

Emily Hansel

emilyhansel@mail.usf.edu

U42945605

BFA in Dance Performance

The Representation of Ideas by Words and Art

Thesis Director: Bliss Kohlmyer

Committee Member: Andee Scott

Date Submitted: April 29, 2016

Compilation of Ideas and Development of Choreographic Concept

For the past several years, I have been writing things in journals. I write down everything that I feel needs to be preserved. I never share anything I write with anyone—it is often simply the process of putting my thoughts into words that I am after. Concretizing my abstract thoughts helps me figure things out and allows me to move forward to the next round of thoughts that comes my way.

Having a conversation with another person functions in much the same way. I must convert my ideas into the medium of language in order to communicate them. Just like journaling, this changeover from abstract to concrete has a clarifying effect. However, even though speaking words out loud helps me organize and get a hold on my thoughts, it does not preserve them. If I ever say, or hear someone else say, a particularly accurate, eloquent, or agreeable string of words, I go to my journal to write it down. This tendency toward preservation is simply a result of my need to make sure that I do not forget important ideas.

For example, three years ago I recorded in my journal this line that a professional dancer named Twitch spoke in an interview with Ellen DeGeneres: “I was passionate about dance before I even knew what passion was.” These words struck me because they accurately described a feeling that I empathized with but had not yet labeled.

Short lines like this, in addition to much longer excerpts, fill my journals. They are excerpts from a huge variety of books, articles, interviews, TED Talks, videos, emails, texts, lectures, and personal conversations. A good number of them came from the works mentioned in the literature review in my prospectus for this

thesis. I noticed that a lot of these ideas that I had recorded in the past few years dealt with the subject matter of this thesis: "The Representation of Ideas by Words and Art." Ironically, I was so intrigued by making abstract thoughts¹ concrete that I needed to make my thoughts on the matter concrete.

I went through all of my journals (and all the scraps of paper upon which I had scratched important words) and copied down all the quotes that dealt specifically with the subject of this thesis. I needed a starting point and I was going to begin by comparing and contrasting all of these ideas. Some of these quotes were my own thoughts and musings, but more of them came from other people. I ended up with a list of 63 ideas represented by a total of 2,123 words. Here are a few examples from this document:

"Kilgore Trout's unpopularity was deserved. His prose was frightful. Only his ideas were good."

Slaughterhouse Five, by Kurt Vonnegut
(Vonnegut).

"The chief obstacle, therefore, to our improvement of the moral or metaphysical sciences is the obscurity of the ideas, the ambiguity of the terms."

David Hume, his "necessary connexion" (Hume).

¹ Thoughts are not concrete, tangible objects. I am labeling them as "abstract" to emphasize this.

"I could email him. I struggle with the limitations of language, words, words serve only to abbreviate thoughts, abstractions, ideas, dances, is there anything that can be completely accurately expressed via words? I don't think so. Maybe a stop sign. Dance cannot express everything either of course, it can express different things than words—maybe that's why I do it, music too, writing too, it's a wonder I don't paint --- all art forms are equal tools of communication. People use art forms on a very basic level to communicate efficiently with each other on a daily basis: talking, illustrations, body language/gestures. 'Artists' are not satisfied with this entry level expression of self and take it further. So I shouldn't email him because right now I would have to verbalize – or poorly represent abstract ideas with words – in order to describe my struggle with verbalization. Defeats the purpose, if he were sitting in front of me perhaps I would try to describe this to him because we would be able to interact and discuss and therefore my words would not be as concrete as the text in an email."

My journal, 7/18/14.

About Carl Andre: "Sometimes he approached words in the complete opposite way that I do – like building blocks with little or no meaning."

My journal, 5/30/15.

"We are meaning-making machines. It's what we do. We try to make meaning out of everything that happens to us. Organization helps, so we need to structure what we're doing in ways that make sense."

Peter Doolittle's TED Talk, "How your 'working memory' makes sense of the World" (How).

In France: "so many bookstores (which is spelled like library) and I love bookstores but not these because I can't interpret any of the French words and words are already interpretations of ideas so the bookstores are a bit sad"

My journal, 6/8/15

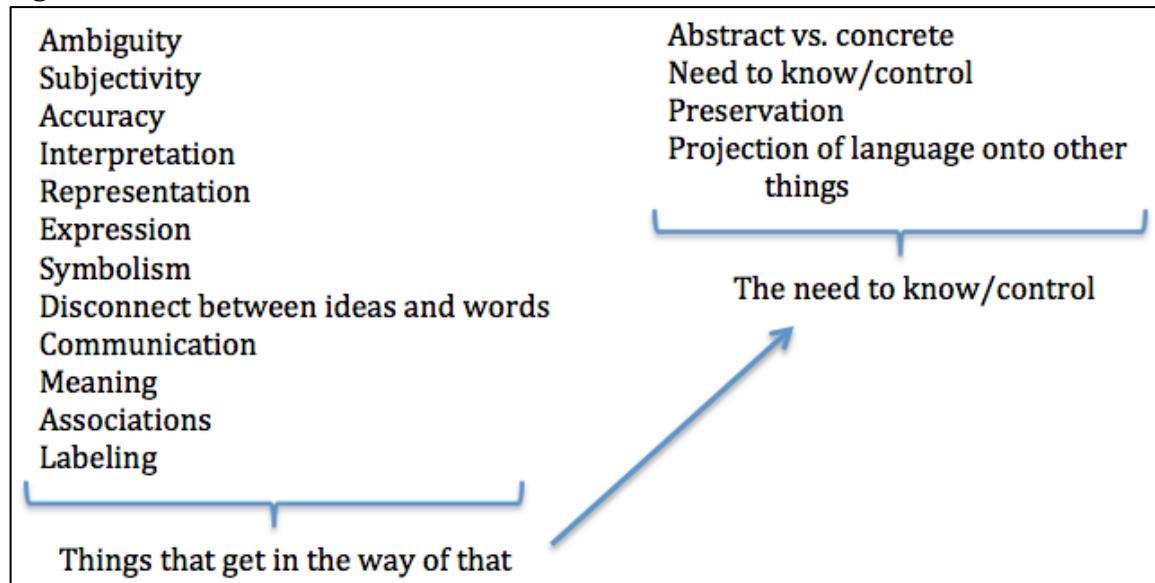
"I used to take objects on a table, like a tumbler or any kind of object and try to get the picture of it clear and separate in my mind and create a word relationship between the word and the things seen.' Commentators

have indicated that what she meant was that the *reference* of objects remained central to her work, although the *representation* of them had not. Scholar Marjorie Perloff had said that ‘unlike her contemporaries (Eliot, Pound, Moore), she does not give us an image, however fractured, of a carafe on a table; rather, she forces us to reconsider how language actually constructs the world we know.’”

Wikipedia article on Gertrude Stein (“Gertrude)

I combed through all 63 of the ideas in this document and tried to pinpoint the topic of each one in one or a few words. This was surprisingly easy to do. I identified 16 different topics among these 63 ideas. Then I examined these 16 more general concepts and found that they fit cleanly under 2 categories: “The need to know/control” and “Things that get in the way of that.” See figure 1 for a breakdown of the 16 topics into these 2 categories.

Figure 1



"The need to know/control" vs. "Things that get in the way of that" explained:

In my experience, I have found that humankind operates on an inherent need for answers, knowledge, and control. This includes the desire to understand what other people are saying and communicating. However, it is impossible for me to completely accurately interpret what someone else is trying to portray because I am not inside his or her head. I cannot begin to grasp their thoughts unless they convert them into a medium of communication, such as words or any other art form. Words are understood differently by all people because we all have different experiences that have shaped us and defined our perspectives. Ultimately, the fact that humans cannot read each other's minds impedes our ability to understand and control situations. Our diversity of experience inhibits us from perfectly accurate communication via words.

Now my concept for my piece seemed to be narrowing on this general lack of human control juxtaposing the immense power of words. I figured that text needed to somehow play a role in my choreography. I could say words out loud or I could have text projected onstage. I, personally, am frustrated when I cannot come up with the right words to describe my ideas or when I cannot understand someone else's intended meaning due to the limitations of language. Having words displayed by a nonhuman source would allow me to demonstrate my human frustration toward whatever text might be displayed. I toyed with the idea of having words projected onto a screen while I throw things at the display of text. Perhaps there could be multiple screens, each with its own projection. I would be surrounded by words and bombarded by language.

But I nixed that idea. I saw no point to me simply voicing a complaint about a personal frustration. I backtracked.

My 2 categories of 16 topics demonstrated that my whole curiosity with the representation of ideas by concrete art forms was really an interest in the human need to understand things. When I watch a dance piece, stare at a painting in a museum, or finish a book, I am not satisfied until I "figure it out." I am obsessed with meaning. I don't consider a book to have literary merit until I can "figure it out." I don't value a painting until I can "get it." I have to figure everything out. Or sometimes I decide that a piece of art does not need to be or cannot be figured out—this is still a way of me "figuring it out" or "getting it." I always need to get a hold of a piece's meaning; I need to be able to grasp it. This is a need I have because I am

human. I feel the need to understand art. I need things to be concrete. Stating that a painting is abstract and has no meaning is still an act of concretization.

So my concept was about the need to know, control, understand, “figure it out,” or “get it” and the fact that things get in the way of this need. I realized my dance must demonstrate this. The choreography would not depict me knowing or understanding everything because I am human and that is not possible. So it would consist of me being controlled. There would be no solution; knowing and understanding the meaning of all things is impossible. The piece would have no resolution, except maybe death, because only with death does the human desire to know cease.

Theoretical Third-Person Description of the Final Piece

A single dancer moves around the stage in silence. She has bare feet and is dressed in plain pedestrian clothes—khaki pants and dark green shirt. Behind her is a huge projection of white text on a black background. The lighting on the stage consists of a plain white wash, and no lighting shifts occur at any time throughout the piece. (See figure 2.)

Figure 2



The dancer's movement is not particularly virtuosic, but it could not be described as pedestrian either. After about 30 seconds of this movement, the sound of a loud gunshot rings throughout the theatre. At this same moment, the text on the back screen changes and the dancer falls suddenly to the floor. She gets up right away and returns to her movement where she left off before the gunshot caused her to fall.

Over the next five minutes, the dancer continues to move through a specific arrangement of both gestural and full-bodied tasks. Her movement ventures to all available corners of the stage at least once during the piece. Sometimes she travels across the entire space very quickly and at other times she remains more rooted to one spot. It is obvious that her intention is very clear in her own mind, but her purpose is not specifically apparent to the audience. Also, the viewers must

sometimes look away from the mover in order to read the words projected on the screen.

Every so often, the gunshot rings out and the words on the screen change. Sometimes just a single word shows up, sometimes a short phrase, and still other times an entire paragraph (see figure 3). The time between gunshots gets increasingly smaller and still the dancer drops limply to the floor after each one. By the end of the five minutes, the shots ring out so fast that the dancer has time to do nothing but stand back up just in time to drop again. In the final seconds of the piece, the text on the screen changes at lightning speed and it sounds as if a machine gun is roaring somewhere in the theatre. The dancer is not able to get up but is constantly being forced down by the shots. She struggles and writhes for the last few seconds until the shots cease and the screen goes blank. She lies crumpled and motionless as though dead, but her lungs can be seen and heard clearly gasping for air (see figure 4). The lights cut to darkness and the piece is over.

Figure 3

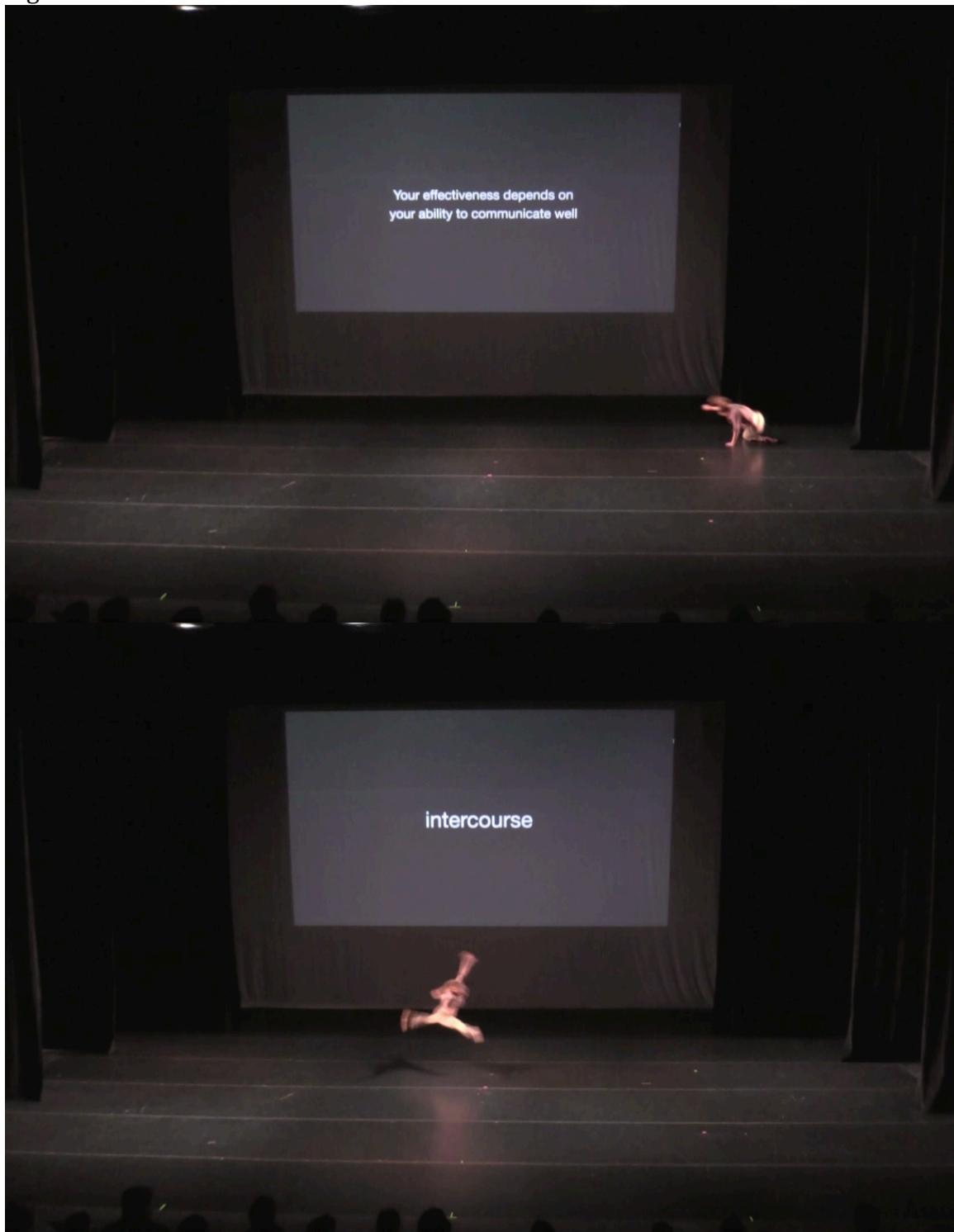


Figure 4



How the Projection Came To Be

The text that is projected throughout the piece is random. The words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that appear were randomly selected and they are not intended to portray any particular meaning.

I went to the library for a couple hours one day and walked in an arbitrary pattern among the shelves. I pulled random books from the shelves without looking at their titles. I flipped through each book with my eyes closed and haphazardly jabbed my pointer finger onto a page. Whatever words my finger landed on became part of this project. I typed up these text samples of different lengths and this became my “text bank.”

A computer program, created by collaborator Michael Fix, randomly selects text from this text bank to show up on the screen. In real time, the program chooses what words appear onstage. As a result, the piece is different every time that it is performed.

I needed the projected words to be random because I had no reason for them to mean anything specific. Meaning is inevitable. I tried to avoid meaning by making the words random. Nevertheless, I can guarantee that ultimately audience members walked away from this piece with a meaning that they each had interpreted. And each of their interpretations were probably unique. But these specific meanings were not designed by me.

The piece could portray a completely different meaning each time it is performed depending on what words pop up on the screen and in what order. I am avoiding designing meaning and at the same time proving that designing meaning is inevitable. This lack of meaning is reflected in my movement vocabulary.

How the Movement Came To Be

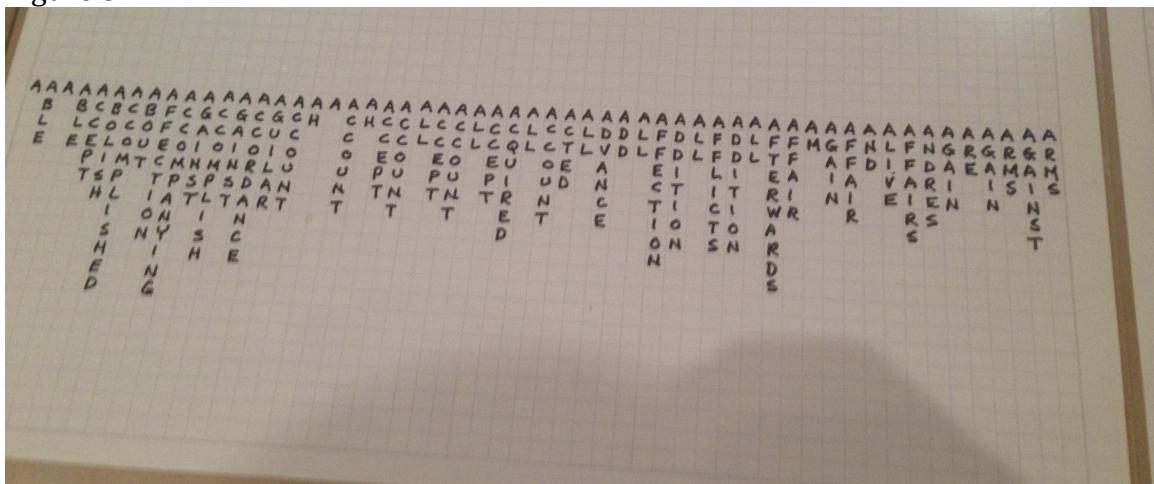
I needed a way to generate some movement material that had no particular meaning or moral. The only requirement was that it appear to be at least somewhat task oriented. The computer program lasts exactly five minutes from start to finish, so I needed just under five minutes of movement. I would simply perform this five minute task onstage and whenever I heard a gunshot, I would stop in the middle of whatever I was doing and drop limply to the floor. Then I would get back up as soon as possible to pick up where I left off.

The dancer trying to move continuously through the choreographed motions is reflective of a person attempting to know, understand, or control things. The interruption of the gunshot and simultaneous changing text corresponds with the things that get in the way of that, namely, language and all its restrictions.

Generating random movement was much more difficult than generating random words. I searched for a way to develop movement that could appear task oriented. I recalled a choreographic process that I had begun exploring about a year ago. I had used this process to choreograph a solo and it ended up producing choreography that made the mover (me) appear to be completing a series of very specific and unique tasks. Another reason that I got excited about this process is that it is based on interpreting words and playing with meaning.

Carl Andre is sculptor known for his use of industrial materials and minimalism. I first discovered his work in Madrid in the summer of 2015. In accordance with my obsession with meaning, I was struck by the amount of value that I could uncover in his minimalist sculptures. I learned that, in addition to sculpture, Andre also created what he called poems. However, I prefer to refer to them as “word sculptures” because in these works, Andre utilizes the shape and space of words rather than their definitions. Several of his unpublished word sculptures were on display in Madrid and I was blown away by a particular one that consisted of words written vertically and side-by-side on graph paper. The words were not listed alphabetically, but all the A’s were first, the B’s second, and so on until Z. These seemingly random vertical words filled up somewhere between 20 and 30 pages. Figure 5 is a photograph of the first page of this word sculpture.

Figure 5



What struck me most about this word sculpture of Andre's was that the vertical words triggered different mental associations for me than the regular, horizontal words would have. Observing a word written in evenly spaced, capital letters on a plane contrary to the norm required me to take more time to figure out what the word even was. This extremely brief window of extra time caused my thoughts to move in different ways than they would have if I'd simply read a standard, horizontal word. This slight shift in perspective is comparable to hearing a familiar piece of music played at a much slower tempo and a few rooms away.

I used this photograph of Andre's unpublished word sculpture to create my movement material by turning each vertical word into a movement. I used whatever movement first came to me when I looked at a vertical word. This original, instinctive movement was the simplest and most authentic interpretation of each word, so I made a rule that I had to keep whatever movement first came out. The movements that I produced were of a wide variety. Some were small and internally focused while others were sprawling and expansive. Some travelled across or

around the entire space and others did not even involve movement of the legs and feet. All of these actions that I created were movements that I had never done before. They did not originate from any particular codified dance technique or vocabulary and they could not be identified by names. When I strung all of these individual movements together, I had the choreography for my piece.

The choreography is not exactly the same every time I do it. For example, the movement that came from the vertical word “AFFLICTS” requires that I walk backwards on a diagonal, press into my neck with my hands, and feel as though I have a fever for a while. These requirements are quite open for interpretation so this section is slightly different every time that I perform the piece. On the other hand, the movement that came from the vertical word “ACCOUNT” is a specific, repetitive tapping of the fingers and this remains exactly the same every time I do it.

How the title came to be

The title of this piece is *untitled_37.txt*.

I always have trouble titling my work because I usually feel that dance should speak for itself and does not need additional language attached to it. Especially with this piece, I did not want the audience to attempt to divine any particular meaning from some contrived title that they saw in the program before the piece even began. I needed the audience to have no major preconceptions of the piece before they experienced it. I decided *untitled_37.txt* was ambiguous enough that nothing significant about the piece would be revealed.

I nearly always want to leave my choreography untitled, but it is simply not functional for every piece I ever produce to be untitled—I would have no way of referring to my own creations. So I included the word “untitled” as well as the “37” as a reference number. “37” is a random number with no meaning, which is only fitting. “.txt” is the filename extension of the “text bank” that the computer program uses to generate the projected words. The title is not particularly significant, akin to the rest of the text that is included in the piece.

Ironic Conclusion

By far the most difficult part of this project has been writing this paper. The irony of having to put all my ideas about ideas and language into language has caused me as much laughter as it has frustration. Ultimately, this work to express my choreographic concept in complete, coherent sentences has been an excellent practice in communication.

Works Cited

- Carl Andre's "vertical words", Madrid, Spain. Personal photograph by author. 2015.
- "Gertrude Stein." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 8 Aug. 2015.
- How your "working memory" makes sense of the world*. Perf. Peter Doolittle. *TEDGlobal 2013*. TED, June 2013. Web. 28 Oct. 2016.
- Hume, David, and Tom L. Beauchamp. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.
- Snapshots of untitled_37.txt, Theatre 2, University of South Florida, Tampa.
Personal photographs by author. 2016.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-five: Or, The Children's Crusade, a Duty-dance with Death*. New York: Delacorte, 1969. Print.