

Locating and Losing the Self:
Explorations of Trauma and Identity in Live Performance

“The academic guild only has patience for philosophy that dresses itself up with the nobility of the universal.” – T.W.Adorno, The Essay as Form

Nadia Hannan
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Abstract:

Examining the location and presence of personal history and identity, specifically trauma, this thesis explores depiction and approaches to trauma in live performance alongside theories of abstraction, disinterestedness, and depersonalization. Using Kant's notion of disinterestedness, along with Arlene Croce's review of Bill T. Jones' work *Still/Here* (1994) and her introduction of the term "victim art" as a jumping off point, this thesis asks: What is the relationship of art and trauma? Who is 'allowed' to make what art? What stories, bodies, and identities are seen on stage, which ones are left out of the western dance canon? What is about the specific medium of the body that complicates the idea put forward by Kant, and upheld by Croce, of a universal subjective experience? What is the relationship between form and content, the subject and how it is being structured/presented? Bringing together body art from the 1970s, written and performed work produced during and in response to the AIDS epidemic, performance work from the 2000s, and psychological research around PTSD, this paper moves in and out of theory, history, and personal narrative as a way to interrogate the idea of a universal identity and ask questions around the value and role of abstraction in art from modernism to the present.

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1994

At the beginning of Neil Greenberg's *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* lights come up on two dancers in white shorts and white tank tops. One dancer is in a balance on one leg, with the other extended out behind them. The second dancer is turning slowly, with one arm out and up on a diagonal, the other bent into their chest. The text, "This is the first material I made after my brother died," is projected on the back wall, and the two dancers are soon joined by three more. Later on in the piece, mixed in among projected text about his dancers and the events that happened during the making of this piece, Greenberg will enter the space, stand still with his arms bent up by his head, then slowly walk backwards upstage, while text that reads "This is what my brother Jon looked like in his coma/He was in a coma 2 days before he died of AIDS," appears on the back wall.

Bill T. Jones premiere's Still/Here

I turn two years old

The Chunnel Opens

Bill Clinton is in his second year as president

2018:

I asked Juliana May about her thoughts on projected text, live spoken text, and recorded text in performance. With regards to projected texts, she discusses her memory of seeing Neil Greenberg's *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*. "There was such distance. It evoked such a potent sense of the trauma because of that distance. I think sometimes distance can give you such a deeper relationship to the material actually, if it is too sad or too intense."

*Interview Location: Long Island City
New York, NY*

Am I Wrong or Does Separation Actually Make the Heart Grow Fonder?

Does more distance, more space, more separation mean less intimate, less personal, or does more distance, more space, more separation mean more room to engage, play, and respond to the material in a more personal and more intimate way?

*It was really hard for me to write this.
It made me feel callous and cold
like I was betraying something
at the core of my humanity.
My therapist and I have spent many sessions
talking about how hard it is for me to let people
see me, how I feel more comfortable keeping
people at a distance.
I need to let people see more of me,
but maybe I don't need to let them see all of me.
Not sharing or showing, keeping a secret,
hiding, it isn't lying, it isn't betrayal,
it isn't always a bad thing.
Right?*

2018

At the beginning of Juliana May's *Folk Incest* one dancer enters the space and takes a seat in the audience. She has a script which she reads as if she is practicing for an audition, repeating lines in different styles and muttering to herself about doing it better or trying again. This progression is interrupted when she turns to her right, finger pointing out in front of her, and begins to yell "Fuck You" to the audience members, as she moves in a semi-circle from right to left.

2014

"Freud had a term for such traumatic reenactments: 'the compulsion to repeat.' He and many of his followers believed that reenactments were an unconscious attempt to get control over a painful situation and they eventually could lead to mastery and resolution. There is no evidence for that theory – repetition leads only to further pain and self-hatred. In fact, even reliving the trauma repeatedly in therapy may reinforce preoccupation and fixation" (van der Kolk, 32).

Why is this day different than every other day?

If repeating and enacting trauma further fixes the trauma, then does repeating and enacting events that happen in everyday life, keep those events in everyday life. What transforms trauma into healing? What moves everyday life into art? What makes Chris Burden getting shot in the arm by a friend art?

Grievance Studies Hoax is Released

I turn 26 years old

The Shape of Water wins best picture at the Oscars

Donald Trump is in his second year as president

*Publishing Location: New York
New York*

When I first saw the video of Chris Burden getting shot in the arm in Shoot (1971), I was a freshman in college. We watched it during a lecture in my art history class "Contemporary Art I." It was grainy and a little hard to see. I didn't love it, but it didn't sicken me. Now, I read and think about it and it makes my blood boil. After Sandy Hook, after Parkland, after Maryland, after Pittsburgh, after Pulse, after Las Vegas, after Virginia Tech, after Aurora, after Columbine, after Santa Fe, after countless others, Chris Burden ASKED to get shot in the arm and called it art. Why is that art?

Early 2000s

In a solo performed by Avila in the early 2000s, after he had his leg amputated as part of his cancer treatment, Avila tips out of a cardboard box and moves around the stage doing virtuosic balletic and contemporary movements reciting various things he has lost. Some of these items seem trivial, “I lost my watch” Avila notes, while others carry more weight, “I lost my health” and “I lost my humanity.” At one point, Avila stands up on a small orange chair, and recites “I lost my leg” while he reaches down to hold at his hip where his leg used to be, and pauses.

1994

In a review of Bill T. Jones’ Still/Here, Arlene Croce writes, “As a dance critic, I’ve learned to avoid dancers with obvious problems – overweight dancers (not fat dancers; Jackie Gleason was fat and was a good dancer), old dancers, dancers with sickled feet, or dancers with physical deformities who appear nightly in roles requiring beauty of line. In quite another category of undiscussability are those dancers I’m forced to feel sorry for because of the way they present themselves: as dissed blacks, abused women, or disfranchised homosexuals – as performers, in short, who make out of victimhood victim art” (Croce, 55).

To be alive at all is to have an identity

What is ‘the neutral-body’? There isn’t actually one, however, there is a body that is privileged, a body that is the default, a body that can be abstracted. That body, in the West at least, is white, heterosexual, Eurocentric. But those are identities. That body is not identity-less.

(The title of this section is inspired by a quotation from John Steinbeck which reads “To be alive at all is to have scars.”)

My tumor resection and reconstruction

I am 8,9,10 years old

World Trade Towers are hit

Bush is in his first term as President

*Publishing Location: New York
New York*

*When I was eight,
a woman thought it was appropriate
to tell my mom how great my physique was.
I was half-way through six months of chemotherapy
and about 20 pounds underweight.
When I was 13,
I went to my first ballet class.
We started with pliés at the barre.
My teacher came up to me and told me
to bend deeper.
I said I couldn’t.
I had nerve damage and limited mobility.
She asked me why I was in class if I couldn’t plié.
The next week, I didn’t go back
When I was 24,
I was sitting at the front desk at my old job.
A woman came in to ask about studio availability.
As I was pulling up the calendar
she asked me what was wrong with my face.
I told her it was nothing.
She then proceeded to ask if I had recently
had dental surgery,
why one side of my face looked swollen,
how I had gotten my scar.*

1985

In 1985, only six days after being released from the hospital John Bernd performs the last part of his *Lost and Found* trilogy. Bernd was visibly sick at this point. (Danspace Project, 14).

*Ronald Reagan starts his second term as President
I am not alive*

1983-1984

From 1983 to 1984 Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano tie themselves together for a year.

*Ronald Reagan is finishing his first term as President
I am not alive*

1984

Stelarc suspends himself from hooks inserted in his skin over 11th street between Avenue B and C. (Carr, 3-24).

*Ronald Reagan is finishing his first term as President
I am not alive*

These three actions will all be framed as art.

1790

In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant writes about the good, the agreeable, and of the beautiful. The beautiful, Kant argues, is a judgment made without the influence of any personal desire or connection to that which is being viewed. Since beauty is not dependent on one person's individual influences, what is beautiful, is posited as simultaneously a universally agreed upon and subjective idea. Kant, explains "he must believe that he is justified in requiring a similar liking from everyone because he cannot discover, underlying this liking, any private conditions, on which only he might be dependent, so that he must regard it as based on what he can presuppose in everyone else as well." (Kant, transl., Pluhar, 90).

Original Publishing Location: Germany

Am I being selfish? Is art selfless?

What is the difference between a universal subjective experience and an objective experience? Is there a way to think about art and judgment that moves beyond the subjective/objective binary? Is it possible to make a judgment that is devoid of one's personal interests and desires? Is there such a thing as a universal experience?

*The doctors didn't really care about my desires.
Well, maybe they cared but it didn't really matter.
Just because I didn't want the shot,
didn't mean I wasn't going to get it.
Even when I screamed and tried to run
out of the room and my mom had to pull me back in
and one nurse had to sit on me,
they still gave me the shot.
What I wanted made little difference,
and so I learned how to react
and make decisions devoid of desire.
Most of the time it feels empty.*

Introduction - Leaning into Vulnerability: Approaching Trauma and the Body in Live Performance

The pieces, interviews, and texts referenced in the previous “Object Pages” were generated over a span of almost 50 years, by artists, writers and thinkers of different genders, races, and sexualities, in different locations, and with different histories and intentions. Though different in many aspects, they all address issues of trauma on, or to, the body, and in doing so, raise questions about disinterestedness, distance of the maker from what is being made, the place of identity within performance, and the location of desire within what is being made. In some of these works, trauma is evoked through text or a concept, while in others, the trauma occurs in the actual performing of the work. All of the works address the potential harm that can be done to the body, the harm that the body can inflict on others and questions of illness, injury, and ultimately mortality. All of these elements lead to questions about the location of the body/self and its many identities within art. The texts accompanying the description of each piece contain some of the core ideas I will be working with throughout this thesis and highlight some of the questions at the root of my inquiry and interest as an art maker: Where does the self and the personal exist within art, specifically in performance in which the medium is the body? What even is the self and where is it located? Is it the physical body? Is it, drawing on Freud, located in the psyche and perception of self? Is there a way to remove the self from what is created? What is the role of abstraction as a tool in relationship to these questions, and how can/is the body abstracted? When and what makes a specific action art? What is the relationship between the trauma state and the process of making art?

My thesis research is designed to raise and interrogate questions specifically around trauma and identity in live performance as it relates to the question of disinterestedness and distance in art. The topic stemmed from my personal experience of life after a traumatic event, and negotiating that trauma as a dancer and choreographer, as well as in my daily life. For most of my life as a creator and performer, I have looked outside my body and my identity for material. My first introduction to dance was in sixth grade and in those beginning years, I rarely put myself in my

dances. I found source material in the shapes of paintings or images and sensations alluded to in descriptions of quantum mechanics. As a performer, I tried to hide and/or work outside of limitations placed on my body, instead of working within them. I was terrified of making work based on my body, my identity, and my trauma, because of the vulnerability it required, as well as the fear of “using” or sensationalizing my story. I avoided the ‘messiness’ of my body - sensations, memories, physical markers/scars that reminded me of the lack of control I had over my body and often sent me into a state of panic and anxiety – and I centered shape and form. I leaned into a very specific idea of what I considered abstraction to be, of which the primary principle was an erasure of self because I did not trust myself. My body felt unsafe.

My cancer diagnosis felt like a betrayal of my body by my body, and once I was in remission, I was scared of exploring it too deeply, for fear that I might find something I didn't want to—that it would betray me again.

I use “shape and form” as a focus to contrast the idea of content, however, this is a very clumsy binary, as I believe that form and content are inextricably linked. In her essay “Why I Write,” Joan Didion notes that, “to shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed.”¹ The howness of executing a movement adds as much to the whatness of the movement and vice versa. By saying I “centered shape and form” I am trying to explain the focus I placed on the visual container of the work. I think that a focus on form and a focus on the visual can lead to incredibly rich, deeply engaged, highly considered, and overwhelmingly powerful and personal work (in my opinion, Beth Gill’s most recent work Pitkin Grove acts as a good example and while I don’t know Gill’s focus/intention in creating the work, I found there to be a lot of care

¹ Joan Didion, “Why I Write,” (New York Times: 5 Dec 1976).

and attention placed on the formal elements of the composition). My work, however, felt shallow when this was a focus. Upon reflection, I understand part of this to be age and immaturity as an artist, but also to be rooted in a fear I had—and still have—about my body.

Last year, I reached a place in my life when I felt ready to lean into the vulnerability I had been avoiding, and pushed by Sarah Lawrence’s Masters program and the requirement of creating a solo on myself, I decided to make a solo that centered this traumatic event in my life. At the same time, I reread Arlene Croce’s review of choreographer Bill T. Jones’ piece *Still/Here* (1994) in which she introduces the term “victim art.”² I first came across the article as an undergraduate and remember feeling intense discomfort, disagreement, and disjuncture that I wasn’t fully able to articulate. This time, I read the article alongside Kant’s theories of aesthetic judgment and began to understand that the discomfort I was feeling was directly connected to this idea of disinterestedness and distance that Kant argues for, and Croce upholds, as necessary for a work of art.

I began to understand the questions that were coming up for me, as questions around identity, privilege, and medium specificity. What identities are seen as “neutral” and open to abstraction? What identities aren’t? What bodies, stories, and ideas do we see on stage in performance and which ones are left out? What does it mean to abstract the body? Can the body be abstracted? What is it about the body that is different from other media such as painting or writing? When, how, and by whom is trauma addressed in live performance?

Haunted by Croce’s article and Kant’s theories on aesthetics, my research brings together disparate sources from psychology to cultural studies and body art of the 1970s and 1980s to contemporary work created in 2018. For the purpose of this paper, my research focuses largely on performances created in the West, and the questions around trauma that I am addressing are largely

² Arlene Croce introduces the term “victim art” on page 55 of her “review” (can it really be called a review since Croce refused to see the work) “Discussing the Undiscussable,” published in the December 26, 1994 issue of the *New Yorker*. Victim art, as defined by Croce, is art that is overpowered by the hardships of the creator and the personal nature of the subject matter so much so that it clouds one’s ability to make a true aesthetic judgment.

in relationship to aesthetic ideals proposed by a Euro-centric model and way of thinking. These sources are put in conversation with each other with the goal of fleshing out how identity and personal experience, in this case the experience of trauma, effects the body, how one moves through the world and on stage, and the art making process. My intention of bringing in sources outside of dance and performance is twofold: on one hand, I use these sources as a way of highlighting the wide reach of many of these issues across fields and disciplines, and on the other hand, I use them as counterpoints or spaces to ask and look at what is different when these questions are applied specifically to dance and performance.

The structure of this paper, which incorporates the use of fragments, and reflection through the use of footnotes and personal inserts, serves both as a way of transforming this text into a performance/aesthetic art object, as well as a way of performing, through writing, some of the difference between typical memory—by which I mean memory that has not been impacted by trauma with the understanding that there is no such thing as one kind of typical memory—and traumatic memory, which I will address further in a later chapter. My intention in this potential ‘performance of trauma’ is to show how and what information each state communicates.³ Additionally, the “Object Pages” at the beginning and the “Timeline” at the end, serve as alternate ways of viewing and contextualizing this information in a distilled and less linear manner. Throughout my research, I came to realize that it was not just the subject matter, in this case trauma, that was of interest, but how it was being presented, and in what medium it was being presented. As a result, connecting back to this idea of content and form, structure became an important part of how I interacted with my research.

³ In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk, expands upon the differences between “typical memory” and traumatic memory. According to van der Kolk, traumatic memory is non-functional, unsocial, non-verbal, disorganized, and non-narrative (182-3, 195).

I. Performance “is” a Construction:

Before diving into these questions, it is important to first establish, or present a few parameters for thinking about performance, and its relationship to the question of aesthetic judgment. Richard Schechner, one of the founders of the field of Performance Studies, in his most distilled definition, describes performance as “twice behaved behaviors,” meaning repeated, learned behaviors.⁴ These actions exist on stage, but they also exist in everyday life. In fact, Schechner argues, they are the only actions that exist. “There is,” according to Schechner, “no such thing as ‘once-behaved behavior,’” as everything is twice-behaved and can be viewed through the lens of performance, from washing one’s dishes to dancing Balanchine’s *Agon* (1957).⁵ While this definition seems to be all inclusive, Schechner makes an important distinction between something that “is” performance and something viewed “as” performance. While anything can be studied “as” performance, what “is” performance is largely dictated by social, cultural, and historical constructs and conventions.⁶ While these conventions change from culture to culture, if we think about Western theatrical concert dance, we might say that in order for a piece to be considered a performance, not simply studied as performance, there must be spectators, and those spectators are historically, although not necessarily, framed as separate from the performers. Some other conventions that signal performance in this context might include theatrical lighting, a proscenium stage, or a ticketed event. In this sense, while washing one’s dishes and performing *Agon* can both be viewed as performance, washing one’s dishes alone at home would be less likely than *Agon* to be considered a performance. In order to determine what a performance “is” requires an understanding of the socially constructed and mutually agreed upon ontological nature of the

⁴ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

act in question as conditioned by both its historical development and cultural embeddedness in a given society.

II. Between Ritual and Art: Trauma in Stelarc's Suspension Pieces and Questions of Liveness

Stelarc is lying naked and supine on the forearm of a giant white sculpture of an arm, his head resting just at the base of the arm's wrist. A group of people surround him, working together to insert a series of metal hooks into his skin. There is surprising violence and force in the insertion process, where I was expecting something gentler.

I hit pause on the video and take a few breaths to calm and settle my stomach before continuing to watch.

Once all the hooks are inserted, approximately fifteen across his back and down both of his legs, one of the workers goes over to a corner and slowly starts to turn a crank, which raises Stelarc off the arm and into the air. As he rises, his skin stretches, particularly along his back where most of his weight seems to hang. The process of insertion, the slow rise into the air, the circle of observers around the edge, the visible puncture sites.

It's hard for me not to be reminded of Jesus being nailed to the cross⁷.

While Schechner's definition of performance is fairly open, he does draw a distinction in performance between what he calls "Efficacy," rituals and performances that do something and "Entertainment," performances that are "for fun," or what we might call "art for art's sake."⁸ There are other characteristics that Schechner aligns with each pole, such as the value placed on virtuosity, the role of the spectator, and the performances relationship to time. Ultimately, Schechner argues that "no performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment," every performance includes elements of both.⁹ In constructing this relationship between efficacy and entertainment, Schechner raises the question of distance as it relates to the level of personal investment in the

⁷ "STELARC EAR ON ARM SUSPENSION.mov." *YouTube*. Uploaded by John Dogget-Williams, 15 Mar, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAHagdSBATM&has_verified=1

⁸ Schechner, 71.

⁹ *Ibid*,

performance and critically for my project, how that distance serves in the categorization of the performance as more of a ritual or more performing art.

Stelarc's suspension in the gallery can be said to include certain elements of ritual, such as the transformation of his body throughout the duration of the piece. The history of suspension that Stelarc is drawing on is also tied to and rooted in ritual and spiritual practices from multiple cultures.¹⁰ The process of preparing Stelarc's body for suspension also conjures images of rituals of preparing a body for burial. At the same time, this process is being performed within an art gallery. Stelarc's suspension pieces raise the question of where and how live performance, and more specifically, live performance that deals with trauma, fall in relationship to ritual and performing arts, and what role that has in how it is, or isn't, understood as art?

Is Kant's distance or disinterestedness actually achievable in live performance, given the immediacy of the live body as compared to the myriad of ways in which information is presented in a highly technologically advanced society? Walter Benjamin writes in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, "In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place."¹¹ (21). Dance, and live performance more generally, is always rooted in a very particular and unique time and space, making it, potentially, impossible to technologically reproduce. At the same time, there develops a growing separation between the presence and location of the live performance in a specific place and time, and work that can be readily reproduced and therefore spread across space

¹⁰ Body piercing can be seen in rituals such as the Okipa festival, a ceremony performed by the Mandan (Numakiki) Native Americans (Encyclopedia Britannica). It can also be seen in the practice of Hindu rituals, with some people tracing the earliest suspension pieces to the practice of vel Kavadi, a rite performed during the Thaipusam festival "in which worshippers undergo some form of hardship as an expression of debt bondage to the war god Murugan (Wyatt Marshall, "The Therapeutic Experience of Being Suspended by Your Skin," in *The Atlantic*, 21 Sep, 2012.)

¹¹ Walter, Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, and E.F.N Jephcott.(Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 21.

and time. Perhaps it is this growing gap that makes the body of say, the dancers in Juliana May's *Folk Incest* moving around the space topless and visibly perspiring, so immediate, physical, and unavailable to distance. It isn't just the live performing body itself, but rather, the live performing body in the 21st century in relationship to the hyper mediatization and reproduction of other artworks and presentations of self.

III. How Far Can I Be: Disinterestedness and Trauma

Many of these questions are wrapped up in concerns around an aesthetic of disinterestedness, the definition of which has shifted slightly, depending on the philosopher writing on the concept. The notion of disinterestedness can be traced back to Aristotle, however, the term was generally used to describe a detachment largely reserved for God.¹² The aesthetic use of the term arose in the 18th century, largely with the rise of the distinction between high art and popular art, with the term disinterestedness being reserved for high art.¹³ One of the prominent philosophers to apply this concept directly to art aesthetics was Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant makes a distinction between three different judgments that I focus on: the good, the agreeable, and the beautiful. For Kant, the good and the agreeable, are judgments made in which the individual has a personal investment in the object they are judging, perhaps due to the object's use or a personal attachment of another nature.¹⁴ The beautiful, however, which Kant deems a judgment of taste, can only be made when the individual has no personal investment in the object. I will expand upon this idea of disinterestedness and its relationship to the idea of beauty, the beautiful, and art in Chapter 1.

¹² Michael Kelly, ed., "Disinterestedness," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (2 ed.), (Oxford University Press: 2014).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, "Immanuel Kant: From *The Critique of Judgment*," trans. Werner S. Pluhar in *Aesthetic Theory: Essential Texts for Architecture and Design*, ed. Mark Foster Gage (Norton and Company, 2011), 84-88.

While many of the texts I am working with, such as Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and Croce's "Discussing the Undiscussable," raise questions around "what is art" and "what is dance," I find it important to also address the question of what is trauma. In his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, doesn't so much address the definition of trauma, but rather how traumatic events effect a person's body and how they move through the world. While van der Kolk identifies common characteristics among people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, throughout his case studies, it also becomes clear that trauma is an individual experience, that is people respond to traumatic events in very different ways.¹⁵

That some people develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and others do not, also points to the subjective nature of how trauma is defined. I feel this is particularly important to point out when it comes to performance, since there is the experience of the maker and/or performer, as well as the spectator. When discussing his suspension pieces, Stelarc does not fixate on the pain or the process of having hooks inserted into his body. In fact, he steers the conversation away from human sensation. "I am not interested in human states or attitudes or perversions," he explains. "I am concerned with cosmic, superhuman, extraterrestrial manifestation."¹⁶ His description of his experience and intention is beyond body and beyond trauma—however, to the outside spectators, the act of puncturing and stretching the skin, could be seen as traumatic and could frame how they view his work. According to Kant's theory, the mere fact that there could be a difference of experience negates the work as a work of art.¹⁷

¹⁵ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, (Penguin Books, 2014), 65-71. One of the clearest examples of this is in the story of Ute and Stan Lawrence who were both in car number 13 of an 87-car pileup in 1999. When their brains were studied using an fMRI, they showed very different responses. Where Stan's brain showed him reliving the accident when triggered by reminders of the event, Ute's brain showed a complete dissociation and disconnection from the event. Stan went back into the pain of the trauma, and Ute became numb to it.

¹⁶ C. Carr, *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century*, (Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 11.

¹⁷ Refers to Kant's theory of universal subjectivity (Kant, 91).

The following chapters delve into essential concepts and considerations in addressing these questions around art, distance, identity, and trauma. Chapter 1 further investigates Kant's idea of disinterestedness as it relates to the definition of art, as well as a similar theory put forward by T.S. Eliot regarding depersonalization in art, its connection to the trauma state, and the role abstractions plays, or doesn't play, in generating this distance. Chapter 2 examines how these questions manifest when the medium is the body, versus an external art object, such as a painting or a poem. The conclusion asks what it means to make work that addresses trauma while actually in a state of trauma, versus making work about the trauma at a later point in time. This is largely done through a reflection on work being made during the AIDS Crisis, Danspace Project's 2016 Platform *Lost and Found: Dance, New York, HIV/AIDS, Then and Now*, and my own experience making work about personal trauma.

Chapter I - In or Out? Trauma in Conversation with Disinterestedness, Abstraction, and Depersonalization

“I always begin a project with the knowledge that I am dealing with people – with individuals, with human beings...I mean abstraction is always present in an art form, and I use it but I have never used human beings simply as a design element.” Donald McKayle¹⁸

*A human is not a chair, is not a triangle, is not an electronic device. The body may and can take on these qualities. A dancer may kneel on hands and knees, providing a chair-like surface for one to sit on. They can bend and create triangle-like shapes with their bodies. A dancer may even move mechanically with a rigidity and performed detachment similar to a machine; however, they are not these things. The body is living and messy. The body overflows. The body is grotesque.*¹⁹

There is a history of lived experiences the body cannot escape. The body may be treated like an object, but it is not one. Even objects show their histories. A cup that gets chipped shows that chip from then on. Even if it is glued back together, the point of fracture remains visible. Like the cup, bodies have scars of varying sizes and depths. Kant’s insistence on disinterestedness in art, reads not just as a request to not show the scars, but as a demand to hide them. Is that even possible?

In the work *Rope Piece*, Tehching and Montano tie themselves together for a year using an eight-foot rope.²⁰ They do everything together: sleep, eat, shower, go to the movies. Tehching emphasizes that the project is “about Art,” and must be devoid of emotions and the personal.²¹ Given the incredibly intimate nature of the work, it seem that this lack of emotion and personal feeling is what distinguishes what they are doing from simply living, and makes it art. It is not about their individual relationship. It is about a general experience. Or perhaps it is also about

¹⁸ Miguel Gutierrez. “Does Abstraction Belong to White People: Thinking the Politics of Race in Contemporary Dance,” *BOMB Magazine*, Nov 7, 2018. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/miguel-gutierrez-1/>

¹⁹ In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin writes about the “grotesque body” as it relates to carnival and festival in the Middle Ages and the writing of Rabelais (207). One of the defining characteristics of the grotesque body is the simultaneity of devouring and being devoured (221). One of the characteristics that Bakhtin points to is the images of consumption of meat accompanied by the images of defecation and excretion of bodily fluids (224-5). Bakhtin writes, “We thus obtain a truly grotesque image of one single, superindividual bodily life, of the great bowels that devour and are devoured, generate and are generated,” (226). In her book *Dance, Space, and Subjectivity*, Valerie Briginshaw, cites Bakhtin’s idea of ‘grotesque realism’ as it relates to the idea of a “double body,” a body that is both inner and outer, and how the simultaneity of those existences work to trouble the dichotomy established through binaries (17).

²⁰ Carr., 3

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5. This explanation from Tehching is a response to a comment Montano made about the project, which Tehching deemed too “personal” and too “emotional.”

intention—if we say its art, if we set out on a project with the intention of making art, is it then art?

Stelarc, similarly deemphasizes his personal experience and his body, partially by referring to himself not by name but as “the body.” Stelarc explains, “if I referred to myself all the time it would personalize the experience too much. It’s not important that it’s me.”²² The truth, however, is that it is *his* body, not your body and not my body that is suspended. It is *his* body that they are inserting hooks into, *his* skin that is pulling and stretching as he is lifted into the air, and *he* who is having that experience. His identity as a white man, the physical body in which he is being suspended, the process of being suspended, all of these shape the experience of viewing this work. Change any of them and change the viewers experience.

I was not in the first trio I made using my trauma as source material, and it felt thin. In my solo, I didn't have to share or explain my trauma because I knew. It was my body moving. While I developed movement with various levels of attention and consciousness to this source, my body held the history of my trauma, and therefore it ended up feeling more present.

In summarizing Kant’s idea of the beautiful Mark Foster Gage writes: “it is critical not only to avoid cognition of the objects’ identity or use but also to be free from desire regarding the object of contemplation.”²³ In order to make an aesthetic judgment, the subject must have a certain amount of distance from, or disinterestedness in, the thing being judged. It is precisely this distance that Stelarc and Tehching are striving for in their respective works. The beautiful, Kant argues, is a judgment of taste that is predicated on this ability to achieve some sort of distance, and is separate from finding something agreeable or good, which are judgments that carry with them some form

²² Carr, 13.

²³ Kant, 81.

of personal investment.²⁴ Since the beautiful is not connected to personal investment, the beautiful, Kant argues is something universally agreed upon.²⁵ If the beautiful is a judgment of taste “devoid of all interest” on a personal level, then what one finds beautiful, one must assume all others find beautiful, what Kant deems subjective universality.²⁶ But where does trauma reside alongside what is free from investment; trauma, something that can hold people so tightly in a moment, that they become frozen, fixed, imprisoned. Is there a way to relate to trauma that is free from investment, and if there isn't, can work that addresses trauma ever be beautiful?

I. Exposing ‘The Neutral’ and ‘The Universal’ Through Form and Content:

In making an argument for distance or disinterestedness, Kant is making a distinction between, and separation of, the self and the art object, and it is exactly this space between the self and art object that I'm interested in, as it is the amount of space or distance that is tied to one's experience of trauma that effects one's experience of trauma. While Kant's idea of universal subjectivity acknowledges, to a certain extent, the impossibility of this, given that the judgment being made is still one of a subjective nature, it does introduce the problem of the universal. What is universal? Whose universal is Kant referencing, if our judgments are shaped by the cultures we inhabit, the identities we embody, and the characteristics that we take on, or have put on, our bodies over the course of our lives, whether we are consciously aware of them or not.

Accepting identities, cultures, and structures as given and fixed has been troubled with the rise of post-structuralist thought, which has also made space for the validity of phenomenology and the knowledge gained through an individual's lived experience. In her essay connecting the

²⁴ Ibid., 83,86.

²⁵ Ibid., 90.

²⁶ Ibid., 90.

structures of narrative to sexual pleasure, Susan Winnett writes of the constructed nature of the universal. She suggests that: “once we recognize how a psychoanalytic dynamics of reading assumes the universality of the male response, we have little difficulty noticing how arbitrary the foundations of its universalizations are.”²⁷ In addition to highlighting its construction, Winnett also undermines the myth of the universal as a “neutral.” While the word “arbitrary” feels a little too *blasé*, it does introduce the idea that it (the universal) does not have to be this way. It does not have to be male-centric, white-centric, Eurocentric. It was something that was constructed within a cultural context, and therefore it can and does change.

This notion of disinterestedness and universality as it relates to art is one that Arlene Croce upholds in her review of Bill T. Jones’ work *Still/Here* when she comments on her inability to review the work because of its personal and deeply invested relationship with trauma, AIDS, and death, as well as more generally in her approach to reviewing dance.²⁸ In the *The Dance Criticism of Arlene Croce*, Marc Raymond Strauss points to the formalist and classicist ideals that Croce endorses.²⁹ In a review of Kurt Joos’ *Pavane on the Death of an Infanta* (1929), revived by the Joffrey in 1976, Croce notes the way that the choreographer and the dancers sway and cue the audience to react in a specific desired way that is highly constructed.³⁰ One can argue that this is the case for most all performance. The choreographer or director makes decisions to construct a

²⁷ Susan Winnett. “Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure,” *PMLA*, 105, no.3, (May 1990), 511.

²⁸ Croce writes, “If an artist paints a picture in his own blood, what does it matter if I think it’s not a very good picture... The artist is going to bleed to death, and that’s it” (58-9). It is possible to read this as a statement that the act of trauma, the decision to bring death and dying into the work, prohibits it from being critiqued as art. The question of if it is art, is inconsequential when positioned alongside the possibility of death.

²⁹ Marc Raymond Strauss. *The Dance Criticism of Arlene Croce: Articulating a Vision of Artistry, 1973-1987*. (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005), 11-17. In the first chapter of his book, Marc Raymond Strauss outlines the brief history of classicism as it moves from Aristotle into the 20th century, and in the influence that “formalistic theorists” had on returning art criticism to its classical ideals and upholding the theory of “art for art’s sake” and art objects as having “their own autonomous values,” and Croce’s relationship to those ideals

³⁰ Strauss, 48.

certain experience that elicits a certain reaction. However, Croce identifies a particular passivity in the audience which she attributes to the “tone of entertainment” being “uneven.”³¹ Croce writes, “audiences are so passive and suggestible that they won’t laugh unless they are cued; they respond to what the dancers want, not to what they do.”³² In other words, the spectators’ reactions to what they are seeing are implicated by what they believe the dancers desire they see and experience, which one could consider a type of personal investment or interest.

Perhaps this is not the separation that Kant was referring to when he wrote about disinterestedness, however, the question of responsibility is an important one to address. Is this passive reaction the product of the work that is being made, and therefore the responsibility of the maker, or is it a matter of the structure and codes of the proscenium that allows for this passivity? If it is a result of the structure and codes of how the work is being portrayed, then perhaps it has less to do with the subject matter and more to do with the space. Here we return to the complex relationship between content and form, this time with the specific lens of trauma. Watching Stelarc being suspended, seeing the skin being pierced, and coming across his body in an unexpected setting (a gallery or above E. 11th street) creates a surprise, an unknown, in a way that seeing Bill T. Jones’ dancers move on a proscenium stage does not. Perhaps it not just the topic of trauma or the narrative of the stories being presented in Jones’ *Still/Here*, but those elements combined with known construction of the theatrical space. The example of Stelarc’s work presents us with something unfamiliar, it gives shape to the unacknowledged distance between the known and unknown. Perhaps it is this space of the unfamiliar that engages us in the process of experiencing art. Might this also be called abstraction?

³¹ Ibid., 48-9.

³² Ibid., 48.

II. There is No Such Thing as Abstraction (or is there?):

Croce states that she refuses to review works performed by dancers with any “obvious problems,” the un-beautiful she might call it.³³ What she considers to be problems of the body, detract from the form of the dance, and Croce’s writing suggests that form, perhaps more than content is what constitutes art. This is, however, a very limiting, problematic, privileged, and ableist perspective as it restricts the medium of artistic dance to a select group of people whose bodies fit a ‘desired aesthetic.’ It is possible that what Croce is voicing when she writes that she cannot review these works, is the belief that these “obvious problems” as she calls them, get in the way of the body being abstracted.

Connected to this idea of disinterestedness that Kant is proposing, is the notion of abstraction. From the Latin root *abstrahere*, meaning “to draw away,” the definition and the associations connected to the term, at least within the realm of the arts, can be quite fraught. When we talk about abstraction in performance, what are we talking about? What are we drawing away from and how are we doing that? Is it even possible to abstract the body? Choreographer Juliana May, suggests that it is not.³⁴ Referencing ideas put forth by one of her company members along with the vies of dance artist Xavier Le Roy, May notes, “I don’t believe that the body can really be abstracted. Our perception and our projection and our relationship to an art object or a performance can be abstract depending on our proximity to the material and to ourselves.”³⁵ Abstraction then becomes about the spectator’s relationship to the material and to themselves, more than the actual art object (dance, sculpture, text, painting.) Instead, the abstraction exists and

³³ Croce, 55. For the full quotation, see the “Object Page” regarding Homer Avila’s work.

³⁴ Interview with Juliana May

³⁵ Ibid.

occurs in the exchange. This is not to say that the form of the object has nothing to do with what kind of exchange takes place, just that it isn't the only element.³⁶

May's use of non-linear narrative in her recent work *Folk Incest* seems to act as one way of navigating and invoking questions of trauma and abstraction.³⁷ The performers speak throughout the entire piece and some of the text includes references to traumatic events such as the holocaust and sexual assault; however, the text does not follow an arc from beginning to end. Instead, it winds, it cuts, it moves, it repeats, and it restarts. Coupled with movement repetitions, and modulated through different melodies, the words stop signifying what they typically signify. They shift and that makes the body shift. At the same time, while watching the piece, I was still very aware of the performers' bodies as human bodies, which was heightened when the five women pulled down the tops of their leotards and revealed more of their bodies. Even though the narrative in this work was broken and both the text and movement "abstracted," the intimacy of the space and the proximity of myself to the dancers worked to close some of the distance between us and left me feeling implicated and invested in the work. In this way, the relationship between the abstraction of the text and the proximity to the bodies via space had a strong impact on my investment in the work, and the distance worked to bring me closer.

³⁶ Juliana May in an interview regarding abstraction and how it relates to her most recent work, *Folk Incest*, explains: "it's a privilege to have an abstract body, right. Because you basically, it's like white people assuming that like, their body is the neutral body, right. And I think people who claim that their work is abstract, I don't think that means anything, I think it's just as literal as anything else, I just think that their relationship to meaning is, is, a bit, the proximity is a bit farther, and I think that's fine, I just don't think it's any different, so that distance that maybe Croce is talking about, is, is completely subjective, you know. So her argument doesn't hold up because she is arguing about subjectivity, and how you can't actually make an opinion based on someone's tragedy, basically, but she's arguing that abstraction or looking at a painting or an object, right, is like somehow much more distance, and it really isn't, it's just that kind of assumption about neutrality and abstraction is, like, really embedded in, like, whatever notions you have about art making, you know."

³⁷ Siobhan Burke. "A Dance of the Unspeakable." *New York Times*, 2 Oct. 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/arts/dance/folk-incest-juliana-may-abrons-arts-center.html>.

III. The Limited and Unlimited Body: Homer Avila's Work in Relationship to Abstraction:

In *Solo for Homer Avila* (2002) choreographed by Victoria Marks, Avila stands at the downstage corner of an empty stage. As the music plays Avila begins a series of roles, slides, and pushes across the floor. His movements are strong, linear, and exacting, while simultaneously smooth. The music shifts between a driving track with symbols and crashes, and a languid melodic string track. Avila's movements similarly shift from high energy jumps and inversions to softer and gooier rolls. At one point Avila speaks, tapping himself on the chest and reciting his name. At another moment, Avila visibly shows his breath patterns.³⁸ Unlike the work Avila appears in that is described in the "Object Pages," in this work, there is no direct verbal or gestural reference to his amputation. "I have a limitation, but the work does not."³⁹ Disability activist and author Simi Linton recalls this statement by Avila in an interview he gave regarding his project of solos (*Body of Work in Progress*). I do not think that Avila's work is limited, but this statement raises a few questions for me about what Avila means by limited, specifically: limited compared to what? Avila's statement that his body is limited, suggests that there is an 'unlimited' body that he is comparing his body to, and that while interested and excited by the possibilities of his body post-amputation, he is still working in relationship to a particular idea of a body, and more specifically, a body in dance. Secondly, I question how separate the body can actually be from the work. Are the work and the body brought further apart or closer together by the references to his amputations in the one piece and his lack of reference in the other? Is the body more abstracted in one versus the other?

³⁸ Victoria Marks. "'Solo' for Homer Avila (2002)." *Vimeo*, uploaded by Victoria marks, 2014. <https://vimeo.com/100284864>.

³⁹ Simi Linton. "Odyssey of a Sure-footed Man" in *My Body Politic*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 206.

Why might one want to abstract the body? Miguel Gutierrez has argued that there is a certain neutrality in whiteness that allows for abstraction to take place. Gutierrez asks “who has the right not to explain themselves...the people who don’t have to,” and responds, “the ones whose subjectivities have been naturalized.”⁴⁰ The privilege of abstraction, as Gutierrez describes it, is reserved for those whose identities have become the dominant or default identity. As framed by Gutierrez, abstraction seems to be a drawing away from identity and an embracing of a lack of identity, which not all bodies have the same access to in the same spaces. I add in the qualifier of same spaces, because, here is also something worth considering, when it comes to abstraction, in the knowledge or assumed dominant or default identity held in certain spaces, which has to do with learned conventions or ideas about different spaces. In her memoir, Linton describes a conference on disability studies that Avila attended and performed at. I wonder how and if his work differed in a space such as a disability studies conference versus at a theater such as the Joyce.⁴¹ Did the structure and space of the conference shift the experience of watching Avila perform. Did it allow Avila, drawing on Gutierrez, the opportunity not to explain himself?⁴²

If abstraction is an act of distancing or drawing away from some initial source, then there needs to be some knowledge of that original source. In order to create distance, you have to know what you are distancing yourself from. T.S Eliot’s idea of depersonalization is useful at this point as it shows how, like Merce Cunningham’s depersonalized mask-like expression of the dancers, that what Eliot called a “continual extinction of personality” actually effects its opposite and has the possibility of re-personalizing the art object.⁴³ Eliot defines depersonalization as the distancing

⁴⁰ Gutierrez.

⁴¹ Linton, 203-6.

⁴² Gutierrez.

⁴³ TS Eliot. “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1921), 47.

of the poet from what is being written, and sees the “progress of an artist” as dependent on depersonalization and “a continual extinction of personality.”⁴⁴ It is however, important to note, that after defining depersonalization, Elliot acknowledges its dependency on an artist who is very knowledgeable about their own emotions and feelings. “But, of course,” Eliot writes, “only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these.”⁴⁵ Eliot addresses the need to “escape” the existence of the personal subjective emotional self in the process of creating art and lays the groundwork for thinking about the self and the personal in art, not simply as something that is in or is out, but rather as something that exists on a spectrum. How much of me is in and how much is out?

IV. The Traumatic State of Making Art

I never know how much to disclose: when I enter a class with a new teacher or I begin a rehearsal process. My first tactic is to talk around it. I reference my surgeries, but I don't use the word “cancer.” When I do, I bumble through it, my voice gets higher, I push hair that longer exits behind my right ear, I talk faster, and I look down. I always look down.

I'm rarely not thinking about it in class. Will the teacher think I'm lazy when we do pliés and my knees barely bend? I'm always planning. How will I make this work when we switch sides and I can't hop on my left leg or put my heel down in a lunge to find stability?

Will I ever be a good dancer, or will I only be a good dancer despite or in spite of my limitations?

There is also a very important relationship between art and trauma through the shared phenomena of “depersonalization.” Eliot defines depersonalization as a “continual extinction of personality,” and a desired state in which “art may be said to approach the condition of science.”⁴⁶ This is the space in which the poet should work from, Eliot says. In trauma, depersonalization is a

⁴⁴ Ibid., 52-3, 47.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 47.

potential symptom of PTSD and is connected to dissociation.⁴⁷ Like Eliot's definition, depersonalization in trauma involves a distancing from the self, however, unlike Eliot's view, depersonalization in trauma is not desired, but rather a state to move out of through the healing process.⁴⁸ What does it mean then for art that takes trauma as its source material? If the artist engages in a practice of depersonalization in order to create art, and depersonalization is brought on by a traumatic event, is the practice of art making a traumatic event? Is the art object a manifestation of trauma?

If we abide by Kant and Eliot's insistence on distance when it comes to art, is art then the perfect medium through which to explore or manifest trauma? If art, as proposed by Eliot and Kant requires the state of trauma, is art making adding to the damage or the trauma? How and can art be used as a method of not only communicating trauma but of acting upon (changing, subverting, healing, addressing) trauma? Disinterestedness, distance, and abstraction in art are not inherently negative or problematic, nor are they the ideal or only method of approaching (making, critiquing, viewing) art. Rather they are ideas that are deeply embedded within a discourse of privilege. They have the potential to lay dormant, go unchallenged or unnoticed, or, borrowing a phrase from TW Adorno used to describe philosophy acceptable from academia, are concepts that dress themselves "up with the nobility of the universal."⁴⁹ Trauma has the potential to remove this veil of the universal and expose various socio-cultural and political factors shaping ideas of abstraction and disinterestedness.

⁴⁷ Van der Kolk, 72.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 72-3.

⁴⁹ T.W. Adorno, Bob Hullot-Kentor, and Frederic Will. "The Essay as Form." *New German Critique*, no. 32 (1984): 151.

Chapter 2 – The Body on the Stage and The Body on the Page: Questioning Media Specificity

I walk to downstage left quarter, face the audience and pause. My heart starts beating a little faster at this moment. I take a deep breath and in one swift motion remove my shirt and then my pants. I look at the audience again. I don't intend for this to be confrontational but in some ways, perhaps it is. I want the audience to look at me, at my exposed body, whether they want to or not, and I won't give them anything else to focus on. I reach down to pick up a tube of lipstick and slowly raise it to my chin and start to trace the scar running from the middle of my lip, down my chin, under my jaw and to my left ear. A recording starts to play: "left supraomohyoid neck dissection, segmental mandibulectomy, and fibular free-flap reconstruction." The recording continues, listing off the various operations, procedures, and side effects of cancer treatment, and the marks they have left on my body—some visible, some not, some already known, some a cloud of potential. As the recording plays, I continue the tracing, moving down my body, in one continuous stroke, highlighting these areas in a color more purple than iodine but reminiscent of it in its red undertones and the way it stains my skin. When I reach my left foot I stand back up, face the audience, drop the lipstick, and require they look again. The recording ends, and after a pause, I frantically try and erase the lines I have just drawn. My attempt is futile. The outlines stay and the stain spreads, to my arms, my hands, the inside of my leg.

This is the middle of a solo I created in the spring of 2018. It was the first solo I choreographed for myself, and one of the first pieces I intentionally put myself in. Structurally, the beginning half of the solo is movement heavy: there is a brief voice recording at the beginning, but aside from that, there is just silence, and my body moving slowly and jerkily, on my shoulders, inching across the space on my back, and eventually building to standing. In contrast, in the latter section, largely shaped by text, I tell a story about losing my hair while I fall onto my side and quickly come back to stand, over and over again. The goal is to exhaust myself—the more I fall, the more labored my breath becomes, the choppier the words come out.

The middle section, as described above, is the place where these ideas of text and body meet and diverge. There is my body in its most exposed form: still and naked. There is the recorded text, fairly even in pace and tone, which tells a kind of story, although one that doesn't necessarily abide by the rules of a linear narrative. Lastly, there is the visual design that the lipstick makes as I move it down my body. This is the section that spans the greatest amount of time, with anchors

in the past traumas of my body, the present breathing and movement of my body on stage, and the future possibilities to come: the rest of the dance, any future side effects. It is also the section that raises the most questions for me as choreographer, performer, and imagined spectator, largely around the relationship between the body and the text. How are these two elements working and communicating?

At times the relationship between text and movement felt violent, often with the text dominating, its signs more readable (familiar, recognizable) than the movement. And there are more questions that emerge the more I consider each medium: What is the effect of the text as a recording? Would it be different if I spoke it live? What would that do? What if I were wearing clothes? What if I were all the way upstage? What are these elements doing individually and as a whole, and what experience of my trauma are they presenting, communicating, enacting, highlighting?

I. Writing, Painting, and Dancing with Trauma:

David Wojnarowicz, a painter and writer who died from AIDS in 1992, writes and illustrates the trauma of his teenage years and the experience of receiving a diagnosis of, and living with, AIDS in his memoir, *Memories of Gasoline* (1992), published shortly after his death. While very personal, visual, and visceral, there is a way in which the absence of Wojarowicz physical body creates space or an opening, which slows down and diffuses the impact of the trauma being described.

Art and Trauma is not a new question of a the late 20th century. Art movements throughout history have developed in response to larger political, social, and cultural events, some of which have contained elements of trauma. German Expressionism, for example, which developed at the turn of the 20th century, was largely influenced by the events of World War I and “the need to

confront the devastating experience of World War I and its aftermath.”⁵⁰ Surrealism, which was born in 1924 with the first publication of André Breton’s “Surrealist Manifesto,” lasted through World War II. Drawing heavily on the importance of the subconscious mind, Bréton’s manifesto calls for a “violent reaction against the impoverishment and sterility of thought processes that resulted from centuries of rationalism.”⁵¹ As such, many surrealist paintings depicted the body as distorted and dismembered, which can also be seen as connected to many veterans returning from World War I who lost limbs during battle, and the anxiety about a future world war.⁵²

Many of the works mentioned above coming out of these movements fall under the category of 2D visual art or writing. What happens, though, when the trauma is expressed through the body? I argue that one element of Jones’ work that Arlene Croce seems to be reacting to in her ‘review,’ has to do with the medium being the body. It isn’t just the trauma or the victim narrative, but that it is being presented through the liveness, presence, and immediacy of the body. There is no distance between the art object and the body. Even if the choreographer is separate from the performer, the art is being created in the moment through live bodies on stage. It doesn’t exist outside of them.

The Viennese Actionists directly implicated the body, the violence it can do and the violence that can be done to it, through their performances which often involved naked human bodies, animal carcasses, blood, milk and other life-feeding substances. Schimmel writes that these actions also worked to “reintroduce the ritualistic and religious sentiments that had characterized the weight of European history and psychology for centuries,” thus reinforcing the relationship

⁵⁰ “German Expressionism: Works form the Collection – Themes,” *MoMA*, last accessed March 24, 2019. https://www.moma.org/s/ge/curated_ge/themes/index.html.

⁵¹ “Surrealism.” *MoMA*, last accessed, March 24, 2019. https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/surrealism/.

⁵² “Surrealism and the Body.” *MoMA*, last accessed, March 24, 2019. https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/surrealism/surrealism-and-the-body/.

between ritual, trauma, and art throughout history.⁵³ These artists brought death to the forefront in a shocking and violent way. They made the trauma that so many had been avoiding, unavoidable. The timing of the Viennese Actionists is also important to note. Arising in the 1960s, there had been some distance between the end of World War II and their work, but not so much that the spectators would have forgotten the trauma of the war. As a result, the Viennese Actionists had the opportunity to play with the immediacy of trauma in relationship to the distancing of time, and they chose to lean in to the trauma, with very little abstraction. Their aesthetic arose under a certain number of conditions, the distance of time being one.

What is it about dance (here I am using this word in the broadest way to include live performance of a body moving in space over a period of time) when it comes to questions of disinterestedness, abstraction, the beautiful, and trauma that is different from other media such as painting or writing in which the art object being created exists outside of and separate from the body? Additionally, how does liveness, of the performer's body and the spectator's body, as well as the conventions of theatrical spaces (here I am primarily referring to 'traditional' theatrical spaces such as proscenium or black box theaters) affect how we relate to narratives of trauma and our relationship to the concepts of abstraction and disinterestedness? And in performance works such as my solo, Neil Greenberg's *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*, Juliana May's *Folk Incest*, or Bill T. Jones' *Still/Here*, in which text and the body, are being used together, how is each medium working? Are they doing the same thing?

⁵³ Schimmel, 84-88.

II. A Reflection on Learned Conventions and Their Connection to Medium Specificity:

All of these questions are predicated on an understanding of medium specificity, a term and idea not invented by, but made popular by, art critic and historian Clement Greenberg. According to Greenberg, medium specificity refers to the idea that each medium has a unique set of characteristics and unique materiality unto itself. Each medium then justifies its own existence through its work which is ultimately anchored in the formal characteristics of that medium.⁵⁴ About Picasso, Braque and other prominent painters Greenberg writes they “derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors etc...”⁵⁵

Following this idea of medium specificity, the best paintings are about painting, the best sculptures, about sculpture, and although he doesn't state this, the best dances, about dance. Dance scholar and art historian Jenn Joy, however, proposes a different way of looking at dance in which the idea of media specificity is troubled. “How does dance encounter other media (photography, sculpture, as examples) materially and conceptually to undo notions of media specificity?” Joy asks.⁵⁶ That is, how does dance, and an understanding of the choreographic as defined by Joy, push against an idea of essentialism, or inherent essence of art within each given medium or work?⁵⁷ At the same time, Joy's proposal, which suggests the possibility of viewing one medium through the lens of the other, such as viewing visual art choreographically, also suggests that there is something innate to each medium.

⁵⁴ Greenberg, 6.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁶ Joy, 20.

⁵⁷ Ibid. Here Jenn Joy is drawing on ideas put forth by Carrie Lambert-Beatty in *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*.

So does that mean that what is communicated through movement can never be communicated through text, or painting? In Joy's *The Choreographic*, she writes about the choreographic as "a dialogic opening," that is an engagement that is two-way, between art object and viewer.⁵⁸ The choreographic then, is a space in which the body of the spectator is active and implicated, even if the object is static and inanimate. Joy also calls attention to the effects of history on how we engage with what we are experiencing. "I trespass across a constellation of works, artists, writers, philosophers, and dancers," Joy writes, "to argue that the choreographic is not only a critical discursive force, but always already explicitly social, historical, and political."⁵⁹ That is, how we engage with art is shaped by the historical, social, and political context in which we are encountering the art object. How large a role does this play in the way we experience different media and the effects they have on us as a result?

This process as proposed by Joy, seems to suggest that this difference is not solely rooted in the ontology of the medium, but is also linked to our experiences with different media, and how we have been taught to interact with them. In other words, we have been conditioned by history, society, and culture to experience, and expect and value specific experiences from specific media, in different ways. How I engage with a painting, for example, has partially been shaped by growing up in New York City and visiting museums where I was required to keep a certain distance from the art.

How I engage with dance partially has to do with my own physical experience as a dancer, as well as the rules I have learned from attending dances, about what is expected in particular theatrical settings: In a gallery it is okay for me to walk around the space, in a proscenium theater where I am assigned a seat, this is generally not allowed, unless I am specifically instructed to by

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 24.

the performers. All of my interactions are shaped by my experience living as a white, queer, cis, passingly able-bodied, woman, and survivor of cancer. How much of what I experience comes from the art work I am viewing and how much comes from these larger cultural forces that have shaped me?

III. Can Text Dance? Can Paintings Talk?

Georgina Kleege, a literary scholar, enters the stage in the middle of “The Choreography of Rehabilitation: Disability and Race in Balanchine’s *Agon*,” one of six sections of Netta Yerushalmy’s most recent work *Paramodernities* (2019). Kleege is blind, and as she moves around the space, sometimes separate from the other two performers, other times with them, she discusses the tendency for dance (choreographers, presenters, theaters) to not consider blind people when considering who the audience is. Kleege explains that when there are performances that provide audio description of what is happening for those who can’t see, the descriptions are very dry and focused on the spatial movements and actions of the performers. This leads Kleege to introduce the idea of *ekphrasis*. Kleege describes an experiment she conducted in which she asked a variety of people to describe the duet between Arthur Mitchell and Allegra Kent from *Agon*, but she didn’t ask just anyone. Kleege asked writers, dancers, and others who she believed would and could provide an ekphrastic description of the duet that moved beyond just the physical actions to communicate the sensations and totality of the movement. The descriptions varied from person to person, but all together, these descriptions tended to rely heavily on associations and metaphor to more fully capture the movement. Is this ekphrastic description working in a similar way as the dancers performing the duet?

In his series of cut “paintings,” entitled *Tagli*, artists Lucio Fontana makes a slash or series of slashes down the center of the canvas. Fontana’s action of breaking the canvas, something that has historically been painted on top of, blurs the boundary between the 2-D medium of painting and the 3-D medium of sculpture. In “The White Manifesto,” which Fontana co-wrote, he calls for the idea of “spatialism,” which one author describes as “a form of art making that aimed to eliminate the boundaries between architecture, sculpture, and painting, and embrace scientific achievements.”⁶⁰

Does it actually break down these barriers? Additionally, where is the body in this work? In the case of Fontana’s *Tagli*, the violent slashes and ripping of the canvas leave a trace of the body behind, much like Pollack’s action paintings imply and carry traces of the movement of the body, however, the remnants or final product still exist in an object separate from the body. Process is brought closer to product in these works of art, however, there is still a distance between the act of making and the made product. It is a very different experience to view one of Fontana’s canvases slashed down the middle and one of Stelarc’s suspension pieces with his skin pierced and broken. Skin and the canvas are different material and breaking them yields very different results.

Text, and specifically the example of ekphrasis as discussed by Kleege raises a whole set of different questions. For one, Kleege was speaking in performance. There was an ephemeral quality to her words, similar to movement, in that they did not exist in a concrete separate form for the audience, but only existed in performance. Kleege’s performance also raised many questions for me around the emphasis of the visual experience in dance, and art in general, and Clement Greenberg’s idea of media specificity as carrying an element of assumed ability. Is sight the only way to engage with dance and art? What would it mean to listen to a dance, or touch a body as it

⁶⁰Alina Cohen. “The Salacious Violence of Lucio Fontana,” *Artsy*, February 8, 2019. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-salacious-violence-lucio-fontanas-slashed-canvases>.

moved? How would feeling the cuts made by Fontana change the way we experienced the work? By placing our bodies, as spectators, in a different relationship to the works of art we are encountering, perhaps a painting can dance, a dance can talk, and a text can paint.

IV. Piercing, Shooting and Slicing: The Intermedial Trauma of the Body in Burden, Stelarc, Pane and Fontana

In Stelarc's suspension pieces, as with Chris Burden's shoot piece, there is real trauma being done to the body. The same holds true in the work of Gina Pane, artist and member of France's *art corporel* (body art) movement, such as in *Escalade non anesthésiée* (1971) in which she climbs a ladder with blades attached to each rung.⁶¹ Pane's climb lasted approximately 30 minutes and ended when she "reached a state of total exhaustion."⁶² What is curious about Pane's *Escalade non anesthésiée*, unlike Stelarc's suspension pieces for example, is that there was no audience present during Pane's actual climb. Rather, the climb was documented through a series of photographs, *constat*, shot at a distance and later mounted on a wooden structure that had the same dimension of the ladder Pane climbed.⁶³ While Pane notes that one of her aims in this work was to "re-corporalise' the abstracted body-as-image," she approaches this through a distancing of the spectator from the action of her live body.⁶⁴ Instead, of witnessing Pane climb and bleed live, the viewer is left with the images of this action.

In all these works, there appears to be a real attention to and consideration of the materiality of the body. Similar to Fontana's exploration of what happens when a 2-D canvas is sliced, these artists seem to be working with the question of what happens when the boundary of the body is

⁶¹ Schimmel, 99.

⁶² Frédérique Baumgartner, "Reviving the Collective Body: Gina Pane's "Escalade Non Anesthésiée," *Oxford Art Journal* 34, no. 2 (2011): 249.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 259.

breeched. How does the skin break and pull? How does the body bleed? This is very different than the role of trauma in *Still/Here*, *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*, *Folk Incest*, or my own solo. In these works, trauma is present, and perhaps it is altering the body, however, in a less material way. In my solo, I may trace my scars with red lipstick causing the audience to imagine the moment in my past when my skin was cut apart, but I do not enact the actual cutting. I do not make myself bleed.

Conclusion: Trauma Now and Then

“Writing between the two world wars, Einstein and Benjamin demand of art something more than aesthetic disinterest: they want to reconcile, even avenge. As Einstein writes in a letter to his friend, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, in 1923: ‘I cannot give myself the luxury of thinking about such [exclusively theoretical] things, in the middle of all this continuously unfolding daily catastrophe’ (Einstein in Didi-Huberman 2007, 190.)”⁶⁵

There is a certain urgency in the above quotation from Einstein above: a deep need for art that addresses the traumatic state of the world following World War I and amidst the events that would eventually lead to World War II. Amongst the trauma and the chaos of the world, disinterestedness and abstraction in art is a privilege, not just of white people as Miguel Gutierrez suggests, but of a world not currently engrossed in war, violence, and catastrophe. Disinterestedness and abstraction are both embedded in a sense of distance, but when you are living in a state of trauma, how possible, how powerful, and how useful is this distance? As is suggested in Chapter 1, there is a tendency for people experiencing trauma or PTSD to enter into a dissociative state, which generates a certain amount of distance akin to distance or abstraction in art; however, this is not a desired state to exist in. The process of healing from trauma involves moving out of a dissociative state and being able to “reestablish ownership of your body and your mind,” which includes facing past traumatic events.⁶⁶ In a state of trauma, does art mirror the trauma state, lean into disinterest and abstraction, or does it address the urgency and the immediacy of the trauma? The answer I propose is that it does both.

What I am suggesting here is that there is a difference in the process of making work that addresses trauma during or immediately following a traumatic event and making work that addresses trauma after the traumatic event. As I have mentioned before, there is a certain

⁶⁵ Joy, 162.

⁶⁶ Van der Kolk, 205.

immediacy of the live body, which makes it a strong medium when working through trauma, both in the midst of a traumatic event and after. The liveness of the body can lend a certain urgency to a work, because when there is a live body, there is always the real possibility of death.

I made my solo, The space inside before and after, seventeen years after completing treatment. The first work of art I made after my treatment, was a short novella I wrote in my fourth grade writing workshop. I changed my name and the name of my family and friends, but besides that, there was very little distance between what had happened and what I wrote.

I think there is a power in both the abstraction and distance I was able to engage with in my solo, and the immediacy of the story I wrote at the age of ten. There was a power in being able to tell my story in my own words as a child, since so much of the information had been mediated through my parents. There was also a power in being able to present my body in my solo as shaped by, but not defined by or only existing within my experience of trauma.

I. An Inheritance of Absence:

In 2016, choreographers and dance artists Ishmael Houston-Jones and Will Rawls curated, Danspace's Platform titled *Lost and Found: Dances, New York, HIV/AIDS, Then and Now*, the title of which was taken from a trilogy of works by dance artist John Bernd, who passed away from AIDS in 1988. In the forward to the catalogue accompanying the platform series, Judy Hussie-Taylor, Executive Director and Chief Curator for Danspace Project, describes Bernd as having: "the heartbreaking distinction of being perhaps the first choreographer to make his illness the subject of his work."⁶⁷ Part zine, part "memory palace," part curatorial essays, the platform's accompanying catalogue highlights questions around the generation of artists making work in the 1980s and early 1990s, in the midst of the AIDS crisis and artists making work today.⁶⁸ What is interesting about this is the way illness, AIDS, becomes an aesthetic focal point within the social

⁶⁷ Judy Hussie-Taylor. "Forward" in *Lost and Found : Dance, New York, HIV/AIDS, Then and Now*. Edited by Ishmael Houston-Jones, Will Rawls, and Jaime Shearn Coan. (Danspace Project: New York, 2016), 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 8

conditions of the period. This question can be seen in the decision to present a restaged version of John Bernd's work, Houston-Jones' decision to choose Will Rawls, thirty years his junior, as co-curator, as well as questions posed in the series of essays by Houston-Jones and Rawls. "How do I quantify an absence; how do I curate an absence," Houston-Jones writes.⁶⁹ Bill T. Jones developed *Still/Here* through a series of workshops with terminally ill participants. Some of their stories are in the work, some of their gestures, some are even projected, but what does it mean that their bodies are absent? When Neil Greenberg's walks on stage, faces the audience, tilts his head slightly to the right, raises his arms to his head, bent at the elbow, the left hand relaxed and curling in towards the palm, the pointer finger of the right hand limply extended, and the text, "This is what my brother Jon looked like in his coma," appears on the back wall, we are made immediately aware of his brother's absence.⁷⁰ The information that is given and the information that is withheld, shapes and makes space for the absences to become visible, palpable, present; how it is delivered, the positioning of the known and the unknown, becomes a sort of choreography of absence.

In 2016, Houston-Jones notes the loss of urgency and fading away of the trauma of the AIDS crisis that was present in the 80s and 90s, even though AIDS is far from eradicated. Houston-Jones emphasizes the importance of remembering and passing on memory, especially by those who survived since so much of a generation was lost.⁷¹ He also points to the impact the AIDS crisis had on works of art being made in the late 80s and early 90s, even if the work itself wasn't directly about AIDS. Houston-Jones recalls asking Jennifer Monson if she considered her work to be influenced by HIV/AIDS to which she responded, "How could it not? Anyone living and

⁶⁹ Ishmael Houston-Jones. "A Personal Reflection on John Bernd's Lost and Found: Scenes from a Life," in *Lost and Found: Dance, New York, HIV/AIDS, Then and Now*. Edited by Ishmael Houston-Jones, Will Rawls, and Jaime Shearn Coan. (Danspace Project: New York, 2016), 12.

⁷⁰ Neil Greenberg, "Not-About-AIDS-Dance," 1994. <http://www.neilgreenberg.org/naad.html>. Time: 20:23

⁷¹ Houston-Jones, 13.

creating artwork in this community at the that time had to have been influenced by AIDS.”⁷² What Monson and Houston-Jones are talking about here is an environment of trauma that couldn’t not affect those working within it. This is important as it shows how a certain historical moment infuses all work of the period, and how young queer performance artists today are not necessarily working with the knowledge of that trauma⁷³ How does that affect the work? Without the knowledge of this past trauma, queer artists today risk making work that doesn’t acknowledge the historical context that generated the environment in which they are working today. This leads to the risk of losing the knowledge of life and work of many of the artists who were making work during the AIDS crisis, as well as the possibility of further perpetuating, consciously or not, an idea of dance that does not have space for or make room for these artists and these works. The works discussed throughout this thesis—works by Avila, Jones, Stelarc, May, Greenberg—though not all working with the subject of AIDS, all push against the container of what art can be. Whether you or myself consider their work art or dance, their willingness to wade into the territory of trauma, identity, and subjectivity, generates space for more of this work to occur.

Will Rawls and Bill T. Jones talk around this question in an interview printed in the platform’s catalogue. Specifically, the two discuss identity and inheritance as it relates to their respective performance works. Near the middle of the interview, the two move into a conversation about labels. Jones refers to himself using the title “out, HIV-positive man” to which Rawls asks, “And do you like saying that about yourself?”⁷⁴ Jones explains it isn’t a matter of liking it, “it’s a statement of fact.”⁷⁵ He continues, noting “If I choose to speak the language of the culture, well,

⁷² Houston-Jones, 12

⁷³ Houston-Jones, 11.

⁷⁴ Bill T. Jones and Will Rawls. “A duet, an argument, an inheritance: Bill T. Jones and Will Rawls in Conversation,” in *Lost and Found : Dance, New York, HIV/AIDS, Then and Now*. Edited by Ishmael Houston-Jones, Will Rawls, and Jaime Shearn Coan. (Danspace Project: New York, 2016), 211.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

that's how you talk about me.”⁷⁶ There is a lens through which Jones' work and his body are being read that is directly connected to an identity label or title. This may be a fact, as Jones states, but connected to it is a question of value: how does identity affect the value of the work and who is determining that value? This question directly relates to one of my initial entry points into this project, in terms of the value placed on abstraction, disinterestedness, and depersonalization in art as evidenced in the writing of Croce, Kant, and Eliot. If I make art about my trauma or my queerness, or even if one identifies my trauma or my queerness in my body on stage, does that change how one perceives, critiques, and values the work? After all of this research, I am still not sure I can answer this questions. I have my desires, my hopes, and my beliefs, but I do not have a clear answer.

II. Why Trauma Now:

I want to return to the statement I made in the beginning about this thesis being haunted by the works of Kant and Croce. I wrote this not because I feel that Kant or Croce's aesthetic values are 'correct' or the goal of my art making practice. Nor did I enter into this project with the goal of justifying my interest of working with trauma within the values presented by Kant or Croce. I write about being haunted by their works, because, even after all of this research, even as I gain more confidence in myself as a choreographer, performer, writer, queer person, survivor of trauma and so many other identities, I still notice myself judging my work through some of the values they put forth. I worry that if I mention cancer on stage, then that is all the audience will take away from the piece. Will they feel sorry for me? Will they see me as inspirational? I don't make work

⁷⁶ Ibid., 211.

for pity or for praise, but my diagnosis and treatment is so embedded in how I understand my body that my trauma, whether through being addressed or avoided, feels inherent in what I make.

This research process—written and choreographic—has not answered all of my questions around art and trauma, however, it has allowed me to contextualize my work within a broader history, which has given me new ways of thinking about art, trauma and the body. Furthermore, the ability to see my work as being in conversation with so many other artist, has further ignited my interest in continuing to explore these questions in both my performed and written work. I have found that choreographing can at times feel isolating, and choreographing about personal trauma doubly so. Being able to contextualize my work in this way, has taken away some of that isolation, and opened up new possibilities.

Towards the end of the interview, Rawls tells Jones that he can make the work that he makes because of the work of Jones and other artists that came before him.⁷⁷ There is a space that these artists opened up that Rawls has inherited. What responsibility do we have as the next generation of artists with regards to this inheritance? How do we cite it or reference it in the work that we make? What privileges and what burdens do we carry? While I have a strong interest in exploring my relationship to my body in dance post-cancer treatment, I have recently also started feeling a sense of responsibility to do so.

Why is it important to examine the relationship between art, trauma, and performance now in 2019? As this thesis has demonstrated, I have a personal investment and interest in this question as a performance maker in understanding what histories my work sits in relationship to. However, I think that there is a larger reason at play. While trauma is my initial point of departure, many of the questions about trauma and art are more broadly connected to the relationship between identity

⁷⁷ Ibid., 213.

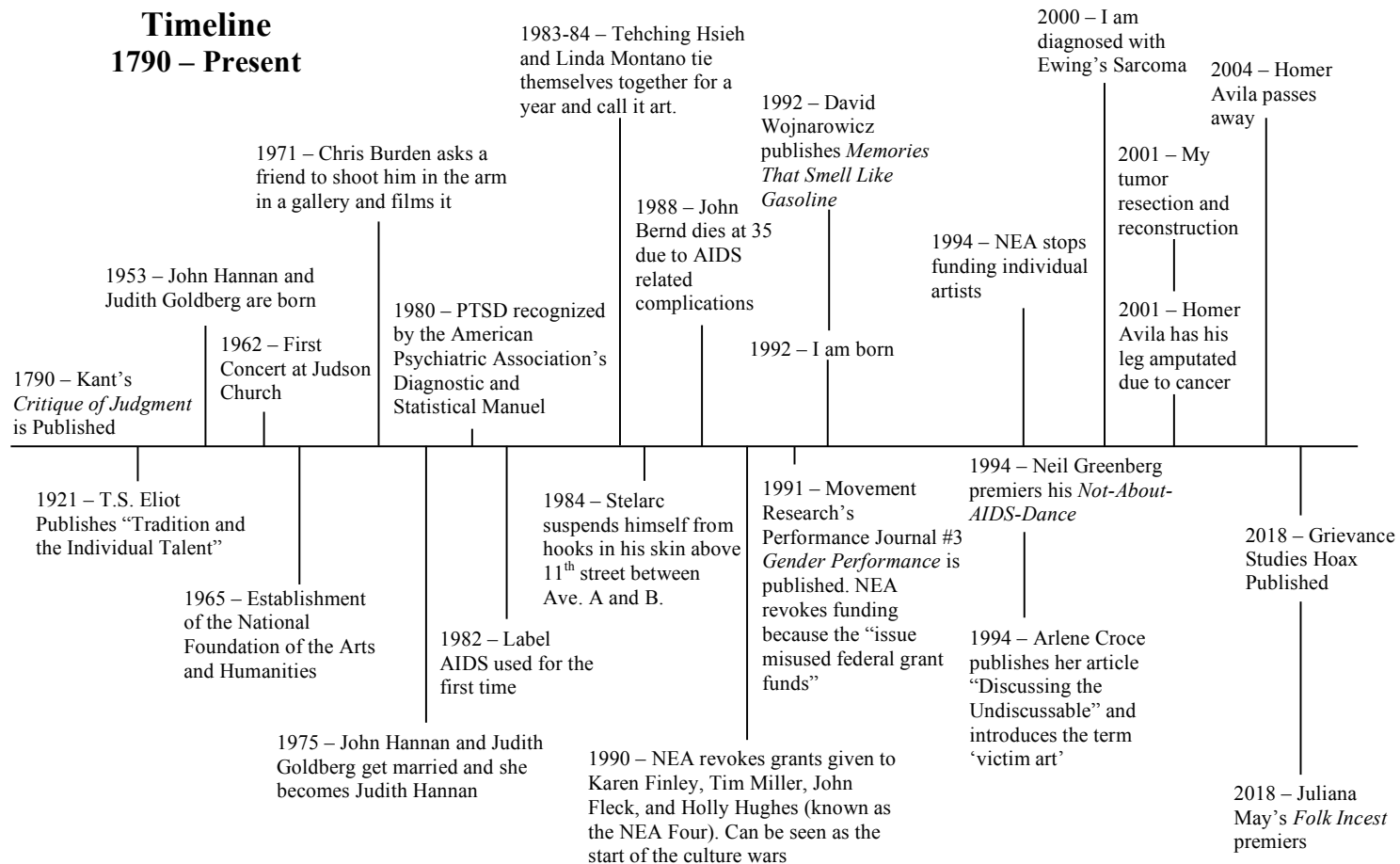
and art, and even more broadly to personal identity in relationship to the cultural, social, and political climate of today. The work and ideas of gender theorists, critical race theorists, and disability studies scholars are further breaking down and unearthing the constructed nature of many ideas that have been historically taken as ‘given’ or ‘natural.’ Acknowledging the idea identities—gender, race, sexuality—that are often presented as innate and nature as culturally constructed, as proposed by Judith Butler, dance scholar Ananya Chatterjea introduces the possibility of performance in either furthering the myth of the natural or subverting it. “Performance,” Chatterjea writes, “also offers possibilities of using bodies in certain ways to either reaffirm sociocultural expectations or to subvert them in the context of such expectations.”⁷⁸ The current political climate, heightened by the election of Donald Trump, has pushed issues of identity and inequality to the forefront of many debates and conversations. Live performance, thus becomes a powerful tool and arena for challenging these ideas.

What role do our various identities play in how we move through the world, and will our lived experiences ever not be filtered through these lenses? To what extent can and should the work that we create, try and distance itself from these personal identities? As Danielle Goldman writes, “one does not check one’s ‘everyday body’ at the door upon entering a studio or concert hall, and one’s artistic choices are never entirely separate from the broader social world in which one lives.”⁷⁹ Denying the histories of our bodies and the identities we elect and/or have placed on us, is antithetical and unproductive. The question becomes how do we work with or engage with these identities? How do we make work with, through, because of, and in spite of our Trauma?

⁷⁸Ananya Chatterjea. “Chapter 1: Premises and Locations,” in *Butting Out: Reading Resistive Choreographies Through Works by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Chandralekha*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 23.

⁷⁹Danielle Goldman. “Introduction: The Land of the Free,” in *I Want to Be Ready*. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 9.

Timeline 1790 – Present



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