

# Critical Acts

## Choreographic Transmission in an Expanded Field

Reflections on “Ten Artists Respond to Trisha Brown’s Locus”

Hope Mohr

with contributions from Larry Arrington, Gerald Casel,  
Gregory Dawson, Peiling Kao, and Xandra Ibarra

Photos by Margo Moritz

### Introduction

I’m a former Trisha Brown dancer. I also direct the Bridge Project, a presenting program committed to multidisciplinary exchange. The Bridge Project began in 2010 as a platform for investigating the post-modern lineage with a special commitment to female choreographers, but has shifted to programming that expands the canon. I approach curating as a form of community organizing. When I envision or evaluate a program, I use a multidisciplinary lens and draw on current conversations in literature, politics, and visual art.

In 2016, as director of the Bridge Project, I initiated “Ten Artists Respond to *Locus*,” presented in association with Yerba Buena Center

for the Arts in San Francisco, 14–15 October 2016. For the project, I partnered with other curators to commission 10 Bay Area artists from multiple disciplines to learn Brown’s dance *Locus* (1975) and respond with new work. The *Locus* project was the first time that the Trisha Brown Dance Company (TBDC) had allowed one of Brown’s dances to be transmitted beyond the company for the explicit purpose of inspiring new works of art by artists who hailed from disciplines other than dance.

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Figure 1. Isaiah Bindel and Hope Mohr in Gregory Dawson’s 15, part of “Ten Artists Respond to *Locus*,” 14 October 2016, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. (Photo by Margo Moritz)

*Locus* exemplifies Brown's use of what she called "pure movement," or, in her words, "movement that has no other connotations. It is not functional or pantomimic. Mechanical body actions like bending, straightening, or rotating would qualify as pure movement provided the context was neutral" ([1975] 2002:87). To make this "abstract dance," Brown "designed an imaginary cube for each performer to inhabit, with points on it labeled with numbers corresponding to the letters of the alphabet. Dancers' gestures literally spelled out sentences from a statement written by Brown as a professional autobiography" (Goldberg 2002:39). As former Brown dancer Mona Sulzman writes, Brown "immersed herself in self-imposed restrictions [...] remaining within the imaginary cube, adhering to the sequence of numbers (which once were letters and words), and using only one or several of the twenty-seven points as her sources for a given movement" (1978:122).

As the project director, I wanted to facilitate a conversation inspired by Brown's work that included artists from a range of artistic disciplines and cultural backgrounds. I also wanted the culminating performances to bring together different aesthetics. To these ends, I made some initial selections, including a poet (Frances Richard), a visual artist (Tracy Taylor Grubbs), an experimental performance artist (Larry Arrington), and a choreographer with a connection to the Brown lineage (Gerald Casel, who danced with Stephen Petronio, Brown's first male dancer). I then asked several curators rooted in different disciplines in the Bay Area to add to my list by nominating an artist, which resulted in the following cohort:

Xandra Ibarra (performance art—nominated by Keith Hennessy)  
 Affinity Project (theatre—nominated by Erika Chong Shuch)  
 Cheryl Leonard (new music—nominated by Pamela Z)  
 Amy Foote (new music—nominated by Adam Fong)  
 Peiling Kao (choreography—nominated by Dohee Lee)  
 Gregory Dawson (choreography—nominated by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts)  
 Larry Arrington (choreography—nominated by Hope Mohr Dance)  
 Gerald Casel (choreography—nominated by Hope Mohr Dance)  
 Tracy Taylor Grubbs (visual art—nominated by Hope Mohr Dance)  
 Frances Richard (poetry—nominated by Hope Mohr Dance)

The above artists participated in an intensive two-week workshop with Diane Madden, coartistic director of the Trisha Brown Dance Company, which included daily morning movement classes and afternoon sessions dedicated to learning *Locus* (or rather, as much of the dance as was possible given time constraints and the range of people in the room). After an additional two weeks of independent rehearsal, the project culminated in 10 premieres, all in one evening, by the participating artists in response to the process. The 10 pieces comprised *Ten Artists Respond to Locus*, which was presented for two nights at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

Alongside these new works were performances of *Locus Solo*, a solo version of the original *Locus* quartet, by four different dancers: Karla Quintero, Jenny Stulberg, Sarah Chenoweth, and myself. One version of *Locus Solo* was performed at the start of the program each night and one happened in the lobby at intermission. The combination of new work and repertory placed challenges on Madden, who faced the task of not only transmitting the dance as repertory, but also mentoring the 10 artists to make new work, all within a short time period.

The *Locus* project was part of the TBDC's renewed commitment to sharing Brown's legacy with a broader audience. Traditionally, choreographic transmission of Brown's work has occurred from body to body among current and former company members or from company members to other dance companies, often with the assistance of archival video and always with rigorous dedication to historical accuracy. The *Locus* project instead posed new questions: How do you transmit a historical work of art to inspire contemporary authorship, as opposed to transmission solely to inspire allegiance to the original? How do you transmit a work of art in such a way that allows artists from different backgrounds and disciplines to engage with the form on their own terms? These are questions not only of structure and resources, but also pedagogy, ethics, and aesthetics. Following are images from a selection of the new works, artist reflections written after the completion of the project, and curatorial questions inspired by the process.



Figure 2. Xandra Ibarra's a view from outside the cube, part of "Ten Artists Respond to Locus," 14 October 2016, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. (Photo by Margo Moritz)

**Xandra Ibarra's** *a view from outside the cube* was a duet performed with floor fans edged with neon lights blowing large translucent plastic tarps across the space. After a sequence of mirrored gestures, Ibarra and dancer Jenny Stulberg crawled under the tarps and delivered a guttural song into the fans.

*What are the political and aesthetic implications of the premise of "pure movement"?*

"Pure movement allows the individual to be seen."—Diane Madden, Co-Artistic Director, TBDC, speaking to commissioned artists in a morning movement class.

"I viewed *Locus* as an attempt to define absolute exactness, dimension, and space. This then led me to want to move against mapping and measurement in Brown's work. I attempted to create abject movements and sounds that reflected my position as racialized subhuman other. I played with plastic to create metaphorical spaces devoid of matter, movements that conjured animalistic and insect type qualities, and vocalizations that were sung to exhaustion. I created an 'Alphabet song' as a nod to Brown's use of the alphabet in *Locus*. It helped me to address language as code or grammar of Western imperialism. I sang the alphabet while exhausting each note and the voice produced a quality of sound that is monstrous (but pleasurable) and could be associated with speech disorder, primitiveness, or someone who has difficulty enunciating words or sounds." —Xandra Ibarra, performance artist (Oakland)



Figure 3. Choreographer Gerald Casel and dancer Suzette Sagisi in Casel's *Taglish*, part of "Ten Artists Respond to Locus," 14 October 2016, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. (Photo by Margo Moritz)

Choreographer **Gerald Casel** and dancer Suzette Sagisi in Casel's *Taglish*. *Taglish* brought together "Filipino and American elements in one space to represent what our bodies have been exposed to as dancers. Contending with the tensions between lineage, appropriation, 'biculturality,' and representation, the dance asks whether it is possible to present the body adorned by and simultaneously devoid of its culture and history through performance." (From program notes by Gerald Casel)

*Is "pure movement" universal?*

"Formal constraints have the capacity to invigorate creativity, however, they do not function equally for all bodies. More precisely, there is no such thing as pure movement for dancers of color. In my view, it is difficult to separate structural and systemic power from race. Dancing by brown and black bodies is read differently than dancing by white bodies. One of the assumptions that postmodern formalism arouses is that *any* body has the potential to be read as neutral—that there is such a thing as a universally unmarked body. As a dancer and choreographer of color, my body cannot be perceived as pure. My brown body cannot be read the same way as a white body, particularly in a white cube."—Gerald Casel, choreographer (Santa Cruz)



Figure 4. Choreographer Peiling Kao and visual artist Tracy Taylor Grubbs in Kao's *per[mute]ing*, part of "Ten Artists Respond to Locus," 14 October 2016, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. (Photo by Margo Moritz)

Choreographer **Peiling Kao** and visual artist **Tracy Taylor Grubbs** in Kao's *per[mute]ing*, which paired Kao's interpretation of the *Locus* vocabulary, freed from the confines of the cube, with Kao's own movement. Painter Grubbs unrolled a long scroll of rice paper with her feet throughout the dance.

*Are culture and form inseparable?*

"I incorporated the movement from all the dance forms I've encountered, adopted, rejected, and absorbed living in this Taiwanese dancing body. The dance lineages that I carry in my body via years of movement training have shaped my identity as a mover and choreographer. No one seems to have a problem seeing me as an Asian dancer when I do Eurocentric dance forms. Ironically, when I did Taiwanese/Chinese movement in *per[mute]ing*, viewers started seeking cultural meanings. An audience asked me if I was 'trying to empower my Asian identity.' But I have never thought of empowering my Taiwanese identity by using Taiwanese movement in my work. The audience's feedback led me to several questions: How do people assume and perceive the separation between Western and Eastern dance forms? Why do I need to do anything to 'empower' my Taiwanese identity? Why does the doing of Taiwanese movement or speaking Taiwanese suddenly allow people to see me as Taiwanese? From my perspective I am already a Taiwanese, and nothing can change that. There is no need for empowerment." —Peiling Kao, choreographer (Oakland/Honolulu)



Figure 5. Madison Otto and Cameron Lasater in Gregory Dawson's *15*, part of "Ten Artists Respond to Locus," 14 October 2016, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. (Photo by Margo Moritz)

Madison Otto and Cameron Lasater in **Gregory Dawson's** *15*, a work that featured six contemporary ballet dancers moving in and out of a grid of square light projections with dense, driving movement inspired by Brown's original sequence of numbers on the imaginary cube.

*How can choreographic transmission acknowledge the historical, cultural, and political experiences of the bodies involved?*

"I was interested in what happens when the cube moves. And how the cube limits choreographic possibilities. I was also interested in applying a creative concept developed by a white woman into my gay African American male creative thought process. My cultural questions were consciously a part of my development process; culture was a factor I could not neglect." —Gregory Dawson, choreographer (Oakland)



Figure 6. Larry Arrington in *quarter*, part of “Ten Artists Respond to Locus,” 14 October 2016, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. (Photo by Margo Moritz)

**Larry Arrington** in *quarter*, a solo by Arrington that began with her balancing on a rock and raising her arms repeatedly to the sky. The solo featured other repetitive movements, such as turns in relevé, as well as several props, including an aquarium, which Arrington filled with water, a potted plant, and silhouettes of horses made from plastic and tinfoil. At the end of the dance, water was poured from the catwalk down onto the potted plant.

*How can choreographic transmission be a platform for contemporary authorship?*

“You can use material from *Locus* if it is ‘a borrowing that furthers your work.’” —Diane Madden, Co-Artistic Director, TBDC, in conversation with the commissioned artists during the workshop phase of the project.

“Diane Madden has danced in Trisha Brown’s work longer than I have been alive. I was so inspired by her beautiful leadership and her spirit as a dancer. Having Diane Madden introduce Trisha Brown’s work put a welcome spin and complication on a Western approach to expertise. My exposure to the monolith of the Judson canon has been frustratingly void of body, heart, context, time, and relationship. Having the dancer, Diane, centered as the expert made my heart full. In this way I was finally able to situate Judson in the very situatedness that I love about dance: how it is something that is passed from body to body.” —Larry Arrington, choreographer (San Francisco)

## Curatorial Directions for Further Research

“Ten Artists Respond to *Locus*” illuminated the importance of creating space for cultural questions as contemporary artists engage with work from the past. As the project organizer, I initially chose to take a hands-off approach to questions of cultural identity in order to avoid interfering with the process of choreographic transmission and the participating artists’ processes. However, in retrospect I see my neutrality as complacency—a curatorial blind spot. Christina Sharpe refers to the “violence of abstraction” in relationship to the African American experience (2016:100), indicating that in some contexts, abstraction can be dehumanizing. As curators, we can’t take the neutrality of abstraction for granted. How can curators make dialogue about cultural identity essential not only in the context of presenting artists of color, but also for white artists, so that whiteness is no longer the default cultural perspective?

Transmission of historic dance forms enables contemporary artists to situate themselves in a progression of ideas. Dance legacies, like forms of history, are valuable archives that both “influence and challenge the definitions we construct for ourselves” (Rankine 2016:12). How can we engage with archives while recognizing that a driving force behind a creative act may lie not only in influences from past forms, but also in the ways an artist *perceives* those forms? Choreographic transmission in an expanded field involves valuing the subjective perception and embodiment of the original material as much as valuing the material’s original conception.

What methods might facilitate choreographic transmission in an expanded field? We need more research that approaches choreographic archives as open scores. Incorporating improvisational practice in relationship to source material could be one way to honor participant subjectivity and embodiment in the process of choreographic transmission. Diane Madden and I discussed the need to incorporate improvisational practice in the *Locus* project. Indeed, improvisation was a central aspect of Brown’s original dance. However, time constraints prevented us from fully utilizing this essential tool.

As curators, we must attend to the methods through which we interface with artistic archives and bring them into current cultural awareness. In our conversations with the past, and with each other, we must cultivate consciousness on all sides about which paradigms to preserve and which to change.

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*TDR: The Drama Review* 62:2 (T238) Summer 2018.  
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