Choreographics: Dance in Post-War

American Poetry

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2022

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

This work was supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/L503848/1) through the White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities

Acknowledgements

There are a number of people to whom I owe thanks for their support throughout my PhD. Firstly, I would like to thank Dr Michael Kindellan for his generosity in giving so much time and guidance throughout the process of producing this thesis. I am sincerely grateful for his ongoing support and enthusiasm for my project, and for helping me to keep pushing my work further. Secondly, I would like to thank Dr Carmen Levick for her invaluable time and advice.

I would also like to thank my friends and family for their encouragement and support, as well as my fellow PhD students in the School of English. I wish to pay particular thanks to my friend and fellow PhD student, Cora James, for her endless support and advice. It has meant so much to have someone to share every high and low with along the way.

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of the White Rose College for the Arts and Humanities.

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Abstract

Dance remains one of the most overlooked art forms, despite its vast history, and is still frequently left out of discourse concerning the artistic innovation and advancement of the post-war American avant-garde. Through my study of the works of Charles Olson, Frank O’Hara, and Jackson Mac Low, however, I will argue that dance was of signal importance to avant-garde experiment and invention of this period, undergoing its own metamorphoses of aesthetic styles and practices, and providing important inspiration to the poets as they carved out their own literary revolutions.

Through both close readings of poems written by each of the poets, as well as contextualising their respective poetic projects within the artistic collaborative communities that they operated within (Black Mountain College; The New York School; The Judson Dance Theatre and Fluxus), this thesis explores the influence dance had on the formal and aesthetic organisation on the work of each poet. In each case, ‘dance’ is understood as an art form that operates with the dual functions of ‘choreography’, that is, a form of ‘dancing writing’, or notation, on one hand; and on the other hand, performance, as the live event of ‘realising’ choreography through movement.

By further situating each poet in relation to their dance contemporaries – Charles Olson with Merce Cunningham; Frank O’Hara with George Balanchine; Jackson Mac Low with Simone Forti – this thesis reveals what I term a ‘poetics of dance’ in which verse is organised to emulate the dynamic qualities and structures of dance, and a ‘choreographic poetics’, in which poetry is produced according to the compositional and structural processes of dance choreography, across the works of these poets.

Part One: Introduction

Poetry and Dance in the Collaborative Communities of the Post-War Avant-Garde:

Charles Olson, Frank O’Hara, and Jackson Mac Low

For Charles Olson, Frank O’Hara, and Jackson Mac Low, dance was a means of ordering their human experiences and expressing their poetic sensibilities and practice. These poets looked to dance as a model for poetry in order to centre movement and kinesthetics in their literary works. In particular, the writers addressed in my thesis took a formal, aesthetic interest in dance and literalised it through the collaborative networks of their artistic communities. That is, through engaging in interactive readings, performance becomes a direct product of this interdisciplinary engagement across poetics and dance, rather than simply as material of inspiration for their written works. It is in the creation and performance of dance as an extension of poetry within the communities explored here that the key difference between inspiration and collaboration lies. In other words, dance was more than simply something these poets wrote about. Although it did make up the content of some of their work, my thesis aims to show that theories and practices of dance are in fact in some ways constitutive of their respective poetics, contributing components integral to both their formulation and realisation. By reading dance and poetry alongside one another in a mid-century American context, I will examine the historical and conceptual relationships connecting these two art forms in order to describe and interpret their connections.

In particular, the body, as the medium of dance, became the key figure through which the poets could connect the internal sensations of movement with the external space of their environment. As Michael Davidson observes, “poets in the United States have been especially sensitive to the poetics of embodiment.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Davidson writes that:

many poets of the 1950s and 1960s returned to Whitman’s eroticized version of embodiment and to Williams’s poetics of immanence. The new aesthetic was launched in the mid-1950s […] and solidified through the appearance of Donald Allen’s 1960 anthology, *The New American Poets* […]. The idea of the poem *as* body or as direct expression of psychic and physiological ratios characterizes one dominant mode of poetry during this period forged around the authenticity of expression guaranteed by the signifying body.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Whilst Olson, O’Hara and Mac Low all looked to dance as the reference point for this poetic expression, and each utilised the body as the primary tool in this interdisciplinary innovation, the modes of each poet’s execution of this differs in style and form. For instance, Olson is concerned with the physiological body, explored in his work through theories of proprioception and the nerve patterns that take place within the body to enact movement. His work traces the reciprocal relationships between physiology and poetic composition. O’Hara, on the other hand, is concerned with the aesthetic body, and perceives beauty as interconnected with movement. He explores dance across his work through a gestural poetics in which the syntax and rhythms of his verse emulate the internal impulses and sensations of movement, in turn creating a sense of the poem being always in motion. Mac Low, conversely, is concerned with the political body, liberated from the author-centric subjectivity inherent to language.

Each poet conceives of poetics in ways that are identical to how they conceive of ‘the body’, organising their verse via their respective understanding of how the body moves through the world. For Olson, dance was in some sense an archaeological act of recovery of a lost cultural history and means of archiving/remembering within society. He writes in his dance-play ‘Troilus’, for instance, “We in the West have so lost the syllables of the dance, the fingers and the toes and grass-blade shifting of the body, that it may not be obvious that such dance as here imagined taps sources of power in movement we may very much need again to know.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Dance, then, was a means through which to develop a body of knowledge in Olson’s view. For O’Hara, the dancer served as an aspirational figure of poise and wisdom that the poet endeavoured to emulate in his verse. For example, he iconises the graceful ballerina figure on stage with an air of both compelling command and ethereal vivacity:

She floats she steps

automatically correct, then suddenly

she is alive up there and smiles.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This idealised image of the dancer, an aesthetic body both graceful and charismatic, is a view into O’Hara’s aspirations for his own poetics, striking a continual balance between self-reflective poise and energetic bounding. The dancer thus served as both compositional muse and collaborative partner in the works of these three poets, and speaks to their attempts to balance creative impulse and choreographic notation. As one of Mac Low’s *The Pronouns* poems suggests:

Then – making her stomach let itself down

& giving a bit or doing something elastic

& making herself comfortable

She lets complex impulses make something.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Writing instruction for pure dance,[[6]](#footnote-6) Mac Low removes any cultural-specific reference points, or literary devices, in order to explore the body in motion, interacting with the world and its surroundings free of any loaded or leading language. In this sense, for Mac Low, dance allows the body to ‘speak’ for itself: its ‘complex impulses make something’.

Whilst my thesis is primarily a literary project, mapping this interrelationship between the two art forms also requires individual analysis of dance in its own right. In each chapter, I analyse the specific practices of dancers contemporary to each poet as a means of developing a rounded view of both dance and poetry, separately, within the given collaborative community, in order to establish connections between them. In Chapter One, I focus my dance analysis on the career of postmodern pioneer, Merce Cunningham. Cunningham sought to subvert the narrative, emotively symbolic styles of modernist choreographers such as Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham by re-balleticising technique and developing choreography out of the body’s natural impulses. In keeping with this objective, Cunningham would revise the choreography of each dance according to the specific styles and strengths of each new performer, and in so doing destabilises any notion of the possibility of a single prevailing choreography being in existence.

George Balanchine, the choreographer explored in Chapter Two, also adapted his dances depending on who was performing it at any given time. In his role as the central figure of the New York Ballet Company, Balanchine innovated an American ballet style that privileged virtuosic ability and dynamic speed and energy, as well as adopting non-balletic styles such as jazz into his productions, seeking to challenge and subvert the European balletic traditions. Chapter Three takes as its focus the post-modern dancer and choreographer Simone Forti, who had been involved with early Fluxus happenings, and later with the Judson Dance Theatre. Forti was at the forefront of composing dances that stripped movement of both grand aesthetic flare and technical precision, instead focusing on ‘pedestrianised’ movement, such as walking and running, that most commonly relied on performers fulfilling mundane tasks set out in written form, and often included the use of ‘everyday’ props like ropes or children’s toys. In each of these three examples of post-war avant-garde dance practitioners, their respective modes of choreography are complementary to the poets writing contemporary to them. For instance, in their most basic tendencies, Olson and Cunningham both produced work organised out of the physiological processes of the body; O’Hara and Balanchine sought to create works that spring to life with urgent speed, combining gestural motifs from both high and low culture; Mac Low and Forti shared an investment in chance and pre-determined methodologies rooted in task-based instruction.

Just as I aim to give space to dance within the conversation of the arts, I also wish to highlight the ways in which some of the most significant poetic advancements of this period can and should be re-framed and re-interpreted through their close connection to the poets’ contemporaries of the dance world. Where previously the work of these poets has been linked to painting and sculpture – art forms whose embodied plasticity *has* impinged irrefutably upon these poets’ thinking about movement, the body and writing, as I’ll also discuss – or their poetics traced to notions of breath and musical rhythms, I argue that these characteristics of embodied plasticity all have equally important corollaries in a poetics of dance.

As such, it remains a clear intention of this thesis to retrieve and make available for literary critical discourse some recognition of dance’s consequence. Despite the relative invisibility of dance in the twentieth-century context, my work fits within an emergent field of concern. For example, in her 2013 book *Literature, Modernism and Dance*, Susan Jones asserts that the “reciprocal relationship between literature and dance represents one of the most striking but understudied features of modernism,” arguing that where music, painting, film, as well as the relationship between modernism, technology and the body, have all frequently been addressed in academic scholarship, dance has been neglected despite extensive collaborations with literary artists.[[7]](#footnote-7) Dance found its place in artistic exchanges of this period largely due to its own revolution away from traditional dance forms, towards a variety of new, distinguished, ‘modern dance’ styles. This evolution in dance occurred simultaneously to the modernist literary evolution.[[8]](#footnote-8) Significantly, Jones asserts that:

the dialogue between literature and dance at times constituted the very substance of discussion during the modernist period. As literary aesthetics disrupted traditional assumptions about narratology, poetics, and historiography writers sought modes of representation to express more adequately what they perceived to be a disjunctive ‘modern’ subject, whose experience of consciousness, of identity, of the passage of time and memory was above all sceptical.[[9]](#footnote-9)

That is, out of shared aesthetic concerns across the two art forms around discussions of gender and the body, language and experimentation, anthropology and modern technologies such as photography and film, grew a reciprocal relationship in which important advancements in one art form catalysed experimentation and innovation in the other.[[10]](#footnote-10) The modernist environment of collaborative experiment and exchange that Jones investigates in her work provides an insightful view of the interdisciplinary culture that directly preceded and informed the post-world war two artists of this thesis.

In particular, the modernist emphasis on process, both in terms of the socialised, collaborative context of art works, and the methodology of creation, rather than product or art object, provided the shift in thinking about art production that brought performance arts such as dance into conversation with literature. Conducting a reading of dance in the poetry of Marianne Moore, Aurore Clavier offers a helpful perspective on the ideas and questions raised in such a project:

Moore does not only write about dance, but also *with* it, *through* it, and sometimes also, *against* it, in the sense that dance always seems to fascinate and escape her writing at the same time. If indeed it only really exists in the ‘here and now’ of an ethereal performance, can it really be ‘written’, entrapped and fixed within (seemingly) more rigid lines? If the dancer’s body operates the synthesis between the work of art, its creative process, and its author, can it survive once it’s become fragmented, abstracted, mediated (sometimes multiply), by another’s hand? And how, in turn, does writing get transformed in the process […] which so frequently oscillates between movement and stasis, natural flow and stylisation, spontaneous expression and formal restraint, prose and poetry? Does her treatment of dance not reveal porous lines within her own writing, and more generally between kinds of artistic performances? Are dance and writing as antithetical as they appear to be?[[11]](#footnote-11)

Here, Clavier speaks directly to the sense, or essence, of dance that I identify in the poetic works written about in this thesis. It is equally true of Olson, O’Hara, and Mac Low that their poetics look to dance to inform the rhythms and formal qualities of their verse, writing both with and through the impulses and energies of the body in motion, and in some sense *against* dance’s evasive nature, resisting its disappearance through language. The differences between both the motivations and methods of each poet’s engagement with dance exemplifies the diverse nature and possibilities of the media, as well as the difficulty of being able to represent dance through language, with all its complexities and contradictions, in its entirety. The questions raised by Clavier’s writing about the interdisciplinary, interconnected nature of dance and poetry in Moore’s work take on further complexities when applied to the works produced by poets who not only took influence from dance, but actively and interactively engaged with choreographers and dancers. In these collaborative dynamics, poetry and dance are equally transformed. The dancing body and the written line each enact writing and reading through the creative act, translating and responding to one another as they come into being.

My thesis seeks to explore the ways each discipline informs the other, how these interactions are conducted, and what effect this exchange has on the individual works, as well as the effect this interrelation has on how we read and interpretate the poems. However, through the very act of interdisciplinary analyses, my thesis raises the question: how do we write about dance? Crucially, I make a distinction between writing *about* dance, such as in Edwin Denby’s dance criticism, and ‘writing dancing’, wherein the poetic composition of Olson, O’Hara, and Mac Low comes out of choreographic practices. Both in terms of scholarly criticism and the poetics of dance that I examine here, to write about dance is to endeavour to capture that which cannot be wholly fixed into the static signs of language. As Hutchinson Guest writes of the long history of attempts at graphing movement, “the three fundamental requirements – recording complicated movement accurately, recording it in economical and legible form, and keeping up with continual innovations in movement – left dance notation in a state of flux, incapable of steady growth for centuries.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Dance, as embodied movement, is the hardest art form to ‘fix’ into writing. However, the term ‘choreographic’ encodes an interstice between the two physical processes of writing and dancing, marking the two practices as intrinsically interlinked.

*Choreography*

The interrelations between poetry and dance within the artistic communities of Black Mountain College, the New York School, and the Judson Dance Theatre, are examined in the thesis through five key themes: choreography, performance, community, collaboration, and interdisciplinarity. Fundamental to each of these themes are the processes of reading and interpretation, processes which in each case define the relationships between the poets and dancers studied, as well as the theoretical framework of this thesis.

The dance-poetics nexus has tended to be overlooked across criticism precisely because the ontology of dance is fundamentally textual and reliant on documentation. As Hutchinson Guest argues, dance “is more complex than music because it exists in space as well as time and because the body itself is capable of so many simultaneous modes of action. Consequently, the problems of formulating a movement notation that can be easily written and read are numerous.”[[13]](#footnote-13) In this sense, the ontology of dance is at once, in terms of performance, most immediate and yet, in terms of writing, highly evasive, and as such susceptible to the exigencies of performance. Beyond dance and poetry’s complementary relationship, this structural condition leads to the central question of ‘choreography’: to dancing writing, and to writing dancing.

Significantly, it was an unfamiliar phrase in dance and theatre lexicon in America until Balanchine’s 1936 production *Before On Your Toes*. Where choreographers had always been credited using the simple phrase ‘Dances by X’, for Balanchine’s work on the musical-comedy he requested the programme instead read ‘Choreography by Balanchine’, and from this point the term came into common use.[[14]](#footnote-14) In making this request, Balanchine clearly made a distinction between ‘choreographer’ and simply ‘dance-maker’, one that is central to the framework of my thesis. Encoded within this distinction is the transition from score to performance, in which the death of the literary author, at the point of departure from the page onto the stage, brings into being what might be called the author of the dance. Where dance-making perhaps insinuates the action of organising pre-determined movements into a dance, ‘choreography’ suggests an additional process of creation, namely through writing, or notation, and is thus linked to notions of publication and the capacity to be archived.[[15]](#footnote-15) Choreography includes writing as an integral part of the processes of composing and performing dances.

In Gabriele Brandstetter’s definition, choreography “is an attempt to retain as a graph that which cannot be held: movement. On the one hand, ‘choreography’ means the writing of movement as notation; on the other hand, it also refers to the text of a composition of movement. Choreography, as the writing *of* and *about* movement, as preserved memory, thus always includes something of a requiem.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Choreography relies on its other, performance, for this survival, however, and thus the trace left behind by the moving body may only survive through the secondary act of reading: “And this choreography is not the transcription of a previously written pattern of movement, but rather a movement of reading and writing in one.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The choreographer’s work is inscribed, and thereby immortalised and recorded. In Kélina Gotman’s definition, however, choreography:

may be understood as an apparatus of articulation investigating the part movement plays in structuring how we see, talk about, or embody relationships between order and disorder, historically and aesthetically. In this sense, choreography takes place between language and archive, where the archive is embodied as well as written or notated; choreography passes between systems of meaning, serving as an act of translation, at once reinterpretation and reinscription of prior forms, returning to and moving prior systems of order along.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Choreography thus describes the dynamic process involving dancing and writing. This act of translation through choreography is important to my readings of the works between poets and dancers throughout my thesis. The exchange between two artists, and between the two art forms of dance and poetry, comes largely in the form of an active cycle of ‘reinterpretation and reinscription’ of the other. For example, where O’Hara endeavours to translate the kinetic force of the corps de ballet into his verse, and Forti brings Mac Low’s text into realisation through movement, these translational processes are understood in my work as inherently choreographic. The ‘inscription’ that is ‘read’ can be either the dance that is a result of a written text, as in the case of Forti’s work with Mac Low, or a poem that is the result of seeing a dance, as is the case with poems such as O’Hara’s ‘Ode to Tanaquil LeClercq’.

Choreography, as “a perpetual act of reorganisation”,[[19]](#footnote-19) encapsulates the concepts of poetics and dance with which my thesis is concerned, reimagined as practices of writing and reading. As the precise point at which dancing and writing meet, choreography is at the very core of my interdisciplinary analysis as the subject, object, and method of my thesis. Exploring the term’s historical usage and implications in ‘Writing for the Body: Notation, Reconstruction, Reinvention’, Mark Franko writes:

*Choreography*, from the etymological perspective and by virtue of current usage, seems to be a portmanteau word referring to two kinds of action: writing (*graphic*) and dancing (*choros*). As such, the word *choreography* seems to encode a theory of the relation of dance to scriptuality – of writing as movement and dance as text. The theory seems to be that movement originates in the text through which it is initially thought and recorded. But an implication of the theory is that something called *choreography* remains in the wake of its performance.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The choreographic poetics of Olson, O’Hara, and Mac Low work through this duality of writing and dancing that Franko outlines in diverse ways. For Olson, poetic embodiment is paramount to how he formulates his literary works, in which he aims to write, or *graph*, physiological systems and sensations that occur when the body moves. Mac Low, on the other hand, takes the structural formulations of choreography to ‘write through’ a pre-existing text, in which he makes dances out of words, to compose his own poetry. O’Hara, conversely, takes an impressionistic approach to mapping movement into his verse, encapsulating not the proprioceptive sensations of movement, but the kinetic and emotive impulses that motivate a person’s movement. Franko goes on to consider an alternative view of the term ‘choreography’, by acknowledging that:

thanks to the modernist intertwining of dance and poetry, contemporary thought on dance is frequently split between a concept of dance-as-writing and a concept of dance as beyond the grasp of all language, especially written language. The trope of dance-as-writing assumes that one does not go to the [theatre] only to see dancing but also to “read” something called choreography, which is “written” in time and space. There is an argument to be made that choreography exists as a visual component of the dance as it is being performed: the dance itself, independently of its actual performance, has an identity.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In Franko’s terms, the performance of movement in dance is haunted by the ever-present spectre of the ‘text’, of the procedures and notations that must predate its actualisation into space, as the dance. The conceptualisation of this ‘text’ is further complicated when regarded in the context of the interactive processes of reading and performing, acts constitutive of the collaborative communities described in this thesis. Implied in Franko’s claim is the ‘score’ of the dance, the text that is produced prior to performance, yet continues to lives on after the fact as a text in its own right. Forti aimed to resolve this spectral haunting by composing written task-instructions that would serve as choreographic notes for future performers. Cunningham and Balanchine, on the other hand, resist written notation in favour of a combination of graphic score and live rehearsals. In the case of the latter, in which dances are composed in real time and space, through active movement, ‘composing’ a dance requires actual bodies as instruments of inscription. As such, the question raised by Franko, concerning the material identity of ‘choreography’, as separate from performance and not recorded as a text, guide much of my analysis in bringing writing and dancing into stable articulation when a central component of the ‘work’ exists only in immaterial form.

Crucial to the survival of the dance work beyond its fleeting performance is the organisation of analytical codes through which to read dance, and a system of language through which to express this. Frederic Pouillaude describes a “sensory apparatus particular to dance” through which to read it, stating, “a particular physiological configuration of the organs and senses seems in some way to validate, on the basis of facts of nature, the identity of a given artistic practice. If each art relies on a particular sense, dance relies on the kinesthetic.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Originating in the end of the nineteenth century, ‘kinaesthetic empathy’ provides a useful concept for describing common experiences of perceiving other people’s movements as visual images, as well as the subsequent stirring of movement in one’s own body this caused, that otherwise remains difficult to verbalise. In particular, the organisation of dance performance as a sharable event on the stage invites kinaesthetic empathy, in “which an ‘I’ addresses a ‘you’.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Using this model of performance and reception, my own work examines dance in terms that are legible as poetics, as a series of dialogues between the dancer and the dance; the choreographer and the audience; and the dance and its spectator; as well as the dance work and the responding work of the poet. However, in Pouillaude’s positing of ‘kinaesthetic empathy’ as a way of reading dance, he falls short of interpreting a particular code through which to interpret the empathetic sensations experienced by the audience, and thus re-enforces the notion of dance as somehow beyond reach of the reader, transcending the understanding of its audience. Beyond the mere subjective empathising with performed movement, to read dance as an artform, like poetry and painting, necessitates a pre-conceived, universal system of interpretating these embodied sensations.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone adopts a phenomenological framework for interpreting movement that is helpful in understanding the ways in which the active body as artistic medium appealed to the aims of the post-war avant-garde poets. Crucially, Sheets-Johnstone insists, dance calls for a phenomenological reading due to its kinetic nature, and its giving itself to consciousness as both a formed and performed art, characterising the experience of both the dancer and the dance-viewer as a *lived* experience.[[24]](#footnote-24) Furthermore, both the dancing subject and the dance “exist in an *ekstatic* relationship to themselves,” always in motion, always existing spatially and temporally as their own past, present and future, yet never entirely one of these at one moment, and unable to exist apart from one another.[[25]](#footnote-25) In her reading of dance works, Sheets-Johnstone identifies two key abstractions: firstly, “the forms of actual human feeling which are abstracted from their everyday movement in order to be created and presented symbolically”; and secondly, the abstraction of the movement from its everyday context into an expressive form. Through these abstractions, these modes of human feeling come to exist in a new, symbolic context.[[26]](#footnote-26) The task of dance criticism, then, is to interpret these expressive signs through the kinesthetic phenomenon – the experience of the body as it completes movement – as they relate to our lived, human experience.

Force, space, and time are created in a dance through the nature of tensional qualities in the movements. For example, a phrase consisting of soft, linear movements, or quick, powerful aerial movements will create different dynamic qualities, and thus determine the expressive character of a particular dance. Moreover, this enactment of forces creates what Sheets-Johnstone calls a ‘dynamic line’:

This is not an actual line, but ‘line’ in the sense of an ongoing projection of forces from a beginning point. Each dance creates its own dynamic line, a unique qualitative organisation of forces from beginning to end. In each revelation of force a specific tensional quality is projected in a specific qualitative manner. Thus, the basis for the *flow* of force in dance, its dynamic line, its projectional and tensional quality: a sheer force of whatever potency is qualitatively projected, and the manner of its projection will govern its temporality.[[27]](#footnote-27)

For example, the temporal quality (the speed with which a movement is performed) used in an abrupt flex of the elbow, or a sustained extension of the leg, uses force in a way that creates its own “temporal flow of force.”[[28]](#footnote-28) This description of the ‘dynamic line’ of a dance, which itself employs the language of the poetic line, speaks to the poetic prosody I examine in the chapters to follow. Within this idea of the ‘dynamic line’ is a description of the energies that animate both dance performance and poetic composition that are profoundly mutual in their application, and one that terms both art forms as kinds of rhythmic, patterned movement. In particular, both O’Hara and Olson compose the lines of their verse to inscribe the dynamic and temporal qualities of a body in motion, an abrupt short line or sustained, flowing, phrase evoking varying forces of a dance. In their poetics of dance, O’Hara and Olson also adopt a similar framework of relating to, and expressing, the lived experience of movement. In particular, this manifests in their poems serving as the cause of their own occasion, in O’Hara’s case, this being his emotional spontaneity, and for Olson, in physiological rootedness. In each case, this is firmly grounded in a poetics of embodiment. In many ways, this framework for reading dance begins to, but never quite manages, to reach the vocabulary of poetics. My thesis carries these ideas forward into a direct dialogue with the qualities and structures of poetic composition, whereby the poet acts as choreographer, organising the dynamics of the syllable and the line, which are then ‘read’, or interpreted, by the reader in place of the dancer.

So much of human experience and sensation is unspeakable, and it is in this gap that language cannot fill that O’Hara, Olson, and Mac Low turn to movement as the apparatus for both understanding and expressing the world. They ‘move through’ their thoughts, mapping out their ideas through kinetic energies of the body, and they order these movement phrases, through their poetic language, into sequences of syllables and lines. In this sense, the poem acts as a choreographic score as they inscribe and graph movement through the page, producing verse that might be understood, in some ways, as notational. In Olson’s writing, this manifests in the organisation of his poetic lines across the blank space of the page, utilising enjambment and line length to guide the exact breaths and movements of his reader. In O’Hara’s work, the poet writes with the same rhythms as he walks, with playful and campy energy, bounding from one observation to the next. In Mac Low’s poetry, conversely, this notational poetics comes through his diastic writing, in which he uses numeric systems to work through the body of another text, in order to extract singular letters or phrases to compose a secondary work. In this sense, by composing poetry developed from the principles of movement and choreography, the resulting poems can be read as a score of the ‘movements’ executed by the poet in the compositional process. Once this poetic score is completed, it becomes reliant on subsequent interpretation by a new reader-performer. Consequently, through reading the poem, this movement may be retraced, and re-enacted, through performance, or reading, as was the case with Mac Low’s *The Pronouns* being interpreted and performed by Judson dancers, Forti and Trisha Brown.

*Performance*

Alongside ‘choreography’, as both its kin and its other, concepts of ‘performance’ are also central to my work. As the final act of creation in bringing choreography into being, I consider performance as a dual event of both reading and writing. On the one hand, the dancer reads, interprets, and enacts the movements that make up the choreography, and on the other hand, this performance writes a new creation, or experience, into being through the event of performance. Consequently, it is left to the spectator to interpret, or ‘read’, the dances, and in this sense, the performance of the dance work operates in the same way as the published literary text. The performance, in turn, is itself read and interpreted by a new audience. This reading requires aesthetic and theoretical frameworks unique to understanding dance viewing.

Importantly, what is meant here is ‘reading’ in its dual sense, both the literal “event” of reading, as Peter Kivy phrases it, and reading as synonymous with ‘interpretation’.[[29]](#footnote-29) Reading, in the former sense, is an act of performance. Furthermore, performance is also the product of reading in the second sense, a performance ultimately coming out of someone’s interpretation of a score, a text, or even an idea.[[30]](#footnote-30) In his account of the performativity of reading, Kivy outlines the history and cultures of reading, arguing that “until the advent of silent reading, and the spread of literacy, which are relatively recent phenomena, even ‘reading to oneself’ was a performance: either a performance by oneself, if read aloud to oneself, or a ‘being read to’ performance.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Whilst Kivy is addressing specifically eighteenth-century theories of reading, his perception of reading as fundamentally performance-based lends itself to understanding processes of interpretation when ‘dancing’ is understood as a form of writing.

Furthermore, Kivy characterises literature as an ‘imitative’ art, one that tells a story yet relies on an active reading: “Poetry or literature, then, is an ‘imitative’ art in so far as its languages causes to arise in us ideas of the kind we would experience if we were actually perceiving the objects, characters, and events of which the language speaks.”[[32]](#footnote-32) In the choreographic poetics explored in this thesis, each poet is writing as a response to having viewed dance. Consequently, the poems that are produced have an ‘imitative’ effect, which conveys the aesthetics and energies of dance to the new audience of the poem. On one hand, each dance performance is regarded as a form of reading, and on the other hand, a dance performance requires to be read. If dance choreography is inherently an act of writing, then supplementary theorising of codes and systems to read or interpret the work are required as the necessary other to that writing process. To read dance is always, ultimately, to observe embodiment, yet the ephemeral nature of live performance troubles conventional notions of ‘reading’.

A phenomenological reader of dance, as Simon Murray and John Keefe explain it, relies on the idea that the human body is not in space, but of space, and from this principle, believes that we understand the world only by moving through it, re-enacting the sensations and phenomena we encounter within ourselves, on a moment-by-moment basis. Therefore, a person’s relationship with the world is formed not of linguistic signs, but from sensory and mental phenomena. For the phenomenologist, knowledge and understanding originate in, and are reproduced by, our embodied experience of the world. [[33]](#footnote-33) Phenomenology thus privileges practices that foreground the performer’s body, movement and physical expression.[[34]](#footnote-34) In this way, in terms of the arts, that which is labelled ‘theatre’ seems on the surface to be most conspicuously the site of phenomenological investigation and interpretation.

Within this interpretation, ‘kinesics’ is a branch of semiotics that aims to provide a code for interpreting movement in dance by focussing on the performer’s gestures, facial expression, and posture in order to interpret what meaning is intended to be communicated. Whilst each culture will operate with an existing code in which a smile or a frown is understood as part of daily human discourse, a kinaesthetic reading will highlight the ‘gestural fallacy’ of “assuming that a gesture or physical action can be understood as a discrete unit without recourse to a possibly complex range of other signs and contexts.”[[35]](#footnote-35) For example, we know that a smile can communicate a range of meanings, and can be used to convey emotions quite different to what it may, at first-glance, suggest. Kinesis, then, proposes a way of reading the “gestural physicality” of a performance without reducing it to simplistic ‘body language’.[[36]](#footnote-36) In addition to providing a useful lens through which to interpret gestural movement in dance, ‘kinesics’ also lends itself to reading the phenomenological poetics of embodiment of poets such as Olson and O’Hara.

Furthermore, where Balanchine, Cunningham, and Forti all endeavoured to minimise narrative and emotive aspects of dance, relative to their respective cultural and historical moment, it proves useful to adopt a standardised method by which to interpret the subtleties of force and mood displayed in their dances. In Susan Leigh Foster’s *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance,* Foster offers a way of reading the specific dance cultures of the early twentieth century that speaks to my analysis of the literary cultures of the same moment and provides a useful framework for my interdisciplinary approach to reading dance and poetry alongside one another. Foster categorises this particular moment in dance history through its emphasis on dance as the most appropriate means of expression for primal, emotional, and libidinal human experience, as well as its function as an outlet for unconscious and intuitive feelings that are inaccessible to verbal expression.[[37]](#footnote-37) In this attempt to reach the blind spots of verbal art forms, and because of movement’s fleeting nature, dance at this time also evaded language in its works, to the extent that choreographers also seldom spoke about their dances, preferring to leave the choreography to ‘speak’ for itself. However, innovations such as Graham and Cunningham’s in *how* the body is used to convey meaning have necessitated a new mode of interpretation.

This reading must be an active and interactive interpretation of dance via a system of meaning, and she outlines these choreographic conventions by tracing their development from the class and rehearsal space, to the performance itself, as well as by comparing the choreographer’s views on creative process, technique, the body, and expression in their works.[[38]](#footnote-38) Similarly, my thesis examines each choreographer’s pedagogical practices, their ideas concerning technique, the use of the body and expression in their works, as well as their choreographic methods, dance aesthetics, and performance practices. However, where Foster provides a useful overview of the choreographers’ isolated methods in creating dance, my work aims to situate each dancer and choreographer within the broader cultural moment they worked within by placing them in dialogue with their literary peers, and thus tracing their collaborative and interdisciplinary contexts. In addition, my thesis focuses on poets ‘reading’ dances, and in the cases of Mac Low and Olson, of ‘writing’ dances too. Due to dance’s allographic quality, in which there is ‘the dance’, on one hand, and its ‘performance’, on the other hand, the art form itself requires such a dialogue. Within dance is an implicit sociality that Olson, O’Hara, and Mac Low, in their own ways, were interested in incorporating into their poetic practice.

Across my work, I read individual dances both in the broad context of its origin, through the influences and collaborative exchanges of its creator, the processes – both practical and theoretical – used by the choreographer, as well as through dissecting and interpreting the minute details of the qualities, gestures, and phrasing performed. Foster identifies the choreographic conventions that characterise a dance as:

(1) the dance’s frame – how it separates itself from the rest of the world; (2) its modes of representation – how through *resemblance*, *imitation*, *replication*, or *reflection*, the dance refers to the world; (3) its style – how it creates a personal signature for itself; (4) its vocabulary – the individual movements of which dance is composed; (5) its syntax – the principles governing the selection and combination of movements.[[39]](#footnote-39)

This analysis of a dance’s qualities and contexts provides an insightful starting point for my own dance criticism, as well as readily lending itself to be transferred into literary interpretation. Foster’s key for reading dance both reveals the significant crossovers in the structures and qualities of choreography and dance, as well as lending itself as a helpful lens to reading poems. For instance, in my readings of Olson and O’Hara’s poetics of dance, I consider modes of representation, deciphering how the poet resembles and imitates dance to refer back to the art form, as well as to the world more broadly. Style, moreover, is a crucial component to analysing each work of dance and literature in my thesis, particularly when contemplating the ways in which a poet or choreographer creates their own ‘personal signature’ when adapting the work of another. Style takes two forms in the poetic works studied in my thesis, however, as on the one hand each artist established a style particular to themselves as independent creators, and on the other hand, functioned within a shared style, representative of the aesthetic concerns of their respective collaborative communities.

*Community*

Whilst dancing, unlike writing, tends to be a more readily socialised discipline, Frank O’Hara, Charles Olson, and Jackson Mac Low all operated within close-knit collectives in which participation through collaboration, performance, and reading were central to forming the social and artistic bonds of the community. In sharing their work with one another, from the early stages of conception to drafted manuscripts and poetry readings, the groups formed their own audiences made up of fellow writers, musicians, painters, and dancers. Thus, the community network served as the source of both inspiration and reception for its members, and in doing so the framework of that community shaped the work produced within it. As Gerald Bruns frames it: “The avant-garde work emphasises the theatricality that is arguably the condition of all art. […] In the avant-garde the production of the work cannot be separated from the formation of the group, and vice-versa.”[[40]](#footnote-40) In Stephen Voyce’s terms, following the vast cultural shift in the wake of the Second World War in response to the collective global trauma of the Holocaust and fascism, “mid-century poetry advances a very different understanding of *community*,” in which community meant “*not* the absence of structure but the productive invention, multiplication, and arrangement of social formations. For the literary critic, this means tracing the associations between elements of cultural production – actors, materials, technologies, methods, spaces, and texts – in order to determine what sort of social model it invents.”[[41]](#footnote-41) In this sense, the formation of an artistic collaborative community was a *process*, rather than a fixed entity, always in flux, producing itself in motion, and thus evading the anxiety of a fixed identity based on exclusion, reminiscent of the fascism that had defined the recent past.

Instead, these artists created new modes of producing a collective based on a sense of shared individualism and alienation from dominant culture.[[42]](#footnote-42) Ron Silliman marks an important distinction between the two modes that these artistic communities operated under. On one hand, there is ‘the *network*,’ and on the other hand, ‘the *scene*’:

The scene is specific to a place. A network, by definition, is transgeographic. Neither mode ever exists in a pure form. Networks typically involve scene subgroupings, while many scenes (although not all) build toward network formations. Individuals may, and often do, belong to more than one of these informal organizations at a time. Both types are essentially fluid and fragile. As the Black Mountain poets and others have demonstrated, it is possible for literary tendencies to move through both models at different stages in their development.[[43]](#footnote-43)

For the New York School, a communal ‘scene’ was created through shared locations, such as the Cedar Tavern, and later the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church. The Judson Memorial Church similarly provided the necessary locale for a ‘scene’ of interdisciplinary artists to gather and collaborate directly. For Black Mountain, the site of the college itself provided a base for the ‘scene’, whereas community publications such as *Origin* and the *Black Mountain Review* provided a space for the poets to share work and collaborate that was abstracted from the physical setting of a particular place, and thus operated as a ‘network’. In the case of the former, in which a particular setting became the central site for a collaborative community to operate in, this physical setting served to further consolidate the collaborative and communal spirit of each ‘scene’. Physical presence and the live experience of both the processes of creation and the event of performance, and thus in Silliman’s terms, the forming of ‘scenes’ rather than ‘networks’ are required for a poetics of dance that centres embodied movement in its verse.

Both in terms of the communities themselves, and the sites they operated out of, these collaborative communities functioned in line with Foucault’s concept of ‘heterotopia’, which Arabella Stanger argues is fundamentally choreographic.[[44]](#footnote-44) Heterotopia operates through a dialectics of time and space, in which “space is temporal and time is spatial”, and in which “movement is the only constant.”[[45]](#footnote-45) If utopia is a process rather than a thing, heterotopia, as the site of utopia, is equally a process, organised choreographically. Choreography, at its core, produces time and space through the organisation of movement, wrapping both space and time up in its creation, and in turn, both duration and environment are needed for the negation of stillness: “Choreography, then, in organising movement organises something that works negatively. Movement denies stasis.”[[46]](#footnote-46) In the creation of these artistic collaborative communities, the artists who formed both the community and its heterotopian site sought to negate the values and conditions enforced in dominant culture through organisation and movement, to carve out an alternative, utopian, community. By creating and inhabiting this choreographic space, the conditions of its existence are a constant process organised by its creators, allowing the community to create their own boundaries and values outside of normative society.

In particular, it was in the bars and coffee shops in which poets read their latest work, and artists discussed their new ideas, which provided space for these communities to form.[[47]](#footnote-47) Crucially, these communities were formed through the ritual of sharing their individual works with each other, and thus acting as their own audience and critics. Peter Middleton emphasises the significance of these poetry readings to the collective forming, and sharing, of poetic communities, through the example of Ginsberg’s first public reading of ‘Howl’, writing that:

the semantic repertoire of the written text was extended by its performance in several notable ways: by the location of the poem in a particular place within a defined ritual, by the force of the poet’s presence as he read, by the addition of sound to the act of reception, and by the enfolding intersubjective drama generated as the lines were spoken. The author read aloud work conceived and written elsewhere, giving spatial salience to the sound of the language, in surroundings temporarily borrowed as a performance space for poetry, to an audience who experienced some common purposes partially articulated through the poetry itself.[[48]](#footnote-48)

In a poetry reading the experience and meaning of the poem is crucially altered in two ways. Firstly, the collective experience shared amongst the audience and between the audience and poet/reader bares the possibility of new meanings for the poem that is wholly context-specific to that shared, communal experience of the here and now.[[49]](#footnote-49) Secondly, through the physiological experience of hearing the sounds and feeling the vibrations of these sounds, “the entire body resonates with it … The amplification is a bodily process common to all the live performance arts in which the performer uses the bodily directly and the audience ‘delegates its corporeality to the stage.’”[[50]](#footnote-50) Much like the ‘kinesthetic empathy’ experienced by the dance viewer, the embodied experience of live poetry reading connects those present through the collective physiological, and psychological, meaning making of the work shared.

In this sense, for these artistic communities, the acts of writing and reading poetry were both predominantly communal activities, and thus formed an ‘interpretive community’. Crucially, it is the act of reading and interpretation as communal receptivity, more so than writing, that maintains the intimacy between members of the community and exclusion of those ‘out there’, not in the know. In Stanley Fish’s terms, interpretive communities are “made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assured, the other way around.”[[51]](#footnote-51) By reading their work almost exclusively within the communal, performative context of readings and receptions, poetic and artistic collectives sustain the interpretation of their poetry in line with the community’s values, creating an intimate connection between production and reception. For dance collectives like the Judson Dance Theatre, the shared rehearsal space created an ‘interpretive community’ in which choreography was discussed and shared between peers. Rather than one choreographer teaching a dance to the dancers, all of the dancers would perform their works in progress for the input and collaboration of one another. This ‘democratic spirit’ not only helped the group establish their shared socio-political goals, but also their aesthetic and methodological principles.[[52]](#footnote-52) It was by creating a collective interpretive community that actions such as walking across the performance space, or fulfilling a task using a children’s toys were interpreted, and affirmed, as important post-modern works of dance.

Reading, then, is paramount to the creation, function, and maintenance of artistic community. Crucially, moreover, reading is a fundamentally choreographic act. Through the act of reading, the written markers of the text or dance come into being, presented to one’s community for interpretation, and thus into existence in space and time. The process of reading is therefore also a collaborative act, creating an exchange between members of the community that had an additional defining consequence on the communities. In these dynamics, in which production and reception are so intimately linked, the structure of the artistic community held influence on each individual’s work far beyond direct collaboration.

*Collaboration*

Where composition and reading take place within an intimate community, amongst peers who share in the creative process, both the making and deciphering of meaning takes place as a collaborative exchange. The poetry produced by the writers involved in the artistic communities of the New York School, Black Mountain College, and Mac Low’s broader networks across Fluxus and Judson, all explore issues of authorship, both as individual poets and as a collective voice of the given artistic community. In particular, the fragile and at times disappearing status of the individual author came into question throughout the art works of the mid-twentieth century. For the avant-garde poetic communities, collaboration offered a remedy to Barthes’ figure of the single author, in which he argues that, “the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions […]. The *explanation* of a work is sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were … the voice of a single person, the *author* ‘confiding’ in us.”[[53]](#footnote-53) In their questioning of this status of the authorial role, and their striving towards a democratised poetic voice that de-centred the individual, the performance of reading also becomes an increasingly collaborative process. Just as Kivy argues that, “in silent reading of fictional works, I am performer, my reading a performance of the work. It is a silent performance, it is in the head. I am enacting, silently, the part of the storyteller,”[[54]](#footnote-54) both individual readings and meaning-makings of a work, and the collective reading aloud at poetry events, are acts of performance and collaboration. Barthes’ claim that “it is language which speaks, not the author”[[55]](#footnote-55) outlines a model of authorship that is predicated on reading, and is inherently collaborative: “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.”[[56]](#footnote-56) That is, the poet composes the poem for their audience of peers, passes over the work to be read, and it is in this reader-response that the poem comes into being, through their interpretation.[[57]](#footnote-57) The sociality of the circuit, connecting performer and audience, artist and reception, was at times so intimate within these communities that collaboration was inevitable.

Writing in the same year as Barthes’ ‘Death of the Author’, E. D. Hirsch argues that through the interpretive process of reading, which is “by nature two-sided and reciprocal,” the text “is not simply the expression of meaning but also the interpretation of meaning.”[[58]](#footnote-58) In this way, the secondary act of reading and interpretation, which is here termed as a collaboration between writer and reader, is of equal importance to the meaning-making of a text as the primary act of creation. In the case of these collaborative communities, interpretation often meant an artwork being made in response to the primary work, whether directly or indirectly, and often taking form in a different medium to the primary. In this sense, the exchange of works constituted a new form of interactive reading, in which the reader-audience of the first work manifested their interpretation of it into a secondary piece.

Where collaboration occurs in the form of interpretation, this allows for two distinct outcomes: on the one hand, reading, and on the other hand, performance. Where this reading and interpretation leads to the performance of a secondary work, this distinction becomes destabilised. It is in this tension that my evaluation of interdisciplinary collaboration exists, as the difficulty of keeping ideas of reading and performance apart are inherent to the nature of the avant-garde’s artistic principles. That is, the breakdown of any distinction between art and life, and in their institutional critique, both of which exist in many ways through interdisciplinary collaboration. For instance, in the lifecycle of Mac Low’s *The Pronouns: Forty Dances for the Dancers*, the original poem was written as a result of watching Judson dancers in rehearsal, and out of this first poem, dancers went on to choreograph movements in response to the text. This interactive reading-as-creation is thus founded on the dual principles of collaboration and interdisciplinarity. Furthermore, both Olson and Cunningham invested the development of their respective art forms in notions of body intelligence and instinct, taking the organisation of these kinetic impulses as their key role in creation. Crucially, overall, it is through the concept and practice of choreography that this interdisciplinary collaboration operates.

Collaboration defines the shaping of these artistic communities, including how art was produced and the forms this art took. Where some artists worked in close proximity to one another, working side-by-side in the same place and time as part of a ‘scene’, others worked independently on a shared project, creating a ‘network’ of peers. In addition, where some artists collaborated within the same forms and disciplines, many worked across mediums.[[59]](#footnote-59) What characterises collaboration, ultimately, is that “more than one author has a defining role in shaping the text, so that the final work always results from some form of dialogue. This conversation may be highly structured and constrained by particular rules […] or wholly spontaneous and improvisational, but in either case the relationship itself has a defining effect on the work.”[[60]](#footnote-60) It is in this collaborative dialogue, between artists and across artworks, that my study of collaboration takes place. In some cases, such as Olson and Litz’s contributions to ‘the glyph exchange’ at Black Mountain College, the intention and function of collaboration operates in explicit terms, with each artist creating work in response to the other’s work. In other cases, such as amongst the Judson Dance Theatre, collaboration occurs as an intimate exchange, working in both spatial and temporal proximity to one another. Finally, whilst O’Hara did not collaborate directly with Balanchine, he developed his collaborative skills in numerous projects with painters whose primary impetus was ‘action’. In his poetic engagement with dance, however, his intentions were more firmly grounded in the internal, through either his writings as a spectator and admirer of Balanchine’s work, or as the romantic admirer of his partner, Vincent Warren, who was a professional dancer.

The tension of object and event persists through all of these collaborative dynamics, and across art forms, which Mark Silverberg usefully defines as an exemplar of practice, on the one hand, and form on the other:

What I will call *collaborative practice* describes collaboration as an event, highlighting the performative and social interactions that take place when two or more artists work together to produce a text. *Collaborative form*, on the other hand, relates to the dual nature of the composite work where two or more forms – poetry, painting, film, music – are conjoined. While collaborative practices may not always produce collaborative forms (partners may be working in the same form, as in the collaborative poem or novel), they do raise the question of whether we can read the trace of the event in the object. Even when there are not two distinct forms (as in the poem-painting), can collaborative works be said to house two voices, two presences, a living dialogue? […] Rather than try to answer this undecidable question, it may be more important to recognise that one effect of collaboration is to highlight the *tension* between event and object, collaborative practice and collaborative form.[[61]](#footnote-61)

In the collaborative dynamic between dance and poetry that I explore, however, such a distinction between ‘*collaborative event*’ and ‘*collaborative form*’ is broken down through the interdisciplinary nature of working across dance and poetry, as well as through the processes of interpretation. Dance is frequently discussed in terms of its destabilised position between event and object. Where defining dance as an event overlooks its status as an artwork before and after its performance, its inability to be entirely encompassed as a singular product, to be held and archived, equally troubles the notion of a dance object. Whilst theorists such as Kivy and Tanselle conceive literature as baring similar problems, the gap between text and performance is lessened by the shared medium of language in both cases. Dance, on the other hand, is always notated via a translation from performed movement into linguistic or pictorial choreographic score. If the ontology of dance is already difficult to trace precisely, to map the exact role of a dance work in these collaborations, from its initial conception, to its notation, to its performance and subsequence interpretation by its audience, creates further fluidity between its status as event and object. My thesis explores the notion that poetry can be conceived as a kind of choreography, and dance as a form of interpretation, and as such a kind of reading practice. Interpretation, in the sense of both reading and performance, is therefore central to my conceptualisation of the interdisciplinary collaboration between dance and poetry.

The communities I discuss throughout my thesis are ultimately predicated upon the key ethos of collaboration and interdisciplinarity, in which even works produced by individual creators are considered collaborative due to their relation to a wider context of their collective entities. For this reason, I have labelled collectives such as Black Mountain College, the New York School, and the Judson Dance Theatre as ‘collaborative communities’. Crucially, at the very centre of my use of this term is the practice of interdisciplinarity, in which the collaborative exchange takes place across mediums, to produce a whole work made up of multiple art forms, producing what Dick Higgins first coined as ‘intermedia’ works.[[62]](#footnote-62) Moreover, it is significant that for the three groups investigated – the New York School, Black Mountain College, and the Judson collective – collaboration is, to some extent, synonymous with the very ideals of community and interdisciplinarity. As the avant-garde artistic communities of this period placed great emphasis on the collapsing of boundaries between media, and in their endeavour to establish a shared set of artistic values, interdisciplinary collaboration provided a tool for reimaging the boundaries of both artistic process and mediums. The poets within these interdisciplinary collaborative communities were attracted to dance precisely because of its capacity to destabilise boundaries between event and object, and between interpretation and performance, as well as its potential to reach those human experiences that language cannot utter through an emphasis on embodiment. For these poets, whose literary works were already invested in the communal, dance presents itself as perhaps the most social of media.

*Interdisciplinarity*

For the collaborative communities of Black Mountain College, the New York School and the Judson Dance Theatre, interdisciplinary artistic practice was a central component to their collaborative principles and came as a response to their critique of the mainstream literary world and academia. The forming of these collaborative communities came out of their will to create their own audiences, seeking approval and critique from their artistic peers whilst the dominant art world continued to ignore them. Out of these interdisciplinary unions of poets, painters, musicians, filmmakers, and dancers came a wealth of inter-media collaborative experimentation. Amongst poets and dancers, this exchange most frequently included re-interpreting one’s own discipline through the lens of the other.

Where the poets and dancers sought to re-perceive their own work through the lens of the other discipline, my thesis reads dance from a poetic perspective, and poetry through dance theory. Whilst some vocabulary overlaps across dance and poetry criticism, such as rhythm and metre, there are dance terms that require definition. I have taken many of my definitions from Lynne Ann Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin’s *The Intimate Act of Choreography* to ensure consistent usage of terminology.

When discussing formal elements of a dance, just as the space of a dance performance and the space of the page in poetry are analogous, the term ‘phrase’ in dance functions in a similar manner to the poetic line, it is the smallest and simplest unit of form and is a short but complete unit that has a beginning, middle, and end: “it starts, goes somewhere or does something, and comes to a resolution. A phrase is to a dance as a sentence is to a book. […] But a phrase is not a simple accumulation of movements strung together any more than a sentence is a list of words. Both phrases in language and phrases in dance must make sense. The movements share some common element of intent. So a phrase has form and content.”[[63]](#footnote-63) In the development of a dance, then, phrases are organised together to build sequences, and these sequences are subsequently placed into sections, serving the same function as the stanzas of a poem. Phrases are considered as both isolated units, and as a series of units placed together into the field of the whole, across the performance space of a dance and the page space of a poem. As such, when analysing the spatiality of a dance, there are a number of analytical terms to consider. Fundamentally, the space of a dance is three-dimensional, and is evaluated according to its width (use of the space from side-to-side); its depth (diagonal); and its height (use of air and floor, up and down). In addition, one may speak of the ‘floor pattern’ of a dance, which refers to the mapping of movement across the space danced on, and is often reproduced as a literal map on paper.[[64]](#footnote-64) In examining the analytical language of the respective art forms, the inherent interdisciplinarity across the art forms is most immediately apparent. Where terminology overlaps in many places, and in others is readily transferrable from one art form to the other, a reciprocal dialogue of form and process between the two forms is revealed as both natural and necessary.

Dance criticism’s language of ‘energy’ provides a particularly useful lens into reading post-war avant-garde poetry: “In dance, it's the energy that provides the go power. Underneath the airborne leap, the held arabesque, the fall-roll-suspension is the muscle flow of the dancer's body ... energy.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Dance thus provides the language to analyse and discuss the essence of movement, pace, and flow that can otherwise be difficult to encapsulate using the vocabulary of poetic criticism. My work subscribes to Blom and Chaplin’s usage of:

*Energy* [as] the potential for force, the capacity for action and for overcoming resistance or gravity. As an element of dance, it is a pure entity in the same way that space and time are. *Force* has to do with the magnitude or intensity of the energy exerted, expended, or released. Force exists on a continuum that ranges from strong to gentle. […] *Dynamics* is an interaction of force with time-the two playing together. It results in action in the body. Every movement is dynamic – it exists over time and has been achieved by using force. *Movement Qualities* are the distinctly observable attributes or characteristics produced by dynamics and made manifest in movement. For example, the dynamic coupling of strong with fast results in a sharp or whipping quality, while the coupling of gentle and slow produces a melting or free-floating quality.[[66]](#footnote-66)

In reading the works of poets such as Olson and O’Hara, this terminology is particularly useful as an entry point into examining the essence of kinesis and vivacity that pushes through each line of each poem. ‘Force’, for example, enhances analysis of the effect of differing line-lengths in a poem, offering a way of describing the physiological impact this has on the reader’s senses, rather than simply commenting on the physical presence of the poem on the page. ‘Movement qualities’, on the other hand, speaks to the sense of movement created by formal tools such as rhyming scheme, or metric feet. The experience of reading poetry is as physical an experience as watching dance, it provokes kinaesthetic impulses in the body – a sense of speed, of suspension, or of bounding energy – that can be elusive to language. Just as Kivy deems silent reading as a performance, Olson terms it as learning ‘how to dance sitting down’.[[67]](#footnote-67) The vocabulary of dance theory offers a means to bridge this gap between embodied experience and language.

In the chapters that follow, my analysis of the relations between poetry and dance utilises two phrases that are minutely, but importantly, distinct. Firstly, ‘choreographic poetics’, in my usage, refers to compositional and structural processes, such as Mac Low’s ‘diastic writing’ and Olson’s theorising of proprioception in his poetics statement, that are characterised by their adherence to principles and functions of choreography. I use ‘poetics of dance’, conversely, in reference to poetry that either takes dance as its subject matter in terms of its content, such as O’Hara’s ‘Ode to Tanaquil LeClerq’, or poems that adopt dance as its subject by emulating the dynamic qualities and structures of the art form, as is variously the case with each of the three poets. These relations between poetics and dance and poetics of dance and choreography are not ultimately stable, however, and it is in the space between these difficult distinctions that my thesis seeks to function as an exploration of language’s troubled relationship with naming and representing movement that exists exclusively in real-time and space. This ephemeral quality of dance proves resistant to language due to its inherently embodied nature, in which movement is rooted in the sensations and impulses that are experienced only fleetingly by the moving body. Poetry, of all literary modes, offers the most promising attempt at bridging this gap between movement and language, largely because of its formal structuring of smaller units, organised into a cohesive whole, each line offering a new ‘present’. My chosen examples of American post-war avant-garde poets and choreographers, through their contexts within collaborative communities that operated in a continual process of reading and interpretation, exemplify and reveal moments of cohesion between the two disparate art forms through interdisciplinary experimentation.

Chapter One: ‘How to dance sitting down’:

Writing as Dancing in Charles Olson’s Poetics

*Introduction: Black Mountain College*

Black Mountain College was founded in 1933, with only twenty-two students registered and the explicit objective that it was “to be a community as much as [it was] to be a school,” as well as “to exemplify progressive education’s most prominent theorist and advocate John Dewey’s mantra ‘learning by doing’.”[[68]](#footnote-68) In addition, Helen Molesworth writes that the college’s founder John Rice “insisted that art be at the [centre] of the curriculum. Refusing its typical designation as extracurricular […] Rice felt that art not only occupies a possible zone outside of language but also holds the potential to enable individuals to make choices—and choices, he stressed, were at the heart of a truly democratic society.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Both physically removed from the normative culture of large cities, and far removed in its ethos from principles of individualism, Black Mountain became a haven for artists and students to escape into a culture of communal effort and collaborative exchange. At the core of the college’s founding principles was the framing of interdisciplinary practice as the primary means of developing a holistic world view. A number of the college’s original faculty had come from the Bauhaus, and with them brought an ethos of interdisciplinary and collaborative experimentation across art and design.[[70]](#footnote-70)

Eugen Blume and Gabriele Knapstein outline this collaborative principle in the introduction to their seminal book *Black Mountain College: An Interdisciplinary Experiment, 1933-1957*, in which they claim that the “founders posited a principle of openness to new experiences and insights to be gained in communication between different disciplines. The faculty had complete freedom in the organisation of their teaching, and there was no prescribed curriculum for the students. They were encouraged to take courses in a wide range of scientific and artistic subjects. [However] the arts increasingly came to dominate over the years.”[[71]](#footnote-71) In fact, the very maintenance and basic functioning of the school was one of complete collaborative effort: “the faculty shared responsibility for the college’s interests with the students, and everyone was expected to participate voluntarily in the day-to-day maintenance of the community, in the evening concerts and theatre performances, in the work program and the building project. These activities were considered a part of the development of their personalities.”[[72]](#footnote-72) Here, then, community is at once an end in itself and the means through which the pedagogical objectives of the college were to be achieved. Just as the work produced by members of the college operated through an intimate connection between process and product, this interconnectedness is reflected in the very running of the college. In this case, the process being a liberal arts education, and the product being democratic citizens. Significantly, the maintenance of the space that the members of the college had created for themselves was integral to the maintenance of the values it wished to teach. In this sense, the creation of an alternative, communal mode of living was bound to the creation of the physical site in which it was to be put into practice.

Charles Olson, the primary focus of this chapter, began teaching at the College in 1948, and formally took over rectorship in 1954, at which point the college’s focus shifted to writing practices rather than artistic media such as performance and the plastic arts. During his period at Black Mountain, Olson composed much of the first volume of *The Maximus Poems* (1960) as well his polemic essays ‘Projective Verse’ (1950) and ‘Human Universe’ (1951).[[73]](#footnote-73) From the opening stanza of *The Maximus Poems*, Olson’s ‘poetics of dance’ explored in this chapter, in which writing is framed as a sort of dancing, is already evident. In the first verse of the collection, Olson announces the occasion of writing the poem as a dance:

Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood  
jewels & miracles, I, Maximus  
a metal hot from boiling water, tell you  
what is a lance, who obeys the figures of  
the present dance[[74]](#footnote-74)

His second volume, *Maximus IV, V. VI*, similarly begins with an image of dancing:

With a leap (she said it was an arabesque  
I made, off the porch, the night of the  
St Valentine Day's storm, into the snow.

[…]

Nobody else will grant  
like he said the volcano anyone of us does  
sit upon, in quite such a tangible fashion.

[…]

Gondwana.[[75]](#footnote-75)

Here, the poem ‘leaps’ forth into action, before being steadied by the hesitant, ‘she said it was an arabesque’. The linguistic qualities of ‘arabesque’ serve to extend the spatial and temporal length of the line into a gradual pace, replicating the drawn-out elongation of the leg described in the phrase. As the poem continues, Olson refers to ‘the volcano’, as well as ‘Gondwana’, the formation that existed before the body of the earth moved to form continents. Here, like the body of the poem, the movement of the tectonic plates are also choreographic acts. Choreographics, for Olson, was an insightful means of ordering both the processes that make up the world, and human experience, into the poetic field.

It was also at Black Mountain that Olson wrote most of his dance plays, as well as his essay ‘A Syllabary for a Dancer’. It was in the prose works written at the college, in particular, that Olson sought to outline his vision for a new, ‘post-modern’ poetics that lay emphasis on writing as an immediate, kinetic art form. As Sherman Paul argues in his review of Olson’s dance plays, “The open or field poetics of ‘Projective Verse’ - so much a matter of physiology, stance, and self-originating movement - is also a poetics of dance.”[[76]](#footnote-76) I argue, therefore, that his prose statements’ calls for immediacy and action appeal above all to dance practice.

*Choreographics: Projective Verse*

In 1950, Charles Olson wrote of verse that to “catch up” with the modern moment, it must “put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man.”[[77]](#footnote-77) This assertion is the core of his poetics statement ‘Projective Verse’. The essay continues: “the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending – where its breathing, shall come to, termination.”[[78]](#footnote-78) Vincent Katz summarises his reading of Olson’s statement, writing:

Projective Verse was composition by field; that is, it regarded the page as canvas on which words could be dropped in a variety of positions, not simply one after another. The space between them indicated the pause appropriate to timing one’s reading of the verse. This emphasis on the visual aspect of poetry made the typewriter an instrument for determining precise spatial delineations, […] The other key aspect of Projective Verse was to demand that it be written in the moment, that one word, one thought, spur the next, that it, in other words, not be a ‘mediation’ on a ‘theme’ but capable of such ‘abstraction’ as painters and musicians were exploring.[[79]](#footnote-79)

Katz presents ‘Projective Verse’ in terms that are generally accepted by critics of Olson, however, this reading assumes an approach to verse in which the ‘breath’ and line are composed, via the typewriter, as performance notes for reading poetry, as if a script for speech, rather than a metaphor for the physiological foundation of verse.[[80]](#footnote-80) Where Katz reads Olson’s poetics through ‘visual aspects’, the page a ‘canvas’, ‘Projective Verse’ instead outlines the ‘field’ of the poem as the space in which movement occurs, Olson’s poetics in turn aspiring to a kinetic exploration of language and syllable placement.

Olson’s pronouncements about ‘the breath’ as the determining feature of the poetic line have often been taken literally. For example, Brendon Gillot writes: “the line will run as long as the breath of the poet can sustain it, in a manner somewhat analogous to the phrasing of a song. […] The scene of writing is directly implicated in the production of poetry, ‘at the moment’. This seems to open up the possibility of varieties of line-length dependent on the varieties of breathing – relaxed, ragged, meditative and so on.”[[81]](#footnote-81)  Here Gillot reads into Olson’s poetic project as a literal manifestation of the reader’s breath, as well as through exclusively visual-spatial means, and subsequently characterises the form of Olson’s verse in a symbolic manner, which in fact was a dimension Olson vigorously withheld in his writing. In his reading of ‘Projective Verse’ Gillot takes particular significance from Olson’s lines:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE

the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE[[82]](#footnote-82)

In his criticism of these lines from the essay, Gillot attempts to follow the breathing of the poet in Olson’s readings of his poetry, again taking literally this notion of the breath as structural determination of a poem. He writes: “It is difficult, however, fully to square this interpretation of ‘Projective Verse’ with the poetry Olson went on to produce, and even with those poems written around the time of the essay’s composition […] the strict equation of breath length to line length does not stand up to scrutiny when recordings of Olson reading his work are taken into account.”[[83]](#footnote-83) In fact, Gillot’s attempt to read ‘Projective Verse’ in these terms proves difficult because it is at odds with Olson’s design.

Olson did not organise his lines in conjunction with breath length, nor did he compose his verse as a direct instruction for its performance. Rather than reading his poems in visual or spatial terms, through the image of the ‘canvas’, Olson’s poetics were so grounded in embodied terms of the body moving through space, the natural corollary of his writing is instead choreographic. That is, a poetics grounded in the feeling and experiencing of the body’s organic physiological processes. Rather than making these manifest through immediate language of speech, however, the poet organises and mediates these embodied experiences through the written word, producing notational verse. Writing is thus a physical act, in which breath stands in as metaphor for the body and all its functions (“being” in the most basic sense). Olson goes on in his theorising of the breath:

For from the root out, from all over the place, the syllable comes, the figures of, the dance:

‘Is’ comes from the Aryan root, *as*, to breathe. The English ‘not’ equals the Sanscrit *na*, which may come from the root *na*, to be lost, to perish. ‘Be’ is from *bhu*, to grow.

I say the syllable, king, and that it is spontaneous[[84]](#footnote-84)

In this etymological tracing back, Olson delineates ‘breath’ to ‘is’, *to be*, and that is, to move. To write through the breath is to externalise and convey the essence of being, to portray the body’s experience as it exists, feels, and functions. Olson sets up this dichotomy of head-ear-syllable and heart-breath-line to convey his overall design of composition by field, whereby the syllable is arranged into the line to create the verse. These lines thereby fail to be held up to Olson’s actual poetry when taken literally. Instead, Olson’s dichotomy functions as an anatomical synecdoche, through which Olson attempts to reveal the bodily nature of poetry as he understands it. That is, in this bodily metaphor is a process of the body externalising its internal and internalising its external. For instance, the ‘head’ construes ‘thought’ with hearing, and in this sense internalises the external world. This is then emitted back out again through the ‘heart-breath-line’ cycle. When considered in choreographic terms, the former head-ear-syllable may be taken to represent the poet, and the latter ‘heart-breath-line’, the dancer.[[85]](#footnote-85) In this way, writing for Olson was the body *embodying* itself through language, enacting the processes and circulations of anatomy. Olson further splits his dichotomy into the broader division of the intellectual (head-ear-syllable) and the corporeal (heart-breath-line), and thus, the whole as the union of the two, formulates a poetics of physiology, one that encompasses the entirety of human experience both within oneself and as receptive to its surroundings.

Through the motifs of breath and ear, ‘Projective Verse’ presents the two key functions of the receptive, creative body as the former is responsible for externalising the internal, and the latter internalises the external; both of which are crucial for the body to engage and share with the world. Writing, then, is a concretisation of the ways in which the subject relates to their surroundings, how they come to understand and participate in the world, through the body in action. The body repeats this cycle of inward and outward engagement with the world, but it is through assigning this experience to the page that it is embodied and relayed. By determining the units of his poetics through these physiological phenomena, Olson enacts his profession in ‘Projective Verse’ that, “form is never more than an extension of content.”[[86]](#footnote-86) The formal structuring of the individual units of a poem is determined, above all, by their relation to the internal instincts experienced by the moving, speaking body.

In ‘Maximus to Gloucester Letter 27 [withheld]’, Olson explores this intricate connection between one’s relation to their own body, and the further relation between that body and its surroundings. One of the most poignant examples of Olson’s exploration around the themes of the local and one’s belonging, the poem shifts between an inward pull into oneself, and an outward ‘compelling’ to a sense of external ‘place’:

No Greek will be able

to discriminate my body.

An American

is a complex of occasions,

themselves a geometry

of spatial nature.

I have this sense,

that I am one

with my skin

Plus this—plus this:

that forever the geography

which leans in

on me I compel

backwards I compel Gloucester

to yield, to

change

Polis

is this[[87]](#footnote-87)

In a letter to Robert Creeley in 1954, Olson wrote of this poem that, “what I was searching for was the simplest [way] to say how we do have this sense of unity with our body,” that is, that we are ‘one / with [our] skin’.[[88]](#footnote-88) Later, in ‘Last Lectures’, Olson reimagines this searching through a sense of the individual’s responsibility to notate this embodied unity through writing: “In our post-pre-literate period you must get close to illiterate / to be a human being / You must see yrselves as scribes / be as scribes / It’s not, ‘can you read?’ / It’s, ‘can you write?’ / It isn’t so much yr own poetry that counts / it’s poetry that counts … it’s man’s practicality / you yrself are a scribe.”[[89]](#footnote-89) The complexities of one’s relations to their own internal workings, and with their external environment, can best be understood not through ‘reading’, that is, through an inward reflection, but rather through ‘writing’, an active, outward, ‘graphing’ of those physiological processes that connect our bodies to outside phenomena. ‘Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]’ can thus be understood as choreographic notation of the embodied poetics put forward in ‘Projective Verse’, in which Olson attempts to map out the complexities of these dual experiences of self onto the page.

In the poem, as the subject seeks out their place in the world, questions of selfhood spurs movement as the subject divides both their nationalistic identity and the relationship between their own internal and external form. To be American, for example, is to be defined in some physiological way by national identity, however this identity is disrupted through its relation to a ‘complex of occasions’. ‘Themselves a geometry / of spatial nature’ suggests a choreographic mapping of these various ‘selves’ across an imagined space, both geographic in terms of placing the self in context of a physical rootedness, a sense of ‘home’, and a more archaeological sense of historic and cultural roots, a national identity traced back through its global lineage. As Miriam Nichols puts it: “As a historic route of occasions, the organism includes not only a personal past but also a genetic past (its entire evolutionary history) and the pure past (the structure of time as such).”[[90]](#footnote-90) From the security of self-knowing in ‘I have this sense, / that I am one / with my skin’, the internal serenity brought about by an inner connectedness with one’s physiological self is disrupted by the pull outward, back toward Gloucester, the external place of home. ‘Plus this—plus this’ embodies the conflict felt in attempting to locate one’s sense of self amongst these various ‘occasions’ of selfhood.

Notating the kinetic forces at play between the mapped roots of internal and external contexts of self, the subject of the poem is unable to settle in one space. However, this ‘compelling’ is also to change, for ‘Gloucester/ to yield, to / change’. Through the choreographic graphing of this archaeological exploration of one’s internal phenomena and external lineage, the speaker gains new knowledge through active scribing. As Nicholls puts it: “To take thought as a dynamic process is to see the difference between ‘what one can do and what one is doing.’ Hence the aim of The Maximus Poems: to present an image of human possibility that will serve as measure.”[[91]](#footnote-91) With this new understanding, the subject is able to redesign not only their sense of self, but the physical environment that they make for themselves. Moreover, the final lines –‘Polis / is this’–is a performative interpretation, rather than an observation, of the poem’s meaning, in which the pronoun ‘this’ makes the self-presence of the poem’s speaker part of that meaning, and as such, claims the agency of the poem’s subject, and refersonly to their present. Finally settled in the present, ‘Polis’ can be interpreted as the place in which the subject locates themselves, both pointing back to an inherited history in its ancient Greek origin, and to the here and now that is created by understanding, and notating, the multiple ‘complex of occasions’ of self. It is a site at which the speaker has mapped their internal physiological sensations, and their external historical and cultural roots, into cohesion.

In recorded footage of Olson reading this poem aloud, the corresponding movements to the poem’s language reveals its deictic, and in turn choreographic, nature.[[92]](#footnote-92) The dual components of poem and performance, and language and dance cannot be separated in this instance. For instance, gesturing his arms in synchronisation with his reading, ‘that forever the geography / which leans in / on me’ is spoken with arms raised above his head, over himself in the suggestion of oppressive pressure, or containment. In contrast, the following lines, ‘I compel / Gloucester to yield / to change’ are performed with open arms and strongly clenched fists, moving with emphasis for each new line, enacting the defiance of the speaker. Finally, the conclusive ‘Polis / is this’ is embodied through circling arms, a gesture encompassing all of the space around the speaker, reinstating the call back to all that has been mentioned and explored beforehand, signalling the all-encompassing nature of this phrase. Written as choreographic notation of movement, both imagined and actual, the poem comes to life through an equally embodied reading. That is, through a performance of the movement graphed through the lines of the poem. In this sense, to compose ‘projective verse’ is to create a score for speech that necessarily also entails a kind of bodily routine.

Despite a reduction in pedagogical focus on dance and theatre during his time at Black Mountain, the performance arts became increasingly central to Olson’s literary experimentations. This concern with performance in his writing is perhaps most explicit in Olson’s ‘dance-plays’.

*Olson: Theatre and the Dance-Plays*

What is being traced here is not a history of direct influence, which in respect to ‘Projective Verse’ can be found in Olson’s letters with Creeley and Frances Boldereff, as well as, more broadly, the influences of Williams and Pound.[[93]](#footnote-93) However, there is a network of mutual concern in operation, within which the role of dance can be traced in Olson’s developing poetics. Firstly, as Karlien van den Beukel acknowledges in her essay, ‘Why Olson Did Ballet: The Pedagogical Avant-Gardism of Massine’: “Olson looks more widely to dance collaborative practice as a pedagogical method. At Black Mountain, modern dance, as Katherine Litz taught it, was based in improvised practice, requiring ‘the self-reflexive dramatization of the creative practice’.”[[94]](#footnote-94) In his endeavour to give his students a holistic education across history, literature, philosophy and performance, Olson adopted dance practice as a tool in his teaching. For example, the course outline for his ‘Verse and Theatre’ class in the Summer Session 1949, reads:

The course is a laboratory leading to a production at the end of eight weeks. The projects themselves are various, depending on the capacities of the students, but distributed in such fashion that all combinations of language and the other instruments of theatre are re-examined and newly used. (1) dance composition to verse, without music; (2) to prose, ditto; (3) to solo instruments, chiefly woodwinds and percussion, the flute as well; (4) slides and colour projections; (5) masks; (6) various combinations of the human voice, without music, without dance, but with gesture, posture, and the skill of speech.[[95]](#footnote-95)

Olson’s objectives for students to explore ‘dance composition to verse’ and ‘to prose’ reveals his interest in the potential for realising the written word through movement, as well as reconceiving literary texts as notation towards embodied performance.

Olson’s interest in dance also made its way into his expository writing, most notably in his poetics statements ‘Proprioception’ and ‘A Syllabary for a Dancer’, as well as in the dance-plays he composed. Olson had originally composed his dance-plays at Black Mountain College to be performed by his students, believing that through the collaborative process of interpreting and performing the plays, the students would gain the poetic knowledge and understanding outlined in his ‘Verse and Theatre’ course and later theorised in his poetics statements.[[96]](#footnote-96) That is, through the active interpretation of his scores into performance, not only do the participants gain theatrical training, but are encouraged to reconceive the very nature of verse composition as being of and for embodied movement. His writing directly for performance in some sense serves as a stepping stone between his prosaic theorising of a poetics of dance and his later choreographic poetics. Where the latter is an abstract exercise in notational verse writing, the dance-plays offered him the space to experiment with combining language and movement on the page. Olson thus placed emphasis on educating through practice and action, rather than the conventional pedagogical methods of text-based learning.

Although Olson’s most lasting and important interactions with dance and dancers occurred at Black Mountain College, his interest arguably began in the late 1930s, when “Olson had been remarkably educated by Massine himself , acquiring inside knowledge of the choreographic practice of narrative ballet in the Ballet Russe.”[[97]](#footnote-97) Subsequently, in 1940, Olson was invited by Massine to perform on stage with the company. Olson also applied this dance training to his thinking about poetics. Across his poetics statements, for instance, he adopts the language of anatomy and the nervous system’s processes of perceiving and responding to the body’s external environment to redefine the task of the poet. Beyond his background experience in ballet, at Black Mountain College Olson was exposed to, and participated in, the pioneering works of Merce Cunningham and Katherine Litz, whom I will discuss later in the chapter. Olson’s interactions with both of these modern dancers also had significant influence on his poetics. This shift in dance style and practice is reflected in Olson’s writing from the more literal dance writings of his dramatic, balletic plays to the more abstracted dance-influences in his poetry, which will be explored later.

Writing on Olson’s experience with Massine and the Ballet Russe, van den Beukel reports that Olson “regarded the imperial ballet-trained Massine as the embodiment of the autotelic discipline of ballet: ‘the whole of literature’ is felt in ‘the bones’, making for the ‘acute’ consciousness of ‘contemporaneity’. The materiality of dance, residing in physical gesture, is accessed by kinetic memory.”[[98]](#footnote-98) For Olson, then, ballet was inherently and importantly literary in its embodied expression of experience as a series of physiological impulses. That is, Olson regarded the ‘autotelic discipline’ of dance, in which the creative act has a purpose of and in itself as the body’s externalising, through performance, of internal creative impulses, as the necessary model for a contemporary poetics. In addition, through ‘kinetic memory’, psychological and physiological sensory experiences are interwoven into a bodily memory, in which dances are archived within the body, creating an unconscious knowing of the medium’s history in its makers. Artistic creation is, for Olson, an archaeological act, and taking from the dancer’s kinetic memory, he sought to devise a poetics practice that would embody a sensory, physiological archive of the literary past.

Much of the theatre practices at Black Mountain took influence from Antonin Artaud’s ‘The Theatre and Its Double’, which M. C. Richards translated into English in 1953 for Cid Corman’s *Origin* journal. Artaud’s writings on theatre were grounded in his claim that theatre “resides in no one language but makes use of all languages – gestures, sounds, words, fire, shouts—rediscovers itself at precisely the point where the [spirit] needs a language to produce its manifestations.”[[99]](#footnote-99) These ‘concrete languages’, those other than spoken language – ‘gesture, sounds’, as well as features unique to the stage such as lighting and set design – are all incorporated in Olson’s ‘Verse and Theatre’ course, and are central to the exploration of poetic expression beyond written or spoken language. Artaud writes of these non-verbal languages in terms of the body’s senses, which, as in Olson’s poetics statements, appeals to physiological experiences of performance:

I say that this concrete language, destined for the senses and independent of words, has first to satisfy the senses, that there is a poetry for the senses as there is for language, and that this concrete physical language to which I refer is truly theatrical only to the degree that the thoughts it expresses elude spoken language. It consists of everything that occupies the stage, everything that can be manifested and expressed materially on a stage and that is addressed first of all to the senses instead of being addressed first to the mind as is the language of words.[[100]](#footnote-100)

This ‘poetry for the senses’, that Artaud positions as similar to, but fundamentally other to ‘the poetry for language’, appeals to Olson’s emphasis on the body’s externalising its internal workings as the primary focus of artistic expression. That is, through a physical performance of the body’s natural impulses and responses as it moves through an external environment. As such, Olson’s investment in theatre was driven by his desire to unearth poetic expression outside of the space of the page.

Olson had a long held interest in dance and the dramatic arts, and envied the dancer who was both creator and instrument of their creative act.[[101]](#footnote-101) In a letter to Cid Corman in 1952, Olson wrote: “‘I believe … that all men and women can dance – and this alone is enough to establish expression – that all other expression is only up from this base; and that to dance is to make a whole day have glory.”[[102]](#footnote-102) Dance and theatre provided Olson with solutions to the limitations he experienced in the written word, so bound to its context within literary history and convention. ‘Projective Verse’ begins with Olson citing these concerns of “what a French critic calls ‘closed’ verse, that verse which print bred and which is pretty much what we have had, in English & American, and have still got.”[[103]](#footnote-103) Olson’s poetic theorising advocates an ‘open’ verse which is to be a form of oral, rather than ‘written’, verse. However, this oral verse does not equate simply to speech, but is grounded the combination of verbal, poetic utterance, and what Artaud terms ‘the concrete physical language’ of movement.

Just as Olson sought a return to origin in his writing, Fielding Dawson observed “that Olson was seeking an alternative to conventional narrative drama, which he considers ‘false’ drama, through a return to the primitive or ritual. Although a poem or other verbal script established the theme, the meaning was revealed or evoked through the total performance, including voice, light, movement, and sound, rather than through an explicit expository text, character development, or plot.”[[104]](#footnote-104) In his ‘return to the primitive or ritual’, Olson endeavoured towards an archaeological tracing back of performativity itself in his theatre, rather than presenting a scripted verbal narrative. That is, an exploration of the rituals and sensations of movements for its own sake, and as a result, producing works that emphasise dancing as the primary process and product of dance performance.

Beginning the same year as his ‘Verse and Theatre’ course, from 1948 to 1953 Olson turned his hand to writing dramatic scripts, producing ‘eleven known plays and verse dramas’, none of which were ever performed:[[105]](#footnote-105) “Olson, drawing on his formative education in dance, begins composing dance plays […] for students (both male and female) to perform at the College. Olson’s teaching thus becomes projected into a collaborative practice where the interpretive study of the plays would generate poetic knowledges even as the dance performance would be creatively engendered by the body of Black Mountain students themselves.”[[106]](#footnote-106) Ranging from operas, to dance-plays, to more conventionally structured theatrical pieces, these works offer a rare insight into his keen interest in dance and performance, as well as his experimentation with poetics as instruction which would later shape his ‘poetics of breath’. It is important to note that while Olson presented these texts as instructive scripts for performance, they do not provide movement phrases or choreographic notes, but rather summarise the plot and intended essenceof the plays to the performer.

In this way Olson sets up a similar relationship between choreography and dancer as Merce Cunningham, one which enforces interpretation for the performer only through the active exercise of moving through the dance. This interpretative freedom was limited, however, with Olson clearly stating the emotion each step was to express, as well as a general outline of how the sequences were to look to the audience, such as travel direction and dynamics between characters. For instance, in *The Born Dancer* – a dance-play based on the life of the ballerina Nijinsky and his struggle with his sexuality in an intolerant time and place, and by extension, in Olson’s patriarchal view, his masculinity – Olson simply writes: “the job here (choreographically) is to so construct the movement of Diaghilev, and of the two together, that Diaghilev seems to become more and more rising wall, on Nijinsky’s left, until, at the end of the dance, he is straight and almost so overtopping that he leans [centre] stage above the withering figure of Nijinsky.”[[107]](#footnote-107) In this simple direction it is clear that the dancer of Diaghilev must evoke masculine virility in his movements, becoming an increasingly dominating presence on the stage, whilst Nijinsky’s (Tim LaFarge) gestures signify the man’s gradual loss of prowess through movements of diminishing scale as he loses his internal battle against his sense of self. However, the details of how the dancers were to execute these instructions, through which movements or dance style, in its literal sense, the ‘choreography’, are excluded from the script. Consequently, the distinction of the text as ‘dance’, rather than prose, is unclear. Additionally, if it is only through the ‘concrete language’ unique to the performer’s physical embodiment of the written word that the dance may come into being, the fact of the dance never being performed further troubles this distinction. However, Olson’s claim that ‘the job here (choreographically) is to so construct the movement of Diaghilev…that Diaghilev seems to become more and more rising wall’ suggests that the active notation of this development of character and movement through writing is itself the choreographic process. It is in his later development of a choreographic poetics that Olson resolves this difficult relation between text and performance, abandoning explicitly instructive script writing for abstract forms of embodied notation.

Olson’s plays did not stray far from his poetic project and carried over many of the themes he had been exploring in his literary work of the same period, with particular focus on place, and particularly of the local and one’s belonging within that locality, as well as notions of ‘man’ and, in Olson’s chauvinistic view, man’s inherent vitality. For example, Sherman Paul writes, “I call [the plays] primary because what also makes them notable is their singular emphasis on dancing the Man, and, in doing so, dancing out Olson’s own developing fable. […] Olson defined man, in Vedic fashion, as a ‘dancing thinker’, but in respect to him we might modify this to ‘dancing pedagogue’, bringing over the insistence on single intelligence and adding the insistence on the *work* to be done.”[[108]](#footnote-108) Almost all of Olson’s plays are written with specific casting in mind, and all of the dancers named were students at Black Mountain. Paul continues, “From the start his predilection was for a minimal company: for the single actor who exemplified heroism, danced the Man [and] for the very few who were necessary to dance out his moral equations.”[[109]](#footnote-109) The most prevalent expression of these themes comes in *Apollonius of Tyana*, written in July 1951 and circulated around the college in the same year. The play was later reprinted in Corman’s *Origin 6*, and is the only of these plays to have been published outside of Olson’s immediate circle.[[110]](#footnote-110) It was written with the intention of Olson playing Tyana, the speaking role, and Black Mountain’s Nicola Cernovich was to dance the leading role of Apollonius.[[111]](#footnote-111) The dance-plays thus functioned both out of, and for, the collaborative community of Black Mountain College, with *Apollonius of Tyana* most prominently representing the sense of collectivism and locality that the college’s community offered.

*Apollonius of Tyana* has been compared to Olson’s *Maximus Poems*, with Paul noting the play’s dramatisation of “Olson’s second-birth and self-shaping, the vocational voice that he had made in undertaking *The Maximus Poems*, that great poem of place,”[[112]](#footnote-112) as well as the play’s “didacticism and the extent to which dance patently fables him.”[[113]](#footnote-113) Additionally, Butterick writes: “Apollonius is of Tyana the same way Maximus is of Tyre and Olson is of Gloucester – bound together, they are ‘an image of health in the world’.”[[114]](#footnote-114) For Olson, engagement with the world is of great significance, particularly with the local, immediate surroundings.[[115]](#footnote-115) In the 2007 documentary dedicated to Olson’s treatment of place in his work, *Polis Is This: Charles Olson and the Persistence of Place,* John Stilgoe summarises Olson’s concern with the local: “The local environment is the prism through which anyone’s experience of the cosmos is filtered. What I think Olson did that was spectacularly successful was twist the prism in his hands all the time, and look through it toward an outer world from a vantage point in the local – the ward, the precinct, the corner of the street, his front steps.”[[116]](#footnote-116) Central to this participation in the local area is the body, the physiological experience of space.[[117]](#footnote-117)

The narrative of *Apollonius of Tyana* follows Apollonius as he leaves Tyana to explore the regions of the world, seeking wisdom and enlightenment, and with each new place a dance is performed based on the themes of these self-actualisations: the dance of the body, the dance of the mind, the dance of recognition, the dance of passage, or travel, and finally the dance against rulers. The dance comes with explicit lessons: “*no man should impose his mode of life on others*,” and that “what is native to [oneself], even the places, heroes and gods local to their neighbourhoods, is worth all the state or world religions they are being offered on every hand.”[[118]](#footnote-118) That is, the lesson of Apollonius’ wandering is that the only place he belongs, is that place he left behind. This unity of self and place is explicit from the very opening scene of the play, the only part of the script that really describes any specific movement sequence. It begins:

A very white stick of light then picks out from the general obscurity a hump about two-thirds of the way back on an oblique axis from the audience. It is the two actors, sitting on the floor facing front, the dancer close inside the legs of Tyana, so close as to obscure the body and head of the other actor. As Tyana speaks the introduction most slowly and most clearly, it should be as though the words came out of the mouth of the forward figure, the dancer […] As the introduction proceeds, however, the dancer should discover movement, first of his face, then of his fingers, until the most dramatic discovery for him is his two arms. And when he raises them out and to the side, Tyana, too, should accompany him, so that, at a high moment, they compose together a four armed figure. As the introduction comes to its ending, a two armed, two legged man is erect, the single dancer himself, ready to move off, to make his next discoveries in space.[[119]](#footnote-119)

Apollonius and Tyana are so bound that the audience is unable to distinguish where one begins and the other ends, and importantly, Apollonius ‘close inside the legs of Tyana’, rests within Tyana. This position of the figure of Tyana around Apollonius evokes both security, creating a shield around his body, and an oppressive hold around him, keeping him within the constraints of Tyana’s locality to the point of suppressing his capacity for individual expression.

Significantly, the dance signifies the poet, representative of voice, giving birth to the dancer, who in turn represents movement. The following phrase plays out the battle Apollonius faces between his ties to Tyana, the known place so a part of himself, and his will to break away into the unknown. The catalyst of this tension comes through his spiritual and physiological awakening – finally, Apollonius begins to discover himself, the lone body apart from his surroundings, and crucially, it is through movement, not language, that this discovering occurs: ‘first of his face, then of his fingers, until the most dramatic discovery is his arms.’ As Apollonius begins to explore this body he has long resided in but only just come to know, Tyana attempts to shadow these movements, however, coming to a ‘four armed figure’, the two figures no longer move in unison.

It is from this moment of individualisation that at last, Apollonius begins to break free into the space not yet travelled. Here lie Olson’s own core values: on the one hand, his commitment to the local, to one’s immediate surroundings, and on the other, his fundamental belief in the need for artistic expression to occupy that blank space, whether of the page or the stage. As Olson writes later in the dance-play:

It can be put this way, the dance, to key it: it is a wide investigation into the local, the occasional, what you might even call the ceremonial, but without, on Apollonius’ part, any assurance that he knows how to make objects firm, or how firm he is. He is troubled, to cause objects to stay in place, to see clearly his place […]. The problem is, how to extricate what he wants from the mess he is surrounded by, how to manage to locate what he himself feels: that life as spirit is in the thing, in the instant, in this man.[[120]](#footnote-120)

Here, Olson’s notation of Apollonius’ internal dilemma is suggestive of what he later calls ‘Stance’. First referenced in his *The Special View of History*, ‘stance’ for Olson encompasses a way of knowing that privileges ideas of ‘self-reliance’ and oral learning:

In short, the recognition (inquiry picture story) that, to get to the density – WOT ‘APPENED – not so easy. Two alternatives: make your own story – fiction, or history: when you are up against it, to equal *what went on*. One can know what one oneself makes, but to know what happened, even to oneself?

Which, then, is WHY history as the other kind of ‘story’, that one does also want to know what did happen – I mean now. Or just five minutes ago. Or right now as *it is* *happening*. It is a stance.[[121]](#footnote-121)

Olson offers “two alternatives” to knowledge-making: “make it up; or try to find out.”[[122]](#footnote-122) As Miriam Nichols writes of this claim, “Olson translates this task as a search for a worldview and stance that might issue in a new ethos. […] he is interested in *knowing how* rather than in *knowing* *that*.”[[123]](#footnote-123) In the scene described in *Apollonius of Tyana*, Apollonius’ problem is ‘how to extricate what he wants from the mess he is surrounded by, how to manage to locate what he himself feels,’ and in this sense, in the ‘stance’ of ‘knowing how’ Olson conceives of stance as an embodied, physiological standpoint, as well as one’s standing in the world: how one stands, their posture, determines how they know things. ‘Stance’, in Olson’s terms, is a poetical and epistemological principle that has more in common with dance than any other art form, including poetry.

The dance-play offers a fruitful setting for Olson to put these ideas into practice, in which literally the way Apollonius holds himself, and how he moves through space, determines *how* and *what* he knows. Olson’s conceptualising of ‘stance’ is a key concept in his poetics and is fundamentally choreographic in its emphasis on the body’s posture as a means to active knowledge and understanding. In ‘Projective Verse’ Olson again asserts the promise of ‘stance’ in creating a new poetics: “I want to … suggest a few ideas about what stance toward reality brings such [open] verse into being, what the stance does, both to the poet and to his reader. (The stance involves, for example, a change beyond, and larger than, the technical, and may, the way the things look, lead to new poetics and to new concepts from which some sort of drama, say, or of epic, perhaps, may emerge.)”[[124]](#footnote-124) Taken to signify an embodied understanding of one’s posture and standpoint, this ‘new poetics’ of ‘stance’ comes in the form of Olson’s choreographic poetics, in which the physiological contexts of his poems’ subjects are notated across the page in order to interpret and inscribe new perspective and knowledge. Before looking further at Olson’s choreographic poetics, it is helpful to first outline the culture of performance that he experienced at Black Mountain College.

*Performance at Black Mountain College*

Black Mountain’s privileging of collaboration was significantly influenced by the Bauhaus in both its values and practical organisation. Josef Albers, for example, brought from Bauhaus his combination of discipline and inventiveness, telling his students that “art is concerned with the HOW and not the WHAT; not with literal content, but with the performance of the factual content. The performance – how it is done – that is the content of art.”[[125]](#footnote-125) Consequently, both process and performance as the dual events of artistic creation became the principal means for collaborative exchange amongst faculty and students at the college.

The first major figure in dance studies at Black Mountain College was Xanti Schawinsky, who had fled his longheld post as performing arts teacher at the Bauhaus due to increasing Nazi threat, to join Black Mountain College in 1936, leaving the college two years later in 1938. Schawinsky brought to the college his developing ideas of a theatre of ‘total experience’:

The stage was to be a laboratory for synthesising through non-analytical, non-literary means, ideas being explored in all disciplines of the curriculum, including contemporary scientific, philosophical and literary concepts. In class students studied ‘fundamental phenomena: space, form, color, light, sound, music, movement, time.’ Masks and uniform tights were used to release the performers from a concern with facial expression and their own individuality, and in performance those devices served to disguise the personality of the performers in favour of the idea being presented.[[126]](#footnote-126)

With emphasis on the stage, rather than the classroom, as the site of education, Schawinsky saw performance arts as the centre point for interdisciplinary training. In addition, his belief in masking the expressive faces of the dancer’s marks the beginning of an emphasis on movement and the body over narrative or expression in dance at the college. In his own words, he claims that:

To illustrate this process, the study of *time*, for example, may differ greatly depending on the outlook on this phenomenon. The economist’s interest in the subject may differ entirely from the composer’s, the physicist’s from the poet’s […]. But in bringing together these various concepts, theories, and principles on the stage as a ‘laboratory’, vistas open up a deeper understanding of all phases involved, including all those purely emotional aspects of the individual.[[127]](#footnote-127)

If, for Schawinsky, learning is achieved through *doing,* or more specifically through *movement* and *acting out*, it is the dancer’s “body intelligence” that provides the maximum potential for this non-verbal means of education and expression.[[128]](#footnote-128) Schawinsky’s experimental ideals were best represented in two seminal performances produced by him at the college. The first, performed in November 1936, were early versions that were later incorporated in *Spectodrama: Play, Life, Illusion* and the second, *Danse Macabre: A Sociological Study*, in May 1938. The former of these performances was a visual masterpiece that combined stage design, music, dance, and lighting. The backdrop and props provided the main elements of the performance, conveying the key theme of shapes (circles, squares, triangles) and colours (blue, red, yellow) moving across the stage and being depicted throughout. Additionally, the characters in the play were as far-reaching as a lecturer, physicist, a messenger, a nude, an architect and assistant, putting into practice the interdisciplinary philosophy that fuelled Schawinsky’s art. One scene reads in the script:

ACTORS in tights in corresponding colors appear from behind the walls, each one demonstrating the character of his own color. More join him, and they form a BALLET CORPS of the three temperaments. From the orchestra, corresponding *solo instruments* are introduced: *Cello* for blue, *clarinet* for red, *trumpet* for yellow. SOLO DANCERS in white join the group, and a ballet evolves, with the moving walls an architectural setting.”[[129]](#footnote-129)

Elsewhere, “Three ACTORS appear, representing *normal time*, *slow motion* and *fast motion*. They perform an identical scene simultaneously, but each one in his own relative speed.”[[130]](#footnote-130) On the one hand, Schawinsky’s dance piece still adheres to historical conventions of classical dance and ballet, in which movement relies on characterisation and serves as figurative representation to provide a narrative. On the other hand, however, *Spectodrama* provided him the opportunity to experiment with notions of creating tensions between dynamics in the dance, as well as introducing interdisciplinary art that relied on the art forms engaging with one another to portray both contrasts and unisons between artistic modes. This performance of Schawinsky’s *Spectodrama* paved the way for dance at the college as a key site of experimentation and innovation. Following Schawinsky’s departure, the dance programmes that did take place through the college’s history were prestigious, however the study and practice of dance “as an artistic discipline was relatively seldom part of the curriculum.”[[131]](#footnote-131) For much of the college’s history, dance was limited to short courses and workshops during the summer institute sessions or organised and performed by students during college festivals.

In this period, the move towards dance and performance studies came first from the college’s literary studies. M. C. Richards, for example, is credited with serving “as the bridge between literature and the visual arts, which manifested itself as an intensive commitment to theatre, particularly in the absence of a formal drama teacher in the years between 1945 and 1950. ”[[132]](#footnote-132) In *Poems* (1947), Richards touches on the potentials of physical performance to convey human experiences in place of language:

What but a gesture can convey

the heart invisible?

No phrase may.

Body, opening, asks more eloquently

than syllables.[[133]](#footnote-133)

This interest in the merging of language and performance culminated in 1950 when Richards “directed her translation of Cocteau’s *Marriage on the Eiffel Tower* (1921), converting the dining hall into a ‘total environment’ for the performance with the construction of the Eiffel Tower’s platform, from which the actors and audience gazed down on a skyline of Paris.”[[134]](#footnote-134) Taking influence from the principles introduced in Schawinsky’s *Spectodrama*, and in some sense pre-empting the experimental happenings to come, such as John Cage’s *Theatre Piece No. 1*, Richards’s performance piece required collaborative efforts to create the setting, script, costumes, and performance. In addition, in her creation of a ‘total environment’ of an immersive performance space, she continued to explore the dynamic between performer and audience, placing the audience in amongst the setting and action of the play. Crucially, moreover, in her adaptation of Cocteau’s play, Richards emphasised to her students the inherent bond between literature and performance.

Dance as a subject of study was generally folded into the college’s Theatre courses. Whilst, on one hand, this suggests that dance was overlooked as a valued art form in its own right, on the other hand this speaks to the interdisciplinarity inherent to avant-garde dance practices, speaking to both literary and performative practices. As Mary Emma Harris writes: “There was no formal dance teacher during the postwar years, although students who had studied dance continued to organise informal groups.”[[135]](#footnote-135) One of these groups was organised by Cunningham’s student Elizabeth (Betty) Jennerjahn, along with her husband Pete Jennerjahn. Running from 1948-1949, the LIGHT SOUND MOVEMENT Workshop came to be the focal point of artistic activities during this period in which no regular formal training was available. Although very little survives in terms of records of the workshops, existing accounts primarily recall interdisciplinary performances of written texts, including a “dance-dramatisation of *The Lament of Ignatio Sanchez Mejias* by Federico Garcia Lorca after seeing a performance of Doris Humphrey’s interpretation of the poem.”[[136]](#footnote-136) Harris writes of the workshops that they were “a continuation of the Verse and Theatre class that Olson had taught in 1949” and that “the class created short theatre pieces using projected slides, painted backdrops, music, dance, and at times, verbal texts or themes. […] Although the performances were undoubtedly often amateurish, the study of theatre through the creation of original performance pieces rather than the production of [plays of] expository scripts represented a significant change in the approach to theatre.”[[137]](#footnote-137) In the Jennerjahns’ workshop, interdisciplinary practice was encouraged more than ever, with collaborative efforts across music, literary and visual arts being the structural base of each production.

In a step beyond the theatrical output of Richards and Olson’s performance teachings, the LIGHT SOUND MOVEMENT workshop allowed students to experiment in forms of performance, such as mime and dance, which do not rely on language as the primary means of expression. Additionally, the workshops also facilitated non-verbal realisations of written scripts. For instance, the most consistent recollection of the Jennerjahns’ workshop was their performance of Olson’s ‘The Kingfishers’. Elizabeth’s Jennerjahn recalls: ‘I remember especially rehearsing ‘The Kingfishers’ with Charles Olson. We were near the kitchen; Olson was reading; I was dancing; Pete was playing; and a sharp light was on me, and the whole rest of the dining hall was dark. And there were a lot of LIGHT SOUND MOVEMENT rehearsals with Nick Cernovich and Tim LaFarge and moving in our green-and-red-striped tights through green-and-red saturated light created by the green-and-red-striped slides’.”[[138]](#footnote-138) Experimentation with colour, and particularly colour and light in dialogue with one another, provided another key movement practice in the workshops. That is, to watch the coloured costumes change appearance under the coloured lights provided a movement sequence of its own and provided an exploration for the students into dance movement extracted from the performing body – ideas that would continue to develop in later collaborations and performances at the college.

The most influential instructor in dance and performance at Black Mountain College was Merce Cunningham. Although he only taught at the college for short periods over a few years, Cunningham, alongside John Cage, dramatically altered the student and faculties’ perceptions of the possibilities for performance. His dances were a representation of pedestrianised movement, but necessarily and importantly presented as a performance. In addition, his approach to choreography in general was firmly rooted in the embodied experiences of one’s contexts and environment. Cunningham’s embodied dance practices are integral to my interpretation of Olson’s choreographic poetics and require attention before turning to Olson’s work.

*Merce**Cunningham at Black Mountain College*

Previously a student of Martha Graham’s, Merce Cunningham embarked on his independent career in order to explore his unique approach to dance, which in contrast to Graham’s practice, “was not dependent on the accepted need for story, character, and dramatic mood. He was interested in pure movement and its inherent possibilities.”[[139]](#footnote-139) In this way, Cunningham was invested in the medium specificity of dance: the body and its natural potential. By withdrawing from the expressionist work of Graham to discover his own artistic vision, which sought to challenge expression through movement, Cunningham “repeated the pioneering gesture of his mentor,” taking it a step further. As Susan Foster writes: “Cunningham’s decisions turned expressionist dance inside out. His pieces challenged the organic connection between feeling and form by denying the expressionist choreographers’ symbolism, their syntax, and their distinction between pedestrian movement and dance movement. In addition, Cunningham shattered the hallowed relationship between dance and music and thwarted viewers’ expectations by providing no commentary on the human condition.”[[140]](#footnote-140) In place of story and emotion, Cunningham centred the virtuosic body as dance’s primary artistic tool.

At the very beginning of his prolific seven-decade career, Cunningham was invited to teach at the College’s 1948 Summer Institute. Here he gave Technique of Dancing classes, which Olson reportedly attended. [[141]](#footnote-141) These classes reflected the experimentations that came to define Cunningham’s career, such as his interest in movement for movement’s sake and the notion of time, rather than theme, as the basic structure for a dance.[[142]](#footnote-142) In all recorded accounts of a Cunningham class, no context or explanation was ever provided for any choreography, and rehearsals took place with no musical accompaniment or costume and stage design. Cunningham would give each dancer a series of moves to learn, and these would be repeated until technically correct. His dances were not expressive of a particular mood or narrative, but were explorations of the relationships possible between choreography, as a process and material in itself, and the performing body. Whether through chance procedure or conventional movement composition, Cunningham would devise a sequence of movements and actions and in the classroom or rehearsal, these would be tested out on the dancing body. It was in this process of the body’s interpretation of movement – not as interpretation of the movement’s meaning, but their interpretation of the pulls and forces of that movement through their body’s ability to execute it – that dynamic relationships between the choreography and performance developed. For Cunningham, the only thing any of his dances could be considered to be ‘about’ is this relationship between the performance, the dancer, and the choreography. In this sense, it is the artistic medium—the dancer’s body – that determines the content of the work.

Importantly, Cunningham, like Olson, envisions replacing the egoistic, confessional, subject in artistic creation by exploring instead the relationships between the maker and medium, and through an internalised exploration of the relationship between the body and the world. In addition, their practices share an emphasis on the neutralisation of personal expressiveness in their work, in “getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego.”[[143]](#footnote-143) In this approach to dance composition, whereby the material precedes any pre-determined meaning or structure, Cunningham’s practice speaks to Olson’s appeals for ‘objectism’ in poetics. As he writes in ‘Projective Verse’:

It is now too late to be bothered with [‘subjectivism’]. It has excellently done itself to death, even though we are all caught in its dying. What seems to be a more valid formulation for present use is ‘objectism’, a word to be taken to stand for the kind of relation of man to experience […]. Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the ‘subject’ and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creatures of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For man is himself an object.[[144]](#footnote-144)

Although Olson attempts to distance himself from Objectivism by instead asserting ‘objectism’, Robert von Hallberg argues that: “[the] contradiction between Olson’s claim that it ‘is now too late to be bothered with’ subjectivism and his definition of objectism as ‘the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the ‘subject” suggests that his position was much closer to the Objectivists than he admitted.”[[145]](#footnote-145) In particular, von Hallberg aligns Olson’s thinking on ‘objectism’ to Louis Zukofsky’s objectivist theorising, which shaped his belief that good poetry “is precise information on existence out of which it grows, and information of its own existence, that is, the movement (and tone) of words.”[[146]](#footnote-146) Words, then, as with the body in Cunningham’s dance works, are the subject and object of a poem, and the poem is to be an exploration of the various movements and possibilities open in arranging words across the given space. The composition of phrases and order in Cunningham’s choreography, like in Olson’s verse, is determined by the specific contexts of each separate unit in relation to space and in relation to other units that either precede or follow them. The initial phase of choreography is therefore an internalised exploration of the body’s organic response to its environment. In Cunningham’s role as instructor, who teaches his dances to be performed by other dancers, however, this ‘spontaneity’ of composition is distorted by the process of teaching and repeating the choreography outside of its original context.

Whilst Cunningham and Olson similarly endeavoured to construct a postmodern revision of their respective disciplines, Cunningham’s experiments with chance are at odds with Olson’s ‘composition by field’. As Olson asserts in *Last Lectures*, “We’re going thru a phase of liberation / not that you have to get rid of the past / (the radical view) / but *to articulate order* / Poetry…is the articulation of order. / You can’t get rid of the past / What will be true is / that the life thing will be in hand.”[[147]](#footnote-147) Given the atrocities of World War II, Olson’s emphasis on order, and the human responsibility to reinstate order to the world, suggests that to leave anything to chance would be at great risk. David Herd characterises Olson’s thinking in a similar sense, writing that:

What Olson set out in ‘Projective Verse’, following the catastrophic disregard for human society that constituted the Second World War, and building on his profoundly cross-disciplinary study of political and economic space in nineteenth-century literature, was a conception of the poem grounded in relations; an aesthetic that made relatedness (of people, objects and ideas) axiomatic to the poem’s form and creative practice.[[148]](#footnote-148)

In this positioning of interdisciplinary thought and practices in connection to one another, Olson’s compositional practice does share with Cunningham’s choreography a particular emphasis on creating a whole out of situating otherwise disparate components in relation to one another. Although Olson establishes these relations with purpose, actively organising parts into dialogue with one another, and Cunningham relies on chance to excavate natural relations between movements and images, the two methodologies share compositional principles. In both instances, the processes of exploring and representing these organic interrelations between separated units are made the primary subject of the works.

Cunningham’s ‘Technique of Dancing’ classes came to fruition on August 20th 1948 in *A Program of Dances* with Louise Lippold and Sarah Hamill: “The Program included three solo dances previously performed by Cunningham, *Totem Ancestor* (1942), and *Root of an Unfocus* (1944), both with music for the prepared piano by John Cage […]. In addition, three new dances were choreographed and performed at the college. [*A Diversion*; *Suite for Toy Piano*; *In A Landscape*].”[[149]](#footnote-149) *Totem Ancestor* is a two-minute dance that includes a repeated sequence of pliés and jumps, the male soloist jumps into a kneeling position, shins on the floor, into a deep plie on his toes, from which he then jumps into an upright position, feet flat on the floor. Later, the sequence is repeated, now replacing the final jump with a leap, kicking his legs backwards, toes positioned towards the body. This phrase is repeated three times as the dancer moves across the space, diagonally, from backstage-right, to front stage-left. In this sequence, the body is pushed to its logical extreme, executing physically challenging transitions whilst mapping a three-dimensional floor pattern, moving across the widths and levels of the stage. In a similar sense to the organisation of linguistic components across the lines of a poetic field, *Totem Ancestor* takes as its subject the ‘movement and tone’ of the performer’s body as it fulfils the choreographic phrases. Crucially, however, this is not as simple as composing sequences of movements for a dancer to perform. The limits and possibilities of the performance space itself, as the specific site of the dance, are equally central to the dance’s subject.

Cunningham does not put the body in motion as an abstracted form. Instead, it is how the body interacts with and experiences its environment that determines the nature of the dance. Further, as Roger Copeland says of Cunningham’s choreography:

Another way in which Cunningham encourages us to focus on what the movement ‘is’ … is by refusing to differentiate in any hierarchal way between steps that are traditionally preparatory (e.g. a plie that precedes a jete) and the steps that normally serve as climax or exclamatory punctuation for a phrase. In the fractured causality of Merce Cunningham’s universe, one moment doesn’t ‘lead’ to the next. Each moment – each instant of the present – is given the full weight of his attention. As Cunningham one wrote, ‘if one thinks of dance as an errand to accomplish, as a message to be sent, then one misses the *spring* along the way’ (1952, 22).[[150]](#footnote-150)

It is precisely this fracturing of conventions at play in *Totem Ancestor*’s jump sequence. The deep plie repeated in this phrase, which would normally serve as the preparatory and landing pose for the leap, are repurposed as the primary travelling movement, whereas the leap is performed stationary, and as an after-effect of the plie-jumps. Crucially, moreover, this idea of each instant, each movement, being in and of the present, is fundamental to Cunningham’s choreographic practice. Indeed, just as he composes without narrative, no single movement is designed to facilitate or cause another, because in his view, each new count presents a new moment to be captured, and with this, each movement exists in and for itself.

Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ professes a manner of composition similarly grounded in the immediacy of potential present in each new unit of verse:

the process of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished. And I think it can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at all points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER![[151]](#footnote-151)

Here, Cunningham’s ‘*spring* along the way’ is reconceived by Olson as an urgent push to persist in creation, rather than dwelling on what has come before. Within this urgency, Olson perceives the potential to get close to expressing organic responses to perceptions, rooted in embodied signals of ‘the nerves’. In doing so, moreover, the content perpetually points back to the process of composition as its subject, or as Copeland writes of Cunningham, ‘to focus on what the movement ‘*is’.*’ Similar to the organisation of poetic components into a field, Cunningham organises movements according to their natural fit with the performing body, and the performance space, rather than according to aesthetic or emotive considerations. To write or dance each new phrase in the present is an additional means of destabilising the expressive egoistic voice in a work. With no looking back on what has just been done, and no preparation for what is to come next, meaning-making reflection is abstracted from the work.

Despite his innovative experimentations and shifts away from expressive dance, what Cunningham sought to reject was not theatre, but linear narrative, “the plotline based on the classical dramatic arc: development, crisis, denoument.”[[152]](#footnote-152) Whilst at various stages in his career he also moved away from the traditional proscenium theatre space, his dances were always transformed into productions intended for an audience, distinguished from, and elevated above, everyday experience. As Noland writes:

Ultimately, the spatial relationships of the street (and *not* the movement vocabulary of the street) are what interest him. However to become ‘art’, to become ‘expression’, these spatial relationships must be seized within the frame of a window, door, proscenium, lens, or screen. That is, the potential relations *he* sees emerging before his eyes must arise before the spectator’s eyes as well. Otherwise, these relations, generative of ‘theatre’, exist for Cunningham alone. […] To make theatre out of life, the choreographer must make *his* theatre *our* theatre. Something must happen *after* the arbitrary to make ‘action’ into ‘dance’.[[153]](#footnote-153)

Ultimately, regardless of whether he was producing pedestrianised movement phrases, or choreographing dances for film, the stage, or just a rehearsal space, Cunningham understood the significance of performance and theatricality in establishing his work as art. In a repertoire so invested in the physiological experience of how we relate to the external world, the theatricality of engaging, challenging, and addressing an audience remained a primary concern to Cunningham sharing his vision.

The product of Cage and Cunningham’s 1952 summer session, Cage’s ‘Untitled Event’, or *Theatre Piece No. 1*, is a key exemplar of how this distinction between performance and life was established. Retrospectively regarded as the first ‘Happening’, the performance took place in the Black Mountain College dining hall, and consisted of numerous individual non-narrative performances, taking place within pre-arranged time-frames, and with no direct link between one another.[[154]](#footnote-154) The separate elements of the work that came together to form the whole – namely music, dance, light, design, text – were created in isolation from one another, to come together only at the point of performance before the audience, with each artist unaware of what the others had prepared.[[155]](#footnote-155) Describing the event after the fact, Cunningham recalls that:

Cage organised a theatre event, the first of its kind. David Tudor played the piano, M. C. Richards and Charles Olson read poetry, Robert Rauschenberg’s white paintings were on the ceiling. Rauschenberg himself played records, and Cage talked. I danced […] The audience was seated in the middle of the playing area, facing each other, the chairs arranged on diagonals, the spectators unable to see directly everything that was happening. There was a dog which chased me around the space as I danced. Nothing was intended to be other than it was, a complexity of events that the spectators could deal with as each chose’.[[156]](#footnote-156)

In this historical performance, Cage and Cunningham began the experimentation of collaboration that relied on artists creating individually, and thus testing the bounds of collaboration as it had thus far been understood. The crucial event, then, came in the audience’s perception. Being confronted with numerous conflicting pieces at once, Cunningham alludes to the possibilities of how viewing one art form alongside another necessitates new understanding and experience for the perceiver. The interdisciplinary collaboration of this piece, in which many artists compose works in their own field, independently, to come together as separate pieces within the frame of a whole work, serves as a blueprint for the regular practice that would later characterise Merce Cunningham Dance Company.

In the summer of 1953, one year after *Theatre Piece No. 1*, Cunningham once again returned for the college’s summer session. In another historical milestone for both the college and the dance world more broadly, it was here that the Merce Cunningham Dance Company was founded.[[157]](#footnote-157) The summer’s triumphant visit ended with the first performance as the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, which took place in the college dining hall and included *Septep*, *Dime a Dance*, *Banjo*, and *Collage* as well as a new piece, *Suite By Chance*, with an electronic score by Christian Wolff.[[158]](#footnote-158) Each of these dances came to define the forward direction of Cunningham’s company, and remain some of Cunningham’s best-known works.In particular, *Suite By Chance* marks the move away from artistic ancestors such as Schawinsky, who had paved the way for the intermedia, cross-discipline performances leading to *Theatre Piece No. 1*. Where Schawinsky’s *Play, Life, Illusion* and Cage’s Happening have drawn frequent comparison, the former was produced through careful planning and rehearsal, with no chance element, whereas the latter relied entirely on chance, and had no hierarchy across the media of lights, movement, and music.[[159]](#footnote-159)

Cunningham’s *Suite By Chance*, “a long dance in four movements to music for magnetic tape by Christian Wolff,” was choreographed using a large series of charts.[[160]](#footnote-160) Cunningham created “a chart numbering body movements of various kinds (phrases and positions, in movement and in stillness); a chart numbering lengths of time […]; and a chart numbering directions in space (floor plans).”[[161]](#footnote-161) Cunningham student and dancer Remy Charlip explains Cunningham’s process:

These charts, which defined the physical limits within which the continuity would take place, were not made by chance. But from them, with a method similar to one used in a lottery, the actual continuity was found. That is, a sequence of movements for a single dancer was determined by means of chance from the numbered movements in the chart; space, direction, and [time] were found in the other charts. At important structural points in the music, the number of dancers on the stage, exits and entrances, unison or individual movements of dancers were all decided by tossing coins.[[162]](#footnote-162)

Speaking years later on *Suite By Chance*’s premiere outside of Black Mountain College in 1953, Cunningham said that “it was impossible to see a movement in the modern dance during that period not stiffened by literary or personal connection, and the simple, direct, and unconnected look of [*Suite By Chance*] (which some thought abstract and dehumanised) disturbed. My own experience while working with the dancers was how strongly it let the individual quality of each of them appear, naked, powerful, and unashamed.”[[163]](#footnote-163) According to Cunningham’s beliefs, by limiting personal preference in the formal organising of a dance’s timing, spacing, and direction through chance procedures, the dancer’s capacity for exploring their personal relationship to the movements was liberated. That is, focused only on the execution of each movement phrase, rather than its expressive meaning or significance, the performer may experiment with and push the potential of their body’s understanding and actualising of it, and it turn reach their own interpretation of the action, only *through* dancing.

Dance, for Cunningham, was a purely embodied phenomenon. For this reason, Cunningham resists formal methods of choreographic notation, placing emphasis on the lived experience of the dancer processing movement through their active body:

All of these systems based as they are on symbols which are translated by the dancer, are out of whack. The element of them that always troubled me was the translating act. The notator looks at a step, translates it into a symbol, writes it down then at some time later, the dancer looks at a symbol, translates it back into a step, and then does it.

But this is not the way a dancer acts. In [their] class and in [their] rehearsing [they look] directly at a step, or someone doing a movement, and reorganizes that immediately into [their] own body. It is more direct than the symbol-syndrome.[[164]](#footnote-164)

The distinction Cunningham makes between a dancer’s ‘personal connection’ to a dance and the first-hand embodied experience of ‘reorganising’ choreography ‘into [their] own body’ is intricate but significant. What Cunningham rejects is the projection of personal emotion or narrative onto a dance, calling instead for the dancer to learn and perform the steps of the choreography according to the forces and tensions that the movements specifically require. The particular performance of a dance does depend, however, on each individual dancer’s physical experience of performing those moves. For instance, where one dancer may instinctually step onto *pointe* with force, another may do so with delicate precision. Transitions of a dance, in addition, may be performed with greater speed or finer grace depending on the particular style and ability of the performer. What is important for Cunningham is that the choreography is felt in a physiological, rather than emotional, way within the dancer. Having inherited this approach to dance training, in which both the dancer’s body and the dance itself are divided into strict groups to be carefully placed together, Cunningham reworked the system once again, becoming an innovator and pedagogue for the next generation of dancers, beginning at Black Mountain College.

Where Cunningham sought to create a fundamentally embodied choreography, Olson’s theorising in ‘Projective Verse’ aims to conceptualise speech as the primary physical embodiment of language, rather than type. In doing so, Olson emphasises language as an action and a medium, rather than as visual signs printed on the page. In a letter sent from Olson to Cunningham in 1952, during one of Cunningham’s summer visits to Black Mountain, the poet writes:

dance

is an action AND a thing.[[165]](#footnote-165)

This defining of dance as both process and product serves as a model for Olson’s thinking about poetics. In its framing of poetry as an embodied form, ‘Projective Verse’, can be read as not only exhibiting the influences of his exposure to dance, but also as a document that is in many respects expressive of this interdisciplinary context of poetry and dance.[[166]](#footnote-166) Cunningham’s particular influence through his embodied choreographics is evident in Anne Dewey’s claim that, “Olson sought original, unalienated consciousness in the body’s spontaneous response to its environment.”[[167]](#footnote-167) Elsewhere in her writings on Olson and dance, Dewey states that:

The projective poet’s language emerges dancelike from the body, registering physical forces on the body through breath-based rhythms scored formally on the page. ‘Composition by field’s’ conception of the poet as object among others inspires Black Mountain’s distinctive poetics of ‘open form’. This blend of processual spontaneous response with the Bauhaus legacy of disciplined challenge to conventional form through abstraction produces the distinctive, precise visual form of the Black Mountain poem, described paradoxically by art critics as expressive gesture, akin to the abstract expressionism of Rauschenberg or Jackson Pollock, and in literary studies as formally disciplined, as compared to the Black Mountain poets’ more colloquial free verse contemporaries.[[168]](#footnote-168)

Described here is Olson’s choreographic poetics, in which he literally notates experienced movement onto the page, structuring the verse according to the moving body’s relation to the space it occurs in. In this organisation, placement of language on the page is physical without being expressive. In these ways, Olson’s published work is best understood not as a ‘score for speech’, nor in a visual sense informed by painting, but as choreography that is rooted in the process of movement inherent to his methodology of verse composition.

Just as Olson breaks poetry down to the essential features of syllable and line, organised within the field of the page to create the whole of the poem, Cunningham:

conceives of the body as muscles, bones, sinews, and nerves, physically organised to move with tension, liquidity, percussiveness, and lightness and with enormous variations in shape and timing at each jointed segment. It moves through space and time, the dancer must exercise assiduously but also must recognise and become attuned to the body as a material entity with its own logic. The body’s intrinsic interest, then, resides not in its ability to display or to make manifest but rather in its own consummate physicality.[[169]](#footnote-169)

In this innovative approach to organising the internal workings of the body to compose a performance of dance lies the roots of Olson’s poetics, in which he sought to represent these bodily procedures through language, taking each minute part of the poem apart to gain an understanding of their workings before placing them together in verse. In this sense, Olson’s embodied poetics are not “a reference” to the physical body of the speaker, as such, but rather as an “inner inherence.”[[170]](#footnote-170) In this distinction between ‘reference’ and ‘inherence’ is the nature of representation. For instance, where plastic arts represent that which can be viewed as an artifact, in consciously experienced reality, the physiological sensations his poetics seeks to make manifest, like dance, occur beyond our conscious experience. Rather, they take place within the body, and our knowledge of these processes comes from an internal, inherited, awareness. Embodied poetry, for Olson, is the closest one can get to representing the body’s physiological processes, which are experienced only abstractly and cannot be seen or felt consciously, making them manifest through language in order to attempt to make it something we, as readers, can better grasp or experience. Where in ‘Projective Verse’ Olson’s sense of the physiological dimensions of poetry is only implicitly outlined, he extended this theorising later on in his career in his essay ‘Proprioception’

*Writing Through The Body: Proprioception*

In this essay, Olson further outlines his theorising on the physiological dimensions of human intelligence: “PROPRIOCEPTION: the data of depth sensitivity/the ‘body’ of us as object which spontaneously or of its own order produces experience of, ‘depth’ Viz. SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM / BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES.”[[171]](#footnote-171) If the physical body is the core at which the human subject experiences the world, it follows for Olson that it thus acts as the core organising principle of poetry, the ordering and expression of experience. Olson’s primary concern in the essay is the notion of the body as its own stimulus, the active body creating and experiencing sensation through movement. In Olson’s view, the outer body, formed by tissue, moves and experiences, and sends signals inwards to the circuits that form the body’s emotional and intellectual intelligence. This fascination with anatomical systems grew into a desire to conceive of a reality in which the body itself is the source of value and judgement, as well as sorrow and joy:

‘Psychology’: the surface: consciousness of ego and thus no flow because the ‘senses’ of same are all that sd contact area is valuable for, to report in to central. (THE WORKING OUT OF ‘PROJECTION’) Inspection, followed hard on heels by, judgment (judicium, dotha: cry, if you must/ all feeling may flow, is all which can count, at sd point. Direction outward is sorrow, or joy. Or participation: active social life, like, for no other reason than that – social life. In the present, wash the ego out, in its own ‘bath’ (os).[[172]](#footnote-172)

Olson, in his focus on the ‘interoceptive’ function of the body, attempts to reframe ‘mind’ as ‘guts’, and in turn associates neurological/auditory and circulatory/respiratory systems, mirroring the investment made in ‘Projective Verse’ to the flows between the external and internal bodily functions. In breathing, it is the body’s musculature system as a form of life in itself that is of interest. Likewise, in ‘Projective Verse’, it is physiological movement of the body in verse, rather than a vocalised breath, that is at stake.

‘Proprioception’ continues: “The gain: to have a third term, so that *movement* or *action* is ‘home’. Neither the Unconscious nor Projection [have] a home unless the DEPTH implicit in physical being [is] asserted or found-out as such. Thus the advantage of the vale ‘Proprioception’ as such. The ‘soul’, then is equally ‘physical’.”[[173]](#footnote-173) Olson’s key claim is to the physicality of human receptors of emotion and knowledge, and the capacity for the physical body’s capacity of feeling and experiencing.

One of Olson’s primary concerns in ‘Projective Verse’ investigates “how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished,” concluding that:

ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at all points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can.[[174]](#footnote-174)

Olson’s assertion that ‘one perception must lead to another’ is not a polemic instruction, or prescriptive in essence, but rather descriptive. In this latter sentence, he aptly embodies both the poetic and physiological kinesis that he posits through his rapid flow from one short phrase onto the next. This exemplifies his professed privileging of writing that follows the instinct of the moment, guided by a bodily impulse to act and move, rather than a heavily revisionary process of organised articulation. Olson perceives and composes his poetics through physiological systems. Here, for example, the writing process becomes an extension of the body’s nervous system through the physiological process of the hand in action, external stimuli being received through the body inwards, and vice versa, as the writing body assigns these sensations to the page.

Thus, writing is an act of projecting outwards the body’s ‘perceptions’, experienced through ‘the nerves’, or as Olson terms it in the ‘logography’ section of ‘Proprioception’, “Word writing. Instead of ‘idea-writing’ (ideogram etc.).”[[175]](#footnote-175) In this portion of the essay, Olson establishes a firm differentiation between his own practice and Pound’s ideogram writing practice. The logical extension of this approach to writing, for Olson, ‘leads to phonetization’: “The procedure involved may result in a full phonetic transfer, as in a drawing of knees to express the name ‘Neil’ (from ‘kneel’), of the sun for the word ‘son’, or even together in a drawing of knees plus the sun to express the personal name of ‘Neilson’.”[[176]](#footnote-176) Beyond the literal consequences of this claim to language, here Olson explicitly outlines writing in choreographic terms, at its root a system through which cues are used to designate bodily functions, such as the movement of the tongue or the drawing of breath, in order to make sounds, and thus communicate through the body.

Writing, in these terms, is a means of getting the body to move in ways that are communicative and meaningful. This movement is not led by narrative, but by instinctual physiological pathways set in motion. Cunningham, writing on his approach to initiating movement choreography, speaks in a manner that appeals to Olson’s claims:

In a direct way. I start with a step. […] I ‘step’ with my feet, legs, hands, body, head – that is what prompts me, and out of that other movements grow, and different elements (theatre) may be involved. This is not beginning with an idea that concerns character or story, a fait accompli around which the actions are grouped for reference purposes. I start with the movement, […] then, out of this action, begins to assume its own portions, and other possibilities appear as the dance proceeds.[[177]](#footnote-177)

From this initial ‘step’, the dancing body takes over, one action leading to the next through the internal perceptions of the body kicking in and guiding the movement through the kinaesthetic impulse of the nerves and muscles. The mind and muscle senses a natural progression from one step into another, not with any formal narrative intention or accordance to grammatical rules, but through pure physiological instinct. The body perceives, and then it must act. Likewise, in composing poetry, then, the writer is led by the instinctive circuits of one thought initiating the next. In this sense, Olson speaks to his compositional process through the biological givens of the nervous system. Where Cunningham conceives of discrete units of movement within the whole of a movement phrase, Olson takes syllables as minute particles of speech that, in their particularity, resist broader systems of conventional movement of grammatical rules.

In his essay, ‘On Composing a Dance’, Cunningham celebrates this externalisation of the body’s impulses in dance, writing: “It is that blatant exhibiting of this energy, i.e., of energy geared to an intensity high enough to melt steel in some dancers that gives the great excitement. This is not feeling about something, this is a whipping of the mind and body into an action that is so intense, that for the brief moment involved, the mind and body are one.”[[178]](#footnote-178) Importantly, for Cunningham, his approach to choreography is invested not only in formal ideologies of composition, but equally in the energetic joy conveyed through the dancing body in tune with its internal wiring. Similarly, Projective verse is born in the poet’s perception of the body’s instinctual processes of circulation, tuning into and acting out its internal rhythm and impulses, and in this way, for Olson, poetry is akin to dance: “And the threshing floor of the dance? Is it anything but the LINE?”[[179]](#footnote-179) The line, then, is the space in which movement occurs. Rather than a dance floor, Olson alludes to the ‘threshing floor’ of farmers, in which they used their feet to ‘thrash’ corn or wheat, and thus signals to the ritualised labour activity of the wheat field.

Reitha Pattison remarks on Olson’s understanding of space that: “The import of the presence and absence of matter in empty space as an unreconciled cosmological condition for Olson can be apprehended by comparing his pronouncements of space as an elemental and solid reality, a ‘fact’ we live and breathe in.”[[180]](#footnote-180) Space, or in ‘Projective Verse’ the field, then, is not a negative or *lack,* but rather a site of potential, of what is to fill it. Within this space takes place the dance of language, the choreography of the syllable. Olson continues: “We now enter, the large area of the whole poem, the FIELD, where all the syllables and all the lines must be managed in their relation to each other”[[181]](#footnote-181) The task of the poet is to first create, through engaging with the body’s internal impulses, and then organise into a sequence of movements on the page space.

Cunningham approaches the space of the stage in a similar way, writing in 1952 that “the fortunate thing in dancing is that space and time cannot be disconnected, and everyone can see and understand that. A body still is taking up just as much space and time as a body moving. The result is that neither the one nor the other – moving or being still – is more or less important, except it’s nice to see a dancer moving. But the moving becomes more clear if the space and time around the moving are one of its opposite – stillness.”[[182]](#footnote-182) Cunningham, in his innovative approach to choreography, regarded the body in a similar way to Olson’s ‘Proprioception’, professing:

The dancer’s discipline, [their] daily rite, can be looked at in this way: to make it possible for the spirit to move through [their] limbs and to extend its manifestations into space, with all its freedom and necessity. I am no more physical than my legs, but from them I sense this fact: that they are infused with energy that can be released in movement […] a man is a two-legged creature – more basically and more intimately than he is anything else. And his legs speak more than they ‘know’ – and so does all nature. So if you really dance – your body, that is, not your mind’s enforcement – the manifestations of the spirit through your torso and your limbs will inevitably take on the shape of life.[[183]](#footnote-183)

The dancer is, of course, able to manifest these internal impulses in much more explicit ways than a poet, the body in movement being their direct medium. However, Cunningham’s understanding of the body’s internal and external workings, as well as his approach to organising these physiological functions and instincts into coherent art forms lend a crucial lens through which to understand Olson’s poetics.

Cunningham’s figuration of ‘the spirit to move through [their] limbs’ works to the same effect as Olson’s ‘breath’ running through both the body and the lines of his verse, and in both cases, what this amounts to is ‘the shape of life’ and the artistic expression of it. The system Cunningham describes, through which the body builds energy that is released only through the movement capacity of that body, speaks to Olson’s theorising in ‘Proprioception’ and ‘Projective Verse’. The leg, for instance, carries a kinetic energy that may only be expressed through action defined by itself. The leg, then, feels and moves as its own entity, its movement replicating the kinetic circuits within the body. Olson’s ‘poetics of breath’ is not a literal tracing of the breath onto the page as an instruction for performance, but a means of organising the introspective functions of the body out, through language, onto the page. Thus, Olson’s poetic task focused on embodying the systems of the anatomical body through verse, striving towards a poetry that must act out this process of the body’s instinctive perceptions, sensing, introspecting, and reacting. Subsequently, his poetry becomes a sequence of movements, notating the physiological phenomena of a body as it perceives its environment. That is, a choreographic poetics:

Black at that depth  
turn, golden boy no more  
white bone to bone, turn  
hear who bore you weep  
hear him who made you  
deep there on ocean's floor  
turn  
as waters stir;  
turn, bone of man[[184]](#footnote-184)

In this poem, which was performed by Nick Cernovich as a dance at Black Mountain College, Olson’s lines read as both choreographic instruction, and poetic verse.[[185]](#footnote-185) The poem traces the body through its physiological structure – ‘bone to bone’ – through to its spiritual making – ‘him who made you’. In the poem, Olson imagines a dead body in water, the movement being caused by the conditions of the ocean rather than the body itself. The repeated motif, ‘turn’, not only maintains a kinetic energy through the poem, reading almost instructively and creating a rhythm rooted in action, but also seeks to graph the complete cycle of life and death. Importantly, the poem’s mapping of this movement utilises the organisational principles of choreography to notate the continuation of movement beyond death. Whilst the body’s capacity for movement has ceased, it remains part of the wider kinesis of the world’s action. Additionally, the recurrent ‘turn’ can also be read as a choreographic graphing of the body’s movement from life into death. Imagined in the ocean, the body is pulled downwards, which similarly marks its descent into death.

Much like Cunningham’s instinctive leg leading itself in movement, the ‘turn’ of the poem manifests the exploring, feeling subject tracing its roots, feeling out its place in the world, compelled into expressive movement. The turning body carries multiple connotations: to turn back, or to return; to turn away, and thus to move forward from the point of origin; and equally, the pirouette, a full turn, which creates a sense of confusion, of seeking to move beyond but ultimately ending up in the same position as one started. Additionally, ‘turn’ has meaning in poetics, of ‘verse’, and in particular refers to line endings, and in this context, refers back to the very movement the term notates in the poem: to the suspension created at the line endings as one phrase runs from one line onto the next. In this duality of meaning pointing back to the action of the term’s meaning, Olson emphasises the choreographic nature of the poem as ‘turn’ functions as both instruction of movement to be performed and a description of the action being performed. In this duality of meaning, Olson plays out the body’s systems of introception and perception, a choreography of the physiological circuits of self-knowing.

This kind of bodily movement can be seen in Olson’s verse to operate as subject, theme, and method. In ‘The Twist’, one of *The Maximus Poems*, for example, Olson writes:

the whole of it

coming,

to this pin point

to turn

in this days sun.[[186]](#footnote-186)

Here, once again, in the kinetic imagery of ‘turning’, Olson unpacks the cycles of being. For instance, in the turning of the tide, or of the earth on its axis, is a reciprocal exchange of energies, in and out. Within these terms, the earth itself is conceived as organism, its seasons becoming metabolic processes. Through his poetic language centred around ‘turning’, Olson embodies the cyclical procedures of the body, and the world in which that body resides, drawing upon the relational experiences between humans and environment, in which physiological cycles are at the core of existence.

Although Olson and Cunningham never directly collaborated, through their coinciding time at Black Mountain College and shared artistic concerns with the move away from expressionism in their respective arts, and back towards the ‘root’ of the sensing, moving body, their work mutually speaks to one another’s. In particular, for both artists this emphasis on physiological creation also bound that moving body to its external surroundings, with emphasis on the natural world. In 1952, when both Olson and Cunningham were at Black Mountain College, Olson wrote ‘Merce Of Egypt’. The poem reads as if from Cunningham’s perspective, and appears derivative of Cunningham’s Black Mountain classes, and thus acts as a kind of document of Cunningham’s pedagogical and choreographic project of that time. The poem begins:

1

I sing the tree is a heron

I praise long grass

I wear the lion skin

over the long skirt

to the ankle. The ankle

is a heron

I look straightly backward. Or I bend the to the side straightly

to raise the sheaf

up the stick of the leg

as the bittern’s leg, raised

as slow as

his neck grows

as the wheat. The presentation,

the representation,

is flat.

I am followed by women and a small

boy in white carrying a duck,

all have flat feet and, foot before foot,

the women with black wigs

And I intent

upon idlers,

and flowers[[187]](#footnote-187)

The recurrent ‘I do this’ statements of the poem are the imagined first-person perspective of Cunningham, and read as choreographic directions. Cunningham did, particularly early in his career, take inspiration from the natural world and animal movement when stylising his dance. For example, Copeland points out that despite Cunningham’s professed evasion of expressionism or imagery, “of course, there are also occasions when Cunningham’s movement seems unmistakably ‘animal-like’. Alastair Macauley, for example, refers to ‘Inlets II’ as ‘one of Cunningham’s most hushed nature studies…those flat rhythms of Cunningham dance can catch the very essence of animal life. I see a bird floating, taking wings, hovering, resettling; rodents scuttling and then freezing’.”[[188]](#footnote-188) As such, Olson’s ‘The ankle / is a heron’ is a particularly poignant signpost to Cunningham’s unique movement quality, often favouring a bent ankle over the classical pointed feet, mustering the image of the bird’s physique. In addition, Cunningham did not have his dancers perform *en* *pointe*, and hence Olson alludes to the ‘flat feet’ of his dancers. In writing this poem, Olson positions himself as a ‘reader’ of Cunningham’s choreography.

As Cunningham’s reputation grew, he often became associated with a movement quality of sharp angles, and the line ‘I look straight backward. Or I bend to the side straightly’ perfectly summarises what would be viewed in a Cunningham dance: one soloist moving only their neck back and forth in isolation, the other bending sidewards from their hip. Crucially, Cunningham’s taking from the natural world in his choreography was never to be a direct replication, or literal narrative of animal life, but much like Olson’s poetics of the body, was an indirect embodiment of the *essence* of animalistic movement. For example, the nicknamed ‘cat dance’ phrase in *Solo Suite in Time and Space* was not performed as a literal depiction of a cat, but rather took from the study of feline movement a particular quality in the performance of leaping. The focus of such movements was to interpret animalistic movement, through performance, onto the human body, and by extension to push and revise such action according to the capacities of the human physique. In addition, the jolted, inconsistent rhythm of the poem echoes Cunningham’s use of indeterminate, disruptive time phrases in his choreography, as Edwin Denby writes: “His dances are built on the rhythm of a body in movement, and on its irregular phrase lengths.”[[189]](#footnote-189) Furthermore, the signature angular and jolting movement quality of Cunningham’s choreography is embodied in Olson’s determination of phrase and line lengths. Olson’s poem is arranged through the feeling out of intuitive movement phrases of the body, at one point flowing and regular, the next jagged and blunt. In ‘Merce of Egypt’, Olson applies Cunningham’s innovative movement practices into his verse, putting into practice the kinetic poetics of physiology put forward in ‘Projective Verse’.

*Choreographics Poetics in ‘The Kingfishers’*

Often in Olson’s poetry, this kinesis of composition, of the body’s perception circulations and the writing hand, manifests in the poem as it is presented on the blank space of the page, creating an additional visual element to the ‘energy-flow’ of the poem. For instance, Eleanor Berry identifies Olson’s “isolation of single words and lines, wide variations in line lengths, stepping of lines and line groups, inclusion of typographic devices conventional in nonpoetic discourses, and even shaping of abstract visual forms,”[[190]](#footnote-190) to create a textured and varied presence across the poetic field. However, where Berry, like Katz, reads Olson’s poetics through the visual qualities as they appear on the page, ‘Projective Verse’ points to these experimentations in line variation instead being rooted in movement. The organisation of phrases and syllables embody the organic movement of the body, travelling from one end of the performance space, in this case the page, to the other, the choreographic task being to organise these relations in time and space.

‘The Kingfishers’ (1949),[[191]](#footnote-191) is considered by many critics to be the key exemplary instance of Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ theory, and had been rehearsed as a dance in the Black Mountain LIGHT SOUND MOVEMENT workshop with Elizabeth Jennerjahn.[[192]](#footnote-192) Berry writes of ‘The Kingfishers’: “Olson using alternating indented and outdented lines to interweave two distinct statements, referring to orientation or movement in two opposite directions, thereby conveying the simultaneity of the two opposed pulls.” [[193]](#footnote-193) For example, the second section of the poem begins:

I thought of the E on the stone, and of what Mao said

la lumiere”

                    but the kingfisher

de l’aurore”

                    but the kingfisher flew west

est devant nous!

                    he got the color of his breast

                    from the heat of the setting sun![[194]](#footnote-194)

Throughout the poem, as the lines begin to stray from the central motif of the kingfisher, the

poem is repeatedly drawn back towards its image, just as in the above stanza the lines begin

by pursuing the Mao strain, only for its flow to be interrupted by the recurrent image of the

bird. The two strains of the poem occur simultaneously in time and space,

yet do not bare any explicit connection to each other, creating a kinetic tension of push and pull across the page space. In addition, the imagery of Mao, the leader of a ‘movement’ inciting action through a cosmological metaphor of ‘the east’, running alongside the kingfisher’s movement to the west, conjures the image of the rising and setting sun. Although pulling away from one another in opposite directions, together the two motifs articulate the world turning, of a revolution in both a cosmological and a political sense, and most significantly, the union of all processes of being in relation to one another.[[195]](#footnote-195)

In dance, the organisation of dancers as disparate units across the performance space can be used to create a sense of unity or disparity according to the arrangement of how the movements of each dancer interact or contrast with those around them. Cunningham often spoke of redefining the dancer’s roles on the stage in a similar way to Olson’s handling of individual syllables and phrases. Where in traditional ballet corps there would be, for example, eight female dancers, moving together in perfect unison, Cunningham approached his dancers as a collection of soloists, each performing different movement

phrases within different rhythmic structures:[[196]](#footnote-196)

Taking nothing else but space, you see how many possibilities have been

revealed. Suppose you now take the dimensions of time. Our eight dancers can

be doing different movements, they may even do them to the same rhythm,

which is all right, there’s nothing wrong with any of it! – but there is also the

possibility that they can be doing different movements in different rhythms,

then that is where the real complexity comes from, in adding this kind of

material one on top of and with another […] the possibilities become

enormous.[[197]](#footnote-197)

In the 1967 documentary *498 3rd Ave*, Cunningham said of his approach to composition that it is not “one thing following another,” but rather, components “within a field”.[[198]](#footnote-198) This is evident in his placement of multiple ‘soloists’ across the stage, rather than adhering to traditional structures of the ballet corps. In Olson’s poetry, different ‘voices’ function analogous to the different bodies of Cunningham’s choreography. Olson, similarly, speaks of the poetic ‘field’ as the space in which the poetic lines are to be organised. That is, in both dance and poetry, rather than a rigidly structured narrative piece, the choreographic process places individual elements in order to experiment with, and embody, the natural and incidental relations of components in the world. In fact, Roger Copeland writes, “We can go a step further by observing that not only is everybody a ‘soloist’ in Cunningham’s choreography…Every section of every *body* can become a soloist as well – for Cunningham often sets the head, arms, torso, and legs moving in opposition to one another.”[[199]](#footnote-199) In Cunningham’s 1960 composition *Field Dances*, the title implying “both country fields and spatial fields […] instead of a linear thing, having a field of movements,” Cunningham approached the placement of movements and dancers across the performance space in a manner similar to Olson’s organisation of ‘The Kingfishers’.

Cunningham said of *Field Dances* that: “each dancer has a series of relatively simple movements, it’s not intended to be a long piece, they can do the movements in any order and any number of times, they can repeat, they can go on and off stage; there were certain sequences that two dancers did together and three dancers and four, each had these movements that he would do with any person.”[[200]](#footnote-200) Just as Cunningham’s choreography set out to experiment with balletic corps through innovative uses of time and space structures, poetry had come to reject the basis of inherited form in search for a new poetic structure – as the opening lines of *The Kingfishers* states, “What does not change / is the will to change.”[[201]](#footnote-201) Most notably, for Olson, this came through his experimentation with syntax and form in his poetry. Paul notes of these lines that “it may be that dance, with which Olson was familiar from youth, had for him the priority it had in human history – and was necessary now because the requisite of the will to change was the will to move, an idea he pushed at Black Mountain College.”[[202]](#footnote-202) As Herd suggests, the poem’s investment in change is bound to Olson’s experiments with form, observing:

the way Olson uses the page to produce a field of inter-related elements, thereby calling for a reading that cuts back and forth across space and time, is undoubtedly fundamental to his poetic practice. […] What we are asked to understand is the way that visuality figures relations, especially human relations, how the reciprocity and interference of feedback inform both human agency and historical change. One can read Olson’s understanding and expression of change into any line, or set of corresponding lines, in the poem.[[203]](#footnote-203)

Both on the stage of Cunningham’s dance and the page of Olson’s poem, these textured, conflicting strains not only create a rich kinetic energy through the flowing and slicing of movement as it is being created and presented, but the works’ reception enact a further kinetic response, in the movement of the viewing eye across the stage or page. Whether indeterminate, as in Cunningham’s dance, or intentional, as in Olson’s poetic composition, the interrelation of contrasting sequences draws upon an inherent relation between events and subjects.

For instance, the man-made change of Mao’s leadership will always co-exist with the natural order of the kingfisher’s life cycle of migration. The two may never explicitly cross paths and impact one another, but their placement interweaving across the page embodies their co-existence in the world. Berry continues: “This section of the poem concludes with further words of Mao, arranged in a stepped line, reinforcing their dynamic message”:[[204]](#footnote-204)

Mao concluded:

                   nous devons

                                       nous lever

                                                         et agir![[205]](#footnote-205)

‘We have to stand up and act’: this conclusive statement is thus a call to action in the poem, brought into motion through its arrangement, dancing across the page. These lines also function as a literal verbal instigation of physical and political ‘movement’, itself a kind of mass choreography that carries palpable social consequences. Whereas the previous section created a back and forth between motifs, across the page and by extension back and forth through time and space, these stepping lines conclude the Mao section of the poem by travelling across the space, each new line reaching further toward conclusion, and thus travelling towards future events. A linear movement, no longer reflecting or hesitant in its direction, moving towards further ‘change’. This key theme of change continues in section four, part one, of the poem, which begins:

Not one death but many,

not accumulation but change, the feed-back proves,

the feed-back is

the law

Into the same river no man steps twice

When fire dies air dies

No one remains, nor is, one

Around an appearance, one common model, we grow up

many. Else how is it,

if we remain the same,

we take pleasure now

in what we did not take pleasure before? love

contrary objects? admire and / or find fault? use

other words, feel other passions, have

nor figure, appearance, disposition, tissue

the same?

[…]

We can be precise. The factors are

in the animal and / or the machine the factors are

communication and / or control, both involve

the message. And what is the message? The message is

a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable

events distributed in time[[206]](#footnote-206)

Here, ‘change’ is tied to ‘feed-back’. When read through the lens of the physiologically grounded theories Olson puts forward in ‘Proprioception’, this ‘feed-back’ can be interpreted as those processes of internalising external phenomena that govern the body’s primary functions. Even read through the poem’s suggested thinking on cybernetics, these basic procedures of the machine are modelled on the proprioceptive human body. The lines ‘the feed-back is / the law / Into the same river no man steps twice’ summarises, on a rather macro-scale, the systems through which the human unconscious interprets its environment, experiences, and thus learns about the external spaces it occupies, and adjusts its behaviour and thinking accordingly. ‘Not one death but many, / not accumulation but change’: with one’s knowledge acquisition through embodied experience, the self ‘dies’, or rather constantly renews, through each lived change. As with the ‘kingfisher’ and ‘Mao’ strains of the first part of the poem, this section is also concerned with the cycles and inherent interconnections between disparate components of the world. With form being only an ‘extension of content,’ following these natural processes of the world, the poem’s composition, too, must follow this natural order. To return to Olson’s musing that it is ‘not a reference but an inner inherence,’ this section of the poem addresses the process of Olson’s choreographic poetics by making these inherent processes the poem’s content.

The embodied imagery of these lines makes manifest Olson and Cunningham’s approach to choreographics as a continual revision, and remaking, through the placing together of minute, distinct units into a cohesive whole: ‘Around … one common model, we grow up.’ This renewal is valued by the poem’s speaker as central to human experience. It is only through constant change that ‘we take pleasure now / in what we did not take pleasure before?’. Crucially, moreover, through this evolution of self, garnered only through self-made knowledge of trial-and-error experience, our ‘output’, as such, also evolves: ‘use other words, feel other passions, have / nor figure, appearance, disposition, tissue / the same?’. New found modes of expression, to ‘use other words’, is borne out of a renewal of ‘tissue’. Expression and perspective are from and of the body, and thus, ‘both involve the message.’ In the final lines of this section, ‘The message is / a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable / events distributed in time,’ the speaker is describing a fundamentally choreographic process. Whether his thinking is of ‘animal … or the machine,’ these lines expose a means of interpreting and representing the world through organisational procedure that has its roots in the choreographic. Ultimately, moreover, in the case of Olson’s poetics, the organisation and communication of ‘the message’ is an embodied act that begins with the writing hand.

With the typewriter, expressed in ‘Projective Verse’ through the motif of the hand, the poet carries out a physical exercise, or labour, of assigning his words to the page, a dance in which the keys are the stage, and the writing hand is in motion. Derived from Keats’ ‘this living hand’, the motif of the hand as artistic tool is recurrent in Olson’s work, most poignantly so in *Maximus Poem* [III.177]: “This living hand, now warm, now capable / of earnest grabbing,”[[207]](#footnote-207) and is central to the kinetic action attached to the writing process. Olson’s use of the typewriter was never organically instantaneous, however, as Michael Kindellan observes, he “frequently wrote poems on whatever writing surface happened to be at hand.” Transferring his poems to page by the typewriter was thus a secondary act:[[208]](#footnote-208) “the idea that projective verse is somehow more germane to the primary event of writing, which in Olson’s case usually consists of holographic inscription, rather than to the secondary event of writing (its instructive arrangement on the typed page) is the exception rather than the rule.”[[209]](#footnote-209) In light of this, and despite his apparent celebration of the typewriter’s function in ‘Projective Verse’, the ‘machine’ itself performed a secondary process to the initial composition. The writing hand, in this instant, is in motion, the poem “energy transferred” directly from the poet’s body to the page.[[210]](#footnote-210)

Where the poet’s impulsive scribblings of verse onto ‘whatever writing surface’ he could find is the improvisatory, organic composition of poetry, the typewriter enacts the subsequent choreographic process, organising the various components into a coherent whole after the fact. Just as Olson regarded the typewriter as a means to an end in presenting his work, for Cunningham, as Carrie Noland writes, “execution is a step in the creation of the work.”[[211]](#footnote-211) Cunningham explains his choreographic practice to Lesschaeve in terms similar to Olson’s theorising of phonetic writing: “I never thought and I still don’t, that dancing is intellectual. I think dancing is something that is instinctual. No matter how complex something I make or do may be, if it doesn’t come out as dancing it’s of no use. I don’t care about the diagrams – those are things that one does, that I need to do often with my pieces because of complexity. But that’s only the paperwork – you have to get up and do it,”[[212]](#footnote-212) or as Olson writes, ‘nous lever et agir’. The real work for both Olson and Cunningham, then, is in *doing.* It is in the innate movement of the body that Olson’s poetics are born, the ‘breath’ of the body manifesting its inner workings out onto the page. The writing process, just like Cunningham’s formal choreographic practices, is merely a necessary means to the end of inscribing these kinetic processes onto the field of the page.[[213]](#footnote-213) At the heart of this ‘doing’ is performance, and in Olson’s case, writing as performance. Olson in fact refers to his work not as ‘poetry’, a static noun, but as *writing*, a noun that instead carries implications of action. Through his active process of the body in action, its movement manifesting onto the page, the writing body performs its thinking through inscription.

*A Syllabary for a Dancer*

In 1951, one year after the publication of ‘Projective Verse’, Olson published ‘A Syllabary for a Dancer’, in which this shift towards movement and poetics as *doing* is emphasised further, with explicit emphasis on dance as a means through which to understand and achieve this end. Where in ‘Projective Verse’ Olson first signals towards the physiology of writing through metaphor, the essay functions largely, as Perloff argues, as a summary of what has happened, and will continue to happen, in poetry during the first half of the twentieth century.[[214]](#footnote-214)

‘A Syllabary for a Dancer’, on the other hand, is a more accurate *ars poetica*, in which Olson outlines his poetic project, calling upon the dancing body as artistic renewal for verse-making:

The will is for work, to get it done; the body is for understanding, its sensibility and capacity the gate in and out of what used to be dubbed the soul; and the mind, is for pleasure, the pleasures, to bring into being those delights which essence holds to have them. […] We are aware they are one. I have called it the Single Intelligence. It is one way to pose the principle of totality. Surely the methodology of this veda – the correction of all technology – is recognition of the kinetic as the act of life: literally, to move. Thus dance the base of the discipline, and its syllabary the source of any other.[[215]](#footnote-215)

The term ‘syllabary’ refers to “a collection, set, system, list, or table of syllables,” and as such describes the organisation of units into a coherent whole, that is, the ‘methodology’ of choreography.[[216]](#footnote-216) Here, Olson states the claim he had hinted at throughout ‘Projective Verse’: the true essence of ‘the work’, of creation through writing, is in the ‘kinetics’ of doing, to bring the internal ideas and processes of the soul and mind into being through movement of the body. This is the principle of dance, in its most basic terms, but Olson extends this to mean that dance in turn must be the principle by which all other creative acts abide. By extension, the primary instrument of verse-making is the human body:

[Dance] is simultaneously an object and an action. As a medium, it has the tremendous advantage – and limit—of the human body as its object, and that its action bucks that gravity, can depend on it. It is of all arts the one in which habit and limit are most palpably severe, most necessary, due to the resistance of our own physicality. At the same time its advantage is that it teaches, straight, the principle of instrumentation: in dance the truth is most apparent, we use ourselves.[[217]](#footnote-217)

By characterising dance in the same terms as in his letter to Cunningham, as ‘simultaneously an object and an action’, Olson implies the equal validity of the movement, or process, and the end that it achieves—namely performance – as it is the action of this creative process, rather than the final product, that connects art and life in this way. If the performance is the ‘object’ of dance**-**making, the true ‘doing’ of the work comes in the initial formalising of the steps. In addition, for Olson the body is both our primary means of experiencing sensations, of processing information from the outside in, and thus our connection to the external world, and the means by which one expresses oneself.

In ‘Last Lectures’, Olson additionally grounds the human experience of language in the bodily processes of perception, as he is reported to have said that:

The fundamentum of language is being able to imagine words inside

it’s a matter of discovering language in your self

of *hearing* the words inside

[…]

There ain’t no recording instrument for poets

only their bodies

I don’t think you’ve all let out your own tissues

to feel them (yr own (intuitive) feelings about things).[[218]](#footnote-218)

Writing, then, is a fundamentally embodied phenomenon of ‘feeling’ the language. This can be interpreted as a binding of the dual experiences of the body’s physiological experiencing of the world and its environment, and that body’s means of externalising these processes through utterance. Whilst language is the tool of this expression, and exists external to the body, it is nonetheless intricately woven into the procedures of ‘feeling’. In this way, Olson attaches the value of ‘truth’ to the body.

Writing on ‘Tyrian Business’, the poem to which ‘A Syllabary for a Dancer’ was a companion, Paul observes that: “For Olson, himself a dancer, movement is the basis for renewal: only get underway, begin the work by which one attacks chaos. But it must be movement of the kind exemplified here, vertical movement, having its origins, its *tropos*, in the chaos within oneself, in what is ‘implicit in himself, what he is and what he impelled to do, that is, how to move.”[[219]](#footnote-219) The poem begins:

1

The waist of a lion,

for a man to move properly

And for a woman,

who should move lazily,

the weight of breasts

This is the exercise for this morning

2

how to dance

sitting down[[220]](#footnote-220)

In Paul’s reading of the poem, he identifies Olson’s hope for America as “they have discovered ‘physicality’ (that they are things among things) and ‘know what the earth is…’ Now they need only to learn to sit.”[[221]](#footnote-221) Olson’s call to action, ‘the exercise for this morning’ is a move toward change centred in action, but crucially, ‘to move properly’. The real work is thus in choreographing one’s actions, or as Paul writes, externalising the chaos within oneself, through such vertical movement. As ‘A Syllabary For a Dancer’ develops, Olson extends his metaphor of the poetic body until ‘the poem’ itself becomes a body:

the kinetics of words, to the syllables as the eyes and fingers of his medium, to the nouns and verbs as the torso and limbs, to the connectives as the ankles and wrists of speech, and to his total use in any given go as more than the sum of any of these parts or of their relevances to each other, as a dance which has achieved its implicit form is more than the body and its movements, is, actually, that thing we used to call the beauty of it.[[222]](#footnote-222)

If the elements of a poem are a body, divided into components to be arranged amongst each other in interesting and dynamic ways, and placed into rhythmic structures, then writing is an act of choreography. To write poetry is ‘to dance / sitting down’. In a later poem, titled ‘Later Tyrian Business’ (1961), Olson puts this theorising of a poetics of dance into action. Through its physical organisation across the page, ‘Later Tyrian Business’ can be read as choreographic notation in which the speaker’s thoughts are organised kinetically through movement, and out of which the resulting text spurs movement in the reader. In his notation, Olson is precise in his placement of the physical language of the poem in the physical space of the page. Just as in ‘Syllabary for a Dancer’ Olson claims that dance ‘is simultaneously an object and an action,’ and that ‘it teaches, straight, the principle of instrumentation: in dance the truth is most apparent, we use ourselves,’ here Olson endeavours to produce a text-piece that reveals itself as, like dance, both process and object. The marks on the page point back towards the physical act of poetic composition, tracing the action of both thought and hand in its process.

‘Later Tyrian Business’ reads as instructional notation, rather than coherent verse, both in its formal organisation on the page and in its language. For example, ‘from / the Diadem, / ‘morning’ / after’ references early passages of ‘Tyrian Business’, such as:

As my flower

after rain, wears

such diadem[[223]](#footnote-223)

Seemingly, the second poem serves as a revision of the first, Olson now inserting additional material. From these references to ‘Tyrian Business’ on the top of the left-hand side of the page, the arrow that spans to the right side of the page takes the reader’s eye across, interjecting and diverting the natural order of reading. Following this instructive graphing of how the poem is to be read, the eye is led to ‘hangs’, the position of which, isolated in the middle of the line, graphs the suspended rhythm that the phrase denotes. From this point of suspended hesitation, the content of the following lines on both the left- and right-hand sides of the page explore the same two subjects: the angel and the dog. Taking the organisation of the verse as instruction for the reader, it is not clear at which points the latter part of the left-hand side, after ‘morning’, is supposed to be read. Rather, the two stanzas that deal with the images of the angels and the dog occur almost simultaneously, demonstrative of two strains of thought unravelling at once, in some sense coinciding with one another, and in another sense independent of each other. The contrast between line lengths and enjambment between these two parts is the most prevalent factor in differentiating them. The section on the left, for example, both in its language and the way it’s printed, slightly slanted to give the impression of hurried handwriting, reads as notes, unrevised and incomplete. In contrast, the stanza on the right-hand side of the page, with its enjambment creating a cohesive rhythm, perhaps suggests a more ‘finalised’, or, that is, revised and stylised, realisation of the themes notated in the section that precedes it.

Read alongside an example of Cunningham’s choreographic notation, published in his *Changes: Notes on Choreography*,[[224]](#footnote-224) the kinesis of Olson’s formal structuring of ‘Later Tyrian Business’ takes on a quality closer to choreography than conventional poetic form. In Cunningham’s choreographic document, arrows are similarly incorporated to designate direction of both the reader’s interpretation of the images, and of the physical movement that the notation demonstrates. Whilst Cunningham’s choreographic notes are explicit in their instructive purpose, designed as directions for subsequent performance, the images on the page also serve as a physical manifestation of his internal thought process. That is, of ordering internal phenomena onto a coherent graph. Whereas in Cunningham’s choreographic document these physiological processes are manifested through images, allowing for a more immediate expression, Olson’s organisation of the body’s internal workings through language work out of the more revisionary tool of language. In Cunningham’s desire to show the dancer in second position plie, rotating their upper body to the right, as shown in the first image of dance #17, this is achieved through straightforward imagery, the illustration in some sense acting as a hieroglyph, denoting kinetic movement through a single static symbol that the viewer can easily interpret. In Olson’s ‘Tyrian Business Later’, in contrast, the lines,

as His Tongue

Hangs, dropping,

depict the intended image through the combination of language, and physical placement of the words on the page. The arrangement of phrases running into the next line, alongside the deep enjambment of the lines to create a hanging, or dropping, visual image on the page, represents and emphasises the impression of the hanging tongue described in the verse. To create such sensory kinesis in poetry necessitates a more refined, reflective process. In contrast to Cunningham’s immediate, instinctive diagrams and short-hand notes, choreographic poetics such as Olson’s comes out of an intention, or aspiration, to muster and notate movement within the language of a poem.

Olson’s choreographic poetics operate through the dual components of, on the one hand, composing poems that notate movement in the structuring of the verse, which here can be understood through Cunningham’s choreographic notes, and on the other hand, through a manifestation of the body’s internal, physiological, workings, expressed externally onto the page. In the case of the latter, one of the most prevalent influences for Olson’s understanding of dance as an external embodiment of this anatomical phenomena, was the Black Mountain College dancer and instructor, Katherine Litz.[[225]](#footnote-225)

*Katherine Litz: Dancing as Reading*

Katherine Litz initially taught at Black Mountain for the summer sessions of 1950 and 1951, and was later asked to remain for the 1951-1952 academic year to teach dance, having been recommended to the college by Merce Cunningham. Litz wrote of her approach to teaching that ‘the discovery of a *way* to work is the most important factor in creative dance development.’”[[226]](#footnote-226) Harris writes of Litz that her “wit, her beauty, and her dance combined to create a magical presence at the increasingly male-dominated college,” whilst also noting Litz’s belief that “a person’s sense of movement is deeply rooted in the subconscious and can be released through the process of discovery.”[[227]](#footnote-227) In June Rice’s account as a student in Litz’s class, she wrote that: “Katie was constantly alert to patterns all around her, and she focused my attention on the art of seeing. A favourite exercise was to follow someone and copy their walk, their posture, their gestures, the tensions they carried, until they were so inside their being that you began to feel what they felt, then move as that person.”[[228]](#footnote-228) This form of knowledge acquisition speaks to Olson’s conceptualising of ‘stance’ in its approach to understanding another person’s reality through embodying their physical standpoint in the world. Crucially, in the ever-patriarchal environment of the college, Litz’s most well-regarded dances centre around the representation of women and their experiences, “through the slightest nuances of movement.”[[229]](#footnote-229) Litz’s most notable dance works during her time at Black Mountain were *The Glyph* and *Chorales for Spring*, both created in the summer of 1951 to music composed by the college’s Lou Harrison, as well as *The Long Night* and *Thoughts out of Season*. In addition, Litz choreographed two dances for students to be performed in March 1952, *Transmutations* and *Montage*.[[230]](#footnote-230)

Litz went against the grain of expressive traditions, as well as against her avant-garde peers’, such as Cunningham’s, focus on advanced technique, to establish a dance that privileged externalising the body’s subconscious impulses. That is, whilst Cunningham and Litz shared some vision in their renouncing of traditional modes of expression and representation, compared to Cunningham’s strict regime towards technical and physical perfection, Litz placed far more emphasis on the individual experience of movement.[[231]](#footnote-231) Rice remarked on this division in approach that: “Merce’s work implied that you do not lift your leg unless you can lift it all the way, and we tried. Then Katie came in the summer and Katie’s work implied that it does not matter how high you can lift a leg, it is how you feel when you lift it that is important.”[[232]](#footnote-232) Another of Litz’s students, Mary-Jean Cowell, writes of Litz’s process that:

Working with Katy revealed that one of her special talents is the ability to create extremely complicated movement which, however, escapes the appearance of ‘virtuoso technique’. In fact, her movement often appears tremendously spontaneous and free. My only explanation for this phenomenon is the great subtlety of her work. The complexity of her rhythmic structure often lies in split-second hesitations, tiny variations on a repeating rhythmic pattern. Yet Katy understands (consciously or instinctively) how this subtle irregularity contributes to the psychological ambience of her pieces.[[233]](#footnote-233)

Like Olson’s embodied poetics, Litz’s approach to dance was centred in feeling out the body’s instincts and capabilities, the aligning of the internal impulses and external abilities. In contrast to Cunningham’s strict technical specificity in his teaching and dancing, Litz allowed her dance to be carried by physiological impulse to create the illusion of such strict movement. The task of the dance, then, was to bring out the minute workings of the body, working in her Black Mountain classes by focusing on one body part at a time, to eventually form a coherent sequence by relating one move to the other through complementary and contrasting dynamics. In a similar manner to that with which Olson’s lines stutter and linger in hesitation, revising and rephrasing themselves before beginning and being abandoned, Litz’s privileging of instinctual physiological phenomena in her choreography allows for the body’s natural faltering and suspension. Just as for Olson the syllable was the crux of composing each line to form the whole of the verse, for Litz each choreographic phrase arose from each detailed micro gesture of the body.

Teaching at Black Mountain College at the same time as Olson, Litz implemented many of the same ideals into her approach to composition and pedagogy, with her own dance practice being grounded in “pure movement, the physical properties of the body signifying the meaning of its own materiality.”[[234]](#footnote-234) The New York Public Library’s Jerome Robbins Collection houses a script used by Litz to teach a dance workshop at the 1963 ‘Eight Annual Conference: Creative Teaching of Dance’. In the midst of practical movement activities, Litz expressed her approach to dance, and her beliefs around its meaning, stating:

What is dance? It is a language. Your body expresses an idea. The movement itself – what does it do? It is visual. What do you see? You see that you need movement material. I wanted you to think to a certain extent as we did those movements. You were thinking direction. Later on this concern for direction will become more automatic. We think with our bodies and minds. Visually, you made spatial designs. What about the body? You don’t have to move out of one spot in order to make designs. Let us make some designs. A moving design. If something comes from the movement, we will see what we can do with the theme. Our bodies are the instruments. Start with the arms high and go straight down – design and space. Cross the arms in front of the body and bring them out and up. Find a way to relax and do it very easily. Make the movement smaller, or larger.[[235]](#footnote-235)

Here, Litz’s teaching explores the body’s innate movement, with the subsequent theme and arrangement of a dance being a product of this initial movement, rather than the classical mode of ballet production, for example, in which movement is designed to portray a theme or narrative. For Litz, as for Olson, thought and feeling comes as much from the body as the mind, it is fundamentally an instinctive, physiological phenomenon. Elsewhere in the class Litz tells the students to “be very quiet and listen and move only when you feel like you want to move and how you want to move.”[[236]](#footnote-236) Furthermore, dance is here a language, as well as a visual phenomenon. Through dance we must communicate what ‘we think with our bodies and minds’, but this expression manifests through the ‘spatial designs’ that the moving body creates as it travels across the performance space.

In terms of practical exercises in movement, Litz’s class focused on moving the body so as to open it up and ground oneself in the sensations of the free movements. For example, the first physical exercise Litz takes the class through reads: “Take lots of space so that you can move around. Stretch the spine. Place the hands on the hips and lean way out with little bounces…go all the way down, reaching away from the body, let go the arms and head. Roll up, rounding the back, open up the arms, and stretch them out to the sides and plie. When you are down let everything go. Come up and reach way out over to one side them let go.”[[237]](#footnote-237) By taking the body from movement to complete relaxation of muscles, Litz leads the students into their bodies, and away from their minds, by becoming attuned to the delicate sensations of the body in motion. Consequently, Litz’s exercise encourages such movement to become increasingly automatic to the dancer, free from thought, reinstating the ‘body as instrument’.

Reviewing a performance of hers for *Black Mountain Review,* Olson “praises her presentation of the body freed of socially imposed meaning. Her ‘investigation of the body as instrument’ presents ‘the possibilities of the bodies parts…so that…their physicality…is in front of you so clean of all reference that it is like when the finest painter confronts you with paint in the power of itself as pigment’.”[[238]](#footnote-238) Indeed, Litz approached choreography in a manner akin to Olson’s ideals of projective verse, in what she called ‘inventive movement’,[[239]](#footnote-239) considering each part of the body “as an instrument in the orchestra of the whole,” playing “one part against another.”[[240]](#footnote-240) Cowell describes this quality of Litz’s choreography in textile terms, as a knot in yarn: “As I watched her draw pieces together, I had the feeling of many contrasting strands being woven together, but in an unpredictable fashion – some strands disappearing completely for a while to reappear in the least expected place. And here and there in the fabric, an inexplicable knot or hole. These ‘knots’ might be a marvellously [absurd] touch of humour, a gesture loaded with emotional connotations.”[[241]](#footnote-241) Additionally, June Rice further recalls of Litz’ classes that, “whatever simple movement started the class was the germ out of which composition emerged. A plie, add an arm, a twist of the head, change direction, the other arm, torso position, change dynamics, level, tempo – and at the end of a two-hour class, the group involved was performing a Katherine Litz composition.”[[242]](#footnote-242) This description of Litz’s creative process embodies, and *acts out,* Olson’s composition by field.

In Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ he identifies the key components to writing verse as the syllable, the line, the field, and the object: “every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and that these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world.”[[243]](#footnote-243) Just as Olson dissects the poem through metaphor, as if a body, into ‘nouns and verbs as torso and limbs’ and ‘the connectives as the ankles and wrists of speech,’ Litz dissects the body and its dynamic possibilities into relations and tensions to create her dance works. However, where Olson’s poetics goes through the body onto the page, mediated through the process of writing, for Litz the body speaks for itself, and in doing so, expresses itself in pure form.

In her own terms, Litz had apprehensions around the term ‘performance’ for this reason. Suspecting a loss if innate humanity through performativity, Litz wrote in an essay titled ‘Performance Can Have a Dangerous Connotation’, housed in the New York Public Library Archive: “In my view, performance is the ability to get inside oneself during the action so as to present fully one’s intention to the viewer. *Presentation* may be a better term psychologically: it might serve to prevent over-projecting or anything extraneous from interfering with the very sensitive union between heart, head and body.”[[244]](#footnote-244) The task of dance is to present the body in movement, exactly as it exists, from the inside out, rather than *perform* what is not authentic to that body. This carried through Litz’s choreography, as Elizabeth Jennerjahn writes in a review of Litz’s 1951 concert:

Each dance seemed to have penetrated to the ultimate of the possibilities of its own choreography, music, and costume. The quality of each was pure, elusive, and completely realised as any living thing is completely itself, not because of any formal structure which is of course there and through which the life moves, but because Miss Litz allowed the forces within her to move, breathe, and struggle as the dance demanded. At the instant of performance it seemed as if a human being could not be more totally aware, could not create more indisputable life out of the varied elements of which dances are made.[[245]](#footnote-245)

As Olson’s ‘A Syllabary for a Dancer’ details, Olson’s poetry aspired to the conditions of dance, to be led by the body’s instincts and shaped by the combination of each minute, intuitive gesture to form a natural whole. Furthermore, to return to Olson’s calling upon physicality as the key to verse in his claim: ‘ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means […] get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can.’ In Rice’s account of a typical Litz class, the choreographer’s body in motion precisely enacts this: the body flows organically from one movement to the next, free from revision of strict choreographic design. Consequently, Litz’s dance refuses metaphor and narrative in favour of showcasing the body’s innate impulses and capacities.

*The Glyph Exchange*

*The Glyph* was choreographed as part of an interdisciplinary exchange amongst Black Mountain faculty, inspired by Olson’s trip to Mexico to view the ancient Mayan hieroglyphs: “Back at Black Mountain for the summer of 1951, Olson transmitted his excitement regarding glyphs to the community there. As [Litz] describes it, “the glyph dance grew out of an exchange of ‘glyph gifts’ across the faculty. Charles Olson presented Ben Shahn with a glyph poem and in turn Shahn presented Olson with a glyph painting. I then presented the community with a glyph dance with music by Harrison and décor utilising the Shahn painting enlarged. The common idea of a Glyph expressed by the different art forms was simply a compound image contained in a single work.’”[[246]](#footnote-246) Known as ‘the glyph exchange’, it has been consolidated into the history of the college as a primary exemplar of the collaborative and intermedia culture within the arts. Through this exchange, the artists within the collaborative community of Black Mountain College engaged in an active process of reading and interpreting the previous participant’s work in order to ‘realise’ their response through their subsequent creation.

The influences that led Olson to the hieroglyphs can be traced through Pound, to Ernest Fenollosa’s *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*,[[247]](#footnote-247) in which Fenollosa’s argument is based in “the (admittedly questionable) belief that Chinese ideograms constitute a system of reading and writing which is lively and flexible because it lacks the rigidities of English syntax.”[[248]](#footnote-248) Olson himself rallies against syntax in ‘Projective Verse’ as a restrictive convention in poetry, championing instead ‘the LAW OF THE LINE’. To return to his distinction between ‘word writing’ and ‘idea writing’ in ‘Proprioception’, the former carries for Olson the requirement of participation, and thus the important context of interdisciplinarity and collaborative community, which is manifested in the organisation of the ‘glyph exchange’. Although Fenollosa’s text undoubtedly influenced Olson’s approach to understanding the hieroglyphs, where Fenollosa valued what he understood to be the unmediated representation of physical experience in Chinese characters, Olson’s focus in the glyphs was on their subsequent potential in broadening the range of possible movements in language. That is, if language and syntax are viewed as physical constructions, rather than logical rules, then the ‘movement’ of language opens up to far more possibilities. Adapting these ideas of the kinetic system of language taken from the glyphs, the work that followed explored both the creative body and the body of text it produces, focussing on the broadening of possibilities of movement and expression. The exchange began with a poem written by Olson:

GLYPH

(For Alvin & the Shahns)

Like a race, the Negro boy said

And I wasn’t sure what I heard, what

Race, he said it clear

gathering

into his attention the auction

inside, the room

too lit, the seats

theatre soft, his foot

the instant it crossed the threshold

(as his voice) drawing

the whites’ eyes off

the silver set New Yorkers

passed along the rows for weight, feel

the weight, leading

Southern summer idling evening folk

to bid up, dollar by dollar I

beside him by the door.[[249]](#footnote-249)

Olson gifted the poem to artist Ben Shahn, who in turn produced a drawing. Shahn’s drawing, which was taken from a design he had previously projected onto the body of dancer Nick Cernovich for a college performance, “depicts a headless torso as a rigid black armature filled in with a mosaic of colour and framed by two arms hanging on either side.”[[250]](#footnote-250) Litz’s dance was performed to Harrison’s composition, the “music and dance operat[ing] as inter-and- independent entities with passages of perfectly rhymed sounds and motions, as well as bells that run out of sync and piano notes that linger beyond Litz’s disappearance,”[[251]](#footnote-251) reflecting Litz’s shared exploration with Olson of the relations of objects and things in the ‘field’ of the art work.

Ruth Erickson offers the most thorough account of the Glyph pieces in Helen Molesworth’s *Leap Before You Look,* in which she outlines the recurrent themes and images across the works. In each case, the body is both the tool of creation and the subject of the work. Erickson writes of Olson’s poem that he had composed it:

after encountering an auction in the town of Black Mountain, while in the company of a boy named Alvin, the nephew of the college’s African-American cook, Jack Lipsey. ‘His poem,’ the historian Daniel Belgrad writes, ‘attempts to reconstruct the complex of meanings surrounding the word, by providing an ideogrammic image that locates ‘race’ in the context of a specific utterance and telescopes outward.’ Beginning with a reference to the spoken word (‘Like a race, the Negro boy said’), Olson builds a rich constellation of images (‘the room/ too lit’, ‘the whites’ eyes’) and sensations (‘the seats/theatre soft’, ‘feel/the weight’) that endows his meditation on the abstract word *race* with a lived, corporeal character. It is the quality of race as an abstraction derived from and applied to a physical body that Shahn captures in his drawing.[[252]](#footnote-252)

From this reading, elements of ‘Projective Verse’ are recognisable in Olson’s beginning with the single word ‘race’ – both its linguistic qualities and thematic meanings, including its potential multiple meanings: where the boy means footrace, Olson takes racial identity—and working outwards, placing it in relation to both the physical surroundings within the setting of the scene of the poem, and its broader socio-political and sensory connotations. Thus, glyph-like in its dual function as referent and symbol, ‘race’ shapes the body of the poem. Above all, the poem concerns itself with the physiological experiences of the two bodies – the white poet, and his African-American companion – existing within the space of the auction room. Significantly, whilst the boy experiences first-hand discomfort and alienation in this space, the poet experiences this second-hand; the speaker stands in discomfort as a result of his body’s instinctive reading of the person stood next to him. Consequently, the poem represents alienation in two distinct ways. The first is an explicit experience of not fitting in, of finding yourself and your body as ‘other’, along with the sensations felt by the ‘the whites’ eyes’ all on you. The second form is far more implicit as the speaker senses an alienation from his companion through his sensory intuition of the boy’s discomfort, alongside a feeling of unwelcome by association. In both cases, the body is experienced as abstracted from oneself, as if each of the subjects are seeing themselves from an outsider’s perspective. Ultimately, the poem represents the sensations felt by Alvin, yet removes his perspective by recounting the tale from a second body, the speaker’s.

For Olson, the Mayan hieroglyphs both represented the kinetic, physiological act of writing, and stood as a body of writing, a language, in its own right, which he states: “on its very face, is verse, the signs were so clearly and so densely chosen that, cut in stone, they retain the power of the objects of which they are the images.”[[253]](#footnote-253) Thus, Olson endeavoured to create verse that traces the body that writes, meanwhile presenting language as a kinetic force of movement, beyond formal rules of syntax.

This duality of the glyph is further expressed in Shahn’s sketch, presenting a body-coming-through writing, a static image coming to life, which was later projected onto Cernovich’s dancing body. In this sense, in Shahn’s image, the body writes, and is written. Following Shahn’s sketch of the static torso, Litz’s dance further extends this notion of the body as both the means and end of the creative process:

For her nine-minute solo dance *The Glyph*, Litz retained [Harrison’s] six-part structure, emerging and disappearing six times from behind a four-by-eight flat painted with an enlarged version of Shahn’s drawing. Each time, she invented a kind of character through the manipulation of her body and a jersey tube costume. Moving with mime-like precision and humour, she first bounced onto the stage, flipping the top of the dress up and down, and then reappeared galloping, pivoting, shuffling, and crawling, showcasing an index of how bodies move. As rapidly as a character seemed to appear, it was transformed through movement, -- a mermaid turned into a tree, then a stone sculpture, then an animal.[[254]](#footnote-254)

Working only with her body and the minimalist costume encasing it, Litz presents the theme of the glyph through an exploration of the potentials and limitations of the human anatomy as its own hieroglyphic language system, which for Olson “served powerfully as symbol of something that both acted in itself and carried additional significance – a keystone to Olson’s aesthetics.”[[255]](#footnote-255) By transforming herself into a variety of objects and entities through the contortions and movements of her physique, Litz takes Olson’s proclamation of the body as primary tool of creation to its extreme, using it to create ‘characters’ and representing the rich variety of the natural world. Yet, unlike Olson’s poem placing the subject outside of their living, feeling body, Litz’s dance works to reconnect each figure it represents to one another, her smooth transition from one ‘character’ to the next implicitly affirming the body’s relation to its surrounding world. Thus, the dance functions as a script, and in this instance, utilises costume as a form of ‘language’, creating images and tensions through its dynamic relation to the moving body, as well as expanding her movement vocabulary through the use of this external, additional voice alongside her body as pure form. Anne Dewey writes of Litz’s *The Glyph* in which “her body ‘sheathed in a tube of synthetic cloth that stretched as she moved’” that “form [is stripped] of psychological expression and reduced to counterpoint of the organic form and the sheath’s abstract geometry,”[[256]](#footnote-256) exemplifying both her use of her body as the dance’s own limitation, and her exploration of the dynamic between ‘things.’ To reverse Olson’s personifying of the poem, through her body as creative tool, Litz travels across the space, ‘pivoting, shuffling and crawling,’ enacting the contrasting prosody of the poem, isolated body parts moving in tension and harmony with one another as syllables. With the addition of the sheath, the dance is formulated and emphasised into an expressive language in which the body is the primary voice.

At the core of Litz’s choreographic process, in what Rice called her ‘art of seeing’, is the function of reading and interpreting. In her ‘constant alert[ness] to patterns all around her’, as well as her classroom exercises’ focus on viewing and acting out the movement of others, Litz’s compositional practice exemplified the intimate exchange of reading and interpreting *as process* that would come to define the ‘glyph exchange’. Implementing these values of creation into a dynamic that involves multiple artists from across disciplines, in which each new work is borne directly out of reading and responding to the previous work, most explicitly maps the workings of interdisciplinary collaborative communities that my work takes as its subject. Where in the ‘glyph exchange’ this takes place between people, Olson’s choreographic poetics can be conceived in a similar manner, through an embodied reading of physiology. That is, where the collaborative work operates out of one person receiving a work to read and interpret, and out of this reading creating a new work to be passed to the next person, Olson’s proposed poetics functions according to the writer becoming attuned to the physiological processes occurring within their body, and from this internal awareness gaining a heightened sense of their relation to the external environment. Through reading and interpreting these embodied phenomena, the poet then inscribes their verse.

The ‘glyph exchange’ moved from poem, through the other arts, and concluded in dance with Litz, in particular, serving as an ideal reader of Olson’s poetics. In contrast to the abstract intellection of reading as merely a mental phenomenon, dancing presents itself as a logical, and most effective, form of interpreting an Olson poem because of its complete emphasis on the embodied nature of his verse. In Olson’s poetics statements, he privileges dance as the inherent mode of representing human experience, and from this endeavours to organise his poetry in a choreographic manner. In the work of Frank O’Hara, the subject of the next chapter, it is conversely the dancer as expressive figure that shapes his poetics of dance.

Chapter Two: ‘The fact that you move so beautifully’:

Intimacy and Erotics in Frank O’Hara’s Poetics of Dance

*Collaborative Communities: The New York School & New York City Ballet*

For Frank O’Hara, poetry was an extension of social life. His social life, in turn, was grounded in the artistic communities that he operated within. These included the New York School poets and painters, the circles linked to his work at MOMA, and the broader avant-garde networks across America in the post-war period. As Lytle Shaw outlines in his seminal book, *Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie*: “The idea of O’Hara as a coterie poet emerges both from his intimate links to a circle of famous artists and writers and from the intimate referential practices of his work, […] his poems also *thematised* the idea of a close-knit audience through intimate, seemingly shared references, dedications, and the mention of proper names.”[[257]](#footnote-257) Such references came from a wide circle of artists, writers, and dancers working across different media. In addition, his poetics took inspiration, above all else, from the parts of life that inspired joy and affection in him; namely, the people and artworks that he loved. O’Hara consequently produced an interdisciplinary poetics that experimented with inter-medial form and content. In his theorising of poetry and social life, Oren Izenberg argues that, “by totalising the scene of judgement – by treating the whole world as a magnification of the art world – O’Hara dramatises the consequence for social life of using a single scale – not taste, but *love* – to determine the value of a thing, regardless of what sort of thing it is. O’Hara understands ‘poetry’ less as a collection of objects that appear than as a *medium* in which persons, things, or actions can appear.”[[258]](#footnote-258) One such love, which shaped both O’Hara’s social life and literary work, was dance.

O’Hara and his New York School peers frequented the City Center of Music and Drama on West Fifty-fifth Street, attending performances of George Balanchine’s New York City Ballet (NYCB).[[259]](#footnote-259) The company found itself a “true cult following” in writers and artists such as John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Jane Freilicher, and Howard Kanovitz.[[260]](#footnote-260) Within this following, O’Hara took the place as prime spectator, and admirer, of the ballet. Brad Gooch writes that he “had no trouble in matching, even somehow surpassing, their Balanchinomania. He began at once to see almost all the performances, the price for balcony seats at the time being a merciful $1.75 […] made it possible for O’Hara to treat City Center as casually as if it were a movie theatre. As an audience member he was every performer’s dream: rapt and expressive.”[[261]](#footnote-261) O’Hara’s most frequent companions to the ballet were his partner, the dancer Vincent Warren, and their friend, the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby, both of whom would match O’Hara’s enthusiastic discussion of the performances, most of which took place “at intermission on the way to and from the hotel bar across the street.”[[262]](#footnote-262) Dance, then, was a significant part of O’Hara’s social life, and in turn, also had a substantial impact on his approach to developing a poetics of movement.

A significant innovation in Balanchine’s direction of the NYCB that particularly appealed to O’Hara came in his democratisation of the company through the collapsing of traditional distinctions between the principal ballerinas and the corps de ballet. This was achieved by choreographing similar movements for all dancers on stage, as well as by putting his corps de ballet dancers in pointe shoes. Historically, pointe shoes had been almost exclusively for the principal ballerinas, and Balanchine’s departure from tradition in extending them to all of his female dancers was a reflection of the communal spirit he endeavoured to create in the company, and resulted in a visual sense of unity between the dancers on stage.[[263]](#footnote-263) In an additional remove from balletic tradition, from 1958 Balanchine implemented “a ‘no stars’ policy … by listing principals and soloists alphabetically on programs,” rather than in order of status within the company, in order to express collectivism, putting into action his ethos that the “company took precedent over any one dancer, the choreography over any one personality.”[[264]](#footnote-264) Moreover, in his choreographic practice Balanchine prioritised the individual dancer’s abilities and movement style, creating material specific to the dancer and thus privileging movement over any pre-prescribed meaning or narrative. As Susan Leigh Foster writes:

Balanchine begins putting the dances together by working with the dancers directly because, as he explains, ideas for a ballet come from the dancers’ own technical expertise, their particular flair for moving, and their idiosyncratic mastery of specific movements. These living versions of abstract choreographic ideas serve as the catalyst for dance making. Using the structural organisation of the musical score as template, Balanchine transforms the dancers’ repertoire of skills into elegant spectacle.[[265]](#footnote-265)

In this sense, where Balanchine’s creative tool, in place of a paintbrush or language, is the individual dancer’s unique technique and style of movement, his approach to choreography is equally led by his artistic material, allowing the nuances and accents of personal movement style to dictate the direction of a dance.

In O’Hara’s poetic practice, similarly, his tone and linguistic register are characterised by the unique idiosyncrasies of his own style of speech and movement. Furthermore, although his poetry does explore and express his individualism through such manifestations of personality in his verse, O’Hara also frequently locates his poetry within the context of a broader artistic network, particularly through naming his painter and poet peers, and reference to artworks of both mainstream popular culture, and more local referents of his immediate community of artists. For example, his 1960 poem, ‘Steps’, reads:

How funny you are today New York

like Ginger Rogers in *Swingtime*

and St. Bridget’s steeple leaning a bit to the left.

[…]

where’s Lana Turner

she’s out eating

and Garbo’s backstage at the Met

[…]

and the park’s full of dancers with their tights and shoes

in little bags

[…]

and all those liars have left the U N

the Seagram Building’s no longer rivalled in interest

not that we need liquor (we just like it)[[266]](#footnote-266)

‘Steps’ sees O’Hara shift in and out of a micro- and macro- viewpoint, mixing in the everyday sights on New York’s activity with political musings and pop culture icons. Crucially, however, the poem abstains from creating any hierarchy of importance or value between these references in its sustained tone of flippancy. In this way, Balanchine’s legacy of both democratic community and celebration of individual style and personality speaks to the careful balance between the internal and external, high and low culture, as well as the intimate and the communal, that O’Hara, and the members of New York School more broadly, explore in their work.

In addition to its place on the national and international stage as representative of the United States’ emerging cultural identity, the NYCB, amongst its local audience, developed a reputation as a specifically New York institution, with Lincoln Kirstein likening the company, in retrospect, to a “democratic equivalent of a royal patent,” declaring: “We were not Americans, but rather New Yorkers, and … our ballet must represent one city in its immediacy rather than remotely personify a nation.”[[267]](#footnote-267) Where Lynn Garafola identifies the company as “essentially New York in the sophistication of its style and its melting-pot role as a magnet for talent,”[[268]](#footnote-268) particularly identifying the international makeup of the company’s personnel, Copeland writes that: “Manhattan was always more than just the home of [Balanchine’s] company; it was the principal source of both inspiration and subject matter. Indeed, in Balanchine’s great practice-clothes ballets such as ‘Agon’, there is no need to signify ‘New York’ by commissioning cubist images of urban high rises. His tall, leggy, hyperextended ballerinas call to mind the deep iconography of the skyscraper and the construction crane.”[[269]](#footnote-269) This abstract visual imagery of the city, in which New York becomes personified through the long balletic lines of the ballerina’s physique, transforms both the iconography of the city’s architecture and the dancing body into muse-figures for Balanchine’s choreography and O’Hara’s poetics alike: the body, and the surrounding environment in which the body finds itself, are defining and recurrent themes of subject matter and visual motifs in Balanchine and O’Hara’s respective work. This imagery does not always come in the form of explicit, figurative reference, however, but is emulated through the physicality of the ballerina’s body, or the physical organisation of language across the page. Crucially, for both Balanchine and O’Hara, it is the human body in motion that shapes the formal structures and imagery of a work. As so much of Balanchine’s innovation within the ballet world influenced O’Hara’s poetic project, it is useful to look in detail at the advancements he achieved through his role at the New York City Ballet.

*George Balanchine and the New York City Ballet*

Arriving in New York in 1933, at the invitation of Lincoln Kirstein, Balanchine brought from St. Petersburg a combination of strict classical ballet training and a desire for innovation in the balletic form.[[270]](#footnote-270) Together, Kirstein and Balanchine co-directed a number of short-lived companies until, finally, in 1948, they formed the New York City Ballet company, which, “under Balanchine’s leadership as ballet master and principal choreographer … evolved to become one of the most reputable ballet companies internationally.”[[271]](#footnote-271) The goal of the company was to establish a uniquely American ballet, distinct from its European, and particularly Russian, counterparts. Given the context of the competitive showcasing of culture throughout the cold war, this new ballet had to win over a disinterested American audience, as well as stand against its ‘rivals’ of the European tradition on the world stage. It is in this sense that Balanchine, Kirstein, and the dancers of the NYCB are credited as the pioneers of a ‘modern ballet’, distinct from both modern dance, such as that created by Martha Graham and Isadora Duncan, and classical ballet. As Roger Copeland asserts, it was Balanchine’s ballet, and not modern dance, that sought to “assimilate uniquely twentieth century movements” like jazz, cubism, futurism, and dada, with dance.[[272]](#footnote-272) The New York City Ballet as cultural phenomenon, both national and specific to New York City, shares with the Abstract-Expressionist painters a status within the zeitgeist as innovators in their position as a meeting point between mass-, or popular-, culture and high-art. Indeed, the poets who held a passionate affection for the NYCB were also deeply involved with the painterly community of the Abstract-Expressionists.

The New York City Ballet’s approach to redefining the dance form can be summarised under three key principles: firstly, the stripping away of dramatic devices such as expressive or narrative use of costume and stage design, as well as of mime as narrative tool in a performance; secondly, an emphasis on virtuosic technique, in which the ballerinas’ physicality and technical ability were privileged above all else in a dance; and thirdly, specific to Balanchine’s choreography, a destabilising of tradition in ballet through choreographic reference to non-balletic dance forms, such as jazz, Charleston, and square dance, as well as taking influence from Balanchine’s time as a Broadway choreographer. With these three principles, the company endeavoured to establish a new ballet that was both superior in form and technique, and singularly American in stylisation.[[273]](#footnote-273)

In a 1952 article titled ‘A Letter on New York City’s Ballet’, Edwin Denby writes in favour of Balanchine’s stripped-back, virtuosic ballet style above its European predecessors, asserting that: “American ballet is like a straight and narrow path compared to the pretty primrose fields the French tumble in so happily.”[[274]](#footnote-274) In the article, first published in *Ballet*, Denby summarises the qualities of strong, decisive lines and energetic vigour showcased by the company’s dancers, writing:

Handsome the New York City way of dancing certainly is. Limpid, easy, large, open, bounding; calm in temper and steady in pulse; virtuoso in precision, in stamina, in rapidity. So honest, so fresh and modest the company looks in action. The company’s stance, the bearing of the dancer’s whole body in action is the most straightforward, the clearest I ever saw; it is the company’s physical approach to the grand style – not the noble carriage but to the grand one. Simple and clear the look of shoulder and hip, the head, the elbow, and the instep; unnervous the bodies deploy in the step, hold its shape in the air, return to balance with no strain and redeploy without effort. Never was there so little mannerism in a company, or extravagance.[[275]](#footnote-275)

In the absence of narrative or dramatic plot, the company strove to showcase a group of youthful dancers who were capable of precision in technique, with muscular physiques emulating perfect lines, dancing with unmatched energy and kinesis, all performed with the appearance of ease.

*Serenade*, Balanchine’s first ballet composition in the United States, for example, was choreographed using simplistic movement sequences and basic balletic positions in order to highlight the perfectionism of the dancer’s execution, rather than distract with lengthy sequences of mime to establish narrative.[[276]](#footnote-276) The ballet’s primary focus is the seventeen women of the ensemble, with the choreography barely distinguishing between the soloists and the corps. Through its stripped-down movement phrases, Balanchine sought to teach his American dancers about ballet by showcasing its historical roots in classical French and Russian tradition, as well as exploring what the future may hold for the dance form in its new American variation.[[277]](#footnote-277) A key motif of the choreography, repeated throughout the ballet, is a simple sequence of pirouette into arabesque, back into pirouette, repeating the two movements, in varying order. At times this phrase is performed by only one dancer in the middle of the stage, at others a handful, moving in different directions and forming different pathways across the stage, as they weave in and out of one another, and in some instances all seventeen women in unison, dancing in the same direction, creating a striking visual of unity and vitality. The power of this simplistic movement phrase comes not only in the physical prowess of the pirouettes hitting every mark as they travel one after the other across the space, and technical perfection of the dancer’s extended line as they strike each arabesque pose, a moment of suspension in the midst of the bursting pirouettes, but additionally, with the play of activity and pause achieved by the different visual imageries created with each variation of spatial pathways and directions utilised with each repetition. Ballet productions such as *Serenade*, in which narrative plot and devices are removed in favour of pure dance, have been labelled Balanchine’s ‘neo-classicism’, and perhaps represent his better-known choreographic style.

Productions such as his 1954 *Western Symphony*, on the other hand, reveal another side to Balanchine’s choreography and movement style. *Western Symphony*, Andrea Harris writes, “attempts to make ballet ‘American’ through, first, the theme of the American West and, second, movement vocabulary drawn from folk and popular sources, particularly from Black American lineage, like tap and jazz,” whilst equally drawing on ballet’s rich global history: “Spatial patterns and rotations, for instance, clearly reference square dance in one moment, but quickly fracture into the symmetrical lines of Russian Imperial classicism in the next, a motif that repeats until it becomes nearly impossible to tell where square dance ends and classicism begins, and vice versa.”[[278]](#footnote-278) In the third section of the dance, as Harris describes it, a set of one man and five women dance “in near-constant motion, travelling through the space in huge sweeps. The dancers’ flexed wrists and quick side-to-side flicks of the hip disrupt the classical line and unity of the body.”[[279]](#footnote-279) Here, Balanchine draws on movement styles characteristic of a uniquely and specifically American culture of the wild west.

As well as being significant in establishing national identity in the dance style, however, the inclusion of such references to what may be understood as low-brow culture in a historically aristocratic artform demonstrates Balanchine’s commitment to the modernisation of ballet, and his attempts to render the dance form both accessible and appealing to a larger audience. As the sequence continues, “The Running Set gives way to a pas de deux [literally ‘steps for two’, i.e., duet] and virtuosic variations for a male and female soloist. Country dance patterns appear and then crossfade into symmetrical lines and formations of Russian Classical choreographer Marius Petipa.”[[280]](#footnote-280) This melding of both subversive and classical dance styles in one ballet is indicative of Balanchine’s commitment to honouring ballet’s classical roots, as he attempts to pass on the rich cultural history of the dance form whilst bringing it to new audiences. In his viewing of Balanchine’s productions, O’Hara identified an affinity with his own creative values of audience and collaboration, as well as qualities of motion and stillness throughout his work.

*O’Hara and the Collaborative Community of the Corps de Ballet*

In an essay written in 1961 titled ‘Notes from Row L’, O’Hara “describes Balanchine’s genius in the establishment of dance as the true subject of dance, much as he would claim in his notes to his own poem ‘Second Avenue’, ‘I hope the poem to *be* the subject, not just about it’: ‘One of Balanchine’s greatest achievements is in making the dancers be the dance, be human and yet have the theatrical grandeur of the specific occasion of the dance.’”[[281]](#footnote-281) For O’Hara the poem, like a dance performance, was an event that should present ‘human’ phenomena, whilst elevating its portrayal of common experience into the ‘theatrical grandeur’ of performance. Elsewhere, in his 1955 review of Balanchine’s *Roma*,[[282]](#footnote-282) O’Hara enthuses of the collaborative dynamics presented between dancers on stage: “So much in this ballet is reciprocal!”[[283]](#footnote-283) Remaining unpublished in O’Hara’s lifetime, the review first appeared in print in the 1975 prose collection *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, and is not only a display of his love for the ballet, and particularly Balanchine’s productions, but also doubles as an insightful view into his own creative values and poetic practice.

Ballet, O’Hara suggests in the review, is grounded in a series of collaborative relationships. First, that between the principal ballerinas and the corps de ballet, who are not choreographed to stand out from one another, or for the corps to merely shadow their leads, but rather, as a community. O’Hara writes:

The differentiation between the two main dancers and the corps is kept to a minimum. They dance bigger and fuller and faster, but not differently. They interpret the steps of the corps with something added, with reflection and understanding, as if they were spokesman for the tribe; they are part of society, they exist in and because of the corps as lovers did in the 19th century and don’t anymore.[[284]](#footnote-284)

Here, O’Hara identifies a dynamic between the sets of dancers that presents the choreography of the performance as a dialogue between them. In O’Hara’s *Roma* review, an additional collaborative relationship is outlined between the audience and the dancers, crossing the boundary of the stage into an exchange of dialogue: “*Roma* is more a matter of choice, something you may live with the dancers, a vital, social, exhausting and vivacious exchange between you and them, like trying to keep up with an exciting conversation in a foreign language.”[[285]](#footnote-285) Rather than mere spectators, the audience are consistently involved in the performance via translation, producing their own meanings and responses in real-time, feeding energy back onto the stage.

Far from the European traditions of ballet as a tool of bourgeois hierarchy and propriety, the forming of the new American ballet tradition saw the breakdown of those barriers into a proscenium of exchange and dialogue. In writing the review through the lens of his own position as spectator of the dance performance, O’Hara provides a commentary on his own project in which his poetics function as a form of aesthetic responsiveness, setting up a reciprocal relationship between poet and reader, as well as between the poetic speaker and the poem’s dedicated addressee. In his essay ‘Ballet, Basketball, and the Erotics of New York School Collaboration’, Terence Diggory summarises O’Hara’s review, stating that:

Collaboration, then, takes place along two axes in the model of ballet: onstage, it involves the relation between the individual dancer and the corps; across the boundary of the stage, it involves the relation between the dancers and the audience […]. Yet, at the point where he makes that exclamation, he is referring to a third relationship: that between the two principal dancers themselves.[[286]](#footnote-286)

It is in this dynamic, between the two principals, that Diggory pinpoints the ‘erotic charge’ of collaboration that was equally defining in O’Hara’s own collaborative endeavours: “What seems to have been of at least equal significance to O’Hara, [was] the transformation of the erotic charge in context of the corps de ballet, on stage, and the audience, across the stage boundary.”[[287]](#footnote-287) A poem written by the individual poet may also mimic this erotic charge of collaboration, as O’Hara professes in his mock-manifesto ‘Personism’: “one of [personism’s] minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet [themselves]), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love’s life-giving vulgarity […]. It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages.”[[288]](#footnote-288) Just as a performance is something that occurs between the dancers and the audience, in O’Hara’s model of creation both a single-author poem and a resulting product of interdisciplinary collaboration are not simply art objects, but occur as events, or as he writes of *Roma*, ‘exchanges’ between two intimately connected persons.

For O’Hara, the discipline of dance in particular, through the relationship between the dancers and the movements they perform, offered an aspirational muse for his poetic mode of personal address. Whilst this does not always come in the form of a poem explicitly about dance, as a point of introduction, ‘Ode to Tanaquil LeClercq’ offers the most poignant example of O’Hara’s emulative use of the ballerina figure in shaping his verse:

Smiling through my own memories of painful excitement your wide eyes

stare

and narrow like a lost forest of childhood stolen from gypsies

two eyes that are the sunset of

two knees

two wrists

two minds

and the extended philosophical column, when they conducted the dialogues

in distant Athens, rests on your ribbon-wrapped hearts, white

credibly agile

flashing

scimitars of a city-state

where in the innocence of my watching had those ribbons become entangled

dragging me upward into lilac-colored ozone where I gasped

and you continued to smile as you dropped the bloody scarf of my life

from way up there, my neck hurt

you were always changing into something else

and always will be

always plumage, perfection’s broken heart, wings

and wide eyes in which everything you do

repeats yourself simultaneously and simply

as a window ‘gives’ on something

it seems sometimes as if you were only breathing

and everything happened around you

because when you disappeared in the wings nothing was there

but the motion of some extraordinary happening I hadn’t understood

the superb arc of a question, of a decision about death

because you are beautiful you are hunted

and with the courage of a vase

you refuse to become a deer or tree

and the world holds its breath

to see if you are there, and safe

are you?[[289]](#footnote-289)

Written in June 1960, the poem is addressed to the French ballerina and principal dancer for the New York City Ballet, who was paralysed by polio in 1956, abruptly ending her ballet career. The poem doubles up as an appreciation for LeClercq’s performance and form specifically, as well as a broader experiment in evoking dance-like dynamic qualities in poetic verse, and an ‘ode’ to the death of her time as a ballerina.

The poem reads as if LeClercq had lost her life, and in this way provides a dramatized outline of O’Hara’s recurrent notion that just as movement equals life, stillness threatens an end. Vincent Warren notes of O’Hara’s affection for LeClercq that, “It’s important to remember too that dancers’ bodies changed […] LeClercq was extremely long and thin at a time when dancers were short and compact […] She was ahead of her time in the sense that she had an elongated line.”[[290]](#footnote-290) Taking the lines of the dancer’s body as a muse-like figure, the physical form of the poem on the page conjures rich imagery of the dancer in motion; just as some of the lines run across the page with exaggerated length, others consist of only two words, deeply enjambed onto the other end of the page, creating a sense of dynamism as the phrases stop and start in action across the space of the page.

One of the poem’s primary thematic concerns is with the dancer’s body – ‘two knees/ two wrists / two minds’, and ‘incredibly agile’ – that eventually becomes immortalised, stuck still in the metaphor, ‘the extended philosophical columns’. Most poignant, however, is O’Hara’s dramatized portrayal of the viewer’s place within the dance, in which the ‘ribbons’ that had previously been imagined as encasing LeClercq’s heart shift to entrap the speaker himself: ‘where in the innocence of my watching had those ribbons become entangled / dragging me upward’. Where the poet begins this line conscious of his place as simply a spectator of the events on stage, the magnetism of LeClercq’s performance lures him in, up, towards the stage, ending in a complete blurring of the distinction between performance and reality, as well as a breakdown of the formal divide between stage and audience. The ribbon acts as a metaphor for the unspeakable bond created between performer and audience, that of the emotionally felt connection between them that forms over the course of a performance that O’Hara alludes to in his review. Expecting only to ‘innocently watch’ LeClercq dance, what instead occurs is an imagined, intimate dialogue, as if in the ballerina’s movement she is addressing herself personally to the individual viewer. Consequently, the speaker of the poem feels himself, in his spectatorship, to be part of the performance. The meaning-making of the dance is a collaborative exchange, in which the audience does not just see, but engages actively in the emotion and narrative of the production, experiencing themselves moving with, or even as, the dancer. This momentary collapse of boundaries between stage and audience is interrupted by the speaker coming back into their body: ‘from way up there, my neck hurt’, reinstates the physical setting of the poem’s speaker, viewing the movement of the ballerina positioned above him on the stage, emphasising his position as audience.

Furthermore, where O’Hara’s poetry frequently makes attempts to grasp at the potential of continuous change through metamorphosis, like the form of the ode itself, he writes of LeClercq’s almost mystical potential on stage: ‘you were always changing into something else / and always will be’. Aligning the ballerina’s character dancing with that of masking identity, the following line, ‘always plumage, perfection’s broken heart, wings’, alludes to *Swan Lake*, which O’Hara’s writing on *Roma* suggests he had seen LeClercq dance in.[[291]](#footnote-291) The figure of the swan, as both the pure, white swan Odette and the deceptive, mystical black swan Odile, is important to the idea of dual-identity and masquerade. O’Hara does not depict LeClercq as devious in her disguise, however, but idealises the dancer’s capacity to slip between characters whilst remaining intrinsically herself: ‘everything you do/ repeats yourself simultaneously and simply / as a window ‘gives’ you something.’ O’Hara reveals here a recurring objective of his own poetics, always oscillating between revelation of self, the poem as ‘window’, and the self as inherently multiple and concealed. The apparent ease with which LeClercq moves across the stage, as if she ‘were only breathing / and everything happened around’ here is lamented upon her exit from the stage, ‘because when you disappeared in the wings nothing was there’, and in her absence O’Hara is all too aware of the unfulfilled space on the stage, much like the reader’s experience of the jarring blank spaces that surround the lines of the poem on the page. What lingers in this empty space, however, is the kinaesthetic memory of the action that had just taken place, ‘the superb arc of a question’ alluding to both the physical form of LeClercq’s body positioned in balletic poses, and to the speaker’s professed unknowing of the dances meaning. As Brian Reed writes of the poem, “LeClercq’s ‘superb’ gestures prove to be a ‘window’ on to ‘something’ so ineffable that it exceeds language,” leaving behind “not a message but the ‘arc of a question’.”[[292]](#footnote-292) What overcomes this reflection on the memory of movement, however, is the sense of threat that comes from the stillness that has replaced it: ‘of a decision about death’. From this point, the tone of the poem shifts from idealised praise to anxious speculation. Now, LeClercq refuses metamorphosis by refusing to be immortalised as that which others perceive her to be, but in her escape, and in her stillness, risks an end.

By addressing the poem to LeClercq, and positioning the speaker as the spectator of her performance, physically sat in front of her, ‘Ode to Tanaquil LeClercq’ occurs between ‘two persons instead of two pages’. The ‘erotic charge’ of performance and collaboration is carried through the poem as O’Hara writes firstly in response to the ‘arch of a question’ posed by LeClerq’s dancing, and secondly, invites the dancer into a reciprocal dialogue, awaiting response through the final line’s questioning, ‘are you?’. The reciprocity that O’Hara identifies in his ‘Roma’ review, and that he emulates in the encasing ribbons in ‘Ode to Tanaquil LeClercq’, also characterises much of Balanchine’s choreography. In particular, each section of the New York City Ballet’s *Agon* explores the possibilities of movement between different dynamics of dancers, according to how many dancers are on stage, and how this number is divided between genders.

*Balanchine’s ‘Agon’*

*Agon* is widely considered as the masterpiece of the New York City Ballet, and of Balanchine’s career. It was choreographed and premiered in 1957, one year after LeClerq had contracted polio, and marked a significant turning point for the NYCB. Although the ballet was performed numerous times, spanning many decades, my readings of the dance are in reference to the video footage of the company’s 1960 performance for the Radio-Canada studio in Montreal, which featured the original cast for whom Balanchine first devised the choreography. The subject of the dance has often been questioned, with NYCB dancer Barbara Milberg Fisher writing that the title, *Agon*, in classical Greek:

denotes a ‘struggle’ or athletic contest, such as that between wrestlers at the Olympic Games. It could refer to chariot races or foot races. According to the lexicon, the term goes well beyond athletics. It can suggest any kind of competition, a political contest, or the fiercely fought over award among Athenian playwrights for the coveted drama prize. It could mean an armed battle, and this military-strategist sense of the word extends to an action at law, a court trial.[[293]](#footnote-293)

However, Fisher questions, “what possible meaning does it suggest for a ballet?”[[294]](#footnote-294) According to Denby, after watching a performance of *Agon,* O’Hara professed that the ballet’s subject is “pride”.[[295]](#footnote-295) In addition to pride, I argue that *Agon*’s central subject is virtuosic ability, and more specifically, the subject of the ballet is ballet dancing. It is a showcase of the company’s ability to dance exceptionally well, and an announcement of this ability to the world. In an interview with the broadcaster of the Montreal performance, Balanchine affirmed the possibility of the interviewer’s reading of the ballet as a dance competition, whilst himself suggesting that the dance could also be seen as a circus, in that you “purchase a ticket” in order to “see something lively.”[[296]](#footnote-296) The ballet is characterised by the tensions it creates through shifting between large movements, with sequences of wide leaps and enduring pirouettes, and smaller, more simplistic steps, executed with sharp precision and speed, with emphasis on the dancer’s strong lines.

As Denby observes in his review ‘Three Sides of *Agon’*, the “explosive thrust of a big classic step has been deepened, speeded up, forced out farther, but the mollifying motions of the same step have been pared down. […] The conciliatory transitions have been dropped. So have the transitional small steps. Small steps do not lead up to and down from big ones. They act in opposition to big ones, and often stress their opposition by a contrariness.”[[297]](#footnote-297) The movement is generally fast, but never rushed. Each pose and transition is executed to perfection, all with the appearance of ease. In some instances, the strong lines of classical ballet are subverted by jazz-infused accents of a tilted-hip or knee turned inwards, which is further emphasised by the recurrent motif of stepping in a square formation on the outside of the feet.

As many commentators observe, another key characteristic of the choreography is the recurrent use of canon, “wherein a step or a few steps are repeated by the dancers on consecutive beats,” rather than in unison.[[298]](#footnote-298) Here a secondary tension is brought to light, as shifting dynamics of power are inherent to the appearance of one dancer leading the action of their peers in the use of canon. In the trio of two female dancers and one male dancer, for example, whilst the two women perform pirouettes and arabesques on bent supported legs, the male ballerina’s jazz-inspired movements become stylised as he steps with flopped hands and arms in fourth position, his hip tilted out, hinging his leg with his knee bent in, towards rather than away from the body, giving him the appearance of a puppet. In the sequence that follows, however, as the music becomes increasingly playful, the two women begin to parrot this action. Consequently, although he performs this puppet phrase first, the dynamic of the women repeating these movements after him, and thus copying his actions, suggests that he is the master, and they his puppets. Once this ambiguous dynamic is first shown in their use of canon, he supports one woman, and then the other, taking turns to spin them. They are not in control of their bodies; they only turn through his manipulation of their movement. In other moments, such as the opening sequence of the ballet, four male dancers perform steps, arabesques and leaps in canon. This reflects the theme of competition, each man matching the endurance and strength of the previous dancer’s action. If the ballet is akin to the circus, on the other hand, the opening variation is equivalent to the strongman performance, a display of sheer strength and physical prowess. Equally so, in the following sequence eight women replace the four men, and continue this competitive canon, striking open balletic poses between intricate steps, taking turns to pose with one toe on point, arms open to the audience in fourth, presenting themselves to the audience for applause. Next, a series of leaps and turns that again allude to friendly competition.

Arguably the climactic sequence of the whole ballet, however, comes in the penultimate section of the ballet. This male/female duet is a poignant examination of the extremes of reliance and balance two bodies can be pushed to when moving together. In contrast to the ease and energy that accents much of the movement elsewhere in the ballet, this duet is characterised by anxious suspension, of only *just* executing lifts and arabesques as the two bodies struggle to find their balance together. This sense of uncertainty is intended in the choreography, however, and is striking in its emotive playing out of trust and resistance between the couple. In Goldner’s account of the duet, she writes that this tension is “right in the bones of the choreography, involving the emotional relationship between the dancers […] the duet embodies the volatile climate in which an intimate couple lives. The duet is in constant flux between moments of tenderness and aggression, assertiveness and submission, challenge and compliance, escape and return. The whole thing trembles with change.”[[299]](#footnote-299) Crucially, it is in movement, rather than any narrative or plot, that this relationship is explored. The dance’s emotion is expressed only through the relationship between two bodies in motion: a moment’s flicker of hesitation in between movements, a split second of loss of balance.

The duet begins with the dancers, led by the female ballerina and in slight canon, pirouetting from the right-hand side of the back of the stage, along a diagonal pathway, to front left of the stage. They move separately, and with speed and strength. Then, beginning the pair work, the couple hold hands as they step back and forth, seemingly finding their balance and pace in unison. They turn to face away from one another, back-to-back, and he supports her as she leans slightly onto him, slowly increasing her weight onto his back. On point, she steps her feet in and out of where his feet remain solidly on the ground. The visual image of this sequence is that of two individuals, tenderly but inhibited, trying to find balance and harmony as a newly bonded pair. This uncertainty is made more explicit in comparison to the confident energy their movements possessed in their entrance, as they danced across the stage independently. Seemingly embracing the trust of their union, however, the female dancer wraps herself around him, one leg around his back. She is no longer supporting herself, but is now entirely reliant on him. They share steps in harmony, a glimpse of contentment. Then, he kneels on the floor and supports her as she goes into arabesque. She spins on a bent leg, balances on one foot *en point*, into arabesque until her raised leg rests on his shoulder. She then bends her raised leg, hesitant to rely on him entirely, finding her balance she experiments bending and extending the leg, another hint at her losing and finding her sense of self within the coupling. Then he moves her leg for her, the leg no longer moving independently but being guided. In a shift of dominance, suddenly, he lies flat on his back holding one of her hands as she extends, on pointe, leg raised higher than before, an impressive arabesque above him. Her balance is precarious, their visibly shaking hands exposing the intricacy of balance and trust between them. Despite this apparent uncertainty, however, this glimpse of vulnerability between them solidifies the sense of a tentative, but enduring, bond between them.

Rather than through language, as in O’Hara’s poetry, in *Agon*’s sensuous pas de deux, the dancers are placed into an ‘exchange’ that explores intimate relationships through the physical limits and possibilities of two bodies moving together. As Diggory writes, “the lovers’ pas de deux in ballet offers a perfect paradigm of the ‘erotics’ of collaboration.”[[300]](#footnote-300) As the dancers move between supportive balancing and solo sequences, they enact a performance of collaboration that plays out the intricate power dynamics of co-creation through movement. If, in collaborative composition, “what is created is actually the social bond between the collaborators; the ‘work’ that is exchanged between them is merely an objectification of that bond,”[[301]](#footnote-301) then *Agon* creates a ‘work’ that presents an ‘object’ made up of that very bond in action. Where O’Hara identifies a mirroring between the relationship between dancers in *Roma* and his own collaborative principles, he also maintains this view of creation as inherently tied to collaboration and community in the poetry he composed independently.

*Having a Coke With You: Poetry as Collaboration and Conversation*

In ‘Personism: A Manifesto’, O’Hara expands on his statement of poetics as ‘occurring between two people’ as he professes that “[I realised] if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born.”[[302]](#footnote-302) Here he refers to his faux ‘movement’ of personism, yet despite his jest, speaks effectively to his by then established poetics style. Art, in O’Hara’s terms, is always a form of conversation, and thus a form collaboration that relies on the presence, even if not literal, of a second person in composition. Commenting on O’Hara’s ‘personism’ manifesto, Prudence Bussey-Chamberlain writes that “[in] the same way that the poem might be a gesture of dialogue, the telephone actually realises dialogue, removing the work from the staid context of the page to the more alive and dynamic framing of a conversation. The complete lack of need for the page itself suggests that the poem should be realised in action; it can be lived and experienced.”[[303]](#footnote-303) Whilst the punchline of O’Hara’s mock-manifesto is that he, of course, would still write poetry, rather than picking up the phone, this emphasis on his verse as dialogue, and of movement and lived experience rings true of his ongoing poetic project. Where ‘Ode To Tanaquil LeClercq’ addresses the ballerina and speaks to the corporeal experience of witnessing her perform, O’Hara’s love poems take the same format as personal address to his partner, Vincent Warren.

‘Having a Coke With You’, written the same year as ‘Ode To Tanaquil Leclercq’, for example, is an intimate address to the object of his love. The ‘you’ addressed in the title situates the poem as an occurrence between the professor and the subject. Moreover, the poem prioritises movement over all other experience in both its thematic content and its formal organisation. Warren, like LeClercq, was a dancer, and in O’Hara’s writing for Warren he brings poetics and choreography into dialogue with one another through the ‘erotic charge’ of personal address and of two bodies moving together, such as in *Agon*. Where LeClercq was partner and muse to Balanchine, Warren functions in a similar manner as dancer-muse to O’Hara and his verse. If, as O’Hara suggests in his review, the relationship between ballerinas onstage is that of address and dialogue in which the principal dancers exist because of the corps, ‘like lovers’, his conversational love poems may be read in the same terms. The poem begins:

HAVING A COKE WITH YOU

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irun, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne

or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona

partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian

partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt

partly because of the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches

partly because of the secrecy our smiles take on between people and statuary

it is hard to believe when I am with you that there can be anything as still

as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary when right in front of it

in the warm New York 4 o’clock light we are drifting back and forth

between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles[[304]](#footnote-304)

The poem examines similar anxieties and dualities between motion and stillness to ‘Ode to Tanaquil LeClercq’, however this is not a clearly defined privileging of motion over stillness. Rather, the title, which also serves as the first line of the poem, creates pause through the line break before the following line, and in its content idealises a singular moment. We imagine the two lovers sitting across from one another, having a Coke, a seemingly unremarkable moment of pause and respite. Similarly, as the poem moves on, the reflective stillness of this moment is idealised above glamorous travel across the Basque country. Additionally, the simplicity of a Coca-Cola, which by the nineteen-sixties was solidified as a symbol of common experience and the everyday, is elevated, both literally in the structure of the poem on the page, and sentimentally, above experiences of excess as in the image of the speaker ‘being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona.’ Rather than giving grand imagery to these places and experiences, they are listed off in passing. In contrast, the following lines’ anaphoric repetition of ‘partly because’ creates a rhythmic energy, privileging minute details that could only be observed in reflective looking: his lover’s ‘orange shirt’, and the ‘fluorescent orange tulips around the birches’. It is in the intimate details of the everyday such as his partner’s ‘love for yoghurt’, and the beauty of the smaller flowers surrounding vast trees, that O’Hara places emphasis. As this repetition demonstrates, the physical pull of the excitement and desire O’Hara feels for Warren is what catalyses the movement of the poem, as well as what draws in his attention in favour of any other view.

In these rapid, flowing lines, rather than simply celebrating movement, the speaker is grasping at the immediacy of truly looking, which is inherently both a reflective stillness, and a short-lived moment that cannot be fixed or immortalised. It is only in the seventh line that the tone shifts, suddenly lamenting movement and positioning stillness as a source of anxiety and threat. This tension between life-affirming motion and an underlying anxiety of boredom and loss of time comes to climax in the lines: “it is hard to believe when I’m with you that there can be anything as still / as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary when right in front of it’. The forced pause at the line break, ‘still’, emphasises this interruptive threat, enacting the very pause that it denounces. Moreover, the awkward syntax of the line ‘as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary when right in front of it’, particularly compared to the flowing lines that precede it, is difficult to read in a steady rhythm, and thus enforces a slowing down of the poem’s otherwise energetic stride. The effect is an ungracious stumbling for the reader, emulative of the interruptive stillness that the line laments. Importantly, this moment of anxiety comes as the subjects seemingly enter the public realm. Where each preceding line has focused purely on the speaker and the subject of his direct address, line six sees the introduction of ‘people’ to their surroundings. It is through ‘secrecy’, and thus the private, that this tension is recovered, however, as the sibilance of ‘the secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary’ restores a sense of unity between the lovers, as well as restoring rhythm to the verse.

In the final lines of this stanza, attention turns once again to the micro and the immediate, ‘in the warm New York 4 o’clock light we are drifting back and forth/ between each other’. Significantly, movement here takes place ‘between’ the two figures, it is a reciprocal action, unlike the movement elsewhere that O’Hara positions himself as only a spectator of. The poem continues:

and the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint

you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them

I look

at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world

except possibly for the *Polish* *Rider* occasionally and anyway it’s in the Frick

which thank heavens you haven’t gone to yet so we can go together for the first time

and the fact that you move so beautifully more or less takes care of Futurism

just as at home I never think of the *Nude Descending a Staircase* or

at a rehearsal a single drawing of Leonardo or Michelangelo that used to wow me

and what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them

when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank

or for that matter Marino Marini when he didn’t pick the rider as carefully

as the horse

it seems they were all cheated of some marvellous experience

which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I’m telling you about it[[305]](#footnote-305)

The second part of the poem thematises looking much more explicitly. The speaker looks at art but no longer *sees,* as such, in the same way. In contrast, upon viewing Warren in motion, he sees every ‘life-giving’ detail. In this sense, stillness, both as a lack of movement and in the fixed-statuary nature of paintings, is aligned with a failure to see. Movement, on the other hand, both in life and art, through dance, is framed as relating to attention and experience, and thus life-affirming. Whereas references to art are generally listed off quickly, the enjambment of lines focused on being with his lover isolates and emphasises Warren. Most poignantly, the line ‘I look’ sits isolated in the dead centre of the poem, forcing a suspended pause, reflection lingering in the empty space around it. This sits in contrast to the quick-paced lines that surround it. This moment of pause is even further emphasised in the comparably blasé ‘just paint’. Significantly, with the exception of the list of cities in the beginning of the poem, there are only two commas in the whole poem. Here, in the line ‘and the portrait shows seem to have no faces in it at all, just paint’, like the pause around ‘I look’, the use of comma creates a moment of reflection connected with ways of seeing, but here reversed between art and life. That is, whereas the pause around ‘I look’ is used to privilege the real-life instance of looking at his lover, the pause around ‘just paint’ is utilised to emphasise the now underwhelming instance of viewing painting. The key difference in the speaker’s experience of viewing artworks, or the scenery of the Basque Country, and gazing at his lover is the embodied, physiological experience of desire and affection.

Crucially, where Warren’s movement and dancing represents being alive in O’Hara’s eyes, the comparable visual art representations of movement in two-dimensional form such as Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, [[306]](#footnote-306) or Futurist works such as Umberto Boccioni’s three-dimensional sculpture *Unique* *Forms of Continuity in Space*, [[307]](#footnote-307) remain fixed, or ‘statuary’, in their physical form. No longer susceptible to the beauty of the visual art form in comparison to gazing at his lover, the speaker now merely sees the painted marks on the canvas, making an explicit claim to prefer seeing dance, such as ‘in a rehearsal’, then to look at paintings that once ‘wowed’ him. In addition to his explicit privileging of spending time with Warren over spending time viewing such art works, O’Hara contextualises this preference in art historical, aesthetic terms. To see Warren move, or dance, is preferable to the work of Duchamp, Da Vinci, or Michelangelo that grasps at illustrating the movement that dancing fulfils.

The fact of O’Hara devoting so many lines of ‘Having a Coke With You’ to visual art reveals the extent to which the art form still did preoccupy him, and that he considered it comparable to dance in its attempt to capture the body in motion. Works such as Duchamp’s and Boccioni’s equally compare to O’Hara’s own practice of grasping at dance in language across his poetics. The point at which he identifies a break between art and dance, however, is in its immortalising of a moment into a stationary form upon the work’s completion, and this reveals a potential anxiety he carried over into his own work. However, in his own collaborations with visual artists, O’Hara makes his own attempt to bridge this gap between the movement he privileges in ‘Having a Coke With You’ and the static state of visual art viewing. He does this, firstly, through the physicality of production necessary in creating the work, and secondly, through the erotic current of intimacy between the collaborators.[[308]](#footnote-308) The final product of that collaboration truly is something ‘that occurs between two persons’, as he calls for in ‘Personism’. The intimate dynamics put forward in ‘Having a Coke With You’ were put into practice by O’Hara in his collaborations with visual artists such as Larry Rivers and Norman Bluhm.[[309]](#footnote-309)

*The Erotics of Collaboration: Larry Rivers and ‘Stones’*

Writing on his experience of collaborating with O’Hara on a series of lithographic prints entitled *Stones*, Larry Rivers recalls that, “I did something, whatever I could, which related in some way to the title of the stone and he either commented on what I had done or took it somewhere else in any way he felt like.”[[310]](#footnote-310) Elsewhere, O’Hara is reported to have asserted *Stones* as the “only real collaboration” he had worked on. For Magdelyn Hammond Helwig, this claim is tied to the fact of O’Hara and Rivers’ manner of collaboration being entirely physical:

In many ways, *Stones* seems to represent the kind of ideal, pure collaboration we imagine when thinking of two people working together. O’Hara and Rivers were always in physical proximity when working on *Stones*, and O’Hara marks this kind of proximity as important when he announces that he and Rivers ‘did physically collaborate’. For O’Hara, the closeness of collaboration had as much to do with corporeal closeness – ‘We worked on the stones together. He did not work on the stone if I wasn’t there and I didn’t work on the stone if he wasn’t there to see what I was doing’ – as with mental, emotional, or artistic closeness.[[311]](#footnote-311)

O’Hara and Rivers’ collaborative practice speaks to the relationships O’Hara perceived and praised in Balanchine’s ballet, both in the sense of their dialogic creative process, and in the bodily presence of each collaborator during the event of creation. The creation of stone lithography relies on the dynamic between the components of oil and water. Although this dynamic is one of antipathy, the process relies on a collaborative relationship between the two elements.[[312]](#footnote-312) Working in opposition to the ‘statuary’ visual art works, or ‘portraits’, that O’Hara resists in ‘Having a Coke With You’, the *Stones* collaboration, like abstract-expressionist ‘action-painting’, is invested in collaborative composition that centres the physical presence of the artists, as well as the physical labour required to complete the works, rather than the comparatively static works of ‘just paint’.

In addition to this physical closeness of the two artists present in one space whilst they work, and of those two bodies moving together in the creative process, *Stones* is further characterised by the closeness of the intimate bond that connects Rivers and O’Hara. It is relevant to the content and organisation of the work that O’Hara and Rivers were involved in a romantic relationship that ended in 1954, three years before they began work on *Stones*. This relationship, and O’Hara and Rivers’ differing feelings after the ending of their romantic relationship, plays out throughout the series, including in Rivers’ disguising himself and O’Hara in the faces of Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, who serve as recurring subject matter. [[313]](#footnote-313) In Rivers’ account on one of the stones, titled ‘The End of All Existences’, he claims that the initial inspiration of Rimbaud and Verlaine prompted a shared recollection between himself and O’Hara, which took place at the home of the NYCB:

We then remembered a ballet night at the City Center. During an intermission we were making our way down the wide staircase from the cheap seats to the mezzanine when our mutual friend and my dealer John Myers thinking he was funny screamed out for general use ‘there they are all covered with blood and semen.’ This is a reference to something said about Rimbaud and Verlaine that Verlaine’s wife hounded him with for his whole life.[[314]](#footnote-314)

The significance of this event in Rivers’ mind is suggested by Myers own recollection of it, years after *Stones* had been completed, in which he remarks that: “Frank…was amused. Larry’s reaction was more complex probably…because he still felt more comfortable in the closet.”[[315]](#footnote-315) For Rivers’ part in the symbolic portrayal of this memory, then, both the figures of Rimbaud and Verlaine, and the blood and semen projected onto the figures, function as thinly-veiled concealment of the erotic charge that exists beneath the works. For O’Hara, on the other hand, the intimacy of collaboration did not pose a threat in itself, but the suppression or interruption of that intimacy in itself was perceived as a threat. Diggory argues, for example, that:

In the text he wrote on this stone, consisting of three brief couplets, he seems intent on breaking out of the closet, though the closet is not necessarily homosexual but that of any romantic dyad, signalled in the address to a specific but ungendered ‘you’ in the second stanza. The threat, as in *Roma* … is that the dyad will close down on itself in a violent implosion, concentrating ‘all existences’ in a ‘pint of blood’, the central image in the opening stanza. As an escape from such narrow concentration, ‘the enormous staircase’ of stanza two, the scene of Myers’s remark, offers not only expanded scale but also public exposure. The anonymous ‘someone’ who taunts the pair of lovers might as well be everyone.[[316]](#footnote-316)

For O’Hara, then, exposure carries the threat of breaking the intimate bond that binds the two artists together, of allowing the outside to infiltrate. This anxiety is recovered primarily through the creation of the *Stones*, in which the physical production of the work exists exclusively between himself and Rivers.

In ‘The End of All Existences’, O’Hara references the New York City Ballet’s home, City Center, as well as the ‘corps de ballet’ specifically.[[317]](#footnote-317) Imagery of the body remains the central theme of O’Hara’s verse in this lithograph, however, in contrast to the idealised physicality and movement of the dancing figure, this poem instead looks at bodily fluids. Where bodily fluids can generally be understood as symbolic of the human body’s most basic functions, the context in which blood and semen are used here seems instead to imply an emptying, and thus a failing or decline, of the body. Beneath this emptying of the body is also a sense of a giving over of the body, the end of all existence being when the individual has nothing left to give. Where the lovers’ pas de deux of *Roma* and *Agon* see the collaborating ballerinas’ bodies support one another, sharing the weight of the action and giving one another increased strength and breadth of movement, in ‘The End of All Existences’, intimacy between the two bodies results in loss.

This end may well be welcomed, however, as the violence implied by the bullets is offset by the dreamlike imagery of the gunshots appearing as the corps de ballet dancing in unison, their steps audible against the floor. This sense of giving, or emptying, of the self speaks to the intimacy and intensity of Rivers’ and O’Hara’s collaborative practice and personal relationship during the making of the *Stones* series. Beyond their physical proximity, many of the stones take the poet and painter’s personal relationship, as well as references to their local network of friends and personal heroes, as their subject. In this sense, the creation of the series can be understood as a reciprocal, intimate giving over of each of their selves both to the work, and to one another.

In taking their relationship as its subject, *Stones* functions as a working through the complexities and layers of the two artists’ erotic bond in real-time. Rivers remarked on the collaboration that, “Since there was nothing we had more access to than ourselves the first stone was going to be called ‘us’.”[[318]](#footnote-318) The improvisational and collaborative mark-making of the print is evident in the chaotic nature in which the images and words are placed amongst one another in ‘Us’, at times intersecting and obscuring the other. [[319]](#footnote-319) This creates a sense of cohesion amongst the energetic overlapping, however, as the visual and linguistic marks on the lithograph embody the physical proximity and movement of the two bodies as they produced the work. It is significant that the work’s title encapsulates in simple terms the unity of the two artists as one integrated entity, ‘us’, alongside sketches of both O’Hara and Rivers in the top left corner, as the introductory lithograph of the series, in this sense “announcing itself” as a product of complete collaboration.[[320]](#footnote-320) Beneath the overlapping marks, and read in the context of O’Hara’s written lines in ‘The End of All Existence’, however, is the inference of a potential loss of self through the collaborative event. As the work itself merges, so too does the identities of its creators, now named as a single ‘us’. At the very bottom centre, O’Hara writes, “A very soft rain / we were sitting on the stairs”, which as Marjorie Perloff observes reinstates the poet and painter as “two ordinary human beings, sharing a moment of love,” bringing the piece back to the emotional and physical dynamic between the collaborators.[[321]](#footnote-321) O’Hara furthered this experimentation with embodied collaboration in his work on the series *Poem-Paintings* with Norman Bluhm.

*‘Poem-Paintings’: O’Hara’s Gestural Poetics of Movement*

This continued experimentation with movement as the process of creation through collaborating with visual artists brings together O’Hara’s appreciation for gestural painting and dance into communication on the canvas. Lytle Shaw observes that O’Hara’s collaboration with Rivers “succeed[s] in part because of the *contrast* between written language and images.” His collaborative work with Norman Bluhm, a series titled *Poem-Paintings,* on the other hand, succeeds by integrating the two practices on the canvas: *Poem-Paintings* “seems, on the contrary, to assert the poem’s graphic embodiment as a large-scale gestural event on a par with Bluhm’s swirls and splashes of black and white gouache and ink – the writer’s lyric interior scrawled out in quadruple calligraphic scale against a blotchy [Abstract-Expressionist] background.”[[322]](#footnote-322) Through experiments with language as and through gestural painting – that is, painting that is produced by, and that manifests, the action of the painting body in motion – O’Hara is “liberat[ed] from ‘the poem’ as unit of composition,” and able to experiment with the kinetic force of language through the embodied practice of action-painting.[[323]](#footnote-323) In creating these interdisciplinary works, O’Hara allowed himself the space to step outside of language and the restrictions of the page into a creative practice predicated on performing movement. In producing the *Poem-Paintings*, O’Hara engages in embodied composition, in which he dances as he writes. The gestural traces of the paint across the canvas are evidence of the embodied process used by the painter, creating a visual image akin to a choreographic floor plan in dance. The most significant example of this comes in the *Poem-Painting* ‘Noel’, which Brian Reed describes in his essay ‘Footprints of a Wild Ballet’:

In the upper-left corner one sees an exclamation mark followed by the word ‘noel’ in black cursive. A thick white brushstroke begins beneath the ‘n’ and angles upward towards the right corner. Profuse long drips of white paint, extending to the bottom of the sheet, link the top and bottom halves of the piece. In the lower-right corner appears a vertical list of words, again in black cursive, apparently, too, in the same handwriting: ‘apples/light/fires/dances’. The first three words have all been crossed out by white lines. Paired with the list is a blob of black paint that looks as if it were applied downward and to the right. While one can see traces of the paintbrushes bristles, the total effect is not calligraphic. It is as if mid-stroke a sweeping gesture turned into a stabbing or slamming one, scattering paint like a small contained explosion. Overall, the mass resembles the impression of a hot iron, angled to point to the word ‘dances’.[[324]](#footnote-324)

In his reading of the poem-painting, Brian Reed argues that: “By exaggerating and stylising how he applied paint to canvas, Bluhm foregrounded his brushwork’s function as a trace of embodied performance. The *Poem-Paintings,* too, seem to draw attention to this feature of his creative process. The word ‘dances’ appears in *Noel*, for instance, and Bluhm describes the creation of the whole series as if he and O’Hara were involved in an improvised *pas de deux*,” echoing O’Hara’s own thinking of collaboration as a lovers’ *pas de deux* in his review of ‘Roma’.[[325]](#footnote-325) Dance, then, is referenced as both the content and context of the collaborative piece’s creation. In his ‘Roma’ review, O’Hara writes of the two principal dancers’ adagio, “the loveliest of pas de deux,” observing that “the soloists are reminded at the moment of impending intimacy that they are not alone.”[[326]](#footnote-326) Like the erotic charge of ‘Having a Coke With You’, and *Stones,* *Roma*’spas de deux carries a current of desire that is reflected in their movement, in which they “dance closely and intimately, duplicating each other’s thoughts with great familiarity and cordiality, […] at the beginning of her turns, Miss LeClercq, supported on left toe, gently lifts her right leg through the arc of her partner’s arm to rest on his wrist.”[[327]](#footnote-327) Just as LeClerq rests her leg on Eglevsky’s arm, the gestural traces of Bluhm’s brushstrokes and O’Hara’s words embody their physical proximity, and thus the intimacy of collaboration, through the marks positioned to touch, or lingering in a space of almost-touching, on the canvas.

In theories of embodiment, ‘flesh’ acts as the physical point through which we perceive the world through ‘bodily presence’: “flesh manifests as a visceral entwinement and dialogical exchange between embodied participants [which is] confined by choreographic structures.”[[328]](#footnote-328) Between O’Hara and Bluhm, the bodily perceptions and expressions of each artist are organised, or *choreographed*, and manifested onto the ‘flesh’ of the canvas, onto which the independent expressions of these bodies, in motion whilst creating, come into dialogue with one another via the paint. Furthermore, Reed argues, Bluhm and O’Hara’s poem-paintings “test whether paint and language can both be used *gesturally*. That is, they propose a formal and functional homology between particular methods of applying pigment to paper and words to a page. … the goal is to mark a moment and a place as constituting embodied expression. Here, Bluhm and O’Hara imply, were bodies that breathed, moved, and thrived: bodies that danced.”[[329]](#footnote-329) This dance took place through the specifically gestural compositional method of action-painting, introduced to O’Hara by the abstract-expressionists within his community.

In his introduction to the Royal Academy of Art’s *Abstract Expressionism* exhibition publication, David Anfam considers the “layers of Abstract Expressionism” as “body language,” [[330]](#footnote-330) characterised as “inner dynamism… externalised, like mind-writing that unravels in pigment.”[[331]](#footnote-331) This ‘body language’ of gestural painting signified for O’Hara a conduit between poetry and dance, allowing for a creative practice entirely bound to bodily movement, and in turn, new possibilities of collaborative dialogue between dance and artforms such as painting and poetry began to awaken.

Bluhm described the composition process of *Poem-Paintings* in an interview with John Yau and Jonathan Gams, recalling: “Frank would write something on a sheet of paper while I was in another part of the studio, making a gesture on the paper.”[[332]](#footnote-332) Elsewhere, Perloff reports Bluhm as stating that working on *Poem-Paintings* “was a terrific event, a Happening – a way of amusing ourselves. They were done as an event by two people who had this special feeling for each other and for art, music, and literature.”[[333]](#footnote-333) These accounts of the composition practice suggest the presence of O’Hara and Bluhm physically in the same space, ‘making a gesture’ onto the paper, and thus highlights the centrality of bodies moving, of dancing in a room, to the production of the work. The resulting object, the word-painting, functions as a graphic trace of their dancing, and thus as a visual embodiment of choreography. As a poetic work, moreover, O’Hara’s language phrases serve as ‘action writing’. Through his appreciation of movement and action-painting, and direct collaborations with artists producing gestural painting, O’Hara developed and explored the possibilities of movement and gesture in his poetics.

*Queering Gesture: Concealment and Revelation in Jasper Johns and O’Hara*

The *Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* defines ‘gesture’ in visual art practice as a:

term describing the application of paint with expansive gestures so that the sweep of the artist's arm is deliberately emphasised. It carries an implication that the artist's actions express his or her emotions and personality, just as in other walks of life gestures express a person's feelings. The term has been applied particularly to Abstract Expressionism and is sometimes used more or less as a synonym for Action Painting.[[334]](#footnote-334)

The brushstroke on the canvas stands in for, and represents, the physical motion of the body that made the mark. In Wilhem Wundt’s terms, performed physical gestures “appear as pictorial script, or letters, with which its symbols are sketched in the air by means of transitory signs, rather than on a solid material which could preserve them.”[[335]](#footnote-335) In the case of the painterly mark on the canvas, the expressive bodily action behind the gesture remains the same as in movement performance, but what is left to speak is the mapping of this movement, onto the canvas, that becomes the art-object.

In ballet, on the other hand, where language or pictorial symbol is eradicated, gesture enables the body to speak. Rachel Duerden defines gesture in dance as “‘meaning-bearing’ movement, movement that can be interpreted in a manner that draws attention to the phenomenon of being alive. In music, the word is likewise used to describe something related to human experience; something disembodied and lacking a spatial dimension, yet nonetheless perceptible in terms of physical activity.”[[336]](#footnote-336) Gesture, as mime or motif in a dance, has historically been used as a storytelling or character defining tool, particularly useful in pushing plot forward. Gesture can be understood as a movement phrase that hints towards a more complete meaning, it is suggestively meaning-bearing, but not demonstrative of the entire meaning. For instance:

In *Swan Lake* … Odette’s first encounter with Prince Siegfried involves a ‘conversation’ in which Odette explains the circumstances of her enchantment. Her expressive wing-like movements are evocative not only of the grace and beauty of the swan but also of the spell that binds the woman in captivity. In contemporary dance gesture refers to a broad range of movement, some of which may be very far from having literal significance. A movement may derive from an ‘everyday’ gesture – plaiting hair, glancing at a watch – but it can be abstracted and estranged to the point that its derivation all but disappears.[[337]](#footnote-337)

The single movement stands in for a complex of meanings that the dance viewer instinctively understands through their own embodied experience of communicative signifiers. However, individual perception and deciphering is required of the audience. In this way, the qualities of gesture in both dance and painting provide a useful lens through which to interpret particular characteristics of O’Hara’s poetics.

O’Hara utilises gesture in his poetry in the form of linguistic phrases that operate in a similar manner to abstract-expressionist brushstrokes and dance phrases, both in the kinaesthetic energy and rhythms of his language, as well as in explicit portrayals of bodies in motion. In his poetic explorations of queer identity and desire, gesture is used to oscillate between self-revelation and self-concealment.[[338]](#footnote-338) Whilst many of his gestural motifs are suggestive of one, more obvious, meaning, beneath the surface there is an additional, secondary meaning at play. By shifting between differing metaphors and visual motifs in his poems, O’Hara destabilises the reader’s sense of subject matter as he races from one line to the next, never quite settling on one image or another. In this way, the motion of such a gesture points to one meaning in order to distract from, or obscure, a coded subtext of the poem, available only to those ‘in the know’.

In his poem ‘In Memory of My Feelings’, O’Hara plays with this multiplicity more directly in his claim to “a number of naked selves”, or elsewhere “my transparent selves.”[[339]](#footnote-339) Elsewhere in the poem, disparate images and references are listed off:

So many of my transparencies could not resist the race!  
Terror in earth, dried mushrooms, pink feathers, tickets,  
a flaking moon drifting across the muddied teeth,  
the imperceptible moan of covered breathing,  
love of the serpent![[340]](#footnote-340)

Just as Anthony Paraskeva writes that “the deduction of a speaker’s intentions can be hidden or complicated by a gesture, resulting in infelicities or cross-purposes,”[[341]](#footnote-341) here the speaker’s claim to ‘many … transparencies’ is ‘complicated’ by the obscuring of meaning achieved by the rapid ‘brushstrokes’ of visual images and linguistic phrases. This relationship between O’Hara’s gestural poetics in ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ and the kinetic brushstrokes of a painterly practice rooted in action is also evident in Jasper Johns’ appropriation of O’Hara’s poem in his painting, *In Memory of My Feelings – Frank O’Hara* (1961).

Taking its title from O’Hara’s poem of the same name, Johns plays with ideas of expression and revelation, pointing towards the ‘feeling’ of the work, yet concealing his personal expression behind the pre-existing material of O’Hara’s poetic voice. The use of O’Hara’s title for the painting is itself gestural, as Johns immediately binds the painting to the language and meaning of the poem, without centring himself as the expressive voice behind these meanings in his own work. As Fred Orton observes:

*In Memory of My Feelings – Frank O’Hara* does not illustrate O’Hara’s poem. The painting refers to the poem, and by referring to it alludes obliquely to the poem’s main themes of feelings remembered and metaphorical deaths of selves. Though the painting ‘has a man in it’ he is hardly ‘transparent’. I take it that the ‘feelings’ are there on the surface of the two canvases and that the ‘man in it’ is underneath.[[342]](#footnote-342)

Crucially, Johns utilises gestural brushstrokes to obscure meaning in the work, and the uniquely embodied presence of this artistic style further plays out this contention between revelation and concealment of self. In fact, the painting appropriates both O’Hara’s poem and the gestural brushstrokes, “signifiers of the expression of feelings appropriated from the pictorial language of Abstract Expressionism,” and in this way, “their very identity as appropriated signifiers inhibits our seeing and understanding them as marks directly expressive of Johns’s feelings.”[[343]](#footnote-343) Beneath these brushstrokes are stencilled phrases: on the bottom left panel, ‘In Memory of My Feelings’, and on the bottom right canvas, ‘DEAD MAN’. In this sense, Johns’ gestural brushstrokes literally conceal an additional layer of meaning in the painting. Additionally, a spoon and fork rest, dangling, just in front of the left-hand canvas, whilst the two canvases are held together by hinges. The canvas, in this sense, reflects the sense of various and conflicting selves, held together precariously through code-shifting of self-presentation that O’Hara also explores in the poem:

One of me rushes

to window #13 and one of me raises his whip and one of me

flutters up from the center of the track amidst the pink flamingoes

[…]

So many of my transparencies could not resist the race![[344]](#footnote-344)

The presentation of ‘a number of naked selves’, each obscuring and revealing itself through the body and gestural movement, speaks to the very specific experience of navigating queer identity in post-war American society.

Whilst both O’Hara and Johns lived openly as gay men amongst their peers, survival in wider culture necessitated the capacity for code-switching between an authentic self, and a ‘straight passing’ performance in the public realm during “a dangerous time for gay men in America, a time of long prison sentences, McCarthyite witch-hunts, and cold war hate mongering.”[[345]](#footnote-345) Even within their broader social and artistic communities, expression of their identity came at a risk. The abstract-expressionist painters, for instance, tended to agree “with dominant cultural attitudes regarding sexuality and gender – including the general assumption of masculine privilege premised in part on the exclusion of women and gay men.”[[346]](#footnote-346) The code-switching required for survival that comes with moving between spaces of safety and threat ultimately characterises every aspect of a person’s external behaviour, including speech and the ways in which one holds themselves. Consequently, “these social and psychological conditions did not merely require Johns to disguise and encode all references to homosexual or autobiographical subject matter; […] they conditioned every aspect of his works’ technical and formal construction, including his treatment of painterly gesture.”[[347]](#footnote-347) This fluidity of self-presentation is not entirely submissive or defeatist, however, and in the case of Johns and O’Hara, they were defiant in refusing to suppress entirely their identity in either their life of their work. This duality of openness and concealment manifests in both of the ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ works through multiplicity in meaning, presented and confused by conflicting direction and imagery.

Jonathan D. Katz writes of the post-war period that “[to] be homosexual in a homophobic culture was forcefully to realise that conversation was not always about expression, that it might be about the opposite: dissimulation, camouflage, hiding.”[[348]](#footnote-348) Importantly, in O’Hara and Johns’ works, this camouflage did not simply equate to silence. Instead, across the works of queer artists in the post-war period, a coded aesthetic language allowed queer expression to remain somewhat uncensored. Foucault’s writing on nineteenth-century sexuality, the values of which were not much changed by the nineteen-sixties, unpacks this careful balance between the boundaries of silence and confession:

Not any less was said about it; on the contrary. But things were said in a different way […]. Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse […] than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorised, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse.[[349]](#footnote-349)

This queer coding was characterised by suggestive gestures comprehended only by those ‘in the know’, functioning in a similar manner to the balletic gesture, which acts as mime for the audience whilst relying on pre-determined, and pre-learned, symbolism. In this sense, to read a poem by O’Hara, or a painting by Johns, through the lens of its queer significations is akin to ‘reading’ a ballet dance. Whilst anyone may watch a performance of ballet, and anyone may find this experience thrilling, this viewing will not be the same experience as an audience member who is skilled in reading dance choreographically.

In a formal reading of dance, this ‘coded’ nature of ballet is organised via a pre-prescribed system of movement vocabulary and its designated meaning. As Wundt explains, “gestures are considered to be wholly the product of systematic invention, or at least more so than speech.”[[350]](#footnote-350) In Balanchine’s *Apollo*, for example, each of the three muses perform a solo that relies on gesture to convey their narrative. Whilst some of these gestures are immediately decipherable for any audience member, such as Polyhymia, the goddess of mime, holding a finger pressed to her lips to signify her silence, others are less explicit. For instance, the goddess of poetry, Calliope, at first performs with open arm gestures, miming speech, intended to convey her reading poetry to the audience. However, as her solo progresses these movements are interjected by her bending her body inwards, clutching her chest. In the midst of her dance, she draws one finger around her other hand before scrunching that hand into a fist. These particular gestures are not part of a pre-determined language of dance, and thus in the moment of performance does not convey absolute meaning to the audience. It opens the movement to individual interpretation from each viewer.

In Goldner’s reading of this sequence, she concludes: “Calliope’s problem is harder to read [than Polyhymia’s]. My understanding is that she keeps running out of ideas. She starts with big ones; that is, she clutches her bosom as though digging deep inside herself, and then declaims with stentorian arm movements. These grand (grandiose?) beginnings end with whimpers, her body sagging.”[[351]](#footnote-351) On the other hand, however, the ballerina’s gesturing can also be read not as a lack of ideas, but as a loss of voice, or failure to speak. She extends her arms out in grand gesture to share her poetic musings, but her body is forced back into itself as she finds no words come out. Ultimately, the ‘true’ meaning of her solo sequence is never confirmed, and in this way the gesture as a meaning-making device leaves decoding this meaning to the individual audience member. As Foucault argues, there are many ‘different ways of not saying’ things, just as there are a number of ways of professing something. This coded, multiplicitous, mode of meaning-making, both in the presentation of meaning and in its subsequent interpretation, relies on the body’s gesture to fill in the gaps of what is not being uttered.

In O’Hara’s poetry, gesture is used in the dual senses of *obscuring* meaning, as in gestural painting, and *meaning-bearing*, as it is used in dance. In both cases, crucially, gesture is used to express that which the subject cannot speak. Reading the gestural movements embodied across the lines of O’Hara’s written verse, in this sense, provides a subtext of the poem’s meaning. This form of gestural subtext shapes the coded, acrostic poem ‘You are Gorgeous And I Am Coming.’ The poem is one of many dedicated, somewhat secretly, to O’Hara’s partner at the time, dancer Vincent Warren:

Vaguely I hear the purple roar of the torn-down Third Avenue El

it sways slightly but firmly like a hand or a golden-down thigh

normally I don’t think of sounds as colored unless I’m feeling corrupt

concrete Rimbaud obscurity of emotion which is simple and very definite

even lasting, yes it may be that dark and purifying wave, the death of boredom

nearing the heights themselves may destroy you in pure air

to be further complicated, confused, empty but refilling, exposed to light

With the past falling away as an acceleration of nerves thundering and shaking

aims its aggregating force like the Metro towards a realm of encircling travel

rending the sound of adventure and becoming ultimately local and intimate

repeating the phrases of an old romance which is constantly renewed by the

endless originality of human loss the air the stumbling quiet of breathing

newly the heavens’ stars all out we are all for the captured time of our being[[352]](#footnote-352)

In Joe LeSueur’s account of the poem, he writes that “Vincent had it in his head that there was every chance his mother might one day run across [the poems] written for him, so naturally he couldn’t allow his name to appear in it,” [[353]](#footnote-353) rendering the acrostic embedding of his name both playfully teasing and culturally necessary. In addition to this queer-coding of O’Hara’s characteristic use of naming in his poetry, now scattered not-quite-hidden and not-quite-exposed across the lines, as well as the double-entendre of the title, which epitomises O’Hara’s tense juggling between the personal, or internal, and the external through the urban site, the poem is of the body. That is, of both the subject’s body moving through the city, and it’s meeting with the body of his desire in real time. In Cal Revely-Calder’s reading of the poem, he writes that it “invites some form of pause, ‘suspension’, or alteration of speed, it doesn’t tell you how significantly to alter it, or in what way. As elsewhere in O’Hara’s poetry, the reader is caught up by exactly what the poems are, in one sense, all about: direction, transit, pauses in a moving city.”[[354]](#footnote-354) Whilst this reading is effective in identifying the significance of the speed, suspension and kinesis of the poem, as well as its mapping of the city through each line, this meaning is only ‘one sense’ of the poem, that which exists on the surface. In fact, the poem is “immediately enthralled by the way it’s haunted. Absences hang in the air.”[[355]](#footnote-355) Within this absence, a reading of the gesturein O’Hara’s poetics reveals a secondary meaning, one that is conveyed by the subject’s body, and ultimately, more sincere desire. It is in the jolts and sways of the subway train as metaphor for the bodies moving together in sexual encounter that O’Hara appropriates the gestural brushstrokes of his painterly peers to obscure transparency and meaning in the poem.

The opening line, ‘Vaguely I hear the purple roar,’ begins as if the subject’s conscious mind is just coming round to what is going on in the world beyond themselves, the distant sound interjecting their thought and returning themselves to their body and its surroundings, having been lost in a moment of pleasure. The noise is not taking place in reality, however, but is emulative of a sensory memory, a ghostly haunting of ‘the torn down Third Avenue El’. Rather, this brief flicker of memory serves as a metaphor for the unspeakable body, the descriptive imagery of the train’s gestural movements standing in for, and masking, the corporeal sensations of the subject’s body as it encounters the body of their lover. We imagine a hand, for instance, lingers beneath the motif of the train as ‘it sways slightly but firmly like a hand or golden-downed thigh.’ The following lines offer a glimmer of awareness, partially uncovering this coded presentation of the body: the subject confesses, when feeling corrupt sounds become coloured, and in this sense, corruptive thoughts code and mask themselves in their presentation to the self as something other than what they are, as in the following line, culminating in an ‘obscurity of emotion’. Additionally, the final lines of the first stanza build the tension and suspension of his pleasure as a contradictory sensation: ‘nearing the heights themselves may destroy you in the pure air / to be further complicated, confused, empty but refilling, exposed to light’. The exposure of this pleasure, to be visible in his desire, threatens destruction, yet the subject is ‘refilled’ and ‘purified’ by the corporeal experience of pleasure and intimacy. Just as in Foucault’s claim that ‘there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things,’ O’Hara plays with this precarious division between exposure and concealment, and even in the moment of climax appears haunted by the duality of his desire.

The repetitive use of comma here serves as a linguistic gesture, hinting at the unspoken possibility lingering between each encounter between the bodies, pushing each clause onto the next with an urgency for both climax and clarity. Significantly, this final line of the stanza does not end with punctuation, and in fact there are no full stops throughout the poem. In this sense the poem does not pause at all, but rather pushes forward onto the next stanza: ‘With the past falling away as an acceleration of nerves thundering and shaking.’ It is in this line, the beginning of a new stanza, that a sense of conclusion is realised, however, this moments placement at the beginning, rather than end, of the stanza emphasises continuation and potential, rather than ending. The body’s climax is conveyed with a sense of both pleasure and destruction, however, and in this sense the specific metaphor of the ‘torn down’ El train is significant. Pleasure is a moment of both ‘acceleration’ and ‘corruption’, an embodied wave that is both ‘dark’ and ‘purifying’.

Just as Johns conceals part of his painting with grey brushstrokes, the gestural motif of the train as both kinetic force and haunting absence serves to obscure a layer of meaning in the poem. In this sense, the bodies that make up the subjects of both ‘You Are Gorgeous and I Am Coming’ and Johns’ ‘In Memory of My Feelings – Frank O’Hara’, oscillate between visibility and concealment, expression and suppression. Furthermore, where in *Apollo* the muses convey both their body’s intentions and failures in their individual artistic expression through gesture, in ‘You Are Gorgeous and I Am Coming’, the written poem mediates the expression of the body behind it’s confession through poetic gesture. The weaving in and out of the two images across the poem’s lines, one of the train and the other of the lovers’ bodies, serves the function of making one claim on the surface, concerning the destruction of the urban site, whilst hinting at the secondary claim, of the intimate encounter, through linguistic code. The jostling of the lines from one image to the other creates a heightened rhythm in the poem, the energetic pacing of the lines making it even harder to decipher the precise subject of one image to the next. Elsewhere, this movement-as-distraction manifests in O’Hara’s ‘walking poems’, in which the speaker is seemingly walking at pace through the city, the reader following his movements through each line.[[356]](#footnote-356)

*‘A Step Away From Them’: Walking as Gesture*

Understood in its dance context, gesture is:

a major part [of daily] movement. As physical movement symbols that express or emphasize ideas and emotions, they are the most overt and commonly shared language of the body. Although gestures accompany speech as a way of emphasizing what is being said, they function independently as well. Indeed, people often resort to the use of gesture when they do not speak the same language, and in so doing, can communicate a tremendous wealth of information.[[357]](#footnote-357)

For O’Hara’s poetics, gesture occurs in two ways: firstly, in poems like ‘You Are Gorgeous and I Am Coming’, as an inference to that which is not being said, leaving coded hints that only those ‘in the know’ are able to identify; and secondly, in the stylised, campy flair of the sways and jolts of his lines, moving in conjunction with the poem’s subject. In the latter sense, this poetic gesture is grounded in the formal organisation of the poem, in a discursive casualness that carries the lines in movement with the speaker. Crucially, these gestures are from and of the body in his poetry.

Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin summarise dance theory’s usage of gesture, stating that “the choreographer can work with gesture in two ways: (1) [they] may incorporate/or abstract established gestures, or (2) [they] may create gestures that become meaningful within the context of a given work. The aim of such created gesture symbols is that they be perceived and understood on an intuitive level (and perhaps on a cognitive level as well).”[[358]](#footnote-358) The action of walking, across O’Hara’s poems, is established as a recurrent gesture that stands in for, and conveys, a lexicon of themes and ideas that need not be explicitly named in each poem. For instance, the characterising of his poetics as being concerned with the urban site, with the social and the observational, as well as his ‘I do this, I do that’ poetry, all stem from the accepted impression of the speaking body in motion through the time and space of the verse.

Gesture also characterises the legacy and persona of O’Hara, the poet, off the page. O’Hara’s distinctive movement of his body – the way he walked, the way he stood or poised himself – appears repeatedly in written memories by his friends and peers and is often referenced in critical accounts of his life and work. In Joe Brainard’s memoir of O’Hara in *Homage To Frank O’Hara*, for example, he makes a number of references to O’Hara’s movement and body in a way that suggests a union between his internal character, and external characteristics:

The first time I met Frank O’Hara he was walking down Second Avenue. It was a cool early spring evening. I remember that he seemed very sissy to me. Very theatrical. And I remember that I liked him instantly.

[…]

I remember that Frank O’Hara could hardly talk about ballet without demonstrating it too.

[…]

I remember Frank O’Hara’s walk. Light and sassy. With a slight twist and a slight bounce. With the top half of his body slightly thrust forward. Head back. It was a beautiful walk. Casual. Confident. ‘I don’t care.’ And sometimes ‘I know you are looking.’[[359]](#footnote-359)

In Brainard’s account, O’Hara’s physical gesture remains in his friend’s memory as representative of the deeper traits and allure of O’Hara’s personality. Reading this account of the poet alongside his work, in which even in his daily life O’Hara seems to perform the movement of walking, as if *en pointe*, is demonstrative of the ways in which poetic gesture functions as an unspoken inference to life, movement, and desire throughout his poems.

In his observations of how pedestrian movement styles differ across national identities, Denby characterises the American gestural accent in terms that align the everyday movement of walking with his modes of defining American ballet stylisations. Outside of his reviews addressing the works of ballet company directly, Denby published an essay, titled ‘Dancers, Buildings, and People in the Street’, that outlined his observations of particular movement styles belonging to different nationalities. In this essay, he describes various gestural accents he identifies across certain nationality’s ways of walking and stepping. Writing from an aesthetic standpoint, Denby asserts that “dancing in daily life is also seeing the pretty movements and gestures people make.”[[360]](#footnote-360) He writes:

American young men loll quite differently, resting on a peripheral point; Italians loll resting on a more central one. Italians on the street, boys and girls, both have an extraordinary sense of the space they really occupy, and of filling that space harmoniously as they rest or move. Americans occupy a much larger space than their actual bodies do; I mean, to follow the harmony of their movement or of their lolling you have to include a much larger area in space than they are actually occupying. […] In Italy I have watched American sailors, soldiers, and tourists, all with the same expansive instinct in their movements and their repose, looking like people from another planet among Italians, with their self-contained and traditionally centered movements.[[361]](#footnote-361)

In Denby’s terms, whilst Italians move with a strong sense of rhythm and flare, American pedestrians carry themselves in a manner that is “amazingly beautiful, so large and clear.”[[362]](#footnote-362) It is this strength in presence, and urgency of movement, that Denby goes on to commend in his reviews of American ballet companies such as the NYCB and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. For instance, in an essay titled ‘In The Abstract’, Denby makes a similar comparison of accent in dance style to his observations of walking, once again placing American movement aesthetics against that of Europe:

Many people notice that the New York City dances more strictly to the measure than the Europeans. It holds as strict a beat, whether in rhythm or counterrhythm, as the orchestra does. That gives to the dancers the lift of a steadily upbeat pulse. To hold that pulse, that impetus, they do the step with a distinct and steady action – soberly. And the steady impetus allows – like in on-top-of-the-beat dancing, or driving a car – a quicker timing and a higher speed. Many people have noticed that the New York City is unique in the lucidity it keeps at high speed; none of the other companies is able to remain as distinct in complexities of beat and step continued so long at top speed. None has the high-tension stamina necessary. The strictness of the New York City has been called its Swiss-watch technique.[[363]](#footnote-363)

In this sense, Denby’s characterisation of pedestrian movement styles according to national identity is important to understanding his claims in favour of the emerging American balletic style. In his reviews, it is the straightforward execution of choreography, rather than narrative, that Denby praises, as well as the speed and strength of the NYCB dancer’s movement in opposition to the dramatized flourish of the French and Russian dance styles, that sets American dancers apart. Fundamentally, it is the ballerinas’ capacity to dance in a way that is *alike* to the everyday accents of pedestrian movement, and as such maintaining an allusion to American values and sentiments, whilst crucially moving with virtuosic perfection that elevates the activity on the stage above that of the everyday.

It is in this careful balance between the performers moving in some sense like their audience, yet also dancing with impressive technique and prowess that creates an experience of aspiration and entertainment for that audience, that the American ballet found its mass appeal. In Andrew Hewitt’s historical view of gesture, he examines “walking and gesture – or walking *as* gesture, as a ‘demonstration of bourgeois self-consciousness.’”[[364]](#footnote-364) That is, he writes:

At its most simple, I trace bourgeois social choreography back to learning comportment and how to walk – to the promenade that clearly shows off the body and makes of the very condition of man (‘walking on his own two feet’) an aesthetic gesture, a mode of representation. Walking is that human action where performance and text meet.[[365]](#footnote-365)

In this sense, the gesture of walking served as a meaning-making language of the body in the forming of a recognisable bourgeois class in the public realm. Walking for leisure, without destination, signified someone unbound by the restraints of the workday, and thereby inferred someone of middle-class status. O’Hara’s walking poems fluctuate between that of leisurely wandering for wandering’s sake, and hurried movement from place *a* to *b*. As Susan B. Rosenbaum writes, O’Hara’s walking poems frequently observe images of pleasure and excess in sites of consumerist capitalism:

the walk poem embodies an ideal of spontaneous, unconstrained movement, feeling, and reflection, propelled by the poet’s autonomous power of locomotion rather than by any external authority […] and yet, oddly enough, the walk poem often flirts with its own demystification, setting up a dialectic between the poet-walker and his external environment […] that challenges and potentially undermines a spontaneous ideal.[[366]](#footnote-366)

Through the gestural motif of walking in his poetics, reflective of his own distinctive walk, O’Hara creates an additional mask of subjectivity, much like gesture is used in balletic narrative to establish a recognisable character. Through the performative self of the walking poem, O’Hara plays with ideas of the poetic voice, projecting a persona of self that appears to originate from a confessional, personal voice that in fact obscures and conceals meaning in the poems.

These tensions and oscillations are particularly explicit in O’Hara’s ‘A Step Away From Them’, written on August 16th 1956, the day after Jackson Pollock’s funeral.[[367]](#footnote-367) Originally published in *Lunch Poems*, a collection of poems that O’Hara frames as being written on his lunch break, whilst “strolling through the noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noon,”[[368]](#footnote-368) the poem begins:

It’s my lunch hour, so I go

for a walk among the hum-colored

cabs. First, down the sidewalk

where laborers feed their dirty

glistening torsos sandwiches

and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets

on. They protect them from falling

bricks, I guess. Then onto the

avenue where skirts are flipping

above heels and blow up over

grates. The sun is hot, but the

cabs stir up the air. I look

at bargains in wristwatches. There

are cars playing in sawdust.

On

to Times Square, […]

[...] Everything

suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of

a Thursday.[[369]](#footnote-369)

The poem opens with a statement of time, ‘It’s my lunch hour.’ However, unlike O’Hara’s characteristic announcing of time, behind this statement is an awareness of restriction: both the poem, and the city walk it describes, are constrained to the hour assigned to the speaker by their employer. Swiftly, however, marked through comma and monosyllabic wording, ‘so I go’, the poem is propelled into action before a moment of reflection can take over. Throughout this poem, each new observation begins halfway through a line, and runs onto the next line to be suddenly interrupted by the next sighting. The energy of the poem is life-affirming buoyancy, yet this movement comes from anxiety that is rooted in a resistance to stillness, which would give way to pause and reflection of thought. In this poem, to be still is to give in to death – both the death of life and pleasure, and grief for the death of loved ones. ‘First, down the sidewalk’; ‘Then, onto the / avenue’: the full stops of this stanza do not signify stoppage, but rather a change of direction in the persistent action, and most significantly, a hurried changing of observation to keep the subject’s mind, and the poem’s lines, from resting on the thought of the death of his friends. The reader is led to identify themselves as walking ‘with’ the poem’s speaker yet is as restricted to that subject’s perception as the speaker is to the restrictions of the lunch hour. The most substantial pause in the poem comes in the admiring of laborers, who ‘feed their dirty / glistening torso sandwiches / and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets / on. They protect them from falling / bricks, I guess.’ Compare these five lines to the fleeting observations later on in the stanza – “The sun is hot … / There / are cats playing in the sawdust’ – and it becomes clear that whilst the city bustles on, the subject’s interest is in the desires of the body brought in the moment, by evidence of desire and life. The poet’s speaker is distracted by none of the city’s offerings but the men’s glistening torsos. Meanwhile, those men are fulfilling their needs by eating a sandwich. Thus, this moment of suspended action on the speaker’s part is still entirely grounded in the body. Through the humorous mixing of perspectives, in which the Coca-Cola bottles seem to be wearing yellow helmets, rather than the working men, O’Hara further entwines the two bodily needs at force here: the desired physical body, and that body’s desire for food. Back in motion, we pause briefly to ‘look at bargains in wristwatches,’ the looming threat of the capitalistic ruling over the speaker’s time, the threat of an ending, which forces the poet back into reality, marking once again the moment: it is 12:40 of/ a Thursday,’ and the lunch hour is almost over. The poem continues:

Neon in daylight is a

great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would

write, as are light bulbs in daylight.

I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET’S

CORNER. […]

And chocolate malted. A lady in

foxes on such a day puts her poodle

in a cab.

There are several Puerto

Ricans on the avenue today, which

makes it beautiful and warm. First

Bunny died, then John Latouche,

then Jackson Pollock. But is the

earth as full as life was full, of them?

And one has eaten and one walks,

past the magazines with nudes

and the posters for BULLFIGHT and

the Manhattan Storage Warehouse,

which they’ll soon tear down. I

used to think they had the Armory

Show there.

A glass of papaya juice

and back to work. My heart is in my

pocket it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy.[[370]](#footnote-370)

This second half of the poem is concerned with fullness, whether of the body, of life, or the threat of loss of it. With this question of fullness comes existential musings on pleasure: the pleasure of ‘neon in daylight’, the pleasure in excess of a cheeseburger and chocolate malted, of a woman in furs putting her dog into a taxi. These pleasures are placed in contrast to the threat of ends, however, which come in the loss of his friends, the demolition of the urban site, and even in the clock turning one and signalling it’s time to get back to work. The poem’s temporal structure, limited to the speaker’s one hour break, frames the lunch break as a performative occasion. Within this structure, the poem choreographically maps the movements of the speaker as he walks through the city: first here, next there, then stop here. Whilst this graphing of the pathways through the city is observational in a literal sense, we read the poem as if O’Hara is the subject we are observing doing this movement, positioning him as the performer who not only sees as he goes, but transcribes this movement into choreographic notation.

In Bill Berkson’s published notes for his unfinished study on O’Hara’s life and work, he had written out a quote from Arshile Gorky (1941) that reads: “‘Movement is the translation of life, and, if art depicts life, movement should come into art, since we are only aware of living because it moves’.”[[371]](#footnote-371) Gorky’s lines encapsulate O’Hara’s long-standing project to represent what he believed it meant to truly be alive, which is, through constant movement and experiencing the world through that movement. By making the daily action of walking, and particularly by articulating his personal stylised movement into his poetics, in addition to his dance poetics, O’Hara sought to grasp at the kinetic joys and rhythms of life through poetic symbols of human gesture. In ‘A Step Away From Them’, the motions of daily life are not simply notated, rather O’Hara utilises the motifs of human gesture to poeticise, and romanticise, the otherwise mundanity of the city-dwellers daily walk. In this way, motifs of gesture served a secondary function in O’Hara’s poetics. His exploration of movement, such as the gesture of the step, places emphasis on the performance and dance of movement, rather than literal everyday action, in order to elevate the subjects of his poems as a celebration, rather than mere representation, of the experience of living.

*The Performative Step in Poetry and Dance*

O’Hara’s poems are not literally written as he walks but enact a performance of walking, and in this sense function as a performative gesture. Where the whole poem performs this walking, observing the sites and turning corners as it travels from ‘a’ to ‘b’, this movement is organised according to the smaller units of steps. The minute idiosyncrasies of the step, of *how* both the body of the speaking subject and the body of the poem moves, serves as the organising force of the poet’s thinking. The poems present an idealisation of walking that elevates the act above pedestrian movement, into a performance more akin to dance that takes the universal gesture of stepping as a movement motif representative of common human experience, and utilises it as an aesthetic tool of poetic expression. Writing about ‘A Step Away From Them’, David Herd argues that, “[if] O’Hara is not actually writing as he walks […] he is thinking, as he walks, of what he will write shortly. He is composing as he steps; the step, throughout, is the measure of his composition. And then as he steps he becomes acquainted with the environment that forms the fabric of his poem.”[[372]](#footnote-372) In addition to the visual image of the poet in motion portrayed in ‘A Step Away From Them’, in which the speaker describes his direction and observations as he moves, many of O’Hara’s walking poems are organised onto the page to emulate the embodied movement of stepping across a space.

In these ways, O’Hara’s walking poems are composed choreographically, and in turn present both pedestrian movements, and the composition of his verse, as a performance of dance. One of the most vivid examples of this poetics of the performed step is O’Hara’s 1959 poem, ‘Walking’:

I get a cinder in my eye

it streams into

the sunlight

the air pushes it aside

and I drop my hot dog

into one of the Seagram Building’s

fountains

it is all watery and clear and windy[[373]](#footnote-373)

The poem begins, seemingly, mid-walk, and immediately the walking body and its surrounding elements merge: ‘I get a cinder in my eye’, the external environment disrupts the subject’s train of thought at the same moment that the reader is invited in. This does not disturb the flow of the poem’s step, however, and just as each line portrays an action that causes the following line’s movement, the subject describes the visual sensation affected by the cinder in his eye as ‘it streams into / the sunlight’. In this cause-and-effect poem, in which one observation is quickly replaced by another, there is a lot happening at once, yet with the movement of each line, enjambed across the page, the step of both the printed poem and the subject’s movement organises each element into a comprehensive series of actions. Through the chain of events, O’Hara blurs any distinction between the subject’s physical form, the urban setting they are walking through, and the wider environment of the elements. With the broken form of the poem, we are swerving and turning with the speaker, remaining light-footed and in motion.

Taking from Heidegger’s metaphor of the leap in his theorising of the prosody of cognition, as movement informing and shaping one’s cognition, Herd argues: “the step, in O’Hara’s poetry, is integral to his thinking, that in thinking he steps, that in stepping he thinks; that the term, in its recurrence in its poetry, works as metaphor but also as the trace of gesture, and that in the combination of metaphor and gesture is the order of O’Hara’s thoughts.”[[374]](#footnote-374) By taking the organisational principles of choreography, O’Hara’s poems enact a performance of walking, in which the visual and thematic act of stepping serves as an expressive device. More akin to a principal ballerina than the flat-footed, instinctual walk of a pedestrian simply travelling from one destination to another, O’Hara’s every step is taken with precision, grace, and purpose.

In Denby’s dance writing, the balletic step also emerges as a central component of the dance viewer’s experience. He emphasises that the balletic step, or the ‘toe step’, as he terms the female ballerina dancing *en pointe*, is crucially other to the everyday step of walking. It is a dramatized form of stepping, necessarily elevated above pedestrian movement:

She can step onto them, or she can rise onto them, rising with a soft flick of both feet. She can step about on them with a fanatic delicacy and a penetrating precision. She can spin on them like a bat out of hell. When she jumps or runs on them one hears a muffled tapping that sometimes sounds fleshy. From the side you see the sole curving like a bending knife blade with at the back the queer handle of the heel. From the front they over-elongate the leg and alter the body’s proportions; and the extreme erectness of the foot seems in keeping with the extremely pulled-up waist and the stretched lightness of the slender ballerina.[[375]](#footnote-375)

The balletic step, then, functions in a similar manner to a poetic device such as metaphor, or metre, depending on its choreographic usage. It may provide the rhythm of a dance, or create imagery and convey emotion. In this sense, the balletic step serves as both form and content for a dance; the stepping foot is both primary tool of the medium of dance, on which a ballerina’s ability to dance relies, and a means of artistic expression, allowing for aesthetic flourish and meaning-making or storytelling. In addition, as Denby notes, “Dancing on and off toes may be described in this sense as an expressive play of changing proportions.”[[376]](#footnote-376) Just as O’Hara’s steps in ‘Walking’ organise the speaker’s movements and sensory experiences across the page, Denby asserts the balletic ‘toe step’ as an organisational tool in dance in which tensions and dualities of the body’s lived experience may be expressed. He writes:

Their justification is the shift in the dance, the contrast between taut and pliant motion, between unexpected and expected repose, between a poignantly prolonged line and a normal one. Toe steps also increase the speed and change in the rhythm of some figures. On paper these formal aspects sound less dramatic than psychological ones; but they are what one actually sees on the stage, and out of them, seeing them distinctly, the better part of the dance emotion is made.[[377]](#footnote-377)

This physicality of stepping is also important to the psychological experience of viewing movement, Denby argues, as he writes of watching a ballerina dance on pointe that:

[there] is a sense of discomfort even of cruelty in watching them, a value that often shocks sensitive persons when they fail to find in the emotion of the dance a vividness that would make this savage detail interesting. Well, from a psychological point of view, toe steps have here and there a curious link to the theme of a ballet. In *Giselle* they seem consistent with the shocking fascination of death that is the core of the drama; in *Swan Lake* they are part of the cruel remoteness of the beloved; in *Noces* they hammer out a savage intoxication.[[378]](#footnote-378)

This witnessing of the dancer’s pain serves to elevate the movement of the balletic step away from the everyday, and into the realm of performance. The ballerina is not simply walking across the stage, she is dancing in the specific context of performing choreography for an audience.

In ‘Walking’, it is not the content of each line but their choreographic organisation, stepping back and forth across the page, that creates dynamism and tension in the poem, as well as emulating the cause-and-effect relation between each moving element of the external world. Back in the poem, suddenly, with the following step, this apparent harmony is disrupted as the speaking subject is brought back into their body, notated through the poem’s ‘stepped lines’:

the shape of the toe as

it describes the pain

of the ball of the foot,

walking on

asphalt

the strange embrace of the ankle’s

lock

on the pavement

squared like mausoleums

but cheerful[[379]](#footnote-379)

The jolt of the line break in ‘the strange embrace of the ankle’s / lock / on the pavement’, evokes the sensation of the walker’s stride suddenly broken by a buckle of the ankle. For Rosenbaum, this signifies that “the pavement dictates the ankle’s motion and that this friction causes ‘the pain/ of the ball of the foot’ […]. These sources of friction suggest that the walker’s motion is not spontaneous but constrained, a struggle to move against resistance.”[[380]](#footnote-380) The lines, ‘squared like mausoleums / but cheerful’, however, suggest an acceptance or harmony in the pavement’s interception of the speaker’s movement. In fact, in both cases of physical harm inflicted by the surrounding environment, the ‘cinder in my eye’ and the ‘pain / of the ball of the foot’, these sensations are neither dwelled upon nor interruptive to the poem’s rhythm, but rather give way to subsequent moments of joy and pleasure: the cinder in his eye ‘streams into / the sunlight’, and the ache of his foot only gives way to further movement, ‘walking on’. These bodily reminders of one’s place in the world serves to remind them that they are alive, and present, in their environment. As Herd writes, “as one thinks about O’Hara’s style and performance, his way of conducting himself on and off the page, one quite readily finds oneself thinking about the way he places his feet. … one thinks of him – because he thinks of himself this way – as stepping out into the New York street.”[[381]](#footnote-381) O’Hara’s walking poems do not simply observe the sights of New York, but enact a performance of the embodied sensations of what it is to be in motion through the environment of the city. Through representing movement both in the action portrayed in each line, and through the poem’s formal organisation on the poem, O’Hara does not seek to simply replicate dance movement in his poems through imagery of action. Instead, O’Hara attempts to evoke the aesthetic elements of dance movement, and formal elements of choreography, in his specifically poetic modes of expression.

*‘Parallel Poetics’: O’Hara’s Choreographic Verse*

In addition to the indirect influence Balanchine’s productions had on O’Hara and Denby’s poetics, the two poets enjoyed a more direct creative exchange as friends, ballet-viewing companions, and as literary peers. Denby was born in 1903, twenty-three years before O’Hara, and had trained in dance at the Hallerau-Laxenburg School by the time the two poets met.[[382]](#footnote-382) To O’Hara, then, “Denby would [have] appeared the living embodiment of the pre-war European artistic experimentation that was so crucial to O’Hara’s poetics and personal development and which arises so often as a theme and an influence of his poetry.”[[383]](#footnote-383) Similarly, O’Hara was one of Denby’s greatest advocates in publicly praising his poetry in addition to his dance writings. For instance, Denby’s first collection of poems, *In Public, In Private*, “had been praised by O’Hara in 1957 as ‘an increasingly important book for the risks it takes in successfully establishing a specifically American spoken diction which has a classical firmness and clarity under his hand.’”[[384]](#footnote-384) Denby’s poetic voice carried the Americanised inflection that he identified as characterising the American manner of pedestrian movement and dancing. The two poets shared a number of themes in their work, particularly of the body in motion through the specific settings of New York City, explored through visual motifs of the urban skyline. Denby draws on this source of inspiration himself in an interview with Anne Waldman, noting that as “a poet, some days one feels like writing shapeless romantic things. Just as [Balanchine] does – in his case, as a choreographer.”[[385]](#footnote-385) Crucially, these themes were predominantly explored through a shared poetics of movement and dance.

Beyond the writings that explicitly take dance as their subject, O’Hara and Denby’s poetics of dance seek to convey the motions and rhythms of dancing, and dance viewing, through what the photographer and Denby’s long-term collaborator, Rudy Burckhardt, terms in a 1986 interview with Simon Pettet, ‘parallel poetry’:

Pettet: “Let me read you something… Edwin said, *Well, I learned a lot from Rudy Burckhardt’s photographs and movies. I got very interested in them, the way that you can study them, and know what the texture of air and light is all about. I wanted that in my poetry. Nobody really understood the films of Rudy Burckhardt because he was trying to capture that, to make you feel as if you might be able to touch the air and the light.* What is he talking about?”

Burckhardt: “Well, this is what seems to be called ‘parallel poetry’. In the 50s our friends, the poets – Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Jimmy Schuyler – were all writing art reviews for Thomas Hess and *Art* *News*. But people would object. They’d say, ‘he’s not really criticising the painting, he’s not talking about the painting.’ This is parallel poetry and it’s great.”[[386]](#footnote-386)

Burckhardt’s notion of ‘parallel poetry’ speaks to an essence of O’Hara and Denby’s poetry that appeals to dance through a sensory emulation and relies on kinaesthetic empathy for the reader to experience similar sensations to that of viewing dance motion. In presenting his theory of kinaesthetic empathy, Theodor Lipps posited that when observing performed movement, “we literally feel what the acrobat, suspended high in the air above us, experiences […] When we see someone sucking a lemon, it is as if we tasted the acid; when someone cries, we often feel a lump in our own throats.” John Martin, similarly, argues that it “is virtually impossible for us to resist translating what we see or hear into our own present and active experience.”[[387]](#footnote-387) In their parallel poetics of dance, O’Hara and Denby did not seek to produce images of dances, or refer to specific dances in any explicit way. Rather, they sought to find new ways of organising language to establish a poetics that provoked the same embodied, sensory experiences in the reader, as one experienced whilst viewing dance.

As Catherine Gunther Kodat explains:

“What Burckhardt here describes as parallel poetry is not art-inspired verse along the lines of Williams’s ‘The Dance’ or Auden’s ‘Musee des Beaux Arts’. Rather, it’s writing that seeks to work the same effects (or affects) that the visual and performing arts accomplish in their quite different media: Denby wants his poetry to convey the same sense of the ‘texture of light and air’ that he experiences in viewing Burckhardt’s photographs. In his follow-up question, Pettet takes Burckhardt’s explanation literally (‘So is the light in the photos like the spaces in the poems?’), but Denby’s sense of poetic form was never so concrete. In any event, the point that concerns us here is not whether Denby succeeds in conveying in verse the same quality of light one experiences in Burckhardt’s photographs and films but rather that Denby was a poet whose strong visual sense influenced his formal verse formally at least as much as thematically. Understanding this aspect of his poetics makes even clearer – if there was any doubt – how important the dance was to Denby’s sense of what could be accomplished in poetry.”[[388]](#footnote-388)

As Kodat makes clear, neither poet sought out to replicate dance in their verse in any literal sense. Instead, they were able to identify the embodied sensations felt in response to viewing dance, and endeavoured to find a means of breathing this sense of life into language through formal composition and visual motif.

One such poem, O’Hara’s ‘Polovtsoi’, which takes its title from Ivanov’s 1890 ‘Polovtsain Dances’, choreographed as energetic Tartar folk dances in the second act of his ballet *Prince Igor*, emulates dance through its formal organisation of language onto the page. The dance, with its “rousing energy and scale of choreography,” was revived by Diaghilev in 1909, and was subsequently performed across Europe throughout the twentieth-century.[[389]](#footnote-389) The formal organisation of ‘Polovtsoi’ on the page stands out from much of O’Hara’s work, its disparate, disordered structure and unmediated vulnerability and pessimism vastly unlike his other poems explored in this thesis. To handle such subject matter, O’Hara turns to the structural principles of dance as a means of moving through the anxieties expressed throughout the verse. The poem reads:

white

blood

dead

when

ate

fear

yes red

scare

pearl

die gay

black

fit

saturdaynight

parse

fend

flame

contend

disperse[[390]](#footnote-390)

Without narrative, and with no coherent verbal phrases, ‘Polovstoi’ is nonetheless emotive and captivating. The poem demonstrates the kinetic and disjointed embodied experience of terror. Although the poem explores themes that are present across many of O’Hara’s poems, now stripped away from metaphor and double-entendre, the energetic movement of this verse cuts deeply to visceral human experience. Through the gestural scattering of language, the eye of the reader follows the phrases as one would follow the action of a dance, the hurried movement from one end of the space to another giving the viewer just enough time to catch the essence of one phrase before they must glance across to the next. O’Hara offers single words as meaning-making gestures, and in this sense relies on the corporeal readings of the individual viewer to determine the poem’s themes. No more needs to be said, however, as the violent impulses of the language, ‘blood / dead… fend/ flame’ carry the weight of their unspoken meaning. The shape of the whole poem on the page evokes a visual image of a body in motion, mid-spin, leaning its weight in one direction to the next.

This overall sense of movement emphasises the poem’s urgency, with a drive to action, or reaction, underpinning the language of anxiety. The organisation of the individual components across the page draw attention to the absences surrounding them, omitting the transitions of movement from one phrase to the next that would also be missed by the eye of the dance-viewer. In this space looms the threat of eradication, the traces of self already ‘dispersed’, erratically, at once concealed and revealed. Furthermore, the rhythm of the dance-poem is dictated by the predominantly monosyllabic language, creating bursts of dynamic action, in comparison to the longer beats of silence. Through the poem’s placement on the page, the eye is drawn immediately to the second line of the poem, ‘blood’, rather than the first, ‘white’. The reading eye tries to make sense of the scattered wording, for instance, instinctively reading the fourth line before the third – ‘when / dead’ – due to its position further left of the field. From the very beginning of the poem, a sense of violent threat is evident, ‘blood / dead /when’ creating a fragmented experience of time in the poem. The threat is certain, but the question of ‘when’ it will occur keeps the emotion of the poem, and the reader, in frenetic motion. Suddenly, jolting out to the other end of the space, ‘ate’ suspends in an air of stability, a return to the safe normality of daily life in which the speaker fulfils their basic bodily function of eating. The following lines ‘fear / yes red / scare’ interjects this pause of safe mundanity, however, enacting in real time the interruption of one’s daily life when they live under threat, and provoking a sensory embodying of this fear in the reader.

As in viewing a dance, the reader’s body intuitively lives the motion of the poem, and in this sense, the reading experience is itself one of performative movement. The phrase ‘red / scare’, followed by the most poignantly spaced line,

‘die gay’

reveals the source of the speaker’s fear, yet the scattered wording also reveals the speaker’s inability to explicitly name this threat. Requiring some deciphering, the revelation takes place over suspended time and space, as opposed to the instantaneous nature of much of O’Hara’s other verse, such as ‘A Step Away From Them’ and ‘Having a Coke With You’.

In Balanchine’s *The Four Temperaments*, balletic gesture is suspended in space creating a parallel visual image to O’Hara’s ‘die…gay’ phrasing placed across the page. The ‘Sanguinic’ variation, representing blood, for example, is a duet performed by a male and female dancer, and features the recurring motif of the female ballerina in arabesque, on pointe, with her left leg extended to the front. She performs the arabesque over a suspended period, extending her leg to the very extreme and, for a second, seems to be falling, slowly, backwards, as her supporting foot shifts her weight from toe to ankle. Immediately following this sequence, the male ballerina executes a sequence of lifts with her, as he walks them around the parameter of the stage space, and the female slowly extends her legs from *pas de chat* position, knees bent and toes pointing towards each other, into an outward extension suggestive of the splits. On the page, the line ‘die / gay’, illustrates a visual image that mirrors this latter movement of the ballerina’s legs, drawing out their extension until they finally reach the out-right position. The resulting effect of this duet, and the suspension of movement in space, for the audience, is an embodied kinaesthetic tension, waiting for the familiarity of the final position to be executed. In the case of ‘Polovtsoi’, however, this relief is suspended further, as the gestural placement of the poem’s language continue to be suspended across the page, the meaning of the vocabulary becoming increasingly disjointed.

As the poem continues, the single word ‘fit’ is placed just off-centre of the page, suggesting an attempt to fit in, or pass, in dominant culture. Yet this attempted self-concealment only serves to further emphasise the speaker’s difference, expressed through the physicality of the word not quite falling into its ‘proper’ place in the space of the poem, a visual mirroring of the speaker’s own embodied sense of finding themselves just-outside of normative expectation. Similarly, ‘parse’ gestures towards multiple meaning. Taken literally, ‘parse’ as the separation of a whole into component parts, hints towards a secondary meaning, in which an individual separates the parts of themselves into components, learning to conceal those parts of themselves that fail to conform, and ‘pass’ safely in society. Both ‘parse’, and the following line, ‘fend’, are isolated apart from one another, surrounded by vast blank space, illustrating the isolation felt by the lone body, left to fend for themselves. The final three lines of the poem, ‘flame / contend / disperse’, create a return to the heightened state of corporeal anxiety of the beginning of the poem, their placement from left to right on the page giving a regular, abrupt beat to the rhythm of the verse. ‘Flame’, crucially, suggests two possibilities for the reactionary movement of the poem. On the one hand, ‘flame’ sees a return to the explicitly violent threat looming in the blank spaces of the poem, and on the other, ‘flame’, as with the subsequent ‘contend’, hints at a defiant movement *against* the threat, enflaming the tension of the poem with the question of retaliation. Finally, however, ‘disperse’ concludes the poem with a down-beat. The soft ‘s’ sounds sitting in contrast to the harsh, blunt, textures of ‘fit / fend / contend’. Seemingly defeated, the components of self are left separated, now scattered and suspended in a mirroring of the formal organisation of the verse on the page. Within O’Hara’s parallel poetics of dance, the verse is not organised to replicate the precise action of a dance, but rather, in its jolts of action, suspended across the page space, emulates the embodied experience of kinaesthetic empathetic dance viewing.

O’Hara’s poem ‘Cohasset’ explores similar sensory themes through kinesis. The title of the poem references a beach in Washington, and in this taking of place to name the poem O’Hara’s hints towards Denby’s poetry, many of which are titled with the name of the particular location written about in the verse. The opening lines of ‘Cohasset’ immediately establishes a rhythm that aligns with Goldner’s writing on accent and beat in Balanchine’s Waltz choreographies:

The accent of the Waltz is step down; the women dip deeply on the first count. That first plie gives them a lot of upward spring to make the second and third spritely […]. But it’s that initial downward swoop, into the floor, that sets the tone of melancholy. Indeed, its impact is so lingering that it influences what we feel about the rebounding second and third beats. Sometimes the dancers seem to be showing gaiety in the face of sadness. How resilient they are – and how noble, too.[[391]](#footnote-391)

When this rhythmic beat is paralleled in poetic form, it injects a strong sense of both motion, and emotion, into the reader’s interpretation of the lines:

I see you standing

there on a rock

in my light mind

your body’s smiling

as a tern plummets

and gulps fishward

from hot rocks

to freezing water

clambering up

swooping down

golden like last

year always golden

your tender eyes

pull me into the

water like a lasso

of seaweed green

and I fall there

the huge rocks

are like twin beds

and the cove tide

is a rug slipping

out from under us[[392]](#footnote-392)

Springing forth from the initial down beat of the opening line’s ‘I see you’, the poem flows and turns in a rhythmic manner similar to that which Denby identified in NYCB’s *Agon*:

By now you have caught the pressure of the action. The phrases are compact and contrasted; they are lucid and short. Each phrase, as if with a burst, finds its new shape in a few steps, stops, and at once a different phrase explodes unexpectedly at a tangent. They fit like the stones of a mosaic, the many coloured stones of a mosaic seen close by. Each is distinct, you see the cut between them; and you see that the cut between them does not hurt the dance impetus.[[393]](#footnote-393)

In the poem, individual ‘phrases’, made up of each newly noted component of the intricate details that make up the whole moment, are organised into lines to create the ‘shape’ of the poem. The physical shape of the poem on the page visually emulates both the haunting, absent physical forms of the cityscape that we are used to viewing in O’Hara’s work, and the tall physical form of a ballerina, such as the poet illustrates elsewhere in reference to LeClerq. Moreover, Denby’s allegory of ‘the many coloured stones of a mosaic seen close by’ speaks directly to the nature of this poem. A single moment seems to be paused in the speaker’s mind, whilst each line hones in one intricate detail at a time, to convey each element within the chain of activity in the scene. The poem is not painterly, however, as the language and structure of the verse function together to give *motion* to what would have otherwise been a static image. Despite this focus on detail, the poem presses on speedily, ‘as if with a burst’, and in this sense alludes to the virtuosic pulse and precision of Balanchine’s dancers. Extending the ideas put forward in ‘Having a Coke With You’, ‘Cohasset’ highlights that for O’Hara, dance is a logical next step to both painting and language in ensuring that the life-giving energies of movement are encapsulated in his poetics.

The poem’s opening lines, ‘I see you standing/ there on a rock/ in my light mind/ your body’s smiling’, plays with the reader’s sense of place. The title gives a specific setting, Cohasset, which we imagine the first line’s image to be located in, yet the third line destabilises this, suggesting that the action is taking place instead in the speaker’s ‘light mind’. This simple four-word line, with no punctuation preceding or following it, presents a number of possibilities: firstly, the whole scene could be taking place in the speaker’s mind, and this could be as a dreamlike fantasy, or as a memory of something that had occurred in reality. Alternatively, it could be taking place in real time, at the title’s given location. The speaker sees the addressed ‘you’ standing on a rock, but in his imagination, as in the following line, their ‘body’s smiling’. It is crucially through movement that a body smiles, as the following lines seem to suggest: ‘as a tern plummets / and gulps fishward’. ‘Tern’ is particularly significant in propelling the poem’s sense of action as the motion of these two lines serves to emulate the erratic movements of the fish it references, but for the reader, also carries aural reference to ‘turn’, giving the rhythm of the verse a visual and aural image of dance.

The motions of ‘a tern plummets / and gulps fishward’ are particularly reflective of Goldner’s writings on Balanchine’s Waltz in that ‘plummets’ emphasises a down beat that accelerates the ‘upward spring’ of ‘gulps fishward’, propelling the action into an upwards accent of ‘spritely’ action. However, just as Goldner emphasises the sense of melancholy inherent in the Waltz’s first downbeat plie, the motion and visual image of the fish plummeting down into the water reveals a glimmer of anxiety in the poem. The fish is likely trying to escape its predator, survival only possible if it remains in constant motion. The poem’s speaker, seemingly attempting to eternalise this perfect snap-shot moment in the ‘light of [his] mind’, seems to fear losing grasp on this idealised image of this single moment, and ‘smiling in the face of sadness’, persists with grasping at each flicker of movement in the scene to keep it alive in his memory.

Emulating another of Balanchine’s signature qualities, the following lines present a cycle of tensions, ‘from hot rocks / to freezing water’, that endeavours to balance the contrasting components in harmony with one another. This sense of tension in nature, the extremes of temperature and oppositional qualities of the elements offers a sense of cyclical movement and of relief for the poem’s underlying anxieties. The regular, rolling rhythm of the lines reflect the comfort found in the ongoing cycles of the natural world, giving kinetic rhythm to the speaker’s knowing that even if this moment is lost to time, the physical place of this memory will go on in motion for eternity. As this motion continues on, ‘clambering up / swooping down’ further replicates this action of ups and downs, with ‘clam-ber-ing’ implying a difficult upwards motion, let go and resolved through the long smooth downward ‘swoop’, which doesn’t end in suspension but is propelled into continuation with the abrupt ‘ing’ sound. Next, ‘golden like last / year always golden’, with the motion of a turn, the rolling lines emphasise the familiarity of this scene, the repetition of ‘golden’ at the beginning and end of the phrase keeping the couplet both enclosed, and thus intimate, and cyclical, as in a pirouette, ending in the precise position it began. It is significant that O’Hara’s lines emulate the spins and pirouettes of a Balanchine production, rather than the open gesture of a leap or pas de chat, as the sense of these movements experienced through a reading of kinetic empathy emphasises the intimately private scene of the poem, revealing flashes of image and emotion. In this inward turn, however, the poem prevents the voyeuristic eye from entering the moment entirely, revealing flashes of the shared moment, but never the full view.

In the final lines of the poem, the intensity of this intimacy strengthens: ‘your tender eyes / pull me into the / water like a lasso’. Reminiscent of the entangling ribbon in ‘Ode to Tanaquil LeClercq’, in which the speaker felt themselves bound and dragged from the audience, into the dance, here the speaker is audience only to the object of his affection, the ‘lasso’ creating a kinetic visual image of the energy between them, that further excludes the reader and emphasises intimate desire. In contrast to the Ode, and in a similar sense to ‘Having a Coke With You’, however, ‘Cohasset’ loses focus on the surrounding scene in favour of looking at his lover, and equates this romantic gaze with viewing movement akin to dance. The speaker shifts from spectator, taking in his lover’s every move, to inserting himself into the scene – ‘and I fall there’ – yet seemingly lacking control over this movement, lacks the grace of his companion. Meanwhile, the readers of ‘Cohasset’ are themselves pulled into the scene of the poem, in a mirroring of O’Hara’s experience in the audience of LeClercq’s performance, ‘like a lasso’, experiencing the beats and turns of the embodied motions of the scene along with the poet’s speaker.

In a poetics so invested in the intimate and communal, O’Hara centres movement, and particularly dance, in his poems as part of his constant endeavour to resist the threat of stillness. To stop moving, for O’Hara, is to stop feeling, and ultimately, to stop living. In the figure of the ballerina, then, the poet found a muse from which to shape his verse, striving to parallel the ethereal grace of the balletic step, flowing through his lines. In many of these poems, the dancer is representative of desire. This adoption of the balletic figure serves a secondary function, beyond aesthetics, however, as the constant sense of motion and performative movement also functions as a mask throughout O’Hara’s poetry, behind which the subjective, speaking ‘I’ is destabilised and concealed. Whilst O’Hara’s poetics of dance is bound primarily to aesthetics and expression, Jackson Mac Low, the subject of the next chapter, looks to dance as a means to detach the authorial voice, and subvert the speaking subject, in his poetics of ethics and a political body.

Chapter Three: ‘Making Something New’:

Jackson Mac Low’s Choreographic Poetics in *The Pronouns*

*‘Egoless’ Poetry and Buddhist-Anarchism*

In an artistic practice that sought to resolve the concerns raised by his Buddhist-anarchist beliefs through experimental compositional practice, Jackson Mac Low turned to dance and performance to compose a choreographic poetics rooted in interdisciplinary collaboration. His works were frequently written with live performance in mind, ranging from music, to spoken poetry, to movement. In his *Asymmetries, “*composed from September 1960 and published in *An Anthology [of Chance Operations],*” for example,[[394]](#footnote-394)“the white spaces between the words stand for silences ‘equal in duration to the time it would take to read aloud the words printed anywhere above or below them.’”[[395]](#footnote-395) In this early instance of a choreographic poetics, Mac Low uses the printed poem as a literal score to direct performance. Moreover, in his concerted attempts to create artwork freed from the authorial ‘ego’, Mac Low constructed a form of collaboration that relied on a second participant ‘realising’ his work through their interpretation and performance of it.

Although every poem ‘needs’ a reader, in Mac Low’s work this need is literalised beyond its metaphorical and sociological conditions. His poetry turns ‘reading’ into performance in a more unambiguous and clearly delineated way, in which reception is not physically ‘passive’, but active and interactive. Most notably, these experimentations with choreographic poetic composition and collaboration as performance culminated in his poetry collection *The Pronouns: A* *Collection of 40 Dances for the Dancers*, a collection in which Mac Low used a combination of pre-determined rules and chance-composition to compose poems that were addressed to dancers such as Simone Forti and Trisha Brown, inviting them to perform the poems as dances. What and how this work means, as well as the history (in both theory and practice) of Mac Low's poetic thought before the occasions of its composition, are the subjects of this chapter.

Mac Low studied Buddhism under D. T. Suzuki and chance-based composition from John Cage,[[396]](#footnote-396) and by combining these two influences in his work, was concerned with the issue of the author’s ego.[[397]](#footnote-397) In his approach to Buddhist principles, Suzuki:

saw as the centrality in Zen of individual liberation. Whereas ‘Zen is concerned with the absolute individual self,’ the government, he wrote in 1948, ‘should cast such a pale shadow that one begins to wonder whether it even exists at all.’ Towards the end of his life, in 1952, Suzuki took this strain of thinking to its furthest extent, remarking at a symposium that ‘I think anarchism is best’.[[398]](#footnote-398)

Writing on the application of these philosophical ideas to his own work, Mac Low wrote:

How better to embody such ideas in microcosm than to create works wherein both other human beings, their environment, & the world ‘in general’ [are] all able to act within the general framework & set of ‘rules’ given by the poet […]. The poet creates a situation wherein she or he invites other persons and the world in general to be co-creators. The poet does not wish to be a dictator but a loyal co-initiator of action within the free society of equals which it is hoped the world will help to bring about.[[399]](#footnote-399)

For Mac Low, art was a space in which to practice and explore an ethics of community and collaboration according to Buddhist-anarchist beliefs, and in opposition to cold war politics and military aggression. Consequently, he sought to compose poems that operated within a ‘general framework’ of pre-determined structures in order to overcome the threat of ‘ego’ present in personal preference and authorial ‘dictatorship’.

By creating ‘a situation’ in which the first ‘co-initiator’ fulfils the compositional task according to the pre-conceived rules, and notates these results for the second ‘co-initiator’ to subsequently read, interpret, and respond to, Mac Low aimed to ‘embody’ the Buddhist idealisation of disparate components of the universe. These components are placed together by means beyond personal control, into a dialogue that both allows each part to maintain their natural state and reconceives these separate parts as a collective whole. In his 1992 essay, ‘Fluxus & Poetry’, Mac Low reflects on his earlier works, writing:

My own aesthetic was and is in no way ‘anti-art’. […] I believed and I still do in opening art to ‘the world’ and to ‘life’ by including ‘ordinary’ objects, actions, and words, and especially by including silences longer than traditional rests, during which ambient sounds may be heard and thus become intrinsic parts of performances. [In my case], part of this ‘opening to the world’ consists in using nonintentional compositional methods such as chance operations, ‘reading-through’ methods, and ‘translation’ from one universe of discourse to another, and also in allowing performers’ choices to determine various parameters of performance.[[400]](#footnote-400)

Here Mac Low outlines his anarchist-Buddhist objective of creating art to ‘open to the world’ the radical potential of interpretation and outside forces, utilising the ‘ordinary’ as a means to distance himself from notions of Author-as-genius, as well as inviting external sounds into his works. In his effort to render the intention of the poet irrelevant, Mac Low strives towards an art that prioritises method over meaning and sets up a framework in which meaning is constitutive of ego as far as it alludes to intention and thus back to ‘Authorship’.

Granted, what is laid out on the page can never truly be entirely ‘devoid of ego,’ but by labelling himself ‘*co-initiator’* of the full work, Mac Low insinuates that the work is only complete once the reader has played their equal part as co-initiator. Importantly, Mac Low labels both himself, the poet, and the reader-performer *initiators* of action, suggesting an absence of ‘creation’ or ‘origin’ of the work. To initiate is to cause something – a process, an action – to begin. However, the implication here is that that process or action exists prior to its initiation into movement, and thus that its conception occurred prior to the initiator’s involvement.

Beyond his own project of developing a politicised poetics, Mac Low was a member of the anarchist-pacifist group responsible for the magazine *Why?* (titled *Resistance* in the years 1947-1954).[[401]](#footnote-401) This involvement with social and political activism had direct impact on his highly politicised modes of viewing, and discussing, the function of the poet as both capable of, and responsible for, implementing societal change. Suzuki also speaks of “the doctrine of *upaya,* or skilful means, which enabled the Buddha to enlighten his listeners by engaging them at their individual levels of understanding, applied to cultures as well as to Buddha’s interlocutors in the sutra.” That is, “Once we ‘personally experience it through our own efforts,” Zen, “by ‘directly appealing to facts of personal experience and not to book knowledge,’ promises to return us to ‘our original state of freedom’.”[[402]](#footnote-402) Mac Low adapted this sentiment of *upaya* in his own Buddhist-anarchist project of egoless poetics through his artistic emphasis on the reader’s personal experience of his compositions and by opening his work to be read not by learned experts but by active readers making meaning for themselves through the experience of his work.

For Mac Low, this experience is entirely predicated on effort, or labour, on the part of the reader. Just as he regarded the poet as holding some political weight through their creative output, his positing of reading as an active task infers his sense that the reader equally held both power and responsibility to actively engage with the works. Finally, for Suzuki, “[harmony] between the individual, society, and nature was at once a reaffirmation of the individual, in the sense that one’s real nature was realised as identical to that of cosmos, and a freeing of the individual from the delusion of the isolated ego. Thus freed, one could co-operatively engage the world without the need for political governance.”[[403]](#footnote-403) In this integration of Buddhist beliefs and anarchist ideals, then, communal governance is guaranteed because action – as always bound to experience, as well as effort – is inherently both political and social. For Mac Low, this freedom from ego and institution manifested in his artistic project as he strove to liberate his work from his authority and individualistic taste and voice. The collaborative communities of the Judson Dance Theatre and Fluxus Happenings were central to providing a socialised setting in which to experiment with producing works that relied on interactive reading and performance.

In a letter written to Allen Ginsberg in 1991 Mac Low directly addresses these influences on his compositional technique, stating that: “In my own case, Zen & Kegon Buddhism (both of which Suzuki dealt with in his books and his Columbia classes) influenced me in two ways: On the one hand, they led me to devise and practice nonintentional methods of writing[.] On the other hand, these forms of Buddhism reinforced a way of writing I’d practice intermittently all my life—intuitive, immediate writing with relatively little revision.”[[404]](#footnote-404) The precarity borne out of his experiments with combining nonintentional methods of composition that rely on pre-determined rules with ‘immediate writing’ that relies on the individual author’s intuitions define the concerns that his work preceding *The Pronouns* failed, in his mind, to resolve. Finding his methodology of ‘egoless’ writing insufficient, Mac Low then socialises this concept through opening his artwork to be interpreted, and realised, in performance. As he writes to Ginsberg:

in many of my writings, after 1960 especially, I combined the two methods--writing freely between nonintentionally given ‘nuclei’[.] Also, my performance pieces from late 1960 on, although usually composed and/or set on the pages by nonintentional methods, allow and encourage immediate reactions to the ongoing performance situation and the other performers in the choices people make in using the materials provided them. […] I carry on and encourage [a] dialog between the nonintentional and the intentional.[[405]](#footnote-405)

For Mac Low, then, his ‘performance pieces from late 1960 on’ succeeded in his aims towards an ‘egoless’ writing due to two key components: the first, his process of composition, which relied on pre-determined rules and systems that abstracted authorial intention; and the second, the product being in some sense in-complete, awaiting realisation through the open interpretation and performance by someone other than himself. The route to achieving an egoless artwork is thus grounded in interdisciplinary collaboration, in which a ‘dialogue’ must occur between process and product, and between author and performer.

Although stemming from vastly contrasting schools of thought, much of the literary criticism published contemporary to Mac Low and the Anarchist-Buddhist ideas he subscribed to posit similar concerns with subjectivity and the figure of the author in literature.[[406]](#footnote-406) Most notably, Roland Barthes’ polemic ‘The Death of the Author’ was first published in English in the avant-garde magazine *Aspen*. [[407]](#footnote-407)Barthes’ essay appeared in the same edition as Cage, Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg, whilst Mac Low and La Monte Young were featured in a later issue.[[408]](#footnote-408) Although Barthes’ argument pertains to, and is aimed towards, scholarship and intentionalist interpretation, and is an argument well-worn in literary criticism, Mac Low’s compositional project uses ideas that are latent in Barthes’ theorising on authorship. As such, a brief treatment of Barthes’ ideas is useful in terms of outlining and contextualising Mac Low’s artistic principles and concerns with authorship.

Where Mac Low writes of his critique of the role of author-as-dictator, Barthes characterises this authorial power as ‘the prestige of the individual,’ of ‘the human person’ over the esteem of language itself.[[409]](#footnote-409) He writes:

The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions […]. The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* confiding in us.[[410]](#footnote-410)

Here, Barthes posits a critique of the tendency towards reading literary work as a symbol of the identity responsible for it, as if the work exists only as a code for the singular expressions and intentions of the author.[[411]](#footnote-411) Inferred in this assertion of the tyranny of the author is the submissive consumer of art, passively reading the celebrated author’s word as absolute truth, echoing Mac Low’s reading of confessional traditions as inherently predicated upon a dynamic of power that sits in direct opposition to Buddhist-anarchist ideals of communal dialogue and collaboration.

Akin to Mac Low’s objective towards ‘egoless’ poetry, although not approaching the issue from a Buddhist-anarchist context, Barthes asserts: “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.”[[412]](#footnote-412) For Barthes, then, the moment of writing represents the diminishment of the ‘ego’ or ‘single person’ of the author; at which point it becomes an entity in its own right. Importantly, in Barthes’ claim is the centrality of the ‘body’ that writes, hinting at the active movement involved in the writing process. Furthermore, the “text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination,” the location of which rests with the reader: “we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”[[413]](#footnote-413) Barthes’ thinking appeals to Mac Low’s project of dismantling the authorial position of the author, as well as his investment in the reader’s crucial role in completing the existence of the work.

The two differ significantly, however, in their view of what is at stake for the author within this dynamic. Where Barthes professes the absolute negation of author, Mac Low takes a comparatively reformative stance in his assertion of literature as a collaborative event, requiring both authors and readers, both of whom serve the work as ‘co-initiators’.In addition, despite his commitment to experimenting with ‘egoless’ and ‘chance based’ compositions, Mac Low was ultimately sceptical about the ability to entirely remove the ego from his work, noting decades later in 1993: “the ego is inevitable. It’s always there, in one way or another. The more I’ve worked with nonintentional methods, the more I’ve seen that the ego is manifested and effectual in anything you do.”[[414]](#footnote-414) Collaboration, then, is a means through which to temper the ego through the shared dialogue between two individuals, framing a Utopian vision of a socialised, rather than individualistic, compositional method. Within this framework of collaborative creation, diminishment, rather than eradication, of the ego is the aim. This writing for, or towards, collaboration in Mac Low’s work reflects the influence of the teachings of his friend and mentor, John Cage.

*John Cage and the Second-Generation New York Avant-Garde*

Cage’s own career was largely based on collaboration with peers working in different disciplines. One of his primary concerns, Deborah Jowitt asserts, “had to do with dismantling or ignoring distinctions between the various art forms, and with allying the materials and processes of art with those of daily life […]. Performance was seen as a way of making art immediate, verifiable, ‘real’.”[[415]](#footnote-415) In Cage’s teachings, then, experimentation and improvisation, with an emphasis on live performance, were highlighted as integral to both creative and collaborative innovation across previously divided disciplines. Most notably, Cage’s collaborations with Cunningham revolutionised the dynamic between dance and music:

Most important – and this was Cage’s great innovation in the dance arena – although the music and dance are performed at the same time in the same space, they are created independently of one another. The dancer no longer dances ‘to’ the accompaniment of the music. […] As [Cunningham] explains it, ‘what we have done in our work is to bring together three separate elements in time and space, the music, the dance, and the décor, allowing each one to remain independent. The three arts don’t come from a single idea which the dance demonstrates, the music supports and the décor illustrates, but rather they are three separate elements each central to itself’.[[416]](#footnote-416)

Through this partnership, dance no longer relied on music accompaniment to lead movement, just as music no longer met the demands of choreography to shape its structure. Instead, each was free to create their own initial piece, and through performance, a secondary work was created as the dance piece and music composition occurred together for the first time. The result would be a contrast of musical and dance movements, at times at odds with one another, and at times meeting in chance synchronisation, even if only fleetingly; both existing in their own right, meanwhile complementing and contrasting the other. Overall, however, there was no pre-determined intention towards unity or simultaneity, but rather a celebration of experimentation and the chance occurrence of either harmony or tension between the two art forms.

In addition to his collaborative partnership with Cunningham, Cage saw himself as working in collaboration with the world around him. Benjamin Piekut characterises Cage’s ethos, that came to shape Mac Low’s own compositions, in his 2013 essay ‘Chance and Certainty: John Cage’s Politics of Nature’: “Since at least 1950 the composer took the junior role in his collaboration with what he understood to be nature; Cage sought to remove his own control, to be affected rather than to affect. In his musical experiments, he tells us, he was nothing more than ‘a faithful receiver of experience,’ committed to eliminating personal expression in favour of revealing a more general truth.”[[417]](#footnote-417) It was from this belief that Cage came to his most famous composition, *4’33”*, in which the performer takes his place at the piano but does not play any notes. Whilst many regard this as his ‘silent piece’, for Cage the piece was made up of the ambient sounds produced by the audience and environment. Rather than silence, or piano music, it was the shuffling of a spectator in their seat, or traffic beyond the performance space that formed the sounds of the piece. The influence of this work, as with many of Cage’s compositions, came from his lifelong investment in Buddhist teachings, manifested in his experimentation with chance procedures.[[418]](#footnote-418) Cage set the temporal frame for the piece, but his agency over the sounds that were produced was forfeited to its surroundings, and as he believed, reconnected art and nature. Writing on his Zen-inspired practice of chance procedures, Cage stated:

[Value judgement is] a decision to eliminate from experience certain things. Suzuki said Zen wants us to diminish that kind of activity of the ego and to increase the activity that accepts the rest of creation. And rather than taking the path that is prescribed in the formal practice of Zen Buddhism itself, namely sitting cross-legged and breathing and such things, I decided that my proper discipline was the one to which I was already committed, namely the making of music. And that I would do it with a means that was as strict as sitting cross-legged, namely the use of chance operations, and the shifting of my responsibility from that of making choices to that of asking questions.[[419]](#footnote-419)

Here Cage outlines the most significant influence Zen-Buddhism had on his own, and later Mac Low’s work: the principle of forfeiting ego, and by extension personal intention and preference, in favour of an openness to all that the world presents to you. For Cage, such teachings opened up broad new possibilities in his compositions, as his focus shifted away from expression or aesthetic intention, and towards ‘pure sound’. By implementing pre-determined restrictions to his compositions, such as the roll of a dice, Cage explored the dynamics of sound, he believed, liberated from his ego and biased authority.

These teachings of chance composition in music that Mac Low gained from Cage, both as a student in his ‘Composition of Experimental Music’ course at the New School for Social Research,[[420]](#footnote-420) and through their continued friendship and frequent correspondence throughout the decades that followed,[[421]](#footnote-421) eventually became for Mac Low “a paradigm for poetry.”[[422]](#footnote-422) Mac Low turned his attention to applying these notions of removing authorial ego and nonintentional methodology to his literary works. He wrote to John Cage remarking on this attenuation of individual authorship that, “I never trust my calculations &/or predictions. I’ve been surprised too many times by the pleasant, astonishing, &c. consequences of either some slight rule-change or even the use of the same system (unchanged) as applied to various sources,”[[423]](#footnote-423) highlighting his faith in indeterminate process over his personal preference. Mac Low achieved this will to pre-prescribed procedure over personal preference through devising systems that relied on pre-determined numeric and linguistic rules to compose his poetry, such as in his ‘diastic writing’ which I will explore in detail later in the chapter.

Cage’s artistic experimentation became increasingly invested in interdisciplinary experimentation and performance, writing in 1964 that:

[the] arts are not isolated from one another but engage in ‘dialogue’. Much of the new music (composing means which are indeterminate, notations which are graphic) is a reply to modern painting and sculpture (Marcel Duchamp, painting on glass which is not separate from its environment, the ‘found object’, the dropped strings). However each art can do what another cannot. It is predictable therefore that the new music will be answered by a new painting – one which we have not yet seen.[[424]](#footnote-424)

As such experimentations went on, the processes of these ‘dialogues’, in which a musical score, for instance, was composed in response to a painting, dance, or poem became the very source for performance. Following *Untitled Event No. 1* at Black Mountain College, Cage’s network of artists in New York began to further experiment with performance through ‘Happenings’, in which artists working across mediums would stage their process of creation as a live event, intended to be witnessed by an audience. In this sense, process became a live art product of sorts in its own right. The live ‘Happenings’ continued to emphasise interdisciplinarity and collaboration as the crux of creative innovation.

*‘Intermedia’ Happenings*

The early ‘Happenings’ took place in the years 1958-1961, and were “a form of collaboration without object, [without] either a preconceived goal or a resulting product.”[[425]](#footnote-425) In addition, Johanna Drucker writes, “*as* collaborations […] they were activities, artworks, *in themselves*, which were mostly defined as *relations among individuals.*”[[426]](#footnote-426) Whereas the first generation practitioners of Happenings such as Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg and George Brecht all continued to define themselves as ‘artists’, the second generation – Mac Low, Higgins, Cage, and Charlotte Moorman – saw themselves as ‘*performance* artists.’ Ultimately, however, Drucker’s notion of ‘collaboration without object’ continued to define the spirit of Happenings throughout the 1960s. Happenings practitioners objected to the ‘art object’, or product, instead hailing live art and ‘intermedia’ creation in its place, with particular emphasis on artistic process as performance in its own right. The term ‘intermedia’ was first coined by Higgins in his 1960s essay by the same name. In this essay, Higgins asserts that he and his contemporaries “declared war on the script as a set of sequential events,” opting for alternative modes of structuring performance pieces.[[427]](#footnote-427) The Happenings performances embraced the ontology of dance as angled towards disappearance, producing events that were intentionally fleeting, and as such privileged the process and live context of the performance over any permanent art ‘object’.

Higgins’ approach to highlighting the condition of performance as inherently and importantly momentary is useful for thinking about Mac Low’s poetics project, which like the ‘Happenings’, is a poetics that functions against the permanence of trace, instead creating poetry that aspires towards the condition of dance’s ephemerality. In 1958 Higgins produced a piece titled *Stacked Deck,* “in which any event can take place at any time, as long as its cue appears. The cues are produced by coloured lights. Since the coloured lights could be used wherever they were put and audience reactions were also cuing situations, the performance-audience separation was removed and a happening situation was established.”[[428]](#footnote-428) In addition to collapsing the performer-audience divide, *Stacked Deck* also plays with distinctions between author/composer and audience, as the audience are implicitly responsible for the initiation of action, taking on an implied role as director of the piece. Much like Cage’s chance-led musical compositions, here Higgins dictates the placement of the coloured lights, and the movements associated with each coloured light (determinate factors of the piece), yet leaves the temporal framework of the piece to indeterminacy by relying on audience reaction and ‘chance’ timings of the lights to conduct when these movements are performed. Consequently, and in line with Higgins’ proclaimed ‘war’ against ‘the script as a set of sequential events’, the performance piece resists conventional limits of pre-determined chronology, as well as the hierarchal audience/performer divide. Events such as *Stacked Deck* were the influencing force of the artistic social circle of which Mac Low and Forti were involved, and paved the way for intermedia experimentation, as well as experiments with collapsing divides between audience and performer, or reader and author, such as Mac Low’s *Nuclei* and *The Pronouns.*

Higgins concludes his essay by summarising the birth of this new era of art-as-event as inherently invested in interdisciplinary practice: “Thus the happening developed as an intermedium, an uncharted land that lies between collage, music, and the theatre. It is not governed by rules; each work determines its own medium and form according to its needs.”[[429]](#footnote-429) Similarly, Higgins’ peer and Happenings pioneer Allan Kaprow wrote of the Happenings: “what is astonishing is that they are pan-artistic phenomena, in which energies originally developing within the separate fields of painting, dance, music, poetry, etc., began to cross each other’s paths at various and unexpected places. This was what mutually affected all of them, and in turn produced new hybrid arts and new ideas as well.”[[430]](#footnote-430) Thus, whilst notions of cross-discipline collaborations had been in play prior to Higgins and Kaprow’s cultural moment, through the social and artistic exchanges that came out of the Happenings, new possibilities of collaboration and performance across art forms came to light. Consequently, with the rise of Happenings came a shift in focus of art creation for realisation and performance, rather than merely for the sake of a stand-alone finished product of published poem or completed painting, as well as a renewed investment in the merging of art forms. It is from this changing climate that dancers, writers, and artists began to collectively reimagine the potentials for both interdisciplinary collaboration and performance art, which came to a head in Robert Dunn’s choreography classes.

*Robert Dunn’s Choreography Class: Mac Low meets ‘The Dancers’*

In the early 1960s, Robert Dunn’s choreography class, given at the Merce Cunningham studio, was the social and creative focal point for the dancers, artists, musicians, filmmakers and poets of the moment.[[431]](#footnote-431) Dunn had previously been a student of Cage’s ‘Composition of Experimental Music’ course at the New School for Social Research.[[432]](#footnote-432) In addition to Mac Low and Higgins, who had met Dunn through Cage’s composition class,[[433]](#footnote-433) attendance at Dunn’s classes included Simone Forti, Remy Charlip, Fred Herko, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, and Robert Rauschenberg. A space for experimenting with composition, improvisation, and the moving body, these classes introduced Mac Low to the dance world, and to Forti in particular, and provided inspiration for Mac Low’s eventual writing of *Nuclei for Simone Forti* and *The Pronouns.* Sally Banes, the leading scholar on the Judson dancers, writes of the classes that:

both in their heritage from Cage and in their eclectic assimilation of various cultural preoccupations of the 1960s – including Zen Buddhism, Taoism, existentialism, and scientism – [they] were a microcosm of New York’s avant-garde art world. It was an art world small enough for poets, painters, dancers, actors, and musicians to know each other and each other’s work. So, many of the ideas circulating in the various artistic and social networks around Greenwich Village found their way into the dances and discussions in Dunn’s courses. To Dunn, the classes were a generalised ‘clearinghouse for structures derived from various scores of contemporary action: dance, music, painting, sculpture, Happenings, literature.’[[434]](#footnote-434)

Here, Banes outlines the equal importance of Dunn’s class as site of artistic experimentation, andas social centre for the avant-garde worlds to collide, forming an interdisciplinary collaborative community. Dunn’s classroom was equally a space for exploring alternative philosophies, leading to a richly diverse approach to compositional and performance technique that aimed to merge different ideals, and in turn, collapse the rigid divides between schools of thought.

The key objective of Dunn’s classes was the explorative experimentation across the arts, challenging the long-held *status quo* of previous generations by extending notions of dance into literary artistic practice. Banes continues in her account of the classes: “Perhaps even more important than the dances given [was] the attitude that anything might be called a dance and looked at as a dance; the work of a visual artist, a filmmaker, a musician might be considered a dance, just as activities done by a dancer, although not recognisable as theatrical dance, might be re-examined and ‘made strange’ because they were framed as dance.”[[435]](#footnote-435)Thus, consequent of Dunn’s cultural exchange between his students, and across disciplines, the very notion of defining dance was destabilised. Following the logic that anything is a dance, the practice of dance as an artform became an inherently interdisciplinary practice for Dunn’s students. For instance, Yvonne Rainer recalls of the sessions that:

Dunn’s class provided an atmosphere of risk taking and ‘anything goes’. Steve Paxton ate a sandwich; I took off my sweater and put it back on; and Simone [Forti] read a story, or ‘dance’, about an onion sprouted in a glass and toppled over. Anything performed before onlookers became ‘dance’. For those who had toiled for years in the discipline-bound classrooms of classical and modern dance, all this was a revelation.[[436]](#footnote-436)

Through Dunn’s teaching, the choreographic process was no longer removed from the dance ‘product’. Instead, in an atmosphere where ‘anything goes’ and ‘anything might be called a dance’, every stage of the artistic process, and all creation across mediums, were reinterpreted as valid performance works in their own right. As the students of the class began to explore the principles of interdisciplinary dance further, the possibilities of written texts asdance became a recurring theme in the works produced. These aims frequently manifested through written instructions accompanying dances, as well as in poetic texts being used as prompts for movement improvisation.

Dunn’s teaching assistant, Danielle Belec, writes that “Dunn’s ultimate pedagogical goal was to teach students how to find their own images, how to cue their movement vocabulary, and how to clarify conceptually their various methods of making dances.”[[437]](#footnote-437) Dunn’s choreographic principles, additionally, were focussed on making “objective structures human.” That is, “he structured his classes to develop the form, mood, and theatrical image of the dance.” Taking direct influence from Cage’s theorising of music composition, this “constant interplay between intuitive and non-intuitive choices constituted the essence of Dunn’s pedagogy.”[[438]](#footnote-438) One of the earliest assignments given by Dunn was to:

make a dance by combining sets of choices for body parts, durations, parts of the room, and left or right directions in space.” Forti’s resulting dance, as Charlip remembers it, was structured according to pre-determined rules, to “put different parts of her body against the floor, depending on whether the musical phrase was a five-count, four-count, or three-count measure. ‘If it was a five she put her head down. If it was three, she just put her two feet down.[[439]](#footnote-439)

The dance was not choreographed to be accompanied by any specific piece of music, and therefore the movements of the dance were determined at the point of performance based on chance, according to whichever music was used for that particular realisation. Experimentations with chance composition and improvised movements continued to define the parameters of post-modern dance after Dunn’s course ended and were at the core of the Judson Dance Theatre’s innovations in performance.

*Judson Dance Theatre*

In 1962, the students of Dunn’s classes put on a public performance of the works they had choreographed during the course, to take place at the Judson Memorial Church.[[440]](#footnote-440) What was only meant to be one concert led to the dancers finding a more permanent home through the church’s newly established arts program, which sought to support avant-garde artists without censorship.[[441]](#footnote-441) Within this new setting, the dancers and artists that had taken part in Dunn’s classes carried forward his principles of interdisciplinary dance and formed the Judson Dance Theatre.[[442]](#footnote-442)

For Mac Low and the Judson dancers, the site of the church, located opposite Washington Square Park and amongst New York University buildings, in the Greenwich Village district of New York City, provided the space for an ideal community to be formed. The Judson Dance Theatre developed as a community that emphasised collaborative and interdisciplinary artistic experimentation and was formed of individuals who shared a sense of isolation and alienation from the dominant culture of the city. The church provided a site for the collaborative community of artists and dancers to form “a vital gathering place for artists in various fields who exchanged ideas and methods, seeking explicitly to explore, propose, and refute definitions of dance as an art form. […] There was no single prevailing aesthetic in the group; rather, an effort was made to preserve an ambiance of diversity and freedom.”[[443]](#footnote-443) In Fran Tonkiss’ theorising of community in the city, she argues that in addition to those who find kinship through shared experiences, others may find a sense of community through a shared sense of indifference, or removal, from society. Similarly, the artists and religious figures of Judson Church may not have had a shared sense of identity between them, but their shared sense of removal from the socio-political conditions of the city, as well as the physical closeness of the city’s geographical conditions, allowed the forming of an idealised collaborative communal spirit.[[444]](#footnote-444) The Judson Dance Theatre built the foundations of their collective on language of democracy and experimentation, alongside open, critical conversation between members, and in this sense attempted to develop a micro-society that reflected their own beliefs, in opposition to the functioning of mass society.

With Cage and Cunningham’s innovative works as a catalyst, the Judson network sought new modes of creating art that not only challenged aesthetic traditions, but also reflected the radical socio-political climate of the post-war period. Their shift away from narrative and highly stylised movement phrases towards minimalist, task-based choreography brought focus back to the pure human form, creating works that presented bodies in motion, at times in harmony and at times struggling against its indeterminate surroundings. In addition, many of the key works to come out of the Judson Dance Theatre put performers in communication with one another, choreographing pieces that relied on communal experimentation for the movements to be realised together. For instance, in Brown’s 1964 piece *Rule Game 5*: “the performers walked in within demarcated tracks and had to get lower to the ground as they approached the seventh and final aisle. When passing a fellow performer, you had to crouch lower or rise higher depending on where your track was in relation to theirs.”[[445]](#footnote-445) This was a radical move away from the traditional hierarchy of a choreographer creating a dance and teaching it to the dancers who are expected to learn and rehearse it to precision. Instead, dances were constructed by the choreographer outlining rules and frameworks within which performers must complete a set task. The movement itself, consequently, brought the dancing body closer to the everyday movements of pedestrians on the street. The Judson dancers, Ana Janevski writes:

introduced into dance ordinary movements, forgoing leaps and spins for running, walking, catching, falling and climbing. They interacted with objects and wore everyday clothes. They abandoned narrative, expression, and formal stylization; they abandoned everything that marked the dancer’s body as extraordinary, ideal, or ethereal. […] They executed task-based actions, foregrounding the experience of a task undertaken, start to finish, in real time.[[446]](#footnote-446)

By diminishing and evading the formal regulation of dancers’ movements, the Judson dancers created works that further pushed the art form towards ‘disappearance’. Taking Dunn’s concept that anything can be a dance to its logical extreme, the Judson dancers formulated a dance aesthetic that sought to centre common human embodied experience in performance. These structures with which the Judson Dance Theatre operated put into practice the socio-political ideals that Mac Low had subscribed to for many years, opening up new possibilities of artistic practice grounded in principles of interdisciplinarity and collaboration that came to define his literary compositions.

*Chance-Based Methodology and Diastic Composition*

One of the principal means by which Mac Low challenged conventional ideas of author-centric literary production was in his compositional methodology of ‘diastic’ writing. Mac Low describes this method in his own words in his essay ‘Poetry and Pleasure’, in which he explains that:

the writer (or her digitized surrogate) reads through the source text and successively finds words or other linguistic units that have the letters of the seed text in positions that correspond to those they occupy in the seed text. (The neologism “diastic” was coined on analogy with “acrostic” from the Greek words dia, through, and stichos, line. The writer “spells through” the seed text when she “spells it out” in linguistic units successively drawn from the source text which have the letters of the seed text in corresponding positions.[[447]](#footnote-447)

In some instances of this diastic method, “the writer reads through a source text and finds successively words, phrases, sentence fragments, sentences, and/or other linguistic units that have the letters of the seed text as their initial letters. This group is called ‘acrostic reading-through text-selection methods.’”[[448]](#footnote-448) The seed text is used to select words from the source text via the placement of letters; for instance, the first letter of the first word of the seed text may be used to find a word in the source text that begins with the same letter.[[449]](#footnote-449) This diastic method of selecting the poem’s syntax via a pre-existing set of rules, alongside the use of chance procedure to determine the words to be used, demonstrates a means of composing literary works void of subjective poetic expression. Mac Low’s diastic poems thus explore the potentials of language itself, enacting a choreographic experimentation of linguistic movements, the placement of certain letters at certain points of each line determining the transitions and movements of the words and letters surrounding it.

In one such example, ‘Quatorzains From & For Emily Dickinson’, Mac Low takes the poet’s name as the ‘seed text’ and spells the name out, one letter per line, placing the letter in its corresponding position in the line; ‘E’ is the first letter of the seed text and so is the first letter of the first line, ‘M’ is the second letter of the second line, and so on:

**E**clipses—Suns—imply—

I**M**pregnable the Rose

Th**I**s—then—is best for confidence—

Coa**L**s—from a Rolling Load—rattle—how—near—

And **Y**et We guessed it not—

**D**ivulging it would rest my Heart

V**I**cinity to Laws

I **C**ounted till they danced so

Luc**K** is not chance—

Be m**I**ne the Doom—

All i**N**terspersed with weed,

It aim**S** once—kills once—conquers once—

With Pr**O**spect, and with Frost—

We disti**N**guish clear—[[450]](#footnote-450)

Through the system of placing the first letter in first position, and the second in second position, and so on, the poem enacts the procedure of choreography by notating units of ‘language’, as ‘movements’, in the given space of the poem. In addition, Mac Low utilises Dickinson’s stylistic use of the hyphen to denote pauses, rather than simply leaving spaces. As well as exemplifying Mac Low’s reliance on ‘writing from’ Dickinson, this use of symbol presents the poem as a score of movement in which the hyphen literally moves across the space of the line, transitioning from one ‘movement unit’ to the next. In doing so, Mac Low draws attention to the form of the poem as an event taking place in time and space. Furthermore, this notation that connects one unit, for instance ‘Eclipses’, to the next, ‘Suns’ highlights the inherent relations between the components both in terms of the poem’s progression, and in the elements of the universe that each phrase represents, the ‘eclipse’ as an event occurring due to the movement of planets around the sun. In the fourth line, ‘Coals – from a Rolling Load – rattle—how—near—’, the hyphens serve a further function as a physical graph of the causational relation in which each new unit propelling the action of the next.

In the second stanza, the poem seemingly takes authorship as its subject: ‘Divulging it would rest my Heart’ presents the emotive lure of the confessional, present in much of Dickinson’s own poetics. Yet the following lines, ‘Vicinity to Laws / I Counted till they danced so’, seemingly resists the expressive voice, taking the poem’s compositional process as the very subject of its utterance. The poem itself, formally structured according to pre-determined laws, counts its way through each line, relying on external algorithmic procedure rather than internal subjective confession. This process may resist personal expression, but in its organisational procedure allows the units of language to ‘dance so’ across the page. The following lines, ‘Luck is not chance– / Be Mine the Doom—’, suggests an anxiety bound to this methodology. By denouncing subjectivity through pre-determined poetic structures, the poet must not only let go of the ‘ego’ as spiritual-political concept, but gives up authorial voice all together, leaving the end product not up to luck, but to pure chance. In ‘luck’ is the suggestion of some desired outcome, whereas Mac Low’s use of ‘chance’ is designed to evade ‘intention’ from creation all together. As such, ‘It aim**s** once—kills once—conquers once—’: the ‘birth’ of the poem comes at the ‘death’ of the poet.

Both in its organisational reliance on ‘Emily Dickinson’, taking the name of an author, and the thematic musing on questions of utterance and authorship by a second author, Mac Low, the poem plays with the status of author and reader. Mac Low is in some sense ‘reading’ Emily Dickinson, yet in doing so, himself composes a new poem. The process of composition thus relies on a form of collaboration, albeit indirect, between Mac Low and the works constructed by the author of the source and seed texts. Whilst in other poems, such as Mac Low’s diastic ‘writing through’ Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos*, [[451]](#footnote-451) this interrelationship between primary source text and the secondary text produced by Mac Low is much more explicit in its appropriation of a pre-existing text, ‘Quatorzains From & Of Emily Dickinson’ presents a further challenge by taking not a work by Emily Dickinson as its source, but the very idea of ‘Emily Dickinson The Author’, through the simple signifier of her name. Mac Low’s particular selection of Dickinson, who only gained prominence posthumously, raises interesting questions about the figure of authorship beyond the simple concerns of authorial ‘ego’. That is, Mac Low highlights an additional power structure tied to readership. An author may only gain prominence and celebrity through their recognition and celebration by readers. Thus, taking the central role that reading has in the literary work, Mac Low’s diastic composition makes that active reading the very methodology of his writing. In essence, one text *reads* the other, moving through the body of another work, and in turn creates a third work.

To return to ‘The Death of the Author,’ Barthes describes the role of the medium of language as the determining force in the literary text that poets like Mac Low had been working out of for a long time, writing that “it is language which speaks, not the author; to write [is to] reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’.”[[452]](#footnote-452) Mac Low’s diastic composition explores the limits of this assertion by permitting language itself to dictate the syntax and structure of the text’s discourse. Through diastic methodology the language of Mac Low’s composition ‘speaks’ and ‘acts’ through the text that precedes it, distancing both Mac Low and the author of the seed text from the final work. In his diastic writing and chance-based composition, Mac Low thus identified the freedom afforded in the “[balance between] allowing random events to function within the context of a controlled system.”[[453]](#footnote-453) The process of composing poetry through this pre-determined ‘controlled system’ leads to a poetics that takes its organisational principle directly from the choreographic score, in which independent units of movement are notated via a system of pre-determined numeric or linguistic signs, and organised within a strict spatial field. For instance, if the dancer must get from ‘a’ to ‘b’ in a fixed timeframe, as with the seed letters of ‘Emily Dickinson’ being positioned in set positions across each line of the verse, the choreographic score must graph both the fixed positions of the dancer, or linguistic unit, and the transitional movements between those positions, as the hyphens do in ‘Quatorzains From & For Emily Dickinson’.

The natural conclusion of this choreographic poetics was realised in his poems written explicitly for performance. Mac Low frames his poetry as open invitations to the reader to interpret and ‘realise’ the notated ‘movements’, both linguistic and bodily. Just as he composed works via the system of interpreting a source text to lead to a completed product, this subsequent text became for the performer a new source text to adapt into a newly interpreted end of their own.

Before shifting his focus onto dance, many of Mac Low’s performance pieces were designed for musical realisation. Some of these works, such as ‘Piece for Recorder, One Hand Moving’ (1961), were composed for specific instruments. Many of these performance works, however, were intended to be spoken or sung. For instance, the accompanying instructional text to Mac Low’s ‘Peaks and Lamas’ (1958-1959) states:[[454]](#footnote-454)

In this simultaneity (composed by means of random-digit chance operations) each line is preceded by a loudness indicator: *pp* (very soft), *p* (soft), m (moderate) *f* (loud), or *ff* (very loud, *but don’t yell!*). Each line is followed by a number indicating a duration of silence in clock seconds, half-seconds, or intuitively timed moderately slow counts. Performers agree, before a performance, on which duration units to employ.

Two to all eight parts may be performed, each by one speaker. Performers may choose which parts they will perform or draw lots for them. All five stanzas in each part must be performed in the given order. [[455]](#footnote-455)

Mac Low wrote the poems as scores for performance, notating the tempo, force, volume, and silences, akin to a musical or choreographic score, yet emphasises the work as, above-all, a poem. Alongside the 2005 edition of the work, he writes that, “Peaks and Lamas was written as a five-stanza poem in spring 1958 and arranged as an eight-part simultaneity in autumn 1959, when it was first performed by eight students in John Cage’s course in experimental composition at the New School in New York.”[[456]](#footnote-456) In this sense, Mac Low’s performance poems complicate distinctions between score and poem.[[457]](#footnote-457) Where Cage, for example, would construct a score that exists exclusively for the purpose of being performed as a piece of music, the ‘text’ being somewhat incomplete without this subsequent performance, Mac Low’s works are always composed with the dual function of being a poem in their own right, and as a score for performance, to be given a new form through its realisation. This dual status of poem and score is evident in the lines of the poem itself, which begins:

A – 1

Initial Silence: 0

f weather degree letters frontiers illness 49

pp acts 24

ff song bed 29

p col proportion word Sunday load ridge path descent Bashahr 41

m domination 91

A - 2

pp current glacier Odsung skyline tone 4

ff valley 24

p care things 41

pp pitch left archers speck miles fact ledge rate one 45

p prejudice 55[[458]](#footnote-458)

The two functions of the text co-exist beside one another on the page, with the instructional notations becoming part of the language of the poem. The content of the poem was determined using chance methods, as Mac Low explains: “All aspects of the poem, except the decision to include nouns only, were determined by chance operations utilising random digits from the Rand Corporation’s table *A Million Random Digits* and *100,000 Normal Deviates* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1955). The word source was Marco Pallis’s book *Peaks* *and* *Lamas* (New York: Knopf, 1949).”[[459]](#footnote-459) Varying slightly from his diastic composition, here Mac Low’s use of chance performs a ‘writing through’ movement in which both numeric and linguistic units are selected at random, ‘lifted’, in some sense, from the page and positioned into the space of his new verse. The resulting poem resists meaning-making as far as the lines do not exemplify poetic utterance, however, the performance of reading the poem—whether silently or aloud—encourages an embodied awareness of the qualities and forces of the linguistic units, such as the shifts in syllable counts, as they move through each line. Significantly, where in ‘Quatorzains From & Of Emily Dickinson’ Mac Low uses the hyphen to signify pause, the use of numeric notation of silence in ‘Peaks and Lamas’ brings even the silent reader into an interactive performance of reading in which they count themselves through the designated pause.

This writing for performance, and through chance, shifts the poetic voice away from an expressive ‘I’, and towards an algorithmic notation of individual units of sound as they are read. In his 1981 article ‘Balancing Between Freedom and Limitation’ Gill Ott writes of Mac Low’s poetic methodology that:

by adopting formalised methods of composition Jackson denies uniqueness and leaves room for alternate social and poetic vision. This commitment brings Mac Low the writer on line as a worker within the context of contemporary mass production, which leaves no room for individual genius. Further, programmatic aspects of Jackson’s writings, which often include instructions for performance or further composition, and which can assume greater importance than the tenets they generate, rival the languages of high technology.[[460]](#footnote-460)

Here Ott points to the assembly line of labour ‘freed’ from human agency, to automation in production. Positioning Mac Low as ‘a worker within the context of contemporary mass production’, his poetry can be understood as the first stage in a longer process of production, his poems serving the function as instructions for further creation. However, whilst Mac Low’s goal was a poetics freed from the ‘ego’ of the single author, his ‘programmatic’ composition resists the stasis of machinery. Rather, his choreographic poetics appeal to the cohesive labour of a communal group, reliant on a socialised and embodied interaction with his text through performance. In this sense, in “the dialectic of freedom and limitation, the ground clearly marked out, the actors [are] allowed to explore as deeply as they like. In this way Mac Low confronts and utilises contingencies which would not occur to the writer working toward strict definition.”[[461]](#footnote-461) To compose poetry devoid of personal expression alone does not fulfil Mac Low’s artistic project, it is only through composing works explicitly for performance, and the continuation of the compositional process through collaboration that the author’s ego may be removed from the work.

One such performance piece was Mac Low’s play, *The Marrying Maiden*, which was performed at the Living Theatre in 1960. The play itself was composed via randomly selected filing cards, onto which Mac Low had written out “action directions for the actors […] such as ‘walk forward ten paces’ or ‘do something romantic.”It was during rehearsals, when Mac Low witnessed that “some actors started to use the cards to improvise scenes with each other, performing tasks independent from the actual play,”[[462]](#footnote-462) however, that the play came into being: “‘It made me realise,’ Mac Low recounts, ‘that I could allow performers ordinary freedom of choice within a non-intentionally determined situation (one constrained by such means as chance operations and systematically random selection and/or by a score composed by such means)’ (1991: 275).[[463]](#footnote-463) Crucially, it was through the actors’ incidental engagement with the source text (the filing cards) in play, rather than any conscious authorial decision on Mac Low’s part, putting “elements of chance in conversation with intention,” that led to this new way of approaching composition. [[464]](#footnote-464) This component of ‘play’ would become a significant aspect of both Mac Low’s poetics and the Judson dancer’s improvisatory composition, encouraging freedom of interpretation by creating an open environment in which ‘anything’ could be a performance.

For Mac Low’s 1961 work ‘Drawing-Asymmetries’, the boundaries of distinction between media were pushed to their logical extreme. The pieces were produced in a system of metamorphosis that began with language, which was then used to construct drawings that in turn became source texts for performance. In Mac Low’s description of the work, written in 2005, he explains:

The Drawing-Asymmetries are performance scores as well as drawings. […] Each of the Drawing-Asymmetries was produced in the following manner: I would be reading and would come upon a particular word that I decided (usually impulsively) to use as the ‘generator’ of a Drawing-Asymmetry. I would then ‘spell that word out’ by means of words I came across further in the text while I was reading it. These words would have the successive letters of the ‘generator’ word as their initial letters. (Thus all the Drawing-Asymmetries are initial acrostics.) Whenever a letter was repeated in the generator word, I would repeat the word having that letter as its beginning. I placed each of the words on the drawing as soon as I found it. Placement on the drawing, sizes of letters, etc., were chosen impulsively.[[465]](#footnote-465)

This process of moving separate units of language from its coherent syntax in the seed text, and in turn abstracting its original meaning, instead marking the individual letters as purely visual components, positioned into the fixed structure of space of the drawing, is inherently a choreographic process. The end-product, furthermore, is collectively poem, drawing and dance.

Performance of the drawings is entirely predicated on the principles of active reading. The instructions for the piece call on performers to “[read] any word on the drawing in any manner suggested by the way the word is drawn. All possible parameters of reading each word (loudness or softness, pitch changes, etc.) are to be inferred from the word’s appearance.”[[466]](#footnote-466) In some of the drawings, the exact words are difficult to decipher due to their placement within the picture. The performance therefore calls on careful, involved readings of the work, relying on the subjective interpretation of each reader-performer to engage in an instinctive, embodied reading, in which the visual position of the words within the drawings conjures a physical response. Each stage of the work, from its initial conception to its eventual realisation, relies on both physical and interpretative interaction on both sides of authorship and readership, operating almost as if a puzzle to be deciphered and solved.

Mac Low’s work intuitively subscribes to ideas of hermeneutics and interpretation that were being taken up formally by scholars writing contemporary to the poet. For example, writing on the role of ‘play’ in the creation of art in 1960, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that:

the work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience of art, that which remains and endures is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself. This is the point at which the mode of being of play becomes significant. For play has its own essence, independent of the consciousness of those that play. Play – indeed, play proper – also exists when the thematic horizon is not limited by any being-for-itself of subjectivity, and where there are no subjects who are behaving ‘playfully’.[[467]](#footnote-467)

In particular, Mac Low’s format of producing poetry works onto filing cards that were inherently lucid, and designed to be shuffled and selected at random, facilitated this notion of play, in which determining the structural organisation of a performance was literally ‘a game’. By initiating the action of the performance in this way, whereby the medium itself calls for playful interaction with the material, Mac Low posits an improvisation in which neither his own nor the performer’s subjectivity is what makes the work, as Gadamer asserts, “[the] players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches [presentation through] the players.”[[468]](#footnote-468) Rather, it is the experience of the process of realising the work through action and interpretation through a suspension of inhibition and intention. Through play, moreover, the performer-interpreter becomes a secondary composer to the work through their engagement, just as in the case of *The Marrying Maiden,* backstage improvisatory games determined the structure of the performance rather than solely Mac Low’s poems and instructions. Thus, through this aspect of play in composition, *process*, not the material object, is the crux of the work. In their ‘unbound’ nature, the use of filing cards allowed Mac Low to produce work that achieved what Higgins outlined as a disruption to sequence in the performance ‘script’, or in Mac Low’s case, performance notation. Mac Low returned to the use of filing cards to create both *Nuclei for Simone Forti* (1961) and *The Pronouns: A Collection of Forty Dances for the Dancers* (1964), along with emphasis on realisation through dance performance as central to the very method of composition of the poems.

*Nuclei for Simone (Morris) Forti*

*Nuclei for Simone (Morris) Forti* (1963)[[469]](#footnote-469) *–* from which *The Pronouns* were later developed – was a collection of poems written onto 108 individual filing cards and used as ‘source texts’ for dancers to improvise movement from. Each poem was made up of “one to ten words to be spoken (in sentences or phrases, or separately) & the names of one to five kinds of action (gerunds or gerundive phrases).”[[470]](#footnote-470) For example, one such poem reads:

Words:

Polynesia, grain, brick, night, window, waiting

ACTIONS:

BLESSING, KNEELING, SCRATCHING[[471]](#footnote-471)

From this pack of cards wherein each card is a poem, the performers were instructed to select one at random, and perform an improvisatory response to the words and actions given. In his paratextual instructions for the cards, Mac Low writes:

Selecting one card from those provided, the performer improvises freely, using the words & actions indicated as focal points in the improvisation, but adding other words, nonverbal sounds, and actions, as desired. The nucleus words & actions may be repeated any number of times during an improvisation, but they should be introduced in the order in which they are given on the card.

The words and actions given on one card are nuclei for one complete improvisation. Any number of such improvisations may be performed successively or simultaneously, but a definite pause should follow each one. When two or more are performed simultaneously, no new improvisation should be begun until all of one simultaneous group have been completed and pause has followed the last one completed.[[472]](#footnote-472)

Where, in Mac Low’s diastic writing, the poem produced out of the source text becomes an end-product in its own right, in the case of *Nuclei*, the publication of the poems enacts an extension of this gesture: the ‘finished’ texts – the filing card poems produced by the ‘word list’ – become source texts in themselves, with which dancers are invited to interact, and realise the poems through their own dance work. In its title, however, ‘nuclei’ refers to “the centre or core” of a material object, a community, or ‘movement’, as well as to the ‘nucleus’ of a cell, which “contains the genetic material of the cell.”[[473]](#footnote-473) As such, Mac Low positions his text as the centre point of the ‘work’ as a whole, on which all realisations depend. Further, taking itself as ‘the genetic material’ of the collective work, Mac Low presents the *Nuclei* collection as a code for life, or for being, and as such states his broader artistic project through the methodology and performance of the original text.

The opening notes to this work state that: “This material may be used as basis of individual improvisations (one card at a time) & was so used by Simone [Forti] – 925 Madison NY 17 June 1961,”[[474]](#footnote-474) and it was in this year that Trisha Brown also performed two of the poems at the Yam Festival[[475]](#footnote-475) held at the Smolin gallery.[[476]](#footnote-476) The cards were additionally shared with the dancers in Dunn’s class to experiment with.Mac Low’s wife and collaborator Anne Tardos recalls that *Nuclei* was written “on a set of 3x4-inch filing cards on which there are groups of words and of action phrases around which dancers build spontaneous improvisations. These can also be read as poems, as either accompaniments to dances or as themselves.”[[477]](#footnote-477) Here, Tardos opens up an important component of the work, as its proposed function as either poems *or* choreographic scores characterises the two modes as mutually exclusive. Rather, the components of poetics and choreography are intrinsically interlinked in the work. The poems are composed choreographically, with Mac Low taking independent linguistic units, chosen at random, and organising them into the field of the poem. Once written, the poems have the dual function as poems in their own rights, and as choreographic score to be realised, in movement, by the dancers. This duality of poetry and dance is central to Mac Low’s project in producing *Nuclei*, in which both the process and performance of the poems seeks to remove, as much as possible, the subjective voice of the author. To return to Franko’s defining of choreography as always “referring to two kinds of action: writing (*graphic*) and dancing (*choros*),” and thus denoting “writing as movement and dance as text,” [[478]](#footnote-478) and in contrast to Tardos’ claim, Mac Low’s work stands simultaneously as text and performance, the written work always pointing towards the movement it inscribes.

Mac Low recalls of ‘the only performance of *Nuclei for Simone Forti* as a play,’ on 30 June 1961 at the AG Gallery in New York that: “The *Nuclei* cards [were] divided into three groups for performance as a play of three scenes, in each of which the performers use only the cards in one group. […] Each performer would choose one card from the group for the scene taking place & use the unconnected words [as] *nuclei* around which to improvise […] while performing the given actions.”[[479]](#footnote-479) Here, then, the written words that make up *Nuclei,* whilst themselves enacting the choreographic process, are also centres from which activity is spurred, as the work’s title suggests. In this sense, *Nuclei* has a dual function of writing both *for* and *as* choreography, on the one hand serving the function of choreography in its literal notation of performance sequences, and on the other, acting out the choreographic process in the composition of the text. Crucially, reading the poems is always an act of performance, whether through language or movement. Indeed, in each of the poetics statements attached to the poems Mac Low exclusively addresses the ‘dancer’ in place of the ‘reader,’ alluding to this inherent relation of reading and performance.

The work is always both text and dance, the choreography already set on the page, open to be realised through the performance of ‘reading’ the work. Crucially, in Mac Low’s choreographic poetics, this reading must be both active and interactive, in which poet and dancer interpret the work of the other and formalise this interpretation in a realisation of a new work. As such, the text and performance space always allude back to one another. Elsewhere in his essay, Franko argues that:

*choreography* denotes both the score of a dance and the dance itself as perceived in real time and space – which raises the question: when we observe a dance, do we observe (its) writing? That question could be rephrased to ask: What does it mean to ‘see’ choreography? The writing I refer to as being ‘seen’ is not necessarily synonymous with notation. But notation generally also conjures up the image of a dance in preparation or a dance remembered.[[480]](#footnote-480)

Franko’s investigation of choreography and notation underlines the written score as only half the work, the text as ‘notes’ awaiting actualisation through performance, and therefore an incomplete text requiring completion. This speaks directly to Mac Low’s notion of himself as *co-initator*, his authorship only making up some part of the artwork that is to be completed through the performance act of reader or performer. For instance, *Nuclei*, in its notational form, presents the potential of movement in its language, and thus as a full work only comes to fruition once the poems are actualised in the performance space.

Where each filing card that made up the collective *Nuclei* consists of simply a collection of fragmented ‘words’ and ‘actions’, free of pronouns and adverbs, they equally resist subjectivity and imagery. In the fragmented nature of the poems, as well as their open invitation to realisations through performance, Mac Low presents the works as fundamentally incomplete. The initial writer supplies the individual linguistic units, and it is up to the reader-performer to ‘do it yourself’ and complete the poem. Another of the poems reads:

words—

slip, ray, basin, summer, such, finger.

ACTIONS:

WALKING ON HEALS, SHAKING A LIMB, DOING A DOUBLE-TAKE.[[481]](#footnote-481)

This ethos of composition positions the poems as only the initial step in the choreographic process, from which movement sequences are to be deciphered and performed from the notations set out on the filing card. Writing on the dynamic between poetics and choreography, Ric Allsopp extends Barthes’ argument into thinking about dance, stating:

writing, as a creative practice is not something to be completed and therefore appropriated, but an endless practice. Writing ceases to be either a psychological expression of the poet’s subjectivity or a representation of something external to its own workings. Choreography can also be thought about (and practiced) in similar terms – eschewing both psychological expression and ‘aboutness’ as the reference to something beyond its own workings.[[482]](#footnote-482)

Similarly, *Nuclei* is involved in an ‘endless practice’ of revival through the performance-acts of reading and dancing, rather than serving as a completed product awaiting ‘appropriation’ through the dancer’s movement. That is, through this cycle of re-creation and interpretation, there is never one hierarchal author or reader for long before the power dynamic shifts again, the role of author constantly revolving. In this ongoing succession of re-creation and performance, the reader is elevated to the status of collaborator with the artist in generating new realisations of the work. It takes place between reader and poet in a dynamic that establishes the active reader *as* collaborator, and by extension, reader as artist. As such, *Nuclei for Simone Forti,* a work that names its reader in its title,persists in Mac Low’s project of disturbing the boundaries between artist and audience by creating art that empowers the audience with interpretive freedom, creating a cycle in which artist and reader/viewer hold equal prevalence.

*Chambers Street Happening: ‘Huddle’*

Mac Low’s experiments with poetic texts as seed materials for dance were derived from Forti’s own choreographic methods, which frequently adopted written instructions as integral to her dance works. In 1961 Forti was invited by La Monte Young to perform as part of a series of Happenings held at Yoko Ono’s Chambers Street loft, for which Mac Low helped construct props.[[483]](#footnote-483) Forti presented her piece *Huddle*. Although she had not provided written instructions for this particular performance, she later published a version that reads:

A group of seven or eight people standing together in a very close huddle. One member of the group would climb up the mass of people and then down again, becoming once more part of the mass. Immediately another is climbing. The movement must be constant but not hurried. Sometimes it happens that there are two climbing at once. That’s all right. The dance construction should be continued ‘long enough’, perhaps ten minutes.[[484]](#footnote-484)

This performance was a seminal moment for modern dance and opened the floodgates for a new mode of pedestrianised, task-oriented choreography, which are reflected in Mac Low’s experiments in *Nuclei*, and later *The Pronouns.* Writing on his experience of being involved in this first performance of *Huddle* at Chambers Street, Steve Paxton remembers, “I had a chance to come to some understanding of her vision because she asked me to perform in her first New York performance […] Simone did not employ the body as a highly trained dance technician. She used it as a pedestrian body. It wasn’t a fictional body at all. The work was task-oriented; the tasks were unusual, but each person did the task.”[[485]](#footnote-485) Here Forti breaks away from the normative ‘highly trained dance technician’ ideal of the ballerina, towards an exploration of the body’s, indeed *any*-body’s, inherent capacities, derived from what Cunningham first coined as a ‘pedestrianised’ use of the body, focused on more ‘everyday’ modes of movement. However, where Cunningham’s choreography remained true to the aesthetic principles of dance as theatrical performance, in which he emphasised the dancers’ virtuosic movement ability and specialist training, Forti took the idea of a pedestrian movement vocabulary to its logical extreme in a way that would later define the dances created by Judson dancers such as Brown. That is, by composing dance works that relied on the performer fulfilling explicit tasks, such as ‘climbing up the mass of people and then down again’, Forti reconceived the role of the choreographer, as not to compose dances that embody poetic, subjective expression, but as defining the framework within which movements must get the performer from ‘a’ to ‘b’. In her written task-instruction choreographies, Forti presents only an end goal for the dance, and it is the performer’s role to solve the ‘problem’ of the task and devise the means through which to achieve this end. In doing so, Forti equally reimagines the very terms of dance itself, placing emphasis on the individual body’s unique capacities and responses to pre-determined structures and conditions. Like Mac Low’s attempt to centre language as the authority of its own composition, Forti allows the dancing body to write its own movement, and thus writing the dance itself, through the completion of the task.

The formation of *Huddle* alludes to the ideals of collaboration central to Dunn’s classes and the works that came out of it. Where Balanchine and Cunningham’s dynamic, in which they choreograph a dance to then teach it to their dancers to rehearse and perform relies on the participation of multiple figures, Forti understands her role as choreographer in terms that are closer to Mac Low and Cage’s compositional method. Forti alone constructed the structures of the dance – how long it should take, how it should begin and end – but the realisation of the work relies on the performers acting as a collaborative community within this framework to fulfil the action prescribed. One person begins to climb the huddle, the next must perform their responding move accordingly, always looking back and forth to respond to those around you. Paxton goes on in his account of the performance to state:

In *Huddle* we huddled and took turns climbing up the huddle to the top, then down to the other side. What is this thing? It coheres into a random geometry much as a bunch or a mound is geometric. Its members individuate, aspire, achieve, and then return to the mass. One sees a scrambled group—arms, legs, heads, and torsos obscured by one another. It is semi-fluid and adjustable, but retains its overall identity. It resembles a swarm of bees. Forti did not provide this image, however. She provided no images at all. We were performing in a metaphor-free zone. This attitude was new.[[486]](#footnote-486)

Here Paxton provides a vivid image of the dance-structure as viewed by the audience, at once mustering an image of careful coherence and abstract disorder. This is reflective of Forti’s approach to choreography in general, setting clear instructions that necessitate corporeal struggles as the dancing body improvises responses to realise the proposed task. Most significantly, Paxton’s assertion of Forti’s ‘metaphor-free’ approach to choreography marks her innovative stripping-back of choreographic practice: for Forti, movement was not to be utilised as a means to an end of expressive imagery. Rather, the exploration of the moving body and its various capabilities was an end in itself.

*An Anthology of Chance Operations*

Following the Chambers Street performance, and in the same year that Mac Low produced *Nuclei* (1963), “*An Anthology* was assembled by Young, and published by Young and Mac Low in 1963, with a second edition published in 1970”:[[487]](#footnote-487)

The full title, for which *An Anthology* is a minimal nickname [is], *An Anthology of Chance Operations/ Conceptual Art/ Meaningless Work/ Natural Disasters/ Indeterminacy/ Anti-art/ Plans of Action/ Improvisation/ Stories/ Diagrams/ Poetry/ Essays/ Dance Constructions/ Compositions/ Mathematics/ Music.* The title itself, referencing chance operations, ‘plans of action’, and indeterminacy, points to the significance of Cage’s influence on the new works and suggests the directions in which artists were extending these ideas.[[488]](#footnote-488)

Young approached Forti to submit works for the anthology, of which a written report of *Huddle* was included, as well as two dance reports of events she had seen, one score for a dance, and an additional description of a past performance.[[489]](#footnote-489) The first of Forti’s ‘Dance Reports’ describes an abstract scene of an onion sprouting:

An onion which had begun to sprout was set on its side on the mouth of a bottle. As the days passed it [transferred] more and more of its matter from the bulb to the green part until it had so shifted its weight that it fell off.[[490]](#footnote-490)

In response to this dance report, Wendy Perron writes: “Why was this a dance? For Forti, observation, time, and change were part of dancing.”[[491]](#footnote-491) Meredith Morse, on the other hand, writes that, “as a *text piece* it can be read as detailing an occurrence that may or may not have come to pass.”[[492]](#footnote-492) Interestingly, in each criticism of the work it is rigidly labelled as either dance *or* text. In light of the climate of intermedia experimentation and the culture of Happening performances, Forti’s dance report in fact functions as a binding together of text and dance as a single choreographic work. Morse’s observation of the report’s possible reading as ‘detailing an occurrence that may or may not have come to pass’, is an entry way into understanding Forti’s exploration of the limits and potentials of working across the two mediums. On the one hand, written in past tense and without poetic flourishment, the report appears to simply be recounting an observed event. Alternatively, if taken as dance instructions, it may instead be read as a source for improvisatory dance realisation to occur in the future, after the fact of the work’s publication. On the other hand, Perron’s assertion that ‘For Forti, observation, time, and change were part of dancing’ allows the report to be read as dance in its own right. That is, the act of observing the sprouting onion, together with the process of realising this event through setting it in language on the page, is itself a dance-event in Forti’s view.

Comparatively, Forti’s ‘score’, which had been performed prior to its publication, reads as entirely non-descriptive instructions: “One man is told he must lie on the floor during the entire piece. The other man is told that during the piece he must tie the first man to the wall.”[[493]](#footnote-493) In this piece, a further extension of what Paxton labelled Forti’s ‘task-oriented’ choreography is evident. The performance of this piece calls for a literal following of the instructions given, once again establishing a ‘metaphor-free’ environment. Much like *Huddle,* the piece relies on the dynamic exploration of two opposing bodies at work. The two sets of instructions – one instructing the first man to lie on the floor, the other instructing the second man to tie him to the wall – are at odds with one another, creating a tension between the simultaneous successful actualisation of both actions.[[494]](#footnote-494) Subsequently, the objective of the piece becomes invested in exploring the possibilities of actualising the movements instructed, and of realising a task that is not strictly possible. That is, the piece prioritises the two performers working in solidarity to achieve the instruction as a unified pair, rather than following the governing orders of the written score. Morse goes on in her account of these works to assert:

Because Forti’s texts [are] labelled as if they might be actualised as ‘dances’, they force recognition of these limit conditions […] Forti’s concern with actualisation is not simply a consideration of the range of opportunities for outcomes in performance. When actualisation (past or present) is contemplated, the artwork-as-situation begs fundamental questions about where the work begins and ends – and in what kind of space and time it occurs.[[495]](#footnote-495)

By transcribing a work that had its origins in performance, Forti challenges conventional notions of the score as authorial text, positing a challenge to the idea of the score as preceding performance as the original, innately ‘true’, version of the work. By notating the movement only after the performance has occurred, and instructive of how to repeat the movement again in the future, Forti reverses the temporal order of choreography. Instead, for Forti the score-as-text functions secondary to the moving body testing its capabilities through the performance space. The text sets out the overall task-objective of the piece, but it is only through the performers’ experience of attempting to actualise these instructions that the work comes to life, the artwork as a whole constituting both the compositional process, the text, and the corporeal experiment of the scores performance. These principles of task-based choreographic instruction pioneered by Forti were the primary influence on Mac Low’s own composition of *The Pronouns*.

*The Pronouns*

Following the success of *Nuclei* as a source for dance in Dunn’s class, and upon the request of Judson dancer Fred Herko for his own version of the cards, this experiment led to Mac Low’s writing of *The Pronouns* in 1964. Mac Low’s *The Pronouns* operated within a similar choreographic framework in which the poems provided notation for movement to be performed after the fact of the poem’s publication. In a letter sent to Brown, Mac Low explains his motivations for creating the new collection: “I think Fred Herko had seen one of your groups of improvisations on the Nuclei for Simone during Yamday. Later, practically every time we met, he asked me whether they’d gotten back from you yet. Finally, after a party at the loft he was staying in (early in 1964) I got the idea of making him a dance from the action cards that had been the source of the actions in the cards for Simone.”[[496]](#footnote-496) Having first written a ‘she’ poem for Brown and a ‘he’ poem for Herko, Mac Low explains that he “got the idea of doing a dance for each of the other English pronouns. Some of these words are more correctly ‘nouns’ I guess (somebody, nobody, &c.) but they are called both in many dictionaries, so I used them as subjects, Anyway, I ended up with 40 of them before I got tired of it.”[[497]](#footnote-497) Language, then, serves as the subject and agent of the poems. To compose each of the poems, Mac Low first used chance procedures to randomly select fragmented ‘words’ alongside a collection of unrelated ‘actions’ from the ‘the 850-word Basic English Word List’. These words and actions were then written onto a new ‘pack’ of filing cards, similar to those of *Nuclei*.[[498]](#footnote-498) These newly devised filing cards then became seed texts through which Mac Low wrote the poems that make up *The Pronouns*. For example, one card reads:

Words:

Property, music, here, interest, I, space.

ACTIONS:

DOING THINGS WITH THE MOUTH AND EYES,

MAKING GLASS BOIL,

HAVING POLITICAL MATERIAL GET IN,

COMING BY.[[499]](#footnote-499)

Each poem’s title was selected by shuffling the pack, selecting a random card, and then “point[ing] blindy” to one of the words listed on it.[[500]](#footnote-500) “Once the title was determined”, Mac Low explains, it was then used as a “diastic index”: “That is, the letters of the title determined the actions drawn for the dance: turning the cards over, one at a time, with occasional shufflings, I let the title letters ‘select’ the successive actions.”[[501]](#footnote-501) In his active engagement with the filing cards, such as his ‘pointing blindly’, Mac Low uses physical action as a compositional process, whilst composing poems intended to be ‘read’, or ‘realised’ through further physical action. The poem ‘18TH DANCE – PLANTING – 1 March 1964’ reads:

Anyone begins by **p**enning anything or anyone,

c**l**eaning something,

bl**a**ckening something,

doi**n**g waiting,

& then plan**t**ing.

A little later anyone may be react**i**ng to orange hair.

Then anyone is printi**n**g.

At the end anyone is spongin**g**.[[502]](#footnote-502)

As in the title above, the first-position ‘P’ of ‘Planting’, led to the action ‘penning anything or anyone’; the second-position ‘l’ of the title resulted in the action ‘cleaning something’. In his paratextual statement, Mac Low further explains his compositional method, writing that:

the letters of the title determined the actions drawn for the dance: […] For example, in the ‘37TH DANCE—BANDING,’ the ‘B’ selected ‘*b*eing flies,’ the ‘A,’ ‘h*a*ving examples,’ [&c]. In some dances I gave myself the rule that the actions had to have the title letters not only in corresponding places in *any one* of the words (as in the example) but also in corresponding words. That is, if the 2nd word of the title had an ‘H’ in the 2nd place (e.g., in ‘T*H*E’), the corresponding action-phrase had also to have an ‘H’ in the 2nd place of the 2nd word, & so on. As the method ‘selected’ each action-word or –phrase, I made it, or a modified form of it, part of a sentence in which the pronoun chosen for that dance was subject.[[503]](#footnote-503)

In this guide to his compositional technique, Mac Low emulates the language of choreography and choreographic notation, creating an image of language dancing as it writes. Within this statement, Mac Low implies an inherent relation between how he composed the poems, and how the audience should read and interpret them. In his historical overview of dance notation, Franko alludes to notational practices of a similar kind: “Feuillet notation is a track system rather than a word-based system, it shares grammatical aspects of language-based symbolization. Its very possibility suggests that baroque dance alphabetizes the body from hip down into tropological relationships.”[[504]](#footnote-504) In a Feuillet score, movement is shown on “a 'map' of floor patterns and contains information as to how the movement relates to measures of music (delineated by 'cross bars' in the floor pattern). Because the arm movements were generalized, the movement of the lower body (feet and legs) was shown on the score.”[[505]](#footnote-505) In a similar sense, Mac Low’s diastic compositional technique alphabetizes movement through his methodological spelling out of the title, structuring this movement through a ‘language-based symbolization’ of his own design. In this way, diastic composition is choreographic in its technique. Moreover, where Mac Low explains his process in writing ‘37TH DANCE – BANDING, ‘the ‘B’ selected ‘*b*eing flies,’ the ‘A,’ ‘h*a*ving examples’,’ he notates a movement sequence emulative of working through the steps of dance choreography, a process both systematic and corporeal. Mac Low’s composition method positions his chance-derived diastic writing *as* choreography, not only in its instructive function and will to performance, but in its methodological nature. Diastic compositional technique functions as a prosody of sorts for Mac Low, one in which rhythm is generated by the linguistic units of the seed text, rather than through the poet’s own expressive manipulation of sounds.

Whereas the filing cards that made up *Nuclei* consisted only of fragmented words rather than coherent phrases, the poems that make up *The Pronouns* are made up of completed phrases and can thus be read more overtly as choreography and as descriptions of whole movement sequences. For instance, where the *Nuclei* poems present disjointed action-phrases such as ‘WALKING ON HEALS, SHAKING A LIMB,’ *The Pronouns* are far more explicit in depicting a flow of movement: ‘Then each of you jumps, / … Then one of you starts fingering a door.’[[506]](#footnote-506) On one hand, the poems that make up *The Pronouns* read as clear imperatives for subsequent dance realisations, as indeed Mac Low himself labels them “dance-instruction poems” in his opening poetics statement.[[507]](#footnote-507) Equally so, Mac Low’s ‘Some Remarks to the Dancers’ presents clear ‘instructive’ statements regarding the work: “In realizing any particular dance, the individual dancer or group of dancers has a very large degree of freedom of interpretation. However, although they are to interpret the successive lines of each of those poems-which-are-also-dance-instructions as they see fit, dancers are required to find *some definite meaning of every line*.”[[508]](#footnote-508) Here Mac Low outlines clear ‘rules’ and restrictions of interpretation for the dancer. However, the poet equally makes an explicit call for active participation and interpretation from the reader.

Mac Low’s assertion of the poems as ‘instructions’ opens the potential of multiple meanings of this claim. For instance, if to ‘instruct’ is to order, then the poems are to be taken as definitive actions to be performed, and thus places the author in a position of inherent authorial power. Alternatively, if to ‘instruct’ is to be taken as to teach, or to inform, then Mac Low’s claim of opening a dialogue of interpretation and re-imagining between author and performer, or *co-initiators,* becomes more substantial, and the author enters into a collaborative exchange with the reader-performer. The opening stanza of the ‘16th Dance’, titled ‘Being Red Enough’, plays with this duality in its instruction for active movement written in passive terms:

Somebody boils delicate things,

& afterwards, being in flight

& doing something consciously,

somebody’s going out & coming across art.[[509]](#footnote-509)

From the poem’s chosen pronoun, ‘somebody’, the instructional voice of the lines is immediately destabilised. The poem does not address a specific ‘you’ or ‘they’, and as such reads closer to suggestion than order. The movement sequences that follow, which exist in undetermined time and space, are equally passive, resisting commitment to a particular image of action through its language: ‘somebody doing something’ and ‘somebody seems to’, for example, plays out the realities of the removed author’s voice to its extreme. What results is a vagueness that troubles a reading of the lines as either poem or dance, and as such forces its audience into the performance of active reading.

A sense of nervous energy is felt across the lines of the first stanza, which opens with the destructive image of somebody ‘boiling delicate things’. Despite the indirect language of the lines, the action itself is one of forceful intention. The instruction is one of both violence and renewal: on the one hand, it is an active infliction of harm onto an already fragile object, and on the other hand, through the process of boiling, that ‘delicate thing’ will be transformed into a new material object. Within this action is a play with power, in which a stronger being ‘does’ something, an active verb, to something weaker and inanimate. If the text is taken at face value as literal instructions, then this position of power comes into question: there is the original writer who exercises authority over the performer, determining their actions, and there is the person committing the actions onto the inanimate object. In this cyclical dynamic in which each person involved exercises power over another subject, the poem could be read as an allegory of the socio-political systems that Mac Low’s Buddhist-Anarchist values resist. The third line, ‘& doing something consciously’, plays out this power dynamic further.

Taking the poem as instruction, here Mac Low problematizes the authority inherent in the dynamic of choreographer/author and reader/performer by instructing not a way of moving, but a way of thinking. In addition, the final line of the stanza, in which the performer, acting ‘consciously’, ‘comes across art’, positions this authorial power dynamic in terms of art-viewing. Almost pointing back to itself as an art-object complicit in this artist/viewer hierarchy, the poem performs this power dynamic, conscious of its own movements of authority, as a means of critiquing the functions of instruction in a broader socio-cultural context.

As the poem continues, the instructions given become increasingly abstract in both its passive language and in the realism of the movements described:

Then giving a bit or doing something elastic,

somebody gives an egg to someone loose or seems to do so.

& shocks somebody,

making a structure with a roof or under a roof.[[510]](#footnote-510)

In this section of the poem, the act of interpretation as an additional step in the process of performance becomes more apparent. Mac Low seemingly endeavors to resolve his critique of authorial power dynamics by giving the dancer open, rather than direct, instructions. For example, ‘Then giving a bit or doing something elastic’, leaves subjective reading up to the performer in every aspect of the line’s meaning, with exception of the action occurring after the previous line. The inclusion of ‘or’ sees the poem perform a freedom of choice that has real consequences on the performance. The same poem may be performed one way or another, and in this way the realisation of the poem is not fixed into a repeatable translation of the original ‘text’.

Alternatively, the poems may also be read as third-person descriptions of often abstract or metaphorical actions, and thus closer to traditional notions of poetic declaration. This latter reading points towards a more conventional poetic style, and one that is at odds with Mac Low’s professed artistic project. That is, Mac Low speaks as a confessing, first person subject—even if the literal ‘I’ is removed—who utters their experience to the admiring reader, and thus remains master of their narrative. In this reading, the actions described are no longer movements awaiting performance, but events described, witnessed by the singular Author. Read in this way, lines such as “& says things as an engine would / though coming on as a horn/ & paining by [having waves]”[[511]](#footnote-511) read as purely metaphorical, almost dreamlike in their imagery, and thus allude to the poet’s psyche as their source. Where Forti enacted a ‘shift away from emotional expressionism’ and metaphor, towards a minimalist dance in which “the viewer sees a real person, made of flesh and bone, subject to gravity’s pull and limited by [their] body’s particular skills and range of motion”;[[512]](#footnote-512) Mac Low’s dance-poems leave open the potential for less radical readings, invested instead in the Author’s poetic prowess and authority of meaning.

Where some of *The* *Pronouns* poems are instinctively read as instructions for unfulfilled action by the reader, others read more organically as poetic expression. The 3rd dance of the collection, ‘Making a Structure With a Roof or Under a Roof’, for example, begins:

They meet over water,

say something between thick things,

and make something new.

Soon they’re making drinks

& giving falsely.

Then after giving enough of anything to anyone,

they awaken yesterday when the skin’s a little feeble;

seeing danger,

they attack,

force someone to see something,

again give enough of anything to anyone,

attack again,

& after doing things to make a meal,

Thus having uses among harmonies,

One of them being a brother to someone,

& giving an egg to someone loose or seeming to do so,

They wheel awhile,

giving the hour,

& thereafter let complex impulses make something.[[513]](#footnote-513)

Despite the role of chance in composing the poem, the lines carry through a cohesive narrative that develops with each new line. The use of the ‘they’ pronoun lends itself to a reading of the poem as a lyrical view of a developing relationship between two people, and as closer to a love poem than as notation for dance. The opening line, ‘They meet over water’, positions a clear beginning to the narrative, with the following stanzas first words ‘soon’ and ‘then’ progressing the story through real time.[[514]](#footnote-514) The opening stanza, ‘They meet over water / say something between thick things, / and make something new’, evokes a familiar image of two strangers meeting and connecting. Forming a relationship, ‘they make something new’. The sudden shift to ‘Soon they’re making drinks / & giving falsely’, cutting through time, relocates the poem as the relationship has developed. Evoking cinematic structures, in which we glimpse snapshots of a longer scene, these fleeting moments revealed to the reader function as poetic musings of common human experience. From this isolated stanza, which shifts from a scene of ‘everyday’ domesticity, the tone of the poem shifts with ‘giving falsely’. The stanza that follows rushes with anxious energy through the highs and lows of romantic relationships, yet the narrative’s progression is centered in the individual movements of the couple. In this way, rather than lyrical expression of emotion, the poem firmly grounds the experience of its events in embodied movement. This does not take away from the sense of feeling in the reader, however, but instead roots the emotions presented in the poem in the very real physiological sensations of each of the line’s movements. Furthermore, by portraying only movement, with no descriptive subtext of the action, the poem is driven forward with a rushed energy, evoking the embodied, rather than psychological, sensations of emotional turmoil.

The opening lines of the second stanza, ‘Then after giving enough of anything to anyone, / they awaken yesterday when the skin’s a little feeble’, creates a causational relationship between the two lines in which the latter is a consequence for the former. Implied in the first line is an active giving over of oneself, suggestive of the labour of giving up one’s energies to love. With no more to give, they are left ‘feeble’. The pace of the poem swiftly shifts in the following lines, at which point the harmony of the partnership seems troubled: ‘seeing danger / they attack’ creates a rapid, regular metre, emulating the instantaneous speed of the movements described. The poem, like the moving body it portrays, acts out of instinct, moving with force. The repetition of these actions, is now slowed to the pace of familiarised monotony, set off from the down beat of ‘again give enough of anything to anyone’. In contrast to the monosyllabic ‘Then’ in the first instance of this action, which propels the first five lines of the stanza into a kinetic bounding, here the repetitious ‘a’ sound slows the rhythm of the lines, emulating the feeling of frustrated familiarity felt by two people caught in a cycle of repetitious daily routines.

From here, the poem turns to the domestic: ‘& after doing things to make a meal, / thus having uses among harmonies’. Rather than a scene of domestic bliss, however, and in contrast to the impassioned urgent bursts of ‘seeing danger/ they attack’, beneath this ‘harmony’ persists a sense of steady unravelling. Under the slow pace of this domestic scene, the actions described in each line become increasingly static: ‘one of them being a brother to someone’, for example, is a passive action, requiring no movement, but simply a body existing in relation to another. The two penultimate lines, ‘they wheel awhile / giving the hour’, extends this sense of the two bodies in a state of inactive being. Here it is time, rather than the subjects themselves, that appears to be in motion. The ‘ee’ sound of ‘wheel’ embodies the kinesis of a long, drawn-out moment, the repetition of the soft ‘w’ extending this sense of a coasting movement. The final line of the stanza, ‘& thereafter let complex impulses make something’ sits in contrast to that of the poem’s opening stanza. Where before ‘they’ were making something ‘new’, the reduced action of simply making ‘something’ emphasizes the gradual decline of excited energies as the poem placates into a monotonous, regulated rhythm. In this poem, the combination of the ‘they’ pronoun and the particular actions described across the lines positions the poem as poetic observation of a narrative unfolding beyond the speaker, rather than directive instructions for movement to be performed.

Through these possible readings, Mac Low establishes the duality of the work, bringing to the forefront questions of distinction between the numerous modes of interpretation, and most crucially, opening up the possibilities of choice and interpretation for the reader of the poem. For example, the fifth poem, titled ‘Numbering’, reads:

All of you begin naming things.

Then each of you jumps,

comes on as a horn,

numbers anything or anyone,

darkens something,

& then hammers on it.

Then one of you starts fingering a door.

[…] At the end all of you are numbering things.[[515]](#footnote-515)

In the two opening lines of this poem, it is explicit that the movements are to be performed first in unison (‘All of you begin naming things’), and next in canon (‘Then each of you jumps’ – suggesting the task is to be completed one after the other). Moreover, the action given in line two, to jump, is an immediately recognizable dance movement requiring no interpretation from the reader. As the poem continues, however, the actions described become increasingly abstract. Where the lines seem to describe action, they are in fact only realizable metaphorically: ‘Then one of you starts fingering a door,’ for instance, does not refer to any singular movement within established choreographic register. In addition, such a line is equally open to interpretation as a report of an event already taken place, witnessed and relayed, albeit abstractly, by the author. Thus, two modes of temporal interpretation are also possible: the first is to read the poems as choreographic score, and therefore as succinct instructions for action taking place in the future, after the fact of the text. Alternatively, one could read *The Pronouns* as poetic observation, descriptive and abstract, looking back at past events, real or imagined. In each case, however, the reader holds some authority in their freedom to interpret the text itself, and in turn the function of the author. In *The Pronouns* Mac Low has engineered a poetics in which the reader is forced into an open, active role of interpretation of the lines in which meaning-making relies on the readers’ embodied performance.

*The Pronouns For and As Performance*

Mac Low wrote of the collection that “*The Pronouns* is *‘For The Dancers’* – all the dancers everywhere – & it is my hope that many of these dances will receive as many entirely different realizations as possible,”[[516]](#footnote-516) signifying the dialogue open between the different artists in the broader interdisciplinary communities of Fluxus and Judson. The publication of *The Pronouns* contributes to this culture of collaboration by enacting an invitation to the dancers into an active exchange. In this sense, the ‘poem-dance-instructions’ await response through movement performance to fulfil what it is in some sense the ‘whole work’, that is, the point at which text and performance meet. Just as Mark Silverberg writes of collaboration that “[what’s] most important is that more than one author has a defining role in the shaping of the text, so that the final work always results from some form of dialogue,”[[517]](#footnote-517) Mac Low opens this dialogue through the poems’ simultaneously descriptive and instructive register. In the ‘9th dance’, titled ‘Questioning’, for instance, this duality of the poems’ function is reflected in its tone:

One begins by quietly chalking a strange tall bottle.

[…]

& giving an answer

& giving a simple form to a bridge

& making drinks,

one ends up saying things as an engine would.[[518]](#footnote-518)

The descriptive components, such as the first action being performed ‘quietly’, and the detail of the ‘strange tall bottle’ function akin to stage directions in a theatrical script, setting clear instructions for the contexts of how the actions should be performed. The list form of the last four lines, which now offer no additional detail to the movements described, on the other hand, read as notational instructions that require translation and artistic imagination to be performed as a dance event. The tone of *The Pronouns* thus calls for open interpretation and active response from the reader-performer, each poem reading as an abstract, task-oriented movement sequence.

In an interview with a student at Connecticut College, Mac Low recalled a particular performance of *The Pronouns* in which Forti improvised realisations of a number of poems that gave Mac Low a new interpretation of his own text. The article states:

Jackson told us about [Forti’s] realizations of one of his poems which instructed the dancer to ‘come to give a parallel meal, beautiful and shocking.’ Simone, he said with a sinister smile, had gnawed on a huge oak wooden table, screaming ‘Hungry! Angry!’ and pushed the table into the audience, who had to flee to the other side of the performance space. […] Jackson said that it was the best realization he had ever witnessed. She crawled across window sills, leapt to the oaken table, held books as rotting meat, dragged two whips across her body, and sang farewell to a street in Italian while moving in a small circle.[[519]](#footnote-519)

In this performance, and Mac Low’s response to it, this transference of interpretive authority is enacted as Forti becomes the new maker of meaning, as well as the authoritative voice in conveying the poem’s content. Through Forti’s innovative readings of the poems, lines such as ‘come to give a parallel meal’ take on new ‘aesthetic meaning’ beyond its context in the original poem. In this particular performance, as a member of the audience Mac Low’s relation to his work underwent a metamorphosis of its own as he gives up his place as creator, becoming an interpreter-viewer of the new, subsequent work. Consequently, the ‘changes in sensibility’ that Mac Low predicts for the participants of a given performance take place for the poet himself. For the rest of the audience, whether or not they had read the source text collection of poems, Forti’s performance of her active interpretation of the poems troubles those notions of traditional hermeneutic practice. Far from the making of meaning being invested in a relation between scholar and text, in which a scholar reads through writing, such as in a ‘close reading’ of a poem, here the social relation between the reader performingthe process of interpretation into action takes precedence, the dancer ‘reads’ by dancing. The poem is no longer the object of attention as performance brings the interaction between text, performer, and audience to the forefront. In this sense, Forti’s performance embodies Mac Low’s sense of the ethical and aesthetic implications of performance, by transforming the static, authorial text of the poem into a communal experience.

As a collaborative piece, *The Pronouns* raises crucial questions around what makes an artwork complete. Whilst the project as a whole was one of collaboration across disciplines, from its diastic composition to its ties to subsequent performance, the poems themselves possess a single author. However, the formal organisation of *The Pronouns* takes ideas of ‘reader-response’ quite literary in its reliance on the ‘text’ being realised only through performance. As Julian Wolfreys writes:

[the] reader – more abstractly, the process of reading – produces the text as a living entity, an aesthetic object – unread, the text is inert, without effect or value. The literary text […] stimulates both response and interpretation, and these together constitute the activity of reading which, rather than the author alone, creates the literary *work* – something much more than the mere or literal *text*.[[520]](#footnote-520)

Such a claim supports Mac Low’s ideals concerning the collaborative process of bringing an artwork into being, or into ‘action,’ between the author and reader/performer as ‘co-initiators.’ In its purely textual form, *The Pronouns* is thus a static body of text, and the *work* is only created through the subsequent engagement of the reader-performer. It is only through the process of a reader’s interaction with the poems, always deciphering and interpreting their own meanings, that the words come into being as a living, dynamic body of work.

This question of the entity of the text, and the reader’s role in forming it, was of particular concern to Mac Low’s approach to art composition. For example, writing on Mac Low’s career, Cage asserts: “Concern has moved from the work to include the world and the people in it, those performing and those listening, the audience. The audience completes the work (Duchamp), makes the paradox, brings us back to a concern with what they have done, the work itself in its many forms. And this leads the artist directly to the work which he has not yet composed. [...] There is never any silence.”[[521]](#footnote-521) As Cage and Mac Low would have it, Mac Low’s artistic project centres around a cyclical process of exchange between author and reader, one in which Mac Low’s work acts as both seed text *and* source text – a product of chance-based composition, and a site of further creation.

Just as Mac Low utilized diastic methods to create new texts appropriated from pre-existing literature, it was the reception and interpretations of *Nuclei* that fed his inspiration to create *The Pronouns.* Gadamer analogises this active process of reading through the exchange of translation between two different languages:

[The] situation of two people coming to an understanding in conversation has a genuine application to hermeneutics, which is concerned with *understanding texts*. Let us [start] by considering the extreme case of translation from a foreign language. Here no one can doubt that the translation of a text […] cannot be simply a re-awakening of the original process in the writer’s mind; rather, it is necessarily a re-creation of the text guided by the way the translator understands what it says […] this is precisely the activity that we call interpretation.[[522]](#footnote-522)

Gadamer characterises the dynamic between authors’ creation and readers’ interpretation as a conversation, in which one partner in the conversation, the text, ‘speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter.’ He continues, ‘[only] through him are the written marks changed back into meaning […] the subject matter of which the text speaks itself finds expression. It is like a real conversation in that the common subject matter is what binds the two partners [to] each other.’[[523]](#footnote-523) In addition, Gadamer asserts, “having to rely on translation is tantamount to two people giving up their independent authority.”[[524]](#footnote-524) In Mac Low’s anarchist project of composition, this notion of ‘giving up [his] independent authority’ is paramount. In this sense, Gadamer’s ideasspeak convincingly to Mac Low’s creation of *The Pronouns*, providing an insightful way into comprehending the always-fluid dynamism with which the text shifts and develops through the reading process. Gadamer’s theorising of the reading process would posit that Mac Low’s role in the existence of the text starts and ends at his committing words to the page. Thus, according to this view, once the poems are published and distributed, both his involvement in and authority over the work ceases, and the text becomes, as much as is possible, ‘devoid of ego, of an author.’ The dancers, by extension, are figured as translators of the text.

In line with Mac Low’s anarchist objectives, then, publication of his work acts as a transference, or *giving over*, of his position as ‘co-initiator,’ surrendering both authority and meaning to interpretation. In this surrender, the author knowingly forfeits intention and meaning, as, akin to translation, the reader ‘re-creates’ meaning for themselves. If the text ‘speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter,’ as Gadamer professes, the additional component of choreography introduces a greater depth to this interpretative process, one that leads to a continuation of this process through the eventual production of a second artwork – the subsequent dance piece – that must itself surrender to interpretation. Alternatively, however, through Mac Low’s emphasis on doing over saying, the interpretive task of the reader is no longer focused on uncovering meaning. That is, in his efforts to avoid telling the reader what to think, Mac Low replaces this authoritative voice by suggesting what they could, or indeed should, do.

In a career spanning the composition of music, plays, and poetry, it is important to note Mac Low’s move towards dance as the site of his experimentation for generating this ‘egoless’ composition. Significantly, through the metamorphosis of the artwork from text published on the page into dance performance, itself a species of translation akin to Gadamer’s notion, the words selected – albeit by chance and indeterminate methods – are even further removed as language is translated, or danced, into action. Thus, in Mac Low’s terms, the author’s presence is twice removed from the work as it becomes the ‘source text’ of its interpreter’s subsequent composition. Although this could be said of the performance of Mac Low’s musical scores, it is a transference most notable in the realisation of dance from text, the moving body most poignantly embodying the ultimate freedom of improvisatory interpretation of the poems. The moving body responds to the poems instinctively, prioritising corporeal improvisation over carefully thought-out meanings of the poetic lines, and in this way, best embodies the escape from decisive meaning that Mac Low desired. Writing on the process of actualising a dance score into performance, Victoria Watts writes:

the notation score cannot be passively read. The symbols must be moved and their relation on the page undone and rearticulated in concert through the body. It is already a form of deconstruction in that the ‘text’ must be taken apart to be corporeally reconstituted. Even if this is done little by little as a process of sight-reading, the meaning of the score is still elusive. […] The score’s meaning can only be performed, or rather its meaning is produced through each instance of performance and every performance requires an active reanimation of the knowledge encoded in the score.[[525]](#footnote-525)

Watts’ description of this reading-performing process invokes a sense of total rewriting of the text as it sits on the page, ‘moving’ and ‘taking apart’ the words as they have been laid out by the author, calling for an ‘active’ reading akin to Gadamer’s theorising. Thus, the act of reading that comes before the dance performance already creates a secondary artwork that serves as a midway between published text and performed dance, exemplifying the ongoing metamorphosis Gadamer alludes to as the ‘self-creating work of art’[[526]](#footnote-526) that arises through the reading process.

Unlike Gadamer’s notion of interpretation as translation, however, Watts deems this process of deciphering meaning as a ‘deconstruction’ of the text, and thus, a further detachment from the original text/score. Where interpretation of a literary text requires the reader to ‘translate’ it into meaning through interpretation, in which the meaning will only slightly differ between readers, and inferring only a slight re-working of the ‘marks on the page,’ here the dance score necessitates a total rewriting of the text through the performer’s translation of words into action. In Watts’ assertion that ‘the score’s meaning can only be performed’ reading becomes secondary to action, and the score denotes an unfinished work awaiting this corporeal action. Finally, Watts asserts “[to] be read the dance must be articulated through the reader’s body.”[[527]](#footnote-527) Thus, to be read the dance must be *rewritten* through the dancing body, the performance of this movement marking the creation of the second work. In this sense, *The Pronouns* enacts a transference that not only hands over authority and autonomy to the reader, but enables a re-birth of the work itself each time it is read, performed, and re-interpreted. Choreography, then, is a process of renewal that deconstructs the notational score into active movement. The text as poems disappears through this active transference, leaving only the movement performed by the dancing body in its wake.

As part of the 1983 retrospective *Judson Project* documentary series, Mac Low recounts Meredith Monk’s realisation of ‘27TH DANCE – WALKING’ —in which the pronoun selected for the entire poem was ‘nobody’ – that the poem was performed with members of the audience (not the performers) simply walking across the performance space, with no additional movement at all.[[528]](#footnote-528) Monk’s interpretation thus focused solely on the text’s pronoun, reading lines such as ‘Nobody does any waiting, / & nobody has an example,’ as an instruction for the action described to not be actualised in the performance.[[529]](#footnote-529) Whilst this is a reasonable reading of the poem, what is also implicitly enacted here is an erasure of the poem’s authoritative voice. That is, by taking the lines as literal instruction, something of the original text is lost in the subsequent performance. Whereas the reader of the text is given an account of the movements not acted out by the subject of the poem, the viewer of the dance does not consciously experience its absence, taking in only the movement presented to them on the stage. As a result, Mac Low’s poetic voice is muted. The work is thus left to ‘speak’ through the ‘interpreter,’ the performer, meanwhile undergoing a secondary process of being read and understood by its new audience.

It is worth nothing the architectural layout of the Judson Hall, in which many of the realisations of The Pronouns took place, including Monk’s interpretation of ‘27TH DANCE – WALKING’. As Randy Martin remembers it, “there are no wings in Judson Church. Stained glass. A marble altar. A gilded organ. These and not the conventional tokens of theater architecture are the marker of a space transformed.”[[530]](#footnote-530) Moreover, Martin writes, “[there were] no lights angled at the stage at Judson Church that normally would blind performers to those who gaze on them, generating the visual asymmetry on which spectacle depends. On the contrary, the general illumination does little to discriminate between the two parties, and in the moment of movement that open outward, it is possible, albeit only fleetingly, to regard them [the audience] as they do us [the performer].”[[531]](#footnote-531) With its unconventional architectural arrangement, the performance space at Judson Church forces the audience closer, both physically and figuratively, to the action of the stage: “Without a functioning proscenium, the audience itself serves as a physical boundary of the performing space.”[[532]](#footnote-532) In Monk’s realisation of ‘the nobody dance’, this marginal divide between the audience and performers is further collapsed by inviting the audience to enter the performance space entirely, becoming central to conveying the choreographer’s interpretation of the poem. The distinction between the parties must still stand to some degree, however, as it is crucially through the performer’s absence in this dance that the poem is realised, and thus the performance relies on the audience as being distinctly *other* to the dancers.

By dedicating *The Pronouns* to ‘*The Dancers’* Mac Low alludes to the performance space beyond the pages of the text, and thus towards, as Cage writes, ‘the work which has not yet been composed.’ However, in dedicating the work specifically to the dancers in his immediate circle, Mac Low also indicates his personal expectations of the audience. Where dance—and performance more broadly—are typically regarded as being for the viewer, Mac Low instead addresses his collection exclusively to the performers. Where it is possible Mac Low simply overlooks the audience in his emphasis on the dancer as collaborator, this omission could be read as a reflection of the poet’s assumptions concerning the audience of the work. On one hand, this could imply a lack of audience, and thus points towards the dances taking place in closed, social settings such as Dunn’s classes or the Judson rehearsal space, or, on the other hand, an assumption of the audience as a participatory presence within the performance, and thus as themselves ‘dancers’. Moreover, Mac Low’s paratextual statements make explicit calls for the reader of the poem, and the dancer of the poem, to engage in an active interpretation of his works, and whilst the audience are not directly named, their presence is, by extension, inevitable. The audience’s role does differ somewhat from the reader of the text, and the performer of the dance, however, as they witness the work simultaneous with its active creation. Unlike the reader, who sits with the static poems within both spatial and temporal settings of their own making, privately excavating the work for themselves; the audience is part of an experience at once private and public, viewing the work as it is being actualised, before each movement disappears without a trace, whilst also involved in a social, public gathering.

Furthermore, as Randy Martin posits in his 1998 book *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics,* the audience of a performance is central to both the initiation and conclusion of its action:

Applause emerges at the audience’s moment of fullest self-recognition. It is certainly occasioned by the dancer’s activity, but it is a response to a question that the audience must by this point have posed to itself: was that the dance? […] For, when the audience decides that the dance is complete, it gets them to bow and then quite literally applauds the dancers out of the performing space. What the choreographer began – getting the dancers to move […] – the audience here continues.[[533]](#footnote-533)

Following this reading, then, the audience are not only active participants in the realisation of performance, but are *co-initiators* of action, alongside the author/choreographer and reader/performer. Here the role of ‘co-initiator’ is embodied in its most literal form, as where the author/choreographer creates, and the performer acts through movement, the audience are responsible for causing this action to begin, and moreover, are the cause of the performance’s occurrence. Thus, if the primary work of the poetry collection is ‘for the dancers,’ as Mac Low’s title proclaims, then the secondary work of the dance performances is, in fact, for the audience.

*Text as Performance: Editions of The Pronouns*

Since its completion in 1964, *The Pronouns* has been published in multiple magazines and anthologies. The key editions of the collection, however, are the 1964 mimeographs that were printed and funded by the Judson Memorial Church and Judson Dance Theatre; the 1971 limited edition Tetrad boxed series, including accompanying screenprint art by Ian Tyson;[[534]](#footnote-534) the collection’s inclusion in the 1974/75 volume 9 of *Dance Scope*; and the 1979 Station Hill Press edition.[[535]](#footnote-535) The publication of each edition occurred as performances in their own right, in which the labour of production and the physical conditions of each edition were an extension of the collection’s framing of text as dance. By producing multiple editions in varying formats, the reading experience of the poems require different bodily interaction from one edition to the other, opening the poems further to multiple embodied possibilities.

For instance, with the large Tetrad editions, turning the page requires the movement of almost the whole upper body, necessitating an active participation from the reader. The large scale of the edition, as well as its inclusion of Tyson’s screen prints, creates conditions for a slow, reflective reading of the work. Its limited release creates an intensified awareness of turning the page with care and frames the reading experience as an event in its own right.

Through Tyson’s contribution of accompanying art works for this edition, the poems gain a further interpretation.[[536]](#footnote-536) Each of the prints depict a rectangle containing 16 smaller rectangles, each in different colour patterns.[[537]](#footnote-537)  As in Mac Low’s *Asymmetries,* discussed in the opening of this chapter, in which ‘the white spaces’ between linguistic phrases on the page ‘stand for silences equal to the time it would take to read aloud the words printed’ around them, here the arrangement of the minute units (each rectangle) across the field of the print, which is placed next to its accompanying *The Pronouns* poem, is demonstrative of a graphing of movement patterns. As such, the image as a whole is suggestive of a floor pattern used in dance choreographic notation.

Unlike the gestural trace of the painter’s mark making in Abstract-Expressionist painting, here the production of the artwork follows a systematic process of composition. The specific method of producing screenprints requires a process of transference, in which the colour applied to the fine mesh screen is filtered through, onto the paper.[[538]](#footnote-538) The creative process of producing the prints, in which the artist would have designated that ‘x’ colour phrase must go ‘here’, and the next must go ‘there’, itself enacts a choreographic procedure. In these ways, Tyson’s ‘realising’ of Mac Low’s dance-poems into his screenprints can be interpreted as choreographic both in terms of its process and product.

The *Dance Scope* edition, on the other hand, includes only 12 of the poems from the collection.[[539]](#footnote-539) If a reader were to only read this copy, their experience of the collection would differ considerably from someone who had read all 40 of the poems. For example, they would be less aware of repetitions in movement instructions, and miss the extent to which the varying use of pronouns impacts the tone of each poem. However, their inclusion in a publication about dance presents the poems as choreography, as notation for dance, rather than as literary text. Finally, the 1979 Station Hill Press edition of *The Pronouns* provides the complete collection of the forty poems and includes all the paratextual essays Mac Low had written in conjunction with the poems and their previous copies. The poems are printed individually, one per page, and as such read more easily as individual poems, rather than a coherent collection. The reader may more easily open to a random page, rather than read the collection through in order of its publication. This edition is the most conventional format, presenting a book of poems in trade format. As such, the experience of reading this edition presents the familiar event of reading a work of literature, and frames the text as poems above all else.

In the full version of ‘Some Remarks to the Dancers’ Mac low acknowledges the Judson community for their help in creating the original editions of the collection in 1964:

I wish to thank the DANCE WORKSHOP of the Judson Memorial Church (Washington Square South, New York) for evincing interest in these dances, & to thank the Workshop, as well as the Rev. Al Carmines, & Miss Kathy Jacobson for making possible the original mimeographed version of THE PRONOUNS by providing stencils, paper, mimeograph machine, & production help in order that all the dancers in the workshop might have copies from which to prepare their own realisations of some of the dances.[[540]](#footnote-540)

From this acknowledgement, it is clear that even after the process of composing the poems, and before the event of their realisation through dance, the very process of ‘realising’ the collection through publication was one of collaborative effort. In fact, just as the poems were first written ‘for the dancers,’ it was with the same members of the Judson dance workshop in mind that Mac Low had the collection printed. In a similar sense, the subsequent 1971 editions of the poems saw a collaboration between Mac Low and Tyson of the London-based Tetrad press: “Seventy-five copies were created of these hand-made 26” by 21 ¼” by 1 ¼” editions, which were complete with “nine silk-screened ‘images’ (multi-coloured grid graphics) by Tyson.”[[541]](#footnote-541) Moreover, writing on the publication of his collection in Volume 9 of *Dance Scope*, Mac Low identifies the importance of *The Pronouns’* physical copies being, once again, ‘for the dancers’: “It’s over a decade since I wrote *THE PRONOUNS,* but theystill haven’t been published in a compact printed format which a dancer could slip into a bathrobe pocket. […] no one has yet seen fit to bring the book out in a small-format paperback *for the dancers*”*.*[[542]](#footnote-542) The *Dance Scope* volume offered a remedy to this shortcoming, and the poems were from this point available in a convenient format for dancers to choreograph realisations with the text to hand.

Different presentations of texts enable, and in fact encourage, different kinds of reading. In addition to Mac Low’s sense of the practicalities of producing the *Dance Scope* edition, this notion of the pocket-sized book stems from an avant-garde tradition beginning with Whitman, and furthered by City Light Books’ ‘Pocket Poets’ series, which included O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* and Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems*. Ahead of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass,* Whitman “believed that American poetry would have to be essentially different from any poetry written previously – it had to look different [as well as] sound different.”[[543]](#footnote-543) Approaching the publication of the second edition of his collection, Whitman opted for a ‘pocket sized edition’, rather than the “spacious pages” of the first: “His dream now was to have working people carry his poetry with them and read it during breaks.”[[544]](#footnote-544) Thus, whilst Mac Low’s motivations for the ‘portable’ edition of his poems in *Dance Scope* where somewhat practical, this decision also lends itself to placing Mac Low and his work within a legacy of avant-garde emphasis on the ‘everyday’ reader, as well as the new American poets’ hope for their work to become part of the worker’s active day. As with the filing cards that made up *Nuclei to Simone Forti*, this compact edition enabled dancers to move literally *with* the poems, allowing them to perform their responding movement with the collection in hand.

Importantly, in each instance of *The Pronouns* publication, the physical format of the collection was included in the performance of the works and aided in realising Mac Low’s project of composing a work that functions simultaneously as both poetry and dance, reconceiving the potentials of interdisciplinary collaboration by diminishing the distinctions between the two art forms through interactive reading and performance. The publication, in each instance, relies on a collaborative effort in which the publisher, and in Tyson’s case the ‘book-artist’, act as readers of the poems who go on to ‘realise’ Mac Low’s poems into a renewed form, creating not only a product of the collection, but an additional performance event of the poems.

Part Three: Conclusion:

Embodied Memory and the Dance Archive

Writing about dance presents challenges unique to the artform. Although one can ‘read’ a dance, it’s not like reading a book. Its ontology is such that any documentation is always already mediated, and usually by a subject other than the choreographer or performer of the dance; this mediation relies on a re-presentation of the original event, and is thus never an ‘accurate’ or complete representation of the original work. Even where documentation of a performance does exist, this secondary ‘object’ is rarely widely published in the same way a collection of poetry often is. Whilst a reflection on the nature of representation is beyond the scope of this conclusion, the issues surrounding documentation, preservation and re-presentation, particularly in reference to the archive and access, are particularly fraught in a ‘dance studies’ context.

A dance is in itself impossible to archive and relies on reproduction through a secondary medium such as film or photography. Often, there simply *is no material record*, and when there is, unlike the reproduced literary text, such documentation is frequently a single ‘object’, stored in one archive, and at times un-accessible to the public. For example, the only surviving footage of Katherine Litz’s *The Glyph* (preserved on a VHS cassette) is housed in the Jerome Robbins Dance Collection at the New York Public Library; viewing this recording is only permitted *in situ* with any form of reproduction or distribution (digitisation, etc) strictly prohibited. These restrictions to accessing the footage for my research were further complicated when, due to the global pandemic, I was unable to travel to the site of the archive as I had planned. Consequently, my ‘experience’ of this dance relies on (is mediated by) two published photographs, and two brief personal accounts from Litz’s peers. As such, where poetic texts studied in my thesis are taken from standardised, published documents, the dances I analyse are taken either from supplementary documentation, such as photographs or video footage, or from necessarily subjective personal recollections of individuals who were present at the live performances; or, indeed, from notes written by the choreographer or performer.

In dance’s unique ontology, as the only creative practice that relies solely on the body as its medium, interdisciplinarity is inherent to the art form because of its need to be inscribed through a second medium. This reliance on documentation itself plays out the principles, practices and purposes of choreography, in which the primary work of either choreographic notation or performance must be translated and re-inscribed into some secondary form. This document is, however, only ever a representation of the performance. For example, Merce Cunningham writes of recording dance through film that it:

seems so obvious to anyone outside the dancer’s immediate world. There it is, there's the dance and all you have to do is copy it. But what you are copying is someone's interpretation of that dance, and has no more value than a record does of someone performing a work of sound. It can of course, give you the style of a dance as done by a particular dancer or group of dancers, you could too, laboriously piece together the steps from it, as musicians have done with records. Notators say the answer is in both, the film and the written notation. I don't agree, I feel the symbol notation is an unnecessary hang-up with the past frame.[[545]](#footnote-545)

Whilst Cunningham did use film-making as an alternative setting for performance to the live event on stage, in those works the dances were choreographed specifically for the medium of film. What he argues here, however, is that viewing film documentation of a live dance performance cannot be an adequate instrument of choreography because one has to experience the embodied sensations of moving through the steps to truly know the dance. In this way, the live performance event, as Rebecca Schneider writes, appears to “challenge object status” and “refuse the archive its privileged ‘savable’ original.”[[546]](#footnote-546) Where this secondary inscription is traditionally through film or photography, the poetry of dance studied in this thesis provides an alternative form of re-presentation, closer to choreographic notation.

Where choreographic notation generally precedes the live performance, however, the poems produced by Olson, O’Hara, and Mac Low graph movement after the fact. They compose poems that bear witness to dance and realise this viewing and interpretation of performance by ‘writing dance’. Whilst film, and to a lesser extent photography, tend to be mimetic art forms, the poets present dance via their own personal expression, and as such produce works that are most ‘interpretive’ to their audience. Although a poetics of dance does not sufficiently document dance in archival terms, it serves to represent the embodied knowledge and meaning-making of dance performance, and as such resists the archive’s privileging of the document or object as the ‘true’ or ‘original’ work.

At its core, the tension between live performance and the archive is a question of presence in the moment versus forms of memory: where documentation promises new iterations of past events, as well as the continued memory of ideas; the first-hand experience of performing a dance, as well as the second-hand experience of viewing a dance, occurs in the present and promises an embodied memory that lives in the physiological and psychological sensations and pathways of the body. Where the former aids in scholarly accounts of culture, the latter functions to build community and culture in real time.

Cage’s *Untitled Piece No. 1* performance at Black Mountain College, for example, was not documented through film or photography, its legacy instead relying entirely on word of mouth accounts from participants and spectators. This has resulted in some discrepancies between accounts, and whilst in some sense this has added to the mythology around the event, it also means that no ‘true’ reading of the performance is possible. In Cunningham’s account of the performance, for example, he claims that a dog had chased him around the space as he danced.[[547]](#footnote-547) In Cage’s account, however, there is no mention of a dog present in the space at all, with the exception of the image of a dog on the side of the record player. Implicit in these examples is the suggestion that the performers were also themselves ‘viewers’ of the performance, particularly given that each performer was only seeing the rest of the performances for the first time, in the same instance as the audience. In this sense, where the existence of a performance after its event relies entirely on memory for survival, and no two memories perfectly align, the performance as artefact becomes destabilised. This lack of documentation of such a pioneering moment has instead provoked much debate and conversation about the exact occurrences of the event, and in this sense not only despite of, but *because* *of* its existence only in memory, has had a significant impact on forming community both amongst its performers and viewers, and in the avant-garde communities that have since been shaped by its influences.

In his theorising of ‘documentary’, which he distinguishes from ‘theatrical’, modes of performance documentation, Philip Auslander argues that it adheres to traditional notions that by documenting a performance you are providing a record that allows for reconstruction of the performance, as well as evidence that the performance happened. This in an ontological framework in which the event occurs first, allowing for its subsequent documentation. This is also an ideological concept that derives from accepted theories and ideologies of photography – that is, the idea that the documentary photograph is a means of accessing the reality of a past performance, and is a suitable substitute for first-hand experience.[[548]](#footnote-548) Documentation such as photographs are framed as performances and showcased in galleries, creating a second audience, however this second audience may only experience the performance exactly as it is portrayed in the document. Moreover, rarely is the first audience documented, and therefore documentation privileges the action of the performance and negates the audience of the live event, suggesting that the purpose is to make the artist’s work available to a larger audience, rather than being invested in the live-ness of performance itself.[[549]](#footnote-549) The documentation becomes authentic and originary because it is valued as a performance in and of itself by its beholder.[[550]](#footnote-550) In contrast to the static image of photography, poetry is an art form that is able to enact at once the receptivity of the audience and the performativity of an interpreter.

These issues of photography as documentation are succinctly encapsulated in the physical artefacts of Mac Low’s *The Pronouns*. In the 1979 Station Hill edition of Mac Low’s *The Pronouns*, the collection is accompanied by photographs taken of a dance performance of the poems.[[551]](#footnote-551) Each photograph is captioned with the name of the performer. One of the captions also includes a vague stage direction, “(moving to left).”[[552]](#footnote-552) Interestingly, only one of the captions reveals the action being performed:[[553]](#footnote-553) it is a photograph of Jackson Mac Low, surrounded by the audience, reading from an A4 script. The caption reads “Jackson Mac Low doing reading dance.”[[554]](#footnote-554)

The particular movement instruction, ‘reading dance’, is a reversal of the idea of reading dance, as in Susan Leigh Foster’s usage, as interpreting a dance. Rather, it is choreographic instruction in which the performer dances ‘reading’. Whilst this action is part of the dance performance, it stands out as the only photograph depicting static movement, in contrast to the rest of the collection in which the performers are captured in motion. Why, then, are those instances of performers in motion, in which it is hard to make out precisely which movements they are realising, not captioned in the same way? The performance has been documented through the camera, and shared publicly through the publication, yet the viewer is only given verbal explanation in one instance. In this way, the viewer of the photographs, who did not witness the initial performance live, are experiencing the photographs as a performance event in their own right, deciphering new meaning without the context of the original event, and therefore cannot be regarded as substitutes, or extensions, of the live performance. In this particular instance, the language that accompanies the photograph can read the dancer, by giving the dancer’s names, but it cannot read the dance itself, the performance existing only in the time and space of the live moment.

When reading a literary text one may return and re-read in order to form understanding, or when viewing a sculpture, one can look at the object from different angles to form an overall image. Where there is no documentation, analysing a performance “must be based on our own memories of what we perceived during the performance,” and consequently, “the multitude of perceptible phenomena during a performance is usually so expansive that it is impossible, even with the greatest attention, to perceive everything.”[[555]](#footnote-555) Erika Fischer-Lichte states there are two forms of memory that allow us to perceive and store performances. The first, episodic memory, allows us to remember precise details of a performance, for example: “where an actor stood in the opening scene; the particular way the light hit the stage and washed everything blue […] It is episodic memory that allows us to remember innumerable concrete events during a performance.”[[556]](#footnote-556) The second kind of memory, semantic memory, “stores all verbal meanings—both the words that are spoken and our own thoughts and interpretations during the performance. These memories include the “translations” that take place in our mind—for example that we identify a particular color as red, a movement as abrupt, an atmosphere as uncanny.”[[557]](#footnote-557) Although the two memory types often work together to maintain a more complete impression of the performance, an audience member is ultimately not in control of how, or what, the mind stores, and in this sense, memory is an unreliable source for preserving performance.

The works of Charles Olson, Frank O’Hara, and Jackson Mac Low each enable both kinds of memory at once. On the one hand, what I have called a ‘poetics of dance’, in which the poets write of or about dance, subscribes to ‘episodic memory’ in which the poets relay a sequence of movements in their verse; and on the other hand, their ‘choreographic’, or ‘parallel’ poetics, in which they compose their verse according to principles of choreography, utilises ‘semantic’ memory in its careful organisation of minute phrases into a coherent whole, that takes place in the single moment of the poem. Whilst poetry is inadequate in all together solving the problem of dance’s ontology, it is perhaps the least inadequate of art forms for presenting embodied movement and memory because of its capacity for reflection across temporalities, whilst framing these reflections as taking place in the time and space of the present.

The reliance on documentation troubles the status of the dance performance. On one hand, documentation extends the ‘lifespan’ of a performance, allowing it to be viewed and reinterpreted over again; on the other hand, however, the creation of this secondary object, whether it be written notation or photographs of performance, requires the disappearance of the live event of performance. As Peggy Phelan writes:

Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance’s being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance.[[558]](#footnote-558)

Where representations of performance through secondary documentation disembodies the dance from its live context, the dance remains in a physiological memory. In this sense, if we instead approach performance “not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the act of remaining and a means of re-appearance or ‘reparticipation’ […] we are almost immediately forced to admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document, to the object, to bone versus flesh. Here the [body becomes] a kind of archive and host to a collective memory.”[[559]](#footnote-559) In this re-framing of live performance as that which remains in embodied memory, Schneider emphasises the necessity of presence in that live moment that is so unique to dance as an artform. Whilst a poetics of dance attempts, in some sense, to document embodied movement in its verse, in the interdisciplinary collaborations of the post-war avant-garde communities studied in this thesis, it is precisely this unattainable, un-documentable form of knowledge and meaning-making through embodied experience that the poets seek to grasp at in their work. To revive a dance necessitates an embodied, temporal and rhythmical interpretive art form, of which poetry is the most effective.

For Olson, to ‘dance’ was to open possibilities for new modes of active learning, of seeking knowledge and cultural memory through a historiological and archaeological exploration that relies solely on movement. In particular, through his concept of ‘the stance’, Olson posits that the way we physically hold ourselves in relation to the world, and how we as individuals and as collective cultures move through the world will determine our breadth of knowing. O’Hara, on the other hand, grasps at movement, dancing through time and space, in a constant effort to extend the moment. This is a personal, rather than philosophical, grappling with the potentials of dance as leading to an emotionally-invested embodied memory. Intimacy and desire, for O’Hara, are held onto and stored in one’s memory through this bodily action. To keep moving, to repeat the dances of the lost moment, is to keep hold of the ‘life-giving energies’ of joy and pleasure.

Just as dance persists in and through archival forms despite these difficulties in documentation, in Mac Low’s choreographic poetics he takes reading, and particularly systematic reading, and literally makes it a dance. In his politicised resistance to the institutional value-judgement of the archive, he in some sense self-archives, creating works that are repeatable and re-producible in their own right. In opposition to a document existing in only one form, housed in one place that is difficult to access, through Mac Low’s inclusion of statements that explain his methodology and provide performance instructions for his poems, as well as his sharing of his unpublished work amongst his peers, he aims to make the institutionally-governed archive redundant through a community spirit of self-governed archivism amongst artistic peers.

Addressing similar concerns with performance documentation to Schneider, Diana Taylor posits her own distinction of terms, distinguishing between “the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e. texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e. spoken language, dance, sports, ritual).”[[560]](#footnote-560) In the archive, crucially, the items and materials remain physically unedited, however, the material is assigned a story that changes depending on the beholder. That is, for instance, each researcher analysing a single artefact will reach different conclusions based on their personal bias, intention, and experience. Thus, Taylor argues, the ‘text’ assures a stable signifier and endures as a remembered ‘thing’, but it does not remain unchanged in terms of reception and interpretation.[[561]](#footnote-561) The repertoire, on the other hand, “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge,”[[562]](#footnote-562) the ‘object’ does not remain the same as performances differ, and therefore allows for individual agency. “The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there’, being a part of the transmission,”[[563]](#footnote-563) and importantly, can still be used to trace cultural and aesthetic traditions, trends and influences.

Whilst not immune from the prejudices and biases of selective memory, due to its un-documentability, the material that makes up the repertoire is necessarily immaterial, and relies on active participation to keep the memory of a work alive. Furthermore, “[the] repertoire, whether in terms of verbal or nonverbal expression, transmutes live, embodied actions. As such, traditions are stored in the body, through various mnemonic methods, and transmitted ‘live’ in the here and now to a live audience. Forms handed down from the past are experienced as present.”[[564]](#footnote-564) The experience of both performing dance and watching dance performance is always bound to the present, and to presence in that moment. Where this has been construed as a disappearance because of its resistance to being fixed into permanence, what this instead allows for is the immediacy and all-consuming embodied experience. Although each poet treats temporality differently in the themes of their work, the poetry of Olson, O’Hara, and Mac Low also each occur out of self-conscious presence in the specific ‘moment’ of the occasion of the poem.

In their writing towards the kinetic qualities of movement, to the energies of the live moment and the kinaesthetic empathy this provokes, the poets begin to document movement, in a sense notating the very liveliness of performance. By tracing movement in language as a means of mapping embodied human knowledge and experience, the poets interpret and make manifest components of dance performance in literature. Crucially, however, these poetic notations are not exact choreographic scores, but personalised interpretations and realisations, taken from their own embodied memory and reproduced on the page. Whilst this does not solve the problems that come with the impossibility of documenting dance in any ‘true’ form, it does offer an alternative mode of dance documentation that re-centres embodied knowledge as the medium of the art form.

In this way, “what performance and performance studies allow us to *do*, then, is take seriously the repertoire of embodied practices as an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge. The repertoire, on every practical level, expands the traditional archive used by academic departments in the humanities.”[[565]](#footnote-565) In the treatment of dance by Olson as an avenue to the past; by O’Hara as a means to extend the sensations of the present; and by Mac Low as an assurance for the work’s future, the poetics explored in this thesis not only put into practice Taylor’s ideals of embodied practice as an important ‘system of knowing’, but they turn to dance in an attempt to encapsulate that which language falls short of in its fixed, static nature. In reading poetry through the lens of dance, moreover, poetry’s ‘essence’, as a literary form bound to embodied movement and principles of choreography in its spatial and temporal organisation of human experience into verse, is re-animated in valuable and various ways.

Poetry is uniquely positioned to both elegise and mitigate the ‘disappearance’ of dance. Diane Di Prima’s 1974 collection *Freddie Poems*, for example, is both a celebration and an elegy written for and about her friend, the late dancer Freddie Herko. Published a decade after Herko’s tragic death, the collection is not written explicitly about dance, but through formal organisation and lyrical expression, takes the image of the dancer as compositional muse. The collection, presented as a memoir of the poet’s relationship to Herko, is not only one of the most sustained documentations of the dancer, and preservation of his memory, but it’s most excellent re-instantiation. In her presentations of the person and dancer now long gone, and in her expressions of grief, Di Prima recognises dance’s condition of ‘disappearance’, now tied to the loss of her friend. She writes in ‘Five Takes on Fred Herko’s Birthday’, for instance: ‘So far away I hardly see your tail / aflicker in the distance, you prance, / casting no shadow’.[[566]](#footnote-566) Another poem from the collection, ‘Nocturne’, begins:

The highbridge body, roach, walks

on thin legs

limps slightly; dreamsweat makes acid

my pajamas; the sheet moves

with your breathing

light

dapples the ceiling, undermines the

walls; (cars pass); the child

stirs, but she does not cry;

wind climbs the fire-escape and shakes the window

knees

rise

and

fall[[567]](#footnote-567)

Movement, whether the actual movement of animate beings, or the impression of causational movement of inanimate structures, defines every line of the poem. In the poem, the distinction between choreography, as movement instruction, and poetry, as lyrical expression of emotional complexes through reference to physical action, is distorted and unclear. Di Prima’s use of punctuation moves between the units of movement phrases, creating a careful balancing of suspension and continued flow as the verse develops. Opening with the image of ‘the highbridge body’, in the midst of descriptive scenes of an unsettled domestic setting, moments of the dancer’s graceful physique flicker, haunting the speaker’s mind. The speaker reads her own body through its relation to his, the poem itself, in turn, positions itself in relation to dance and the dancer. The lines ‘on thin legs’; ‘light’, not only muster the image of the dancer, poised on his toes, but function choreographically as notations of pause in the poem’s organisation. These pauses give way to reflection, in which movement is felt in every observation of the speaker’s surroundings. Here, the sensations of the external environment allow for an embodied memory of the dancer’s now lost movements: ‘the sheet moves / with your breathing’, frames the physiological cycles of breath, a sign of life, as motion that involves the whole body. The poem is at once poetically descriptive, and thus refers to the past, and choreographically instructive, and as such refers to something that will take place in the future, and yet the poem works through these dual modalities through its writing in the present.

In the second stanza, the motions of everyday life are inscribed almost as if producing notation for movement, in which ‘light / dapples the ceiling, undermines the walls; (cars pass); the child sirs’. With the exception of the passing cars, which takes place beyond the speaker’s immediate surroundings and is notated as such, separated from the flow of movements by parentheses, the movement sequence of the light effecting the ceiling, which impacts the walls, which makes the child stir, is notated as causational. In the isolated motions of the cars passing, mapped as an action beyond the sequence taking place ‘within’ the poem’s scene, the use of brackets alludes to the continuation of movement beyond and despite the loss of Herko and his dancing. Finally, ‘knees / rise / and / fall’, on one hand reads as description of movement, signifying the continued cycle of life and movement, whilst also creating an image of dancing. On the other hand, however, the stanza’s concluding on the isolated ‘fall’ signals an end. Reminiscent of Herko’s own tragic end, and in opposition to the previous stanza’s concluding image of movement through breath, the poem lingers in this stillness. By creating such a stark contrast between the kinetic, heavily punctuated motion that defines the opening of the poem, and this lingering, suspended end to the stanza, Di Prima is able to convey the embodied sensations of grief in an effectively emotive, but importantly physical, way. The poem that results is legible as both poetry and dance, and as such, is a work that requires to be read in terms of the interaction of poetry of dance. It is ‘choreographic’ in the most complete and truest meaning of the word.

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62. Dick Higgins, ‘Intermedia’, in *Leonardo,* Vol. 34, No.1, (2001), p. 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin*, The Intimate Act of Choreography,* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press: 1982), p. 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., p. 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
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68. Helen Molesworth, ‘Imaginary Landscapes’, in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, ed. by Helen Molesworth with Ruth Erickson, (London, Yale University Press), p. 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., p. 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Jill Medvedow, ‘Director’s Foreword’, in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, p. 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
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73. Steve Evans, ‘Charles Olson’, in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, p. 317-318 [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Charles Olson, ‘I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You’, in The *Maximus Poems*, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Charles Olson, ‘Letter #41 [broken off], in The *Maximus Poems*, p. 171 [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Sherman Paul, ‘Dancing The Man: The Fiery Hunt and Other Plays by Charles Olson’, in *boundary 2* , Winter, 1978, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Winter, 1978), p. 623 [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Charles Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, in *Collected Prose*, ed. by Donald Allen & Benjamin Friedlander, (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1997), p.239 [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, p.242 [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Vincent Katz, ‘Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art’, in *Black Mountain College: Experiment In Art*, ed. by Vincent Katz (London: The MIT Press: 2013), p. 183 [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. For more on Olson and breath in his poetics, see: Daniel Katz, ‘From Olson’s Breath to Spicer’s Gait: Spacing, Pacing, Phonemes’,in *Contemporary Olson*, ed. by David Herd, (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 2015), pp. 77-88 [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Brendon Gillot, ‘Charles Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ and the Inscription of the Breath’, in *Humanities*, Vol. 7, No. 4, (2018) p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, p. 242 [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Gillot, ‘Charles Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ and the Inscription of the Breath’, pp. 3-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, p. 242 [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Olson’s dance-play ‘Apollonius of Tyana’ takes this dichotomy as its structure through its characters: “The dancer, Apollonius” and “The Voice, Tyana”, p. 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, p. 240 [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Charles Olson, ‘Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]’, in The *Maximus Poems*, pp. 184-185 [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. George Butterick, *A Guide to The Maximus Poems of Charles Olson*, (Berkeley: The University of California Press: 1980), p. 262 [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Charles Olson, Last Lectures, (Iowa: The Windhover Press: 1974), p. 26 [ellipsis in original] [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Miriam Nichols, ‘Charles Olson: Architect of Place’, in *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press: 2010), p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Ibid., p. 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Charles Olson, ‘Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]’, <https://www.zinzin.com/observations/2012/maximus-to-gloucester-letter-27-withheld-by-charles-olson/> [24/01/2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. In her essay ‘Charles Olson and the ‘Inferior Predecessors’: ‘Projective Verse’ Revisited’, in *ELH*, Vol. 40, No. 2, (1973), pp. 285-306, Marjorie Perloff argues that the ideas put forward by Olson in ‘Projective Verse’ are derived almost entirely from the earlier works of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Karlien van den Beukel, ‘Why Olson Did Ballet: The Pedagogical Avant-Gardism of Massine’, in *Contemporary Olson*, p. 287 [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. *Summer Session 1949,* 506.2.36.1, ‘General Files, 1933-1956’, *Black Mountain College Records, 506*, Western Regional Archives [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. van den Beukel, ‘Why Olson Did Ballet: The Pedagogical Avant-Gardism of Massine’, pp. 287-288 [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Ibid., p. 290 [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. van den Beukel, ‘Why Olson Did Ballet: The Pedagogical Avant-Gardism of Massine’, p. 289 [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Antonin Artaud, ‘The Theater and Its Double’, in *Origin*, Vol. 1, No. 11, (1953), p. 149 [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Ibid., p. 151 [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, (London: The MIT Press: 1989), p. 182 [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. George Butterick, *The Fiery Hunt and Other Plays*, ed. by George Butterick, (California: Four Seasons Foundation: 1977), p. x [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, p. 239 [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, p. 160 [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Butterick, *The Fiery Hunt and Other Plays*, p. vii [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. van den Beukel, ‘Why Olson Did Ballet: The Pedagogical Avant-Gardism of Massine’, pp. 287-288 [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Charles Olson, ‘The Born Dancer’, in *The Fiery Hunt and Other Plays*, p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Paul, ‘Dancing The Man: The Fiery Hunt and Other Plays by Charles Olson’, p. 624 [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Ibid/, p. 624 [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Butterick, *The Fiery Hunt and Other Plays*, p. xvii [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Ibid., p. xvii [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Paul, ‘Dancing The Man: The Fiery Hunt and Other Plays by Charles Olson’, p. 625 [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Ibid., p. 624 [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Butterick, *The Fiery Hunt and Other Plays*, p. xviii [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. For more on space and place in Olson’s poetics, see: Joseph R. Shafer, ‘The Body of Space in Charles Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael*’, in *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture and Theory,* Vol. 75, No. 1, (2019), pp. 111-140; Christian Moraru, ‘‘Topos/typos/tropos’: Visual Strategies and the Mapping of Space in Charles Olson’s Poetry’, in *Word & Image*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (1998), pp. 253-266 [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. *Polis Is This: Charles Olson and the Persistence of Place* (2007), Ferrini Productions <polisisthis.com/watch-now.html> [02/03/2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Elsewhere in the documentary, Olson’s father is remembered as memorising the route from his time as a postal worker through the feel of the streets under his feet, a sensory knowing of land that translates through to Olson’s play. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
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119. Olson, ‘Apollonius of Tyana’, pp. 57-58 [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
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122. Ibid., p. 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Nichols, ‘Charles Olson: Architect of Place’, p. 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, p.239 [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, (London: Thames & Hudson: 2001), p. 121 [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, p. 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Xanti Schawinsky, ‘Spectodrama: Contemporary Studies’, in *Leonardo*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (1969), p. 283 [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Schawinsky, ‘Spectodrama: Contemporary Studies’, p. 283 [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Xanti Schawinsky, ‘Play, Life, Illusion’, in *The Drama Review*, Vol. 15, No. 3, (1971), p. 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Ibid., p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Gabriele Knapstein, ‘Interdisciplinary and Multimedia Learning’, in *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment, 1933-1957*, p. 286 [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Jerri Sorkin, ‘M. C. Richards’, in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, p. 275 [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. M. C. Richards, *Poems*, (Black Mountain, NC: Black Mountain College Print Shop, 1947), No pagination.  [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Ruth Erikson, ‘Chance Encounters: Theater Piece No. 1 and its Prehistory’, in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, p. 300-301 [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, p. 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, p. 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Ibid., p. 208 [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Katz, ‘Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art’, pp. 187-188 [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Don McDonagh, *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time*, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz, (New York: Da Capo Press: 1998), pp. 1-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Foster, *Reading Dancing,* pp. 167-168 [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, p. 234 [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Ibid., p. 156 [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
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144. Ibid., 247 [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Robert von Hallberg, ‘A Common World: Olson, Whitehead, and the Objectivists’, in *Charles Olson: The Scholar’s Art*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press: 1978), p. 84 [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
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147. Olson, *Last Lectures,* p. 25 [ellipsis in original] [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. David Herd, ‘Introduction: Contemporary Olson’, in *Contemporary Olson*, p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Harris, ‘The Arts at Black Mountain College’, p. 156 [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Roger Copeland, *Merce Cunningham: The Modernising of Modern Dance*, (New York: Taylor and Francis: 2004), pp. 30-31 [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, p. 240 [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Carrie Noland, *Merce Cunningham: After The Arbitrary*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 2019), p. 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Noland, *Merce Cunningham: After The Arbitrary*, pp. 7-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Brandstetter, ‘Still Moving: Performance and Models of Spatial Arrangement at Black Mountain College’, in *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment, 1933-1957,* p. 303 [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Katz, ‘Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art’, p. 137 [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Brandstetter, ‘Still Moving: Performance and Models of Spatial Arrangement at Black Mountain College’, p. 303 [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Katz, ‘Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art’, p. 140 [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
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159. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, p. 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
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161. Ibid., p. 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Charlip, ‘Composing By Chance (1954)’, p. 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Danielle Goldman, ‘An Interview with Beth Gill’, in *Merce Cunningham: Common Time*, ed. by Fionn Meade and Joan Rothfuss, (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center: 2017), p. 202 [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Merce Cunningham, *Changes: Notes on Choreography*, ed. by Francis Starr, (New York: The Merce Cunningham Trust: 2019). No pagination. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Charles Olson, ‘Letter to Merce Cunningham (1952)’, in *Selected Letters*, ed. by Ralph Maud, (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2000), p. 174 [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Anne Dewey describes the effect that the interdisciplinary ethos had on Black Mountain artists, stating that this “intermedia experimentation focused through the body is central to Black Mountain College’s influence on poetry, particularly to the genesis and reception of Olson’s poetics of ‘composition by field’ [as] a catalyst of distinctive Black Mountain form.”, Anne Dewey, ‘Black Mountain College as Experimental Arts Community’, in *American Literature in Transition, 1950-1960*, ed. by Steven Belletto, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2017), p. 214 [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Anne Dewey, ‘Black Mountain College as Experimental Arts Community’, in *American Literature in Transition, 1950-1960*, ed. by Steven Belletto, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2017), p. 214 [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Dewey, ‘Black Mountain College as Experimental Arts Community’, p. 216 [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
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171. Charles Olson, ‘Proprioception’, in *Collected Prose,* p. 181 [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Olson, ‘Proprioception’, p. 181 [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Ibid., p. 182 [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, p. 240 [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Olson, ‘Proprioception’, p. 184 [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Ibid.,, p. 184 [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Merce Cunningham. ‘On Composing a Dance’, in *Dance Perspectives*, No. 34, (1968), <mercecunningham.org/writings/on-composing-a-dance> [03/08/20] [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
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189. Edwin Denby, ‘Elegance in Isolation’, in *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time*, p. 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
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194. Charles Olson, ‘The Kingfishers’, in *Selected Writings*, p. 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
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196. Jacqueline Lesschaeve & Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and The Dance: Merce Cunningham in Conversation with Jacqueline Lesschaeve*, (New York: Marion Boyars: 1999), p. 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Ibid., p. 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. *498 3rd Ave*, dir. By Klaus Wildenhahn, (1967), <ubu.com/Cunningham\_3rd.html> [02/08/2020] [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. Copeland, *Merce Cunningham: The Modernising of Modern Dance*, p. 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Lesschaeve & Cunningham, *The Dancer and The Dance: Merce Cunningham in Conversation with Jacqueline Lesschaeve*, p. 100 [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Olson, ‘The Kingfishers’, p. 167 [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Paul, ‘Dancing The Man: The Fiery Hunt and Other Plays by Charles Olson’, pp. 623-624 [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Herd, ‘Introduction: Contemporary Olson’, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
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206. Olson, ‘The Kingfishers’, p. 170-171 [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Charles Olson, ‘Untitled (This living hand)’, in The *Maximus Poems*, p. 506 [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Michael Kindellan, ‘Poetic Instruction’, in *Contemporary Olson*, p. 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
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210. Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, p. 240 [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
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213. I will look in more detail at Cunningham’s choreographic notation in the following section, *Syllabary for a Dancer* [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Marjorie Perloff, ‘Charles Olson and the ‘Inferior Predecessors’: ‘Projective Verse’ Revisited’, in *ELH*, Vol. 40, No. 2, (1973), pp. 285-306 [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Charles Olson, ‘The Syllabary (II): for Nataraj Vashi’, in *MAPS*, Vol. 4, (1971), pp. 11-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. ‘Syllabary’ in The Oxford Dictionary Online, <https://www-oed-com.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/196129?redirectedFrom=syllabary#eid> [01/03/2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Olson, ‘A Syllabary For a Dancer: for Nataraj Vashi’, p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Olson, *Last Lectures,* pp. 5-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Paul, ‘In and About the Maximus Poems: The Maximus Poems 1-10’ in *The Iowa Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, (1975), p. 127 [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Olson, ‘Tyrian Business’, p. 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Paul, ‘In and About the Maximus Poems: The Maximus Poems 1-10’, p. 127 [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Olson, ‘A Syllabary For a Dancer: for Nataraj Vashi’, p. 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Olson, ‘Tyrian Business’, p. 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. The choreographic notes in this book reveal that Cunningham did not work with one consistent form of notation for his dances. For example, Suite By Chance was choregraphed using a number of graphs, containing diagrams, words, and numbers to make up the whole dance. Particular types of movement, e.g., movements of the back, or falls, each had their own graph. Chance methods were used to combine sets of movements from across the graphs into one dance. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. In a letter to Creeley, Olson wrote of Litz: “I have this feeling that she is the best dancer now alive”, in Charles Olson & Robert Creeley, *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence: Volume 6*, ed. by George Butterick, (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press: 1985), p. 162 [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, p 210 [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Ibid., p. 210 [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. June Rice, ‘Dance at Black Mountain’, in *Black Mountain College: Sprouted Seeds: An Anthology of Personal Accounts,* ed. by Marvin Lane, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press: 1990), p. 269 [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, pp. 210-212 [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, pp. 210-212 [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Dewey, ‘Black Mountain College as Experimental Arts Community’, p. 214 [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Rice, ‘Dance at Black Mountain’, p. 270 [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Mary-Jean Cowell, ‘Working with Katherine Litz (random impressions)’, Box 8, Katherine Litz Papers, Jerome Robbins Collection, New York Public Library [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. van den Beukel, ‘Why Olson Did Ballet: The Pedagogical Avant-Gardism of Massine’*,* p. 293 [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. Katherine Litz, ‘Workshop: How to Compose a Dance (Eight Annual Conference: Creative Teaching of Dance, 27th & 29th December, 1963), Katherine Litz Papers, Jerome Robbins Collection, New York Public Library, p. 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Ibid., p. 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Litz, ‘Workshop: How to Compose a Dance’, p. 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. Anne Dewey, ‘Black Mountain College as Experimental Arts Community’, p. 215 [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Selma Jeanne Cohen, ‘Avant-Garde Choreography’, in *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts,* Vol. 3, No.1, (1961), p. 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Ibid., pp. 20-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Cowell, ‘Working with Katherine Litz (random impressions)’, Box 8, Katherine Litz Papers, Jerome Robbins Collection, New York Public Library [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Rice, ‘Dance at Black Mountain’, p. 269 [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, p. 243 [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. Katherine Litz, ‘Performance Can Have A Dangerous Connotation’, Box 8, Katherine Litz Papers, Jerome Robbins Collection, New York Public Library, p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Elizabeth Jennerjahn, ‘Review of Glyph performed by Katherine Litz, 1951’, <blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/archive-review-second-concert-katherine-litz-july-25-1951/> [16/10/2020] [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. Katz, ‘Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art’, p. 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Fenollosa writes that “The more concretely and vividly we express the interactions of things the better the poetry. We need in poetry thousands of active words, each doing its utmost to show forth the motive and vital forces. […] Poetic thought works by suggestion, crowding maximum meaning into the single phrase pregnant, charged, and luminous from within. In Chinese character each word accumulated this sort of energy itself,” Ernest Fenollosa, ‘The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: An Arts Poetica (with a foreword and notes by Ezra Pound)’, in *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. by Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, & Lucas Klein, (New York: Fordham University Press: 2008), pp. 57-58 [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Gillott, ‘Charles Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ and the Inscription of the Breath’, p. 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Charles Olson, ‘Glyph’, in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, p. 329 [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. Ruth Erickson, ‘Between Media: The Glyph Exchange’, in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, p. 329 [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
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414. Michael O’Driscoll, ‘By the Numbers: Jackson Mac Low’s Light Poems and Algorithmic Digraphism’*,* in *Time in Time: Short Poems, Long Poems, and the rhetoric of North American avant-gardism, 1963-2008*, ed. by J. Mark Smith, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press: 2013), p.112 [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. Jowitt, ‘Everyday Bodies’, p. 314 [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. Marjorie Perloff, ‘Difference and Discipline: The Cage/Cunningham Aesthetic Revisited’, in *Contemporary Music Review,* Vol. 31, No. 1, (2012), pp. 19-35 [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. Benjamin Piekut, ‘Chance and Certainty: John Cage’s Politics of Nature’, in *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 84, (2013), p. 134 [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. By extension, Jonathan Katz interprets Cage’s ‘silence’ as queer resistance. See: Jonathan D. Katz, 'John Cage's Queer Silence; Or, How To Avoid Making Matters Worse' in *GLQ*, Vol. 5, No. 2, (1999), pp. 231-252 [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Interview with Cage, Conducted by Bill Womack at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, March 27, 1979, printed in: Jackson Mac Low, ‘Cage’s Writing Up to the Late 1980s’, in *Writings Through John Cage’s Music, Poetry, and Art*, ed. by David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch, (London: University of Chicago Press: 2001), p. 211 [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. Sally Banes, *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theatre, 1962-1964*, (Durham: Duke University Press: 1993), p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. In an essay by Cage about Mac Low, Cage writes: “he frequently attended my classes in experimental composition at the New School (1957-1960) providing the class with most of the examples of work presented in it. Subsequently he attended the same classes when they were continued in his own home by Richard Maxfield.”. John Cage, *‘Music and Particularly Silence in the Work of Jackson Mac Low’ (1980),* B12, F1, The Jackson Mac Low Archive, UCSD [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. Dezeuze, ‘Origins of the Fluxus Score: From Indeterminacy to the ‘Do-It-Yourself’ Artwork’, p. 81 [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. *Letter from Jackson Mac Low to John Cage (n.d.),* Box 17, Folder 1, Sleeve 29, The John Cage Archive, Northwestern University [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. *Arts in Dialogue (Kostelanetz) [1964],* Box 1, Folder 16, The John Cage Archive, Wesleyan University [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. Johanna Drucker, ‘Collaboration without Object(s) in the Early Happenings’, in *Art Journal,* Vol. 52, No. 4, (1993), p. 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. Ibid. p. 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. Higgins, ‘Intermedia’, p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. Higgins, ‘Intermedia’, p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. Higgins, ‘Intermedia’, p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. Allan Kaprow & Mimsy Lee, 'On Happenings', in *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4, (1966), p. 281 [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. Sally Banes, ‘The Birth of the Judson Dance Theatre: ‘A Concert of Dance’ at Judson Church, July 6, 1962’, p. 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Banes, *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theatre,* p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. Ibid., p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. Ibid., p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. Banes, *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theatre,* p. xviii [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. Yvonne Rainer, ‘On Simone Forti’, in *Simone Forti: Thinking With The Body*, ed. by Sabine Breitweiser, (Munich: Hirmer: 2014), p. 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. Danielle Marilyn Belec, ‘Robert Ellis Dunn: Personal Stories in Motion’, in *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (1998), p. 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. Ibid., p. 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. Banes, *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theatre,* pp. 11-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. Banes, ‘The Birth of Judson Dance Theatre: ‘A Concert of Dance’ at Judson Church, July 6, 1962’, p. 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. Ibid., p. 171 [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. For more on The Judson Dance Theatre see: Ramsay Burt, *Judson Dance Theatre: Performative* *Traces*, (London: Routledge: 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. Banes, ‘The Birth of Judson Dance Theatre: ‘A Concert of Dance’ at Judson Church, July 6, 1962’, pp. 167-168 [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. Fran Tonkiss, ‘The Ethics of Indifference: Community and Solitude in the City’, in *International Journal of Cultural Studies,* Vol. 16, No. 3, (2003), p. 298 [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. Wendy Perron, ‘Simone Forti: bodynatureartmovementbody’, in *Radical Bodies: Anna Halprin, Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer in California and New York, 1955-1972*, (Santa Barbara: University of California: 2017), p. 99 [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. Ana Janevski, ‘Judson Dance Theatre: The Work is Never Done – Sanctuary Always Needed’, in *Judson Dance Theatre:* *The Work Is Never Done*, ed. by Ana Janevski & Thomas J. Lax, (New York: MOMA: 2018), p. 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. Jackson Mac Low, ‘Poetry and Pleasure’, in *Thing of Beauty: Jackson Mac Low, New and Selected Works*, ed. by Anne Tardos, (London: University of California: 2008), p. xxxi [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. Ibid., p. xxx [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. Dani Spinosa, ‘Freely Revised and Edited: Anarchist Authorship in Jackson Mac Low’s The Stein Poems’, in *ESC: English Studies in Canada,* Vol. 41, No. 2, (2015), p. 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. Jackson Mac Low, ‘Quatorzains From & For Emily Dickinson’, in *Thing of Beauty: Jackson Mac Low, New and Selected Works*, ed. by Anne Tardos, (London: University of California: 2008), p. 175 [emphasis in original] [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. In their essay ‘Reading [as] the Power-Free Text: Jackson Mac Low’s *Words nd Ends from Ez’,* in *Journal of Modern Literature,* Vol. 37, No. 4, (2014), Courtney A. Pfahl gives a detailed account of the processes Mac Low used in his 1983 diastic-writing through of Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos*, arguing that the end-product achieves an ego-less poetics and radically alters the original text, creating a new work. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’*,* p. 143 [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. Marc G. Jensen, ‘John Cage, Chance Operations, and the Chaos Game: Cage and the *I Ching*’, in *The Musical Times*, Vol. 150, No. 1907, (2009), p. 97 [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. In his essay ‘By The Numbers: Jackson Mac Low’s Light Poems and Algorithmic Digraphism’, in *Time in Time: Short Poems, Long Poems, and the Rhetoric of North American Avant-Gardism,* 1963-2008, ed. by J. Mark Smith, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press: 2013), p. 177, Michael O’Driscoll writes that “Mac Low is always careful to describe in very specific terms the methods of composition employed in the production of any given text. He consistently describes the process of his compositional methods in head notes to the various poetic sequences, laying bare quite deliberately those unspoken rules that govern discursive formations and that usually go unremarked in both conventional verse and everyday speech.” [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. Jackson Mac Low, ‘Peaks and Lamas [1958-1959]’, in *Doings: Assorted Performance Pieces, 1955-2002*, (New York: Granary Books: 2005), p. 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. Ibid., p. 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. For more on notation and score, see: Nelson Goodman, Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols, (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing: 1976) [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. Mac Low, ‘Peaks and Lamas [1958-1959]’, p. 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. Ibid., p. 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Gill Ott, *Balancing Between Freedom and Limitation (1981), Letter from Jackson Mac Low to John Cage (Oct 1980),* Box 40, Folder 8, Sleeve 27, The John Cage Archive, Northwestern University [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. Gill Ott, *Balancing Between Freedom and Limitation (1981), Letter from Jackson Mac Low to John Cage (Oct 1980),* Box 40, Folder 8, Sleeve 27, The John Cage Archive, Northwestern University [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. Dezeuze, ‘Origins of the Fluxus Score: From Indeterminacy to the ‘Do It Yourself’ Artwork’, p. 84 [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. Ibid., pp. 84-85 [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. Joan Retallack, ‘Jackson Mac Low: Lines-Letters-Words’, in *Artforum International*, Vol. 55, No. 5, (2017), p. 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. Jackson Mac Low, ‘Drawing-Asymmetries [1961]’, in *Doings: Assorted Performance Pieces, 1955-2002*, p. 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. Mac Low, ‘Drawing-Asymmetries [1961]’, p. 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall, (London: Bloomsbury: 2004), p. 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. Morris was Simone Forti’s married name, and the title of the work was changed in accordance with the dancer returning to her maiden name following her divorce. All further references to the work *Nuclei for Simone (Morris) Forti* will be shortened to *Nuclei* [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. *Nuclei Cards,* B52, F9, The Jackson Mac Low Archive, UCSD [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. *Nuclei Cards,* B52, F9, The Jackson Mac Low Archive, UCSD [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. *Nuclei Cards,* B52, F9, The Jackson Mac Low Archive, UCSD [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. ‘Nuclei’, in The Oxford English Dictionary Online, < <https://www-oed-com.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/128970?rskey=S89iEa&result=1#eid>> [09/02/2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. Jackson Mac Low, ‘Nuclei for Simone (Morris) Forti’, in *Doings: Assorted Performance Pieces 1955-2002*, p. 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. In 1963, the Yam Festival was held as a Fluxus Event in which performances and ‘Happenings’ took place every day of May, see: George Brecht & Robert Watts, ‘MayTime YamTime, Yam Festival Calander’, (1963), <<https://whitney.org/collection/works/38278>> [07/03/2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. Mac Low, ‘Nuclei for Simone (Morris) Forti’, p. 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. Anne Tardos, *Thing of Beauty: Jackson Mac Low, New and Selected Works*, (London: University of California: 2008), p. 133 [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. Franko, ‘Writing for the Body: Notation, Reconstruction, and Reinvention’, p. 321 [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. Jackson Mac Low, *The Pronouns,* p. 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. Franko, ‘Writing for the Body: Notation, Reconstruction, and Reinvention’, p. 321 [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. Mac Low, ‘Nuclei for Simone (Morris) Forti’, p. 63 [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. Ric Allsopp, ‘Some Notes on Poetics and Choreography’, in *Performance Research*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (2015), p.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. In a letter from Young to Mac Low, in which Young recommends Forti for a part in *The Marrying Maiden*, he writes of Forti: “you saw Simone in Whitmans Mood – she can do all kinds of stuff (+ none [of] that dancy shit)”, *Letter from La Monte Young to Jackson Mac Low,* B117, F1, The Jackson Mac Low Archive, UCSD [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. Simone Forti, ‘Dance Construction’, in *An Anthology of Chance*, p. 97 [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. Steve Paxton, ‘The Emergence of Simone Forti’, in *Simone Forti: Thinking With The Body,* ed. by Sabine Breitwesier, (Munich: Hirmer: 2014), p. 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. Paxton, ‘The Emergence of Simone Forti’, p. 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. Meredith Morse*, Soft is Fast: Simone Forti in the 1960s and After*, (London: The MIT Press: 2016), p. 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. Ibid., p. 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. Ibid., 69-70 [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. Simone Forti, ‘Dance Report’, in *An Anthology of Chance*, p. 97 [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. Perron, ‘Simone Forti: bodynatureartmovementbody’, p. 100 [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. Morse, *Soft is Fast: Simone Forti in the 1960s and After*, p.72 [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. Morse, *Soft is Fast: Simone Forti in the 1960s and After*, p. 72 [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
494. Ibid., p. 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
495. Morse, *Soft is Fast: Simone Forti in the 1960s and After*, p. 73 [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
496. *Letter from Jackson Mac Low to Trisha Brown (1967),* B11, F13, The Jackson Mac Low Archive, UCSD [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
497. *Letter from Jackson Mac Low to Trisha Brown (1967),* B11, F13, The Jackson Mac Low Archive, UCSD [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
498. Jackson Mac Low, ‘Some Remarks to the Dancers (How the Dances Are To Be Performed & How They Were Made’, in *The Pronouns*, p. 69 [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
499. *Nuclei Cards,* B52, F9, The Jackson Mac Low Archive, UCSD [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
500. Mac Low, ‘Some Remarks to the Dancers’, p. 72 [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
501. Ibid., p. 72 [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
502. Jackson Mac Low, ‘18th Dance – Planting – 1 March 1964’, in *The Pronouns*, p. 35 [emphasis mine] [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
503. Mac Low, ‘Some Remarks to the Dancers’, p. 72 [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
504. Franko, ‘Writing for the Body: Notation, Reconstruction, and Reinvention’, p.323 [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
505. <<https://exhibitions.lib.umd.edu/bartenieff/feuillet-notation>> [07/03/2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
506. Jackson Mac Low, ‘5th Dance – Numbering – 17 February 1964’, in *The Pronouns*, p.. 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
507. Jackson Mac Low, ‘Preface to The 1979 Revised Edition of The Pronouns’, in *The Pronouns*, p. viii [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
508. Mac Low, ‘Some Remarks to the Dancers’, p. 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
509. Jackson Mac Low, ‘16th Dance – Being Red Enough – 21 February 1964’, in *The Pronouns*, p. 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
510. Mac Low, ‘16th Dance – Being Red Enough – 21 February 1964’, p. 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
511. Jackson Mac Low, ‘22nd Dance – Saying Things As A Worm Would – 17-22 March 1964’, in *The Pronouns*, p. 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
512. Virginia B. Spivey, ‘The Minimalist Presence of Simone Forti’, in *Woman’s Art Journal,* Vol. 30, No. 1, p. 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
513. Jackson Mac Low, ‘3rd Dance – Making A Structure With A Roof Or Under A Roof’, in *The Pronouns*, p. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
514. In ‘Some Remarks to the Dancers’, p. 67, Mac Low writes: “*THE PRONOUNS* is *‘A* COLLECTION *OF 40 DANCES’* – not a *series*. […] The important thing is that (even in overlapping realisations or the like) the *integrity* of each dance – its having a definite beginning, middle, & end – ought to be completely clear in every performance.” [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
515. Jackson Mac Low, ‘5th Dance – Numbering – 17 February 1964’, in *The Pronouns*, p. 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-515)
516. Mac Low, ‘Some Remarks to the Dancers’, p. 72 [↑](#footnote-ref-516)
517. Silverberg, ‘New York School Collaborations and *The Coronation Murdery Mystery'*, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-517)
518. Jackson Mac Low, ‘9th Dance – Questioning – 20 February 1964’, in *The Pronouns*, p. 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
519. Matthias Regan, ‘Jackson Mac Low and Simone Forti: Diastic Method and Cheerful Grace’, in Voice Magazine, Vol. 6, No. 3, (1990), B31, 411, The Jackson Mac Low Papers, UCSD [↑](#footnote-ref-519)
520. Julian Wolfreys, ‘Reception Theory and Reader-Response: Hans-Robert Jauss (1922-1997), Wolfgang Iser (1926-) and the School of Konstanz’*,* in *Modern European Criticism and Theory: A Critical Guide*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 2006), p. 279 [↑](#footnote-ref-520)
521. John Cage, *Music and Particularly Silence in the Work of Jackson Mac Low (1980),* B12, F1, The Jackson Mac Low Archive, UCSD [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
522. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 403-404 [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
523. Ibid., p. 405-406 [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
524. Ibid., p. 402 [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
525. Victoria Watts, ‘Dancing the Score: Dance Notation and Difference’, in *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research,* Vol. 28, No. 1, (2010), p. 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-525)
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527. Watts, ‘Dancing the Score: Dance Notation and Difference’, p. 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-527)
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529. Jackson Mac Low, ‘27th Dance – Walking – 22 March 1964’, in *The Pronouns*, p. 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
530. Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*, (London: Duke University Press: 1998), p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-530)
531. Ibid., p. 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-531)
532. Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*, p. 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-532)
533. Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*, p. 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-533)
534. Mac Low, *The Pronouns: A Collection of 40 Dances for the Dancers, 3 February – 22 March 1964*, (London: Tetrad: Press: 1971) [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
535. Ibid., p. vii [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
536. Ian Tyson, ‘Boiling Glass [illustration for ‘Folio 2, Dances 8-13’, (1971), <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tyson-the-pronouns-65566/4> [07/03/2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-536)
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543. Ed Folson, ‘Whitman Making Books/ Books Making Whitman: A Catalog and Commentary’, <<https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/anc.00150.html>> [27/10/19] [↑](#footnote-ref-543)
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545. Cunningham, *Changes: Notes on Choreography*, no pagination. [↑](#footnote-ref-545)
546. Rebecca Schneider, ‘Performance Remains’, in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, (Bristol: Intellect: 2012), p. 139 [↑](#footnote-ref-546)
547. Brandstetter, ‘Still Moving: Performance and Models of Spatial Arrangement at Black Mountain College’, p. 303 [↑](#footnote-ref-547)
548. Philip Auslander, ‘The Performativity of Performance Documentation’, in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History,* ed. by Amelia Jones & Adrian Heathfield, (Bristol: Intellect: 2012), pp. 47-48 [↑](#footnote-ref-548)
549. Auslander, ‘The Performativity of Performance Documentation’ 54-55 [↑](#footnote-ref-549)
550. Ibid., p. 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-550)
551. Performance of *The Pronouns* at the *3rd Annual New York Avant Garde Festival, 10 September 1965*, photographed by Peter Moore, printed in *The Pronouns,* p. 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-551)
552. Mac Low, *The Pronouns*, p. 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-552)
553. See *The* *Pronouns*, p. 73: “on 10 September 1965, during the 3rd annual New York Avant-Garde Festival…the author read the eight poems consecutively as a ‘reading dance’ in which he appeared at a different place in the theater for the reading of each of the poems.” [↑](#footnote-ref-553)
554. Mac Low, *The Pronouns,* p. 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-554)
555. Erika Fischer-Lichte, ‘Methodologies: Performance Analysis’, in *The Routledge Introduction to Performance and Theatre Studies*, ed. By Minou Arjomand & Ramona Mosse, (London: Taylor & Frances: 2014), p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-555)
556. Ibid., p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-556)
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558. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, (London: Routledge: 2005), p. 146 [↑](#footnote-ref-558)
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560. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham: Duke University Press: 2003), p. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-560)
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566. Diane Di Prima, ‘Five Takes on Fred Herko’s Birthday, February 23, 1969’ in *Freddie Poems*, (Point Reyes: Eidolon: 1974), no pagination. [↑](#footnote-ref-566)
567. Diane Di Prima, ‘Nocturne’ in *Freddie Poems*, no pagination. [↑](#footnote-ref-567)