

*No Context: Curatorial Writing & Contemporary Dance*

by

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## Abstract

*No Context: Curatorial Writing & Contemporary Dance*  
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This research explored the function of curatorial writing in the context of contemporary dance and examines the complex relationship between embodied practice and textual discourse. In this research I used a post-structural lens to identify some of the core elements at play in the interaction between writing, embodied practice, and the archive, drawing on the work of dance scholars, performance theorists, and post-structural theorists to expose this complex interaction. I then applied these theoretical considerations to the creation and production of a dance exhibition catalogue. Curated by the Nomadic Curatorial Collective (Erin McCurdy, Victoria Mohr-Blakeney and Cara Spooner) *No Context* a performance and accompanying catalogue re-imagined the form of the dance catalogue and the relationship between curatorial writing and dance. This publication served as a case study, which explored the ways in which the dance exhibition catalogue can support embodied practice.

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To my families

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## **Part I: Dance & Writing**

### **Introduction**

In the early 1960s dance began to shift out of traditional theatre venues into gallery, museum, and site-specific locations converging with visual arts modes of display. As a result, a tradition of curatorial practice, established in visual arts institutions, intersected with the art form of dance to produce a new stream of curatorial practice now commonly referred to as dance curation.<sup>1</sup> Curatorial practice in the field of dance gave birth to new forms of publication, namely dance exhibition catalogues,<sup>2</sup> which arose first and foremost out of the intersection between these two modalities. Curatorial writing<sup>3</sup> in the context of the dance exhibition catalogue<sup>4</sup> provided an opportunity to situate dance within a broader

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<sup>1</sup> In this research dance curation, or curating dance, refers to instances in which curatorial methodologies, practice, and approaches are applied to the art form of dance.

<sup>2</sup> Based on my research, I have determined the typology of the dance catalogue to include three major categories. First, dance exhibition catalogues, which include critical or interpretive writings and are produced in conjunction with live performances or events. Second, dance retrospective catalogues, which examine the history of a single artist's career or dance movement. Third, dance process catalogues, which document a creative process or project, performance think tank, workshop etc. For this research, I will be focusing on the former: dance exhibition catalogues. Unless otherwise indicated when the term dance catalogue in this text refers to the dance exhibition catalogue.

<sup>3</sup> In this research I use the term curatorial writing to describe professional writing on the part of curators and writers aimed at contextualizing artworks. Early curatorial writing in the field of dance occurred primarily in the form of the dance exhibition catalogue.

<sup>4</sup> The first dance exhibition catalogue published in Toronto was titled *Dance and Film* and was published in Toronto by the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1977 and edited by dance scholar and critic Selma Odom.



context in the field of art.<sup>5</sup> This opportunity came with a responsibility to think critically about what it meant to produce textual curatorial discourse in/for the field of dance, which has its own distinct origins, histories, and scholarship.<sup>6</sup>

In this research I explore the function of curatorial writing in the context of dance, and examine the complex relationship between embodied practice<sup>7</sup> and textual discourse. I draw upon a post-structural lens<sup>8</sup> to examine and better understand the core structural elements at play in the interaction between writing, embodied practice, and the archive, drawing on the work of dance scholars,

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<sup>5</sup> It must be considered whether or not it is of benefit to the field(s) of dance, for dance artists, and the form of dance itself to be contextualized within the greater field of art, a field dominated by scholars and historians from the field of visual arts. Due to the limited scope of this research, this essay does not address the theoretical effects of contextualizing dance within a larger (namely visual) arts canon.

<sup>6</sup> It can be argued that curatorial practice presents both a risk and an opportunity to the field of dance. On the one hand, contextualizing dance within the broader field of contemporary art allows for new cross-disciplinary connections to be made and broader trends in contemporary artistic thought to be identified across various media. On the other hand, when contextualized in the wider context of contemporary art, dance potentially risks losing the particularities of its own histories, both written and embodied, as this embodied form becomes re-codified in the language of curatorial practice. If curatorial discourse on dance is in a position to impact the history, the scholarship and the archive(s) of dance, then dance curators take on a significant responsibility.

<sup>7</sup> The term ‘embodied practice’ is used by a number of prominent dance scholars and performance theorists such as Diana Taylor, whose writing serves as an important cornerstone in the theoretical foundations of this curatorial essay. I have chosen the term ‘embodied practice’ to refer to live performance throughout this text, as opposed to other common terms, such as ‘ephemerality’ or in some cases simply ‘dance’ to refer to the importance of physicality and embodied knowledge in dance performance and also be inclusive of cross disciplinary performance practices emerging from the field of contemporary dance.

<sup>8</sup> Post structural theory informs this research in several important ways. Throughout this essay I ground my arguments in the writing of post-structural theorists on the archive, dance art historians working with a post-structural approach, and a post-structural approach to my own work in my research surrounding the form of the *No Context* catalogue. Post-structural thought posits the instability of objective truth, and the impossibility of objective knowledge, as well as the impossibility of escaping structures of knowledge. A post-structural approach offers an attempt to acknowledge and examine the instabilities of structures, such as writing, throughout this thesis.

performance theorists, and post-structural theorists to identify and examine this complex interaction. I then examine these findings in the context of curatorial writing and the dance catalogue, and apply these theoretical considerations to the creation and production of a dance catalogue. *No Context or Studio Place or Decentralize or We Actually Maybe Right Now Have Everything We Need*, is the title of a performance, co-curated by myself, alongside dance scholars/curators Erin McCurdy and Cara Spooner<sup>9</sup> which took place on March 25<sup>th</sup> 2015, accompanied by a catalogue by the same title.

From this research, two central questions emerged. First, how does curatorial writing function in the context of dance and what role does the archive play? Second, how can the interaction between these elements be reconsidered in the form of the dance catalogue to support embodied practice? The dance catalogue provides a unique opportunity to explore new possibilities for both curatorial writing and the form of the dance catalogue itself. I use the *No Context* performance, and its accompanying publication by the same title, as an opportunity to re-imagine the form of the dance catalogue and the relationship between curatorial writing and live dance performance. I posit that the *No Context* catalogue presents an example of how the dance catalogue might be formulated to

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<sup>9</sup> McCurdy is currently a PhD candidate in Communication and Culture at Ryerson and York Universities, while Spooner holds an MA in Performance from the University of Toronto. McCurdy, Spooner and myself met in the spring of 2014 at Envisioning the Practice a conference on curating performance held in Montreal at UQAM.

support<sup>10</sup> embodied live performance through both its writing and structure.

### **Scope & Relevance**

The field of research on curatorial practice in/for the field(s) of dance is an emerging one. My research identifies that the role of curatorial discourse in contextualizing contemporary dance remains an under-examined field of study. The dance catalogue plays an important and under-researched role in contemporary dance curation and raises a number of critical questions regarding the way in which contemporary dance is contextualized within the larger field of contemporary art.

There are many aspects of dance curation and dance catalogue publication that could be addressed in this research,<sup>11</sup> however, due to the limited scope of this research, I focus on several core theoretical concerns regarding the function of curatorial writing in the form of the dance catalogue,<sup>12</sup> as I have identified this to be a gap in current scholarship in the fields of both dance and curatorial

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<sup>10</sup> When I use the word support here I am referring to the potential for writing to provide context for live performance while simultaneously foregrounding live performance as opposed to determining it or replacing it.

<sup>11</sup> Due to the limited nature of the scope of this research digital possibilities for dance catalogue publication are not addressed in a theoretical or practical sense. I recognize that the digital realm introduces many new practical and theoretical considerations for dance catalogue publication and I recognize this as a possible area for future research.

<sup>12</sup> Though this research focuses specifically on curatorial writing on dance in the form of the dance catalogue, I acknowledge that curatorial writing on dance may appear in a variety of contexts such as didactic panels, leaflets, websites etc.

practice. While remaining conscious of practices in dance catalogue publication<sup>13</sup>, I have produced the *No Context* catalogue as an opportunity to investigate the theoretical concerns raised by this research in a practice-based<sup>14</sup> context. Having co-curated the *No Context* performance and edited the *No Context* catalogue, I have had the opportunity to simultaneously consider central theoretical questions alongside the practical concerns of publishing the *No Context* catalogue. It is my hope that by centering on *No Context*, I will privilege a local, un-examined contemporary example of dance catalogue publication and ultimately support heterogeneity in scholarship in the fields of dance and curatorial practice.

### **A Brief History of Dance Writing**

From early choreographic manuals, to a lengthy history of dance notation, periodical reviews, and the emergence of dance scholarship as an independent field of study, the history of writing on the topic of dance long predates the convergence of dance and curatorial practice.<sup>15</sup> The field of dance has a long tradition of writing dating back to the first choreographic manuals produced in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, originally created by scholars to document court

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<sup>13</sup> Through research into the archives at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Dance Collection Danse, UQUAM special collections, Vincent Warren Dance Library, Ecole de Danse Contemporain Library, Artex, university general collections, and scholarly research, I have come into contact with local, national, and international dance catalogues to familiarize myself with current and historical trends in dance catalogue production.

<sup>14</sup> I acknowledge the field of practice-based research in the field of contemporary art has its own breadth of scholarship and theory, though due to the limited scope of this research, I am unable to expand on these methodologies, however, I recognize this as a possible area for further research.

<sup>15</sup> The relationship between text and movement and the history of dance writing predates the intersection between dance and curatorial texts by over five centuries.

dances so that they could be learned, repeated, and disseminated.<sup>16</sup> The choreographic manual gave rise to the first instances of dance notation, systems of codification by which movement was transcribed into a series of signs and symbols, so that it could later be repeated and translated once again into motion.<sup>17</sup> In Europe, in the early 1800s, these documents circulated widely, becoming cultural exports in the service of spreading both nationalism and influence, serving as an example of codified culture inscribed in language.<sup>18</sup> Choreographic manuals were followed by periodical reviews and program notes, which accompanied audience members in performance venues across Europe and North America. The immaterial qualities of dance and attempts to categorize, theorize, and codify it continue to intrigue and engage dance scholars who have written extensively about dance writing in both historical and contemporary contexts.

### **Dance & Writing: Theoretical Concerns**

Dance scholars have long debated what has been perceived to be an inherent tension between the moving body and attempts to capture embodied practice in written language. The history of dance writing has been labeled by some scholars as an attempt to codify and document embodied performance, dating back to the enlightenment's impulse to categorize and codify all forms of

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<sup>16</sup> Lepecki, *Of Presence of the Body*, 125.

<sup>17</sup> Lepecki, "Inscribing Dance", 125.

<sup>18</sup> Lepecki, "Inscribing Dance", 127.

human knowledge.<sup>19</sup> There is a large existing body of contemporary scholarship, which addresses the complexities of writing about dance, including prominent dance scholars and performance theorists<sup>20</sup> who argue that due to dance's embodied nature, interpretation via language is problematic. Scholars such as Andre Lepecki have pointed to intrinsic differences in medium (between body and text), as the source of the problem. In his article, "Inscribing Dance", Lepecki addresses this issue directly and asserts: "...dance's materiality as resistance to linguistic grasping: the moment dance is arrested, fixated, written down, it is no longer dance."<sup>21</sup> The minute dance is written about, Lepecki argues, there is inevitably a shift in materiality from movement to writing which: "withdraws dance from the flow of its own materiality."<sup>22</sup> The complications inherent in this 'translation' have often led scholars to a discussion of how each medium (writing and dance) is valued in the field of representation. Lepecki argues that writing is sometimes seen as an attempt to supplement or rectify dance's status in the field of representation.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In the introduction to *Of the Presence of the Body* Andre Lepecki also classified choreography as a form of non-textual codification and inscription.

<sup>20</sup> Some of these scholars include: Susan Leigh Foster, Andre Lepecki, and Peggy Phelan.

<sup>21</sup> Lepecki, "Inscribing Dance", 139.

<sup>22</sup> Lepecki, "Inscribing Dance", 133.

<sup>23</sup> Lepecki, "Inscribing Dance", 130.

In *Of the Presence of the Body*, Mark Franko disputes the perception that ephemerality in the field of representation is lacking and in constant need of documentation.

Arguments that dance and writing are valued differently in the field of representation also emerge from the field of performance theory. In her text *The Archive and the Repertoire*, performance theorist Diana Taylor writes about the relationship between text and embodied practice and asserts that writing can often be seen as standing against ephemerality and embodiment.<sup>24</sup> Taylor's writing points to a hierarchy within systems of representation, and asserts that writing has become legitimized over other epistemic systems, such as embodied performance.<sup>25</sup> She relates this hierarchy to systems of power and control and posits that historically: "the space of written culture then, as now, seemed easier to control than embodied culture."<sup>26</sup> While Taylor writes specifically about language as a tool in the colonization of indigenous embodied expression, she underscores the point that embodied performance, among other forms of expression has, in many ways, not been considered as a credible source of knowledge.<sup>27</sup> If we concur with Taylor's position that writing is believed to hold credibility, legitimacy and power over embodied expression, then it is essential to carefully

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<sup>24</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2003), 16.

Taylor is writing in the context of a primarily Latin American anti-oppressive framework rather than in the context of contemporary dance scholarship but her words resonate regardless. In her text, Taylor applies a post-colonial lens to the role of writing in the context of the European conquest of the Americas, and examines how embodied practices by subjugated groups were repressed. Taylor writes about the repression of Latin American indigenous embodied practice by European colonizers and their use of language and text as oppressive tools of colonization.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 17.

consider the implications of ‘translating’ or ‘interpreting’ embodied practice, such as dance, into writing.

### **Dance, Writing & Political Agency**

Contemporary dance scholars have argued that dance’s resistance to language is also linked to its agency in the field of representation. A question, which dance scholars have addressed, is whether or not translating dance from its original materiality—the body—into writing has the potential to strip dance of its embodied agency. Dance scholars Randy Martin and Andre Lepecki agree that embodied performance holds political power. Lepecki claims that dance holds: “the potential for the dancing body to transcend a narrowing aestheticization of its moving figure, and thus claim status as political agent.”<sup>28</sup> Lepecki, among other dance scholars, has argued that it is not so much dance itself but the ‘presence’<sup>29</sup> of dance, which holds this power. He describes presence in dance as “slippery movement, presence as that which will not be pinned down.”<sup>30</sup> The question remains whether or not dance’s political agency is subordinated by writing. Burt expands on this point clarifying that: “normative historiography can sometimes contribute to the process through which potentially subversive bodies are

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<sup>28</sup> Lepecki, *Of Presence of the Body*, 4

<sup>29</sup> Lepecki, “Inscribing Dance,” 137.

In his article Lepecki describes ‘presentness’ as a space of tension between dance and writing that is mutable and lawless.

<sup>30</sup> Lepecki, “Inscribing Dance,” 137.

Lepecki goes on to describe this ‘presence’ as indicating ‘ontological coimpossibilities’ that transcend time: past, present and future.



erased.”<sup>31</sup> Post-structural theorist, Jacques Derrida asserts that only when dance evades documentation and written language, can it be seen as a site of agency in the field of representation.<sup>32</sup> I disagree with Derrida’s assertion, and would counter that many of seminal radical and subversive dance performances throughout history have been documented and yet have simultaneously held political agency and deeply impacted the field.<sup>33</sup> I do agree with Lepecki and Burt however, that dance’s ability to create a disturbance in the field of representation serves as one of its most potentially subversive qualities.

### **The Rise of Curatorial Writing**

By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the visual arts exhibition catalogue had evolved from itemized artworks for potential sale, to an important vehicle for the production of discourse aimed to address the conceptual and intellectual goals of art and to contextualize individual contemporary artists and artworks within the

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<sup>31</sup> Ramsay Burt, “Genealogy and Dance History,” *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, Ed, Andre Lepecki, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 30.

<sup>32</sup> In *Of the Presence of the Body*, Lepecki outlines Derrida’s position on dance, highlighting one of the few moments the theorist wrote directly about the field(s) of dance.

<sup>33</sup> I would argue that many seminal radical dance performances throughout history have been documented yet are still understood to have agency and to have had a subversive impact on the field(s) of dance. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A*, which served as a key moment in the postmodern paradigm shift in dance but was also documented. This being said, it can be argued that Rainer’s original performance was not documented, but rather a subsequent performance, years later.

greater field<sup>34</sup> of the visual arts landscape.<sup>35</sup> With the rise of conceptual, body-based, and post-object art in the 1960's (the era of the dematerialization of art in Europe and North America) the need for theoretical framing discourses produced by critics and curators began to grow.<sup>36</sup> While curatorial practice had to respond to the shifting practical and conceptual trends in the field of art, so too did curatorial writing evolve to respond to these changes.<sup>37</sup> The rise of dematerialized art practices coincided with an increase in the production of curatorial writing to contextualize and accompany art practices. The rise of textual discourse to accompany artworks can also be attributed, in part, to the rise of the independent curator,<sup>38</sup> which arguably came with a shift in values with respect to the production of curatorial writing. Tracing a brief history of the rise of curatorial writing in the field of curatorial practice is important to an analysis of the function of curatorial writing in the field of dance.

### **Dance, Writing & The Archive**

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<sup>34</sup> O'Neil attributes, the emergence of what he describes as *contemporary* curatorial discourse to the late 1980s when he believes curatorship as evolved into an independent field of discourse.

<sup>35</sup> Paul O'Neil, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Cultures*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 18.

<sup>36</sup> O'Neil, *The Culture of Curating*, 9.

As O'Neil states, the role of the curator has evolved from the caretaker of a collection, stemming from the Latin 'curar' to care for, to the role of a cultural producer and facilitator of knowledge and discourse.

<sup>37</sup> O'Neil sums up the interconnectedness of curatorial practice and discourse stating that they are didactically intertwined as a result of inscribing and recoding curatorial practice in the form of textual discourse.

<sup>38</sup> O'Neil attributes the rise of the independent curator as occurring primarily in the 1990's.

The relationship between writing and dance cannot be properly evaluated without addressing the relationship between dance and the act of documenting it. Post-structural theorist Jacques Derrida's notion of the archive,<sup>39</sup> as outlined in his seminal text *Archive Fever*,<sup>40</sup> can potentially offer key insights into understanding the archival mechanism at play in the relationship between dance and text.<sup>41</sup> According to Derrida, the archival drive comes from a desire to return to the origin, to a point of "absolute commencement."<sup>42</sup> If we situate Derrida's theory of the archive in the context of writing and embodied practice, documenting and interpreting dance via writing over the centuries can be seen as an ongoing iteration of the archival impulse, and a never-ending attempt to return to a state of presence. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida outlines the archival impulse which always works in tandem with what he calls the archviolithic drive or death drive, a force which: "works to destroy the archive, on the condition of effacing, but with a view to effacing its own traces."<sup>43</sup> Viewed through this lens, the ephemeral nature of dance can potentially be understood as an iteration of Derrida's death drive. This

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<sup>39</sup> In *Archive Fever*, Derrida describes the archive as "objectivizable storage", and claims it is a reproducible iteration and is linked to the production of memory.

<sup>40</sup> In *Archive Fever*, Derrida categorizes a series of characteristics and terms essential to understanding the complex function of the archive, including: the archival impulse, archive fever, and the death drive.

<sup>41</sup> Although Derrida writes in the context of live experience and the archive, the complex mechanisms he identifies in relationship to archival function can be applied to the relationship between dance (embodied ephemeral practice) and written language (documentation).

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, Trans, Eric Prenowitz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>43</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 10.

can be seen in “dance’s somewhat embarrassing predicament of always losing itself as it performs itself.”<sup>44</sup> Examined in the context of writing and movement, the documentation and textual analysis of dance can read as the archival impulse and death drive perpetually at play.<sup>45</sup>

In *Archive Fever*, Derrida points to the ability of textual documentation to co-determine that which it archives.<sup>46</sup> This assertion is important to all those participating in the documentation of dance in any form. By examining curatorial writing in the field of dance via Derrida’s theory of the archive, this writing can be seen as simultaneously co-determining that which it seeks to document. In other words, dance curators can be seen as co-determining the embodied practices about which they write. In the relationship between embodied practice and documentation in language, the archive has the single, clear advantage of longevity as Taylor points out: “Insofar as it constitutes materials that seem to endure, the archive exceeds the live.”<sup>47</sup> Given this, the dance catalogue can be understood to function, in part, as an archival mechanism that will not only outlive, but has the potential to co-determine embodied practice by standing in, in part, as its legacy.

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<sup>44</sup> Lepecki, “Inscribing Dance,” 125.

<sup>45</sup> Lepecki “Inscribing Dance,” 129.

Lepecki describes all forms of dance inscription as stemming from the ‘mourning force’ that presence (dance) proposes.

<sup>46</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.

## **Dance & Writing: Inter-textual Approaches**

Another element to consider in the discussion of how curatorial writing functions in the context of dance is to examine the porous and intertextual natures of both media. Both writing and contemporary dance can be understood as porous in nature, referencing and drawing on a myriad of additional ‘inter-texts’. Naomi Jackson writes about inter-textuality as a by-product or companion of post-structural theory. She contends: “Within the context of post-structural theory, the term intertextuality focuses on the idea that no text is an untouched, unified whole, but the result of many “grafts” of other texts. These grafts need to be analyzed for where they lie comfortably together, or where their intersections create points of juncture and stress.”<sup>48</sup> This is an important insight, as it undercuts the idea of dance as an expression of universal truth via a particular uniqueness or expressiveness of form but rather emphasizes both dance and writing as constructs made up of a variety of cultural and artistic tools.<sup>49</sup> Inter-textual references within a work of art can also function to provide validation or an “authenticating authority.”<sup>50</sup> Inter-textual approaches to both dance and writing also serve to situate individual works in relationship to broader discourses. This has political

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<sup>48</sup> Naomi, Jackson, “Dance and Intertextuality: Theoretical Reflections.” *Dancing Bodies, Living Histories: New Writings About Dance and Culture*, Eds, Liza Doolittle, Anne Flynn, (Alberta, Banff Centre Press, 2000), 218-231.

Niomi Jackson, “Dance and Intertextuality”, 220.

<sup>49</sup> As Jackson so clearly states, intertextual approaches can dismantle notions of authenticity and universality in favor of revealing how subjectivity can support or subvert culturally dominant views.

<sup>50</sup> Jackson, “Dance and Intertextuality”, 221.

connotations as well, as it relates dance to broader fields such as cultural studies and other disciplines, which alter how artistic production in the field of dance is both ‘read’ and understood.

### **The Dance Catalogue: New Possibilities**

While scholars have written extensively about the problem of writing about dance in the context of both contemporary dance scholarship and performance theory, few scholars have examined how curatorial writing functions in the context of dance. If we view curatorial writing on dance as an attempt to ‘legitimize’ dance into a more ‘credible’ form of knowledge,<sup>51</sup> this view holds considerable implications for dance curators. When producing curatorial writing in the field of dance, dance curators have a responsibility to remain cognizant of hierarchies operating in the field of representation, with respect to writing and embodied practice. Similarly, if we take Ramsay Burt, Andre Lepecki, and Jacques Derrida’s views that dance’s political agency is intrinsically tied to its materiality and subdued by its translation into writing, as highlighted previously, dance curators have a responsibility to investigate possibilities for writing which do not diminish the agency of embodied performance. Understanding the particular function of curatorial writing in the field of dance offers an opportunity for curators using the form of the dance catalogue to reconsider the function of writing in the field of dance.

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<sup>51</sup> In her text, *The Archive and The Repertoire*, Diana Taylor uses these terms when she compares how embodied practice is considered as a site of knowledge versus writing.

If, as Derrida posits, the archive holds the power to co-determine its content, dance curators must consider the enormity of the responsibility they bear when producing textual discourse in relationship to embodied practice. While the archival impulse at play in this relationship creates complex, dynamic possibilities for destabilizing<sup>52</sup> this relationship should be considered. Several contemporary dance scholars have considered alternative approaches to writing in the context of dance, including Lepecki, who describes what he calls the possibility of writing *along* ephemerality<sup>53</sup> as opposed to *against* it, an idea originally posited by theorists Mark Franko and Peggy Phelan.<sup>54</sup> Though documentation<sup>55</sup> may be seen as standing against the agency of embodied practice, the question remains, what would an alternative approach to curatorial writing, in the form of the dance exhibition catalogue look like? Is there a possibility for writing in the context of dance to support, rather than subdue, embodied practice?

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<sup>52</sup>Lepecki, "Inscribing Dance," 134.

Lepecki writes about the unfixed nature of dance going on to add not only is dance fluid and unfixed but audiences and writers can also be thought of as being both fluid and in motion as well. Perhaps this multi-destabilization of signification inherent in both dance and writing has the power to destabilize the relationship between text and movement to give way to new possibilities the re-configuring this relationship.

<sup>53</sup> Lepecki stresses that writing in this way occurs by emphasizing the erasure at the origin of dance discourse but gives no concrete examples of writing along ephemerality, leaving the reader to speculate and draw his or her own conclusions.

<sup>54</sup> Lepecki, "Inscribing Dance", 132.

<sup>55</sup> Lepecki goes on to cite Franko's argument that documentation has been used in the service of canonization.

## **Part II: The *No Context* Catalogue**

### ***No Context* & Postmodern Dance**

In the summer of 2014, the Nomadic Curatorial Collective (Erin McCurdy, Cara Spooner, and I), commissioned independent dance artist Amelia Ehrhardt to respond to archival documents from Toronto's first artist-run dance centre, 15 Dance Laboratorium, which acted as a hub of experimentation in dance from 1974-1980. Co-curating this performance presented an opportunity to put a number of the theoretical concerns, outlined in this research, into practice. The *No Context* catalogue offered an opportunity to carefully reconsider the function of curatorial writing in the context of dance, and to formulate the structure and content of the catalogue to reflect some of the central themes and intentions behind the performance. In the case of *No Context*, the premise of the performance was to open up a dialogue between 15 Dance Lab (and the mid to late 1970's Toronto postmodern dance landscape)<sup>56</sup> and the present (Toronto current contemporary dance landscape). 15 Dance Lab and the original 15 Dancers are arguably the birthplaces of postmodern dance in Toronto. Aesthetically and politically, this period bears similarities with the postmodern dance movement in New York in the 1960's, which arose out of the Judson Church Theatre. Prominent dance historian, Sally Banes, has dedicated a great deal of her writing to the Judson Church Theatre and the foundational work that

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<sup>56</sup> The term 'post-modern dance' refers to dance created after the 1960s which is characterized by any or all of the above: gestural everyday movement, conceptual approaches, anti-illusionism, as well as text, and video media.



the group pioneered.<sup>57</sup> Part of the ideology of postmodern dance, shared by dance artists from Toronto's 15 Dance Lab, was a commitment to the defamiliarization of movement by way of everyday gesture, and a rejection of the illusionist, high dramatization of modern dance. Postmodern dance saw everyday movement and gesture performed on stage alongside faults and flaws in staging which demystified dance, intentionally inspiring the spectator to engage critically with the work which was, at times, overtly political in nature. Other techniques commonly used during this time to produce similar effects were improvisation, gestural movement, and repetition.<sup>58</sup> Banes describes some essential elements of postmodern dance: "The anti-illusionist stance dictates that seams can show, and that part of the aesthetic pleasure in watching the dance derives from learning its structure by examining the seams." She goes on to clarify: "watching mistakes occur in improvisation, witnessing fatigue, danger, awkwardness, difficulty, watching movement being marked and learned. Watching systems being built and dismantled. Refusing to be seduced by mere skill."<sup>59</sup> The minimalist, anti-illusionist qualities and unenhanced physicality of postmodern dance were essential tools in achieving its often political purposes, one being to destabilize

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<sup>57</sup> Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Postmodern Dance*, (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 17.

Banes confirms that the Judson Church Theatre performers set the stage for the expansion of the postmodern aesthetic in dance.

<sup>58</sup> As Banes states, repetition was often used in postmodern dance was often used as a tool to point out its habitualizing effect, and reveal the political implications of this technique, namely to expose political apathy.

<sup>59</sup> Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 17.

the relationship between spectator and performance. Since *No Context*'s premise is a dialogue between Toronto's postmodern dance of the 1970s and the present, the question arose: how might this context be reflected in the structure and content of the *No Context* catalogue itself?

### ***No Context: Creating a Catalogue***

The *No Context* catalogue is devised, in terms of structure and content, to point to the instability of writing, and the instability of interpretation (in this case both the artist's interpretations of archival documents and the curators' interpretations of Ehrhardt's work). In the catalogue, to communicate these interpretive instabilities over an authentic or 'true' interpretation of either the archival documents or the live work itself, subjectivity and positionality are accentuated in a variety of ways. There are a number of writing forms represented in the *No Context* catalogue: descriptive prose, written and oral interview excerpts, excerpts of archival reproductions, and excerpts of a transcribed three-way conversation. All written documents (single authored or co-authored) are written in the first person singular 'I' or first person plural 'we'. The aim of this choice was to indicate both the subjectivity and a multiplicity of subjectivities of all contributors. Similarly, the full title of the live performance and catalogue: *No Context or Decentralize or We Maybe Actually Have Everything We Need*, does not label the work in a definitive way, but rather points to multiple and simultaneous significations. Employing the specific terminology of *curator*, *curatorial* and *catalogue* in the *No Context* catalogue, alongside trends and

vocabulary in dance writing, creates a heterogeneous mix of terms originating from both curatorial practice and the field of dance, which, indicates that the creators of *No Context* are operating between these two modes of display.

These are some of the strategies I, along with my collaborators, incorporated into the structure of the *No Context* catalogue in the hopes of inciting complex interpretive strategies on the part of readers. The catalogue served as an opportunity to examine how the unenhanced weight, mass, physicality and anti-illusionist qualities of postmodern dance could be reflected in the writing. In addition, we questioned whether or not it would be possible to de-emphasize the structures which enable powerful illusionist narratives in catalogue writing. Some examples of this approach include the strategies previously mentioned: incorporating multiple authors and perspectives, de-stabilizing traditional narrative structures by way of excerpts and interrupted texts, and including multiple narrative voices and a variety of written forms to emphasize the subjectivities present in multiple perspectives.

One attempt at re-negotiating the function of writing in the context of dance, in the *No Context* catalogue, was to re-consider the effect of textual narratives in relationship to embodied practice. Taylor addresses the reductive potential of language in this context: “Instead of focusing on patterns of cultural expression in terms of texts and narratives, we might go about them as scenarios that do not reduce gestures and embodied practices to narrative description.”<sup>60</sup> It

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<sup>60</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 16.

is worthwhile to examine how narrative functions in curatorial writing and whether or not non-narrative structures impact the relationship between text and dance in new and interesting ways. The *No Context* catalogue presents an opportunity to juxtapose narrative voices in a fragmented, interwoven, non-hierarchical manner, as well as to combine these textual narratives and fragments alongside archival documents, and photographs, to create complex and non-linear narratives and interpretive experiences on the part of the reader, allowing readers to draw connections across narrative voices and textual, photographic, and archival media.

### ***No Context & Inter-textuality***

Another important trend in postmodern dance that serves as a key theme in the *No Context* exhibition is inter-textual referencing.<sup>61</sup> This trend in postmodern dance to cite or reference other works, serves a myriad of purposes. Ehrhardt's performance of *No Context* references a number of works from 15 Dance Lab. Rather than 'cite' an artist directly, she draws on trends such as simple gestural movements, improvisation, and voice-over narration common in a variety of works by different artists from the period in order to reference the ideology of postmodern dance as a whole rather than individual artists or works. In the case of the *No Context* catalogue, inter-textual referencing proves to be important on

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<sup>61</sup> Jackson, "Dance and Intertextuality," 220.

In her text, Naomi Jackson succinctly defines intertextuality as the ability for texts to quote or cite each other, setting up relationships between various works. Intertextuality for Jackson references the origins of additional works inscribing a map of dialogues and 'intertexts.'

several accounts. On the one hand, inter-textual references prove to be inevitable for a catalogue designed to open up a dialogue with a specific period in dance history. On the other hand, these references also suggest a level of shared authorship and recognize that *No Context* as a performance, was built from a rich context of previous artistic production both textual and movement-based. Throughout the catalogue, formal textual and aesthetic references to *Spill* (the magazine/newspaper/zine of 15 Dance Lab) prevail. These references seek to pay homage to a history of experimental dance writing in Toronto, while simultaneously disseminating and complicating ideas of creative authorship and shared histories.

### ***No Context & The Archive***

The relationship between the *No Context* performance and the archive is complex. For one, the source material for the *No Context* performance was drawn from archival documents relating to 15 Dance Lab, in the Dance Collection Danse archives. In addition, after the performance, the *No Context* catalogue will, in turn, become an archive of the event, standing in as a material survivor in the face of an ephemeral experience, remaining foremost in the minds of those who witnessed it. In her writing, dance scholar Alexandra Carter questions the historic prevalence of drawing on written sources as a tool for recreating past events. Carter states: “discourse theories have exposed how knowledge is constituted not by limited logocentric modes of engagement with the world but by a vast variety of influences; this calls into question the reliance on written sources as privileged

evidence for recreating the past.”<sup>62</sup> While Ehrhardt’s work is not a recreation but a *response* to the past, and the artist also interviewed original dance artists who performed at 15 Dance Lab including the centre’s co-founder Miriam Adams, it can be argued that archival documents were privileged as source material.

In her writing, Taylor points out that the archive separates that which it contains from those who initially knew and understood its contents: “What changes over time is the value, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how the items it contains get interpreted, even embodied.”<sup>63</sup> Ehrhardt is invariably separated by space, time and context from the archival materials used to create *No Context*. Does this fact complicate the validity of an artistic response to archival materials or simply gesture towards the inevitable subjectivity of a creative response? Perhaps Ehrhardt’s de-contextualized response to these archival documents indicates a destabilization of authenticity, a trend very much in line with postmodern dance ideologies. Carter comments on this issue: “The postmodern attitude to the role of the ‘author’ has given rise to a questioning of the role of the historian, who is now seen not as a neutral recorder of events but as a creator of them.”<sup>64</sup> Recognizing Ehrhardt in the role of a creator of new histories, rather than a revitalizer of old histories, shifts the lens of how the impacts and effects of *No Context* can be evaluated with regards to the

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<sup>62</sup>Alexandra Carter, “Destabilizing the Discipline: Critical Debates about History and Their Impact on the Study of Dance,” *Rethinking Dance History: A Reader*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 10.

<sup>63</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.

<sup>64</sup> Carter, “Destabilizing the Discipline”, 10.

relationship between performance and the archive. Perhaps, as contemporary art theorist Boris Groys asserts: “today’s contemporary art demonstrates the way in which contemporary art shows itself—the act of presenting the present.”<sup>65</sup> Ehrhardt’s work with the archive reveals itself to be a subjective creative construct, and questions the archive as a point of access to authenticity and origin, and opens up the question of the incompleteness of the archive as a source.<sup>66</sup> However incomplete the archive may be, and however subjective and complex one’s relationship to it, Ehrhardt’s work still posits archival documents as a potential source of liveness. This liveness is seen instantly ‘documented’ by way of the catalogue, and the circle of liveness to documentation closes. In this way, the dance exhibition catalogue proves to be a space to re-consider the archive’s relationship to embodied practice.

## **Conclusion**

In this research I have sought to identify several key mechanisms in the interaction between writing, dance, and the archive and to consider how these mechanisms might function in the context of the dance catalogue. My research has revealed the intersections between dance and curatorial scholarship to be an under-examined field of research. Drawing on theoretical ideas in the field of dance scholarship and performance theory, this research exposes inherent

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<sup>65</sup> Boris Groys, “The Topology of Contemporary Art.” *Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Ed. Terry Smith. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 71.

<sup>66</sup> Carter, “Destabilizing the Discipline”, 10. Carter stresses that archival records are full of gaps and silences, and must be understood as culturally constructed based on the hierarchies of both the present and the past.

differences of medium between text and dance and examines how this impacts their interaction. This research also addresses the disparity between how dance and writing are valued and legitimized as sites of knowledge in the field of representation. I examine how certain theorists posit that writing in the field of dance has the potential to strip embodied practice of agency and intention, a stance which has important political implications for contemporary dance curators in their work. I investigate how dance and writing function in relationship to the archive, by way of Derrida's theory of the archive, particularly the archive's ability to co-determine liveness. This research then relates these theoretical concerns to the context of the *No Context* catalogue. In so doing I have understood that, although the mechanisms in the relationship between writing, dance, and the archive, may be intrinsic to these forms, when conscious of these concerns, the dance exhibition catalogue offers a unique space in which to influence, manipulate and potentially subvert how dance and writing interact. This intervention is achieved by creating gaps, fissures, and instability within the text, by destabilizing narrative and objectivity, and using writing to gesture towards embodied practice as a primary site of knowledge.<sup>67</sup> Conscientious approaches to dance catalogue production provide an opportunity to allow readers and viewers to create complex and non-linear narratives and interpretive experiences, and to

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<sup>67</sup> This research is only a step towards a much larger field of inquiry that is interdisciplinary in nature. Directions for further research would include: analyses of further case studies dating back through time so as to trace the development of this new form.



make new connections across media. This offers an opportunity for practical and theoretical expansion in both the fields of contemporary dance and curatorial practice.

### **Part III: *No Context* Exhibition Report**

#### **Introduction**

*No Context or Studio Place or Decentralize or We Maybe Actually Right Now Have Everything We Need*, was a curated performance featuring dance artist Amelia Ehrhardt, and a catalogue by the same title. *No Context* took place at the George Brown School of Design on March 25<sup>th</sup> 2015, in partial fulfillment of the Masters of Fine Arts in Criticism and Curatorial Practice program at OCAD University. *No Context* was co-curated by myself, Erin McCurdy and Cara Spooner. One of the aims of *No Context* was to offer a possible response to the questions: how does curatorial writing function in the context of contemporary dance, and how might curatorial writing and the dance catalogue support contemporary dance? The research outlined above traces a brief history of the relationship between dance, writing and the archive, while raising a series of theoretical concerns. This exhibition report addresses how *No Context* came into being both conceptually and practically. It will describe the formation of the Nomadic Curatorial Collective, thematic concerns, and research methodologies. This report addresses dance artist Amelia Ehrhardt's practice, the commissioning process, the site, as well as documentation, and catalogue publication and design. This report outlines the curatorial decision-making processes in *No Context* and the practical and theoretical context underlying these decisions. My intention is to offer readers clear insights into the exhibition-making process. The objective of this report is to provide a written overview of the practical, logistic and live

components of this research project to accompany the above research in compliance with the requirements of OCAD University's MFA in Criticism and Curatorial Practice thesis guidelines. As curating contemporary dance is still an emerging field of study, it is my hope that this report may serve as a case study for curators and scholars, and contribute to new writing in the field of contemporary dance curation.

**Background:**

My academic and theoretical research interests began to form while studying literature at the University of King's College and Dalhousie University. I later became exposed to literary and post-structural theory while completing an MA in Spanish Literature at the University of Toronto. Having grown up training intensively in dance, my physical training was later combined with a more theoretical foundation in dance while studying at York University in the Choreography and Dance Dramaturgy MFA program. It was during this time that I was first introduced to both the history of dance notation and dance writing. Later, working as dance columnist in Toronto, my interest in both language and dance began to converge. Studying both contemporary curatorial practice and critical writing in the Criticism and Curatorial Practice MFA program at OCAD University gave me an opportunity to combine my interests in writing, dance, and curatorial methodologies in an academic research setting.

**Forming the Nomadic Curatorial Collective:**

Erin McCurdy, Cara Spooner and I met in Montreal in the spring of 2014 at “Envisioning the Practice”, a conference on curating performance held at the University of Quebec at Montreal, organized by Canadian dance curator and scholar Dena Davida. After an inspiring presentation by the SALTA Dance Collective from San Francisco, McCurdy, Spooner and I began to discuss the shortage of examples of curatorial practice in the field of dance in Toronto, as well as a lack of critical writing on dance curation in Canada and more broadly. McCurdy was in the process of completing a PhD in Communication and Culture at York and Ryerson Universities and was writing a dissertation on curating contemporary dance in museum spaces. At the time we met, Spooner was just completing the final coursework for an MA in Performance at the University of Toronto. It immediately became clear that the three of us were practically and theoretically interested in both curating contemporary dance and the role of curatorial writing in the field of dance. Back in Toronto, after a series of spirited meetings, we founded the Nomadic Curatorial Collective, a collective dedicated to curatorial practice and publication in the field of contemporary dance in Toronto.

### **Theme**

The period of the 1970s in Toronto first became of key interest to me as a result of research I performed during an internship with the Art Gallery of Ontario’s Artist in Residence Program in partial fulfillment of the MFA in Criticism and Curatorial Practice degree at OCAD University. The work of the

internship was to conduct research into the past fifty-years of performance at the AGO and compile a document detailing and describing all performances that had occurred within the institution's walls. The research was in support of the AGO's 2014 artist in residence, Ame Henderson, who was in the process of creating a new work titled *Rehearsal/Performance*, which was performed in October of 2014 at the AGO for the occasion Toronto's Scotiabank Nuit Blanche. The internship work involved in-depth archival research, during which I came across four experimental dance performances which occurred at the AGO between the 1977-1980. These performances led me to conduct further research into the dance artists and performers, most of whom were involved with Toronto's first artist-run dance center 15 Dance Laboratorium. Given my previous research on the role of the Judson Church Theatre in postmodern dance in New York in the 1960's at York University, 15 Dance Lab (originally 15 Dancers)<sup>68</sup> immediately became a rich and fascinating area of study for me. Trends such as the defamiliarization of form, the rise of everyday gestural movement, interdisciplinary<sup>69</sup> approaches, gender politics, and a pervasive critique of the dance world<sup>70</sup> arose in the work of this innovative pool of artists and performers.

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<sup>68</sup> 15 Dancers was a collective formed with Miriam Adams, Lawrence Adams and thirteen other dancers from the Lois Humphreys school of dance. The collective ran from 1972 until 1974 when Miriam and Lawrence Adams founded 15 Dance Lab.

<sup>69</sup> During the 1970s, this term was referred to as inter-arts. In the 1970s text and video were included in dance performances with more and more frequency and 15 Dance Lab was known for its interdisciplinary performances.

<sup>70</sup> A number of the performances at 15 Dance lab enacted a direct critique of larger dance institutions, specifically the National Ballet of Canada.

## Literature Review

Currently the literature that addresses the impact of 15 Dance Lab on the greater field of contemporary dance is limited however, several important contributions informed my initial research. “Moving Forward Looking Back” by Carol Anderson and Jennifer Fisher’s article “From Post-Ballet to Post-Modern: The 1972 Debut of Toronto’s Ground Breaking 15 Danse Collective” were key articles in terms of their ability to situate 15 Dance Lab and the Canadian postmodern dance movement within a boarder context. Both texts were published in 2004 in *Canadian Dance: Visions and Stories* published in Toronto by Dance Collection Danse. Other important more recent literature on the period includes Peter Graham’s “The New Left Cultural Front: A Lense on Toronto Arts and 15 Dance Lab” and Johanna Householder and Selma Odom’s “The Space of 15 - A Collective Memory.” Both articles were published in *Renegade Bodies: Canadian Dance in the 1970s* in 2012, edited by Allana Lindgren and Kaija Pepper.

Key texts addressing post-structural approaches to dance scholarship which have informed this research include both Alexandra Carter’s “Destabilizing the Discipline: Critical Debates about History and Their Impact on the Study of Dance”, and Lena Hammergren’s “Many Sources, Many Voices” from *Rethinking Dance History: A Reader*. In addition, Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Ramsay Burt’s “Genealogy and Dance History”, and Andre Lepecki’s edited collection of texts: *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and*

*Performance Theory* (published in 2004) have informed my thinking surrounding the status of dance and writing in the field of representation. Paul O'Neil's *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* published in 2012, proved to be a key text in contextualizing the history and evolution of curatorial practice and discourse. In terms of contextualizing the mechanisms at play in the relationship between curatorial writing and embodied practice, Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* proved to be paramount.

Since the late 1970s a number of dance catalogues have been published in Canada. Certain texts have been of key importance in my research due to the way in which they have re-negotiated the form of the dance catalogue. These texts include: *Dance and Film* (1977), *Chinook Winds* (1997), *Choreographer's Trust Series* (2002-2006), and *Journey Through Time* (2011). *Move: Choreographing You* (2011), published in the United Kingdom, has also informed my thinking with regards to the possibilities of the dance catalogue form. *Dance and Film*, an exhibition of dance films and accompanying live dance performances, housed at the AGO in 1977 was, according to my research, the first dance exhibition catalogue published in Toronto and was significant to my research in that it exemplified the challenge of positioning curatorial writing in the context of dance. The catalogue itself does not address the live performances which accompanied the exhibition, though the critical essays address the dance films included in the exhibition. *Chinook Winds* (1997) encapsulated the development of an indigenous dance performance housed at the Banff Centre and was important to my research

in that it included a wider variety of writing types, and relied heavily on the format of the interview to convey multiple viewpoints. *Choreographer's Trust Series* (2002-2006) is unique in that, rather than functioning as a dance exhibition catalogue, it functions primarily as a process catalogue to archive the transmitting of a series of solos from the Peggy Baker Dance Projects repertoire to a younger generation of professional dancers. This series was central to my research in that it included a series of descriptive prose passages by Amy Bowring which depicted her experience of sitting in the studio and witnessing Peggy Baker teach her works. *Journey Through Time* (2011), an exhibition of dance history ephemera with accompanying performances was significant in that it sought to historicize Toronto dance movements in Toronto while simultaneously exhibiting contemporary works. *Move: Choreographing You* (2011) was a series of remounted canonical performance works, which straddled the disciplinary boundary between dance and visual art and an accompanying catalogue. The *Move: Choreographing You* catalogue served as an example to me of what curatorial writing in the context of dance might look like if little or no attempts were made to craft the writing to reflect or support the embodied practice.

### **Methodologies**

I employed several research methodologies throughout the course of curating of the *No Context* performance and producing the accompanying *No Context* catalogue. In my research, I engaged with library and archival research practices including an investigation of dance catalogues as primary sources at the



Art Gallery of Ontario archives, Dance Collection Danse, UQAM special collections, Vincent Warren Dance Library, Ecole de Danse Contemporain Library, Artexxe, and university general collections. Throughout this research I examined local, national, and international dance catalogues to familiarize myself with current and historical trends in dance catalogue production. My research methods included investigating scholarly publications in the field of dance history, dance theory, archival theory, and post-structural theory. These texts were found in university libraries across Canada and accessed via the interlibrary loans program.

In addition, I conducted interviews with Miriam Adams (co-founder of 15 Dance Lab and Dance Collection Danse), Amelia Ehrhardt, and Selma Odom (editor of the first dance catalogue published in Toronto). Throughout the curatorial and research process, the Nomadic Curatorial Collective engaged in regular meetings, documentation practices (meeting minutes and tape recordings), and conferences<sup>71</sup> to openly share research in progress. McCurdy, Spooner and I also engaged in a three-way round table reflecting on the process of curating *No Context*, which was included in the final *No Context* catalogue.

### **Artist(s)**

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<sup>71</sup> In October of 2014, McCurdy, Spooner and myself presented at the symposium “Sharing Dance Research with the Community” organized by York University and the Heliconian Club. In March of 2015, I presented a portion of this research at “The Multiple Li(v)es of Artists” conference organized by the CADN graduate program at OCAD University.

Initially, the live performance and accompanying catalogue, conceived by McCurdy, Spooner and myself, was planned to feature three artists. In the summer of 2014 we initially approached Toronto-based dance artists: Danielle Baskerville, Bee Pallomina and Amelia Ehrhardt. Due to an unsuccessful grant application to the Toronto Arts Council, the scope of the event was reduced to feature only a single dance artist: Amelia Ehrhardt. Out of the three artists approached, Ehrhardt was the only artist who was committed to creating a new choreography in response to archival documents from 15 Dance Lab regardless of whether or not the grant was successful. Ehrhardt agreed to create this a new work for an agreed upon fee, the proceeds of ticket sales (minimum of \$500.00). Trained at York University in the BA in Dance program, Ehrhardt was a clear choice for the collaboration due to the conceptual, postmodern aspect of her practice in both the form and the themes that her work undertook.

### **Commissioning**

The idea to commission a young Toronto dance artist came from a desire on the part of the Nomadic Curatorial Collective to open up a conversation between the formal, political and aesthetic trends of 15 Dance Lab and the present (rather than re-mount a specific work or series of works). We were all somewhat cautious about the political and theoretical concerns of re-mounting historic material and approaching original artists from 15 Dance Lab, though we discussed the merits of this approach. One concern was a desire to focus on current practices in contemporary dance and open up a conversation with the past by way

of archival research. Another factor, which influenced our decision-making on this topic, was the richness and breadth of archival documents held at Dance Collection Danse, from the 15 Danse Lab era, including the *Spill* magazine series<sup>72</sup> and a desire to see contemporary artists respond to these documents, to revisit the archives but with an eye to contemporary concerns.

### **Site**

The decision of where to hold the event was an essential one, as McCurdy and Spooner and I were all very committed in our own fields of research to the role of site and the impact of site on the curation and exhibition of contemporary dance. The collective felt that because the physical setting of 15 Dance Lab was so important to the context and content of the work it produced,<sup>73</sup> it would be impossible to ignore the implications of site for this event, and also important to acknowledge the degree to which site would co-determine the contents of the work or at the very least impact the interpretive frameworks used to understand the performance. It became clear that a traditional white cube gallery space would frame the work in a very specific way, and determine its interpretive framing to a great degree. Though performers from 15 Dance Lab did, at times, perform their artworks in gallery spaces such as the AGO or A Space, the majority of the work was originally created for the 15 Dance Lab theatre.

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<sup>72</sup> 15 Dance Lab published thirteen issues of a by-monthly magazine titled *Spill* between 1974-1980.

<sup>73</sup> 15 Dance Lab was an intimate forty-one seat black box theatre, with black walls and theatres seats oriented in the round. It was generally regarded as an unpolished and somewhat informal performance setting in downtown Toronto at 155 George St.

McCurdy, Spooner and I discussed whether or not it would be possible to use the original site of 15 Dance Lab located at 155 George St., or rather to find somewhere in close proximity to the original site. In the summer of 2014, McCurdy, Spooner and I walked from Dance Collection Danse to 155 George St. with Dance Collection Danse Director and former 15 Dance Lab Co-Founder, Miriam Adams, to determine whether or not the building even still existed, let alone whether or not it would be a possible performance site. What we discovered was that the original site of 15 Dance Lab, which was accessed off of Britain St. appeared to have been converted into a townhouse residence. As we were exploring the exterior an elderly woman pulled up in a car, asked if we could ring the doorbell, and stated that she had been trying to call her friend inside who wasn't picking up. As a result, moments later Miriam Adams was reunited with the original landlord of 15 Dance Lab from forty years earlier, who was able to explain in some detail that the space, which had previously been occupied by the black box theatre, was now a storage space for her husband's personal belongings. She was not able to show us the original site as it was packed floor to ceiling, and she was too embarrassed to have us examine it.

Due to this serendipitous event, it became evident that it would not be possible to house the performance at the original site of 15 Dance Lab, however, it confirmed that the original site, though superficially altered by new paint and exterior styling, did still exist. This felt like a stroke of luck due to the rapid and constant urbanization of downtown Toronto. Our attention then turned to the idea

of both proximity to the original site, and to the aim of finding a space that was not a gallery and not a theatre but something in between. The most logical answer to these concerns surfaced in the George Brown School of Design located directly across the street from the former 15 Dance Lab. During a tour of the facility we learned that the multi-purpose activity room, with a wooden dance-safe floor and large windows overlooking the original site of 15 Dance Lab, would be available to us at no cost, due to the support of Lori Endes, an administrator in the George Brown School of Design. Based on the above considerations we selected this location as our site for *No Context*.

### **Catalogue Design & Production**

The decision to produce a catalogue with the performance, dates back to the initial decision, on the part of the collective, to curate contemporary dance in Toronto. It was integral to our collective, based on our intense discussions following the “Envisioning the Practice” conference that we were committed in our desire to produce curatorial writing in the field of dance. Though the decision to create the *No Context* catalogue was fundamental, the design and printing of the catalogue was a complex process, which involved a series of important collaborations.

I wanted the form of the catalogue to be informed by the historical and theoretical research I was undertaking, and to make sure it aligned aesthetically, formally and theoretically with Ehrhardt’s work, and the central ideas behind *No Context*. It also became clear that a decision had to be made as to whether or not

the catalogue would be published concurrently, alongside the exhibition (and available to audiences on the night of the performance), or would be published several months after the performance. I felt very strongly that in order to pose the questions I was interested in posing about the relationship between text and performance, the catalogue and the live performance had to interact in the same space, and audiences had to have the ability to hold the catalogue in their hands and refer to it instantly, even as the performance was unfolding. This created an interesting paradox; in order for the catalogue go to print on time and to work with a designer to perfect the layout, all the writing and catalogue content had to be completed and edited six weeks before the live performance occurred. This meant that, since it was a commissioned work that Ehrhardt was still developing, the writing would have to be completed while the live performance was still in the rehearsal process. This ended up becoming essential to the theoretical underpinnings of the project as it meant that, even had there been a desire for the catalogue to provide a definitive interpretive analysis of the work, this would have been a logistic impossibility. This gave me a chance to revisit the question: how can curatorial writing function in relationship to live contemporary dance and provide context and supportive frameworks rather than an analysis of the work. In this case, the logistic practicalities of catalogue publication, and the publication timeline actually clarified my theoretical approach to the form and content of the catalogue.

There were of course risks associated with this approach. The first essay in the catalogue, written by myself, was written in late January. At this moment in the development of the work Ehrhardt's movement quality and vocabulary were quite different from the final performance on March 25, 2015. In addition, the text read alongside Ehrhardt's movements was still in its infancy, which made it impossible to respond more directly to some of the questions and ideas which Ehrhardt raises later in her text, as they had not yet been formulated. The subtle disjuncture between the essay's movement description and the way in which it addresses only the first ideas that Ehrhardt introduces in her work, reveals the subjectivity and singular perspective of the writer, and also invites the reader to continue building his or her own response to *No Context*. This subjective point of view is alluded to in the final paragraph of the essay when it states that *No Context* is still continuing to grow and evolve and the writing can in no way be understood as complete.

One major challenge faced in the commissioning process surrounded how issues of race and representation were dealt with in Ehrhardt's performance. After the second studio visit, I contacted Ehrhardt to voice my concerns at the inclusion of the song "New Feelings" by hip hop artist Mykki Blanco. I wrote Ehrhardt to say I was concerned that her treatment of the song in the work was conflating a narrative about the liberation from oppression via the reclamation of language on the part of a black hip hop artist with structural gender inequalities at play in the field of contemporary dance in Toronto. Due to the self-conscious nature of the

work, I pointed out that Ehrhardt references a logic behind almost every one of her choices in *No Context* with the exception of this choice. Ehrhardt responded by adding a meta-commentary after the song stating that she had received many comments from spectators at the inclusion of this song and she wondered what the audience thought of it. While it is a criticism of second wave feminists and can be seen as a criticism of the era of 15 Dance Lab that issues of representation surrounding race and sexual identities were not included in conversations about gender inequality, I would argue that when explicitly addressing gender in the contemporary context race and sexual identities must be considered.

### **Documentation**

Throughout the planning of *No Context*, McCurdy, Spooner and I discussed the role of documentation. All Nomadic Curatorial Collective meetings were recorded in the form of typed minutes alongside several voice recorded sessions. When it came to the question of whether or not Ehrhardt's performance should be documented there was some discussion. One concern was that documentation can be extremely invasive, especially in non-theatre sites, which are not making use of traditional lighting and staging systems that may conceal, or partially conceal, documentation equipment. A second concern was that the intimate setting of the George Brown School of Design might be altered by the presence of documentation equipment. A third consideration was the important role documentation (both textual and video) played in Ehrhardt's process of creating *No Context*. Also, in keeping with the period at issue (the 1970s),



documentation and namely video documentation was a real priority in 15 Dance Lab performances. The collective also considered the importance of gaining performance footage in support of future grant applications, to help contribute to the long-term viability of the collective. For these reasons Erin McCurdy, Cara Spooner and I decided to document the work via videography and photography with the intention of donating a copy of all documentation alongside the *No Context* catalogue to the Dance Collection Danse archives. This would bring the role of archival documentation in *No Context* (from source material to the creation of new works to documentation) full circle.

### **Audiences**

One major challenge that arose in terms of working collectively toward a shared vision surfaced in the discussion surrounding audiences. McCurdy and Spooner and I were in agreement that former artists and critics connected to 15 Dance Lab should be invited to attend the performance as well as contemporary dance communities in Toronto. While we reached out to former artists and critics connected to 15 Dance Lab, and a number did attend, at the March 25<sup>th</sup> 2015 performance of *No Context* there were relatively few of Toronto's contemporary dance communities in attendance. Due to limited seating at the venue, and a capacity of fifty-five people we had decided to sell tickets in advance online. This meant that while email invitations were sent out in advance to artists who had formerly performed at 15 Dance Lab, as well as to members of Toronto's contemporary dance communities, the advance tickets that were sold online and

via Facebook were sold on a first come first served basis. To our amazement, *No Context* sold out in less than a day of these advance tickets becoming available. When reviewing the names of those who had bought tickets, we saw a mix of former 15 Dance Lab artists, students and faculty from OCAD University, as well as a mix of curators, writers, actors and contemporary visual artists as well as family members of the curators and performers in *No Context*, and personal contacts. My co-curators were extremely disheartened by the make up of the audience, especially by the large number of audiences from the visual arts and the small number of audience members from contemporary dance communities in Toronto. Taking into account the make up of the audience and the speed with which *No Context* sold out we decided collectively to add another date (April 9<sup>th</sup>) for a second performance of *No Context* so that more members of Toronto's contemporary dance communities would have the opportunity to see the work. One thing that became evident in listening to my co-curators discuss the planned second performance of *No Context* was that they were of the opinion that the majority of those who attended the first performance were not the *intended* audience. While I agreed that a second performance of *No Context* would give the opportunity for more members of Toronto's dance communities to attend, I felt concerned that this attitude suggested that *No Context* would/could only be of value to those working within dance communities in Toronto. I believe that although *No Context* deals directly with Toronto's dance history, it should not be directed solely towards dance communities. Many of the issues that Ehrhardt

raises in her work are relevant not only to the field(s) of contemporary dance, but the field(s) of contemporary art and beyond. This opened an uncomfortable discussion around whether or not some audiences are more deserving to see a given work. Although I believe that if the work was made for a specific community/or communities, as in the case of *No Context*, then efforts should be made to invite and accommodate those communities, however, once those efforts have been made I believe that the audiences for any work of art in the end are those who see it. I think it is dangerous to start evaluating the deservedness of an audience to see a certain work, and to underestimate certain audiences' abilities to access or appreciate a work given that they have chosen to witness/partake in it. Dance communities in Toronto are often criticized for their insular qualities. I believe that cross-disciplinary access and cross-disciplinary dialogues are important in the field(s) of contemporary dance and that these moments of exposure and the cross-pollination of ideas that can occur are central to the development of the field(s) of both contemporary dance and contemporary art in Toronto.

### **Budget**

*No Context* was funded in part by Ontario Graduate Scholarship funding and a contribution from OCAD University Graduate Studies. All proceeds from ticket sales went directly to the artist Amelia Ehrhardt. Overall, costs incurred during the production of both performances were divided amongst the three co-curators, McCurdy, Spooner and myself.

## **Conclusion**

This exhibition report outlines the background, context and decision-making processes of a number of central features of *No Context*. It is my hope that this report will be a practical component to accompany the more theoretical research and analysis conducted in this thesis research. Ideally this report will give readers a clear picture of some of the challenges faced in the planning of *No Context* and some of the key logistic and artistic concerns, which arose. I hope that this report will add to a very small pool of writing on curating contemporary dance and the practical and theoretical considerations at play in the intersection between contemporary dance and curatorial practice. The practical planning of *No Context*, and the more theoretical research conducted in support of this thesis, happened simultaneously creating a unique somewhat symbiotic structure wherein the theory began to influence the practice and vice versa while both were in their early stages of development. This presented the opportunity to ask some practical and theoretical questions regarding the form and structure of the *No Context* catalogue at key moments of juncture in the research processes. I believe the nature of the timeline enriched both the process and the final product of this research. It is my hope that this research and exhibition report will aid future scholars and curators who embark on research into curatorial practice and curatorial writing in the field of contemporary dance.

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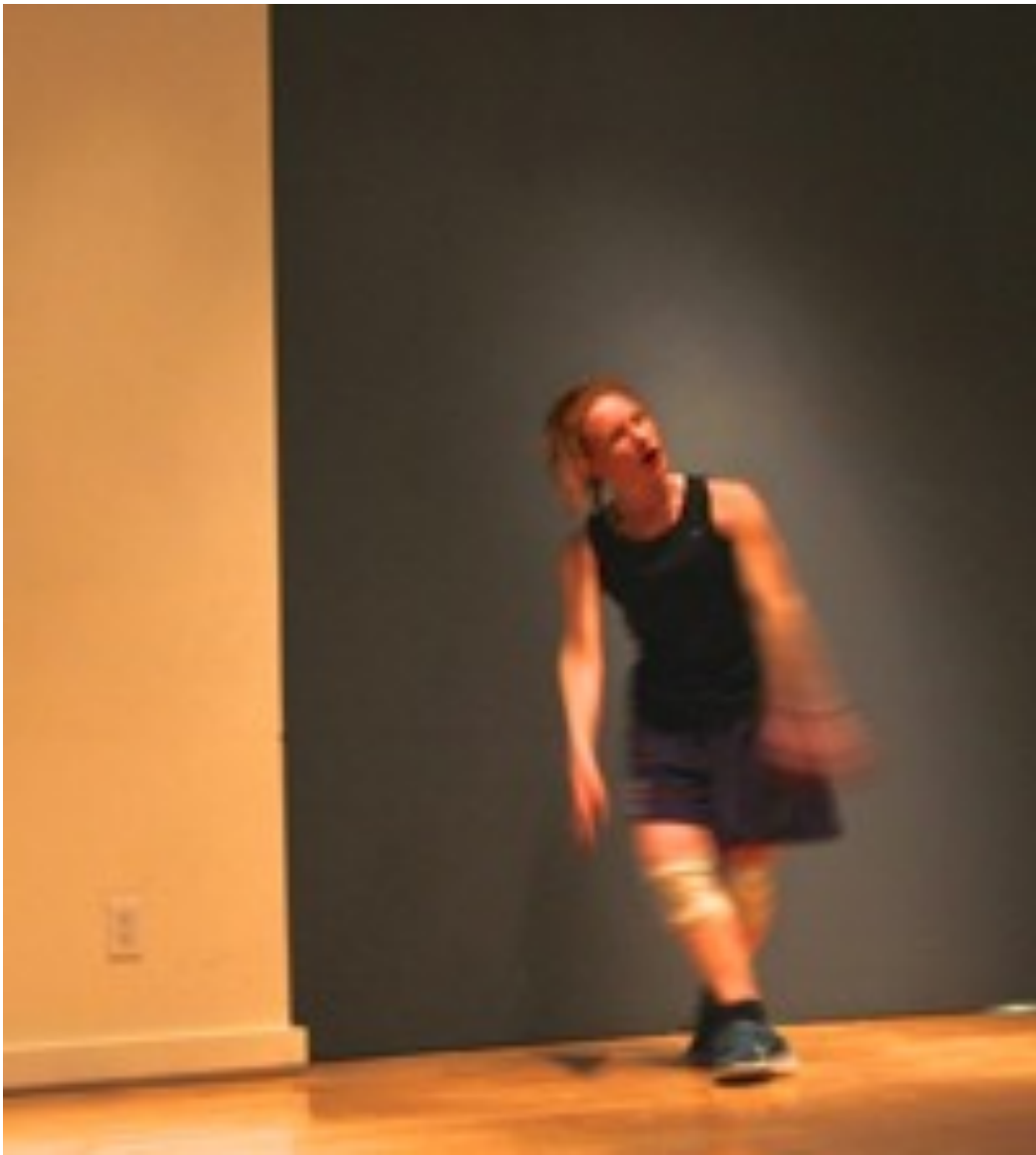
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## List of Figures

Figure 1. *No Context* Exhibition Photograph



Amelia Ehrhardt, *No Context* performance, Photo credit: Miranda Whist

Figure 2. *No Context* Exhibition Photograph



Amelia Ehrhardt, *No Context* performance, Photo credit: Miranda Whist

Figure 3. *No Context* Exhibition Photograph



Amelia Ehrhardt, *No Context* performance, Photo credit: Miranda Whist

## **Accompanying Material**

The following accompanying material is available upon request from the Ontario College of Art and Design University Library: *No Context or Studio Place or Decentralize or We Actually Maybe Right Now Have Everything We Need* catalogue. Any one requesting the material may view it in the OCADU library or pay to have it copied for personal use. The following material is also available at: [www.victoriamohrblakeney.com](http://www.victoriamohrblakeney.com).