

SOURCING — CREATING — SHARING
A METHOD FOR CREATING SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE

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Introduction/Purpose

Often, I find myself asking: what is right in front of me? Who are these people I pass by everyday? What is exciting about this place, any place, right now? These questions have sparked an interest in me about local culture and how it connects to my dance making process. I now find myself stopping in the place that I live, looking around, and noticing the abundance of artistic possibility in the everyday. Site-specific dance is especially relevant to this interest because it encourages me to engage creatively in a local community, bringing new life to everyday places through dance.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a method for creating site-specific dance performances by examining and articulating the creative process in *Complex Environments: This is not a bar*, a live performance in a local café and bar called Banter, in Denton, TX. In this project my collaborator, Bethany Nelson, and I investigated our site by observing the actions, conversations, and interactions that occurred in Banter during normal business hours. After gathering the observed material, we used it as the impetus for choreographing an evening length dance that was performed in Banter on December 4th and 5th, 2009. The creative team was comprised

of diverse performers; Nadia Losonsky, Bethany Nelson, Juan Pablo Montes, Melissa Watt, José Zamora, and myself; along with sound designer, John Osburn. Our intention behind the project was to create a new context for an everyday space, by reimagining and altering the observed actions and conversations of people from the space through dance performance.

Within this paper, I will discuss the theoretical framework for this project in order to investigate the meaning of site-specificity and how it relates to our work. I will then look at three diverse creative frameworks that I used as inspiration to develop our creative process. Connecting those ideas, I will articulate how the theoretical frameworks and the creative frameworks became integrated in the context of this project, and how we developed our method of sourcing, creating, and sharing. Finally, I will reflect on the work, investigating the lasting impact of the project and how it has shifted my artistic mission.

Theoretical Framework

What does site-specific mean in this project? Site-specific discourse lacks critical dialogue, says Miwon Kwon (2004), author of *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*. In his book he states: “This concern to reassess the relationship between the art work and its site is largely provoked by the new ways in which the term site specific has been uncritically adopted as another genre category by mainstream art institutions and discourses” (Kwon, 2004, pp.1). In my experience learning about and performing site-specific dances with artists such as John Dixon, Jill Sigman, and The SHUA Group, the emphasis in the creative process was largely on the architecture of the space. In many of these instances, the site-specific choreography or improvisational

scores were dependent on the physical structure of the site and could not exist in another space. Kwon describes this distinct relationship between site-specific art and the physicality of the space: "...site-specific art initially took the site as an actual location, a tangible reality, its identity composed of a unique combination of physical elements: length, depth, height, texture, and shape of walls or rooms; scale and proportion of plazas, buildings, or parks; existing conditions of lighting, ventilation, traffic patterns; distinctive topographical features and so forth" (Kwon, 2004, pp. 11). When focusing on the architecture of the space, the movement is often informed by the physical structure: the texture, lines, dimensions, and physical parameters. However, entering this project, I found myself drawn more to the activity and interaction of the people in the site, rather than the architecture of it. I became curious how a site could be comprised of both architecture and people and how one could source from both as part of the creative process.

How might one perceive contexts about the space that are not inherent in its physicality? Victoria Hunter speaks to this in her article, *Experiencing Space: The Implications for Site-Specific Dance Performance*. She states, "... the 'meaning' of the space refers not only to its external façade, but indicates the building's function and the social norms employed when interacting with the space" (Hunter, n.d., pp. 6). I believe this is especially true for public and commercial spaces where interaction between people is central to the function of the architecture. In these instances, the architecture is likely designed for interaction between people. These "...constructed environments are not simply empty, passive spaces; instead they actively engage with their contents, users, contexts, and environments to construct meanings" (Hunter, n.d., pp. 8). For

instance, in Banter there is a physical design that directs people to enter the space, visit the sales counter, and move to a seating area, setting up the context for interaction. Yet performance creates possibilities for new context and interaction: "...dance performance can serve to 're-inscribe' the space, thus challenging the context, dominant ideology, and perception of a particular space or site" (Hunter, n.d., pp. 16). Site-specific choreographer, Stephan Koplowitz commented on the embedded layers within a site: "When creating a site-specific performance one is dealing with multiple levels at once: the architecture of the site, its history, its use, its accessibility. I'm interested in becoming a part of the design and rhythm of the site and amplifying that" (qtd. in Hunter, n.d., pp.14). In my work, I too give new context to sites by understanding the space's design and rhythm, as well as the activity and overall energy in the space in order to create something new within it.

Martha Bowers, director of Dance Theatre Etcetera, offers a definition of site-specific dance that accounts for the possible parts and layers of a site, including both the architecture and the activity of people within it. "Site-specific dance is a conscious, performative response to questions concerning locational identity" (Kloetzel et al., 2009, pp. 268). Understanding the identity of the site means understanding its history, purpose, and meaning in contemporary life. I believe having this kind of clarity about a site allows you to understand how dance can potentially enliven, re-purpose, or re-contextualize it. Bowers also notes that because of new technologies available and the addition of virtual space, defining site-specificity is a complex task. What if a site lives in virtual space? How does one define its parameters? How does one define his or her relationship to a virtual space? Bowers suggests that the virtual space is ripe for

exploration and investigation: “If, in previous decades, at least one impetus for artists to leave galleries and theaters was to urge to engage with the world more directly...then it makes perfect sense that artists see virtual space as territory ripe for intervention” (Kloetzel, 2009, pp. 269). Virtual spaces and communities are relatively new territory for myself, yet have great potential to engage diverse audiences, re-imagine how one defines a site, and even create unique virtual sites. Without gravitating toward this idea of virtual space intentionally, in *Complex Environments*, we found ourselves communicating with our audience through familiar virtual spaces like our blog, Facebook, and Twitter. This communication in virtual spaces helped shape the site-specific dance we were creating in a physical space, *Banter*, by adding layers of information we could source from.

The audience’s perception of the work seems even more relevant in site-specific dance, because the artist makes the choice about how the audience will physically see the work. He or she makes choices about where the audience will be located in the space, which may vary wildly from the traditional proscenium theater’s seating design. Because of this, how the audience physically experiences the dance becomes as crucial of a decision as how the dance begins or ends. The site-specific dance artist must think about questions regarding the audience’s perception, such as: How does the audience literally see the work and from what perspective? How does this create a unique relationship with the work? In the book, *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces*, Stephen Koplowitz mentions how often audiences have expectations learned from traditional theatrical settings: “...Most site-specific audience members, often without realizing it, bring to site-specific events their built-in concert

hall/proscenium expectations and desires. No one wants a partial view “seat,” and no one wants to be in an environment that will somehow impede him or her from communing directly with the work” (Kloetzel, 2009, pp. 80). When creating a site-specific dance performance, the work must be created with a three-dimensional perspective in mind. One cannot assume that each audience member will have equal opportunity to view the work, as can be assumed in a proscenium theatre. Though this can be a challenging task, it is also exciting because the artist is inventing the parameters for both performing and experiencing a site-specific dance performance.

It is the unique questions that a site-specific dance artist wrestles with that make this kind of work so fascinating to me: How is “site” defined? Is it architecture, locational identity, activity of people? Is the site virtual or real?; How does one see this work? How does the artist help shape the audience’s perception? Through exploring these questions in our creative process, I noticed a pattern of sourcing, creating, and sharing that became central to the work. We had to define what our site was and how we would source it. We had to also use our creativity to guide the audience’s eye through this multidimensional performance. Lastly, we needed to share the process with others to help us further clarify this new creative process. In the next section, I will investigate three diverse creative frameworks that utilize a similar model of sourcing, creating, and sharing.

Creative Frameworks

Because of the site-specific nature, the creative process in this project expanded beyond the confines of the dance studio—where sourcing, creating, and sharing is exclusive to the cast and the choreographer. Within this project, we wanted to source

people outside of the project and offer participation beyond the creative team. To do this, we sourced conversations and actions from people within Banter to be reconstructed as movement and dialogue within the performance. We also offered participation through a public blog and social media, where we posted information about the creative process and ask for input along the way. To clarify my method, I was curious how other artists' created from the threefold process of sourcing, creating, and sharing. Three creative models I used in this project are author Alain de Botton's writing process within a public airport; journalist Andrew Fitzgerald's process of creating short stories from readers' submitted words and sentences; and Dance Theatre Workshop's process of creating short dance videos from actions submitted by their Twitter community.

Author Alain de Botton turned observations from the London Heathrow airport into a book, *A Week at the Airport: A Heathrow Diary*. During the summer of 2009, Botton was given "unprecedented, unrestricted access to wander around the Heathrow, one of the world's biggest airports, having been appointed its Writer-in-Residence" (Botton, 2012). He spoke to everyone from airport staff to passengers and used these conversations as the basis for his book, a written account of "life at an airport and what it says about modern existence" (Botton, 2012). He sourced conversations and observations, created a lush, descriptive diary of his time there, and shared it with the public. Botton inspires the reader by looking at what is right in front of him in an ordinary Western society context, the airport, and finds the poignant human nature in these mundane actions and interactions. I am immensely drawn to this kind of work that, to

me, serves as a reminder to wake up, look around at our surroundings, and spark curiosity and wonder in everyday life.

Journalist Andrew Fitzgerald successfully funded a writing project through Kickstarter, an online funding platform for artists, designers, filmmakers, musicians, and other creative entrepreneurs. In his project, *Andrew vs. The Collective*, he wrote a story every week for six weeks, using words, characters, settings, and sentences submitted to him by those that pledged financially to his project. I am one of the people who pledged and had the opportunity to see my sentences used in his short stories. Though I had imagined how my sentences might navigate the story in a particular way, the context in which they were used always surprised me. Fitzgerald sourced textual material from his Kickstarter community, created inventive original short stories from it, and shared it with the public. As a participant, I found this project empowering because my contributions could be directly tied to the final product. Fitzgerald also reframed how I connect with a book. I was not only reading it for pleasure, but searching curiously for bits of text and information I knew would be included.

I discovered Dance Theatre Workshop's (DTW) Twitter Community Choreography through my personal Twitter account. DTW was asking its followers to submit actions to them via Twitter posts. Their intention was to compile these actions for a week, sequence them into a short dance, film it, and share the finished product with their online community. I participated in several of the weekly choreographies and have found them to be engaging, accessible perspectives into the dance making process. Currently, DTW has expanded this series and had begun asking the Twitter community to respond to a first draft video and decide the order of the movement and where the

location for filming should be. By doing this, they are offering more opportunities for the public to make creative decisions. In this project, DTW has sourced movement descriptions from their Twitter community, created short dance videos, and shared them with the public. This project is an interesting example of using virtual communities and spaces, such as Twitter, to engage a wide audience base in an accessible way.

Integration: Putting Models Into Practice

Sourcing

In this project, the process of sourcing was drawn from all of the mentioned creative framework models. Collaborator Bethany Nelson and I observed people in Banter and talked to them, just as Alain de Botton did in the Heathrow. In Banter, we documented and described segments of conversations, gestures, postures, actions, and specific architectural elements in the space. We wanted to capture the essence of Banter through snippets of activity that happen while it was most “alive,” i.e. during normal business hours. We turned simple actions into dance phrases, as DTW did via their Twitter community. We also sourced information from our virtual community just as Fitzgerald and DTW did, by asking for responses from the readers of our public blog and followers of the project on Facebook and Twitter. In one instance, we wanted to generate a long series of unrelated questions for an interrogating scene in our dance. To do this, we put out a call for questions from our larger following online, and received a plethora of creative and surprising responses. By engaging with people outside of the creative team, we were able to access a greater pool of experience and creativity.

Knowing that we did not want to merely replicate the context of Banter in our performance, what we *did* to the sourced observations and responses felt more

important than how we sourced them. We wanted to use the observations and responses as impetus to generate inventive ways of interacting with the space and creating a new context for the space. How did we give actions and conversations new life? How did we use unrelated questions submitted from the virtual communities? How did we use our observations in Banter to repurpose the site? To answer these questions, we unleashed our creative tools.

Creating

After collecting observations from Banter and responses from the blog, we had to determine how they were going to take on new life in the performance. The most basic way that we used our source material was to sequence unrelated actions and text to form short movement phrases. In many ways, this process was not different than one we have used in a studio setting. We played with the timing, the scale, and the dynamics of the actions to discover phrases that could be physically nuanced. We linked movement phrases together to create longer “chunks” of energetic ensemble dancing. We also created relationships through movement by physically linking two dancers together, or turning a solo phrase into a partnering phrase. Though many of the choreographic tools used in this process were similar to a non-site-specific dance making process, I made discoveries about how I work in this new territory. In this process, I found it easier to let go of movement ideas if I didn’t feel like it was fitting the work. Unlike my process in a studio setting, I was not as immediately attached to phrase material in the early stages of the process, which could be due to the fact that I didn’t create the initial movement from my own body. The site-specificity of the work allowed me to step back and examine the work from a unique perspective.

After developing a number of short movement phrases from the sourced actions and conversations, we then constructed what I call choreographic scenes. These are larger sections within the performance that included several movement phrases and/or dialogue, but were centered around one idea, much like a theatrical scene is centered around a moment in a narrative story. In developing the choreographic scenes, the architecture and energy in the site influenced our ideas and decisions greatly. The energy of the site was important to notice because the site was also a social space, which had a liveliness when people interacted within it. These interactions between people created energetic qualities that varied from the calm energy found in quiet conversations; to the more vibrant and lively energy found in music performances. We wanted to contrast the energy that is normally present in Banter in our performance, so many of our scenes explored contrasting energetic states. For instance, in one scene, performer José Zamora berates fellow cast member Melissa Watt with an endless stream of questions, nearly verbally assaulting her toward the end. While this happened, the remaining performers who sat scattered around the performance space, slowly and calmly slid to floor, laying on their backs. Neither the bipolar craze of José's questioning nor the sloth-like state of the remaining performers was an energetic state that was regularly found in Banter. The juxtaposition of these two contrasting energetic states created an entirely new situation in Banter, and thus contributed to the shaping of the choreographic world we were creating.

Because there were so many interesting architectural elements to the space, we wanted to make clear choices about what was seen from the audience's perspective. To determine what was visually accentuated during the performance, we used an

improvisational rule that there were to be no more than three ideas in focus, from the audience's perspective, a concept drawn from Nina Martin's Ensemble Thinking methodology. These ideas could be solos, duets, pre-determined choreography, architecture, video, or sound. Often, the architecture in the space aided us in drawing attention to an idea. For instance, there was a stone ledge along the back of the performance space that could be used to elevate a person's height, drawing attention to their actions. The furniture used in the space was also mobile. By moving it, we drew attention to the foreground and background of the space, and to the width of space, by dragging a piece of furniture from one side to the other. For instance, using our improvisational rule, if we noticed that there was a performer on the stone ledge, and furniture being moved across the space, we might choose more discreet movement in order to highlight the activity already happening. While the use of architecture added many interesting possibilities for the dance, it also made us increasingly aware that the audience would not simply be looking at a dance, but also an entire space with countless elements and layers within it.

The ways in which we used the furniture and the architecture in Banter physically repurposed the site. We were not limited to how couches, chairs, tables, bookshelves, walls, fountains, and floors were used traditionally in Banter. Instead, we wanted to juxtapose and contrast the normal usage of the space. For instance, we tumbled on couches, flipping them to the floor; jumped on tables; stood on bookshelves; danced on ledges; laid on floors; and sang in a kitchen. Often these contrasting uses of the space created humorous situations. Our intent was not to be funny, but we noticed quickly that the common response to out-of-the-ordinary actions was to laugh. Personally, what

excites me about these moments of repurposing the site, and the elements within it, is that they evoke a sense of wonder about the space. An audience member might wonder, “What if people sang in the kitchen at Banter everyday? What if that was normal? What defines normalcy?” These are all questions that I would love for an audience member to think about when experiencing one of my projects.

Creating a dance in the site-specific genre involves creating a world that is invented or reimagined by the artists through a multi-dimensional process. In *Complex Environments*, we sequenced unrelated conversations and actions, created choreographic scenes, used improvisation, and repurposed the physical site. We created an environment in Banter that did not fit its original context, although was derived entirely from it. The people in Banter provided much of the source material through their actions and conversations, and the architecture directly influenced how we framed that material in the space. Beyond that, our own creative tools and methods allowed us to experiment with the sourced material and discover new ways in which the site could be used.

Sharing

Because we engaged with the community of people in Banter, the virtual community of blog readers, and the collaborative creative team, this process became accessible to many because of the sharing that took place. I don't believe the work would have had the same depth or completeness without sharing the process because its development was directly related to the feedback we received from others. The sharing process began early on when I decided to log notes and ideas about the project on a public blog. Initially wanting to share the creative process with others and receive

input, I noticed that sharing with several different communities became important to the trajectory of the work, because often public response served as impetus for movement and dialogue in the performance, and general feedback informed what we were doing and why it was meaningful. Additionally, this project sourced a lot of interaction between people in a public space, and it quickly became apparent that, quite simply, *people* were central to this work. This included not only the people in the creative team, or the people we happened to see while researching in Banter, but a wider range of people that were invested in the work on multiple levels. We shared with communities within and outside the creative team including: the artistic collaborators, the patrons of Banter, the virtual community members, and the audience.

Sharing the source material with the artistic collaborators was the first step towards creating the work. Seeing the performers try the documented actions and dialogue with their own bodies and voices instantly created something new. The documented sounds from the space took on new life as our sound designer, John Osburn, began layering and distorting them. It was exciting to see the possibilities of performance open up just by putting our gathered material into new hands.

Throughout our observations of people in Banter, we talked with many of them about our process. By doing this, we were forced to constantly verbalize the mission of the project and explain it to people who had little prior knowledge about site-specific dance performance. This was interesting and informative because with every conversation, we honed in the purpose of the project, which kept it grounded in the site, not letting it drift entirely into our choreographic imaginations.

Sharing the process on the public blog and via social media allowed me to reflect on the process and ask: what did we really do? Why might someone think our project is interesting? Why not? Some weeks, I shared elements outside of the dance making process, such as ideas for publicity. Other weeks, I asked for very specific responses from the virtual community, which fueled creative tasks within the project. In general, offering a variety of rehearsal notes, videos, images, and prompts for the virtual community gave a holistic look into this multidimensional project. This was not only valuable for the public, but for the creative team as it allowed us to continually articulate the scope of the project as it evolved throughout the creative process.

Sharing the final performance with the audience was a new experience for me because some audience members had been following the project as virtual community members and some had no prior knowledge of the project. Regardless of how they entered as audience members, all of these people were the first to experience a new context for Banter that we created. The process of creating and performing the work, and hearing responses from the audience created new memories about the space for me. I became curious what new memories people had about the space after being part of the project, either as an audience member, virtual community member, or a collaborator. In a casual conversation with my brother, Robin Sloan, I asked him how the space had changed for him, if at all. I was curious about his thoughts, considering he had never been to Banter, but was familiar with its function as a café and bar. He relates:

As I watched the performance, I realized that when we occupy a space like that -- a cafe space -- we do it in a really restrained way...I realized this because the

dancers were the opposite: they were loud, expansive, and they did things you'd never do in a cafe: jump up and down on the couches! Slither over the top of the couches! Roll couches around, and move chairs around! It actually felt very transgressive -- like 'oh no, are they going to get in trouble'

His response was exciting to me and made me wish I had gathered responses from all the people involved in the project. I got the sense that Banter has a new context for many of them and was curious if this experience has changed how they see and perceive Banter, or how they see other everyday places as potential places for performance.

Reflections

What was the lasting impact of this project? In my experience, the process of making *Complex Environments* has changed how I see everyday spaces. I now look at coffee shops, bookstores, parks, and alleys as potential spaces to be enlivened by performance; morphing the environment into something new, through researching and understanding the original purpose of the site. This shift in how I look at spaces on a daily basis has also affected how I see and interact with people. I am more aware of interactions among people in my everyday life, and curious how these actions and conversations can have a new life in performance. Creating a performance in a space that I still visit has also created new memories. I have visited Banter numerous times since completing the project, and now have imprinted memories about the space. For instance, when I eat or work on my laptop in Banter now, I find myself turning to look at a wooden table and yellow leather chair in the corner, but instead imagining two performers dancing on them. Although I have gained a new perspective on my everyday

experience and new methods for creating site-specific work, I wonder how our project changed the site.

How did we offer a new context for Banter and possibly repurpose the site permanently? My hope is that this performance would offer a new purpose for Banter, and possibly open up the possibilities for performances in everyday spaces. After a casual conversation with one of my professors, Linda Caldwell, she mentioned that she saw our performance as giving the audience “an idea of what we are missing every day – that we could be having so much more fun in our lives on a day to day basis and in a place to place basis if performance happened everywhere and unexpectedly in unexpected places” (2010). Hearing this response is inspiring and reaffirms my belief that site-specific performances can create, repurpose, and enliven everyday spaces.

If I created a project like this again, I would be most interested in collecting tangible responses from the people who participated in the project about how their context of a familiar place changed after being part of the performance, either virtually or locally. If they participated in the project as a blog reader and virtual community member, how did that involvement engage their own creativity, or shift their perception of their own familiar spaces? Having this kind of feedback fuels my artistic mission to engage with local culture and helps me shape future projects. Richard Schechner says that participation occurs at “those points where the event stops being a presentation of art and becomes a social event, when the spectators feel that they’re free to enter the performance as equals” (2002, pp. 44). I’m curious how local and virtual community engagement can facilitate this kind of participation, as a means to break down the separation between art and everyday life. By engaging closely with a local site, this

process also explores the role of the artist in her community, and the role that diverse spaces play in developing that community. How might these roles change with new sites and new people? How can this process of dance making bring light to these roles, and impact a community?

Creatively, I have always been inspired by everyday experiences and daily interactions with people and have felt an urge to create and offer performances that foster community, ask questions, and bring the subtleties of life into the forefront. Encompassing collaboration, local culture, site-specific performance, and virtual communities, *Complex Environments: This is not a bar* brought together the aspects of dance making that I value and find intriguing. Beyond my personal interests in these ways of working, this method of dance making can be a way to connect art to the everyday, by bringing creativity and dance to unexpected places.

Refernces

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