
Noticing the Feedback: A Proposal to the Contemporary Dance Field, and/or This Revolution Will Be Crowdsourced



Michèle Steinwald. Photo: Rino Pizzi

BY
Michèle Steinwald

FILED TO
Performing Arts

DATE
Jun 10, 2013

When I asked a room filled with my peers to imagine an ideal future for presenting contemporary dance performances, they agreed on a set of qualities: a flexible space, a blurring of art and life, a place of abundance, a performance of life, a ridding of greed, intolerance and self doubt. Here, everyone finds time to make art, has the freedom to explore, and opportunities to be challenged.* I then asked what could a possible first step look like to get to this utopian setting, and I received as many different answers as individuals involved. The answers pointed to early education, shorter workweeks, new economic systems, arts integration, meditation, increased modes of perception. When I am in the audience, I feel the change that certain choreographers affect within their work. What they make on stage creates the change we were imagining. It is our turn, as presenters, to initiate the conversation in order to shift our practice and support such efforts in social change off stage.

Ultimately, my aim is to create an environment for an in-person experience that provokes discussion and introspection. I imagine belonging to a community center, an atmosphere accumulated from multiple activities and needs being served at once, and this sets a framework in my mind to find a balance of offerings, opportunities,

and coincidences within a choreographed, yet spontaneous environment for all participants—artists and audiences—to engage in.

It will take us time to identify the elements that shape a theatrical experience and evaluate each aspect for their inherent conditions on the live performance. I can think of many places to start: the admission process (e.g. ticket prices, seating tiers, front of house ushers, messaging, fluidity of the architecture, ability to meet one's needs within the ritual of watching a performance even before it has begun, order of events, curtain speeches, program notes and playbills), and marketing (e.g. invitations, preparatory language, the distribution of the invitation, translation of artistic inspiration, educational content, historical context, curatorial intentions, background, the inside story, the hook, the social network draw, the buzz, word of mouth, critical appeal, facts, logistics, the aftermath). As we begin to untangle the conditions in which to experience live art, how we ticket and tell the art's story determines the unspoken contract we make with patrons, and influences everyone's ability to embody confidence and commit to the invited exchange. I note the feedback whenever a pre-show curtain speech strikes a cord with the audience or a performance noticeably alters one's preconceived notions of the live theatrical interaction. As for inhabiting a new and potentially utopian landscape, theorist and activist Stephen Duncombe explains, "the trick is to lead people out of what they know without simply replacing this old way of being, thinking, and seeing with a new one. You need to provide space for people's own imagination."

A healthy and thriving non-competitive environment needs activity in order to generate excitement. Tim Griffin, executive director and chief curator at The Kitchen in New York notes:

Now one of the predicaments I think (of arts generally) is that you see culture without community. It's not true across the board, but there's a lack of the kind of organic exchange where the audience produces the work that produces the audience—that sort of dialogue/dialectic—is largely missing. Often things are programmed from above, as opposed to rising from below. (Evans 5)

From the Mayan calendar noting the end of the world as we know it to the Occupy movement demanding new regulations and acknowledgment of the inequities on Wall Street, there is a collective global shift in consciousness and a cry out to reclaim our future. The destructive economic forces during these recent years of financial crisis have prepared us for a new narrative. Stripped of desires to follow a prescriptive path, our guiding principles are noticeably in question. Artists who build ideological principles into the fabrication of their art, not just within the content of the finished production, are coming to the forefront of aesthetic contributions. Hierarchical institutional containers are unnecessary to prove accreditation; labels limit experiential value and are often unwanted by audiences who assume being integrated into the whole. There is an urgency and potential creative freedom to conceive of

future parameters and outcomes collaboratively, with the artists and audiences together. Our globally connected community is saturated with artistic options and perpetually plugged into endless online discourse. The public sharing of our personal contributions is able to unclutter the noise of these offerings through relationships. As constant consumers, we stop only for discovery and are energized by the potential for inspiration and renewal. There is a new dawn that draws from everything and everyone we know or have heard of, anywhere and at any time. Virtual boundaries have not been blurred they have been obliterated.

We have inherited spaces and protocols for arts participation. Modern theaters have been traditionally designed to separate the audience from the art in an environment that controls light, sound, and temperature while framing the stage, disorienting the viewer in order to suspend disbelief. The ability to cut out the everydayness of one's outside life has been a perceived benefit to producing a world distinct from the one left at the door upon entering. In contrast, architecture of engagement starts with the premise of a gathering place, with central meeting areas where everyone has the ability to participate, design experiences and openly share nature, wellbeing, inclusion, and compassion. "Architecture and urban design are social arts, that influence human actions and interactions... [and] can also be a catalyst for change, synthesizing emerging cultural values and weaving critical new strands into the urban fabric." How do we flatten the hierarchical aspects of proscenium theaters into venues sufficient for the participation desires of today?

As we offer dance performances as part of the commercial market, the language used to sell tickets often relies on providing some authoritative perspective from the host venue or reputable newspaper critic. The understanding of worth can alienate when trying to create a name brand for contemporary artists who have no name recognition. The top-down stamp of approval is no longer the selling point it once was with season subscriptions as a privilege to participate in the pre-selected offerings. When everything is accessible online for free, how can we continue to promote exclusivity and intimacy as a price of admission? There is no more substantial touring funding for artists to be distributed to new communities, we need new reasons to host an event. Communication is circular and has room to include all sides of the conversation. Currently our combination of marketing and architectural systems prohibit our bodily intelligence and curiosity to be engaged. As a point of entry, choreographers have started to solve these deficiencies by keeping lights on in the audience during the show (Deborah Hay), having performers enter from audience before walking on stage (Luciana Achugar), and starting to interact on stage before the audience is completely seated (BodyCartography Project)—taking the art experience one step closer to a more inclusive environment.

The word *spontaneity* is defined as *a voluntary or undetermined action or movement*, and is synonymous with *naturalness, ease, uninhibited* and *unrestraint*. How could

those words become principles that establish a live art experience that is equally empowering for an artist as well as an observer/participant? This should be an embodied position for everyone regardless of ability; giving access determined by interest not privilege.

By closely reading and learning from the creative processes and performance practices of dance makers, Deborah Hay, Luciana Achugar, and BodyCartography Project—artists of various generations and nationalities—I will propose new guiding principles for the presentation of contemporary and experimental choreography. Through discovery and comparison, the understanding of the underlying values produced by the dance works of these artists surface and provide us recommendations for evaluating the conditions embedded or presumed in the field of presenting dance. Through the resulting conclusions, I hope to make an urgent field-wide suggestion to collectively examine our practices as a timely endeavor to maintain synchronicity with these artists' works and those of the future.

Deborah Hay – Community

From the earliest point in her career to now, Deborah Hay has always immersed herself in community. She started in the 60s within the art community, known as the Judson Dance Theater, in New York drawn together around the teachings of Robert Dunn, inspired by John Cage, and committed to weekly performance and dance experimentation at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. Later when she left Manhattan in the 70s, it was to live off of nature in Vermont in a communal land-sharing cooperative with other like-minded choreographers and artists. It was at that time, when she began her lifelong research into the solo form. Only, in order to tour dance works and pay her portion of the bills, as solos were unpopular and dance company were expensive to maintain, she developed a system of performing her *Ten Circle Dances*, published group choreographies, by being in residence in a community with nothing but herself and the choreographic instructions. She would arrive in a new location and lead anyone who wanted regardless of training to perform on the spot. In the end there would be no audience, simply and purely participants.

Over the years, Hay evolved her research practice from teaching large group choreography with untrained dancers over long periods of time and distilling those laboratory workshops into her solo choreography to providing a communal commissioning platform for multiple dancer/choreographers. Participants receive a solo choreographed by Hay during an intensive retreat with subsidies crowd-funded from each of their unique communities. The latter, called the Solo Performance Commissioning Project, ran for fourteen years annually ending in 2012. The participants pool their resources and collectively invest to purchase the rights to perform one of Hay's solos. They leave the ten-day retreat to return to their home support systems, enriched by Hay's coaching and group facilitation, and encouraged

by a new network of peers and potential partnerships for future shared performance opportunities around the world.

Hay has developed several strategies to disseminate her dances to generations of dance makers through community-building support systems which expand the visibility of her works throughout the world. She employs deliberate language with rich word-based choreographic directions and has generously “dis-attached” herself from vetting the final product of a commissioned solo by passing along the tools necessary to facilitate the authorship of the solo to its new owner. Hay eloquently establishes the methods for fulfilling her choreographic scores for each individual dancer who commits to her working conditions. In the words of Britain’s Independent Dance co-director Fiona Millward, Deborah Hay’s choreography is riddled with “antidotes for habits that no longer serve you” (Edmunds). Hay wishes to give each performer the tools necessary to prepare them from inside the performance of the work and from the outside within their community in order to share the choreography in performance.

Her constant grassroots efforts to provide platforms for her performances have created peer networks of artists interested in her radical practices, establishing a safe environment for experimentation and research. Hay is a generous teacher and strategic organizer who has received several awards throughout her career. In 2007 when honored with a BAXten Award, choreographer Juliette Mapp presented Hay by recognizing her contributions,

Your experimental work has remained alive and contemporary over four decades, inspiring your colleagues and peers and now – new generations of choreographers and performers. Your sustained commitment and your willingness to change course provides an example for others. Your articulate writing on the body and dance has had a profound impact on the field.

Her lifelong process of creating art works in community has strong repercussions: individual empowerment, synergistic resourcefulness, liberation from/subversive of main systems of dance dissemination and distribution—all embedded into every cellular inch of her artistic contributions.

BodyCartography Project – Empathy

Building off of community (the macro) to reveal the individual (the micro), sourcing the choreographic material for performances through improvisations and somatic research conducted in the studio with their dancers, Olive Bieringa and Otto Ramstad of BodyCartography Project have made the idiosyncratic results of their explorations the aesthetic of their dances. Somatic training techniques (specifically Body-Mind Centering) nurture the whole person, from their place in society to the

internal bodily systems that keep them alive. Often used by dancers to strengthen their alignment and prolong their capacity and career, somatically-sourced movements reveal relationships between the physical, the cognitive and the emotional landscapes in all of us. This inside-out generative method facilitates empathetic responses in the viewers whose mirror neurons record the visual experience as their own. Unlike viewing great feats of athleticism such as acrobatics or ballet, somatic vocabulary is amplified to a potentially unrealistic state in performance but ultimately stems from a common ground. For BodyCartography Project, tapping into presence is placed above external form; the performers must show up in an authentic manner each moment of the live performance, being vulnerable to their surroundings and receptively spontaneous with fellow performers and audience members within the framework of the piece.

The embodiment of movement vocabulary in dance research, development and performance has a profound communicative quality. By using shared choreographic prompts in rehearsal, performers develop bonds with one other as well as a deeply felt personal experience. Within somatic training philosophy, the body is never objectified but instead is appreciated for its emotive capacities which “illustrate... that human experience is multifaceted and reveals itself in complicated twists and turns that constantly spiral back to pick up new information” (Miller 266). It is through actions that the dancers excavate their experiential consciousness and offer this awareness as the conduit to movement inhabitation. The felt reality of the somatic body in motion summons many senses in the viewer’s own body and that experience and energetic response can recall magic. Artists like Bieringa and Ramstad who privilege the body’s intelligence over structural and choreographic hierarchy are more able to break compositional rules by following the natural narrative derived from the performers’ organic presence with knowledge and acceptance of all their multiple meanings and significances.

Somatic training also creates a heightened state of perception. The bodily awareness extends to the surrounding environment and performers establish a gaze that invites being observed. This behavior encourages the audience to actively participate in directing their focus on aspects of the performance, from the angles in body shapes to the pressure of weight being transferred in locomotion. Along with this attention to viewing, the observer removes judgment from their experience while being acutely aware of the information being shared in the moment. Viewers are able to bring their whole selves to the experience during performances as they become engaged with the dance material live.

Somatic influences also propose that audiences remove the assumptions they carry into spectatorial experiences. This ability to refresh ones expectations prior to a performance brings everyone inside the shared moment. This preparedness translates to creating a whole of the entire performance: audience members, performers,

architecture, reactions and sense of time. By raising the awareness of movement patterns and opening up possibilities, new choices are offered as potentially more effective communicators. The elasticity of the entire creation as it encompasses everything unifies us and validates our individuality. This is how the spiritual, a powerful connection that reminds us of our humanity, can reenter our busy lives. Inclusive behaviors are exercised by establishing a creative practice based in somatic techniques. Transitions in life are more apparent. Life is more fluid and theater more real. When somatic awareness is woven into the fibers of a performance, the creative process strengthens the community within the cast of performers, their awareness of the audience expands this community and feeds energy back to the cast in performance. Their movements and actions reinforce the empathetic feedback loop and the logic within the performance is shared and ultimately, understood.

luciana achugar – Dialogue

Originally from Uruguay, luciana achugar came of age during the downtown boom in New York City's contemporary dance scene when emotions and exhibiting pleasure were disregarded in favor of complicated dispassionate choreography. Today her choreographic research and performances are rooted in the body's ability to feel pleasure and create sensations. Expanding these notions in order to build a palpable connection with the audience is one of luciana achugar's primary concerns. When coaching her dancers, she immediately reminds them of the potential the audience brings to the art form. The dancers rehearse in a true state of feeling and sensing so that viewers are able to pick up on the felt sensations brought to life on stage.

The beginning of each choreographic work starts with a conversation between achugar and her dancers. In response to her Marxist upbringing, achugar, a self-proclaimed labor equity supporter, feels it is necessary to be completely transparent about the financial opportunities and limitations for the current production. She treats each of her dancers equally, taking into consideration their needs and contributions in the creation of the work. She deliberately has chosen to work with all-female casts in reaction to the dance field being flooded with women and disproportionately males are favored in dance productions. By choosing women as collaborators and the female form as the vehicle of investigation, she provides more opportunities to women and reclaims the feminine as a site of productivity, pleasure, and creativity.

By establishing a fair working environment, the labor and equality of her dancers' rights are at the forefront of the choreographic material in achugar's performances. The privileging of each of their contributions to the dance, the spirit of collective consciousness achugar promotes includes the audience as they become part of the live experience of her dances. Unifying gestures, whether it is unison movements, identical factory uniform smocks, repetitive actions, and ritualistic energies, explore

the individual within a community. As she explores what is universal, each of the dancers becomes more distinct and valued as a unique contributor to the whole.

Her working relationship elevates the female and flattens the single-choreographer company model. Strategies from within her group choreographic works to date have involved the audience in the final productions by sharing verbal cues that the dancers are inhabiting, inviting the viewer to imagine those same motivations, by moving through the audience not just in front of but between and behind the audience, using ritualistic repetitious movement sequences that establish patterns and that are useful in engaging the viewers by revealing the logic of the composition.

The boldness she demonstrates with her determination around expression of emotion, exposing female distinctiveness on stage, does not diminish the innovations of the artistic rigor or her directorial contributions. It is selfless and courageous to present such fragile states of being in performance in the earnest and optimistic fashion that is her calling. She has created choreographic structures for her performers in which their vulnerability is never a liability but a true strength and vehicle for dialogue. This felt generosity is palpable to viewers and can lead to new appreciation for meaning as Deborah Jowitz, Village Voice dance critic notes, “If I were to cede my ability to construct a sentence and moan my way down the page in syllables, I might better convey the visceral response [achugar’s] work induces.” Without removing the performance from the venues where they exist, achugar has heightened the connection of those involved by developing vibrational movement language, compositional phrasing with transparent motivations, and inclusive and equitable practices inside the rehearsal process to prepare for the stage experience.

Through dance we learn to become sensitive to movements, nuance, and subliminal body language. Performance- and dance-artists who acknowledge observers as willing intellectual, emotional and spiritual participants, and who invite audiences to be an extension of the performance itself start their creative process with the audience’s potential in mind. By defining a value system above their form, their creative foundation finds aesthetic solutions to move their political priorities forward. Their hope is to communicate intentions and perform an interdependent world. Dance’s gift to us is the deconstruction of any Cartesian notions, the re-assimilation of our mind and body connection and its inherent intelligence, and an embodied wholeness. Dance is a body-centric art form which fundamentally aspires to join physical and energetic exchanges between humans. Bodies in movement create tones and textures. The space around the dance provides tension and landscape. Audience members are somatically inclined to receive meaning in proximity to actions. Within the role of curator, the field of presenting contemporary and experimental dance is open to a new heightened awareness and reevaluation of the best practices we have inherited and are currently employing to bring dance to a public. We have started to embrace a new sense of discipline and questioning of the terms that were constructed long ago.

We have identified opportunities to support the live experience with external methods to engage dance audiences. Now it is time to evolve our practice to be inspired by the works of the artists we hold true and create supportive structures from the inside out, starting with the art.

From inside the performing arts presenters' circle, what we are asking of ourselves and for others is to join in, to collectively imagine and discuss new approaches ensuring the livelihood of the art forms we serve. The practices at play are open to lovingly dismantle the traditional setting and restructure the residual effects to be present and ready for the future. As Nicolas Bourriaud writes:

In order to invent more effective tools and more valid viewpoints, it behoves us to understand the changes nowadays occurring in the social arena, and grasp what has already changed and what is still changing. How are we to understand the types of artistic behavior shown in exhibitions held in the 1990s, and the lines of thinking behind them, if we do not start out from the same situation as the artists?

New leadership in the arts speaks differently about innovation and risks. Recently Tim Griffin was interviewed and he mentioned, "that a lot of folks across the board are increasingly aware of the conventionality of their endeavor, of fitting the models that exist. And you can't just conceive of the inconceivable. You have to take a gamble, to allow that possibility to exist" (Evans 5). Imagination is an active pursuit and needs to be exercised. There is no discovery without the acknowledgement and willingness to fail. Health and wellness language is being cultivated and appropriated in the business world. Researcher and Ted Talk sensation Brené Brown, who has made breakthroughs digging around personal psychology to find the root of shame, explains that the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change, is vulnerability. The only thing that cures shame is empathy. It is time we let go of the past and move forward together into the future of performing arts integration and collective personal growth.

I believe a boundary-ridden escape from daily grind, using a variety of tension creating devices such as existing architecture and invented instructions, could set the stage for events to layer within an environment. Now how can a space become tactile? How can a room be anthropomorphized? Works should not necessarily neatly fit into the settings they are performed in. Opportunities and limitations can become clearer in awkward placements and participation more obvious, while edges become softer potentially. Vantage points must be various: can greater distances expose patterns and increase insights into the craft, while proximal immersion lead to reflexive transformations?

Intellectual perspectives must be considered too, from the deliberately informed to the happily empty-minded. New York's MOMA PS1 curator Peter Eleey defines his process of working with artists as a consideration of:

What kind of curator they need me to be. I try very hard not to have a particular style. It's a process of paying very close attention to someone and intuiting things about that person—from the time you spent with them, from the work that you know, from what you know of them over time—and trying to figure out how to be a conduit for the best public presentation of their work.

Eleey's articulation of starting from nothing and being open to being informed from the individual artistic processes is a clue. Acknowledging the use of intuition as a tool in the curator's arsenal also brings us closer to strengthening the empathetic potential in public dance performances. In a recent *New York Times* article about socially engaged art, the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts' director Kristina Van Dyke remarked, "To me art is elastic. It can respond to many different demands made on it."

Where is our flexibility and collegial trust to reinvent the conditions in which we do our work? Building off of Nicolas Bourriaud's 1998 concept of *relational aesthetics* could an existing environment be accommodating so that it is "the actual event that curates the work, not the other way around." According to Mathias Augustyniak of the design duo M/M (Paris), "there is no such place called art or culture but it's all interwoven." Could flattening the hierarchy between performances, art works, and creative interventions of different production scales enable interchangeability between audience and performers and solidify a cultural integrity?

Invitational language needs to consider and be designed to encourage social encounters, with innuendos that heighten senses and activate one's curiosities. Time that stretches around syllables and sharpens to find moments to wander and wonder will interrogate from the inside out and discover from the outside in. "When we are talking about complex communication between two people—inter-human situations—everyone knows that the more indirect communication is, the more effective the message." Artists who value and prioritize generous layering of meaning inside their works and invite us in cellularly and spiritually, affect change physically. The musician and poet, Michael Stipe shares:

It is my belief that memory is our only real contribution to the universe after our death. Our memories, however banal or meaningful, gathered throughout our lifetime, go on to become the fuel, the powers the energy that allows the universe to be as vast and as fantastic as we imagine it is.

Muscles in our bodies contain our memories. Dancers tap into the potency of movements. Everyone's body is the antenna to understanding movement in conversation, in film, on stage. Our mirror neurons bring a dancer's embodiment of space, time, actions, and shapes directly to the audience and our past is released from watching their execution in the present. Our civilized society has placed barriers and doubt in our cellular comprehension of bodies in motion. Bringing back an

embodied permission of full consciousness as an observer will bring acceptance in this world as understanding the complexity of our very human nature is innate in tuning into the frequency of dance. Outspoken and ever-evolving choreographer Tere O'Connor confirms that "choreography eschews singularity of meaning by its very nature" (O'Connor 12). And at the end of the day, what are we left with are our experiences. Eley continues to explain what concerns him about curating is that, like a dinner party, "there is nothing left." And:

Like a dinner party where you hope that it is a great dinner party and you have seated everyone well and the conversation is lively, but at the end of it, apart for some dirty dishes, there is just what people remember from that evening... [that] goes back out into the world.

When we turn to ourselves to be present, we also commit to finding the solutions together. Science is mapping empathy, artists are tapping into this understanding, and we are responsible to adjust and evolve.

I imagine future performances that are as small as a thought and as big as the sky, and with no hesitations. That there would be time to reflect with drifting layers and artistic options bumping into one another, just as there should be no real obstacles in life. Brown writes:

Vulnerability is courage. It is about the willingness to show up and be seen in our lives and in those moments when we show up, those are the most powerful meaning making moments of our lives even if they don't go well, they define who we are.

As audiences show up and participate, make meaning, and lasting memories, we too need to be present to experience the work we do in order to feel the meaning and execute the needs of the art works in public presentation. It will be messy and crystal clear all at once. We need to do this work together. "Making manifestos engages the thinker-practitioner; and in this sphere, the thinker-performer is by no means a contradiction in terms. Art and thought are not incompatible after all" (Danchev xxvi). So I hope this revolution will be thoughtfully embodied, vulnerable, communal, and crowdsourced for our "contemporary condition of overabundance" needs curation and we can't do it on our own.

The three artists/artist collaborations share the following overlapping values: They flatten hierarchies, honor individual contributions, build empathy between participants, and generously offer new opportunities and choices for engagement. In order to mirror those philosophies on the presenting side, for example, what if empathy, building and supporting live dance performance, was our goal? How would we promote and display performances differently? If we were to act intentionally with similar priorities, would we make different choices? By focusing on and researching artists who consciously and intuitively create systems and strategies to engage their audiences, what are our responsibilities and opportunities to do the

same? Artists lead rigorous creative research established through choreographic choices. With that knowledge accessible, how can the conditions to present dance to publics mirror the artistic intentionality that goes into the development of a choreographic work? Could they be customized to match? Language's expressivity can extend not only the invitation to watch but also the effect of experiencing the artwork. It is time to take advantage of the choices and opportunities a presentational platform gives all of us with these artists as our guides.

I challenge us to ask these questions and start from the art works, using the tools we have available in new ways. What if empathy was our goal? How could the meanings of the word *spontaneity* become principles in which we establish a live art experience that is equally empowering for an artist as well as an observer/participant?

I personally promise to embody my curatorial practice with these priorities and engage in conversation with my peers from this day forward. As I perceive abundance and opportunity, my approach changes. I engage my field as a whole being. I pledge to perform this shift in consciousness until it reveals new methods.

Notes

*Thanks to my classmates at ICPP (class of 2013).

°Americans for the Arts' Arts Index, a searchable website database which tracks arts participation by districts and calculates corresponding findings in order to anticipate the needs of the arts in every community across the nation released the 2012 report in which the data confirmed the trend that more people want to be personally engaged while experiencing the arts and increasingly consume arts via technology and value diversity. Audiences are still very much committed to the arts and cultural experiences however are avoiding traditional models of delivery. On the Arts Index blog, Stephanie Riven calls our field to collective action:

After reviewing the long list of downward trends provided by the Index, we as arts leaders need to create a new list that expands the core strategies [setting and communicating a vision, developing Collective Impact as a core strategy, and establishing a commitment to community],

to include:

the following:

– Putting aside our own agendas and our individual needs to be the authority in the room.

- Taking more steps toward visionary and innovative thinking at the national, state, and local level.
- Acknowledging that “survival” is not enough.
- Taking risks to avoid the status quo.
- Making a commitment to continuous dialogue.
- Seeking collaborative learning experiences geared towards new options and potential for our sector.

I wrote this proposal as part of my studies at the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance and invite any feedback you may have. Special thanks to my advisor Thomas Lax for his encouragement. I hope you enjoy reading!

Walker Art Center is a NPN Partner of the National Performance Network (NPN). Michèle Steinwald was supported by the NPN Mentorship and Leadership Initiative to attend ICPP. Major contributors of NPN include the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Ford Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts (a federal agency), MetLife Foundation, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation. For more information: www.npnweb.org.

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