Aromatheatre

Communication and Multimedia Design’s Famous Deaths

Erin B. Mee

I lie down on a cold steel tray, cross my arms over my chest, and am rolled into a morgue drawer. The door smacks shut. A second of silence, and then I hear Whitney Houston singing to herself. It smells like she is in a hotel room: the air is pleasant but stale — hermetically sealed. The scent evokes avocado-green quilts and thick drapes that shut out the outside world. I can hear her walking around on the carpeted floor. I inhale Houston’s perfume, which I later find out is called Petite Cherrie. More pacing. I hear her strike a match and inhale deeply; I smell pot. Then I smell her dinner: something I can’t identify in a crinkly wrapping...cooking oil and french fries. I hear another match. Clinking sounds. Flame. A sickening metallic smell fills the morgue drawer: she must be smoking crack. The smell is overpowering, and I almost gag. She says “I cannot do this anymore.” The smell changes: old farts mixed with stale disinfectant. She must be in the bathroom. She turns on a faucet. I hear two plips, and smell something soft that I cannot identify (I am told later it is olive oil, and am fascinated both that olive oil has a smell, and that I felt as though I smelled “soft-ness”). Then I hear a huge splash, and silence. I smell nothing. The door opens and I am wheeled out of the morgue drawer and brought back to life. I have just experienced the last four minutes of Whitney Houston’s life through smell and sound.

This example of aromatheatre is one of four Famous Deaths, “a series of four portraits of celebrities [John Fitzgerald Kennedy,
Whitney Houston, Lady Diana, and Muammar Gaddafi in their final moments [...] using only sound and scents” (CMD n.d.). Although I experienced Houston’s portrait at the Future of Storytelling (FoST) Festival in New York City in the fall of 2016, this project, created by Communication and Multimedia Design in Breda, Netherlands, continues to tour the world. The creators’ aim to “rethink and prototype the possibilities of scent for strategic communication [...] storytelling, interaction, and media design” (CMD n.d.). The first step in the Famous Deaths creative process is detailed research. For Houston, the creators (scent designers) collected images of the Beverly Hills hotel room she died in to determine what she might have been smelling and hearing in her final moments. The technician running Famous Deaths told me:

The cause of death is: she had drugs in her system, she had drawn a bath, the water was so hot it caused her to faint, and she slipped (in the olive oil she had added to the bath water), hit her head and accidently drowned. She was found in her bathtub face down.

As told through scent, the last minutes of Houston’s life go from pleasant (her perfume, the general smell of the hotel room) to unpleasant (drugs, and a windowless bathroom). You can literally smell her life going “downhill,” and when experienced through scent, her death is not a surprise.

For many of us, because we have watched the Zapruder film, and because the image of Jackie crawling over the back of the car is iconic, our understanding of and relationship to JFK’s death is through vision — from the outside looking in. Famous Deaths puts our noses inside JFK’s car: we smell coffee; then popcorn and cotton candy (the smells of the parade) at a distance; the grass on the grassy knoll; the car and exhaust fumes; and finally, Jackie’s perfume, Joy, which is perhaps the last thing JFK smelled before he died. “They know the type of Lincoln JFK was riding in, and what materials the car was made of, so they know what it would have smelled like. The scents in the installation are a representation of that car,” the technician told me. All the smells are arranged from JFK’s perspective, and we smell our way through what the designers imagine to be his version of the story.

Famous Deaths asks us to do more than identify with a character onstage; it asks us to become the dead character (to paraphrase the title of one of Stanislavsky’s books) as we lie in a morgue drawer and inhale the same molecules JFK and Whitney Houston would have had in their nostrils in the moments leading up to their deaths. We literally internalize the play. As I lay in the morgue drawer my nose became Houston’s nose as I smelled what she smelled: I was her. Dying. Or dead, since I was the/her cadaver. My mind began to wander through

Figure 2. The computer screen showing how Famous Deaths by Communication and Multimedia Design is run. FoST Festival, 2016. (Photo by Erin B. Mee)
these various positions as my brain created a layered narrative out of the olfactory and auditory information it perceived: was I re-living her death as her (cadaver)? Or was I living through her death—not identifying with her, but actually experiencing the last four minutes of her life? Or experiencing her death as myself? If I was re-living her death, was this an after-life memory? Isn’t memory a form of re-living—a way of keeping the dead alive in the minds of the living? If that is the case, do famous people ever die?

Smell is the only sense directly involved with emotions at the neural level, and smell perception always already contains emotional information. Odorants are molecules taken into the nose through either the orthonasal route (sniffing) or the retronasal route (via the mouth), which dissolve in the mucus on the roof of the nostrils. The molecule (a chemical signal) is converted into an electrical signal that travels via the olfactory pathway to other parts of the olfactory system, where the signals are processed to form an olfactory perception. Before information reaches the orbito-frontal cortex (where conscious smell perception occurs), it travels through the amygdala—the part of the brain responsible for processing emotions (Jacob 2011). When the creators of Famous Deaths assert that “olfactors” (people who apprehend the play primarily through scent) “experience more intensely,” they are referring to the fact that smell evokes emotion more potently than any other sense. The olfactory pathway also directly involves the hippocampus, the brain structure responsible for memory formation; “the experience with smell-evoked memory is unique among the senses in the extent of the emotional, as well as factual, recall”—a phenomenon known as “autobiographical memory,” or the “Proust effect” (Jacob 2011:200). Our choice of partner is tied to smell; our libido is tied to smell; we can actually smell fear and happiness; the synchrony of menstruating women happens through smell; lung cancer, diabetes, and other illnesses are detectable through smell—so we can smell when someone is healthy or not; and mothers can recognize their newborn babies through smell. The technician running Famous Deaths on the day I was there told me that people reported powerful responses:

One of the things people have been saying about the Houston one is “are there temperature changes in there? I felt really hot, I felt like my head was on fire, my hair was on fire.” A lot of people feel that heat. And that’s just how your brain perceives that scent.

Famous Deaths is one of many recent experiments with olfactory storytelling. In 2006 Oswaldo Macia created an installation called Smellscape in Oxford, which retold the story of Phileas Fogg’s 80-day journey around the world through a series of scents Fogg would have encountered; the installation included a map of the world in which place names were replaced by the names of scents (see Jacob 2011:200). In 2009 I experienced Green Aria at the Guggenheim Museum, a scent opera in which characters—with names like Funky Green Imposter, Absolute Zero, Shiny Steel, and Chaos—were represented by scents, and their activities personified by music. We sat in seats equipped with “scent microphones,” which distributed the work of French perfumer Christopher Laudamiel to our olfactory pathways in order to experience the abstract struggle between humans and nature through scent and sound.

At the Future of Storytelling Festival 2016 I experienced my first scent film: Alex in Wonderland by Maya Sanbar with scent design by David McEwan. Alex is sitting on a bench in a black-and-white world with no scent when a colorful bird pops up and takes her down a sewer to a colorful and smellful underworld. Alex in Wonderland works by pairing the film with a scent-delivery device called Cyrano, created by Vapor Communications, which looks and behaves like a “scent speaker.” You buy the speaker and various “scent cartridge” trios titled Coffee 66, Cancun Stroll, Central Park, Natural Moods, Einstein, and New York Public, which create what Vapor Communications refers to as “mood medleys.” When paired with the smartphone app ONotes, Cyrano creates, I would argue, mini scent-plays. Jogging North Meadows (one of the medleys in the scent grouping Central Park) begins with the aroma of lime—a bright, cheerful, clean, open, airy scent; after a brief pause it continues with the calm, earthy, lush scent of grass; and after another brief pause it finishes with the smell of
lemonade and cookies. *Jogging North Meadows* is the story of my jog through Central Park, told through the scents I might encounter on my journey. Olfactors can control the duration of the play by setting the length of each scene (for example, each scene can last for 30 seconds or 1:45), and whether the scenes repeat or not. Olfactors can also set the intensity of the fragrances. *Famous Deaths*, however, is arguably the first site-specific play told primarily through scent.

The most obvious limitation of scent-plays is that the odorant molecules need to be dense enough to reach the nasal cavity—which requires a heavily concentrated potion in a strong diffuser, an enclosed space, or both. In *Famous Deaths* the morgue drawer was not only a thematically appropriate “setting,” it localized the scents so they could be perceived. Because the brain is overwhelmed by scent perception much more quickly than by visual or aural perception, scent-plays have to be short: *Green Aria* was 30 minutes, *Famous Deaths* is four minutes, and *Alex in Wonderland* is just under two and a half minutes. Because scent is airborne, it is easy for different scents to get muddled together. *Famous Deaths* had moments when the scented air was sucked back out of the chamber and “cleared” before new scents were introduced; the Cyrano scent medleys have rests or “breathing spaces” between different “scenes.” In other words: scent-plays need to be short, and they require numerous intermissions.

Despite the challenges, scent design is emerging as a new element of theatricality. Disney has been experimenting with scent for a long time; marketers have begun to develop “scent branding”; and several theatre companies have included scent in their immersive and interactive productions—for example, Third Rail incorporated the smell of suntan lotion into *Grand Paradise* (2016), and This Is Not A Theatre Company (of which I am the artistic director) incorporated the smells of wine, cheese, garlic, and chocolate into *A Serious Banquet* (2014) and the smell of chlorine into *Pool Play 2.0* (2017). So many theatre companies are playing with scent that writer Mark Blankenship has coined the term “aroma-turgy”
to describe how people curate scents for their productions (Blankenship 2016), and several artists identify as scent designers (Slagle 2014). What makes Famous Deaths unique is that scent is not used to support other elements of the play, or as an additional nicety, but as the main mode of communicating plot and character.

Olfactors do not observe and empathize, but inhale, experience, feel, and remember. Because aromatheatre takes place in and on the body, because our bodies chemically interact with molecules of the play, and because olfactory perception directly involves emotion and memory, aromatheatre has the potential to create experiences that are more intimate and personal than those that take place on a distant proscenium stage, and can be a powerful affective tool.

References


Curating Dialogue
The Bridge Project’s Radical Movements

Michelle LaVigne and Megan V. Nicely

A renowned gender theorist and a female drag performer move language and gestures as they trade stories and share bodywork. A gender-ambiguous performer and a trans and queer scholar volley the audience’s attention between moments of undulating bodily gestures and precise textual analysis in a lecture-demonstration format. One solo performer, surrounded by clothing and props, tries on cultural identities, arguing for “queer” as a “nonbinary swag” that allows them to exceed the lesbian label. Another solo performer, dressed in a shimmering gold lamé hijab lip-syncs to Iranian pop songs to grieve,

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either as is customary or to mark the uncertain post-revolutionary future. Then there is the four-hour immersive installation in which an environment of precarity and loss is somatically generated via the temporary coherence of bodies, text, and sound. Finding ways to survive within a fractured capitalist logic of production of which they are a part, moving bodies in this durational work assemble in a darkened, cave-like space as audience members huddle around them. Cultural thinkers live-blog a network of associations. Seated next to each other, they only interact through their typed exchange, which is projected on the wall.

These various performance formats comprised Radical Movements: Gender and Politics in Performance, Hope Mohr’s fall 2017 Bridge Project. Occurring over two weekends in November at CounterPulse and the Joe Goode Annex in San Francisco, the curated event asked artists and audiences to consider the prompt: “What does it mean to have a radical body?” Accompanied by an online “Audience Reader” hyperlinking to short articles (Hope Mohr Dance 2017) and a host of rich questions posted on the event’s web page—“Can part of the body be radical if other parts are not?” “Can you transmit your radical body to someone else?” “Does radical need an audience?” (Hope Mohr Dance n.d.)—the project sought to generate dialogue within the Bay Area performance community by posing various dialogic exchanges as performance. Events subverted common formats such as the often unsatisfying postshow talk-back or scholarly lecture that maintains a certain hierarchy in relation to an artist where audiences consume, moderators and scholars explain, and performers labor. Importantly, during these numerous events, conversations arose in real time, giving the sense that “radical performance” is not about planning which boundaries might be transgressed but rather, in the words of artist Monique Jenkinson, about “accepting complexity” (Jenkinson 2017).

The term “radical” moves with a kind of currency in our contemporary global and post-election landscape, where grassroots organizing for change is for many urgent and necessary. A noun, verb, and descriptor,1 “radical” indicates something fundamental and vital, a kind of reforming that attempts to break new ground. Like the related “avant-garde,”2 the term’s use is also historical. It signals both the seeds of future innovation and harkens back to earlier moments. In regards to dance history, the word is associated with the 1960s, when the Judson Dance Theater and Grand Union called for democracy in dance by focusing on collectivity as a challenge to top-down authority. The 2017 exhibit Radical Bodies: Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer in California and New York, 1955–1972, cocurated by dance writer Wendy Perron and presented at the New York Public Library and UC Santa Barbara, relied on this reference to valorize California-based women’s contributions to the Judson moment, which is recognized as radical but often only in reference to New York. In the book accompanying the exhibit, the opening essay defines “radical,” via Deborah Jowitt, as a refusal to “’mold,’ train, or discipline the human body into a vision of someone else’s desire” (in Bennahum, Perron, and Robertson 2017:22).

The Judson notions of community and aesthetic refusal take on a different tone when considered today in the US in relation to DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), and mass global migrations. A refusal to comply with “someone else’s desire” may mean challenging the Judson era itself, and considering the politics of intersecting communities, rather than an ideology of human unity. As Sarah Leonard suggests in her op-ed “Is Trump Turning Liberals Into Radicals?” (2017), Democrats no longer stand for social change. It is time to destabilize the liberal status quo toward an activist stance. Similar chal-

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Challenges are taking place in dance via programming and various social platforms. Given these multiple calls for change, it is certainly time for radical social movement, both in art and politics. But what forms will it take, how will it be recognized, and what role will bodies play in its formulation?

Mohr’s programming begins to answer these questions. Her initial agenda for the Bridge Project was to “bridge” Judson and post-Judson artists with a younger community of contemporary artists, and to link both US coasts; however her current focus moves beyond this historical conversation. While earlier Bridge Projects brought elders such as Anna Halprin and Simone Forti to the stage, and invited local artists to respond to Trisha Brown’s iconic dance Locus (see Mohr 2018), Mohr now sees the Bridge Project as a curatorial platform of “community organizing to facilitate cultural conversations that cross discipline, geography, and perspective” (Hope Mohr Dance n.d.). Radical Movements did this by both challenging performance structures and opening alternative formats for audience engagement. Each evening included a main performance event and ended with some form of Q&A, and between the weekend of events, Mohr hosted an Audience Salon aimed to engage both audiences and the artists about the larger themes, aided by the Audience Reader, which included short texts by Judith Butler, Angela Davis, and others, and covering topics such as queer identity, social justice, feminism, and race. The radical movement in this case became the kinds of exchanges that happened between bodies and words, negotiating how certain bodies or identities became legible during performances and how information was transmitted and processed. Radical Movements as a whole gestured to possible models for how radical social movement might be formed and recognized.

**Weekend 1: Challenging Formats**

The first event, *Ordinary Practices of the Radical Body*, brought esteemed philosopher Judith Butler and renowned drag queen Monique Jenkinson together for what one might call an “embodied conversation” that could have lasted all night long. They entered the stage moving together as if they just happened to meet up on a dance floor at some hip theory club, tapping their feet and swaying their hips to the beat of the dance music. They did not talk right away, allowing us to take in the scene—they were warming up their bodies before they started their verbal exchange. They danced around the stage casually in this way for some time, discussing their bodily practices, early dance experiences, and gender theories. Their conversation seemed planned but not fully scripted, allowing their speech to flow with ease yet stay on track. At one point, Butler asked Jenkinson how she became “a theory queen” and attempted to move her toward a podium that was positioned far stage left. Jenkinson adroitly declined to take the lectern, preferring the safety of moving more freely in the space as her established persona. Butler seemed to enjoy her untethered relation to the podium as well. She did not hesitate to move her body differently than one might expect of a renowned scholar—her established persona. At one point she approached the stage-right wall to demonstrate how during her time at Bennington College she and classmate Wendy Perron used to walk around Greenwich Village “body slamming” into and then sliding down the windows of fancy restaurants while diners ate (an interesting connection given Perron’s own radical bodies project). Jenkinson soon joined her at the wall as they fell together, exploring first the support of the wall and then the floor. The discussion that accompanied this movement reflected on how no one starts on their own and how we depend on all kinds of grounds. Butler astutely noted: “The ground is part of the living that lets us live.”

In another, and perhaps the most poignant moment of the evening, Butler and Jenkinson took turns exchanging bodywork sessions by holding each other’s heads while lying on the floor—bodies holding bodies (fig. 1). Butler is known for her care with language and it was touching to see her take the same degree of care with another body. It seemed fitting that this was also the moment when they discussed ordinary practices of the radical body. What was most striking was that Jenkinson’s persona as a performer who works with both language and movement remained fairly stable whereas Butler’s persona as a famous theorist...
revealed more of her personal side than one might normally be given access to. Holding another person’s head, Butler was doing something ordinary (touching another person), yet at the same time quite extraordinary, given her scholarly profile. In this moment of extraordinary ordinariness, by way of somatic embodied exchange, Butler demonstrated how even ordinary bodies need tending to. She suggested to the audience that by speaking to others as if we were holding their heads, we might find different forms of embodied cognitive exchange.

Once the performance format shifted to the seated Q&A, both Butler and Jenkinson seemed less “alive.” Yet this contrast was a testament to the success of the embodied conversation and of stepping outside accustomed social roles to meet one another. It seemed fitting that the event ended with a dance party on the stage; after a few minutes the Q&A faded away while we moved, mingled, and danced with Butler and Jenkinson.

This opening evening was followed the next night by another artist-scholar exchange — titled dance of darkness: a performance, a conversation, a rehearsal for the future — between trans and queer theorist Jack Halberstam and performance artist boychild. The evening opened with an enthralling solo by boychild, positioned center stage in a pool of light. Vibrations and twitching motions began in her hands and then spread throughout her body while, strikingly, her feet remained in place, creating an image of hot lava bubbling just beneath the surface, building tension and sending up bursts of steam, waiting to explode. Her breathing was strong and her torso rippled. This complex “warm-up” performance, preceding any language, brought the evening’s themes of unknowability and illegibility into one body. boychild is an LA-based artist who grew up in the San Francisco drag scene and now appears in nightlife culture, film (with collaborator Wu Tsang), and other subculture events that blend fashion and modern mysticism. She is also a model whose body appears hermaphroditic. Her shaved head, piercing eyes with colored contacts that obliterate the pupils, and later in the evening a glowing light stick in her mouth, together created a haunting spectacle that appeared part alien, part human — an individual hard to categorize.

After this initial section of the performance, the lights came up in isolated pools onstage, while the house remained pitch black. There was a podium stage left, a projection screen
in the background, and a chair on which boychild sat, downstage and slightly stage right (fig. 2). Professor Jack Halberstam stepped out from the darkness to the podium and began giving a lecture. What ensued, accurately referred to on boychild’s Instagram feed as an “interpretive, combative drag dance lecture talk” (boychild 2017), was an academic lecture/demonstration organized around five key points (“drag,” “butoh/dance of darkness,” “improvisation,” “body/bodies,” and “touching/feeling”). What was combative in this case was not the exchange between boychild and Halberstam so much as the ways the lecture/demonstration tried but could not contain the ambiguity of boychild’s body and identity, even as the artist in this case was physically present. Halberstam, a scholar and clear fan of boychild (whom he referred to intimately as “Tosh”), prepared a carefully outlined lecture accompanied by a PowerPoint that flashed across the back screen. Between the lecture sections, boychild performed and spoke casually to the audience. The triangulation of scholar/researcher presenting his “discovered” subject, the subject case study presenting her talents as spectacle, and the isolated but voyeuristic audience seated in the dark, gave the event an odd kind of dialogic movement that in its reinsertion of roles and subject positions also challenged them.

There was little conversation between Halberstam and boychild until the postperformance Q&A, which suggested that radical movement in this case was less about the performances of and between a scholar and a club persona than the ways their trans bodies navigate the world, at times acting within and at other times outside certain pre-scripted gender parameters. Halberstam elsewhere uses “trans*” with an asterisk to indicate the many ways that notions of the gendered body are evolving, and the variety of trans expressions identified today (Halberstam 2018). And yet questions of how to be a social subject in certain public spaces—academia, the media, and even in performance itself—remain. This hybrid performance/lecture further proposed that radical movement is a kind of illegibility—a state where simultaneously conforming to and subverting certain gender and professional roles put identities into play without solidifying them. Ultimately, though, the point was made most directly in the figure of boychild, whose unidentifiable body solicits inquiry that it refuses to answer. Her form is both/and/
more-than, and her casual verbal responses to others’ attempts to identify her — she is not particular about pronouns — further underscore her refusal to be fixed (i-D Team 2013). While Halberstam attempted to contain the exchange and reach the audience with a well-formulated outline of terminology, this language could not contain what remained ambiguous. Halberstam and boychild’s exchange thus put pressure on the gender binary less by eliminating categories than by allowing them to coexist.

Curating Artists and Audiences

The Audience Salon on 10 November preceding the second weekend of performances was a chance to reflect and expand on the first weekend of the festival. By extracting this format and bringing together audience members and artists from the festival in a stand-alone event, we had an opportunity to reflect together on some of the festival’s central questions in greater depth. Seated in a circle, the group paused to consider shared questions as a community rather than as separate entities (audience members and artists). Together, we considered what it might mean for anyone to have or live through a radical body — particularly in response to the currency of our times — and in what ways understanding a body this way might call for different ways of moving and thinking. Guided by performance theorist and trans dancer Julian Carter, the Audience Salon subverted the back-and-forth exchange of most of the question-and-answer sessions experienced earlier in the festival.

Here, by bringing all of us — audiences and artists — back to our bodies via language, we were able to speak out loud while looking each other in the eye. The event further reinforced the importance of dialogue as a kind of social activism that challenges binary approaches to identity and form, something that concerns Mohr in her programming (Mohr 2017). By engaging issues together, a binary relationship was replaced with shared thinking and envisioning around new models for performance engagement. For those of us who attended the entire festival, these kinds of conversations extended across the events over both weekends, encouraging deeper reflection on the festival’s themes.

Mohr’s politics around curation seeks to address imbalances between “established” and “emerging” artists by forging alternative understandings of how individuals and collectives might move differently in our social world. Citing choreographer Tere O’Connor’s comment that “too much democracy is bad for art” (Mohr 2017), Mohr asserts that artmaking should be more about “deep listening” than people pleasing. She observes that artists often make “fear-based decisions” in order to appease the desires of their performers, funders, or audiences, and that artists might become more aware of how these private choices made in the studio affect the work and its reception. Her programming continues to ask how to build a “we” in performance that includes audiences in the conversation (Mohr 2017), further posing the question of what a radical ensemble might look like today.

Weekend 2: Building Communities

Lisa Evans’s You Really Should Sit Like A Lady (or how I got to femme) was a solo piece that employed personal narrative, costume changes, and call-and-response interaction with the audience. Declaring, “We all know that gender is a fuckin’ shit-show, right?” Evans talked and sang about their journey “to femme.” Evans is a member of the Bay Area queer/trans/people of color collective Peacock Rebellion, whose work emphasizes healing justice. Evans’s work extended a sense of belonging and acceptance that was palpable in the house. The performance was decidedly low-tech and less formal in comparison to the prior weekend’s stagings. The performance area was sparsely arranged, with a folding screen stage right, next to a table with a mixing board, chairs, and discarded clothing — a not-quite-fully inhabited house, a room not quite put together. As the performance unfolded, the complexity of Evans’s identities came into focus. They mixed their own music live, changed costumes, and put on makeup, all of which seemed to further a metaphor of self-making (fig. 3). The audience was not just a witness but a part of the conversation. We were asked to learn (and practice) a tae kwon do move and were handed a page from The Gender Unicorn (a popular graphic that describes the spectrums of gender and sex-
uality) as a route toward questioning the meaning of femme and how LGBTQ labels can also be restrictive and not quite fit. Like the clothing changes they made, Evans continually sought comfort in their own skin, eventually finding a queer female role model in the fantasy anime character Sailor Moon. Evans kept repeating the phrase “wanting to be wanted” throughout their performance, which suggested that radical movement is sometimes a private life-long practice of, in their words, “making a self.”

Maryam Rostami’s *Untitled 1396* (1396 refers to the Iranian calendar year 2018) similarly complicated the ways gender and racial identities are established in certain contexts. The performance was already in motion as the audience entered the theatre. Seated on a chair center stage, covered in a stunning gold cloth hijab, Rostami subtly shifted positions while lip-syncing to “Shabe Eshgh” by Iranian pop singer Hayedeh (fig. 4). Much of the remainder of the 45-minute performance was a monologue about multiple identities and geographic locations ranging from Iran to Texas, and about finding comfort in a cultural past that was initially rejected. Reference to historical events such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Contra affair, current wars, and today’s economic and environmental turmoil are the backdrop for her ordinary concerns as a young person growing up in the US. At one point, as Rostami changed into a black pantsuit and heels, she declared a humorous yet chilling truth: she wants to comment on world affairs and keep fighting, but she is just so busy with day-to-day life. She relayed the story of visiting Tehran with her family and putting on a hijab for the first time—and it feeling “natural.” “It looked good on me,” she stated, a contrast to how her modern “American” self never fit in when she was growing up in Texas. Close to the end of the piece, a radical movement of mourning took place when she faced the audience and explained that she would teach us how to cry. In a matter of seconds, she had teared up, a gesture that seemed both performed and genuine at the same time. The dualities of performance and reality, sarcasm and earnestness, camp and sincerity, war-zone and peaceful daily life together revealed the layered complexities of living through bodies whose meanings, contexts, and legibility are layered and in constant flux.

The final event, *A.U.L.E.* — “an un-named lived experience” (a program note in reference to Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick’s notions of unnaming, queer theory, and lived experience)—was a four-hour in-progress durational showing by Julie Tolentino and collaborators as part of the Bridge Project’s year-long Community Engagement Residency. The event in many ways made Mohr’s vision of the collective a reality, albeit a fractured and dystopic one. The piece—more aptly described as an installation—challenged and questioned various kinds of movement that might be radical to some, less so to others, and invisible to many. The work involved movement by “explorative performers” Maurya Kerr, Amara Tabor Smith, Xandra Ibarra, and Larry Arrington; live blogging projected on two screens by scholars and cultural thinkers Debra Levine and Scot Nakagawa; and live music and sound design by Patrick Murch.

The audience’s role was also somewhat exploratory. We could come and go as we wished, yet the room was dim, chairs scant, and the space nearly filled with props, microphones,
and dancers. This made it difficult to change locations or even find a comfortable spot to stand, and as time went on, the heat and sense of entrapment intensified. The performance seemed an endless meditation that never allowed for release. Tolentino moved throughout, repositioning lights and other props and watching intently from the fringes—she didn’t sit still. The piece created numerous multimodal feedback loops, each shifting slightly with its return, and often not quite connecting to others. For instance, bodies came into contact only to dissipate in a kind of apocalyptic wandering that was both a search for connection and an acceptance of their transitory nature. At times, performers moved individually; at other times bodies cohabited the same confined area, moving together yet seemingly unaffected by one another. Dancers would drag one another, taking turns lying atop large pieces of fabric or passing each other in close proximity. There were also moments when the dancers responded to each other like substances that congeal or repel. Sounds of static within the sound score accompanied the performers’ tasks, which lacked legible purpose but were done with commitment. It was as if the entire space were a somatic entity, living, breathing, and navigating the messy chaos that is our global precarious predicament. As Tolentino’s notes on the piece state:

& being with another seems to go by very fast. so much information. so much to tend to think about and the bow of time talking thru bow we resist, breakaway then give away. sensing bringing forward slinking back. why and what? stutter gasp. wait. [...] unrecognizable currents and cruelty with utopia’s little edges. the separate conversations radiate dark root bodies & instead an aural portal, a vibe. or two or three or four or five or seven of us with each other’s other/s. All together. All a part of this. (Tolentino 2017)

A.U.L.E. was both communal and fractured, reflecting an imperfect and troubled world in which we are compelled to continue living. The live blogging between Levine and Nakagawa soon became the touchstone for this message. Their texts, scrolling in real time on two adjacent walls, were both an asynchronous conversation and solo musings based in memory, associations, theoretical and political perspectives, and shared embodied experiences such as living through the AIDS crisis and participating in ACT UP and other kinds of activism. At one point Nakagawa wrote, “The act of remembering through difficult times can create a template for the future,” and at another, “Not allowing unjust power to distort the ways our experiences are remembered is a form of resistance that is powerful and potentially restorative.” Levine responded, “Maybe it’s ok that I didn’t see everything that happened this afternoon. Maybe I felt it. This feels like a good use of my time.” As Levine stated in the concluding conversation following A.U.L.E., live perfor-

Figure 4. Maryam Rostami in the opening scene of Untitled 1396. Radical Movements, CounterPulse, San Francisco, 11 November 2017. (Photo by John Hill)
mance is a way to show us who we are and why we’re in the situations we’re in.

**Continued Dialogue**

In posing numerous formats for dialogic exchange, *Radical Movements* asked what else could happen via the power of performance, and what role language might play as a tool for exchange. Notably, all events included spoken word sections, even as the focus was on radical bodies and movement, and many participants asked those more familiar with observing or writing to bring their physical bodies into the performance arena. Perhaps the message, if we take Mohr’s earlier reference to O’Connor’s claim that “too much democracy is bad for art,” is that we must risk losing the promise of democracy as a model for community in order to truly build new forms. This includes moving beyond the Judson and post-Judson approaches to the radical. Yet, questions linger about how to locate a language that embraces this kind of radical community.

The project’s collectivist thinking about radicalness might then be understood as an ongoing way of thinking-in-relation, rather than a known ontology or name for the newest art trend. During the Audience Salon, Tolentino noted that today, “Language isn’t being used well.” Yet clearly it could be, and the festival took much-needed steps toward this reality for the Bay Area performance community. Radical movement is thinking with others, performing what is not quite finished, yet vibrating with potential.

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This Dance Which Is Not One
Carole McCurdy’s ((waver))

Lauren DeLand

In ((waver)), a performance in two acts presented six times between 15 and 23 September 2017, director Carole McCurdy fuses what would initially appear to be incongruous forms: the earthy grotesquerie of butoh dance and the slinky restraint of Argentine tango. While early butoh practitioner Kazuo Ohno merged Argentine sensibility with butoh practices in his performances as La Argentina (1977), there remain tense cultural conversations about what constitutes “traditional” butoh. McCurdy enters the conversation to challenge notions that “true” butoh is bound by geographical and even racial specificity. As part of a vibrant Chicago-based “post-butoh” performance community dedicated to expanding the artform’s parameters, McCurdy views the distinction between butoh and post-butoh as somewhat artificial (McCurdy 2018; see also Butoh Chicago 2017). “Post-butoh” to McCurdy signifies “a sort of deference”—it acknowledges the lineage, yet at the same time preemptively announces its difference from traditional butoh, anticipating criticism from purists who insist upon a connection directly traceable to Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno’s pioneering efforts in the 1960s and ’70s (McCurdy 2018). For instance, artists Eiko and Koma take care to distinguish their work from classical butoh, even though both studied with Hijikata and Ohno and a clear aesthetic similarity is evident in their work. McCurdy’s performance addresses tensions between tradition and innovation through choreography that alternates between antagonism and graceful embrace. In a series of charged and unpredictable partnerships between performers, the piece exposes intimacy as a state of profound discomfort as well as sweet relief.

On a warm September night in Chicago, ticket holders cluster outside the Defibrillator Gallery, an intimate space located in the city’s Noble Square neighborhood (the gallery has since moved from its location at 1463 West Chicago Avenue to a new space in the Bridgeport neighborhood). Watched over by the head of a stone bull that juts from the wall above (a testament to the space’s past as a butcher shop), onlookers can see a light winking from the shop window, filtering through the lengths of crumpled plastic and black and white gauze strung up behind the glass. This makeshift lighthouse is activated by performer Mina Büker who spins on a platform with a flashlight in each hand, creating patterns of light that spill from the window onto the pavement below. Eyes closed, she continues her reverie as chatting guests filter into the gallery to take their seats on padded benches flanking three walls of the dimly lit space. In one corner, performer Eli Halpern is silhouetted against a diaphanous fall of backlit white fabric. He stands atop a vibrating platform designed to effect rapid cycles of full-body muscle contraction and release. Typically used as a dubious form of exercise, the platform emits a sound that lends a croaking waver to the droning guttural utterances he continually omits as he sucks liquid from the tube of a water pack while a metronome clicks away on the floor at his side. He soon moves from the platform and slips into a striking pair of eight-inch-high platform sandals that exaggerate the proportions of traditional Japanese geta footwear. Flashes of light appear briefly from hidden hollows in the shoes’ cork soles as, with arduous steps, Halpern walks the room, pausing to gaze beatifically into the eyes of spectators.

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who smile sweetly back. His actions evoke and seek to incorporate the shadowy traces of others coexisting with physically present bodies, as is the case with much butoh work.

McCurdy and her cast use the intimacy of the space to subtly ensnare their audience in a suspended temporal moment. Performer and audience relations are blurred throughout the performance. Cast members at times remove themselves from the action taking place at the room’s center to watch from the margins before rejoining, leaving open the question of whether watching is in fact performing. ((waver)) also establishes multiple planes of space and movement via patterns projected onto the floor and wall from above. Engineered by Francesca Talenti, the projections effectively extend the performers’ bodies by casting shadows that spill across the floor, creating rippling patterns of light and dark.

McCurdy’s inauguration into performance art was catalyzed by an overwhelming sense of love and loss. She responded to the loss of her mother with a conceptualization of grief and love that in this piece merges butoh and tango (McCurdy 2016). Butoh in Japan and tango in Argentina both emerged from periods of traumatic reckoning with the national pasts of their respective countries of origin (2016). A similarly haunted quality pervades ((waver)) in its oscillations between the ephemeral instantaneousity of live movement and the gravitational pull of all that has come before. There are also precedents in McCurdy’s training that speak to this merger. McCurdy had been dancing tango socially for years before beginning her formal butoh training with Chicago-based butoh artists Nicole LeGette and Sara Zalek (McCurdy 2018). She later traveled to Japan to study with masters Natsu Nakajima and Yoshito Ohno—both of whom have a tango connection.

Nakajima incorporated a tango score in a performance of Nisshō, presented for the US debut of her Muteki-Sha company in New York in 1985 (Kisselgoff 1987); and in his aforementioned Admiring La Argentina (1977), Yoshito’s father, Kazuo Ohno, embodied Antonia Mercé, the Buenos Aires–born luminary who ushered in a neoclassical era of Spanish flamenco dance in the early 20th century. In his analysis of Ohno’s performance of La Argentina’s affect, Mark Franko develops the concept of “delayed mimesis”—a process of invoking lost bodies through movement that “blur[s]... the difference between seeking [...] and actually finding” (2011:110, 112). Franko’s concept provides a useful framework for interpreting McCurdy’s performance, and the tension between “true” butoh and post-butoh as well. Since its inception butoh has embraced cross-cultural amalgamation, as postwar Japanese artists rejected both native and Western traditions as calcified. With its focus on intimacy and limitations—death being the most final of these, and yet one we nonetheless long to overcome—McCurdy’s performance reckons with the contradictions of perpetuating the life of a contemporary art form already rendered canonical and inflexible by some. The rigidity of traditional Argentine tango is similarly defied, as McCurdy’s performers resist the traditionally gendered dimensions of “leader/follower” roles, swapping costumes and creating unconventional formations within the dance and with one another.

((waver)) effects a subtle shift from the sociable preshow to the first act through the further dimming of the lights as the still-whirling Büker raises her arms, sending beams of white light flashing across the floor. Halpern sways gently in the platform shoes to the unsynchronized strains of the metronome and Shirley Bassey’s “Angel Eyes,” while the projector casts images of gray clouds upon an adjacent wall. The vibrating board hums, abandoned in the corner. This subtle concert of recorded music and mechanically produced noise sets the tone for a performance in which objects are employed to “speak” for the mute performers. In ((waver)), forms of perception and expression that are typically privileged in everyday interactions—sight and speech—are demoted, as silenced and occasionally blinded performers communicate haptically with one another.

In near-silence, a skein of dancers dressed in black and white rolls from a narrow opening created by two partitions pushed apart to create a passageway from an adjacent room. They appear as a single, serpentine body, as undulating wave patterns projected from above spill over them. Dancer Pamela Strateman picks her
way among this group of bodies, leading herself in a solitary tango in flat-soled black shoes. Lithesome as eels, the dancers curl around her ankles in the center of the room, affording the audience a view of their feet; they wear only socks. In part due to this footwear, the dancers’ bodies throughout are distinctively muted. This is in keeping with tango conventions: though the heels normally sported by female dancers in tango may produce expectations of percussive clicking, their footwork is notably subdued. In some butoh, a carefully selected soundtrack accompanies and amplifies the movements of a totally silent performer (Ohno’s oeuvre provides plentiful examples). Similarly, the footfalls of tango dancers are muted by the distinct rhythms of tango music, the sinuous harmonies of piano, bass, and bandoneóns (a small accordion-like instrument essential to tango music) alternated with impactful, silent stops.

The dancers soon roll silently to the sides of the room to rest at the audience’s feet like housepets, leaving behind one (Irene Hsiao), who covers up Strateman’s eyes from behind, leading her gently in a series of simple steps. Even when Hsiao removes her hands, Strateman keeps her eyes closed, treading air with her hands, and startling when Hsiao touches her hand. Strateman opens her eyes and the two join in a leisurely, silent tango, throughout which the women smile warmly at one another—a pairing that comments on the inflexibility of gender roles in traditional tango performance despite the increasing prevalence of same-sex tango pairings (see Havmoeller et al. 2015). Departing finally to the corner, they mount the vibrating board, lips parted, faces illuminated with quiet delight as they convulse along with the machine. The music begins to hiccup, and a mechanical chugging sound accompanies the arrival of McCurdy herself, carrying two mismatched striped wooden poles, each longer than her body. A dab of white painted on her upper lip creates an illusion of buckteeth, endowing her with an affect at once winsome and slightly foolish—a pale, hapless Pierrot (makeup in this performance is minimal, in contrast to the all-white body paint featured in many butoh performances). Four dancers regroup from the floor, blindfold McCurdy, and proceed to put her through a host of torments, hoisting her poles ever higher into the air as she strains to hold on. When the
dancers transfer the poles into the laps of audience members, McCurdy is left with one hand stretching pathetically in the air for the lost objects. To the frenetic, mocking beats of the popular Uruguayan/Argentinian song “Se Dice De Mi,” a young man (Harlan Rosen) dances circles around McCurdy, blowing on her face, flapping the loose fabric of his dress near her body, and finally leading her through an antagonistic tango partnering in which he pushes with his hand against her forehead and her back, finally meeting her forehead with his and driving her backwards.

In ((waver)), McCurdy and her dancers stage a variety of ways in which the gaze can be thwarted, refused, or simply fail to find its object. Hers is choreography that responds to unseen others: action is often in reaction to touch or even atmospheric disturbances from an obscured body. This gap between vision and motion exemplifies Franko’s analysis of Ohno’s performances as La Argentina in which he articulates his theory of delayed mimesis. Ohno does not impersonate La Argentina in his performances, Franko insists: rather, he dances his memories of seeing her, producing a work that does not replicate her movements despite paying homage to her (2011:109).

Building on the theories of Henri Bergson, Franko reminds us that “pure,” instantaneous perception is impossible insomuch as it requires giving up memory entirely (108).

Memory and performance recreate inexact what the one who remembers/perform/perceives wishes to see again. These conjured visions also cloud the sight: the one who looks backward can neither completely re-experience past moments, nor do they fully inhabit their present circumstances because they are holding onto the past. In McCurdy’s performance, perception is perpetually obstructed by the past, and movement always partially restricted: choreography and props are frequently employed to inhibit movement, and the dancers demonstrate this in their periodic bouts of blindness. Snatching a pole back from the laps of the audience, dancer Geoffrey Guy transforms it into a literal crutch, hobbling laboriously across the floor. Meanwhile, the still-blindfolded McCurdy staggers to the cork platform shoes Halpern wore, breaking the silence that has thus far defined the dancers’ footfalls as she now clombs ominously to seize the pole.

These suddenly resounding steps provoke associations with *aShibyōshi*, the practice of percussive foot stomping practiced in noh to conjure ground spirits. Franko theorizes that Ohno in *Admiring La Argentina* may have associated *aShibyōshi* with the sharp *zapateado*...
Yet in invoking unseen others, McCurdy’s gestures drag her down: the gigantic shoes slow her progress as she moves backwards, attempting to tug the pole from Guy’s hands, wedging her prize in a doorway and thus barring him from entry while immobilizing herself. In the second act, Guy and McCurdy are again ensnared in a conjoined trap, their respective heads enmeshed in a pair of nets that extend from either side of a plunger-like object with an absurdly long handle. Moments before, this object had been braced at a diagonal, almost sodomitical angle against Hsaio’s rear as she stood swaying and bent at the waist, her cascading dark hair denying the audience a view of her face. McCurdy and Guy lift the apparatus from Hsaio’s body, freeing her to wander dreamily away but immobilizing themselves within it.

(109–10). Yet in invoking unseen others, McCurdy’s gestures drag her down: the gigantic shoes slow her progress as she moves backwards, attempting to tug the pole from Guy’s hands, wedging her prize in a doorway and thus barring him from entry while immobilizing herself. In the second act, Guy and McCurdy are again ensnared in a conjoined trap, their respective heads enmeshed in a pair of nets that extend from either side of a plunger-like object with an absurdly long handle. Moments before, this object had been braced at a diagonal, almost sodomitical angle against Hsaio’s rear as she stood swaying and bent at the waist, her cascading dark hair denying the audience a view of her face. McCurdy and Guy lift the apparatus from Hsaio’s body, freeing her to wander dreamily away but immobilizing themselves within it.

 actionable exchange springs from this recurring theme: despite their gracefulness, the dancers are constrained by bonds they will not let slip, and weights they will not shed. Loss is signified not with absence, but with attempts at recuperation. The tension of the performance does not arise from people leaving but rather because others prevent them from departing. Tender exchanges like Hsaio’s and Strateman’s dance are interspersed with passages in which the performers constrain and provoke one another. This interplay of seduction and malice is evocative of some tango partnerships, in which the “follower” will suddenly spin out of a languid caress only to be snapped back against the “leader’s” body in a whirl of sharp knees and elbows. Part of tango’s erotic charge is produced in these moments of near flight that are foiled either by the leader’s unwillingness to let go, or by the follower’s failure to leave. The performance’s first act concludes with the
remaining cast creeping from their vantage point in the shop window to aggressively crowd the covering Guy and McCurdy, drawing an ever-tighter circle around them while emitting nonsense syllables in guttural, aggressive cadences: a shouted verse of The Carpenter’s “Close to You” stands out as an ironic, comprehensible utterance amidst the babble.

Props and costumes are deployed to draw viewers into the performance: in the second act, two performers unwrap Hsiao from a cocoon of white tulle and drape it ceremoniously over the heads and shoulders of audience members who grin, delighted, from beneath the frothy fabric. Earlier during the intermission, audience members had freely mounted the unattended vibrating board, laughing at its throttling rhythms. The license the audience takes with these objects acquires an intimate dimension: the props serve as extensions of the performer’s bodies, as well as instruments that expand the boundaries by which the difference between the space of the performance is typically demarcated from that of “the real.” In a startling example, Guy and McCurdy’s standoff in the doorway is broken by the dejected wheeze of a bandoneón that suddenly unfurls itself down from the hand of a man who has thus far simply observed the action over a section cut from the wall of a second-floor loft above the gallery. The instrument dangling forlornly from his hand abruptly announces him as a performer while vertically extending the space of the performance.

After being stolen away from Guy and McCurdy in the scrimmage that concluded the first act, the bandoneón reappears at the commencement of the second, pulled in a tug-of-war between the dancers, who have swapped items of clothing with one another at intermission. (Are these the same characters we encountered before?) Beyond the obvious significance of the bandoneón to tango music, the squeezebox, as well as other objects employed in the performance, evokes the internal bodily rhythms upon which butoh performers draw.

The respiration of the bandoneón conjures breath training, yielding and expanding to touch as the performers do with one another; the vibrating board both approximates and amplifies the thrum of the body’s energy.

In tango, McCurdy reminds us, intimacy impedes vision: the dancers cling closely so that they can feel, but do not see one another — each dancer’s vision is directed over the shoulder of the other (McCurdy 2018). The question of where the gaze goes when it cannot meet the object of desire is raised when the cast finally pairs off into four slow-dancing couples. Some barely sway to the music, drooping into their partners; others grapple with one another, almost like wrestlers. Performers peer over the shoulders of their mates, some detached, gazing into the distance, others wide-eyed and shocked, their shadows producing two-headed monsters on the floor. Whether scuffling with their partners or simply lurching along with them, the dancers’ energies are restrained by the security of embrace. Here, they perform the dual meaning of “to cleave” by at once clinging together and splitting apart. The work’s theme — the impossibility of truly collapsing the difference between Self and Other, despite the continued drive to do so — further underscores the
tension between notions of a stable butoh lineage and understandings of the dance form as being always already hybrid.

Hybridizations such as McCurdy’s ((waver)) represent the future of “post-butoh” performance, exploring the ways in which antagonism and embrace slip easily into and past one another in tango and butoh alike. Butoh, like tango, is necessarily transformed through the bodies that enact it. While the dead are remembered and honored in each form, it is only through the revivifying actions of the living, whether conservative or experimental, that these artforms continue to thrive.

References


