figure 10

[73] Figure 10, an image of Hannah Gross performing the opening solo of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera*, is taken from a performance video of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* shot by Paul Jackson.

This opening scene set the stage for much of what I was trying to accomplish in *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera.* By utilizing genre bending, unfamiliar sounds, and unexpected images, I was striving to create a setting in which the audience could experience transcendence. In this section, I define a transcendent experience as an encounter with something greater than oneself that overwhelms the subject's physical and mental capacities, leaving them powerless to fully communicate the experience in language. Transcendence is not often a goal in the contemporary arts, but the benefits of transcendent experiences are immense. Through transcendent experiences, individuals are taken outside of themselves, allowing for true self-reflection. More importantly, this self-reflection can lead to positive transformation. In this section, I argue for a return to transcendence in art, particularly in contemporary dance. I introduce a historical perspective on transcendence in art, define transcendence and immanence as contrasting pathways to sublime experience, explore examples of immanence in visual art and dance, address the claim that transcendence in art is no longer possible, and, lastly, examine and present *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* as one example of transcendent contemporary dance.

Historical Transcendence

The pursuit of transcendence in art may be uncommon in the 21st-century, but this was perhaps art's greatest aim in pre-Enlightenment Europe. At this time, much art, especially music, was deeply connected to religion through the church. As Renaissance music gave way to the Baroque era in the 1600s, music's ability to evoke the mysterious

and ethereal aspects of Christian spirituality increased.[74] Indeed, choral music became so much more complex during this period that this complexity was utilized to encourage transcendent experiences through deliberately evoking feelings of wonder and mystery.[75] In the Baroque era, it was not unusual for the choir (or a second choir) to be intentionally hidden from the congregation's view. In this way the music seemed to come out of nowhere, encouraging the listening audience to imagine supernatural angelic choirs.[76] Because of the strong connection between Baroque and Late-Renaissance music and transcendent art, I deliberately drew on Baroque themes in *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* through the use of chiaroscuro lighting techniques (from Baroque painting), live organ, Latin texts, ancient polyphony (music with multiple parts), and a hidden "choir."

According to the definition of transcendence I provided in the introduction to this section, transcendent experiences overwhelm the body's physical and mental capacities. Transcendent experiences are also highly emotional. Baroque composers were aware of this connection between emotion and transcendence and deliberately employed emotive tools in their artmaking. During this era, a "theory of affects" was beginning to be developed in order to explain how certain musical devices could be used to elicit specific emotional states.[77] This deliberate evocation of emotion served to strengthen the

[74] Claude V. Palisca,"Baroque," last modified, January 20, 2001. https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000002097/.
[75] Harmonic complexity that evokes mystery is especially seen in the many settings of the Latin text, *O Magnum Mysterium*. This text, sung at Christmas, marvels at the profound mystery of God coming down to visit man. This work is addressed briefly later in this paper.
[76] Jane Jones, "Vivaldi - Gloria in D: Why Vivaldi Had to Hide His Singers Away," accessed December16, 2019. https://www.classicfm.com/composers/vivaldi/guides/gloria-jane-jones/.
[77] George J. Buelow, "Affects, Theory of the," last modified January 20, 2001, https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy-

transcendent potential of Baroque sacred music. Although this theory was never fully developed and has been mostly lost to history, a very different kind of "affect theory" has been emerging in recent years. Unlike the Baroque "theory of the affects," contemporary affect theory is rooted in critical and literary studies rather than music theory. Contemporary affect theory is thus not concerned with *producing* affects, but is rather concerned with *naming* and *analyzing* affects for the purpose of understanding social processes.[78] Affect theory defines "affect" as a pre-qualified emotion.[79] Pre-qualified emotions are feelings experienced by subjects before they have been fully recognized or named as emotions. For example, we often feel and respond to the "vibe" of a room of strangers, without necessarily labeling or even recognizing that feeling with a specific name. Just like the Baroque "theory of the affects" sought to understand transcendence by analyzing emotional states through music, contemporary affect theory can help us understand transcendence better by examining our feeling-response to those experiences. In order to understand affect theory better, I next share a brief history and description of this emerging mode of thought.

Affect and Contemporary Culture

The Enlightenment period of the 1700s brought with it a humanist ideology that privileged the mind and reasoning over the body and emotions. This preference has come to dominate much of the history of Western thought, but deconstruction philosophy since the late 20th-century has started to reverse that tendency by dismantling the power of

um.researchport.umd.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000000253?rskey=jF96eB&result=1.

[78] In pre-Enlightenment Europe, the word "affect" was more or less synonymous with "emotion." Today the definition is more nuanced.

[79] Patria T. Clough, "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia, and Bodies," in *The Affect Theory Reader,* eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 206.

intellectual reasoning for many people. Deconstructive thought recognizes the disconnect between words and things. For example, when I write the word "tree," the tree I imagine and the one in your head are likely different and neither is representative of all trees in existence. Because words cannot fully summon the things they intend to signify with specificity, language seems unable to truly communicate reality, or access it through reason. In a search for better ways of accessing reality, some theorists are turning to the body and emotions. Because the body and emotions respond to the world directly, looking at the effects of lived experience on the body seems more reliable to some theorists than language about those experiences—especially since language will always involve a certain amount of interpretation and bias.[80] In other words, although the word "tree" seems unstable, a body crushed by a falling tree seems to have a finality beyond verbal interpretation. The lived reality of the action of the tree falling is directly observable in its effects on the body itself. The feeling-response of the person crushed by the tree similarly relates directly to lived experience. Although this introduction oversimplifies two complex modes of thought, affect theory can be understood simply as a return to the body and emotions as legitimate ways of learning about the world.

In his book *Post Cinematic Affect* (2009), affect theory scholar Steven Shaviro analyzes several films and a music video, revealing affects prevalent in digital culture.[81] One of these is a feeling of precarity. Precarity is the sense that the world is unstable,

[80] Whether or not affect theory, a theory communicated through language after all, is able to rid itself of the pitfalls of bias and interpretation enough to truly engage with pre-qualified emotions is a bigger question I won't be able to address here.
[81] Shaviro uses the phrase "structures-of-feeling" rather than "affect" after the Marxist theorist Raymond Williams. On the relationship between structures-of-feeling and affect (which I believe to be a direct relationship), see Hua Hsu's "Affect Theory and the New Age of Anxiety: How Lauren Berlant's Cultural Criticism Predicted the Trumping of Politics" in the New Yorker (Full information in the bibliography). Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (Winchester: 0 Books, 2010), 1.

constantly shifting, and unsafe. Shaviro notes the relationships between a feeling of precarity and some things that make contemporary life particularly unstable. These include online media, globalization, and a neo-liberal economy.[82] Online media abstracts our lives through digital platforms that remove us from more tangible lived-experience.[83] Globalized networking similarly distances us from the grounding of our body in a specific place and time. And neo-liberal economic practices require subjects to be hyper-adaptable in order to maintain employment in a rapidly-shifting market.[84] Adding to these the relatively new anxieties brought about by global warming, global wars, and the development of nuclear weapons, it makes sense that a feeling of precarity would be so prevalent.[85] Shaviro notes this feeling of precarity by observing the unique ways digital media depicts individuals and tells stories about them. In his analysis, he engages affect in order to better understand the reality of contemporary life.

Figure 11

Precarity functions as an affect because it is not often verbalized by individuals under its influence. Feelings not labeled as emotions are also common in transcendent

[82] For more on the subject/object distinction in contemporary thought, see Peter Wolfendale's "Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon's New Clothes" or Patricia T. Clough's essay, "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia, and Bodies" in the *Affect Theory Reader* (2010).
[83] Figure 11, an image of a precarious moment in *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera*, is taken from a performance video of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* shot by Paul Jackson. The featured performers are Grace Tietz, Hannah Gross, Lauren Waugh, Mary Dinkler, and Brianna Nelson.
[84] Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (Winchester: 0 Books, 2010), 57.
[85] It is estimated that anxiety disorders today affect nearly 1 in 5 people in the US, and almost 300 million people globally. Tim Newman, "Anxiety in the West: Is it on the Rise?" last modified September 5, 2018, https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/322877.php#1.

experiences, which overwhelm the subject so much that they are not able to fully articulate their feelings in words. This suggests that transcendent experiences produce affect.[86] Yet transcendence is often associated with positive feelings, such as wonder and awe.[87] Negative feelings, such as fear and helplessness, can be produced through trauma—an experience fundamentally different from transcendence that nevertheless shares many similarities. Like transcendence, trauma overwhelms the body's physical and mental capacities, leaving the subject powerless to communicate their feelings fully in language.[88] But while transcendence is an encounter with something outside the self that can prompt self-reflection allowing for positive change, trauma is immanent to the subject and involves the threat or experience of death, injury, or physical integrity.[89] This always leads to negative change.[90] I consider experiences of trauma to be immanent experiences, because trauma is experienced within the subject rather than outside. Transcendent experiences cause you to forget yourself in the moment of the experience (self-reflection, if it occurs, happens afterwards), but immanent experiences cause an obsession with the self in the moment of experience because the integrity of the self is

86 Lisbeth C. Bethelmy and José A. Corraliza, "Transcendence and Sublime Experience in Nature: Awe and Inspiring Energy," *Frontiers in Psychology* (2019), accessed December 16, 2019, 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00509.

87 Although a more detailed description of how affects are generated and shared is important, for the sake of space I leave aside that discussion in this written thesis. For more on affective transmission, see Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* (2004).

88 The American Psychiatric Association defines traumatic experiences as those producing feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror. Stephen Joseph, "What is Trauma?", last modified on January 5, 2012, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-doesnt-kill-us/201201/what-is-trauma.

89 In defining trauma this way, I follow the American Psychiatric Association's definition related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which states that a person "must have experienced or witnessed an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and which involved fear, helplessness, or horror." Stephen Joseph, "What is Trauma?", last modified on January 5, 2012, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-doesnt-kill-us/201201/what-is-trauma.

90 By "negative change," I mean a negative emotional response (fear, helplessness, horror), or else a negative physical or psychological response due to injury or threat of injury.

threatened. Immanence and transcendence are both experiences of something real, unmediated at the time by verbal language. But while transcendence was historically the pursuit of much art, in contemporary Western culture, immanence is replacing transcendence for many artists.

Noumena, Holiness, and Mysterium

He does not perceive holiness, it takes him captive and overwhelms him; nor does he behold it in a revelation, it reveals itself to him, and he cannot even boast that he has understood it properly. Everything happens apparently outside the sphere of his will....[91]

- Carl Jung

If transcendent experiences are encounters with something real beyond the physical world, what sorts of “out of this world” things are possibly encountered? This question was of concern to the Enlightenment-era philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant was concerned with the question: “what is knowable to the human subject?” To answer this, he divided the world into things we experience with our senses (phenomena) and things unable to be experienced with the senses (noumena). Kant believed that all forms of reason are based on human experience, and so phenomena are the only things about which humans can have any knowledge.[92] According to Kant, it seems that noumena cannot be experienced by human subjects in transcendent encounters.[93] Yet two other influential thinkers took up Kant’s question in the 20th-century. German philosopher and theologian Rudolph Otto (1869-1937) and the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875-1961) both believed that ultimate, external reality was able

[91] “A Psychological Approach to the Dogma of the Trinity,” In *The Collected Works of C.J. Jung Volume 11: Psychology and Religion: West and East*, edited by Sir Herbert Red, Michael Fordham, and Gerard Adler, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), 152.
[92] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 362.
[93] If noumena could be experienced, then they could be known through human reason like all phenomena. By claiming that noumena are unknowable, Kant effectively deems them unexperience-able.

to be experienced by the human subject. Their approaches provide helpful models for our consideration of the possibility of transcendent art in the 21st-century.

Both Rudolf Otto and Carl Jung define the numinous using a positive attribute, "holiness." Holiness, as described by Jung, is the highest value an object can possess.[94] Furthermore, holiness carries a characteristic of self-transcendence in that it is not something experienced by choice, but, rather, encountered forcefully through the experience of noumena. Jung identifies the numinous as belonging to the unconscious mind rather than the conscious one, granting that it is not a product of the subject's individual persona but belongs to the realm of the "collective unconscious," or group mind. Thus noumena, like affect, is shared amongst communities of people, all of whom have the ability to experience transcendent encounters.[95] While acknowledging the power and veracity of the experience of holiness, Jung recognized holiness as belonging to the sphere of faith rather than science, he thus dedicated little further attention to this subject.

Rudolf Otto goes further, however, in his exploration of the numinous in his 1917 text, *The Idea of the Holy*. According to Otto, the numinous is synonymous with the holy and produces a "creature feeling" in us that signals our inadequacy in the face of something wholly "other." He describes this "creature feeling" in this way,

> All that this new term, 'creature-feeling', can express, is the note of self-abasement into nothingness before an overpowering, absolute might of some kind; whereas everything turns upon the character of this overpowering might, a character which cannot be expressed verbally, and can only be suggested indirectly through the tone and content of a man's feeling-response to it. And this response must be directly experienced in oneself to be understood.[96]

[94] Carl Jung, "A Psychological Approach to the Dogma of the Trinity," In *The Collected Works of C.J. Jung Volume 11: Psychology and Religion: West and East*, edited by Sir Herbert Red, Michael Fordham, and Gerard Adler, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), 152.
[95] Ibid., 152.
[96] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. by John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 10.

Feeling-response is an important indicator of the numinous for Otto. He draws upon the reader's personal experiences with transcendence, claiming that without your own "deeply felt moment of religious experience" to recall, there is no way transcendence can be described or imagined.[97] While unable to describe transcendence fully, Otto insists that transcendent experiences are emotional. And it is through the quality of these emotions that the thing encountered (noumena) can be known. In an attempt to place positive attributes on the numinous, Otto uses the word "mysterium" to describe it. He states,

> Conceptually 'mysterium' denotes merely that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar. The term does not define the object more positively in its qualitative character. But though what is enunciated in the word is negative, what is meant is something absolutely and intensely positive. This pure positive we can experience in feelings, feelings which our discussion can help to make clear to us, in so far as it arouses them actually in our hearts.[98]

Otto expresses frustration that feelings are not treated more seriously in contemporary thought, and he puts out a call for psychology to work to classify and record feelings and emotions "according to their qualitative differences."[99] Nearly a century later, affect theory has stepped into this role, taking seriously the impact of affect and emotion on individual subjects and society at large.

[97] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. by John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 8.
[98] Ibid., 13.
[99] Ibid., 17.

Whether an individual can actually experience an external (other-worldly) reality is difficult to prove concretely.[100] As we have seen, this question has been explored in a variety of ways throughout history. and the possibility of transcendent encounters has been embraced by many. Some, like Rudolf Otto, claim the key to understanding these experiences is through our feeling-response to them. And these feelings can even generate an image of the thing unknown. In that sense, transcendent art can be a way of searching the heavens for answers not found in the everyday banality of contemporary life. To better understand transcendence, it is perhaps best to put yourself in places where transcendent encounters can occur and then observe your feeling-responses to them. Art and contemporary dance have the potential to create those places, ultimately presenting themselves as sources of knowledge of things unseen and unknown.

Figure 12

A Transcendent Dance

And am I born to die—to lay this body down?
And must my trembling spirit fly into a world unknown?[101]
- Charles Wesley

Akin to how abject artists make immanent experiences possible through their art, I sought to make transcendent experiences possible in *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement*

[100] Figure 12, an image of Lauren Waugh and other cast members, is taken from a performance video of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* shot by Paul Jackson.
[101] Text to the shape-note song *Idumea*, written by Charles Wesley. These are the opening words sung at the beginning of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera.*

Opera. Immanent experience is brought about by strong associations with death and trauma. To create an artwork capable of inspiring transcendent encounters, I utilized themes associated with transcendence. As a postmodern, interdisciplinary dance artist with a strong connection to the Christian church, I chose subjects I knew well: mystery, divinity, and ritual. In the opening of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* (described at the beginning of Section III), the audience is ushered into a strange new world.

Re-entering the theater after intermission, the audience first sees the stage which has been re-set for *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera*.[102] The stage design is minimal, featuring a looming pipe organ and chairs and risers arranged in a half circle.[103] Half set piece, half instrument (the set designer expanded the organ to twice its size using shop-made pipes and materials), it is not at first clear whether the organ is playable at all. When the organist enters in the silence after the opening song, she approaches the organ, sits down to play, and hits a large open chord which explodes into the space as the organ itself lights up from the inside. All of this adds to the air of mystery and surprise, but the organ music itself is unexpected—not even immediately recognizable as music. *Annum per Annum,* by composer Arvo Pärt, opens with just two notes—played loudly

Figure 13

[102] Figure 13, an image of the organ and organist Alexis Van Zalen, is taken from a performance video of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* shot by Paul Jackson.
[103] The audience configuration (chairs and risers) was the same as the first half of the show, *Black Madonna and Miss America* by Ronya-Lee Anderson. The organ, extended to a towering 14 feet by set designer Grace Guarniere, was hidden for the first half of the show by large chalk walls.

and rhythmically on every keyboard of the organ for over a minute-and-a-half until the sound dies away into complete silence. This is not what one expects to hear from an organ and adds to the aura of mystery. The music of Pärt is often simplified through the use of silence. The composer describes this as a way of revealing the essence of things.[104] Likewise, the dancing, which begins during the organ's opening notes, is reduced in this scene to simple walking, looking, and standing. By utilizing strong elements of mystery, *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* grabs the audience's attention, encourages personal interpretation, and ushers the audience into a strange world. This strangeness allows the imagination to consider and embrace things unknown.

I have described transcendent experiences as encounters with something ultimately real outside of human experience. Although this designation maintains an array of possibilities, transcendent experiences have historically been understood as encounters with God or a spiritual dimension.[105] After the opening sequence of walking, standing, and looking, the eight performers (the full cast excluding the organist) in *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* move through a series of structured dance improvisations set to *Annum per Annum*'s five movements: K, G, C, S, and A. These five movements are meant to mirror the five sections of the Roman Catholic mass ordinary (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei), and each

Figure 14

[104] Peter C. Bouteneff, *Arvo Pärt: Out of Silence* (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015), 100.
[105] Figure 14, an image of Krissy Harris and the cast, is taken from a performance video of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* shot by Paul Jackson.

symbolizes a way in which man can approach God. In the Kyrie (a prayer for mercy), the dancers walk aimlessly through the space, bleak and listless in a perpetual aloneness. As the music begins to shift, the dancers see each other and begin to walk in response—the

Figure 15

solemnity of their gait reminiscent of church processionals. [106] In the Gloria (a song of praise), the dancers sing the Latin text while banding together to form a relentless current of bodies moving on a strong diagonal. One dancer, refusing to sing, turns and walks against the current of bodies, towards a strong amber light. In the "Credo" (a statement of faith and belief), the dancers turn to join this lone dancer, solemnly "flocking" through the stage space as if carried by an invisible current. In the "Sanctus" (an encounter with holiness), one of the dancers suddenly turns and leaps onto the others who catch her and lift her up towards the ceiling. Lowering her to her feet, they erupt one by one into an ecstatic open dance score, leaping into each other's arms, twirling, and reaching towards the sky.

Suddenly the sound dies away, the light fades to black, and the dancers disappear from the stage. In the blackness, with the music of the Agnus Dei (God coming to rescue), one dancer walks out alone holding a ball of light vaguely illuminating her face. As the organ plays a hopeful, music box melody, the solo dancer manipulates and moves with the ball of mysterious light. The other dancers reappear slowly until the ball of light

[106] Figure 15, an image of Brianna Nelson, is taken from a performance video of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* shot by Paul Jackson.

is being tossed amongst them, flying through the blackness as if by magic. As *Annum per Annum* comes to a close, the solo dancer climbs a ladder of human bodies, hooks the light onto a rope hanging from the ceiling, and sets it swinging—casting erratic shadows on organ, stage, and audience. Through the dance movement in *Annum per Annum,* an abstracted depiction of religious devotion is enacted. This draws on themes of mystery, but does so in a way that references historical attempts of man to find God through the church and religious activities. But religious activity itself does not necessarily lead to transcendent experience. In the next section of the work, I consider the power and possibility of a divine encounter.

As the light careens overhead, the dance begins again to a new organ work, Arvo Pärt's *Pari Intervallo*. The new dance movement is a frenzied, adrenaline-inducing display of power and effort leading to fatigue and failure. Beginning in a run, this section increases in intensity as the dancers run up each other's backs, reach towards the ceiling, and fall face first towards the floor. They hurl themselves at each other in unlikely catches, yell in frustration, and sometimes knock the catcher to the ground. As fatigue takes over, dancers begin to exit the stage one by one until only four remain. Running at each other, they fall, get back up, and fall again. Eventually succumbing to fatigue, they drop to the floor and stay there—the sound of their breathing fills the silence.

The fervor of religious activity exhausts itself in this scene, and the dancers are utterly spent. Physical effort has failed them. This sets up the emotional high point of the work because the dancers have accomplished nothing on their own. Just as the work began in bleak aloneness, the dancers are once again bleak and alone. The fervor of their

attempts to reach God have come up empty, and they seem the worse for their efforts. [107] As their heavy breathing slowly fades, four singers step out of the blackness, singing an intricate four-part harmony—pure, effortless, and complex. The text is Latin, but it is known to many. "O Magnum Mysterium" — oh great mystery—a Christmas text about God coming to visit man on earth. As the singing envelops them, the dancers rise from the floor. Blind and tired, they feel their way towards each other, gaining energy from the music until they enter into an unlikely-but-glorious partnered duet that concludes in a long spinning fall as the sound and music fades. In this section, Rudolf Otto's description of "mysterium," as an overwhelming experience of holiness, is played out.

Figure 16

For some, this evocation of God coming down to earth directly relates to things they actually believe about God (the "incarnation" as it is called is a common belief across many branches of Christianity). For them, this is a reminder that transcendent experience is possible, and the wonder of the "incarnation" (God coming to earth as a man), as depicted in *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera,* may be a transcendent experience for them. For others, this scene might evoke feelings of wonder related instead to childhood visits to Christmas mass or feelings experienced touring grand cathedrals abroad. For those with no connection to the Christian church, the use of planetary imagery in the circular lights, the frequent use of orbital patterns, and the title

[107] Figure 16, an image of Heidi McFall, Krissy Harris, Lauren Waugh, and Grace Tietz, is taken from a performance video of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* shot by Paul Jackson.

may similarly suggest feelings of wonder. In each instance, a sense of sacredness becomes a platform for individualized experiences of transcendence to occur.

The final section of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* draws on the third and last transcendent theme I employed in making this work. Just as mystery and divinity relate to each other and overlap each other as artistic tools, ritual does not stand fully on its own but blends with mystery and divinity, uniting them. Ritual invites a meditative state, allowing for the contemplation of mystery or the intervention of divinity. For this reason, it is not surprising that many religious and spiritual activities are based in ritualized movement. In the final section of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera,* several ritualistic actions occur simultaneously. The most visually stunning of these is the assembly and use of a giant thurible (incense burner), lit from the inside and smoking. Just as smaller thuribles are swung back and forth as a symbol of prayer in many Christian churches, this giant thurible (about 2' by 2') swings on a metal rod the full length of the stage and back. Trailing a smoky haze as a pendulum in front of the organ, this thurible represents the ritualistic activities that help us connect with God. Set to Arvo Pärt's, *My Heart's in the Highlands* (sung live by two performers slowly walking across the stage), the thurible ritual involves the majority of the cast. Working together, they lower the metal rod from the ceiling, assemble and light the orb, and set it in motion via a pulley system. Their effort is itself a ritual of community. This section is about longing—about feeling not quite right in the world and reaching out towards something bigger. As the music comes to a close, the performers leave the stage one by one. In the center, snow begins to fall, creating a visual representation of heaven come down to earth. One dancer remains. Alone, she dances in the falling snow—her eyes fixed upward.

Conclusion

Transcendent experiences overwhelm the subject with feelings too powerful to be fully expressed in words. During this experience, time stops and distractions are pushed aside.[108] Through transcendent experiences we encounter a reality greater than ourselves, be it God, supernatural forces, or ultimate truths. These experiences have the power to change us for good. Art has the ability to carve out spaces where transcendent encounters can happen, even in our contemporary lives. Perhaps it is especially in contemporary life, where feelings of precarity can be overwhelming, that transcendent experiences are most needed as a means to take us outside of ourselves through an encounter with something greater.

Figure 17

I simplified several complex subjects in Section III in order to clarify the separate processes of immanent and transcendent experiences for the reader. However, transcendence and immanence are not mutually exclusive. Many artworks employ both types of experience. Even *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* draws heavily on themes of death and decay (though hopefully towards transcendent ends, not immanent ones). Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that art is not dependent on either of these experiences in order to be successful as art. In fact, neither immanence or transcendence is typical in contemporary art or contemporary dance. Most contemporary art seeks other aims, such as societal critique, entertainment, political persuasion, story-

[108] Figure 17, an image of Heidi McFall, is taken from a performance video of *Corpora Caelestia: A Movement Opera* shot by Paul Jackson.

telling, or meditating on and appreciating the beauty of movement, life, or objects. And even art that seeks transcendence and immanence often does so alongside other aims. Yet transcendent art was once a means for profound emotional experience and life change, and I believe it still holds that potential. Especially in a world where immanent art is presenting itself as a replacement for transcendence, it is important for transcendent art to arise alongside its immanent counterparts in order to reinvent itself for a new generation of artists and thinkers.

Glossary

Chiaroscuro A technique in Baroque painting which employs strong contrasts between dark and light.

Choreopolitics A word used by Mark Franko and André Lepecki to describe dance that resists conformity through planned, political movement.

Corpora Caelestia "Heavenly bodies" (Latin). This phrase usually refers to stars.

Illuminated Manuscripts Texts (usually old) that have been supplemented with decorations, usually in gold or silver and added by hand.

Immanence An encounter with trauma that overwhelms the subject's physical and mental capacities, leaving the subject powerless to fully communicate the experience in language. Immanence causes an internalized focus on the self because the integrity of the self is threatened.

Improvisational Scores Sets of rules that structure improvisational dancing.

Minimalist Music Musical Minimalism was developed in New York in the 1960s. This style simplifies music down to its most essential elements, often involving the repetition of simple music ideas.

Mysterium According to Rudolf Otto, "mysterium" refers to that which is beyond understanding, hidden, extraordinary, and unfamiliar.

Noumena Something unable to be experienced with the senses.

Phenomena Something experienced with the senses.

Practical A theatrical prop requiring electricity.

Pure Motion A term used by Sally Banes to describe Postmodern dance. The term refers to a focus on movement for its own sake, without added drama or flair.

Shape Note Singing "Shape note" is a simplified musical notation style developed to aid in social singing. "Shape note singing" is a style of singing associated with the rural American South where this notation is sometimes used.

Telos In philosophy, the Ancient Greek word "telos" is used to mean purpose or aim.

Thurible A censur, or incense burner, that is sometimes swung back and forth as part of a religious service.

Transcendence An encounter with something greater than oneself that overwhelms the subject's physical and mental capacities, leaving the subject powerless to fully communicate the experience in language. Transcendence takes the subject outside of themselves.

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