

EMERGENT CHOREOGRAPHY: SPONTANEOUS ENSEMBLE  
DANCE COMPOSITION IN IMPROVISED PERFORMANCE

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## ABSTRACT

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### EMERGENT CHOREOGRAPHY: SPONTANEOUS ENSEMBLE DANCE COMPOSITION IN IMPROVISED PERFORMANCE

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This study examines the experience of dancemakers, who choreograph spontaneously within the complexity of the ensemble while embedded in a performance environment. The dissertation articulates such themes as the self-organizing aspects of spontaneous ensemble dancemaking; the role of implicit choreography and motivations for engaging in improvised performance; and the function of recursive dance practices that cycle through the spontaneous performance event and the participant's studio practice.

The research focused on five evenings of performance by four different ensembles: the Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation ensembles (Seattle, WA), the LIVE Dance Theater (San Diego, CA), and the Lower Left Performance Collective (Stolzenhagen, Germany). I also conducted face-to-face interviews with three dance artists, Barbara Dilley, Lisa Nelson, and Susan Sgorbati, all of whom have developed ensemble compositional methods for dancemaking. I employed a constructionist approach and engaged in the research process as a participant observer. The data set includes post-performance journaling, performance videos, a study questionnaire (see Appendix B), my research journal, and post-performance group interviews with the

performers. I interpret this data through a lens that incorporates a dynamical systems approach that provides models for understanding self-organizing systems such as the individual choreographer in spontaneous ensemble dancemaking, the ensemble exhibiting characteristics of emergent group cognition, and the live audience.

As the narrative emerges through the dissertation chapters, *The Continuum of Deliberation* serves to disrupt binary understandings of terms such as *choreography* and *improvisation* and, instead, proposes a dialectic relationship wherein the dance artist enacts both an implicit and explicit spontaneous choreography. This dialectic provides ground for framing individual dancemaking epistemologies emerging as an *Ensemble Epistemology* in performance. The self-organizing principles underlying ensemble dancemaking in performance allow each dance to choreograph itself and to create a new dance that is expressive of an *Ensemble Aesthetic*. As the dance unfolds in performance, the dynamic environment includes a live audience that emerges in the study as a co-creator of the dance. The data indicate that communal aspects of this dance form motivate the participants' growth as dancemakers and social beings as well as contributing to the vibrancy of this complex choreographic method.

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## CHAPTER I

### DANCING ON THE EDGE:

#### SPONTANEOUS ENSEMBLE DANCEMAKING IN PERFORMANCE

A dance improvisation is unique in the sense that no score is being fulfilled, no performance is being reproduced. The dancer who is improvising understands this uniqueness in the very manner in which he or she has approached the dance. That is, the dancer has agreed to follow the rules, as it were, of a dance improvisation, rules which might very generally be summed up under the rubric: dance the dance as it comes into being at this moment.

*Thinking in Motion*, Maxine Sheets Johnston

#### **Entering Ensemble Performance**

My journey into the writing of this dissertation has been fascinating enough to sustain my investigations into ensemble improvisational dance as student, choreographer, ensemble member, and researcher over many years. I share a bit of this journey in order to orientate my readers as to my identity as their guide for the journey through the dissertation and to position myself as artist/researcher. I arrived in New York City in the fall of 1976 and soon began to study Contact Improvisation, solo, and ensemble improvisational dance forms. In the spring of 1977, a group of dance artists, including my Contact Improvisation teacher Daniel Lepkoff, asked me to perform improvisational dance as part of an ensemble at the Paula Cooper Gallery in SoHo. I understood these first performances to be Contact Improvisation events organized around the principles and vocabulary of this dance form. Over time, however, I noticed that the performance

vocabulary of the artists in subsequent concerts gradually broadened beyond Contact Improvisation to include any movement choice a dance artist might introduce to the performance event. In other words, my understanding of ensemble performance became more open-ended as it also became more complex. Without the principles of Contact Improvisation organizing the ensemble, I began to question what we dance artists were doing in improvisational ensemble dance. This question has endured for me as I sense the historical threads of the practice of Contact Improvisation still informing my experience of ensemble improvisation in performance though Contact Improvisation functions as but one of the tools at my disposal in ensemble improvisation.

In the early 1980s, I continued my investigation into ensemble dance as a founding member of the performance collective Channel Z. The work with my colleagues in the collective, (Daniel Lepkoff, Robin Feld, Randy Warshaw, Stephen Petronio, Paul Langland, and Diane Madden), helped to begin formulating ideas that went on to become the improvisational ensemble system I termed *Ensemble Thinking*. Since the 1990s, *Ensemble Thinking* continues to be refined by my colleagues, past and present, in the Lower Left Performance Collective (see table 3). Thirty-five years later, I continue to perform in spontaneous ensemble dance performance, and my interest in this dance genre led me to the present dissertation study.

### **Brief Overview of Dance Scholarship**

Dance improvisation as a performance practice is of great interest to many dance artist/scholars e.g., Albright & Gere, 2003; Ashley, 2011; Banes, Harris, & Baryshnikov;

Buckwalter, 2010; Burt, 2006; Benoit, 2009; Goldman, 2010; McKechnie & Stevens, 2009; Nagrin, 1994; Rainer, 1974; Stevens, McKechnie, Malloc, & Petocz, 2000; Tufnell & Crickmay, 1999. With the amount of literature discussing the dance form, clearly improvisational dance practices inspire many dance scholars/practitioners; however, a search of dissertation databases does not currently reveal a single study of open improvisational ensemble dancemaking performed by professional dance makers. There are some studies with undergraduate students that have been conducted, but none looking at professional dancers who have undertaken this dance form as their chosen dance practice. At the same time, my experience in the field suggests that many dance scholars/practitioners are actively researching improvisational dance practices, and I expect much more research to become available in the near future.

Even though studies examining ensemble improvisational practice in performance by dance professionals are not readily available, there is some research examining the solo and duet or weighted body in improvisation. For example, research scholar/practitioner (and study participant) Karen Schaffman's dissertation, *From the Margins to the Mainstream: Contact Improvisation and the Commodification of Touch*, critically examines Contact Improvisation as a continuing subculture practice in the 1990s and then emerging in the mainstream international contemporary dance world as a sought-after technique and visible movement vocabulary (2001). Kent De Spain's dissertation, *Solo Movement Improvisation: Constructing Understanding through Lived Somatic Experience*, observes the lack of theoretical writings on "the underlying nature

of improvisation” (1997, p. 15). Like De Spain, my interest lies in what is happening for artists of dance improvisation in-the-moment: both De Spain and I try to understand what is happening for improvisational choreographers as a way to palpate the surface of complex, improvisational dancemaking as an art form. However, whereas De Spain researched improvisational practice through the lens of the solo body and Schaffman through the lens of the duet or weighted (Contact Improvisation) body, I research through the lens of the ensemble body *in performance*.

Dance scholar Susan Foster’s *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (2002) examines the ensemble body in performance. In this book, Foster foregrounds Bull’s innovative dancemaking methods and discusses how they reveal the spontaneous ensemble dance as it choreographs itself within Bull’s work. My study seeks to extend Foster’s and Bull’s research by concentrating on four performance ensembles identifying as collectives working together for anywhere from one night to ten years and which include artists all working with very open-ended scores. Thus, the under-theorized area of *ensemble improvisational dancemaking in performance* presents an opportunity for this research to contribute new understandings and stimulate new artistic and pedagogic practices in the dance field.

### **Exploring the Bi/nary: Choreography~Improvisation<sup>1</sup>**

For much of the dance field, the terms *improvisation* and *choreography* represent different dance activities. In the American modern dance community, *improvisational*

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<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of the use of “/” and “~,” see page 8.

dancemaking usually refers to improvisation as making it up on-the-spot and the term *choreography* is often synonymous with a highly pre-scribed and rehearsed before performance variety of dancemaking. For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the term *spontaneous choreography* to describe the activity of improvisational ensemble dance performance as both improvisational and choreographic. Spontaneous choreography problematizes neat categorizations of common dance terms such as *improvisation* and *choreography*. Connections between what I term highly pre-scribed (choreographed) and *spontaneous* (improvised) dancemaking methods are important to note because, as the data will show, spontaneous dancemaking does not necessarily indicate *free* or *unprepared* dancemaking. The data – through the voices of the participants in this dissertation study – troubles the binary opposition between planned and unplanned, a construct that is not especially accurate or helpful for the needs of this study. Instead, I move forward into this present research seeking to understand dancemaking artists as entering a dialectic relationship: they simultaneously enact both a choreographic (compositional) and an improvisational (spontaneous) process involving both planning and non-planning. This dialectic relationship between improvisational and choreographic dancemaking methods will be discussed as spontaneous choreography in the following chapters.

Indeed, many contemporary choreographers use both highly pre-scribed and spontaneous compositional strategies within the same choreography in order to discover the method best suited to their material. In the 1980s, while a member of David

Gordon's *Pick-Up Company*, I witnessed firsthand his deft use of a variety of compositional strategies along what I call the *continuum of deliberation*. By this term, I mean that differing durational processes define the most pre-scribed choreographies to the most spontaneous, on-the-fly improvisations. The continuum of deliberation situates more or less repeatable choreographic works on one end of the continuum and more or less improvisational works, without so much as a plan or score, on the other end of the continuum. Gordon, a member of the Grand Union, thinks fluidly on the continuum of deliberation as he seems to understand that improvised and choreographic dancemaking are similar, saying that "to think on my feet while performing . . . is a lot like thinking on your feet while choreographing and/or directing" (in Banes, Harris, & Baryshnikov, 2003, p. 203). Further, I also see myself, as dance artist and researcher, fluidly moving within this continuum. For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the term *choreography* to include both the pre-scribed and improvised material in dance performance. In addition, I include the memory of the dance that audience members retain as they leave the theater to trouble even more the distinction between choreography as pre-scribed or improvised.

### **Improvising Choreography**

Susan Foster's research (2002) foregrounds Richard Bull's choreographic structures as challenging the choreographed/improvised binary when she writes, "Bull especially wanted the dances he directed to be seen as improvised but, at the same time, to display the structural sophistication of predetermined and rehearsed choreography" (p.



110). Bull navigates a liminal space in the performance goal described above and contributes substantially to the notion of dancer as choreographer in improvised dancemaking. Foster further describes Bull as having developed “an extraordinary series of premises, such as ‘The Dance That Describes Itself,’” that could serve as the focus for dancers to function as choreographers in improvised performances” (2002, p. 16) . Foster continues to problematize the binary when she describes Bull’s improvisational choreographic process. She states:

This process, significantly, defies the standard oppositions between individual and group, spontaneity and structure, or even mind and body on which modern dance had been premised. Practicing improvising choreography, dancers gain a profound understanding of bodies, form, impulse, self, and other as constituted outside these oppositions. As they enter into the making of a dance together, they draw on their shared knowledge – of composition, of performing, and of one another- to collectively chart the unknown. Having begun the dance, they retain a memory of what has already occurred so as to imagine better what might happen next. Once finished, they apprehend their efforts as part of an ongoing effort to choreograph the social. (2002, p. 237)

In the above quote, Foster implies a complex choreographic activity occurring *in- the- moment* and infers a *previous time* when the dance artists created a “shared knowledge” of composition. This shared knowledge built over time accompanies the improvising dance artist into performance. From Foster’s conclusions, one may also infer a *time in the future* when the knowledge gained in performance will become part of the “ongoing effort” to inform future performance events. These notions of differing temporal spaces involved in improvisational dancemaking in performance figure in this study as performers come to spontaneous performance with what they know about dancemaking

from their previous experiences, how knowledge gained previously is changed by performance, and how reflection aids the spontaneous choreographer for future spontaneous ensemble dancemaking. The data suggest that, in the spontaneous and pre-reflective improvisational moment dance artists rely on what they already know. This pre-reflective action can be understood as an implicit choreography.

Thus, improvisational dance choreography, even though not pre-scribed before performance, is in a compositional sense operative in performance and can be considered both improvised and choreographic. From this point of view, rather than situating choreography and improvisation as distinct dancemaking activities, I propose that the improvisational dance artist simultaneously enacts both a choreographic (compositional) and an improvisational (spontaneous) process that one can understand as *composing in the moment*.

As a way to disrupt this binary, I also employ Scott Kelso, Director of the Center for Complex Systems and Brain Research at Florida Atlantic University and his colleague David Engstrøm who, in their book *The Complementary Nature* (2006), explain their use of the tilde “in coordination dynamics, where apartness and togetherness coexist as a complementary pair . . . . [For example] yin~yang, body~mind, individual~collective” (p. xiv) . Following Kelso and Engstrøm’s lead, I replace the “/” as a binary with a “~” as a dialectic. The use of the tilde succinctly elevates the perspective of my study beyond binary constructs. Therefore, in this dissertation, I use the tilde to convey notions such as *choreography~improvisation* as a dialectical pair rather than as a binary opposition.

Spontaneous choreography, then, also disrupts the binary and becomes a potent concept for understanding emergent choreographic processes in dancemaking and for further appreciating what non-hierarchical and collaborative meaning making constructs can offer and already are offering the field of dance. Challenging the choreographed/improvised binary with the choreographed~improvised complementary pair sets the stage for me to foreground the experiences of the participating dance artists who, the data show, enact both a choreographic and improvisational dancemaking process as ensemble members in performance.

The experience of improvising dance artists – those who work together in ensembles while engaged in public performance practices – guides my research perspective in this project. It is my hope that this effort opens lines of inquiry for the field and that new insights may be gained concerning the phenomena of spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance. The research data presented in the following chapters provide insight into how ensemble members exemplify and describe their individual experiences when creating spontaneous choreography as a part of a complex system.

### **Entering Complexity**

When I began my involvement with improvisational dancemaking methods in the 1970s, I also began reading literature reflecting the influence of Asian philosophical viewpoints on avant-garde art making in New York City. These books included *Beginner's Mind* (Suzuki & Dixon, 1970), *John Cage* (Kostelanetz & Cage, 1970), and

*The Tao of Physics* (Capra, 1975). The ideas within my first readings led me to further investigate scientific theories in books such as *Chaos: Making a New Science* (Gleick, 1987) and *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (Waldrop, 1992). Later, as I pursued my doctoral studies in the twenty-first century, I found that I was fascinated with how my experiences in spontaneous choreography seemed to be in conversation with authors exploring research into the complex functioning of the brain, cognition, and perception. Emerging from cognitive studies were ideas about how human beings develop in concert with their environments and how the body complexly organizes itself through interactions with its *perceived* environment. These ideas seemed to also describe my practice as a body organizing spontaneous movement with other dance artists in a complex performance environment.

Complexity theory, as dealt with in multiple fields, especially inspired me to make a connection between my ensemble practice and the concepts (articulated below) emerging from studies of complex phenomena as self-organizing systems. I sensed this concept of self-organizing systems, organizing on the edge of chaos, as also playing out in my practice and experience of collaborative ensemble choreography in performance. Reading the research in the aforementioned fields led me to inquire further into connections between emergence and collaborative ensemble choreography. I entered my doctoral studies in 2006 and my course with Dr. Frances Bruce, *Epistemology of the Body*, introduced a structured approach to the study of complex systems for my continued inquiry into spontaneous ensemble choreography via complex self-organizing systems,

perceptual processes, and cognition. In Dr. Bruce's course, I encountered the developmental psychologists Esther Thelen and Linda B. Smith who, in *A Dynamic Systems Approach to the Development of Cognition and Action* (1994) define self-organizing systems as:

Open systems where many components are free to relate to one another in nonlinear ways are capable of remarkable properties. When sufficient energy is pumped into these systems, new, ordered structures may spontaneously appear that were not formerly apparent. What started out as an aggregation of molecules or individual parts with no particular or privileged relations may suddenly produce patterns in space and regularities in time. The system may *[though not necessarily]* behave in highly complex, although ordered, ways, shifting from one pattern to another, clocking time, resisting perturbations, and generating elaborate structures. These emergent organizations are totally different from the elements that constitute the system, and the patterns cannot be predicted solely from the characteristics of the individual elements. (p. 54)

The spontaneously composing dance ensemble, as I, and many fellow practitioners, experience it in performance, also exhibits the characteristics of a self-organizing system as described by Thelen and Smith. The most prominent characteristic discussed by the authors includes how a self-organizing system coalesces with no single source of control; this ability to organize with no single source of control is also evidenced within the practice of the ensembles in which I have participated. Choreographer Bull also connects concepts of self-organizing behavior and dancemaking when he writes, "no one is choreographing the new dance ["The Dance That Describes Itself"], it is choreographing itself through everyone's dancing," (in Foster, 2002, p.274) .

In this study, as I examine dances that choreograph themselves in performance, some seemed to, according to the participants, turn out more successfully than others. I

propose that the ensemble, as a self-organizing system, may or may not reach a state of *emergent collaboration*, or as study participant, Cathy Caraker terms *cohesion*, but rather the ensemble continues in a state on the edge of chaos and order. Another example of a self-organizing system poised between chaos and order would be gathering clouds and the certain atmospheric conditions may have the potential possibility – but not the inevitability – of organizing into a thunderstorm.

In my research, these possible states of emergent collaboration in the ensemble, as discussed by the participants, are of interest in that this study seeks to illuminate what conditions may facilitate emergent collaboration. Thus, the new dance, as it unfolds in performance, has the possibility to stay in a pre-emergent stage and fails to reach a state of collaboration where the choreographers feel that they are enacting a cohesive dance work (whatever that means to each choreographer). When the members of an ensemble feel that the dance is unfolding in a cohesive way, a *sense of ensemble* emerges (a term coined by study participant Alia Swersky). As a researcher, I am interested in what conditions facilitate a sense of ensemble. However, as the following chapters will show, there are no easy answers emerging within the discussions presented as the participants have distinct views as to what constitute the elements of spontaneous composition in performance.

As I researched paths to a sense of ensemble, I realized that this study was not the only one to discuss improvisational dance practice using terms found in the scientific literature. For example, dance artists Ivar Hagendoorn's "Emergent Patterns in

Improvisation and Choreography” (2008) and Susan Sgorbati’s “The Emergent Improvisation Project: Embodying Complexity” (2007) draw parallels between their dance practices and the scientific theories I was exploring. Sgorbati, also a participant in this study, worked closely with biologist and Nobel Prize winner Gerald Edelman and his theories of consciousness concerning the “remembered present<sup>2</sup>” (personal communication, September 24, 2010). Sgorbati’s system of ensemble improvisation sensitizes dance artists to recognize and act upon emergent choreographic forms arising in the ensemble during performance. In describing an effect of her system at work, Sgorbati says, “There is no choreographer directing their movements, and yet there is an emergent form appearing that they all recognize and understand” (2007, p. 40). Like Hagendoorn and Sgorbati, I examine how these “scientific” concepts relate to my dance practice and how they might be explored in a research project as a basis for this dissertation. I now turn to considering ideas that my research discovered that might help in understanding the complex phenomenon of spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance.

### **Dancing the Implicit~Explicit Body~Mind**

As an improviser in ensembles, I notice that I cannot keep track of everything that is happening in the dance, including what is happening with my own body~mind. I am aware that some dance material occurs without my direction (implicit) and other material

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<sup>2</sup> Edelman, G. (2001). Consciousness: The remembered present. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 929(1), 111-122. doi: 10.1111/j.1749-6632.2001.tb05711.x

seems very much directed (explicit). For instance, as I decide to cross the stage to join another choreographer, I cannot track all the movement I do to get there as I simultaneously make explicit choices for composing the dance. Dance scholar Margaret Wilson in her dissertation, *Knowing in the Body: A Dancer's Emergent Epistemology* (2007), suggests the undirected (pre-reflective) material occurring within dancemaking choices is similar to “the dancer [who] practices movement which eventually becomes embodied as a part of her unconscious or tacit knowing” (p. 206). Wilson describes “tacit knowing” as knowledge that is acquired through explicit attention and that eventually becomes, through practice, available to the dancer as a pre-reflective resource, something she does not have to explicitly direct as she dances; she has habituated (made implicit) this knowledge.

From a cognitive perspective, the improviser in an ongoing and complex environment relies on tacit or implicit knowledge that is available to her in pre-reflective action without the time consuming, explicit activity of planning the next move. An example of tacit knowledge is a body stumbling on a curb and spontaneously beginning a complex action to right itself even before the conscious mind can make a plan of action. The process of developing implicit knowledge is similar to learning to drive a car: when one first learns to drive, one must focus attention on every small detail of the driving experience. Later, through practice, this knowledge becomes implicit and one can carry on conversations or daydream while driving, usually without ill effect. Like ensemble improvisation, the more complicated the driving environment becomes, the more the



driver and dancer depend on tacit action while at the same time explicit attention is paid to navigating the complexities of the environment.

Research in the cognitive sciences illuminates a dynamic between implicit and explicit knowledge and provides a metaphorical framework for examining choreography in improvised dance. I do not suggest that I am expert in the cognitive sciences or in the study of dynamical systems that are characterized by bottom up self-organization, but I can offer some of the concepts from those areas to enliven possibilities in my thinking about ensemble improvisation in performance and further frame my approach to this research.

### **Dancing in the Illusion of the Present**

As an improviser, I am always trying to be present in *the present*; however, my research shows that the notion of *being present* is illusive. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1999) in *The Feeling of What Happens* writes, “Present continuously becomes past, and by the time we take stock of it we are in another present, consumed with planning the future, which we do on the stepping-stones of the past. The present is never here. We are hopelessly late for consciousness” (p. 240) . The dance in performance is always ongoing and if I am on the “stepping-stones of the past,” then what is the dance that I am doing in the meantime? Damasio suggests that as improvisers our awareness inescapably lives ever so slightly in the past so that the present and future are always just beyond our awareness and conscious control. The participants speak to their experience of spontaneous ensemble dance as composing a dance that is beyond their control;

indeed, the data reveals that this lack of control motivates the participants to engage in this dance genre.

Cognitive scientist Shaun Gallagher (2005) in *How the Body Shapes the Mind* suggests that, though we might perpetually function on “the stepping-stones of the past,” implicit knowledge can facilitate our paths through the world, or in this case the ensemble since,

The normal and healthy subject can in large measure forget about her body in the normal routine of the day. The body takes care of itself, and in doing so, it enables the subject to attend, with relative ease, to other practical aspects of life . . . it grants to the subject a freedom to think of other things. (2005, p.55)

Gallagher further suggests that I, as a spontaneous dancemaker in performance, have an implicit (habituated, remembered) ongoing embodied dance operative while I think about what to do next when in the process of composing the spontaneous dance. What, then, is this implicit choreography and how does it come to be? Dance scholar and philosopher Erin Manning (2009) speaks to this implicit, real-time ongoing dance when she states:

Moving with movement requires an altered idea of consciousness. This consciousness is not of the body but with the body moving. This is what Feldenkrais and Paxton call "awareness," a feeling-with of the body moving. This feeling-with is a virtual dance. It is too quick for conscious thought, and yet it composes with it as a layering of felt experience in the making. (p. 46)

In this sense, implicit choreography emerges as a presence in a liminal space between a past filled with experience and a, as yet, unknown future.

### **Dancing What I Know: Bringing Prior Experience to Spontaneous Dancemaking**

Though an improvised performance (without a rehearsal) may take only the time it takes to complete the performance, professional dance artists come to the spontaneously composed choreography with years of practice preparing them for the improvised performance. The participants in this study discuss diverse methods and insights into what they have learned in the past (what they know) and what they rely on in a spontaneous ensemble performance (see Tables 4, 5, and 6). The body of knowledge accumulated and changing through the years is discussed as becoming their ever evolving epistemology. The dance artists in this research, therefore, discuss how they bring their epistemology into performance where it then becomes ground for an implicit choreography until new information introduces a change. Choreographers in spontaneous ensemble performance are, therefore, discussed in this research as often enacting a performance from a pre-reflective state that is made up of learned patterns (habits) or behaviors informed by prior experiences. However, how these participants describe their experiences of habituated behavior within their spontaneous dancemaking process are deeply individual and complexly presented in the dissertation's following chapters. In general, many participants sense that by the time action becomes habituated, it has a formidable tenacity, which philosopher Brian Massumi (2002) colorfully describes as habit swimming in a sea of chaos and “doggedly holding onto itself, as its own lifeboat” (p. 150).

In spontaneous performance, therefore, habits or prior experience may act as a lifeboat ferrying the dancers through the complex ensemble improvisation. Frances Bruce, theorizing from dynamical systems theory and as a Feldenkrais practitioner, notes that, “The fluidity of skillful performance would forever elude us” without habituation (2003, p. 38). Imagine a pianist without habituated fingerings. Habit that “spontaneously patterns itself through repetition” (Massumi, 2002, p. 15) can be difficult to break and often, in my experience, becomes my habituated~implicit choreography. For many participants in this study, the sociality of the ensemble helps them to reflect on and differentiate between desired and undesired habituated behaviors. In this way, the ensemble environment offers opportunities for self-learning that facilitate participants seeking change. Unless there is a force for change or some perturbation of habituated behavior, Damasio, Gallagher, Wilson, and Bruce, seem to suggest that *we dance what we know*. From the information in Tables 4, 5, and 6, one can see all the different epistemologies that come together in the ensembles represented in this study and the potential challenges of navigating these individual epistemologies in performance.

### **Dancing the Body~Brain: Timely Short Cuts to Dancing**

Sometimes when I accidentally knock a glass off the counter, before I know it, my hand reaches out and catches the glass in a deft movement that surprises, delights, and impresses me by its quickness. Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux in his text *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (2001) explains how, as humans, our brains have

evolved shortcuts<sup>3</sup> that help make our response times to external stimuli faster (p.123).

LeDoux seems to suggest that shortcuts evolved because predecessors having slow reaction times probably did not survive long enough to pass their genes on to future generations. The correlation between surviving the sabre-tooth lion attack and surviving the improvisation resonates with me as an improviser because sometimes it feels as if I am surviving the improvisation rather than being carried along by it.

LeDoux, researching how the brain processes fear stimuli, proposes that a stimulus from the environment may take a high (slow) or low (quick) road through the brain. According to LeDoux, this ability of our brains to take shortcuts to action helps the organism respond quickly if not thoughtfully. LeDoux (2001) writes, “More processing time by the brain means a slower mental and behavioral response from the organism” (p. 122) . This question of temporal response time is interesting for me as an improviser, as I often feel in reflection as if I take action before I can fully deliberate over my actions. LeDoux’s research into temporal issues in cognitive processes proposed that more precise information requires the stimulus to travel farther in the brain and thus have “more connections to make . . . . In situations where rapid responses are required, speed can be more important than accuracy” (2001, pp. 122-123). LeDoux’s research suggests that, in the heat of performance, a whole arena of responses take place beyond the dancers’

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<sup>3</sup> If a fear-inducing stimulus takes the high (indirect and longer) road, it travels from the sensory thalamus (receiving station) via synapses to the sensory cortex, which creates a more accurate representation of the stimulus, before continuing to the amygdala. However, the low (direct and faster) road uses a “cellular-connection strategy,” (sensory input directly to motor output) that moves the stimulus upon arrival to the sensory thalamus directly via a different synaptic route to the amygdala for a quicker but less accurate response of the organism (LeDoux, 2001, p.123).

awareness, but these pre-reflective responses allow them to function quickly in complex improvisational environments. In the following dissertation chapters, I explore with the research participants through their own descriptions how they sense shortcuts happening within their own practice as pre-reflective cognitive processes become the material of implicit choreography.

Pursuing this theme of pre-reflective temporal action, Gallagher (2008) turned to the mirror neuron system<sup>4</sup> to develop his “direct perception” concept. This concept builds on an enactive understanding of perception as *seeing is doing*, but with a difference. Significantly for this study, Gallagher proposes, “Memory works implicitly to inform my perception” (p. 537). However, Gallagher continues to discuss this process of seeing is doing as not a separate cognitive step, but, rather as parts of the brain that “anticipate reward if they have been tuned by prior experience” (2005, p. 537) . Gallagher seems to suggest that what has worked in the past or been pleasurable in the past may direct our actions in the future. Gallagher goes on to define direct perception as “smart perception” because it does not take the time for secondary cognitive steps. Gallagher’s linking perception and action correlate to my own experiences and those of the participants in this study: that events and reactions are happening faster than we can track. There is a dance arising in performance and necessarily, much of it is not consciously directed. Gallagher’s and LeDoux’s research suggest that cognitive

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<sup>4</sup> Rizzolatti et al. discovered a new type of neurons with wide ranging implications: “Further study revealed something unexpected: a class of F5 neurons that discharge not only when the monkey grasped or manipulated the objects, but also when the monkey observed the experimenter making a similar gesture. We called the neurons endowed with this property ‘mirror neurons’” (Rizzolatti & Arbib, 1998) .

mechanisms in the brain afford improvisers the ability to be *ongoing* in the dance as they compose in-the-moment.

Dance scholar Bruce further suggests that this sense of ongoingness is an “effective knowing reflected in *perceptually guided* [emphasis added] movement, subserving context-appropriate [explicit] action . . . action triggered by internally and externally generated information (p. 151). Gallagher, LeDoux, and Bruce all describe a fluid bridging of implicit and explicit knowing informed by all the memories of dances that an improviser has witnessed, made, and/or performed in the past. This notion of pre-reflective cognitive shortcuts is important to the improviser who must keep participating in the ongoingness of the dance while also engaging in the slower, explicit thinking of what to do next. The dance artist in the ensemble, therefore, creates choreographies on multiple levels, both pre-reflective and reflective, and thus, the dance is more complex than the individual performer can fully track. How does one prepare for improvising in performance as a part of a complex ensemble where some of your choreography will be performed on an implicit level? This question guided much of my research design and questions as I moved through the dissertation process.

### **Perceiving Affordances in the Ensemble Environment**

In terms of how our previous experiences might inform our present choices, James J. Gibson’s *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1986) uses the term *affordance* to mean what an environment allows its organisms. Gibson proposes, “the environment of animals and men is what they *perceive* [emphasis added]. The

environment is not the same as the physical world . . . . the observer and his environment are complementary (p. 15). Thus, the environment comprises only that which the organism can perceive as useful. For example, a branch may afford the bird a resting place and the termite his dinner. Similarly, the dance ensemble environment offers opportunities or affordances to the ensemble artists, but they may only perceive what they know from previous experiences and future desires for change or continued practice.

Dance scholar Margaret Wilson (2007) notes that the affordance must be “*detected* [emphasis added] by an actor as he or she negotiates the world” (p. 213). Accordingly, a dance artist enters ensemble improvisation prepared by prior experience to take advantage of only those affordances in her environment that she can perceive, detect, and recognize. Philosopher Alva Noë (2004) seems to corroborate the importance of prior experience for the dance artist when he writes, “The world shows up for us in experience only in so far as we understand, that is, know or anticipate it . . . the world shows up as blank and flat until we understand it” (pp. 122-123). According to the ideas posited by these philosophers, and cognitive and dance researchers, it would seem that the ensemble environment is only as rich as the artist can conceptualize it. These insights and notions into how we perceive and then act in the environment guided how I shaped and interpreted the data emerging from the research participants in the following chapters.

Emergent choreographic form may be meaningless to the dance artist who has no way to detect or conceptualize it. For instance, one dance artist may see a body and



understand that it affords a surface for rolling, as in the perceived practice of Contact Improvisation. Another dance artist might see a body as creating a point or location in space that she may use to create a line between two points as she positions herself to define this line on stage. Still another dance artist, with an even wider range of prior experience, might be able to perceive both possibilities and make multiple choices.

From my readings and research for this study, it seems possible that dance artists learn and incorporate new skills, and then make habituated choices when composing. However, each of these choices and the understanding of what it means to compose are defined differently by each of the dissertation's research participants demonstrating how the spontaneous dance choreographer perceives and differentiates as a unique individual in the dance journey. These unique journeys which are defined by the individual path of each artist then become what is given back into the world as choreographic action. Taken together, ideas of prior experience, implicit~explicit knowing, and Gibson's concept of affordance suggest future and rich areas of research for examining how the individual artist navigates her journey within the complex ensemble environment in performance.

### **Dancing an Ensemble Epistemology as Ground for an Ensemble Aesthetic<sup>5</sup>**

I move now from considering processes involved in improvisational dancing for the individual artist to consider the ensemble as a whole. *Epistemology* as a term is most commonly thought of as a personal, single-body phenomenon in which an individual might acquire and create new knowledge. Interestingly, and in contrast to epistemology

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<sup>5</sup> See page 26 for an explanation of how I am using the term *aesthetics* in this dissertation.

as a personal way of knowing, the research participants for this study, all of whom describe themselves as engaged in knowledge creation when improvising in an ensemble, discuss this creation as collective inquiry. This collective knowledge was then often further portrayed as emerging while in the process of creating the dance together. Due to this discovery in my data, I now use the term *ensemble epistemology* within the dissertation to describe the phenomena of an emerging collective knowing.

This collective knowing led me to examine concepts for socially distributed systems of knowledge which have been advanced by the philosophers Georg Theiner and Allen Colin, as well as neuro-psychologist Robert Goldstone (2010). These authors define what they term *group cognition* in their following conclusion:

Group cognition is not simply the unstructured aggregation of individual cognition, but the outcome of a division of cognitive labor among cognitive agents. Such division of cognitive labor may be the result of explicit organizational decisions by the individual agents, or (and we believe more commonly) the result of interactions among the agents that lead to enhanced group capacities without the express intent of the agents. (Theiner, Allen, & Goldstone, p. 379)

This concept of group cognition suggests the possibility of describing an ensemble epistemology emerging from the practices within a self-organizing dance ensemble as occurring when *several individual epistemologies* interact dynamically to co-create a *single* dance work. Throughout the following dissertation chapters, I will refer to this concept in relation to how the research participants describe their ensemble practice as collective knowledge.

Edwin Hutchins's *Cognition in the Wild* (1996) further focuses on "cognitive properties of collectives of agents" (p. 223) and informs this research through its discussion of groups of people who must collaborate improvisationally to achieve their end goals. Hutchins's research is conducted while out on the high seas and in harbors with the crews (ensembles) improvising situations that arise from sailing and docking large ships. Hutchins writes:

The project at hand is to develop a framework for describing these [ensemble] situations and the factors that control the cognitive properties of these socially distributed systems . . . . It should allow us to look at what is going on inside individuals and also what is going on among them. It should allow us to characterize both the properties of individuals and the properties of systems composed of several individuals. (1996, pp. 242-243)

Individual knowledge brought into the dynamic play of the ensemble may therefore be conceived as not static; rather it is both shaping and being shaped by the ensemble "not through conscious reflection about the work but by local adaptations to the emerging conditions of the work itself" (Hutchins, 1996, p. 317) . I apply Hutchins's reference to local adaptations as referring to the individual ensemble member responding locally in the dance without knowledge of the larger expression of the ensemble. Moreover, in the process of working together, the ensemble can begin to develop a shared epistemology as they experience the self-organizing characteristics of the phenomena. As I analyzed and then interpreted my data, I became aware that an ensemble epistemology might also lead to an emergent *ensemble aesthetic*.

I use the term *aesthetic* here as proposed by philosopher Mark Johnson (2007) who in his text, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, suggests a definition for aesthetics as moving beyond a linguistic or philosophical understanding of the defined construction of beauty into how an artist experiences bodily meaning within the act of creation. Johnson concludes:

aesthetics is not just art theory, but rather should be regarded broadly as the study of how humans make and experience meaning, because . . . the processes of embodied meaning in the arts are the very same ones that make linguistic meaning possible. I thus seek to continue my expression of the notion of meaning far beyond the confines of words and sentences. (2007, p. 209)

For the purposes of analyzing and interpreting the data emerging from my research, I use Johnson's premise that an embodied aesthetic precedes the description of aesthetic phenomena. Sensing an ensemble aesthetic as emerging from embodied practice allows me to present each new dance that arises in performance as a unique expression of how that particular ensemble in that particular performance, "make[s] and experience[s] meaning." The concept of an ensemble aesthetic is further supported by choreographer Sgorbati's work with Edelman and how she comes to understand the ensemble. In our interview Sgorbati queries:

Does that mean that dancers-improvisers [as part of an ensemble] are actually reflecting their brain chemistry? This was my understanding of an aspect of Dr. Edelman's explanation of consciousness: that the self-organizing structuring of the brain was reflected in the ensemble's thinking process of their own self-organizing patterns. So it's potentially that dancer-improvisers are reflecting literally how we think. How human beings think. And then we're . . . [saying that], the ensemble practice is a collective consciousness. All right? So anyway, that was for me – it was such a revelation to me – an epiphany. (personal communication, September 24, 2010)

Sgorbati's excitement is evident as she further understands her experiences in spontaneous ensemble dance practice through the lens of Edelman's scientific research. Of note is the concept that perhaps what is witnessed in performance is an ensemble "chemistry" a "collective consciousness." In this way, concepts foregrounded by Johnson, Sgorbati, and Edelman, inspire me to consider the possibility of an ensemble aesthetic.

Continuing this line of thought I consider that if the ensemble is not only more than, but also different than the sum of its parts (choreographers, scores, audience, theatrical environment) then the ensemble may produce a choreography that is not just an amalgam of the individual artist's input. Thus, the dance is what Thelen describes as "totally different." Further, as this spontaneous choreography is distinct from each artist's contributions, this emergent dance could be considered as having its own aesthetic: each dance in every performance reflects a unique and emergent signature of the complex ensemble from which it emerged. As a self-organizing system witnessed in public performance, I advocate that the ensemble and its dance reflect a non-linguistic, embodied, and complex ensemble aesthetic that develops without a single source of control i.e. one choreographer.

In the analyzing of the data, even the role of the audience emerged as a significant part of the self-organizing system of the ensemble. The complexity of ensemble improvisation in performance presents an opportunity not only for the ensemble to create a new dance with distinctive characteristics, but also for the audience to participate in the

meaning making. In some cases described by the research participants, the audience was considered another spontaneous choreographer thrown into the emerging mix of possibilities. The ideas of collaborative epistemologies and an emerging ensemble aesthetic, framed by theories of distributed cognition, help to illuminate the emergent and complex world of improvised choreography in performance. This concept will be further elaborated in Chapter 6.

### **Design of Study**

I approached this research project with a desire to examine spontaneous ensemble dance in performance in order to palpate the surface of this very complex phenomenon. Dance artists who perform in improvisational ensembles and have few instructions for what they must do in a performance generate my research data. From them, my data set includes journal reflections, questionnaire responses, and group interview data emerging from viewings of performance videos.

Research questions going into the study were as follows:

- How do the participants describe their experiences of spontaneous ensemble dance making in performance and how do they describe what constitutes knowing within the context of the improvising dance ensemble?
- How might the relationship between individuals and the ensemble be understood and described? How can these descriptions open insights into

how the emerging improvised dance serves as the context for interaction and collaboration?

- How do members of the ensemble perceive and respond to emergent forms during performance? Does the ensemble collectively recognize these forms?
- What are the processes for meaning making in a group of improvising dance artists in performance? How are decisions by one ensemble member described as being meaningful for other ensemble members?
- What part, if any, does previous experience with choreographic/compositional ideas/tools play in the ensemble member's decision-making process in performance?
- How might the data open new ways of thinking about, describing, and theorizing the act of improvisation~choreography as an ensemble epistemology? How might this sense of epistemology open new methods for discussing dance composition?

As an artist/researcher I considered my research questions would be best served by analyzing data gathered from ensembles in performance. I speculated that ensembles with distinct temporal histories might provide further insights into the phenomenon. Thus, I selected the faculty ensembles that performed at the Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation (SFDI) who were together as an ensemble for only the time that they met onstage in performance. I also had professional connections to dance artists who were

members of LIVE Dance Theater (LIVE) ensemble in San Diego that had over one year of practicing together and had only recently begun to perform for an audience. Finally, I selected the Lower Left Performance Collective (Lower Left), a group practicing ensemble performance for over 10 years. I believed these three distinct temporal sites for ensemble improvisation would perhaps generate interesting data to inform the study from differing insights and produce insights into whether the amount of time together as an ensemble made any difference to how the practice was described by the participants.

I performed as an artist/researcher in one of the SFDI ensemble performances and in the Lower Left ensemble performance. I also observed the other two ensembles in performance. As stated before, ensemble members completed a study questionnaire (see Appendix B), wrote post-performance journals, and participated in open-ended post-performance group interviews conducted while the ensemble members viewed a video of their performance. Follow-up interviews were conducted by email with some of the ensemble members clarifying their thoughts expressed in their questionnaires, journals, and the group interviews. After procuring consent from the various ensemble members, I traveled to San Diego to research the LIVE ensemble, then to Berlin and Stolzenhagen, Germany to research the Lower Left ensemble. I next traveled to Seattle to research the SFDI ensembles between May and August 2010.

My research strategies were aimed at gaining an understanding of the experiences of the ensemble members as close in time to the performance event as possible. Thus, post-performance journals were completed upon exiting the stage and the post-



performance group interviews followed as closely to the performance as possible, which usually meant the very same night (though in the case of the Lower Left ensemble the group interview was the next day). I hoped that these research strategies would allow me to gain insights while the moment of practice was still fresh in the dancers' body~mind.

By contrast, the study's questionnaire was more removed from the time of the performance and participants returned the questionnaire via email. Participants answered questions designed to illicit information about what knowledge they saw as the most useful in their practice of ensemble performance. The questionnaire also had participants give answers about their motivations for engaging in this dance genre as well as how long they had practiced the art form. Taken all together, the methods for data collection were designed to gain a more expansive view of the participant's dance practices, thus providing a large corpus of data from which I could explore my research questions. After the transcribing of the interviews and analyzing the performance videos, I analyzed the data collected from my research participants and searched for emerging themes. These themes were shaped by the ideas discovered earlier in my theoretical readings concerning instances of spontaneous choreography as self-organizing systems with ensemble epistemologies and unique aesthetics. However, surprisingly, I also discovered that many participants discussed their practice as a social phenomena contributing to their lives as artists and human beings. In Chapter 2, I more thoroughly detail this qualitative research practice and lead the reader through my decision and interpretive processes. I also discuss the ethical steps undertaken to assure the consent of the research participants as

they are identified in the study and to demonstrate how their ideas shaped my analysis into a much more complex and rich portrayal of ensemble dancemaking than I could have created through a discussion of only my own practice.

### **Conclusion**

In the following pages, I present the research data from differing perspectives in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. In Chapter 4, I draw conclusions and detail where this study could lead in the future. In Chapter 3, I introduce the four performance ensembles in my study and foreground the individual participants as they describe their experiences in performance through post-performance journaling, group interviews while viewing the video of their performance, and their responses to the study's questionnaire. Framing the ensemble in performance through the language I explored within the creation of self-organizing systems, brought the ensemble forward as an entity in and of itself and, most importantly, as different and thus more complex than the sum of its parts (performers, improvisational scores, audience, and theatrical setting). Chapter 3 also further illustrates how the dance co-created by the ensemble members is "totally different from the elements that constitute the system" (Thelen & Smith, 1994, p. 54) .

In Chapter 4, I examine the data foregrounding the participant's prior experiences and their motivations for engagement in this dance genre. As participants speak of their motivations for engagement in ensemble dancing, the social aspect of the ensemble practice seems crucial as they eloquently link their art making with their "life making." As I examine the data pertaining to ensemble members as individuals, the diverse

epistemologies and motivations they bring to the ensemble come forward as possible source material for their implicit choreographies in performance. This chapter illustrates a diversity of individual epistemologies and motivations artists bring to ensemble performance.

In Chapter 5, I examine the participant's desire to bring their studio practice into performance and the data reveal the difficulty of that goal. The praxis of moving studio practice into the performance environment ultimately affects the studio practices. As the artists move back into their studio practice, new information experienced in performance becomes a part of the ongoing, recursive praxis. Further, the participants discuss how the performance environment with a live audience exerts a powerful affect on the performance. This chapter illustrates the participant's engagement in the *performance of practice* and *the practice of performance* and foregrounds the audience as a participant in the emerging choreography.

In Chapter 6, I conclude the dissertation by foregrounding the concepts that emerged from my analysis and how those concepts might extend understandings of spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance. Theoretical constructs arising from the data supported by the literature highlighted in this chapter opens new views into how the recursive cycle between the dance studio practice and the performance onstage develops the dynamic world that is spontaneous ensemble dance in performance.

## CHAPTER II

### FRAMING THE STUDY: IMPROVISING A DANCED WORLD OF RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

I entered the research process for this study as an artist researcher investigating spontaneous ensemble choreography in performance. Deep into the process of analyzing and coding my data, I realized that not only does my research topic concern improvisational dance practices, but an improvisational process also seems to describe my journey through the research. The following chapter will lead the reader through this improvisational score that continually unfolds in my mind, even as I write these words.

As I analyzed my data, I began to see that an improvisatory lens could be considered a methodological tool in its own right, as the data led me to discover unanticipated themes emerging as dominant out of a field of many possibilities. This research process was one I prepared for in my graduate education and in the design of my study, but not being able to imagine beforehand how the results would emerge was a difficult process; I felt as if I was improvising as the dance with the data evolved and sometimes took unforeseen turns. The work of qualitative researcher David Erlandson and colleagues supports this open and emergent relationship between researcher and data in the research process. In their book, *Doing Naturalistic Inquiry: A Guide to Methods*, Erlandson *et al.* write about the notion of “emergent design” and how the “naturalistic

researcher . . . recognizing the complexity of any human setting, goes into that setting with only as much design as he or she believes is faithful to the context and will help to answer questions about it” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 73) In this way, the authors suggest I enter my research journey in much the same way as I enter spontaneous dancemaking. Multiple paths presented themselves as I worked with the data, and I began to trust the paths that kept reappearing through my many recursive iterations with the data. In the end, a data narrative emerged and, for my readers, continues to unfold as they bring their own insights when interpreting the ideas presented in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

In retrospect, as I move toward the conclusion of this study, I realize that another researcher may very well have taken a different path than I did with the data set, which further suggests the emergent and improvisatory nature of this effort. Out of all the complex possibilities that the data offered, three themes gradually emerged: themes of complexity, themes of learned behaviors and motivations, and themes of recursive dance practices. Thus, the themes selected and discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, are subjective in nature and reflect an improvisational research process closely related to the phenomenon studied.

### **Purpose Statement**

In this qualitative phenomenological study, using a naturalistic/constructionist inquiry, I seek to examine improvisational ensemble dance in performance. In particular, I focus on the experience of the improvising choreographer within the ensemble and how,

as a self-organizing unit, the ensemble might exhibit unique characteristics. By closely examining, through participant observation, artists who are similarly engaged in improvisational ensemble dance, my research illuminates the similarities and differences between the individual artist's methods for approaching ensemble improvisation. My research also examines how a new dance emerges from the individual dance artists composing a dance without a dominant, single source of control. In the course of this study, I augmented – in surprising ways – my own understanding of this complex phenomenon that is ensemble improvisation in performance. It is my hope that my readers and the dance field at large gain useful insights into the studied phenomenon.

### **Mode of Inquiry**

I understand the improvisational dance ensemble in performance as a consensus-finding social unit with multiple realities that also can change as the ensemble moves through the dance or spends time together between performances. The concept of an evolving understanding within the ensemble is compatible with qualitative research methodology that recognizes the world does not exist as a fixed entity, but rather is unfolding moment to moment.

Qualitative researchers approach their studies with a certain paradigm or worldview, a basic set of beliefs or assumptions that guide their inquiries. These assumptions relate to the nature of reality (the ontology issue), the relationship of the researcher to that being researched (the epistemological issue), the role of values in a study (the axiological issue), and the process of research (the methodological issue)

(Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 332-333) The qualitative and interpretive worldview defines “the nature of the ‘world,’ the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107) Denzin and Lincoln propose that this worldview is represented by the qualitative paradigm which believes that reality is a relativist concept, that the researcher and researched are interactively linked, and that the understanding of social constructions comes through interaction “between and among” investigator and respondents (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 110-111). Thus, as a participant observer, I am revealed in this dissertation as much as the participants in the study.

### **Dancing between Constructivism and Constructionism**

Here, I clarify the difference between the qualitative research terms of constructivism and constructionism because the social aspect of spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance aligns with the constructionist model of knowledge generation. Within qualitative research history, beginning with the pioneering efforts of Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba in 1985, some confusion between the terms of *constructivism* and *constructionism* emerged. The issue revolves in the different understandings of how knowledge construction takes place. According to qualitative researcher Kenneth Schwandt, the constructivist paradigm holds that “objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective. Knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind” (1994, p.125) Constructionism, on the other hand, holds that “the terms by which the world is understood are social artifacts” (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). The

ensemble in performance comes to understand a world of dancemaking through the social interactions of the choreographers in performance. According to qualitative researcher Michael Crotty (1998) it is best “to reserve the term *constructivism* for epistemological considerations focusing exclusively on ‘the meaning-making activity of the individual mind’ and to use *constructionism* where the focus includes ‘the collective generation (and transmission) of meaning’” (p. 58) Here, I understand the emerging choreography in performance as a meaning-making activity. Schwandt suggests that the gap between constructivist and constructionist modes of inquiry is not all that far apart, as authors Gergen, Guba and Lincoln all see the “*social, dialogic nature* of inquiry as central to . . . constructivist thinking” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 128) For the purposes of my research design and data analysis, I went into the research process with the belief that the co-creation of ensemble choreography in performance embodies Crotty’s and the constructionist paradigm that privileges the “the collective generation of meaning.” In this case, meaning is a social and emergent phenomenon in spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance and it requires a corresponding methodological worldview. In other words, the social and dialogic nature of the researched phenomenon is grounds for viewing the self-organizing collective expression that emerges from the improvising ensemble through a constructionist lens.

### **Participant Observer**

As a participant observer, I found myself examining the phenomenon from multiple viewpoints. Qualitative researcher Michael Quinn Patton, describing this



research approach, writes, “the participant observer employs multiple and overlapping data collection strategies: being fully engaged in experiencing the setting (participation) while at the same time observing and talking with other participants about whatever is happening (2002, p. 265). In his book *Participant Observation* theorist James Spradley further assigns six characteristics to the participant observer:

1. “Has a “dual purpose” to engage in activities of the situation and to observe all aspects of the situation
2. Practices “explicit awareness” to everything going on in the situation; observes the situation with a “wide angle lens” that imparts a broad observation
3. Is at once an “insider” participating with everyone else, yet at the same time experiences being the “outsider;” viewing self and the task as “objects”
4. Researcher as a “research instrument” as researcher practices diligent “introspection”
5. “Keep[s] a record” of what is seen and experienced” (1980, pp. 53-58)

The issue of insider/outsider comes to the forefront in this study because, as researcher, I fulfill what Spradley terms “complete participation,” which is described as the researcher who studies a situation in which they are “already ordinary participants” (1980, p. 61). With this level of participation, the challenge is to come to the situation sensitized to and able to bracket my biases. This level of participation is not uncommon

as Staller *et al.* in *History of Methods in Social Science Research* argue for the inclusion of self when they write, “the introduction of researcher as variable allows for inclusion of the personal in the research process . . . . and a new emphasis on research strategies that employ the self as part of the project” (Staller, Block, & Horner, 2008, p. 39) In the course of my research, I witnessed performance as an audience member and I performed onstage as an improvising choreographer all the while functioning in the role of researcher.

### **Problem Statement**

Ensemble dance improvisation in performance continues as a practice in the field, yet there is a limited phenomenological inquiry into this ensemble phenomenon. As a researcher who has practiced spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance for over 35 years, I felt a keen motivation to deepen my knowledge of this area by researching different improvisational performance ensembles and learning about ensemble systems different from my own system of *Ensemble Thinking* (Martin, 2007) Thus, my situation as a researcher aligns with what qualitative researcher Clark Moustakas considers essential in developing a phenomenological study: “In phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic. The researcher’s excitement and curiosity inspire the search. Personal history brings the core of the problem in focus” (1994, p. 104)

As noted in Chapter 1, there has been little analysis of how the spontaneous dance ensemble in performance functions as a collectively choreographing entity and how the

individuals actually do what they do in order to create an ensemble dance work. For qualitative researcher John W. Creswell, the need for a study “follows from a documented need in the literature for increased understanding and dialogue about an issue” (1998, p. 94). Creswell cites Barritt (1986) as he describes a strong rationale for research:

Thus, the heightening of awareness for experience which has been forgotten or overlooked. By heightening awareness and creating dialogue, it is hoped research can lead to a better understanding of the way things appear to someone else and through that insight lead to improvements in practice. (in Creswell, 1998, p. 94)

It is my hope that examining spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance as an “understudied” phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, p. 94) will enliven dance discourse and dance practices through a deeper understanding of this form that continues in practice today.

### **Selection and Recruitment**

My research interest in spontaneous ensemble choreography in performance led me to first look for ensembles engaged in performance and comprised of dance artists who have an ongoing commitment to dance improvisation as a performance form.

Secondly, I also was interested in interviewing dance artists/theorists who had developed ensemble forms.

The world of improvisational dance is often an inclusive world where students of dance, professional dance artists, and dancers from all walks of life participate in dance jams and even sometimes perform. For this study, I planned to conduct this research with

professional dance artists rather than dance students and other practitioners of improvisational dance who have not embarked on a professional career within the improvisatory form. I wanted to work with professional artists who have spent considerable time developing their approach to this dance form over several years. I defined professionals as those who were teachers of improvisational dance, used improvisational methods in their choreography, and/or had a bounty of experience in improvisational dance in performance. The performers in this study meet the above criteria for being professional artists in this dance genre.

When contemplating which ensembles to include, I decided to include some ensembles that were ad hoc groupings of professionals with little time identifying as an ensemble, and other ensembles that had more extended time together. This difference in time would, I hoped, lead me to interesting insights about the significance of time spent together in ensemble. This research strategy was helpful in that, though one could suppose that time spent together as an ensemble would increase the likelihood of a successful improvisation as understood by the ensemble, I discovered that one of the ensembles meeting for only one night onstage experienced a successful improvisation as described by ensemble members. This outlier in the data introduced important information to the study and further questions. Namely, if familiarity was not essential to the development of a successful performance, what was?

After deciding on the performance ensembles that I wanted to include in the study, according to the strictures of the Institutional Review Board, I contacted a director

of the Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation (SFDI) to gain permission to interview festival faculty self-selecting to perform in a festival concert evening. The director got in touch with the faculty performers and gave them my contact email address. The entire SFDI faculty on both nights of performance agreed to participate. I anticipated that this research site would provide an opportunity for me to work with dance artists who come from diverse geographical areas to form an ensemble over a very short period of time.

Next, I contacted Karen Schaffman, a member of the LIVE Dance Theater (LIVE), who had been a co-founder with me of the Lower Left Performance Collective. She let the members of LIVE know of my interest in having the ensemble members, who have worked together for over a year, join my study. All the members of LIVE agreed to participate in my study. Finally, I contacted my fellow members of the Lower Left Dance Collective (Lower Left), who have danced together for over ten years and who also agreed to participate. Communicating via email, I contacted Lower Left members who were going to participate in a performance in Germany in the summer of 2010. All of the performing artists in the performance ensembles agreed to participate.

As part of the study, I was also interested in interviewing three well-known dance artists/theorists (Lisa Nelson, Barbara Dilley, and Susan Sgorbati) who have all developed ensemble forms. I thought that having these artists' viewpoints would further inform the data collected from the ensemble participants. I contacted the three artists directly as I know them all professionally. I traveled to Madbrook Farm to interview Lisa Nelson in summer 2010 and to Bennington College to interview Susan Sgorbati in

September 2010. I also interviewed Barbara Dilley via Skype in November 2010. As described in Chapter 1, these interviews brought up significant ideas concerning the nature of ensemble improvisational dancemaking practices; however, in organizing the data, these three interviews did not connect directly to the themes emerging from the participants in the selected ensemble groups. Instead, the interviews with Nelson, Dilley, and Sgorbati provided new directions for research as I continue to imagine how my data might open new possibilities for theorizing ensemble practice. I transcribed all group and individual interviews immediately after in order to keep them fresh in my mind.

### **Methodology and Procedures**

For this dissertation, I followed recognized procedures and strategies in the naturalistic/constructionist mode of inquiry. As I mention in Chapter 1, spontaneous dancemaking does not mean unprepared dancemaking. Similarly, I entered the research process simultaneously open and yet prepared. My preparation for conducting research into the phenomenon of ensemble spontaneous dancemaking practices meant securing the approval of the design of my study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee at Texas Woman's University. As part of the IRB process, I composed two different consent forms, one for the four performance ensembles comprised of 25 dance artists and another for the three dance artist/theorists who developed ensemble dance systems (Barbara Dilley, Lisa Nelson, Susan Sgorbati). I developed the 12 questions for the study questionnaire (approved by the IRB committee) that the ensemble members completed. I also prepared for the personal face-to-face interviews with the three artist/theorists by

having a bank of questions formulated from my readings of their publications or publications concerning their work.

All the participants signed informed consent forms and had the opportunity, via email, to review their comments used in the dissertation and to make changes, further clarifications, or to withdraw their comments. In addition, all the participants agreed to be personally identified in the archived data. The IRB committee of Texas Woman's University also agreed to the conditions for archiving the study's data that identified the study's participants.

### **Data Collection**

My research plan included post-performance journaling and post-performance group interviews with the members of the performance ensembles while we watched a video of the performance. I also sent each member of the performance ensembles a questionnaire, which they returned via email. For the three artists/theorists, I conducted open-ended interviews with them as described below. I also kept a research journal throughout the research process.

**Journaling.** For Denzin and Lincoln (2005) reflexivity is a reorientation of researcher to self, an “experiencing of the self as inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self with the processes of research itself” (p. 210). In the course of this research, the world of ensemble improvisational dance – a world I thought I knew so well – opened anew for me and beckoned me ever deeper into its process. Creswell notes that reflective journaling helps to establish trustworthiness of the

study by bracketing the researcher's ideas, biases, and interpretations. This bracketing further helped me to constantly reflect on when my ideas and interpretations might be coloring my readings of the participants' words. Further, journaling records the personal reflections of the researcher, including "experiences, fears, mistakes, confusions, and problems that arise during the study (Creswell, 1998, pp. 71-72). These confusions and challenges can then become part of the research process, entering into the data collection ideas and insights that I might overlook if not recorded.

Creswell makes the point that the reflective journal is also the place "to take into account the personal biases and feelings, to understand their influences on the research" (72). Through the course of the research process my journaling reflections in the field became a place for me to note any new ideas I had emerging from viewing the performances, watching the videos, and listening to the participants speak about their experiences. When consulting my journals throughout the data analysis process, I then attempted to distinguish when ideas were from my own interpretations, when the ideas were coming from the participants, and finally what relationships and new insights might emerge when my ideas and those of my participants connected.

As part of the data collection, I arrived at each performance with a generic, blue composition notebook for each study participant. Before the performance, I explained to the participants that immediately following their exit from the stage, I required them to record their thoughts about the performance. When reading dance scholar Fiona Bannon's article "Towards Creative Practice in Research in Dance Education" (2004) , I



learned of David Perkins (1981), a creativity researcher and Professor of Education at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, and his design for a thinking-aloud report. I also adapted and used Michael Quinn Patton's (2002) ideas for thinking-aloud protocols, in order to shape the instructions I gave to the participants concerning the post-performance journaling exercise (p. 385)

Below are the post-performance journaling guidelines I suggested to the participants as adapted from Perkins' and Patton's ideas concerning the think-aloud protocol:

- Write whatever's on your mind. Don't hold back perceptions, feelings, images, and intentions.
- Write as continuously as possible. Don't lift the pen from the paper; keep it moving even if you feel that you are "drawing a blank."
- Write as telegraphically as you please; don't worry about complete sentences as eloquence.
- Don't over-explain or justify. Analyze no more than you would normally.
- Keep the narrative grounded in this most recent improvisational experience. Get into the pattern of writing what you're thinking now, not of thinking for a while and then describing your thoughts.

As a data source, these post-performance journals were useful for the study as they gave a spontaneous (re)membering of the performance experience. This journaling

practice seemed also to focus thoughts for the performer that they often brought up in the post-performance group interview.

**Interview procedures.** I conducted two types of interviews in this study: face-to-face interviews with individuals and group interviews with ensemble members. Interviews for both groups of participants embodied a collaborative, open-ended dialogue assuming both researcher and participant are in a learning situation, and thus, are continually constructing a knowledge-generating relationship. I recorded all the interviews using both video and audio devices to assure a back-up audio track and to make sure I was attributing remarks to the appropriate person in the group interviews.

I approached my individual face-to-face interviews with the study's three dance artists/theorists in an open-ended fashion. I used qualitative researcher Steiner Kvale's notion of a "semistructured life world interview . . . defined as *an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena* [emphasis in original]" (1996, pp. 5-6) to inform my approach to the open-ended interview process. Patton also describes an expansive view of the interview that allows a freedom "to build a conversation" within the subject matter using open-ended interview techniques (2002, pp. 343-344). This open-ended style employed in the interviews with the three artists/theorists was helpful because it also allowed "topics of importance to my respondent[s]" (Patton, 2002, p. 344) to emerge. Each interviewee gave permission for me to transcribe the interviews verbatim. When necessary, I conducted follow-up interviews via email to clarify the

interviewee's responses. I intended my conversations with these three artists to help me understand how their research led them to develop the ensemble dancemaking systems that they use in their work.

During the interviews with Lisa Nelson and Susan Sgorbati, I also had time in the studio where they demonstrated their ensemble systems. I was also able to be with Barbara Dilley in Marfa, Texas, as a participant in the March 2 Marfa Performance Labs for the Experienced that Lower Left co-ordinated. In this way, I framed the interviews with first-hand experience of the various techniques these artists described as well as my reactions to these experiences.

For the performance ensembles, I employed post-performance group interviews using the video of the performance as a memory prompt and score. My data collection plan was to have the members of the performance ensembles come together immediately after the performance to view a video and discuss what was actually occurring for them in the experience. In the post-performance interviews, the video from the performance played as the performers watched and commented on what they were thinking at particular moments in their performance.

The idea of using the video as a score for the group interviews occurred to me when recalling my experiences with my fellow ensemble members in Channel Z, a dance collective I co-founded in the early 1980s in New York City. Often, after an improvisational performance, we would sit and critically review our work. In these sessions it was common to hear language such as, "I was thinking that you were wanting

me to come in” or “In that moment I had no idea what to do so I did the first thing that popped into my head.” Through my own experience, and what I have observed in others, it seemed that dance artists are able to be very articulate about their descriptions of their mental/physical/emotional states when viewing themselves on video. The transcriptions of these interviews using the performance video captured an in-the-moment quality from the participants.

The digital video of the performance served as the score for the interview. The ensemble participants spoke with one another about what they thought was going on in the improvisation from their perspective, how they perceived the actions of the other dancers, and how they negotiated their own actions. I often would stop the video while members discussed a certain moment in the performance or when I had a question for a member in order to clarify the responses. The group interviews in this situation worked well because, as qualitative researchers Andrea Fontana and James Frey note, the group can “be used to stimulate embellished descriptions of specific events . . . or experiences shared by members of the group” (1994, p. 704) The interviews yielded data about how individuals in the group make meaning in this social context. The use of the performance video as a score for the interview helped to jog participants’ memories and aided in translating the non-linguistic performance experience into the language of the participant’s own words. I followed up via email with ensemble members to further clarify their responses in the group interview.

**Questionnaire.** For the study, I developed a questionnaire comprised of 12 questions that was approved by the IRB committee at Texas Woman's University and sent to the performance ensemble members. The questionnaire asked performance ensemble members about when they started to study dance improvisation and what studies and/or tools they felt had prepared them (or not) to perform spontaneous ensemble dance in performance. The questionnaire also asked the participants to share their motivations for engaging in this dance genre. The response rate for the questionnaire was quite high, with only two participants out of 25 not responding, as noted in the tables listing each performance ensemble in Chapter 3.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis consisted of transcribing the three face-to-face interviews and the group interviews; watching the performance videos several times while making video memos; scanning, highlighting, and making data memos in the post-performance journals, and cataloguing the questionnaire. As I entered the interpretive phase of data analysis, I remembered postmodern concerns about textual representations which are founded in the fear that the researcher presents a story "which tells us the world is 'this way' when perhaps it is some other way" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 211) . To strive against this authoritarian voice Denzin and Lincoln (2005) encourage the creation of

new texts that break boundaries; that move from the center to the margins to comment on and decenter the center; that forgo closed, bounded worlds for those more open-ended and less conveniently encompassed; that transgress the boundaries of conventional social science; and that seek to create social science about human life rather than on *subjects* [emphasis in original]. (p. 211)

As a way to avoid the authoritarian researcher voice, I tried to intertwine my voice with continued member or interviewee checks, peer debriefings, and other strategies for developing multiple voices to help in the analysis and avoid my researcher bias (Erlandson, *et al.*, 1993, p. 116). The member checks consisted of sending all of the participants their quotes from the post-performance group interviews with a few sentences that surrounded the quote in the dissertation in order that the participants felt that I had represented them accurately. The feedback from participants concerning my use of quotes from their interviews proved to be helpful checks in terms of researcher bias as they clarified further for me the specifics of the participant's meaning rather than my own generalized insights.

After transcribing the interviews, I began a line-by-line coding to see what possible categories emerged from the participant's responses. In order to identify easily each performance ensemble and their members' responses, I ascribed different colors to signify the data when I began to group it thematically. All the while, I engaged in extended memo writing as ideas arose from working with the data. Already, early in the process of data analysis, I identified categories and relationships within categories as they began to emerge (Creswell, 1998, p. 152).

At that point, I manually cut the transcribed text into specific categories and put each into a labeled envelope while also making a digital copy of this process. To make the digital copy, I created a document with the category as the title and then cut and pasted the related data into the document. The digital copy allowed me to efficiently

search the data files while the physical handling of the data helped to create a tactile sense of the importance of the emerging themes as some envelopes grew thick and others remained slim, though not unimportant.

This phase of data analysis produced a great number of categories and, as I worked with categories, overarching themes began to emerge and to repeat. As these relationships between the data and emerging themes suggested themselves, I began to work with them by physically mapping the emerging themes. I valued working with the mapping strategies as described by qualitative researcher in the field of nursing, Adele Clark (2005). Clark suggests that a situational analysis methodology is helpful for “‘opening up’ the data and interrogating it in fresh ways” (2005, p. 83) I adapted Clark’s mapping strategy by considering differing methods for organizing my data. These methods included successive mappings placed on large butcher paper, allowing me to manually move the emergent themes into different relationships on each map. This physical manipulation helped me to more directly relate to each new emerging category as I moved between them. Since I am also a visual thinker, the physical mapping of the data helped me to relate visually with the emerging categories as I began to see how they could become thematic groupings. In the end, I saw and felt an emergent data narrative.

Through this evolving process of data analysis, three schemas emerged. These included: narratives of complex dancemaking, relationships found with prior experience and motivations, and the importance of a recursive dance practice in which the participants cycle through performance events and studio practice in order to build upon

the knowledge gained in previous cycles. These themes determined how I organized my research into the following discussions in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.



## CHAPTER III

### A SENSE OF ENSEMBLE: CHOREOGRAPHING THE UNKNOWN

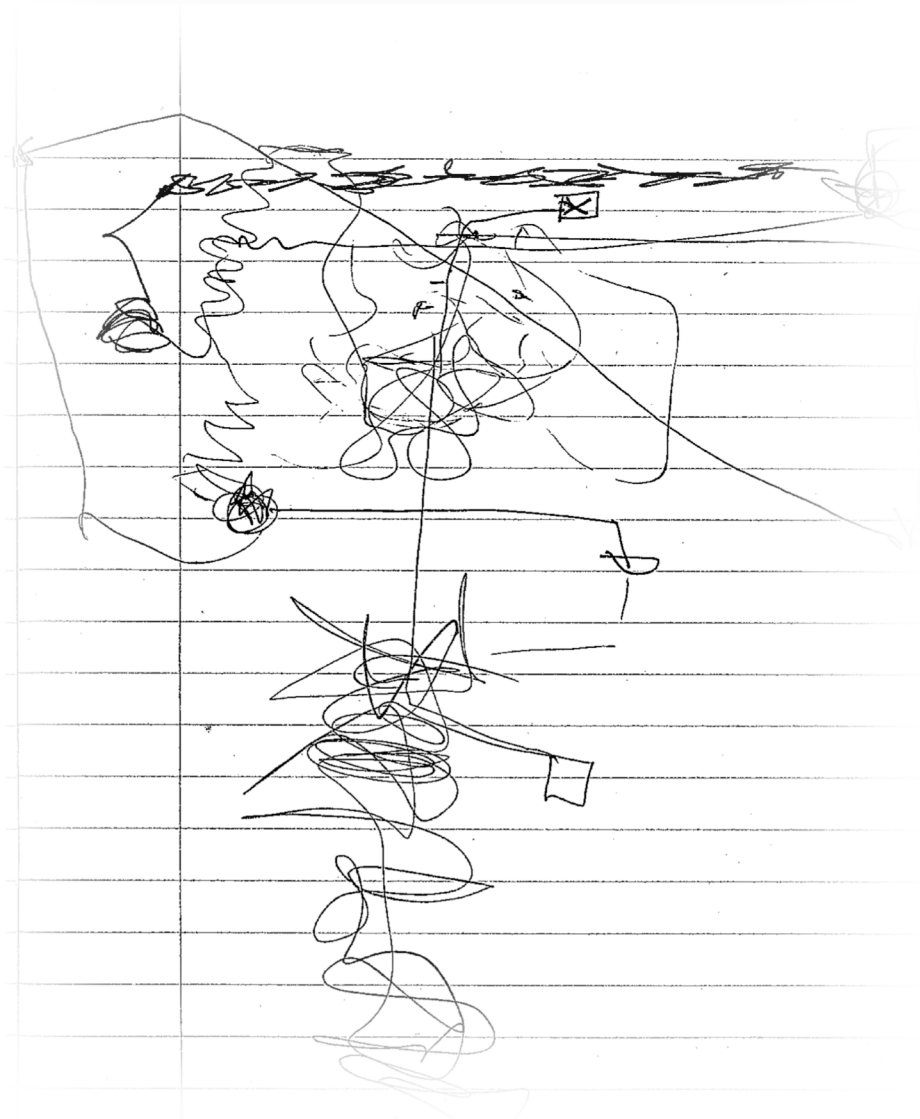
Dance artists who come together onstage to make a dance without any pre-scribed steps or detailed instructions set themselves a complex task – choreographing on-the-fly. This chapter introduces the performance ensembles and specific members who work in this spontaneous manner as well as exploring their pre-performance and rehearsal processes. Included in the chapter are descriptions of performance venues and participant's reflections on their thought processes in moments of performance. These data elements frame for the reader the complex, emergent nature of spontaneous dancemaking and its challenges. The voices of the participating dance artists illuminate the intricate nature of their practice and highlight several themes emerging as aspects of spontaneous dancemaking processes. As they relocate their practice from studio to theatrical stage, the participants negotiate the interplay of theatrical conventions such as proscenium-oriented stages, predetermined time limits for the dance, and often disorienting theatrical lighting, as well as other conditions that the data show powerfully affect improvised dancemaking. This chapter aspires to give the reader an idea of the complex nature of spontaneously co-creating choreography in performance with paying audiences. The themes raised by the participants in this research elucidate the dynamic complexity inherent in *ensemble improvisational dancemaking in performance*.

## Choreographing the Unknown

Improvisational dance ensembles come into being through a process whereby various individuals join for a time – whether for one night or ten years – and identify as an ensemble. For this study, rather than focus on solo or duet forms of improvisational dance, I specifically researched performance ensembles made up of between four and eight dance artists. As noted by the participants, as the number of individuals in a group increases, different compositional challenges emerge. For example, improvising as a soloist or in a duet requires the performer to keep track of different compositional variables than when improvising with greater numbers of dancers. Since every individual in an improvised choreography can perform any number of actions in any moment, each additional individual increases exponentially the complex compositional possibilities of the choreography.

Dynamical systems, as noted in Chapter 1, are characterized by the descriptive that *the whole is greater and different from the sum of its parts*. The dynamical nature of the spontaneously choreographed ensemble dance phenomenon requires dance artists to engage with emerging dance material as they attempt to choreograph a dance with parts that are unknown to them. One could think of the dance artist as a particle of dust caught up in the dust devil as it travels across the fallow field. I call this *choreographing the unknown* or as Susan Foster was cited in Chapter 1, this could also be thought of as, “collectively chart[ing] the unknown” (2002). Study participant Karen Schaffman of the LIVE Dance Theater ensemble cites the difficulty of choreographing the unknown and

echoes the thoughts of many of the study's participants when she emphasizes during the post-performance group interview that, "Again, so much was going on – that I had no idea *what* was going on" (personal communication, May 29, 2010). In a follow up email Schaffman responded, "Yes, in that performance, I was unable to track the group choreography. In our weekly practices, in a very small studio, I sense that I am tracking the whole more consistently" (personal communication, January 6, 2013). One aspect of the complex nature of spontaneous dancemaking is that though the artists may be aware of certain parts of the choreography unfolding, they cannot know every aspect of the choreography that they are engaged in, if only because they cannot visually track all parts of the dance at once. In this way, the audience may actually know more about some aspects of the dance than the artists themselves can. All the ensembles in this study share this improvisatory method and attempt to meet its challenges as they engage in on-the-fly dancemaking in performance. Spontaneous choreography in performance can cause some artists to feel a bit in awe of the challenge, as study participant Rebecca Bryant of the Lower Left Performance Ensemble felt when she wrote in her post-performance journal: "What kind of crazy person decides to improvise with an ensemble?" (personal communication, July 24, 2010).



*Figure 1.* Schaffman's spatial drawing of her performance.

### **Scoring Spontaneous Ensemble Dancemaking**

Dance artists work with a variety of improvisational methods for scoring or planning choreographic elements in their dances. A series of instructions for realizing a

spontaneously composed dance refers to a *score* or *structure*. For the purposes of this research, all four participating ensembles performed without a predetermined or *pre-scribed* (a term I will use) choreography or score that ensembles may choose to impose on a dance work. A dense score or structure, with many *pre-scribed* choreographic elements, might designate where sections of the dance begin and end, define the cues for initiating these sections, and even assign the roles that each dance artist must fulfill. For example, a dense score with a high ratio of instructions compared to the length of the dance might stipulate the dance begin with everyone onstage in the upstage right quadrant moving among one another with only four agreed upon movements, (such as a leap, roll, skip, and turn) for two minutes. Then a music cue might signal everyone to exit except a pre-assigned soloist who performs a solo focused on balancing on one leg for one minute, followed by a contact improvisation duet with a supporting trio in a line upstage for three minutes. From this example, one can imagine a dense improvisational score as pre-scribed choreographic instructions directing perhaps *when and where* an action is to occur during performance, but leaving open *how* the performer might choose to fulfill it or spontaneously choreograph the moment.

For this study, the performance ensembles used *open scores* with only the beginning of the dance organized by minimally pre-scribed instructions. After the initial instructions, the performance ensembles in this study had no defined score or content, though each ensemble knew how long, more or less, the improvised choreography would last. The length of the dance work was either cued by the length of a musical score in the

case of Lower Left, or, in the case of the other participating ensembles, the light board operator marked the closing at an opportune moment by bringing down the lights close to the agreed upon time. The use of this type of time constraint to cue the end is a common one since, in my own experience as an improviser; it is difficult to track the passage of time accurately when improvising.

Each of the ensembles in the study, consisting of several dance artists, engaged in spontaneous dancemaking wherein members created dances that emerged simultaneously both for the dance artists and the audience. Besides knowing how the ensemble was to warm up for the performance or perhaps what score or structure the ensemble would use to begin the performance, the dance artists in this study did not know what they were going to do or what dancemaking choices they would make in the ensuing dance. Because of the undetermined nature of an open score, the participants did not know what the dance was about, or what parts they might play in creating the dance. In the process of shaping the dance, the dance artists reflect on and describe their starting conditions, what kind of thought processes they engaged in while performing, and the impact of locating their practice in the physical environment of a theatrical space. These improvised actions result in a complex weave of self-organizing choreographic processes.

### **Dancemaking Communities**

My dissertation research further focused on five evenings of ensemble performance performed by four different ensembles: the two Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation Faculty ensembles (SFDI Faculty ensemble), the LIVE Dance Theater

ensemble (LIVE), and the Lower Left Performance Collective (Lower Left). Of the many distinguishing aspects of these ensembles, one is the different lengths of time during which they have identified as ensembles: The two different SFDI Faculty ensembles worked as a complete ensemble only for the brief 10-minute improvisation on two evenings in performance, LIVE has worked together for two years, and Lower Left has maintained a working relationship for over 10 years. However, all the ensembles consist of individual dance artists who bring diverse backgrounds and dance experiences to the spontaneous choreography emerging in performance. Further, all of the dance artists are professional performers active in dance communities in the United States with many working abroad and teaching in institutions as well.

Like the ensembles participating in this study, many dance ensembles are not stable over long stretches of time, and if they are, there may be outgoing and incoming members, a situation that was true for the Lower Left ensemble. Further, dance artists interested in improvisational methods often find themselves working in a variety of ensemble situations, a fact noted by participant K.J. Holmes, a member of the SFDI Faculty ensemble. Holmes describes how her experience with different dance ensembles informs her practice when she writes in her questionnaire that she has worked in,

. . . very open scores with groups of people who have never danced together before, at festivals and faculty and student showings, [and also with] finely tuned and rehearsed dances and partnerships as with Karen Nelson (1990-‘92), with Karen and Scott Smith (1990-‘98), Image Lab (with Lisa Nelson, Karen and Scott, 1990-‘98), Steve Paxton (1995-‘98), and with Simone Forti and Troupe (1986-1990). With each of these, there were focuses that would be returned to

again and again, and performance was always an integral part of our work together. (personal communication, June 21, 2011 and June 4, 2012)

Like Holmes, dance artists and faculty commonly have experience performing with *pick-up* ensembles at dance improvisation festivals. More unusual is that, as Holmes mentioned, she worked with several different artists and ensembles, including Lisa Nelson in *Image Lab*, for several years and over time had the opportunity to develop an expertise in multiple dancemaking systems or methods. Holmes brings knowledge gained in her extended investigations to the one-night-stand SFDI festival ensemble experience and builds a shared knowledge base within the dance community, much like an ancient trading system in which traveling traders exchanged tools, concepts, and knowledge. Many of this study's participating dance artists, including this researcher, share with Holmes this ability to move fluidly between the different ensemble experiences that endure for different lengths of time. As we dance through each diverse experience, we share our knowledge about different approaches to spontaneous dancemaking.

### **Theatrical Conventions and Unconventional Dancemaking**

One could consider improvisational dance an unconventional dance form that often finds itself onstage in a theater with all the accouterments that create a theatrical experience. For many theaters, this physical reality translates as seats bolted to the floor, wings hung to hide entrances, exits, and backstage activity, theatrical lighting to aid the audience's viewing experience (but perhaps not the view of the performers), and a clear physical definition between stage and audience. Moreover, in the case of multiple dances



shown in an evening, the length of time the entire performance will take is often a concern for theatre producers. All the performance ensembles in this study had to deal with some combination of these theatrical conventions. The data reveal that these theatrical conventions can affect the spontaneous choreographer in performance.

In the following sections, I present this study's improvising ensembles and their dance artist members, beginning with the SFDI Faculty ensembles in their two 10-minute Seattle performances. Next, I will introduce the LIVE Dance Theater of San Diego, which at the time of this research had met weekly for almost two years as an ensemble. Finally, I introduce the bi-continental Lower Left Performance Collective which performed in Germany and whose members have worked together for more than 10 years.

### **Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation Faculty Ensembles**

Dance artists may find themselves thrown together in open score, improvised choreography in performance and collectively must co-create a dance in real time with dancers, often dancers they may not be familiar with, while also engaging the audience in the process. This complex creative act can be even more challenging, the data suggest, when all the individuals in an ensemble do not have rehearsal time together in practice sessions before the performance, and are meeting as an ensemble for the first time onstage in the immediacy of a performance as well as with an expectant audience.

This spontaneous performance scenario was true for the SFDI Faculty ensembles, self-selected faculty participating in the Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation,

produced by Dance Art Group. Over the two evenings of performance, the makeup of the *ad hoc* ensembles changed with some of the dance artists performing for both evenings and some performing for just one evening. I participated as a performer the first evening of performance and watched from the audience the second evening in order to conduct my research from both inside and outside of the performance. Thus, the two ensembles were a different entity each night, even though the majority of participants performed both nights, as seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Ensemble Members: SFDI Faculty Performance*

First Performance	Second Performance
Bebe Miller	_____
Rachael Lincoln	_____
Nina Martin	_____
Alia Swersky	Alia Swersky
Aaron Schwartzman	Aaron Schwartzman
Christian Swenson	Christian Swenson
K.J. Holmes	K.J. Holmes
Cathie Caraker	Cathie Caraker
_____	Martha Eddy



*Figure 2.* Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation Faculty Ensemble in performance, August 5, 2010.



*Figure 3.* Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation Faculty Ensemble in performance, August 6, 2010.

The venue for the SFDI Faculty ensemble performance was the Broadway Theater in Seattle, which features a traditional proscenium stage with a backdrop and wings, but no front curtain. The theater seats approximately 500 audience members. I describe the theater because, as mentioned by the participants, the physical setup affected the performance. For example, in the post-performance interview, Aaron Swartzman remarked that the wings obstructed his vision and created uncertainty. The unscripted nature of improvisational dance problematizes the use of traditional stages dressed with wings since the interrupted visual field of the performer on the side of the stage hinders a clear view of the emerging dance and possible choreographic choices that the artist could make. Of course, as an improvising dance artist, Swartzman could choose to improve his view of the dance, but perhaps the wings encourage behavior more appropriate to a traditional theatrical setting.

In addition to challenges presented by the physical setup of the theatre, the two SFDI performance ensembles never rehearsed with the entire casts before the performances; instead, they met for the first time as full ensembles onstage in performance. There were two scheduled onstage rehearsals amidst the festival classes and events, and members of the ensembles attended both, one, or none of the rehearsals. The choreographers understand that the purpose of these rehearsals is to agree to and practice the opening score and get to know one another while running through the 10-minute dance. In both cases, the goal is to reflect the needs and value systems of each choreographer and to see how they might work together as a collective.

There was some frustration expressed by those present in rehearsal concerning those ensemble members that did not attend, but those present continued to develop as collective sense of ensemble. To give my reader a more clear idea of the situation, I will explain: one may have self-selected to perform the second night but in the rehearsal might only dance with three of the artists with whom he or she will actually perform with while meeting the other three members of the ensemble onstage in performance for the first time. The assumption here by some of the SFDI faculty ensemble members appears to indicate that as improvisers we share enough of a common language to meet onstage with no rehearsal and create a dance. I discuss this subject of a common language at more length in a later chapter.

Study participant K.J. Holmes, as the designated facilitator for the two performances, proposed an opening score for the performance, drawing on her work with Lisa Nelson's *Image Lab* ensemble. The ensemble's score used Nelson's *tuning score* for the beginning of the dance which directed the dance artists to establish and conclude a series of moving or still images before the ensemble proceeded into an open score improvisation. It was my perception that ensemble members felt satisfied with these rehearsals as preparation for the performance (researcher's journal entry, August 4, 2010). However, the individual commitment to the score on the second night of performance was flexible, as seen in Vitali Kononov's post-performance journal entry:

It was great to have a score that I was familiar with and at the same time, there was no pressure to follow it. It almost felt like there was an invisible presence of a director who for some reason decided to not watch. So, we were all left to

ourselves having freedom to do whatever we wanted, and also being a bit afraid to break the rules completely. (personal communication, August 6, 2010)

Interestingly, Kononov's approach to the tuning score, if similar to the approach of others in the ensemble, brings to question the point of the score since if ensemble members do not fulfill it, it may not serve its function of bringing the ensemble together in preparation for the ensuing open score. Information such as Kononov shared in this research, makes me interested in pursuing the efficacy of tuning scores such as Nelson's as I continue to work in this field. In the particular case of the SFDI Faculty ensembles, the approach to rehearsals and the tuning score in the performance may not have served the overall performance goal of enacting cohesive dancemaking as evidenced in Kononov's comments. As an improviser who often performs in ensembles where the artists are meeting for the first time onstage, I often think that if we do not have to rehearse or pay too close attention to the score then perhaps there is an assumption of a shared improvisational dance language?

The lack of an assembled ensemble continued for both nights up to the time of the performance. In the case of the second night of performance, SFDI Faculty ensemble member Kononov communicates in the post-performance group interview to the amusement of his colleagues the confusion he felt as the dance began. He states: , "I had no idea how many performers... are going to be doing this round" to which Aaron Swartzman replied, "Oh, you too!" Kononov and Swartzman did not know who were the other members of the ensemble as the performance began. To add to the challenge

presented by having no pre-performance rehearsal together as a full ensemble, confusion intensified when several performers chose to start their performance from seats in the audience so they could watch the performances preceding the SFDI Faculty's performance. Swartzman reports, during the post-performance group interview, his starting condition as:

I was offstage and I couldn't see anybody here [backstage] or know where anybody was. . . . To me there was the challenge of not connecting with anybody before the run and having just three of us that I knew were on the stage and everybody else out in the audience . . . and it felt really cut off from everybody. (personal communication, August 6, 2010)

The SFDI Faculty ensemble on the second night did not have a complete sense of itself until minutes into the performance. When Swartzman expressed in the post-performance group interview that "going over the score with everybody involved before the performance tends to help me," Cathy Caraker reminded him, "We had a dress rehearsal," to which Swartzman replied, "Right, I wasn't at that" (personal communication, August 6, 2010). Often at dance festivals there are so many events scheduled that it is difficult to attend rehearsals. Even though Swartzman has many years of experience improvising, the confusion and anxiety seemed to intensify because he was unable to attend rehearsals and further suggests that perhaps rehearsals do have a function even for experienced improvisers.

Caraker's response to Swartzman suggests that, for both of them, the beginning of the performance did not go as smoothly as they may have hoped and, as Caraker reminds Swartzman, it was partly due to the failure of some members of the performance

ensemble to attend rehearsals. Perhaps the practiced flexibility of mind that these improvisational artists practice and demonstrate allows for this relaxed approach to performance and implies that the performers feel confident in their skills for responding to all eventualities. Clearly, for Kononov and Swartzman, the ambiguity and uncertainty may not have made for a comfortable beginning. The question arises, what does it mean to be prepared for improvising choreography?

Similarly, SFDI Faculty members began the first night of performance from seats in the audience; however, my video analysis, and the comments participants made when comparing the two evenings of performance in their post-performance journals, indicate the first night ensemble did not seem to be disoriented by some of its members beginning in the audience. As their post-performance journals state, for the members of the second evening ensemble there was a difference between the two evenings even though five out of the eight members performed both nights. As I analyzed the video from the first night of performance, I wrote:

Audience laughs at the dancer off-stage who begins her performance from the audience. Bebe [Miller] rises to take a solitary, unhurried walk across the stage. Patient. She moves into a crawl position close to upstage right wing as if to exit. Alia [Swersky] enters, poses center stage, and assumes Bebe's crawl posture. Nina [Martin] enters, extends halfway out of the downstage left wing, echoing the crawl posture. Now there is a long diagonal line of stationary crawlers.  
(researcher's video data memo, December 17, 2010)

Though I was a part of the ensemble on the first night, I noticed from my analysis of the performance videos that there was a sense of patient support on the ensemble's part for the material put forth during the first night. By patient support, I mean to say that in the



video I observed a critical mass of the ensemble committed to the establishment of the crawling posture mentioned in the former quote as an image, thus supporting Bebe's initial material. This support continued throughout and required performers both onstage and offstage to recognize the image as an ensemble and allow it to resonate as a choreographic element. This quality of patient support seemed to contribute to a "*sense of ensemble*" (Alia Swersky, personal communication, July 6, 2011) early in the dance and lend confidence to the dancemaking process. For the beginning of the first spontaneous dance, I wrote,

. . . just a light cue spilling on the floor, patience, signaling me to be patient, something is coming. Alia [Swersky], beautiful Alia, enters— phrase is simple and rich. Rachael [Lincoln] joins with same dynamic phrasing and then a brief physical interaction. End of image, they casually exit as the beginning score directed. I feel a sense of completion as a viewer. (researcher's video data memo, December 17, 2010)

Perhaps this feeling of completion on the first night comes from the sense of unhurried action and performers supporting the material presented.

It is interesting that the three SFDI Faculty ensemble members performing both nights preferred the first evening's performance to the experience of the second evening's performance. Swenson writes in his post-performance journal, "Not as free and obvious what to do as last night. My choices were safer" (personal communication, August 6, 2010). Kononov in his post-performance journal wrote, "Working with such talented improvisers was very enjoyable for me. At the same time I liked the first performance more than the second one" (personal communication, August 6, 2010). Caraker writing

in her post-performance journal after the second performance also finds herself comparing the two evenings of performance:

Danced both nights: this one [second night] was harder. Felt myself thinking/watching more and didn't like that.... Loved the beginning- the Zen image of emptiness. Then someone enters from front, someone from side enters w/o having seen first dancer. Jarring, I felt a lack of cohesion. This made me uneasy. Before I went in, I already was comparing to last night. (!) Ha ha, how desire & expectation get in the way! (personal communication, August 6, 2010)

Caraker's use of the descriptive *cohesion* suggests that she may be experiencing the emerging dance work as lacking just what she might expect from a pre-scribed and rehearsed choreography. On what basis does Caraker sense a lack of cohesion? What aesthetic or sensory paradigm is operative for performers in order for them to make judgments such as Caraker's? How does a sense of cohesion develop from openness and why does it not always develop even among skilled improvisers? As has been shown by the conversations of these participants, the nature of the form draws artists who enjoy charting the unknown, but it is also clear that there is no collectively understood language or method of practice for how to collaboratively create a dance.

Swenson, Kononov, and Caraker's sense of disappointment with the second performance as compared to the first may be due to what I observed in the performance video from the second night: "at times members of the ensemble did not seem to support the material that emerged and constituted the dance with the patience and sense of ensemble that appeared evident the first night" (researchers data memo, December 17, 2010). I did observe members of the ensemble attempting to support and develop

material on the second night, but “somehow their efforts could not pull the whole ensemble into a unified entity” (researchers video data memo, December 17, 2010). The following question arises, what does it mean to support emergent material in an improvised choreography? As the data reveal, participants have very different ideas about what constitutes composing a dance. I also must ask as a participant observer, “What biases am I bringing to the analysis of the performance video? Moreover, with so many choices possible, which ones, and on what basis, should an artist make them? How does the dance artist sense which emerging dance material should be supported and then elaborated upon? Further study of this question is warranted.

In her response to the study’s questionnaire, Swersky reflects on the support I observed her giving to material introduced by other ensemble members in performance. Swersky writes:

I find that I like to hook into themes and bring them back in some way. I enjoy catching movement ideas from others that I can translate into my body in some way. I love to replace or replay something that has already happened. I do like structure – attention to space, moments of unison or coming together with an idea. (personal communication, July 9, 2011)

Swersky’s performance goals of supporting emerging choreographic material and even recalling and putting previous material into play again are evident as she writes about her concerns as a dancemaker. Swersky’s thoughts also reflect my own understanding and sense of my practice as a spontaneous dancemaker. On the other hand, Swartzman has differing insights about this dilemma of support. He discusses how at times making the choice to support choreographic material as it emerges in performance can be a

complicated choice that can lead to a disjointed feeling in performance. Swartzman finds himself in this dilemma when he does not act on his own choreographic impulse; instead, he seems to link choreographic impulses to interpersonal group choices. He writes about this concern in his post-performance journal:

An urge to run and jump into Alia's [Swersky's] arms – stifled, many things, stifled, hard to shake the dancing duet I had just done before and get out of abstract world! Strange thoughts, like should I be equitable and dance with everyone? Or, just go for it, and not care – but there is always such a strong interpersonal side to group improv. (post-performance journal, August 6, 2010)

Swartzman's journal entry gives a good example of his on-the-fly thought processes, as he navigates the different levels of engagement in emergent dancemaking and the difficulties in cultivating a state of mind that sustains an artist in the uncertainty of improvised choreography. Swartzman's journal entry reflects his discomfort in performance: he seems to feel restrained and perhaps not all of one mind as he considers different options for action. As Swartzman tries to negotiate the abstract world of choreographic impulses nested within the social world that is ensemble improvisation, he seems pulled by competing social and choreographic interests that are always present and intertwined potentials in on-the-fly ensemble improvisation.

Swenson's, Kononov's, Caraker's, Swartzman's, and my own reflections give one a sense of the difficult challenges posed in ensemble performance generally, and on that second night of performance in particular. With the exception of Martha Eddy, who only performed the second night and thus had no basis for comparing the two nights, the remaining ensemble members, who all performed both nights, echoed unease with the

progression of the second night of performance in the post-performance interview.

Perhaps the ad hoc nature of the performance ensembles and the lack of time rehearsing together exacerbate the already complex challenges encountered in improvisatory performance, or the serendipitous combination of individuals and their skills on the first night facilitated a satisfactory sense of ensemble. In any case, it seems clear that spontaneous dancemaking is a risky endeavor.

The potential complexity resulting from several dance artists creating a dance on-the-spot in performance with innumerable choices open to each performer seems challenging for these dance artists on both social and choreographic levels. Swersky's response in her questionnaire sums up this dilemma when she writes, "I think creating an ensemble improvisation in performance is one of the hardest things to do and it is rarely done well" (personal communication, July 9, 2011). This notion of "doing well" was also noted by the SFDI Faculty ensemble performing on the second night when they expressed a sense of unease with their work, an emotional state mentioned several times throughout the post-performance group interview. For example, participants had the following exchange during the post-performance group interview while watching a replay of the performance video:

Christian Swenson: I was doing these funny gestures trying to connect to people and there was nothing, no connection, [and I thought] well I will just do this.

Aaron Swartzman: To me there was something. And, I am seeing it here [in performance video] although I didn't see it at this time during the improv, but there was a sense of quadrants, or sort of isolated spaces in the performance. I don't know if it was the wings or people starting from the audience, but it really

felt like the space felt divided, and sort of abstract in a way to me. Kinda like, no choice.

Swenson: I was trying to do something but not too much.

Nina Martin: When you said that you were trying to connect but it wasn't happening or there wasn't...

Swenson: Well, there was no eye contact, the only other connection might be that someone is doing what you are doing, or you are doing what they are doing. Separate worlds totally.

Vitali Kononov: I felt totally lost in this whole section.

Martin: When you felt lost what was your response?

Kononov: To continue doing what I am doing and wait for something stronger to come.

Swenson: Or to just go with the stillness, think about exiting [laughing]. Maybe there is too much of weird things going on, obviously.

From this exchange, one can see that creating a sense of ensemble can often elude even very experienced improvisers as they are still in a constant state of learning. After the second evening of performance, the SFDI Faculty members expressed that they felt unable to connect and create a sense of collective choreographic intent in performance, though many reported being satisfied with the first night of performance. However, despite the challenges, an interest in this genre continues as evidenced in the artists that continually pursue this dancemaking process and the audiences that continue to support its performance. Perhaps each sense of failure opens avenues for considering new ways of thinking and doing when undertaking this type of performance.

## **LIVE Dance Theater**

LIVE Dance Theater's history as an ensemble is very different from that of the SFDI Faculty ensembles. Whereas the SFDI Faculty ensembles met on stage for the first time, the LIVE ensemble began as a dance research lab with fellow San Diego-based artists and, then, only later began to perform as LIVE Dance Theater. The ensemble had completed more than a year of studio practice, followed by semi-monthly performances in the preceding nine months, when I arrived in San Diego to conduct my research. I observed two evenings of performance that took place at the Saville Theatre at San Diego City College. The LIVE choreography ran approximately 20 minutes and was the first piece on the program followed by works of other local San Diego choreographers. The Saville proscenium theater seats approximately 500 and though there was a front curtain used in the performance, the stage was not dressed with wings or a backdrop. The bare brick wall at the back of the stage featured a large industrial overhead door with a message in large letters, "DO NOT BLOCK." This stripped-down stage space strewn with props and backstage clutter set the stage for viewing dance through a non-traditional lens. Unlike the SFDI Faculty ensemble, all members of the LIVE ensemble performed both nights except Reich and Clancy, who were out of town but who did participate in the study's questionnaire.

Table 2

*Ensemble Members: LIVE Dance Theater*

LIVE ensemble members	LIVE members participating in performances
Karen Schaffman	Karen Schaffman
Yolande Snaith	Yolande Snaith
Eric Geiger	Eric Geiger
Ron Estes	Ron Estes
Jess Humphrey	Jess Humphrey
Leslie Seitters	Leslie Seitters
Chris Apple	Chris Apple
Mary Reich	
Liam Clancy	



*Figure 4.* LIVE Dance Theater in performance, May 29, 2010.

The LIVE ensemble met weekly for studio practice sessions, followed by a discussion over lunch, for more than a year before beginning to engage in public performance. This weekly practice format may have helped create, as LIVE members



shared in the post-performance group interview, what seemed an articulate and critical engagement in the analysis of the ensemble's performance. Not only did the LIVE ensemble dance together for a year before performing as an ensemble, but it also practiced a form in rehearsals that the members referred to as *The 20s*. In the data, LIVE members sometimes refer to themselves by different names and when I first contacted the group, they always referred to themselves as *The 20s*. However, the program notes for the performance listed them as LIVE Dance Theater. After arriving in San Diego to conduct my research, I realized *The 20s* was a sort of shorthand that described the ensemble's rehearsal practice. LIVE member Karen Schaffman explained:

For a long while, we did it [the 20s score] together and at our own pace and interpretation. The form was "stretched" from [Barbara] Dilley's score as I understood it via Karen Nelson and Margit Galanter. Dilley's Contemplative Dance Practice is scored as follows: 20 minutes of sitting meditation, 20 minutes of personal warm-up, and 20 minutes of open space. Participants bow in between each increment, delineated by a bell of some kind, and each time you return to enter or exit during open space you bow as well. We didn't go in and out of the circle - no bowing practice. We did 20 min. sit, 20 min. individual warm-up/dance, 20 min. dancing with others/space, then open score for 1 hour. (personal communication, February 12, 2012, January 14, 2013)

Schaffman's comments are a good example of how structures and systems developed by one artist, such as Dilley, move and transform among different groups, creating new knowledge and practices for the field. The practice of *The 20s* is significant for this ensemble because, at least for the performances I witnessed, LIVE practiced its version of this score starting one hour before the performance behind the front curtain while the audience entered the theater. At the end of the hour the curtains rose and, with a musical

crescendo played by ensemble member and composer, Chris Apple, the piece began with the ensemble already established in its choreographic process.

The LIVE ensemble score for how to begin its improvised choreography in performance facilitated the ensemble's entry into a conventional theatrical stage space though it was not without its challenges as described by ensemble members in the study questionnaire and post-performance group interviews. LIVE member Leslie Seiters, commenting on the beginning of the first of two nights of performance, wrote in her post-performance journal, "Finally an instant start. The curtain goes up and there we are. Enjoyed the anticipation – and false beginnings – I kept imagining THIS is the place to be, but the curtain kept not opening!" (personal communication, May 28, 2010). Seiters describes her state as an improvisational dancemaker informed by her compositional sense and suggests that at least two skill sets are operative: her skill as an improviser and her skill as a choreographer – co-existing and informing one another. Her choreographer-self seems to imagine the dance to come – identifying the right time for the curtain to rise – and her improviser-self continues working, open to any eventuality. LIVE ensemble colleague, Eric Geiger, writing in his post-performance journal, also noted this experience of being already engaged in the dance and when the curtain flew out. He writes, "Transition from behind curtain to curtain up very exciting for me, felt rush – felt the space open and [the dance] spilled into it" (personal communication, May 28, 2010).

Seiters' and Geiger's post-performance journal entries communicate a sense, from their perspective as spontaneous choreographers, that the new dance work is off to a good

start – a very different feeling than that expressed by several of the SFDI ensemble members concerning their second evening of performance. In the LIVE case, Seiters had the advantage of knowing who the members of her ensemble were and had been able to practice with them the hour before the performance began. Geiger suggests that the beginning structure supported him as a performer and set him up positively to move confidently into the unfolding dance. LIVE member Karen Schaffman, in her post-performance journal, wrote that just before the curtain went up she quoted aloud a question that internationally renowned choreographer Deborah Hay uses to choreograph her dances: “What if where I am is what I need?” (personal communication, May 28, 2010). Seiters, Geiger, and Schaffman, all seemed to have used Dilley’s and Hay’s structures as tools for performance and *tuning* themselves before revealing their process to the audience with the flying out of the front curtain.

Perhaps the practice of *The 20s* in the hour of preparation before the curtain rose, and the familiarity and shared epistemologies within the ensemble that these performers have developed as an ensemble over the last year contributed to the sense of satisfaction as expressed in their post-performance journals. Seiters, Geiger, and Schaffman seemed to cope with and even enjoy the ambiguity, uncertainty, and expectation that often attend the beginning of an improvisational performance. Certainly, the attitude expressed in the post-performance journal entries of Seiters, Geiger, and Schaffman reveals a very positive feeling about the beginning of their dance work in performance.

The data suggest that the LIVE ensemble, through more than a year of working on a weekly basis, including discussions over lunch after their rehearsals, forged a basis for developing a sense of ensemble through the sharing of individual strategies and ideas for spontaneous dancemaking. As I listened to the LIVE ensemble discuss its work, as a researcher, I thought that the familiarity enjoyed by the ensemble facilitated a critical engagement in the give and take of their perceptions about the ensemble's work. In contrast, the SFDI Faculty ensembles, which appeared last on the concert bill, did not have the advantage of tuning together before the start of their performance, much less an extended rehearsal time, and thus, at least for the second night ensemble, struggled, as described by SFDI ensemble members, with this lack of preparation, and the post-performance group discussion reflected this lack of familiarity.

However, though familiarity among ensemble members could benefit a performance ensemble, the data demonstrate in the case of the SFDI Faculty performing on the first night in Seattle that familiarity is not strictly necessary for a satisfactory outcome. On the first night, the SFDI Faculty ensemble managed to fashion a sense of ensemble without the benefits of familiarity among the dance artists. This success suggests that if the SFDI Faculty ensemble performing the first night was not benefitting from familiarity with one another's concepts for spontaneous dancemaking, then what conditions were operating that allowed for a sense of ensemble to develop? Could certain preparations serve the spontaneous choreographer better than others when entering into spontaneous dancemaking with unfamiliar artists? Is there a critical mass of shared

compositional tools that facilitate a spontaneous choreography co-created by artists that have not worked together? These questions emerging from my research process over time continued to echo as I continued to gather and analyze data.

### **Lower Left Performance Collective**

Of the four ensembles in this study (first and second night SFDI ensembles, the LIVE ensemble and the Lower Left ensemble), Lower Left Performance Collective (Lower Left) has the longest time identifying as a performance ensemble, with 2012 marking its 17<sup>th</sup> year in existence. The name Lower Left continues in use though it initially described the lower left geographical corner of the USA in San Diego. I co-founded the ensemble in 1994 with several local artists, and I continue to explore my creative work within the framework of the ensemble. Now, the far-flung members of Lower Left live in Mexico, Germany, New York, Missouri, and Texas. The collective finds time to come together at least twice a year for intensive rehearsal periods and performances. In between the times when we physically come together, we keep in touch via email and Skype conversations.

Though members of the group have changed over time, the ensemble members who participate in this study have at least 10 years working together. I met four of the Lower Left members who participate in this study as students in my classes in Southern California, where I was teaching and choreographing at the University of California, San Diego, and at the University of California, Los Angeles. Because of our long time working together we, of all the study's ensembles, have a body of work that includes

collaboratively developed improvisational systems such as *Articulating the Solo Body*, *ReWire: Dancing States*, and *Ensemble Thinking* in addition to having expertise in Contact Improvisation. These dancemaking systems, used as compositional tools in performance by all the ensemble members, affect the aesthetic signature of the ensemble as reflected in the data presented below.

In addition to being a member of Lower Left, each member also pursues individual research interests and performance opportunities in diverse dance organizations. Below, Table 3 lists the Lower Left members and those who participated in this study. The movement of dance artists between ensembles demonstrates the fluid nature characteristic of much of the improvisational dance community (two members of the LIVE ensemble, Karen Schaffman and Mary Reich, were also co-founding members of Lower Left). This movement between ensembles is another example of the avenues by which different methods for spontaneous dancemaking move within this field of dance.

Table 3 below lists the Lower Left members participating in this study.

Table 3

*Lower Left Performance Collective*

Lower Left members	Lower Left Study Participants
Andrew Wass	Andrew Wass
Rebecca Bryant	Rebecca Bryant
Kelly Dalrymple-Wass	Kelly Dalrymple-Wass
Nina Martin	Nina Martin
Margaret Paek	Margaret Paek
Shelley Senter	
Alicia Marvan	
Leslie Scates	



*Figure 5. Lower Left Performance Ensemble in Performance, July 7, 2010*

The Lower Left performance, presented by Ponderosa Movement & Discovery in Stolzenhagen, Germany, was part of the P.O.R.C.H. Festival. The piece, titled *And Go*, was 20 minutes long. The ensemble came together in July 2010 for a one-week intensive rehearsal period in New York City and in Berlin a few weeks preceding the performance on July 24, 2010. This concentrated rehearsal process focused on identifying choreographic structures that the ensemble could recognize, articulate, and understand as a collective epistemology. Dance choreographer/theorist Susan Sgorbati describes this phenomenon in her article, *Emergent Improvisation Project*, writing in the *Contact Quarterly*: “There is no choreographer directing their movements, and yet there is an emergent form appearing that they all recognize and understand,” (2007). For example,

Lower Left rehearsed what we called *the arm dance*, and if it happened to emerge during performance at someone's initiation, we could collectively fulfill that choreographic structure in performance. In fact, as it happened, this dance emerged in an unforced manner in performance when we found ourselves in a close line facing the audience that resembled the line that was always a feature of the arm dance in rehearsal. The line emerging in the improvisation prompted the ensemble to recognize simultaneously the potential for the rehearsed yet improvised arm dance with its constraints of always being very close to one another while composing our arm movements within each other's kinesphere. In this way, structure evolves as emergent phenomenon in performance and is not pre-determined.

Upon arriving at Ponderosa, a former dairy farm, Lower Left found an old barn with a hayloft housing the performance space above what was once the milking operation on the first floor of the barn. As the performance began, the large glass door at the back of the stage had a view of the forest beyond and the descending dusk. Large wooden beams placed at angles supported the roof high above and sheltered the audience seated in front of the performing space. The audience sat on the floor, except for the numerous children running around. The boundaries of the performance space, demarcated by where the beams met the floor and the theatrical lighting ended, was a window of theatricality with the loft space continuing to spread beyond. Composer Don Nichols' pre-recorded sound score, featuring a collage of such sound effects as church bells ringing at the beginning of the performance and a jet plane at the end, accompanied the dance.



Though the venue for Lower Left's performance was very different from the more traditional proscenium performance spaces for the other ensembles in this study, there were similarities. Other dances by different groups preceded Lower Left's performance of *And Go*, as was the case with the SFDI Faculty ensemble performances. Similarly, confusion reigned in the beginning moments of the dance. Elements of the pre-determined score called for the dance to begin with an ensemble score based on Barbara Dilley's grid structure simultaneously with Nichol's musical score. This plan did not happen because of confusion around the video recording of the dance. Rebecca Bryant speaks to the difficulty and importance of beginnings and skillful problem solving in the Lower Left post-performance group interview saying, "...when you have what I would call a rough start and we did fine with it, but we had a rough start and it is harder to overcome than having a start that is more of what you wanted. A theory that I am thinking about is how important is it psychologically or analytically for the performer to start off feeling good about the situation?" (personal communication, July 25, 2010). If the beginning of an improvised choreography is important, and the data suggest that it is, then what is essential for ensuring a good beginning for an improvised dance? Bryant's emotional state in the beginning of the performance is one of frustration, as described in the post-performance group interview:

We were very well prepared and then you [Andrew] are going to turn on the camera. And none of us were frazzled. We were prepared. But there is this part of me that is resentful that we have to take care of documenting ourselves while we are doing it [performing the dance]. You shouldn't have to be thinking about turning on a camera before you are going on. Honestly, I wish that we were more

in a situation where we're ready to go, instead of having all these little logistical concerns. (personal communication, July 25, 2010)

Clearly, Bryant is not in an optimal state for performing her work and perhaps the data suggest an examination of concert dance convention that positions dance works one after another, with just a few moments in between, would be helpful. Typical dance concert conventions also call for a dress rehearsal to iron out logistical concerns, but there was no dress rehearsal, which can often be the case in improvisational dance performances situated in dance festivals.

Another theatrical convention often used is that just as a performance is to start the house lights dim, which signals the audience to stop conversing and attend to the work that is about to begin. Though there was no dimming of the lights, the audience thought the performance was beginning when Andrew Wass ran on a long diagonal from upstage left to downstage right to turn on the video camera in order to catch the actual beginning of the performance. When Andrew ran the audience stopped conversing and the full force of its attention turned expectantly towards the performance space. I include an exchange between Lower Left members here to show how even experienced improvisers can find themselves unsettled in their practice when their best-laid plans for improvised performance are altered. The ensemble members, prompted by watching the performance on video, had these responses:

Rebecca Bryant: Well, I thought to myself when Kelly came over and said we can't get it [the camera] to turn on. I thought to myself, I don't want Kelly to be in a state like this.

Martin: And I didn't even know this was happening.

Bryant: And then, you [Andrew] went argggghh as you ran over there because you were frustrated and I thought right, right, we are starting, this is where we are starting from now. So in a way I was really glad you [Nina] ran, because you weren't denying all this frantic energy all of the sudden. We switched into something else. We did an emotional jump cut<sup>6</sup> in that moment. Cause its like, "Oh crap the camera's not working.

Kelly Dalrymple-Wass: And yeah, when the camera didn't work, was for me really right when I felt it start then I felt "problem"! How am I going to solve this problem? [Laughing]... This was for me the beginning.

Martin: And when Andrew ran across, by that point from the audience's viewpoint, the performance had begun even though the lights weren't on and the music wasn't on, there I was on the side, I got this sense, "Oh, better go....

Dalrymple-Wass: Because the [audience's] attention was on us.

Martin: So then, I guess that...

Andrew Wass: You should have said, "Wait, we are not starting."

Martin: Yeah. (personal communication, July 25, 2010)

The situation in which the Lower Left ensemble found itself speaks to the power of performance conventions and notions such as *the show must go on* that may position improvising dance artists as at odds with their own artistic best interests. Perhaps when I began to run, I responded to an ingrained sense of responsibility to audience expectations, and the need to fulfill its expectations rather than fulfill the needs of the work we were to present in that performance. In my post-performance journal, I wrote, "Andrew runs, I

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<sup>6</sup> *Jump-cut* is a term in the Lower Left collective epistemology (which was a term used in the Channel Z performance ensemble of which I was a co-founding member) that refers to a film technique wherein the transition from one scene to another is not linear but rather abrupt (Buckwalter, 2010).

run too, Kelly runs, we are all running.” In a video data memo, I wrote, “It was as if an emerging choreographic action was fulfilled before it blossomed into full consciousness, making me a conduit of tacit choreographic impulses arising in the moment” (researcher’s data memo, December 17, 2010). However, this impulse resulted in me abandoning the agreed upon score, and I threw the entire ensemble into a coping mode by my action.

Both Lower Left and the SFDI Faculty ensembles had ambiguous rather than formal beginnings to their performances, no one was quite sure when the dances began. Lower Left experienced confusion with the camera documenting the performance, and SFDI Faculty ensemble had members starting from the audience. These first moments of the performance did not position these ensembles well in order to represent their best work in comparison to and as experienced previously in rehearsals, jams, or other performances as their comments and journal writing demonstrate. Could the casual, freewheeling approach to performance, the privileging of a flexible mind state, and the conception that the performance is a continuation of rehearsal practice sessions, be a reason for not observing a more formal beginning? The LIVE ensemble acknowledged the importance of a beginning and also commitment to *process as performance* by asking to be first on the program and using the stage space for an hour before the performance (other performers on the evening were accommodated during this hour in a shared space arrangement which will not be possible in many situations). LIVE’s beginning strategy,

with the rising curtain signaling a definite beginning to the performance, supported the ensemble in important ways, as indicated earlier in the chapter.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have introduced data pertaining to each ensemble, its members, performance conditions and venues, performance states of participants and their reflections, and the beginning moments of each performance in theatrical stage spaces, all of which inform the phenomenon of ensemble improvised dancemaking in performance. The data suggest that in order to frame and support the improvisational dance practice, spontaneous choreographers should carefully consider how the physical aspects of theatrical stages (wings, bright lights, proscenium orientation, fixed seating etc.) could change their studio practice as it transitions into performance and possibly work against the performance goals of the ensemble. The praxis of moving studio practice to performance and back again are challenges the participants invite as part of the inquiry into spontaneous dancemaking.

Time spent together or the lack of it was also foregrounded in this chapter. The longevity of the LIVE and Lower Left ensembles seemed to help build *collective epistemologies* overtime or at least a greater collective understanding of one another in order to spontaneously choreograph a dance in performance that is always potentially on the edge of chaos. However, as an outlier, the SFDI Faculty ensemble performing on the first evening, though meeting for the first time onstage, did manage to spontaneously choreograph a cohesive dance, as observed by the participants, demonstrating that though

time together may be helpful it is not strictly necessary for a sense of ensemble to emerge in performance. This phenomenon is of interest to this study because it gives rise to the question, if strangers can meet onstage in performance and spontaneously create a cohesive choreography, what critical mass of and in what combinations, are compositional epistemologies or values most likely to support the endeavor? Why does one performance of improvised choreography seem to turn out better for the participants than another? As a reader and improviser of spontaneous choreography in performance, I am still left with this question of when diverse epistemologies of artists come together in performance, who is to stay what is a successful performance? Perhaps rather than viewing the performance event as choreographic, it could also be viewed as *a slice of life* as these artists meet in performance and live together for a time while their individual epistemologies, personalities, and adrenalized performance behaviors merge and sometimes bump up against each other as a part of a greater whole: a dance community in process. However, I continue my investigation into this genre and, as I move with the data, in the next chapter, I will be discussing what motivates the participants to continue their practice and what epistemologies they feel most informs their practice of choreographing the unknown.

CHAPTER IV

EMERGENT ENSEMBLE DANCEMAKING:  
DIVERSE EPISTEMOLOGIES AND MOTIVATIONS

For many of the artists in this study, the data demonstrate that collaborative dancemaking in performance affords unique opportunities for growth, both as an artist and as a social being, through the give and take of dancing in community. From the research data collected to date, the participant dance artists in this study come to improvisational dance practices in performance with diverse motivations. Still, three main themes emerge from their engagement in this dance genre: refining dancemaking skills, acquiring self-knowledge, and working in a non-hierarchical community of artists in rehearsal and performance. Spontaneous choreography, which all the study's performance ensembles practiced with little or no predetermined scores, in performance exhibits characteristics of a dynamical system with unpredictable outcomes, more similar to a weather system than a controlled event. Thus, as noted by the participants, the dynamic, non-hierarchical, and uncontrolled collaborative aspect of this dancemaking practice is itself a motivation.

**Bringing One's History into Spontaneous Performance**

Beyond consideration of each individual's motivations for engagement in spontaneous dancemaking are the distinct epistemologies, comprised of their previous

experiences and study, which each dance artist brings to the performance event. These distinct epistemologies combine in a complex weave from which a unique choreography emerges particular to each ensemble performance. One could consider the choreography as shaped by an emergent ensemble aesthetic beyond the control of any individual, wherein the sum is greater than the parts. In this way, each individual's sense of rightness and consequent action, based on previous personal experiences, co-mingles with other individual epistemologies within the space of performance. The resulting choreography is always emergent and distinct: each improvising ensemble's spontaneous dance manifests a particular aesthetic.

The concept of an emergent ensemble aesthetic leads to considerations of the individual dance artist's preparation for spontaneous dancemaking and how her previous experiences and studies may influence her implicit and explicit, on-the-fly responses during performance. The participant's motivations for becoming engaged in spontaneous dancemaking and the variety of epistemologies she puts into play within the ensemble shape, in particular ways, the emerging choreography and ultimately affect the different paths the ensemble choreography may take in performance.

As a researcher, I am interested in understanding what dance or other life experiences the participating artists feel inform their improvisational practice. As discussed in Chapter 1, spontaneous choreographers carry prior experiences and studies with them into performance. In this chapter, the data bring forward how these dance and life experiences may offer ground for action when one is in the middle of composing



spontaneous choreography in-the-moment within a complex ensemble performance process. In the following section, I include lengthy interactive dialogue between the artists in post-performance group interviews; here, the performing artists emerge as in-the-moment co-creators of collective knowledge. In other words, it is a moment of an emergent ensemble epistemology.

### **Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation Faculty Ensembles**

The Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation (SFDI) invited festival faculty to perform in the festival performance dedicated to faculty work. The SFDI Faculty ensembles participating in this study consisted of those festival faculty members who voluntarily selected to perform. The two ensembles, each of which performed for one night, have members who exhibit diverse backgrounds. In the questionnaire distributed to participants in this study, participants identified disciplines studied and those influential experiences that were significant in their journey into improvisational dance (See Table 4). The following is a summary of their descriptions:

Table 4

*SFDI Faculty Ensemble: Prior Experiences and Influences*

Participant Name	Introduction to Improvisation	Self-Selected Studies and Influences
Aaron Swartzman	2003	Julyen Hamilton, KT Niehoff/Lingo Dance Theater, Contemplative Dance Practice, Authentic Movement, Capoeira Angola, Contact Improvisation, Karen Nelson, Alia Swersky, Amii LeGendre, Ray Chung, nature and children. One college course in Dance Aesthetics, concept based approach to dance as child, Workshops in spontaneous composition, 10 years as performing artist.
K.J. Holmes	1980	New School for Social Research/Andre Bernard Ideokinesis, Release Techniques, Body-Mind Centering, Marsha Paludan, Danny Lepkoff, and John Rolland. Ballet, Modern, Jazz. Philosophy at City College, Lisa Nelson, Karen Nelson, Scott Smith, Steve Paxton, Simone Forti and Troupe.
Rachael Lincoln	1993	Simone Forti, Sara Shelton Mann, Vic Marks, Tere O'Connor, Joe Goode, Leslie Seiters, College, Grad school, 15 years of collaboration/dancemaking.
Christian Swenson	Late 70s - Early 80s	BA Theater 1977, and sometimes dance improvisation (the latter is the least familiar to me after all these years though I'm less nervous about it all), 10+ years as performer in other's work, Human Jazz, Playback theater, Vocal improvisation
Vitali Kononov	1996	Own research, writing, brainstorm with colleagues, other art genres, Nina Martin-1998
Cathie Caraker	Early 80s	Contact Improvisation, Aikido, Body-Mind Centering, desire for play, my own body
Alia Swersky	1994	B.F.A. Dance/Cornish College of the Arts 1988, Karen Nelson, Lisa Nelson, Nina Martin, Amii LeGendre, contact improvisation, somatic studies, modern dance

(Continued)

Table 4 Continued

Participant Name	Introduction to Improvisation	Self-Selected Studies and Influences
Nina Martin	1976	M.F.A. 2008, Texas Women's University, Ballet with Diana Byers NYC, Gymnastics, Diving, Simone Forti, Elaine Summers, Mary Overlie, Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Deborah Hay, Martha Clarke, Nina Martin/Performance, Channel Z, Lower Left Performance Collective
Bebe Miller*		MA '75 Ohio State University, Undergraduate degree in Art, Murray Louis, Alwan Nikolais, Nina Weiner and Dancers, Bebe Miller Company (internet search, July 10, 2012)
Martha Eddy*		Ph.D. Columbia University, MA physiology, undergraduate in dance education, CMA, RSMT, exercise physiologist, movement therapist RSMT, dance and performance from age of 8 (internet search, July 10, 2012)

*Note:* \* Did not complete questionnaire

Most of the SFDI Faculty participants studied with recognized dance artists (Simone Forti, Sara Shelton Mann, Lisa Nelson, and Steve Paxton) in the field of improvisational dance. However, in response to the study's questionnaire, Christian Swenson primarily identifies as a theater artist with a BA in theater and "only occasionally dance improvisation" experience (personal communication, August 16, 2010). In the questionnaire, Christian states, "The latter [dance improvisation] is the least familiar to me after all these years, though I'm less nervous about it all" (personal communication, August 16, 2010). Another SFDI Faculty ensemble member, Aaron Swartzman, has experience in movement forms such as Capoeira, Contact Improvisation, and has worked with Seattle-based choreographer KT Niehoff of Lingo Dance Theater,

among others. He, as so many artists in this study, also privately studied with many well-known teachers of improvisational dance outside of academia, such as Julyen Hamilton, Karen Nelson, and Ray Chung. Thus, the ensemble draws on a complex weave of individual knowledge and prior experiences, as well as an emergent network of variables and connections, as they participate in the bringing of the dance into being in performance.

Based on the list of influences and studies Swartzman volunteered for the study's questionnaire (see Table 4), one can see that he values an eclectic, non-traditional journey into dancemaking. In his list of influences, he does not identify any study in dance techniques commonly offered in college dance curricula or private settings (Humphrey, Graham, Limon, Cunningham or classical ballet techniques) as being influential in his practice of ensemble improvisation. This does not mean Swartzman has not studied those forms, only that he did not identify them as important to his improvisational practice in his questionnaire. In terms of compositional studies, Aaron lists workshops in "spontaneous composition," a term used increasingly to describe improvisational dance practices that include compositional techniques for the solo body. He also includes study in Contact Improvisation and a focus on ensemble forms. Aaron writes:

I don't consider myself academically versed in composition, and consider this a strength of mine, as I don't like the tendency towards creating checklists of what makes good performance and then trying to check those boxes that I see in some more academically trained dancers. (personal communication, August 15, 2010)

Aaron's statement of seeming gratitude for not studying composition in academia juxtaposes the experience of several other members of the ensemble who do list (as shown in Table 4) their academic coursework in dance composition. For example, SFDI Faculty members Alia Swersky and Rachael Lincoln ([www.rachaellincoln.com](http://www.rachaellincoln.com)) have a background in choreographic studies in the academy. Swersky studied dance in college and teaches composition/improvisation classes at Cornish College, and Lincoln studied dance and composition as an undergraduate and graduate dance student. When writing about what she relied on in performance, Lincoln writes, "I bring a technically facile body [to improvisation]" (personal communication, June 13, 2011). After further conversations with Lincoln via email, I interpret this statement to mean that she has studied codified dance techniques as well as improvisatory practices. Bebe Miller, who performed in the ensemble on the first night, is an internationally renowned choreographer on faculty at Ohio State University ([www.bebemillercompany.org](http://www.bebemillercompany.org)). Another member of the ensemble, K.J. Holmes, is on faculty at New York University Experimental Theatre Wing teaching improvisation; however, interestingly, she did not identify academic studies in composition or traditional modern dance techniques as being influential to her artistry in the study's questionnaire. It should be noted that the study's questionnaire intentionally did not prompt the participants as to what type of studies or activities they feel most influence their improvisational dance practice in order to avoid leading questions. In a follow-up email, Holmes further clarifies her understanding of compositional studies when she writes:

I have never formally studied "dance composition" in a traditional way, but I have studied dance composition for most of my dance life as an improviser, that is what we do I think. And, I have studied modern dance and I chose to focus on improvisation at a time where those kinds of choices were made, unlike the current time where so much diversity in focus is part of a dancer's training. (personal communication, January 4, 2013)

I foreground instances of academic and non-academic dance studies in order to highlight the different experiences that the ensemble members bring to the SFDI Faculty ensemble performances. There are no generic or widely agreed upon methods for preparing oneself to perform ensemble improvisation. Swartzman identifies as not academically versed in composition, even though I understand his background to include dancing in an ensemble with other members who have studied academic-based dance composition techniques. He describes this academic training as consisting of what he calls their "checklists of what makes good performance" (personal communication, August 15, 2010).

The diverse studies that the participants bring to the performance lead me to ask, how do the different perspectives on dancemaking affect the spontaneously created dance? Further, can one even think of academic training as providing a "one size fits all" background, given that the artists developed in differing geographic locations, during different time periods, and come to compositional studies having studied various teachers outside an "academic setting"? There is also the possibility that many of the SFDI artists have worked with choreographers outside the academy in professional situations where they gained compositional dancemaking knowledge. Swartzman, for example, danced

with K.T. Niehoff's *Lingo Dance Theater*. From these considerations, a picture of the diversity of experiences the performers brought to the SFDI ensembles begins to emerge and further highlights the complex environment created by these artists meeting on stage for the first time as an ensemble to create a dance.

**Motivations for engagement.** In addition to their differing backgrounds and training in improvisational practices, the SFDI Faculty ensemble members also bring diverse motivations for engaging in spontaneous dancemaking. For example, Swersky communicates concern with several aspects of spontaneous dancemaking when she gives her reasons for participating in this dance form as “deep listening and connection to others. Creative and spontaneous interaction. Play. Sophisticated spontaneous design” (personal communication, July 9, 2011). Rachael Lincoln also uses language concerned with dancemaking and self-knowledge when she writes:

It brings me into the present. To learn about dancemaking [sic]. To check in with myself and see what choices I'm making, where my interest is, where my patterns show up, and to gauge my current shyness/bravery/reticence/judgment/willingness levels – which often correlate with those levels in the rest of my life. Feels like a fairly safe place to experiment with changing habitual tendencies in art making and in living. (personal communication, June 13, 2011)

Lincoln expresses an interest, as do other participants in this study, in seeing “where her patterns show up” and then “changing habitual tendencies” when she describes her critical engagement with her dance practice (personal communication, June 13, 2011). It is interesting for the study that Rachael closely aligns her improvisational practice not only with improving her dancemaking skills, but also her life skills. This pairing of art

and life pursuits is ubiquitous in many of the artists' responses. One could summarize that the holistic aspect of this form emerges as a motivation in many of the artists' statements. It would seem that spontaneous ensemble dancemaking is a practice where dance artists understand that developing as an artist also means developing as a person, one who improvises and reflects on her life in this world through extended dance communities.

Lincoln's colleague, K.J. Holmes, further describes the connection between art and life for spontaneous choreographers when she writes, "I engage in this performative dance practice because it is where I feel the most alive, and the place where a communication happens in theater that brings me to my humanity" (personal communication, June 20, 2011). Holmes also indicates a concern with dance composition when she writes that the tools she brings to ensemble performance are "composing and conducting" (personal communication, June 20, 2011). Holmes further expresses a holistic engagement with her practice that includes historical precedents dating from the 1960s and 1970s in which artistic communities gathered around the practice of Contact Improvisation and the communities it spawned, wherein artmaking and lifemaking were often understood as intertwined. This is described by Cynthia Novack in *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*, (Novack, 1990).

The intertwining of dance and social values is also evident when Christian Swenson articulates a common ground with Swersky and Swartzman in mentioning



“play” as a factor in his attraction to the form. However, it would seem the sociological aspect of the event might interest him more than the formalistic compositional concerns expressed by Swersky. Swenson writes, “I like the challenge of trying to co-create spontaneous dance/play behavior with others and to see how audience members respond, what they ‘get’ from it” (personal communication, August 16, 2010). Possibly, Swenson’s studies in theater (See Table 4) may contribute more to his sociological emphasis on “dance/play behavior” than describing his challenge as *dancemaking*. These different emphasis help to explain the diverse frameworks that ensemble members bring into performance but the notion of playfulness as creative engagement is a theme for many of the participants.

Of the SFDI Faculty ensemble participants in the study’s questionnaire, all in some way indicated that the activity in performance was about connecting to other ensemble members or creating/composing a dance. Additionally, Vitali Kononov explains how he understands his connection to other ensemble members in performance when he says, “I feel that my nervous system becomes connected to the system of others and I receive their nervous impulses directly” (personal communication, June 14, 2011). When articulating his goals in performance, Kononov further states that his aims are “. . . to be present, to remain present, to be able to dissolve my ego in the flow of action and in the group dynamics,” and this statement seems to indicate holistic performance and life values that go beyond the mere composition of dances.

Along with the sense of presence and performer connectivity, spiritual reasons for participating in spontaneous performance were also mentioned by SFDI Faculty members. For example, Aaron Swartzman articulates a spiritual/mystical aspect to his engagement in ensemble performance when he describes his experience as, “Shamanistic tendencies leading towards continual search for magic moments, coincidental epiphanies, connection, mutual discovery and fierce play” (personal communication, August 15, 2010). This sense of magic that Swartzman describes in his dancemaking moves the activity beyond normative compositional concerns and into the realm of spiritual or mystical attainment.

Unlike Swartzman’s magical space, K.J. Holmes articulates how ensemble dancemaking is a place for finding truths in “not knowing.” As an example, Holmes articulates a practice in ensemble dancemaking that seems to reach beyond known principles to discover how “not knowing” might create new truths in her practice.

Holmes writes:

I have come to a place in recent years of inhibiting a practice of shared tools and playing more with breaking expectations of composing. . . .I don't always want an improvisation to "flow". . . .This is not to sabotage a shared relationship, but to invite the possibility of colliding with a truth of not knowing rather than the facility of ease of knowing. (personal communication, June 20, 2011)

In a follow-up email, Holmes expands on her responses to the questionnaire when she writes:

I went to bed last night thinking about this and what came to mind is the study of Body Mind Centering that I have done and have been integrating into my dance work and my teaching for the past decade and more. I realize that it wasn't

spoken about at all [in the post-performance group interview], that I remember, maybe because I don't work directly with any artists that use it as a source (though many do). It is something I feel I use as source and tuning along with all the tuning work of Lisa's [Nelson] as well as it is so deeply embedded in Contact as developmental practices. And what seems pertinent to your questions, especially about the performance at SFDI, is the play with "states" that isn't compositional as some ensemble play is, but compositional in terms of playing with qualities of body systems and perceptual play. It feels rather huge to suddenly acknowledge this and also makes me excited to consider the truth of it in my performance. (personal communication, December 4, 2012)

What fascinates me as a researcher when reading Holmes's last response is that she begins to raise some of the same questions I am posing. These questions include: What do I mean by "compose"? How do I know how others are interpreting the language in the study's questionnaire and how can I interpret something I do not know? Beyond these questions, what is most exciting to me is that Holmes and I are still learning about the extent of this field's true complexity.

My queries and concerns about misinterpretations also developed in the following exchange between the ensemble members in the post-performance discussion:

Swersky: I felt K.J. [Holmes] not wanting to necessarily connect.

Holmes: That is what you imagined.

Swersky: Yeah,

Holmes: I wouldn't say that is not what I am saying, feeling.

Swersky: Yeah, that is what I imagined. But, I felt connected to her. Or, I felt, and I am maybe not sure if I felt that because . . . of, from the conversation [tonight] perhaps, but I didn't feel like you were coming in to meet me, that is what I am saying. (personal communication, August 6, 2010)

From her viewpoint, and perhaps her expectations, Swersky sees a body, in this case Holmes's body, in performance that does not want or intend to meet directly with her in the emerging dance. However, Holmes does not define her intention in the same way. In a follow-up email, Holmes further clarifies, "I was very much part of what was happening but I was not operating from a similar perceptual base as some of the others" (personal communication, January 3, 2013). A bit later in the post-performance group interview, a further exchange between Holmes and Kononov provokes the following statement from Holmes:

I will just say it again, I was just feeling/hearing it [the dance work] as a piece of music when I was going to enter, and how I was drawn to the things – it didn't feel so much about human connection. And, I was not trying to not connect, but I was listening to something else in this performance. (personal communication, August 6, 2010)

Later Holmes clarified her performance process in a follow-up email. She writes:

One of the phrases that Bonnie B. Cohen used to say in the certification training is the "Confusion means you are learning something new." In many ways, that was such a flip of how we view not knowing, making something that has felt wrong right, if you know what I mean. So, instead of looking for ways to connect to not be confused, I welcome the confusion and see what I am learning perhaps from another sense or system. What is found in transition if (one) widens the space between things? I just want to support [the notion of] challenging situations as being a great way to perform improvisation, that a group that never performed before having a conversation afterwards that is stimulating and uncomfortable is actually very interesting to me. (personal communication, December 4, 2012)

As the post-performance group interview proceeds, it seems that Holmes's fellow ensemble members do not recognize (or cannot "name" as Schaffman said in Chapter 3) Holmes's performance intentions. Kononov asks Holmes, "Are you trying to separate?"

Holmes replies, “I am saying that I wasn’t operating from what I am hearing other people talking about, that I hear it as being like a need as a human to connect with each other” (personal communication, August 6, 2010). Indeed, Holmes had clarified earlier in the post-performance interview that, “I watched myself watch a lot of thoughts go by, but I wasn’t compelled to connect with anybody, but then when I entered it was to connect with the space” (personal communication, August 6, 2010). Perhaps Holmes’s collaborators assumed that *connecting with one another* was a shared performance goal and therefore did not understand Holmes’s performance value of connecting to the space or working from perceptual states. From Holmes’s description of her performance goals, her actions, as seen through the aesthetic lens of her colleagues, were perhaps only partially understood: Swersky saw a body in Holmes, a body “who was not coming in to meet me.” In the end, a dance did result, as it does in every improvisational performance, in spite of what may be a lack of understanding of the performance values or compositional concepts held by different ensemble members. Had this same ensemble performed the following night, perhaps they would have better understood Holmes’s dancemaking strategies in ways that would help them find solutions for creating more coherence in the emerging dance work. On the other hand, perhaps coherence is not necessarily the intent, as Holmes suggests.

Holmes’s comments further suggest that she pursued her dance practice in performance, but it seems clear there was confusion among the ensemble members as to how she was approaching the performance. Holmes states in the follow-up email, “I was

very much a part of what was happening but I was not operating from a similar perceptual base as some of the others. . . .And maybe it does continue to come down to a difference of [opinion of] what ensemble work should be, but I really can't pin it down to one technique that is successful while complexity fails" (personal communication, December 3, 2012). Holmes's comments capture the challenge inherent in spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance: it is hard to "pin it down to one technique that is successful."

It seems that, even for professional and highly experienced improvisers, spontaneous composition experiences, like life, cannot prepare one for every eventuality in the moment of performance. Misunderstandings and (mis)readings happen and this dance form creates a performance space where these "missings" can occur. The uncontrolled nature of this dance form draws artists and then offers them a forum for continually learning about spontaneous dancemaking. The question then arises: How do artists, unfamiliar with each other's compositional methods, meet in performance and co-create a dance work? As seen in the exchange between ensemble members above, diverse motivations and performance goals add to the complexity of *pick-up* improvisational ensembles and call into question any assumptions of a shared improvisational language. However, the post-performance data collected for this dissertation's research does highlight that learning between the members continues to happen after the performance. In other words, the praxis of performance continues off-stage as performers transition from performance into studio practice.

Though there was confusion among members of the SFDI Faculty ensemble, they do share similar appreciation for some aspects of ensemble improvisation. Swersky, Swenson, and Swartzman share an interest with the quality of play in this dance practice as well as in its spontaneous and co-creative aspects. Yet, their choice of words may signal important differences for their goals in performance, as indicated in the study's questionnaire. For example, the broad range of epistemologies and motivations of the participants may indicate different objectives. Examples include Swersky's use of a word that indicates a formal choreographic concept such as "design," Swenson's use of the term "behavior," Swartzman's use of "shamanistic tendencies and magic moments," and Holmes's idea of "breaking expectations of composing." This broad range of interpretation of the practice within this dance form illustrates the challenge of creating spontaneous dancemaking in performance for the SFDI Faculty ensemble. Ensemble dance improvisation, therefore, can be seen as the action of complex dancemaking emerging from the interactions of the motivations and epistemologies that each artist brings to the performance moment. The SFDI Faculty ensemble post-performance discussion illuminated how these complexities in the understanding and doing of practice can provide the dance researcher fertile ground to dig into the complexities of language when participants describe these nuances of meaning.

The different perspectives expressed by the participants in the SFDI Faculty ensemble thus far raise questions of what composing a dance means for all these individuals who spontaneously choreograph for an audience. It would seem that, though

engaged in the same activity of creating a dance as an ensemble, these individual artists have very different ideas about what the activity of spontaneous dancemaking might mean. Perhaps spontaneous ensemble improvisation in performance, as manifested by the SFDI Faculty ensembles, highlights the opportunities in performance for ensemble members to negotiate their different approaches and create a dance despite diverse motivations.

### **LIVE Dance Theater**

LIVE Dance Theater is similar to the SFDI Faculty ensemble in that the dance artists have a wide variety of dance, theater, somatic studies, and other disciplines in their backgrounds. Further, as was the case with the SFDI Faculty Ensemble, LIVE members studied with many well-known teachers of improvisation, somatic practice, and post-modern dancemaking, such as Deborah Hay, Barbara Dilley, Nancy Stark Smith, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton, Julyen Hamilton, and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, among others.

*Embodied epistemologies in the ensemble practice.* In May 2010, I arrived in San Diego, California, to conduct research with the LIVE Dance Theater early in their process of knowing themselves as a performing ensemble; they had only begun to perform over the past year. I attended two public performances and conducted post-performance group interviews. The participants indicated these aforementioned diverse studies contributed to their development as improvisational artists and that they rely on this knowledge in their improvisational practice.



How research participants discuss these studies and experiences in relationship to their current work became significant for me as I was reading their responses to the study's questionnaire. In a follow-up email, LIVE ensemble member Schaffman discusses the paradox existing between maintaining individual voices from differing levels and types of practice while at the same time trying to find a shared ensemble language. In one interview, she refers to the "anarchist nature of LIVE" while also acknowledging a reliance on a shared history. She writes further:

In comparison to my experience with Lower Left, where we focused consciously upon giving/taking focus, creating a frame, and primarily performing structures and scores, LIVE operates by refusal to formulate. Rather than creating and experimenting with scores in practice and performance, there is agreement, and perhaps at times compromise, to rely on "shared history" and emerging material in performance. Because of my experience with Lower Left and studies of improvisational approaches, I used to think of LIVE as an "anti-ensemble." Now that language seems to have shifted for me, as the personal/social/professional constellations have evolved among the people and there are also new people in the practice. (personal communication, January 2, 2013).

I was fascinated to note, when observing Live performances, that those choreographers with only a few years improvising in performance seemed to be as skilled as their more experienced colleagues. Perhaps the "anarchist" value, which I observed in the LIVE performance and which Schaffman discusses, camouflaged the lack of experience for some of the members; however, these less experienced members did seem to use their dancemaking skills to support them as they navigated complex "emerging material" guided by "shared histories" of dancing. Therefore, of interest to me as researcher are the descriptions given by the LIVE ensemble concerning how their

previous work in the dance field, as well as their studies with diverse artists and somatic practitioners, may have facilitated relatively quick transitions to spontaneous dancemaking.

Several LIVE members identified graduate studies in dance or performance as part of their dance journeys, and several members are professors of dance in universities. The university faculty include: Liam Clancy, Eric Geiger, Karen Schaffman, Yolande Snaith, and Leslie Seiders with LIVE members Mary Reich and Jess Humphreys also often teaching as adjunct instructors in universities. As with the SFDI faculty ensemble, the LIVE ensemble contains a rich diversity in terms of prior experience and motivations that members bring to the practice of ensemble improvisation. This is illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5

*LIVE Dance Theater Ensemble: Prior Experiences and Influences*

Member	Introduction to Improvisation	Studies and Influences <sup>7</sup>
Leslie Seiders*	1998	Undergrad Sculpture, Graduate Choreography Directed performance work “more on set side.” Member San Francisco Group 1 year, Member San Diego Group 3 years, Sara Shelton Mann, Directing, Visual Art, Contact Improvisation, Group readings, Vicariously [through colleagues] Deborah Hay
Jess Humphreys	2009	Deborah Hay, Contact Improvisation, Laban Movement Analysis, Body Mind Centering, Nina Martin, <i>Fully Present</i> , Somatic Education. Choreographed 15 works and performer in 30 works
Eric Geiger	2008	Member Bill T Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Co., Member Nancy McCaleb Dance Co., Dancer in Choreographed Works, Deborah Hay
Karen Schaffman	1985	Ballet, Modern, Jazz. The Hartford Conservatory/ Trinity College/University of Massachusetts Five College Dance Program: Experimental Dance. Center for New Dance Development (Nederland), Somatic, Performance, and Improvisation Studies with Lisa Nelson (perceptual practice), Eva Karzag (Alexander Technique and anatomical research, Nancy Stark Smith (contact improvisation), Nina Martin (ensemble improvisation), among others. Intensive movement studies in Viewpoints and Feldenkrais™. Performance research and studies with Mary Reich and Deborah Hay. Ph.D. Dance History and Theory, University of California Riverside, studies with Susan Foster and Marta Savigliano

(Continued)

<sup>7</sup> Several participants have graduate degrees in dance, but did not choose to identify them in the questionnaire. A specific question about academic studies was not included in the questionnaire.

Table 5 Continued

Member	Introduction to Improvisation	Studies and Influences
Ron Estes	1983	Therapeutic practice, Watching and participating in dancemaking, Narrative therapy, Physical theatre, Dance theatre, Both audiencing and participating, Statement of Position Map by Michael White, post-structuralism, feminism, social constructionism, cultural and medical anthropology, learning theories, critical theory, narratology
Yolande Snaith	1980	Steve Paxton, Katie Duck, Ruth Zaporah, Julyen Hamilton
Kris Apple	2009 LIVE Dance Theater	Violin Studies. John Brannon, Mary Gerard, Felix Olschofka, Opera, Music theater film, Contact Improvisation, Elizabeth Swallow (Dance), Music for dance
Liam Clancy*	2009 LIVE Dance Theater (20s)	Undergraduate dance Rhode Island College (Doris Humphrey's book), Katie Duck, Member Elizabeth Streb Co., NY Downtown Dance Performances (PS 122), Graduate School UCLA in Choreography, Love of short stories and poetry
Mary Reich*	1981 SDSU 1994 Lower Left	M.F.A. University of Irvine in Performance, Feldenkrais, Nina Martin, and others. Expressive Arts, University Studies, Self Study, Visual Arts, Unlearning, Study of Other forms Deborah Hay.

*Note:* \* Did not participate in performances

Further distinguishing itself from the SFDI Faculty ensemble, the LIVE Dance Theater ensemble met for weekly practice sessions starting in the summer of 2007 in order to investigate art making with no initial intention of bringing their work to the stage. Though conceived as a time for dance and music research, the ensemble did eventually begin to perform in October 2009. From that time forward, they performed

approximately once a month in the San Diego vicinity. In May 2010, when I arrived to conduct my research, they were in the process of knowing themselves as a performance ensemble, which included going out together for lunch or dinner after their practices and performances. It is interesting to see how the LIVE ensemble saw their social interactions as part of and important to their ensemble practice. Eric Geiger reflects on the importance of these post-rehearsal discussions happening over meals together:

After every weekly practice, and performance we, as an ensemble, go to either lunch or dinner and discuss “what happened.” We talk about what we were “working on” and how and why we made some of the movement or compositional choices we made. . . .Through these post practice/performance discussions I learn about the other members in the ensemble [and their] value systems and we create some sort of history together, an intimate sharedness [sic]. (personal communication, June 15, 2011)

Geiger speaks of the value of learning about other members’ creative processes through spending time together socially in addition to the practice sessions in the studio.

Yolande Snaith, another member of LIVE, however, communicates frustration with the ensemble discussions when ensemble members desire to shift the ensemble towards what she perceives as their own interests. She concludes:

The most disappointing aspect of the LIVE ensemble dance practice for me at this point is the verbal communication and discussion about what we do, both after practicing, and particularly discussions concerning preferences, plans, and decisions in preparation for performances. In our group, there are 9 artists each with their own distinctive artistic voice and aesthetic sense, as well as sometimes very different creative pre-occupations and research agendas.

Recently I have felt quite conflicting desires expressed within the group and some tensions between individuals within the group who share preferences and viewpoints, and those who have different concerns. I sense a desire from some people to steer the group into what I experience as very particular aesthetics, often informed by their experiences of studying / working with certain influential

dance practitioners. I find this frustrating, because I am more interested in how we, as nine unique artists can find relationship / interaction / contrast / affinity / juxtaposition / synthesis / dialogue / communication and so forth between our respective aesthetic and artistic voices, both in our regular practice and in our performative practice. I feel that in these meeting points there is the potential for something yet unknown to be discovered. (personal communication, July 7, 2011)

Schaffman, like Snaith, also finds these discussions “challenging” when she describes them as being, “. . . sometimes fantastic. There seems to be this tendency – of wanting to and also not wanting *to name* (emphasis added) what we are doing” (personal communication, June 18, 2010). In Schaffman’s response to the questionnaire, she expresses a desire to concretely name the strategies that ensemble members use for composing spontaneous dancemaking.

After unsuccessfully suggesting structures in which each artist might share diverse epistemologies into this notion of focus, Schaffman was surprised to hear that one of the members was just discovering the notion of allowing for focus. This realization led her to ask, “What are the skills of giving and taking [focus]?” She then continues, “I was surprised to hear that one of the members was just discovering the notion of allowing for focus. There are so many varying perspectives and knowledge bases in the group” (personal communication, June 18, 2010). Schaffman realizes that this notion of shifting foci in spontaneous choreography is not necessarily a shared perspective within the ensemble (personal communication, January 6, 2013). If one wants to make a shared tool among the ensemble, then through that process the ensemble develops an ensemble epistemology. The resistance to Schaffman’s idea for sharing epistemologies, in my

experience as an improviser, is common as ensembles negotiate the balancing act between freedom and structure. Schaffman's struggle for developing and "naming" choreographic skills within the ensemble in contrast to other's notions of choreographing the unknown becomes a place for continual learning for her as an artist.

The push and pull within the ensemble between members' different epistemologies, as evidenced in Geiger's, Schaffman's, and Snaith's comments, gives a sense of deep engagement in the ensemble process, even when it is difficult. In spite of the difficulties, the process has a value that outweighs the challenges, as evidenced by the ensemble members' continued work together. For Ron Estes, the value of continuing studio practice as a group, with time also spent together outside the studio practice as well as in performance, is of utmost importance because he finds that "Practicing without others watching, then practicing with others (audience) watching, then practicing again is important for developing the work of the ensemble" (personal communication, June 20, 2010). Through this process, Estes comes to a more knowledgeable state in terms of the aesthetics of other ensemble members, an opportunity not afforded the SFDI Faculty ensemble that came together for the first time in performance.

**Taking different paths into spontaneous dancemaking.** As seen in Table 5, LIVE ensemble members have different histories with improvisational dancemaking practices. Three members of the LIVE ensemble, Jess Humphreys, Eric Geiger, and Liam Clancy, are relatively new to improvisational dance practices, having begun their involvement in an extended improvisational practice upon joining the LIVE ensemble

between 2008 and 2009. All three have, however, previously performed and/or choreographed highly pre-scribed choreographies. By highly pre-scribed, I mean rehearsed choreographies that aspire to control, as nearly as possible, all eventualities. In other words, these are choreographies wherein the performer feels confident about what is next in a sequence of actions or steps. The highly pre-scribed dancer has a reasonable expectation of how the other performers will behave and that the dance will unfold more or less how it has repeatedly unfolded in the rehearsal studio. Other LIVE members, such as Karen Schaffman, Leslie Seiders, and Yolande Snaith, in addition to engaging in improvisational dance practices for many years, also have prior experience with highly pre-scribed dancemaking methods.

As I examined the different backgrounds of the LIVE ensemble members I noted that where I might have expected to see a difference in improvisational abilities due to time spent practicing improvisational dance, I observed none. In my experience as an audience member at the LIVE performances and through my data analysis of the performance videos, I must note that I could not tell that Humphreys, Geiger, and Clancy had been improvising for such a short time, as they report in the study's questionnaire. This discrepancy is especially notable given that four members of the ensemble each have over twenty years' experience with spontaneous dancemaking methods.

In the case of Humphrey, Geiger, and Clancy, I ask: What prepared them to make this seemingly smooth transition from performing highly pre-scribed dances into spontaneous dancemaking with only a relatively brief exposure to improvisational



dancemaking methods? Have these dance artists' prior experiences in performing and/or creating highly pre-scribed dance works (presumably concerned with compositional aspects and repetitious rehearsing) resulted in embodied patterning, both on compositional and physical levels, thereby facilitating their transition into spontaneous dancemaking? On the other hand, what improvisational dance practices facilitated the transition for these artists? In a review of responses to the study's questionnaire, one sees in Table 5 that Humphrey studied with the choreographer Deborah Hay and studied the practices of Contact Improvisation and Body Mind Centering. Clancy danced with the choreographer Elizabeth Streb and lists (See Table 5) Simone Forti as being influential in his improvisational studies. Clancy also identifies his time viewing "New York Downtown Dance Performances (PS 122)" where he would have witnessed all manner of improvisational dancemaking methods as influential to his practice (personal communication, June 28, 2010). The improvisational techniques studied by Humphrey, Geiger, and Clancy may have been particularly useful for efficiently facilitating these more traditionally trained performers in their transition from creating and performing highly pre-scribed dances to quickly learning how to be present with the unknown of the emerging dance.

Geiger, who has danced with choreographer Bill T. Jones and San Diego choreographer Nancy McCaleb (who both use highly pre-scribed choreographic methods), feels that Deborah Hay's work has been an important tool for his transition

from pre-scribed dance practices into spontaneous dancemaking. He further explains in an email communication:

Most influential for me has been my work with Deborah Hay. Deborah's philosophies around perception and being in the present moment has enabled me to not only have skills and resources for improvisational movement practices, but has also shifted core values around what dance is, and can be for myself. This idea of dance/choreography being a series of questions has relieved me from expectations, desires, and product. The questions are about possibilities- the possibility of the dance. That's so radical to me! I fucking love that idea! For me it's like the work is the *possibility* of the work. Amazing.

I've learned from Deborah that my work is my perception. . . .Deborah has also taught me to have some choreography to hold on to, the choreography being the questions. Questions like . . .What if dance was how I practice relationship? What if dance was how my eyes see? What if my field of vision provided the material for dance? What if dance was getting what I need?. . .What if where I am, is what I need, and what I need is what I am doing?

Currently, I don't always improvise movement from a series of questions. I am as equally interested in state work- states of being, ecstatic states, etc. But, having Deborah's questions as choreography gave me something to hold onto during my earlier transition into improvised practices. She has been most influential in my work. (personal communication, November 11, 2012)

Geiger's eloquent description of the influence of Hay's work on his process suggests that choreographic methods such as Hay's are valuable tools for negotiating the challenges of spontaneous dancemaking. It is interesting that Geiger further feels these methods are shifting "core values around what dance is, and can be for myself." As this ongoing examination of *core values* proceeds for contemporary choreographers similar to Geiger, Humphrey, and Clancy, and as they meld their experiences in highly pre-scribed choreographic practices with their more recently acquired choreographic techniques, the binary of *choreography or improvisation* will perhaps profitably relax and continue to shift for the dance field at large.

As a researcher, I observe that the technical dance skills previously acquired by Geiger, Humphrey, and Clancy and their more recently learned postmodern and or somatic techniques are impressive elemental skills when isolated, each with its own potential. However, when combined, the potential suggests new ground for dancemaking. This potential also exists for other ensemble members who have studied techniques that emphasize highly pre-scribed practices and who have also engaged in improvisatory practices for twenty years or more (see table 5).

However, not all LIVE members have studied traditional dance techniques to the same degree as others; instead, they have come to their impressive improvisational skills via other paths and mediums. LIVE member Ron Estes, a professional counselor, has engaged in improvisational performance since 1983 and identifies studies (See Table 5) in physical and dance theatre practices, yoga, Contact Improvisation, and professional study in therapeutic techniques, but does not list any study of ballet or classical modern dance techniques in the study's questionnaire (personal communication, June 20, 2010, July 27, 2012). However, Estes does mention studies in musical theater and may have studied more traditional dance techniques than he chose to note. Another LIVE ensemble member, music composer Chris Apple, has the least amount of formal dance training, but he participates in the dance composition by playing his violin while moving around the stage space and engaging with other ensemble members. In the performance and in the post-performance group interview, both Estes and Apple exhibit prodigious improvisatory skills and articulation of views into their process.

In their discussions for this research LIVE ensemble members, when speaking about the development of their improvisational dance practices, note that sharing a common dance technique or improvisational methodology is not as important as the ensemble's development of a shared history and shared exposure to the various improvisational dancemaking methods that each member brings to the group. Further, the data suggest that, for the LIVE ensemble, it is clear that the amount of time one has accrued improvising dance is perhaps less important than the curiosity and exploratory methods used to gain that knowledge. The different paths into improvisational dance practice, in combination with the different epistemologies that LIVE members bring to the group, create a fertile ground from which new choreographies in performance continually emerge. The rich diversity of epistemologies operative in the LIVE ensemble reveals new combinations of compositional practice through the engagement in spontaneous dancemaking. Though their descriptions tend to depend on the language they have learned in their past practice, their current practice seems to go beyond that language – they seem to be combining new ways of thinking about, dancing about, and talking about composition on-the-spot. The ensemble aspect of the phenomena creates new ways of reflecting on practice and, therefore, further affects how future dancemaking might be discussed.

**Motivations for Engagement.** Similar to the data emerging from the SFDI interviews, the LIVE members, no matter the challenges or conflicting ideas between participants, are deeply motivated to continue spontaneous dancemaking. The data

collected for this dissertation reveal how this motivation emerges from diverse spiritual, social, and dancemaking concerns. Mary Reich discusses how play and mystery are engaged in ensemble improvisation, echoing SFDI Faculty ensemble member Swartzman's interest in "Shamanistic tendencies leading towards continual search for magic moments, coincidental epiphanies, connection, mutual discovery and fierce play" (personal communication, August 15, 2010). For example, Reich describes her motivations for engagement in this dance genre as:

Mostly it is to experience serious play with adults. To create on the spot with others that brings forth magic and mystery. After every practice there is a mystery as to what occurred and how did that take place and I love experiencing that. If spirituality is attending to what is larger than us, then I would say it is a spiritual experience for me. A church of creative force I get to step into no matter what state I arrive in. (personal communication, June 10, 2011)

Reich portrays an artistic practice that not only addresses her development as an artist, but also her development as a spiritual being engaged in something "larger" than her self. This theme of holistic practice simultaneously nurturing one's artistry and personal development is a recurring theme within the ensemble, as seen in the following exchange between ensemble members Geiger, Apple (composer), and Estes in the post-performance group interview:

Geiger: I think I do it because it helps me figure out what I believe in.

Apple: As an artist, as a person?

Geiger: Yeah. Both. What I believe in.

Apple: I have this idea that this is just what I wanted to do forever. This is just what I wanted to do when I grew up.

Estes: Beautiful!

The gathering of self-knowledge through the interactive reflection within a practice-based community also creates powerful incentives for Karen Schaffman, who – in addition to valuing the sense of play and wonder discussed by Geiger, Reich, and Estes – also states:

. . . I come [to work with LIVE] for many reasons. I am grateful for the sense of community with other movement artists whom I respect. It's a place where I experience moving dialogue kinetically and perceptually with others. LIVE – or 20s – is a space and time for experimentation. The weekly practice is the heart of what we do – it's a weekly ritual. We show up. Something happens. We make something. We're committed. The post-dialogue make reflection possible and hones in what we were working on. Non-judgment. Listening and exchanging, there's an affirmation of what I believe – and helps me to understand my palette in relation to others. I can communicate in ways that I don't have anywhere else in my daily life here in San Diego.

The ideas expressed above make clear that the individual dance artists in LIVE Dance Theater created an environment that serves an important function both artistically and socially for its members. There is a sense of learning in community, where artists feel they bring their whole selves into the dancemaking process. Perhaps this inclusive aspect of developing oneself as an artist and as a person within an improvisational dance community is a factor in the continuing vibrancy of this dance genre evidenced by the many dance jams and improvisational dance festivals taking place worldwide ([www.contactquarterly.com](http://www.contactquarterly.com)).

My analysis of the data pertaining to the LIVE ensemble also reveals how, on multiple levels, the collective is pushing notions of what it is to be a body in performance

and what it is to compose a dance. LIVE member Liam Clancy, former member of Elizabeth Streb's *Extreme Action* dance company, speaks eloquently in his questionnaire concerning his motivations to become "porous" in performance. He sees this type of performance as follows:

. . . as a way to consistently ask what is possible for me as a performer. I'm deeply interested in the idea of availability. How much can I make my performing 'self' porous, and keep the border between audience and myself open in both directions. Not just this presentational, ultra-confident performance style that I have learned and mostly engaged in. The part of our practice that is performed in front of an audience allows me to continually grapple with this. Less about how much can I allow myself to be seen, but rather (and this is a wish) how much can my presence in performance allow the work that is unfolding to be seen/experienced. (personal communication, June 28, 2010)

Clancy makes a distinction between the "presentational, ultra confident performance style" that was a practiced aesthetic in his prior dance work and juxtaposes it to his present investigation moving toward a state of being in performance that seeks to make permeable his relationship with his audience. Clancy's colleague Geiger, former dancer with the Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane Dance Company (among others), also expresses how he is motivated to work on his artistry in a deeply personal way, bringing him to an examination of his limitations as a dance artist. This work may not be the most comfortable of learning situations, but it is potentially transformative. Geiger writes:

Through my history as a performer and choreographer, which I deeply value, I have been engaged in more traditional forms of structured dances and choreographed systems . . . . However, most recently (within the last 4 years) I have been in newly challenging and very exciting creative processes, practices, and performance situations where many of my personal inhibitions and limitations have been revealed. This is when my creative research became devoted to exploring ways to recognize my self-consciousness and to move closer toward a

level of fearlessness within my work as a dance artist. (personal communication, June 15, 2011)

For Geiger, this new way of working revealed aspects of himself, such as his limitations, that were not evident when he danced in more “traditional forms of structured dance.”

This new direction in his work appears to put him on a quest to bring his knowledge gained in previous dance situations into his current performance but that, in a way, situates his knowledge within a courageous move toward what could be called an observant unknowing.

Other members also revealed how this LIVE practice gives them an opportunity to observe and perhaps change patterns they observe in themselves. Yolande Snaith, an acclaimed choreographer, writes in her questionnaire:

I noticed that I have a tendency to relate to others from a distance in what I call my ‘compositional mode’, where I feel safer and more in control, offering aspects of: contrast / counterpoints / background / foreground / supporting / taking the space in solo/following/ punctuating / unison-ing (sic)/ going into associative text or sound / rearranging objects in the space. I have recently been practicing ‘soaking’ into group relationships where I feel less in control and less aware of the overall composition and trusting the ‘group awareness’ more, allowing myself to merge more into the unknown and unpredictable journey of events.

Perhaps Snaith’s words help explain how LIVE members can trace such independent trajectories in the dance work and yet create a dance that appears cohesive to this researcher (researcher journal, May 28, 2010). As Snaith notes, she can surrender her composing “from a distance” and begin “trusting in the group awareness.” Yet, she still uses language and practices previously developed from her “compositional mode” skills developed in past training. By trusting the tacit nature of her knowledge and the



ensemble's growing intelligence, Snaith feels her search to push old patterns into new territory is supported.

LIVE member Jess Humphrey, another choreographer of numerous dances (See Table 5) articulates her journey moving from a *planning* dance state to surrendering to a dance state of sensation. Her description depicts a dance that is unfolding before she can formulate a description of it. Humphrey writes:

This work grounds me. Sometimes I get out of my brain/cognitive process and become more sensate or feelingful (sic). Sometimes, like with the drug Ritalin, it [the process] speeds my brain up even more to slow it down. There's so much to think about, so many tools, so much to respond to, so many senses to take in information, so much I can do with that information, so much evaluation and decision making, some judgment . . . it builds and speeds up until it becomes a blur that supports me, three dimensionally, and then I have greater access to instinct, intuition, sensation, and feeling.

The many performance tasks that overwhelm Humphrey, as she describes, can begin to make a spontaneously composing choreographer relinquish control and feel as if the dance carries her forward as a river carries a swimmer. Humphrey's colleague, Leslie Seiders, a choreographer who has worked with several different groups, also writes about being "more able to be in contradictions, to change my mind, and generally just more able to notice and learn from what is happening" (personal communication, June 19, 2011). The statements by Humphrey and Seiders suggest that they are investigating dancing from a voluntary state of the unknown. This unknown state of voluntary actions teeters on what I sense to be a Deluegian plane where pre-reflective, barely conscious,

and fully conscious action unfolds as it weaves a fluid path through complex dancemaking.

From Clancy's, Geiger's, Snaith's, Humphrey's, and Seiter's comments above, one can see each of them investigating and trusting their skills to navigate in the unknown, uncontrolled flow of the unfolding dance. Here, the dancers relinquish impulses to control the dance, trusting an implicit choreography and explicit decision-making to carry them along in the dance. All the while, each dancer is responding to incoming sensory input and an ever-changing dance environment.

LIVE Dance Theater members, similar to all the performance ensembles in this study, bring many different epistemologies and motivations to spontaneous dancemaking in performance. As a researcher observing and reading the data, it seemed that most LIVE ensemble members were working from sensory states in performance; however, these sensory states are also deeply connected to previously learned skills. Conversely, as many participants in this study stated, they are also simultaneously trying to let go of habitual responses. Perhaps, now, the dance artists are negotiating their individual choices between the habits or attractors they want to develop or maintain and those they want to drop. The habits to drop are seen as those that inhibit how they might develop the act of dancemaking in new ways. When I watched the LIVE ensemble in performance, the boundless quality of the dancemaking gave me a nameless sense of freewheeling surrender to being present in the moment, supported by prodigious dancemaking skill. LIVE Dance Theater, by putting into play very diverse

epistemologies, motivations, and skill sets in spontaneous dancemaking performance situations, challenges normative notions of choreographed concert dance in performance (researcher's journal, May 28, 2010).

### **Lower Left Performance Collective**

The Lower Left Performance Collective (Lower Left) is an ensemble with eight members, though only Kelly Dalrymple-Wass, Margaret Paek, Rebecca Bryant, Andrew Wass, and I are participating in this study (see Table 1, Chapter 1). I first met these four Lower Left artists in San Diego while they were students dancing in my choreography, taking my classes at UC San Diego, and seeking out my classes taught under the auspices of two venues: Lower Left and Sushi Performance and Visual Art non-profit organization, where Lower Left was company in residence. As an ensemble, we investigated dance techniques such as Hamilton Floor Barre and Contact Improvisation while continuing to develop improvisational systems I had begun to formulate earlier in New York City. These included: Articulating the Solo Body, ReWire: Dancing States, and Ensemble Thinking (Buckwalter, 2010).

Through a shared interest in a range of dancemaking methods and encouraged by the sense that “practitioners are just scratching the surface of what is physically and conceptually possible” in spontaneous ensemble dancemaking (Wass, personal communication, July 25, 2012), gradually these artists became my colleagues in Lower Left and greatly facilitated the continued development of the aforementioned techniques. Because of these sustained relationships, ongoing for 12 years, the Lower Left ensemble

managed to develop compositional systems for the *solo body*, the *ensemble body*, while also situating the *coupled body* practice of Contact Improvisation within those systems, for a comprehensive – and hopefully consistent – approach to spontaneous dancemaking in performance. The length of time that Lower Left members have been working together distinguishes it from the histories of the SFDI Faculty and LIVE ensemble. As a member of the Lower Left collective, I sense a shared physical and verbal understanding emerging within the group that not only facilitates an ensemble aesthetic but also suggests a *collective epistemology*.

**Bringing epistemologies to the ensemble practice.** As noted in Table 6, in addition to Lower Left’s shared epistemologies, members of Lower Left have specialized in areas not shared by all members.

Table 6

*Lower Left Collective Ensemble: Prior Experiences and Influences*

Member	Introduction to Improvisation	Studies and Influences
Andrew Wass	1998	Ensemble Thinking, Watching lots of performances, Contact Improvisation, Shelley Senter (Alexander Technique/Post-modern dance technique), Undergraduate UC San Diego – Bio Chemistry, Graduate student – <i>Solo/Dance/Authorship Master's Degree Program</i> at the Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum für Tanz in Berlin
Rebecca Bryant	1998	Ensemble Thinking, Viewpoints, Modern/postmodern/contemporary dance technique, Contact Improvisation, Years of collaborating within dance discipline and with other disciplines, Lower Left (both set and improvised works), Girl Scouts, UC San Diego - Undergrad Visual Art and Choreography, UCLA Dept. of World Arts and Cultures - MFA, Studied comp with improvisers, Self-study- film and performance
Kelly Dalrymple-Wass	1998	Visual arts background - Seeing the shapes in space, Ensemble Thinking, Deconstructing Dance - breaking it all down, Alexander Technique, Observation, Pilates, How I understand my body first, Hamilton Floor Barre, A sensation to look for, All my past dance classes, history, Composition studies with Lower Left, Viewpoints (Overlie), Susan Rethorst, Molissa Fenley.

(Continued)

Table 6 Continued

Member	Introduction to Improvisation	Studies and Influences
Nina Martin	1976	MFA '08, Texas Women's University, Ballet with Diana Byers NYC, Gymnastics, Diving, Simone Forti, Kinetic Awareness (Elaine Summers), Mary Overlie (Viewpoints), Steve Paxton, David Gordon (member of Pick Up Company), Deborah Hay, Nancy Topf, Martha Clarke, Nina Martin/Performance, Channel Z (Diane Madden, Paul Langland, Stephen Petronio, Randy Warshaw, Danny Lepkoff, and Robin Feld), Lower Left Performance Collective
Margaret Paek*	1997	Undergraduate UC San Diego, psychology major, dance minor, Modern Dance, gymnastics, Ensemble Thinking, Shelley Senter/Alexander technique, Deborah Hay, Barbara Dilley

*Note:* Margaret Paek did not participate in the performance.

Early on in its inception in 1994, Lower Left, in order to build a community conversant with post-modern dancemaking, invited guest artists to work with the fledgling San Diego post-modern dance community in performance research lab settings. Consequently, Lower Left studied *as an ensemble* with artists such as Simone Forti, Deborah Hay, Mary Overlie, Paul Langland, Steve Paxton, Barbara Dilley, and Shelley Senter. In this way, Lower Left acquired a shared knowledge of dance research in the field that then became an embodied epistemology of the ensemble.

The embodiment, or bringing the various artists' ideas into our practice, happened both in and outside the studio as we discussed the guest artist's concepts over dinner.

These continued discussions gave us a chance to listen to how each of us felt about and connected to the work. We were not only learning about the different visiting artists, but also about how each of us in the group similarly or differently experienced the practice. For example, in the performance lab, Deborah Hay introduces dancemaking methods such as *Invite Being Seen* both as a physical practice and as a theoretical framework for choreographing dance. By taking part in Hay's work as a group, the ensemble members have, firsthand, both a sensorial and philosophical framework experienced by all simultaneously; they develop a shared and embodied epistemology of Hay's work.

Even though Lower Left shares a great deal of common knowledge gathered when studying as an ensemble, each individual brings his or her own unique journeys and epistemologies to bear in our ensemble dancemaking, as seen in Table 6. Subsets of the larger group of eight artists that make up the Lower Left ensemble design creative projects within Lower Left and with projects outside of the ensemble. Andrew Wass, having received his undergraduate degree in biochemistry, brings a keen intellect and knowledge of the rigors of scientific method to bear on our dancemaking by often questioning assumptions and pushing the ensemble to examine ideas from other viewpoints. Presently, Wass is in his last year of graduate studies in the *Solo/Dance/Authorship Master's Degree Program* at the Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum für Tanz in Berlin.

Kelly Dalrymple-Wass and Bryant, both with strong visual art backgrounds, bring a clear sense of minimalist design and push the ensemble to have a strong relationship

between visual elements in our spontaneous dancemaking. Dalrymple-Wass, deeply influenced by her studies with Molissa Fenley and Shelley Senter (Lower Left member), completed her undergraduate degree in dance at Mills College. Bryant's cross-disciplinary projects with Don Nichols and their company, *Past Modern Performance Duo*, as well as other groups, maintains the development of her work outside the Lower Left ensemble. Bryant also completed her M.F.A. studies in Dance at UCLA Department of World Arts and Culture and is presently on faculty at Purdue University.

Margaret Paek maintains an active engagement within the avant-garde dance community in New York City. Paek is involved with Movement Research, an artist-run organization dedicated to the development of dance research through publications, workshops, public discussions concerning the practice of dancemaking, and performances at the historic church and place of much 1960s dance innovation – Judson Church. Paek received her M.F.A. from Hollins University, and her choreography presently investigates inter-generational performance, most recently presented as part of the Whitney Biennial. I continue to work independently also, developing solo performance and film projects, completing my Ph.D. degree, and teaching internationally. This praxis of working together, working independently, and pursuing scholarly studies in diverse formats continues to stimulate and sharpen new skills and ideas as we communicate via Skype conferencing calls, in emails throughout the year, and by convening for intensive rehearsal periods two or three times a year.



**Motivations for engagement.** After analyzing the research data, I realized that Lower Left members share similar motivations as the SFDI Faculty and LIVE ensembles for engaging in spontaneous ensemble dancemaking; however, it is notable that they did not mention a spiritual or social element as a strong motivation. Perhaps this lack of emphasis on spiritual and social elements is due to the many years Lower Left has spent together, which makes the members take the spiritual and social benefits of the activity as a given. Having members spread across two continents in six cities and managing to make the effort to come together two or three times a year for intensive work periods demonstrates an obvious commitment and value for collaborating as an ensemble. My own sense, as a member of this ensemble, is one of deep social connection that enriches my life as an artist. The social aspect facilitates Lower Left's creative endeavors in much the same way as reported by other ensembles in this study: reflection within these committed groups gives members valuable information about themselves and begins to build an ensemble epistemology.

In addition to the spiritual and social values met in collective ensemble dancemaking, Lower Left members, similar to the other ensembles in this study, also value the ensemble for thrusting them into an unimagined dancemaking process. Paek speaks to this when she writes:

Ensemble improvisational dance provides me the opportunity to practice my choreographic skills — including generating, reflecting and responding with solo body movement; following and crafting the arc of a dance over time; and creating relationships and spatial arrangements within the group. And all of these things I practice within a group engaged in their own practice, which means that the

ensemble can create something together that I could never imagine as an individual. This means I have less control of the outcome, which I often find more challenging, exciting, and creative compared to *only me* having an idea and bringing that vision to life. (personal communication, July 17, 2012)

Lower Left colleague Bryant echoes Paek's interest in a lack of control and predictability: "The ensemble is unpredictable in a way that is exciting to me. Meaning forms in spontaneous choreography in ways that I could not construct using my facilities alone – this interests me because group improv expands the scope of my creative work" (personal communication, September 27, 2010). Values and ideas of "less control" and the process as being "unpredictable" precede ideas of being "forced" into action by the emerging dance, as noted by Dalrymple-Wass: "Working with an ensemble thankfully forces me out of patterns (yet creates new ones) and expands my thoughts on what I thought was possible. Options are created for and by me – Decisions are made for and by me" (personal communication, July 7, 2011). Dalrymple-Wass seems motivated to engage in this genre of dancemaking because she finds herself learning when situations illuminate old patterns while she also experiences being pushed into new patterns and ways of thinking. As described in their interviews and group discussions, many members of the four ensembles in this study agree with Dalrymple-Wass: they all value being made aware of habitual patterns and being given the opportunity to entrain new ones as a benefit for collective ensemble dancemaking.

When describing motivations and goals for composing during performance, in her response to the study's questionnaire Dalrymple-Wass writes, "Sometimes a [choice]

satisfies my aesthetic and sometimes I step out of my aesthetic in order to keep the form the dance is already in” (personal communication, July 7, 2011). Dalrymple-Wass’s description of the uncontrolled aspects of improvisational dance, an aspect appreciated by many participants in all the study’s ensembles, demonstrates how, in the dynamical environment of ensemble improvisations, actions taken by others shift or shape the dance in ways that may not be to one’s aesthetic preference. However, as Karen Schaffman of the LIVE ensemble suggests, even though the dance may emerge in ways that an ensemble member wishes it would not, each performer seeks to find ways to practice “no judgment” (personal communication, June 18, 2010) of the choreographic decisions of others. The challenge is how to balance the practice of no judgment with the activity of shaping the emerging choreography to reflect the performers’ choreographic values.

Clearly, as reflected in the data, an unpredictable sense of freewheeling adventure motivates the members of the performance ensembles participating in this study. This adventurous spirit calls them to participate in spontaneous ensemble dancemaking while also being inevitably both constrained and supported by their prior experiences, epistemologies, and the decision making of others. This interplay between complete freedom and a bounded freedom shaped by prior experiences and the surrounding environment sometimes confuses, but always ignites, exciting conversations as the participants challenge commonly held assumptions that, in improvisational dance, “anything goes.”

## Conclusion

In this chapter, the participants' voices have expressed both the influences they felt contributed to their development as improvisational dance artists and their motivations for engaging in spontaneous dancemaking. An artist's individual prior experiences and motivations may affect how those selfsame artists shape the emerging dance as they engage in on-the-fly performance. Each individual ensemble member's previously learned patterns, embodied through the study of various techniques and previous experiences, all support her in-the-moment interactive decision making within the ensemble and affect the resulting choreography. Each of the study's dance artists put into play her unique history of prior experience and previously learned physical and perceptual patterns within the context of particular performance occasions during which she must quickly act in the emergent phenomenon of *thinking-on-your-feet* dancemaking. The data suggests that when all these individual variants meet in performance, a new choreography comes into existence in a way that is both particular to that performance and is more than the sum total of each individual's contribution. These individual variables, operative in the complexity of spontaneous dancemaking, appear to self-organize out of the potential chaos into some kind of order, weaving a complex tapestry of emergent choreographic forms. In this way, the dance takes on its own identity. This is what I call an *ensemble aesthetic*. The meeting of the artists in this study, whether in rehearsal, at dinner, or on stage, provides grounds for new ways of thinking about, dancing about, and talking about ensemble dance composition *on-the-spot* in

performance. The ensemble aspect is what gives this ground a new fertility and allows new ways of thinking about dancemaking.

I have presented the ensembles as separate entities to better to understand how each ensemble performance is an instance of spontaneous dancemaking; however, each spontaneous performance manifests in a unique expression. Similarly, the participants in the data for this research describe how they, as members within these spontaneous dancemaking ensembles, reflect on their roles as part of a collective while at the same time bringing their unique values and epistemologies to the dancemaking process. As a dance researcher and ensemble practitioner, I am now interested in reflecting on how assumptions, challenges, and methods of practice for spontaneous dancemaking might be questioned in the future.

In the next chapter, I present data pertaining to two aspects of spontaneous dancemaking: the practice of performance and the performance of practice. I examine the strategies participants use to bring their practice into performance as well as how such practice is changed by the performance environment.

## CHAPTER V

### A PRAXIS: PERFORMING PRACTICE – PRACTICING PERFORMANCE

As described in the previous chapter, each of the dance artists who comprise the performance ensembles in this study brings unique epistemologies and prior experiences to the spontaneous dancemaking process. Each of the dance artists who comprise the performance ensembles in this study also brings unique epistemologies and prior experiences affecting all members in an ensemble performance. These shared epistemologies and prior experiences further result in a new “body” of lived knowledge for each ensemble. As the artists interact in performance, a dance emerges with its own distinct choreography as well as a body of lived knowledge that is constantly in a state of becoming. I call this collective knowledge an evolving *ensemble epistemology*, wherein a collaborative knowing emerges as “extended mind” (Clark, 2008) and forms the ground for an emerging ensemble choreography that comes to be known in the choreographic results witnessed in performance. This emergent ensemble epistemology, wherein the whole is more than the sum of its parts, makes possible a unique ensemble expression for every performance and thus exhibits the dynamical nature of the phenomenon.

#### **Practice as Performance**

In this chapter, I foreground data reflecting the desire of the dissertation study’s performance ensembles’ members to bring their studio practice into performance and

examine the challenges encountered in this endeavor. In the post-performance group interviews and in the study's questionnaire distributed to the performance ensemble members, many participants identify the difficulties involved with bringing their improvisational dancemaking, as experienced in their studio practice, into performance onstage. From the research data collected to date, I can only conclude that the concept of *practice as performance* is challenging: the performance environment is necessarily different from the studio environment, which changes the very practice that the artists seek to perform. Thus, as the participants describe, their desire to perform their practices reveals how the act of performance in a theatrical setting can change their practice.

All the performances included in this dissertation study took place in a theatrical setting and featured a paying audience seated in a proscenium/frontal orientation (on one side of the dance). For the performances there were set time limits for each dance as well as theatrical lighting as described by members of the performance ensembles in Chapter 3. The participants note that some elements of theatrical performance (audience, bright theatrical lighting, specific time limits, and adrenalized states) often accompanying the act of performance introduce change when the performers return later to their studio practices. Further, the combination of the theatrical elements appears to create an environment distinctly different from what the artists experience in their studio practice.

The data collected for this dissertation indicate that many of the theatrical conventions mentioned above can become obstacles to the artists' intentions of performing their practice. As the dance artists strive to maintain the integrity of their

studio practice in the transition to performance in a theatrical setting, the participants' voices illuminate the ruptures they experience in their desire to share their practice in performance. Thus, the *performance of practice* entails a *practice of performance*: a praxis that this study's participants fluidly and courageously embrace as they move between the studio and the stage.

### **Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation Faculty Ensembles**

As the Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation (SFDI) Faculty ensemble participants share their successes and challenges in bringing their practice into the two nights of performance as described below, one should note that they did not have a history as a performance ensemble. However, though the ensemble did not experience an extended ensemble practice, each individual member did come to composing in performance with many years of dancemaking experience. Of note is that even in this short time, the members appeared to have begun a journey into a shared knowledge or ensemble epistemology of creating collaborative choreography in-the-moment of performance.

### **Bringing Practice to Performance**

One study participant and member of the SFDI Faculty ensemble, Rachael Lincoln, spent 15 years deeply engaged in investigating ensemble improvisation in performance. Her description below highlights and captures a sense of a delicate dancemaking process in which the paradoxical nature of bringing improvisational studio practice into performance is evident. Lincoln, who performed the first night, eloquently



expresses the challenge of bringing one's practice into performance by describing her practice in the study's questionnaire as, "the performance of 'not performing'" (personal communication, June 13, 2011). The conundrum Lincoln depicts places the dance artist in the endeavor of developing a reliable method or process in order to *connect to* or *find again* that non-performative dancing state experienced in her studio practice. Further, she must somehow embody this studio experience in performance. Lincoln implies a performance state: *I am performing, but it is as if I am not performing*.

As the dissertation data demonstrates, tensions reside within this *staging of practice*. In her response to my email asking for more clarification on the changing nature of her practice over 15 years Lincoln writes: "I am more forgiving of myself and more critical of the practice of performance" (June 13, 2011). In her email response, she clearly describes the balancing act she navigates between her studio practice and her performance practice. Lincoln further states:

Having seen much more ensemble performances than I had when I began dancing/improvising 15 years ago, my interests/aesthetic, and ability to discern have (d)evolved. I notice, now, within the context of 'performance' I am less patient as a paying viewer, also less game to jump into a performance with a group I don't know or trust... and less tolerant of watching things I am not interested in (of course I instantly think of exceptions to anything I might name here, but these things may or may not include and are not limited to: showmanship for its own sake, pushing to get a laugh, senseless chaos for too long, cuteness, dances that go on and on and on . . . )

However, I can be extremely patient/tolerant/game in a studio as a part of a practice. Which is all just to say, I have different (higher?) expectations of ensemble improvisation in performance than I do within the practice. Looking at an improvised ensemble performance as a piece (versus a collection of dancers just doing something spontaneous on stage) has upped the stakes for me as an audience member and as performer/creator - which seems to both honor and

elevate the form, and subject it to more criticism. (personal communication, June 14, 2011)

For clarification, Lincoln confirmed my analysis of her responses in the preceding and following quotes in a follow up email in which she writes, “you have understood my meaning correctly in all that I have read of your re-phrasing, analysis, and interpretation of my words” (personal communication, December 30, 2012). My analysis included how Lincoln’s words imply she has different expectations for her studio-based practice than she does for her performance-based practice. Lincoln’s desire for upping “the stakes” for her work in performance as opposed to her more “patient” approach to dancemaking in the studio suggests that she finds herself practicing in the studio with dance artists that she may not “know or trust” enough to work with in performance and who may have different values about the performance of practice.

Lincoln continues to describe differing levels of expectations for her formal performance practice onstage and her practice in informal community dance jam settings. She speaks about her engagement in a community *jamming* dance practice wherein practitioners may be participating for many diverse reasons, such as getting exercise and socializing; additionally, they may not have a performative or an ensemble interest as part of their practice (Martin, 2007). Lincoln confirms that she is referring to this jamming culture when she writes that she is more “patient” in the studio with behaviors or dance material that she would not consider performance worthy. Perhaps Lincoln engages in

this practice with tolerance for diverse agendas; however, she also has clear criteria for deciding what is appropriate performance material, and what is not.

Perhaps, when Lincoln writes about preferring to “know and trust a group” in order to perform with its members, she wants to trust *shared* criteria for performance material or a *shared* aesthetic, which can be difficult when practicing within the ad hoc environment of a jamming dance culture. One could summarize that Lincoln, both as a choreographer and an audience member, tolerates in the studio or dance jam practice what she does not tolerate in performance. The following question, then, arises: What are the consequences for the emerging dance work in performance when ad hoc faculty ensembles perform at festivals and the individual artists may lack a shared aesthetic regarding suitable choreographic material for performance situations? Lincoln’s journey, from her introduction to improvisational dance in college to her present participation with spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance, demonstrates a critical engagement with the notion of the *performance of practice*. Lincoln’s experiences suggest that, in this form of Western improvisational dance, the many persons participating may not share similar sensibilities for spontaneous dancemaking in performance.

Cathy Caraker, another fellow SFDI Faculty ensemble member, shares Lincoln’s concerns. Caraker’s comments suggest that for her some studio practice inquiries may not contribute to coherent dancemaking in performance. In her questionnaire, Caraker laments the lack of attention paid to, or perhaps the lack of skills on the part of ensemble members, for compositional concerns in improvisational dancemaking. Caraker writes:

Too often in improvisation, I find that there isn't enough awareness of what is being made. Impulses are followed and experiences are had, but there's too little awareness and reflection on the composition, the work itself. For me, this awareness differentiates the skilled artist from the less skilled. (personal communication, July 7, 2011)

Caraker's disappointment in spontaneous dancemaking in performance may also reflect, like Lincoln, a studio practice that does not or cannot prioritize composing strategies for an ensemble in performance. This may be due to dancers participating in dance jams for different reasons as mentioned above. Thus, Caraker's distinction between skilled and less skilled artists begs the following questions: By what process do artists become more or remain less skilled in improvisational dance composition? Then, how might those who are interested in performing ensemble improvisational dance in performance with a live audience develop the necessary skills in their studio practice, skills often thought of as non-theatrical? Where can compositional skills be learned by the ensemble improviser and, further, what might these skills be? How might the practice of improvisation as exploration add to the traditional notion of what an audience expects from a performance? How does an improvisation become a composition and still maintain its core of improvisation or, perhaps paradoxically, non-performance?

Caraker continues in her questionnaire to suggest that the improvisational dance practices enacted in the studio may not contribute to successful ensemble performance on

stage. Caraker describes her disappointment in the level of dancemaking she witnesses in ensemble improvisational dance performances:

I often find the dancing vague and generic. I miss seeing dance that is refined, cultivated, distilled. I see the latter more often in solo work where the performer has the space and time to develop the movement images. It seems to be hard for ensembles to support this kind of depth and specificity. (personal communication, July 7, 2011)

The concerns articulated by Caraker and Lincoln, and from my own experience as well, are that community dance jams populated by dancers with diverse motivations might not be the best environment to develop ensemble and solo compositional dancemaking skills. Alternatively, I ask, could dance jams also function as an ensemble event expanding beyond an emphasis on Contact Improvisation? This expansion could then make space for performance and compositional values that different artists might bring to the jam. I developed the former question at the beginning of my research data analysis and now, in writing the dissertation, I realize how complex any answer to this question might be.

### **The Performance of Practice**

As noted in the data, several members of the SFDI Faculty ensembles expressed concerns with the difficulties encountered in bringing their improvisational dance practice into performance. Of particular poignancy, is Swartzman's comment in the study's questionnaire reflecting the subjective nature of his improvisational dance practice. Swartzman writes, "I also realize that internal and external experiences are very different, and I have been known to be disappointed by 'successful' performances, or fulfilled by 'unsuccessful' performances (as recognized by the majority of the audience)"

(personal communication, August 15, 2010). Even though Swartzman portrays the subjective nature of spontaneous dancemaking as being difficult to analyze from the performer's point of view, dance artists participating in this dissertation, nonetheless attempt to analyze this complex dance form the best they can from their own perspectives.

Fellow SFDI Faculty member Alia Swersky then describes difficulties with the performance of improvisational dance from her perspective. She writes in her questionnaire, "I find that it [ensemble improvisation] can be self indulgent, [participants are] unaware that an audience is watching" (personal communication, July 9, 2011). Responding in his questionnaire as both an insider and outsider to the improvisational dance field, SFDI Faculty ensemble member and actor Christian Swenson also relates concerns similar to Swersky's:

At times, the performers seem to be wallowing in their private worlds. As someone with a theatrical and music background, I am both confused and often disappointed when dancers enter these modes without seeming to have a clue. I find myself asking, when did just dancing with each other become a "no-no"? There has been a shift towards overly cerebral/conceptual/academic performance that doesn't interest me. I've only a BA in theater from '77, and mostly perform for younger audiences, family shows in small towns, so I've become hyper-aware of when these audiences lose interest. (personal communication, August 16, 2010)

Swenson's perceptions of spontaneous dancemaking in performance resonate with Swersky's comments and seem to identify what, for Swenson, is a major challenge to improvisational dance in performance; namely, performers are "wallowing" in private worlds without a "clue" about how to engage their audience in their performances. As I

read their comments, I wondered if, instead, these “unaware” performers find themselves in performance without the requisite skills (a contentious notion) to develop a *sense of ensemble* (no matter their compositional method) in the complex environment of a staged performance while also being *acutely* aware that they *are* performing before an audience. This query of what defines skillful development of a *sense of ensemble* interweaves throughout the rest of this dissertation and in the data from which many research participants speak from differing points of view.

**Pushing for laughs.** Another danger for the performer of spontaneous dancemaking in performance identified by several of the SFDI Faculty ensemble was what Lincoln earlier referred to as “pushing for laughs” (personal communication, July 9, 2011). The dynamical state that is spontaneous dancemaking in performance may sometimes encourage performers to default to a type of material that several SFDI Faculty participants refer to as performing your *shtick*. The data suggest that the excitement of performance can encourage some spontaneous choreographers to respond to the pressures of performance by defaulting to comic routines. The data also reveal that the act of navigating spontaneous dancemaking, wherein the performer is creating a dance and yet does not know what comes next, combined with what may be a natural desire to please one’s audience, leads performers to resort to what Steve Paxton (at the March 2 Marfa performance lab hosted by Lower Left in 2010) refers to as “pandering.” Paxton further shares that, in his opinion, performers often become different people on

stage than in rehearsal: in performance they engage in pandering to the audience while this aspect of performance had never been a focus in rehearsal.

One can consider Paxton's notion of *pandering* as analogous to the Yiddish word *shtick* and to Lincoln's terms, *pushing for laughs*. All these terms suggest a seductive vehicle for connecting with members of the audience. SFDI Faculty ensemble members discussed how the spontaneous choreographer might use humorous material in performance and successfully negotiate the material without surrendering the integrity of her or his work to a mere performing of their *shtick*. SFDI Faculty ensemble member Alia Swersky addresses the urge felt by many spontaneous choreographers to use humor as a strategy in performance even though (in my experience as an improviser) the practice of humorous material in the studio is rare. In her questionnaire, Swersky writes:

I find that humor is often used as a fall back and often leads to a disconnection from the ensemble. However, if humor is used well it is wonderful. There are often one or two performers in a group that may take the spotlight when it [the dance] is not calling for it – this takes away a sense of ensemble. (personal communication, July 9, 2011)

Swersky describes a situation wherein an ensemble member ceases to primarily focus on creating the ensemble dance and, instead, moves into a one-on-one communication with the audience as if using the dramatic device of an *aside*. In this moment, what Swersky refers to as “*a sense of ensemble*” is lost, as the collective becomes of secondary concern for the pandering performer.

Fellow SFDI Faculty member Vitali Kononov found himself drawn to humorous material as he reports in his post-performance journal: “It was easy to get the laughs, but



I wanted to be able to shift from it at some point” (personal communication, August 6, 2010). Kononov found himself playing to the audience for laughs and perhaps found it hard to shift back into an ensemble focus. The following conversation between Kononov and Swartzman in the post-performance interview is informative as to how seductive *performing your shtick* can be:

Swartzman: At this point in the improvisation I didn’t feel like we had really settled into anything and I was worried that we were starting to go for the lowest common denominator. I was worried about that.

Martin: What does that mean?

Swartzman: Usually sort of 'hammy, shticky,' like your 'shtick.' (murmured agreement from the group)

Kononov: I am definitely seeing that my choices are not really offering anything interesting. Or, I wouldn’t say uninteresting, but somehow it doesn’t contribute to what the group is doing. And I am still doing it. I am still doing that as we say, 'my shtick.' (personal communication, August 6, 2010)

In the post-performance group interview, Kononov had the opportunity while watching the video of the performance with his SFDI ensemble members to assess his onstage actions with his colleagues. From this viewing, he realized that, in those moments of performing his “shtick,” he may have stopped functioning fully as a member of the ensemble. In that moment of directly engaging the audience, it appears that Kononov begins a one-on-one communication with the audience and he loses his *sense of ensemble*. In this moment, the ensemble becomes a prop or backup group for Kononov. Caraker at this moment in the performance approaches Kononov and begins to mimic Kononov’s posing and antics. Caraker, while watching the video in the post-performance

interview, says to Kononov: “Well, I am sort of curious about what you were doing when I came over to check it out. I felt like I was kinda trying [you] on . . . I was trying you on and I was feeling a little bit competitive about it. It was like a game” (personal communication, August 6, 2010). In my video analysis of this moment, I found that Caraker seemed to assert and reclaim for herself, and perhaps the ensemble, the audience’s attention rather than let Kononov take center stage.

The post-performance group interview discussion of the performance of shtick found the SFDI Faculty ensemble in agreement with Swartzman, that performing one’s shtick often is “going for the lowest common denominator” and, for this researcher, the discussion demonstrated an instance of ensemble learning. The communal experience of performing together and the following group discussion allowed individual strategies for performing and thinking to become shared experiences and make new meanings through ensemble practice. For the SFDI Faculty ensemble, this praxis of performance and reflection is the beginning of a shared “skillful knowing” for the ensemble. Although this particular ensemble may never come together again in performance, the knowledge embodied and reflected upon will travel with the individual SFDI Faculty members as they move into different communities and ensembles, ultimately passing along and sharing their skillful knowing to other dance artists. In this way, a growing body of knowledge of spontaneous dancemaking methods will perhaps continue to develop within this spontaneous dancemaking community. The praxis, as described by this study’s participants, of taking one’s *studio practice into performance* may require that one

rehearse the *performance of practice*, which in turn further informs and changes studio practice. The research participants in this study see how this process might happen and take place from many points of view. My hope as a researcher is that this study opens a space for future reflection into these complex issues.

### **LIVE Dance Theater**

Similar to members of the SFDI Faculty ensemble, many members of the LIVE Dance Theater (LIVE) ensemble articulate in the data a goal of bringing their practice into performance. The difficulty of transitioning practice into performance becomes obvious as LIVE members speak about the process.

#### **Bringing Practice to Performance**

LIVE member Jess Humphrey states in her questionnaire that she works to, “allow more and more of the magic that happens in practice to emerge in performance” (personal communication, October 1, 2010). However, sometimes the magical moments experienced in practice do not emerge to everyone’s satisfaction. For example, Chris Apple, the ensemble composer who performs live with the ensemble, writes in his questionnaire about moving amidst the other performers on stage, “I have experiences of being disappointed after a performance when I feel that we didn't do what we do in practice” (personal communication, June 27, 2010). LIVE member Liam Clancy agrees with Humphrey and Apple when he writes in his questionnaire, “How we practice on Thursday mornings is the way I want to perform” (personal communication, June 28, 2010). But, Clancy goes on to describe the tension he experiences between previously

held concepts of performance values and new concepts of performance values required in this new performance paradigm. Clancy writes:

I am disappointed in my (as of yet) not being able to let go fully of notions of performance as polished, strong, clear, and full of virtuosity. That said, I believe all those things exist in what we do, but what that means, the context and conventions of it are not accurate for what we're after. And what is that you ask? For me, the poetry of the moment. Poetry is noticing and revealing, not making up, no hammer no nails, no façade, just the embodied eye noticing, pointing toward, perceiving as if new. (personal communication, June 28, 2010)

These new performance values guide Clancy's quest to redefine what performance means for him. In the weekly ensemble practice sessions, he challenges his previously held notions of performance when he danced for companies that stressed "polished, strong, clear, and full of virtuosity" performance values. Clancy sees those previous values also in his improvisational practice, but witnessed through a new lens that supports his ensemble improvisational practice.

The LIVE ensemble's investigation into how the choreographic material and dancing states experienced in practice might be taken into a performance situation suggests, as expressed by Humphrey below, that the process is skillful and thus takes time. Humphrey writes:

Plus there's so many times when we have dances in practice, where –I wish I could do that in a performance. I'm thinking here, "oh my gosh, I'm finally having a connection with myself that I haven't practiced in performance [yet], and it doesn't feel like it's at risk at all [for disappearing]. It feels like it's totally going to stay." (personal communication, October 1, 2010)

Humphrey suggests here that what she discovers in her studio practice can be (re)called so that she can access the "connection with myself" reliably in performance. Humphrey

must know the score, or choreography, or gestalt of the material discovered and practiced in the studio intimately enough in order to be consistent in her execution of the studio material in performance. Thus, Humphrey's material gains enough stability to "stay" with her even in the complex demands that accompany the performance situation. Humphrey's sense of discovery and satisfaction with her accomplishment is palpable in her questionnaire answer and gives an idea of how Humphrey and other members of the LIVE ensemble might develop methods for stabilizing the sometimes-elusive transition of choreographic material between the studio practice and the performance practice. This is the question that comes to me as I reflect on Humphrey's words: How does her activity of stabilizing material between the studio and the stage problematize the artificial binaries often created in our dance discourse between notions of improvised and choreographed dance?

### **The Performance of Practice**

In the previous section, the LIVE ensemble members express the desire to perform their practice as experienced in the studio; conversely, in this section the participants speak to the powerful effect of performance on their practice. Karen Schaffman notes in her questionnaire that, "since we began monthly performances the practice is shifting. Our conversations shifted, a lot, towards what happened in front of audience vs. the privacy of enclosed practice" (personal communication, June 18, 2010). Schaffman's further comments suggest a praxis wherein the performance activity might reveal new material, or require new behaviors, as well as other insights into the

performance of practice. The ensemble then must process and filter these new materials or insights through their studio practice and group discussions before meeting themselves as an ensemble in performance again.

LIVE member Eric Geiger notes the difference between performance and practice in his post-performance journal when he writes that it “feels very different right now, not sure exactly how, but feeling like I was in a different, unknown state for myself in these LIVE performances” (personal communication, May 29, 2010). In a follow up email, Geiger agrees with my analysis of his notion that the experiential learning occurring in performance helps him to more precisely inform his studio practice, thereby making it ever more responsive to his performance practice (personal communication, December 12, 2012). The “different and unknown state for myself,” which Geiger reports, suggests a reason for his engagement with this high-risk form of spontaneous dancemaking: experiencing the unknown stimulated by the act of practicing performance.

LIVE member Ron Estes suggests that performance might be its own practice when he writes in his post-performance journal, “I want to practice in front of people more – I want to exhaust some things that open for me [in performance]” (personal communication, May 26, 2010). It appears that Estes, Clancy, and Geiger all speak of performance as a place of new learning. Further, their comments from the compiled interviews suggest that the artists are not only attempting to preserve their studio practice in performance, but also attempting to preserve those moments in performance that ultimately wield a change in their practice. This praxis, in which practice informs

performance and performance informs practice, seems to engage the artist members of the LIVE Dance Theater ensemble through what, for them, is a deep and meaningful reflection for opening and articulating new paradigms in dancemaking.

**The seducing audience in performance.** The LIVE ensemble participants also discuss in their interviews how one of the most obvious signals an audience member can give to a choreographer spontaneously composing during performance is laughter. The audience's audible laughter signals to the performer the engagement of at least some of the audience with some aspect of the performance. Audiences may engage with a performance in different ways, such as being still and silent, restless and noisy, among other modes of behavior. For the performer, however, a quiet audience response might feel like a void and encourage the performer to *play for laughs*. As seen in the data for the SFDI Faculty ensemble earlier, performers may opt to respond to audience laughter by extending their actions in order to prolong the humorous engagement. In this way, an audience can have a powerful affect on the emerging dance.

Members of LIVE recognize the possibilities for humorous interaction between performer and audience, and they consciously work to be aware of the dynamics of that particular aspect of audience/performer relationship. The following is a rather long section of a post-performance group interview. I include it here since it demonstrates ensemble members thinking about their audience as a partner in the emerging dance. Further, the following text of the group discussion suggests how the ensemble might go about bringing the audience to the emerging work rather than composing the work from

assumptions about what the audience might desire in any given moment. LIVE members discuss this issue:

Estes: It seems like we're doing this thing, especially when laughs are happening, when we're allowing ourselves not to be influenced – by the laugh. We're in a completely different world, where those laughs are touching different parts of what's going on, and I feel like we've worked for that [detachment in our practice].

Humphrey: There's something about it too, now when I hear laughs, the first thing I think of is, "I really have no idea what they're laughing at." You know what I mean? It could be me. It could be somebody upstage. It could be the timing between somebody and me upstage that I can't see . . . so I can only stay in what I'm in.

Geiger: For me, the laughing is a way to track – or being reminded to track because I don't really get laughs. I don't.

Humphrey: You don't understand them, or you don't get laughs?

Geiger: No. I don't get laughs myself, so I know that it's not me. So, with the laughs you know something's going on, and it pulls me back to what's going on that I don't know about. So, it's communication from [with]in the audience. (personal communication, May 29, 2010)

Estes and Humphrey speak to the need to stay in their material and note the laughter, but not to necessarily change their choreographic material. Geiger speaks about communication that comes to him from the audience and that reminds him at least momentarily to "track" or look around, assess the composition, and see what particular material the audience might be responding to. Geiger reflects that the audience is informing him about what he does *not* know about the dance he is making. The idea that the audience knows something about the dance that Geiger does not and that the audience is communicating this situation to Geiger demonstrates the emergent nature of ensemble



improvisation in performance and the collaborative nature of the choreographic act. In this collaboration, an audience is interactively cuing the performers and participating in the development of the choreography. LIVE members continue the conversation:

Schaffman: I notice that I'm really taking a major temperature [reading] of whether I'm the one being laughed at or not. What I'm doing in space gets heightened in a different way.

Seiters: We talked about this humor at some point, that it can squelch other potential things, and I found myself writing about this today after the performance. The audience will often laugh if there's opportunity to laugh. But often I feel like I'm probably not the center [of attention], I'm not what's being laughed at, but I'm part of this scene that I feel is usually more complex than ha, ha, ha, ha, ha [audience laughter]. (personal communication, May 29, 2010)

In the text above, performers consider audience laughter in both positive and negative respects. Schaffman credits the audience's engagement with heightening her own sense of the material she is performing and, as was true for Geiger, the audience reaction calls Schaffman to reassess her material. In this way, audience laughter may have a positive influence on the emerging choreography.

Seiters, on the other hand, seems to suggest that sometimes laughing audience members attend to the dance on a surface level and are anticipating opportunities to engage with the choreography by laughing. More importantly, Seiters suggests that the laughter can "squelch" or otherwise negatively affect the dance by directing it away from further development of the material in progress and toward material that will prolong the audience laughter. Continuing the conversation, Seiters states:

There's something I'm really interested in being with, like helping to educate an audience on complexity so that maybe they get to laugh, but maybe the laugh

settles to something else or maybe next time they won't be so quick to think, "Oh, that's funny. Can I laugh?" (personal communication, May 29, 2010)

Seiters indicates that an audience might come to know a deeper engagement with the work rather than simply looking for a chance to find something humorous in the dance. However, guiding the audience to this deeper engagement is the responsibility of the performers who must not be drawn into playing to audience expectations. Not performing for an audience's preconceived expectations, but instead encouraging them to involve themselves more deeply in the intent of the artists, who present their studio practice in performance, creates an opportunity for the audience to actively learn about ensemble dancemaking. For Seiters, this learning creates a collaborative relationship between audiences and choreographers. Here, the opportunity for growing together, of learning new aspects of human interaction in the moment of performance, takes place for performers and audiences alike.

Continuing the conversation concerning the laughter coming from the audience, Schaffman proposes that the audience may communicate to the performer something about its own state of perception. As she writes, "The laughing says something about who the audience is in terms of how they see space or what they see going on" (personal communication, May 29, 2010). Schaffman further suggests that, through the audience laughter, she can come to know how members of the audience perceive the dance. Of perhaps equal importance for Schaffman and Seiters is that the audience's laughter may also communicate what parts of the choreography some members of the audience are not

attending. This two-way understanding between audience and choreographers is pertinent for this study because it demonstrates that just as members of the audience form their perceptions of the dance, Seiters and Schaffman also form perceptions of their audience. In Seiters' case, sometimes she may desire that members of the audience had more skill or interest for appreciating other "complex" aspects of the dance rather than being too quick to narrowly focus on the *funny part*. As the data reveal and Humphrey expressed, ensemble choreographers find themselves in a more complex dance than even they or members of the audience can fully know. As the dance is an emergent phenomenon, so too is the audience response.

In the following passage, LIVE member Estes further shares with the ensemble what he feels is progress for the LIVE ensemble in terms of holding on to the ensemble's practice in performance in the face of laughter erupting from the audience. Estes states in the post-performance group interview:

.... If I am honest, I would say that I'm not interested in making San Diego audiences laugh, because they want to laugh at the slightest uncomfortability [sic]. I hunker down if there's laughing that's happening, because I feel that it can be so seductive to go for more laughs, because it feels like it registers as an indication of connecting with the audience in a way that I'm supposed to be doing. It means that I'm delivering something that they like, you know? I think that we were achieving that [resisting seduction]...staying with what we were doing. (personal communication, May 29, 2010)

Estes gives the impression here of needing to "hunker down" and not let the audience laughter pull him out of his dance and find himself dancing to the audience's tune. Estes commends the ensemble and notes that it is achieving its aims in valuing the emerging

dance over capitulating to an assumed desire of the audience for more humorous material. Clearly, Estes feels the potential seduction present when, in the moment of spontaneous performance, the performer becomes directed by the audience reaction rather than attuning to the complex space around her or him.

The data present a complex story of the exchange between audience and spontaneous choreographers in performance. Further complicating the extended conversation between members of the LIVE ensemble concerning the issue of audience laughter is the introduction of, from my viewpoint as an audience member and researcher, very skillfully delivered humorous material. Earlier in the post-performance group interview, while watching the video of the performance, Geiger says, “I’m not interested. I’m not interested in making the audience laugh, but I don’t know if anybody is. It’s fair to say that tonight and last night probably most people were laughing at Yolande [Snaith]” (personal communication, May 29, 2010). As someone who has 35 years attending improvisational dance performances, I found myself laughing along with many members of the audience at LIVE members, as Humphrey and Snaith presented spoken words that, in my opinion, were clever and very funny indeed. My observation, as an audience member and researcher, was that Humphrey and Snaith appeared quite adept at storytelling filled with non-sequiturs. I noted that generally many audience members engaged with hearty laughter as they listened to Humphrey and Snaith spin their absurd stories.

In one particularly amusing scene, Humphrey, Geiger, and Snaith engaged in ridiculous juxtapositions of unrelated texts, with Geiger repeating his text, “there is no obligation,” deadpan while Humphrey described moving from a chemical diet to a natural diet and Snaith told a tale that changed with each sentence. As a researcher and audience member of the LIVE performances, I ask: What is an audience to do? When aroused to laughter by performance material, am I somehow undermining the potential for the dance? Should I feel inhibited to laugh at material that strikes me as funny? Am I not grasping the full complexity of the dance? By laughing, am I missing a deeper engagement with the material and practice of these artists? Clearly, the data reveal complex relationships evolving in the spontaneous performance event between the audience and performer where the audience seems to function as a learning, ensemble member.

The ensemble’s preoccupation with the seductive nature of the audience’s engagement in the performance through laughter suggests an interdependent relationship wherein members of the audience remind the performers to survey the composition as a whole. The fine line between *playing for laughs* and encouraging audience members to attend and engage with the complexity of the emerging dance, as Seiters suggests, places the performers and audience in a dynamical system of mutually causal interactions. The data further suggests that this dynamical system offers all the participants in this phenomenon (choreographers and audience members alike) an opportunity to affect the emerging dance. This recursive cycle of practice into performance into reflection

presents a rich praxis of experiential and collaborative learning in the performance setting as these individual artists investigate this still young dance form of spontaneous dancemaking in performance.

### **Lower Left Performance Collective**

The Lower Left Performance Collective (Lower Left) performance of *And Go*, at the Ponderosa P.O.R.C.H. Festival in Stolzenhagen, Germany gave Lower Left performers similar experiences to the other performance ensembles in this study concerning *practice as performance*. However, for the Lower Left ensemble, issues of pandering to the audience were not foregrounded in the research participants' responses, as was the case with the SFDI and LIVE ensembles. Rather, the Lower Left members focused on two issues: how dance material practiced in the studio transforms on stage and how challenges encountered when performing for new and unfamiliar audiences affects the performance of movement developed in rehearsal.

### **Bringing Practice to Performance**

The sense of vulnerability experienced by spontaneous choreographers becomes one bridge to cross when moving from studio practice to performance practice. Lower Left member Rebecca Bryant recalls a story in which material developed in rehearsal, and which she hoped would be performed onstage, did not emerge in the way she desired. The complex and delicate nature of the process of bringing spontaneous dancemaking into performance is evident when Bryant writes in her post-performance journal of how her notion that she should stick with material emerging in performance turned into a

disappointing experience for her when the material emerging on stage was not as good as what she had practiced in the studio. She describes this experience: “I felt I had to stick with material, but I didn’t choose the right material to continue the solo . . . probably wasn’t so interesting as material goes” (personal communication, July 24, 2010). Along similar lines, when writing in my post-performance journal about the same performance that Bryant recalled, I wrote, “our dancing is not as full as in rehearsal” (researcher’s journal, July 24, 2010).

It is interesting for this study that Bryant and I are reminding ourselves to recall what was experienced in rehearsal in order to set a standard for performance material and to bring that material into performance. The desire to stabilize material in the transition from studio practice to performance is not to reenact specific dance phrases. Rather, in performance the artist seeks to (re)embody the body~mind state and the distinctive *quality* of its accompanying dance material experienced in the studio practice. This notion of bringing the richness of choreography discovered in rehearsal to spontaneous composition in performance is a recurring theme for many of the dance artists in this study as well as the Lower Left ensemble. These reflections raise the question as to why dance artists engage in performance practices in which performance does not live up to their studio practice experiences. However, even with these disappointments, dance artists in this study seem to be drawn to the uncontrolled nature of the phenomenon and the opportunities for learning this difficult dance form engages.

Another interesting idea emerging from the Lower Left ensemble participants concerns the value of extended time together in rehearsal before moving into performance. Lower Left member Andrew Wass foregrounds this notion of rehearsing over time when he reflects on how he comes to understand the intentions of others in the ensemble. Wass writes in his questionnaire, “I come to understand their [ensemble members] intentions by what we have discussed and rehearsed. Also, if I am performing with people I know, I can guesstimate what they will do in performance – what their habits and aesthetics are” (personal communication, August 18, 2010). Wass’s thoughts here seem to suggest that, over time, dance artists who spend time together in practice begin to *be able to predict* or “guesstimate” what fellow ensemble members’ customary choices will be in a given situation, or at least not be surprised by their choices in performance. However, as understood from Bryant’s and my comments on the question of stabilizing the transition of rehearsal material into performance, customary choices in rehearsal with its less pressured atmosphere, and customary choices in the more adrenalized atmosphere of performance, may be two very different phenomena. When spontaneously composing a dance work a dance artist’s choices may be different due to the different body~mind states experienced in rehearsal and performance.

In summary, contradictions arise from the reflections expressed by the research participants: extended time in rehearsal has value as a process toward a staged performance but, even with extended time in practice, a disappointing event in performance can emerge. However, within these contradictions, the complexity of the



form of ensemble spontaneous dancemaking comes to life and opens spaces for new learning about the form to take place.

### **The Performance of Practice**

The data from Lower Left's post-performance interview and questionnaires seem to suggest that the audience is also an active participant in the emergent choreography and further influences the action on stage. Choreographers, the ensemble, and members of the audience are the actors in this dynamical system. The physical environment, the performer's prior experiences, and the in-the-moment choices of the performer affect the dance as discussed in Chapter 4. Further, as the data demonstrate, an audience can exert a powerful effect on the emerging choreography. These variables clearly create an environment that makes the *performance of practice* distinct from the rehearsal environment. Though this distinction between rehearsal and performance environments is true for all dance artists who rehearse dances in the studio and then perform them on stage, the dance artist that is choreographing on-the-fly in performance is perhaps more vulnerable to being affected by the dynamic environment of spontaneous performance. This is true especially when compared with those performing highly pre-scribed choreography in which performers have a more controlled, rehearsed routine of dance material to fall back on in the heat of performance.

When considering a notion such as the *performance of practice* and the strategies artists might employ to prepare for working under the conditions imposed by spontaneous performance, Andrew Wass, writing in the study's questionnaire, states:

The best (only?) way to prepare for a performative dance practice is to perform. You can work on your awareness and jetés all you want but if the fight/flight response kicks in and you can't handle it –A book will tell you how a bird can fly, but if you ain't got wings, you ain't gonna fly. (personal communication, August 18, 2010)

Wass seems to suggest that the studio practice and performance practice are distinct states and that one must practice spontaneous performance in order to gain skills in this dance genre. Wass's reference to having wings seems to mean, as I understand him, having tools for coping with the spontaneous performance situation. One may anticipate performance situations in rehearsal, but that cannot substitute for learning performance skills in the moment of performance.

Wass further suggests that performance of improvisational practice with an audience can induce the "fight/flight response," a complex response of the nervous and endocrine systems. Wass, in the study's questionnaire, describes his body~mind state in performance as: "sweaty, slight adrenaline tremble, usually noticeable in my hands when my arms are still and extended. A feeling of control in terms of having the audience's attention and what do I do with it. If I do not have their attention, how do I get it?" (personal communication, August 18, 2010). Wass's statements reflect that he experiences bodily changes in anticipation of performance, a change not commonly associated with his studio practice. As his colleague in Lower Left, I can report that Wass

seems to have a different body~mind state in the studio rehearsal than in performance.

This distinction between the body~mind state in rehearsal and in performance frames the performance event as a critical process for learning how to spontaneously choreograph.

As a member of the Lower Left Performance Collective and a choreographer that often uses spontaneous methods in performance, like Wass, I also find that the chemistry of my body~mind in the presence of an audience sharpens the distinction for me between practice and performance. As an improviser with over 30 years of experience performing improvisational dance, I find that the act of sharing my work in performance still affects my body chemistry. As I prepare for others to witness me in performance, I feel my adrenal glands become more active and produce symptoms similar to those that Wass describes. Usually, this is a different body~mind state than what I may experience in my studio practice. Thus, the body~mind, most likely, in performance is not in the same state as the body~mind in practice. This seems to suggest that an audience introduced into the environment of artists practicing spontaneous dancemaking exerts a sometimes subtle and, at other times, a dramatic shift for the performer. This phenomenon is interesting for this study since it highlights the distinct character of improvisational dancemaking in performance.

An example of how the presence of an audience can affect a dance artist is clear from Bryant's experience in the Lower Left performance. Bryant, in her post-performance journal, as noted earlier, writes of finding herself using movement vocabulary in performance that was a disappointment. Bryant continues by explaining

that part of her problem was that she “couldn’t read the audience” (personal communication, July 24, 2010). This statement by Bryant further suggests that somehow the audience has a role in what material she might choose to engage, and stay engaged with, during performance. Once again, the audience is described as being in a choreographic collaboration with Bryant.

Bryant continues in her post-performance journal to suggest that not only is she attempting to “read” her audience, but she also desires to engage the audience as a partner in the emerging choreography. Bryant writes that she, “met eyes with a young child in the front row- he started to say something to me, but then got shy and covered his eyes” (personal communication, July 24, 2010). Bryant seems to be open to incorporating audience members as part of her composition. In this moment of engaging the young child in the audience, the child becomes an actor in the emerging choreography. However, Bryant finds herself in a place of tension arising from the balancing act between communicating with the audience while also keeping track of the developing choreography emerging behind her onstage. Thus, Bryant must manage a three-way collaboration between herself, her ensemble, and her audience.

In her performance journal, Bryant continues to speak to this process of tracking ensemble and audience by referring to the advice that choreographer Deborah Hay (who Lower Left studied with in a March 2 Marfa Performance Lab 2010) gives performers in a humorous, tongue-in-cheek manner. Hay tells the performer trying to discover what is happening around them to, “turn your fucking head.” However, Bryant responds: “When

I turn my ‘fucking head’ a lot in performance, I can’t read specificity of audience reaction as well” (personal communication, July 24, 2010). Bryant here articulates the difficulty of balancing the split focus of maintaining receptivity to both the ensemble and the audience—a truly complex activity. The relationships between performer, ensemble, and audience that Bryant illuminates in her post-performance journal is of interest to this study because it exemplifies the complex nature of spontaneous dancemaking in performance and highlights the collaborative function the audience plays in the emerging dance.

As a member with Bryant in the Lower Left ensemble, I also felt the effects of the audience in Lower Left’s performance in Germany. Even with decades of experience, I sometimes get nervous around the spontaneous performance event. In the Lower Left performance that is part of this study, I felt myself become agitated and observed in my post-performance journal, “Nervous- Warm-up- How to warm up? Vision closes down. Have the feeling that everything is smaller somehow” (researcher’s post-performance journal, July 24, 2010). Upon reflection, it seems that the reason for my nervousness for this particular performance was due to presenting to a new audience unfamiliar with our work.

The evening of performance included choreographies by the well-known artists Kathleen Hermesdorf, Keith Hennessey, Peter Pleyer, and Stephanie Maher. As the performance evening progressed toward Lower Left’s closing choreography, I began to understand that Lower Left’s work was quite distinct aesthetically from the other

excellent work on the evening. I found myself caught up in the desire to have this audience appreciate our work, but also feeling that my desire might be unfulfilled since Lower Left's performance was very different from the other artists on the bill. As the performance evening progressed, I realized that *And Go* demonstrated our concern with formal choreographic composition values of shape, space and time as articulated by choreographer Mary Overlie, for instance, in her *Six Viewpoints* (2006) did not intend to include (like the other pieces on the evening) humor, text, or task oriented activities such as balancing on several blocks of wood while holding a young child or throwing a nude toddler in high arcs through the air. Rightly or wrongly, I began to worry that this particular audience may not appreciate the non-spectacle aspect of Lower Left's work within the context of this festival. As an artist, I know that it is my responsibility to stand by my work and, in the end, I did just that. However, the experience was not the most enjoyable performance of my career.

In the post-performance group interview, the Lower Left ensemble generally felt that our aesthetic pallet, narrowly focused on choreographic invention in space and time, did not sit comfortably in a performance environment in which the other pieces of the performance emphasized task and novel elements, such as roller skates, high-risk tasks performed with a circus flair, and nude toddlers. In the post-performance interview, Lower Left members reported that comments made by audience members after the performance were varied and included statements such as, "absolutely worthless and boring," "if people are improvising and you can't tell what they are making decisions

about then I am not interested in it,” and “I have never seen anything like that,” (personal communication, July 24, 2010). From the range of the audience’s comments, it is clear that audience members had very different experiences while participating in the collaborative effort that was Lower Left’s choreography, *And Go*.

Lower Left members also reported in the post-performance group interview that audience members remarked to them about the simultaneous nature of our decision-making and that perhaps, for some audience members, it seemed that we had pre-scribed the choreography in detail. Bryant, in the post-performance interview, said of an audience member’s query, “He was saying that we would shift at the same time and how did we know to do that?” (personal communication, July 25, 2010).

This aspect of Lower Left’s practice, making instantaneous and simultaneous decisions as an ensemble, may have been misleading to some audience members because it appeared we *were not* improvising. This was true for other audience members that night with one audience member thinking it was strange to have a completely *set* piece of choreography in the context of the P.O.R.C.H. festival. As reported by Wass, when he informed this audience member that Lower Left had spontaneously composed the dance work, the audience member expressed disbelief and said, “I have been telling everyone that it was choreographed!” (personal communication, July 25, 2010).

The confusion around whether Lower Left’s piece was highly pre-scribed or not suggests the possibility that perhaps Lower Left improvised their choreography too well? What is the difference between spontaneously composed and pre-scribed choreographies

when an audience member cannot tell the difference? Is it important that the audience understand the choreographic method used to create a dance? What skill would an audience need to be able to identify spontaneously composed choreography? Clear answers to these questions will probably never be forthcoming, but the question provides a place for discussion and learning about spontaneous dancemaking process to begin.

Other audience members who did have enough prior experience with this type of improvised choreography were able to discern the improvisational skill involved in Lower Left's dancemaking as well as the aesthetic pallet we chose to work with for this choreography. After the performance, as reported by Lower Left members in the post-performance group interview, audience members used words such as "fascinating" and "completely compelling, every moment, completely compelling" to describe their experience of *And Go* (personal communication, July 25, 2010). Audiences for highly pre-scribed choreographies also experience a wide range of reactions, but in Lower Left's case three ideas emerge from audience comments:

1. Choreography can appear pre-scribed when it is actually spontaneously composed.
2. There is not a universal aesthetic operative in the improvisational dance world.
3. One cannot depend on playing to the needs of an audience when one cannot predict what those needs might be.



These are ideas that would be valuable to contemplate as the Lower Left ensemble continues to research and practice in this spontaneous world of dancemaking.

With these questions and ideas in mind, I now turn to Lower Left member Rebecca Bryant's expressed concerns about the audience's perception of *And Go*. Bryant states in the post-performance group interview:

Was the audience engaged? How would I tell? Do I care? How do I feel about how our work fits in here at this festival? Does it feel cold and soul-less compared to the more emotional material we've seen in the performance marathon? Does it look analytical? In performance, I am using my high brain functions: categorizing, analyzing, factoring, and calculating. (personal communication, July 25, 2010)

Bryant's concern that the audience may perceive Lower Left's piece, *And Go*, as "cold and soul-less compared to the more emotional material" suggests she perceives a distinction between the aesthetic concerns of the Lower Left choreography and expectations that some members of the audience may have. How does an audience with differing perspectives in terms of the intent of a dance work affect the emerging choreography? Alternatively, is the emerging choreography a complex combination of audiences and performers? Further, is it possible to think of audiences as a group of like-minded individuals?

The data collected from the post-performance insights of the performers demonstrate that, in fact, audience members have differing understandings into the work, as do the performers onstage. Everyone brings their histories with them into the performance moment. However, the continued learning about spontaneous dancemaking

takes place when these shared histories interact, opening spaces for reflection, dialogue, and new insights into choreographing on-the-fly.

A field memo that I wrote later that night after performance notes, “Nervous about peer judgment—so nervous before that performance. I wanted people in the audience to respect my work. Danger! This, in the first place, is not a strong place to begin from” (researcher’s journal, July 24, 2010). The next day when I watched the video of the performance with the Lower Left ensemble as part of our post-performance group interview, our performance appeared so much stronger than it had felt in the moment of performance. After the post-performance group interview, I continued writing in a field memo:

Upon reflection and seeing the tape again with more distance from the performance event, it is evident to me that once again my sensations during and post-performance are not adequate or reliable for objectively forming an opinion of the work. My emotional state produced by the vulnerable act of offering a spontaneous work is not an objective state from which to judge my work. I know this, of course, but still am susceptible to falling into this trap. This is where the concept of trust figures in—trusting the practice—trusting the emerging dance. (researcher’s journal, July 25, 2010)

The Lower Left ensemble’s performance experiences at the P.O.R.C.H. Festival reflect the importance of perceptions that spontaneous choreographers may hold of an audience and what these perceptions may play in the emerging choreography. In the act of spontaneous dancemaking, the audience is a collaborator for better or worse. In Chapter 3, the data suggest that, in many cases, time spent dancing together was helpful for the ensemble. Perhaps it is possible to question whether an audience engaging with a

collaborative ensemble overtime might also create an *ensemble of understanding* between a particular performance ensemble and its informed audience.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the artists' praxis: the *performance of practice* and the *practice of performance*. The data suggest that this *staging of practice*, or as study participant Lincoln said, "the performance of 'not performing,'" creates a paradox for these artists to navigate. This paradox troubles notions of choreography, improvisation, freedom, and (re)hearsal as the artists journey the recursive path between stage and studio. Foregrounded were the artists' experiences of bringing their studio practice into performance and how the performance disrupted that artists that practice. Many of the participant artists noted that challenges faced in the moment of performance and then reflected on after the performance, led to new ways to consider their practice. This recursive process of practice, performance, and reflection contributes to the development of a shared epistemology in preparation for the next performance as the ensemble artists come to know one another.

As research participants discussed various aspects of composition, different ideas emerged about what skills or tools an artist might use in composing ensemble dances in the moment. Since individual artists expressed very diverse ideas for what composition means to them, I cannot assume that the participants in this research share viewpoints on what it is to spontaneously compose an ensemble dance in performance. Further, some research participants even questioned the efficacy of defining what is a successful or

unsuccessful performance since helpful insights might be even more evident within a performance that the artist may experience as “unsuccessful.” These thoughts upend notions of what is successful choreography and frame this practice as ongoing collaborative self-learning.

Another theme emerging from the data in this chapter concerns *audience as participant* within the complex weave of ensemble improvisation in performance. Artists in the study’s performance ensembles noted the power of the audience to affect the performer’s awareness and choice making as well as the emerging choreography. The concept of audience as yet another player in the self-organizing system of the collective ensemble positions the audience as active participant in the shaping of the dance.

Finally, the complex nature of spontaneous ensemble dance in performance continues to be revealed in this chapter as evolving within succeeding levels of complexity. It is as if the individual artists contribute choreographic ideas within the ensemble and then from the ensemble a new and different choreography emerges that then is re-shaped by the audience. The shaping and re-shaping does not end with the audience, but rather continues as the audience affects the shaping of the ensemble choreography in performance. It seems that the nesting of complex systems within one another, such as the individual dance artist within the ensemble within the performance environment, is what gives this dance genre such enduring vitality that continues to draw professional dance artists. These complex self-organizing systems offer the dance artists transformational self-learning opportunities that the artists speak to so eloquently in this

study. As these artists continue to work in spontaneous ensemble composition, what forward trajectory, might emerge?

## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: COMPLEX CHOREOGRAPHY –SPONTANEOUS ENSEMBLE COMPOSITION IN IMPROVISED PERFORMANCE

My desire to embark on this study ensued from my practice of ensemble dance improvisation in performance, which I began to investigate in 1977. From these many years practicing this dance form, I came to this study as an artist and researcher with a passion to know how other artists thought about and practiced this spontaneous ensemble dance form. Since initiating the research, I have learned from observing, dancing, and talking with the participants throughout the process that many voices and approaches are contributing to the further clarification of this dance genre. As these study participants and other artists continue their practice and research in this dance form, they accumulate a body of knowledge by dancing in the studio, sharing in performance, and discussing in their ensembles. These discussions and practices continue to lend even more clarity to this still young dance form. My personal hope is that this study will make a helpful contribution to this ongoing endeavor.

The participant dance artists allowed me to enter into their dancemaking processes, sharing courageously the vulnerable aspects of spontaneous composition in performance. I came to appreciate what motivates the artists in the study to engage in the risks of spontaneous dancemaking as I sought to palpate the surface of this complex

phenomenon. Through the research process, the artists allowed me to enter their internal and felt worlds from which they spoke eloquently of their desires and goals for themselves as dancemakers and human beings. The data foreground that, for the participants, the social aspect of this dance practice is essential and the benefits of dancemaking in community reverberate beyond each artist's dancemaking to inform her life-making as well.

One example, among many, of this connection between art-making and life-making is the response of study participant K.J. Holmes when she writes, "I engage in this performative dance practice because it is where I feel the most alive, and the place where a communication happens in theater that brings me to my humanity" (personal communication, June 20, 2011). Thus, the communities of dance artists committed to the practice of spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance find themselves not situated in the margins of conventional dance practices; rather, they sense themselves as part of a more expansive and diverse creative discourse integral to the field of dance and significant for the larger communities that surround this practice.

After engaging in intensive coding and data analysis, I discovered the following themes emerging from this study:

1. The phenomenon is complex and includes the audience in the dancemaking process.
2. Prior experience and individual epistemologies that the artists bring to the ensemble influence the emerging dance in performance

3. An ensemble aesthetic emerges in performance.

Additionally, the research foregrounds the recursive nature of the ensemble practice as it cycles through periods of studio practice and performance events and back again.

From the above foregrounded themes also emerge notions of self-learning as a transformational process that the social aspect of the ensemble facilitates. For the research participants, the ensemble seems to function as a multifaceted mirror, giving feedback from multiple points of view. The feedback has potential to assist ensemble members in reflecting and coming to know themselves and their habits more deeply – an opening to the possibility for change. Dance artist and study participant Rachael Lincoln, reflecting on her motivations for engaging in a social dancemaking method, writes how the practice enables her:

To check in with myself and see what choices I'm making, where my interest is, where my patterns show up, and to gauge my current shyness/bravery/reticence/judgment/willingness levels – which often correlate with those levels in the rest of my life. Feels like a fairly safe place to experiment with changing habitual tendencies in art making and in living. (personal communication, June 13, 2011)

For the participants in this study, such as Lincoln, self-learning takes place through their practice of spontaneous dancemaking within an ensemble, the feedback from the ensemble offering them a possibility to deepen their self-knowledge in community.

My research focused on five evenings of ensemble performance created by 24 dance artists performing with three different ensembles (see Tables 1, 2, and 3 in Chapter



3). The participating ensembles were the Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation Faculty ensembles (SFDI Faculty ensemble), Seattle, Washington; the LIVE Dance Theater ensemble (LIVE ensemble) in San Diego, California; and the Lower Left Performance Collective (Lower Left ensemble) in Stolzenhagen, Germany. I also interviewed three dance artists/theorists who have theorized ensemble dance forms: Barbara Dilley, Lisa Nelson, and Susan Sgorbati. In this final chapter, I present a summary of the main themes that emerged from the data through the voices and performances of the study's participants. The data set includes interviews, participant journals, performance videos, and ensemble members' responses to the study's questionnaire. From a continuous analysis of coding procedures, I developed what emerged as major themes from the study, as well as where future research might extend the findings of this study. The following main sections describe these themes and include sub-sections for deeper analysis

### **Complex Dancemaking**

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I frame my research perspective of the spontaneous dance ensemble as a self-organizing system without a single source of control. Resulting from the ensemble's use of non-hierarchical choreographic methods, a dance emerges as self-organized from the bottom up through the actions of multiple choreographers composing *on the fly*. Though the choreographers compose spontaneously, they bring to the task years of practicing spontaneous dancemaking and the many techniques they have learned. These years of practice result in an individual

epistemology of dancemaking comprised of habituated perceptual patterns and dancemaking strategies from which *in the moment* choreographic actions spring. Thus, the spontaneous choreographer comes to the improvised dance with an implicit choreography.

### **Continuum of Deliberation: Spontaneous Choreography**

In Chapter 1, I suggest the term *Continuum of Deliberation* as a useful paradigm for understanding dancemaking methods as neither absolutely planned nor unplanned. After conducting research and analyzing the data in depth, I now use the term to imagine a fluid movement between planned and unplanned. In this usage, the most habituated or pre-scribed choreographies are permeable to spontaneous events and previously acquired patterns accumulated over time by spontaneous choreographers who support the most spontaneous dancemaking. This concept of the Continuum of Deliberation gives rise to what I term *spontaneous choreography*, describing the notion of the dance artist coming to a performance with individual epistemologies that they then use to spontaneously compose the dance. Many of the study's participants understood their dancemaking within the improvisation as the composing of a dance even though they did not know what they would do beforehand. Thus, in this dissertation, I use the term *spontaneous choreography* to reflect the process the participants describe: a process of composing *in the moment*.

In their responses to the study's questionnaire, participants clearly identified spontaneous dancemaking in performance as a compositional activity. For example, study

participant K.J. Holmes states that, “I have studied dance composition for most of my dance life as an improviser [:] that is what we do I think” (personal communication, January 4, 2013). In our interview, dance choreographer/theorist and study participant Barbara Dilley also concludes: “The fact of the matter is, from my perspective, they [improvisers] are always working with composition whether they think they are or not (personal communication, November 17, 2010). Another dance choreographer and study participant, Lisa Nelson, succinctly positions notions of choreography and improvisation as complementary when she describes her work known as Tuning Scores:

Tuning Scores arose from a desire to understand how dancers make sense out of the dance inside, around, and before them. This desire arose from my inability to read the movement intentions of my collaborators in an improvisational ensemble performance setting. What does it mean when movement is strewn into the space like loose change? Aesthetic judgment aside, though not insignificant, irritation is a great motivator to ask better questions. I wanted to know how dancers think, what they value—what’s at stake in their spontaneous performance. I wished to unveil an improvisational dance language while preserving the mystery of human expression and unite the choreographic act with the experience of dancing. (personal communication, September 13, 2010)

Thus, Holmes, Dilley, and Nelson bridge notions of composition and spontaneous dance as part of a continuum that accommodates composing a dance within the openness of dancing *in the moment*.

The complex and dynamical nature of this phenomenon troubles a binary construct of the planned (choreographed) and the unplanned (improvised) and suggests that, as the study’s participants negotiate complex dancemaking in performance, they enter a dialectic relationship wherein performers both choreograph and improvise the

emerging dance. In this way, this study reimagines the binary construct (improvisation/choreography) as the dialectic (improvisation~choreography). When I write improvisation~choreography, I follow Kelso and Engstrøm's example in their use of the tilde "in coordination dynamics, where apartness and togetherness coexist as a complementary pair . . . . [For example] yin~yang, body~mind, individual~collective. . . . spontaneous-evoked" (2006, pp. xiv, 283). The (re)framing of improvisation~choreography as a dialectical relationship is important to this study because the dance field often understands these terms as discrete methods for dancemaking and, thus, this study frames the binary as a dialectic in order to reimagine dancemaking.

### **Complexity: Spontaneous Ensemble Choreography in Performance**

Through the voices of the study's participants, the data clarifies that the spontaneous dance ensemble in performance, operating with very few agreed upon instructions for making the dance, is a complex phenomenon. During the post-performance group interviews, while watching a video of their performance, the participants often mentioned that they did not always know what was occurring in other parts of the dance. Often, while watching videos of the performance, participants would see another ensemble member's choreographic action and communicate that they were seeing this part of the dance for the first time.

LIVE ensemble member Karen Schaffman offers a sense of composing in this complex environment of spontaneous ensemble performance when she states, "Again, so

much was going on – that I had no idea *what* was going on . . . in that performance, I was unable to track the group choreography. In our weekly practices, in a very small studio, I sense that I am tracking the whole more consistently” (Karen Schaffman, personal communication, May 29, 2010, and January 6, 2013). Dance scholars Katherine Gillieson, Alexis Andrew, and Elizabeth MacKinnon also capture the improvisational state that Schaffman finds herself in when they write:

Improvisation in performance relies on the application of awareness in the present moment, an ability to seize and act upon, decide, react and risk one’s self ‘on the fly’. . . . Here the performer is continuously recalibrating to account for whatever else is happening – as Michael Kirby in his book *Happenings* says, in improvisation ‘there is a constant qualitative crisis of choice’ (1965: 6). (2006)

Unable to track the ensemble dance in its entirety, improvisers navigate their “crisis of choice” as best they can from their individual vantage points within the dance. As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, this local action within the whole is characteristic of a self-organizing system.

For Schaffman and all the ensemble members, even though they entered the performances with scores that defined how they might begin, the dances became more complex as they progressed because the scores did not specify how to proceed beyond that beginning. In this way, the dance organized itself without a choreographer defining it or even a score stipulating the choreography from beginning to end. In other words, the dance organizes itself from all the small and local actions of the choreographers who cannot predict how the dance will unfold.

Phenomena such as these performance ensembles, flocks of birds in flight, and thunderstorms in formation, all represent what dynamical systems theory refers to as complex *self-organizing* systems lacking a single source of control. Referring to the difficulty of being a part of a self-organizing dance, study participant Rebecca Bryant, after a performance with the Lower Left ensemble, wrote in her post-performance journal, “What kind of crazy person decides to improvise with an ensemble?” (personal communication, July 24, 2010). Echoing Bryant’s awe, many participants expressed that, though this dance form was difficult, the very lack of control was an aspect of ensemble improvisation in performance that appealed to them and contributed to their growth as artists and human beings.

The complexity of this dance form comes not only from the self-organizing aspect of the phenomenon, but also from the diversity of approaches that the ensemble members bring to the endeavor. The different perspectives concerning dancemaking strategies expressed by the participants in the data raise questions of what composing a dance means for all these spontaneous choreographers. It would seem that, though engaged in the same activity of co-creating a dance as an ensemble, these individual artists have different ideas about what the activity of spontaneously choreographing a dance might mean. The spontaneous ensemble improvisation in performance highlights the opportunities for ensemble members to negotiate their different approaches for composing a dance in order to become a part of a dance emerging from all their various epistemologies. The study’s participants come to the ensemble with diverse ideas about

dancemaking, and neither the participants nor the dance field appear to agree on the compositional skills needed to spontaneously compose an ensemble dance in performance.

### **Audience as Agent in Improvised Performance**

The live audience present in performance affects the spontaneously composing ensemble and becomes a part of the complex self-organizing system. The nesting of complex agents (performers and audience members) within the performance environment magnifies possible complex reactions. Each dance artist within the ensemble represents a complex entity embedded within an ensemble comprised of equally complex individuals. Nelson speaks to this nesting of complexity when she writes: I feel the rising of desires. Patterns appear. I notice I am breathing. I notice I am a pattern amongst patterns. Or I notice I am nested in the composition” (personal communication, September 13, 2010). Individual performers are in turn embedded within a performance environment that includes the patterns of a live audience that interacts with and affects the course of the emerging dance.

This nesting of complexities within one another gives the spontaneous dance composed in performance myriad, bifurcating possible choreographic paths to tread. The data, through the voices of the participants, clearly indicate that the performers onstage react not only from their own perceptions and to the actions of their fellow ensemble members, but also to the actions of the live audience in any given performance. On multiple occasions, participants describe the profound effect of the live audience on their

choices. The audience time and again pulled the artists' focus up and out of their performance activities to survey the dance in a new way in order to understand what in the dance was drawing the audience's response. This effect of the audience on the dance artists constitutes a change in the artist's actions and thus a change in the possible paths that the dance might take.

The effect of the audience on the emerging dance in performance was substantial, as indicated by the participants in the study's performance ensembles. Therefore, the data suggests that the audience becomes another participant in the making of the dance through its influence on the performers' body states and choreographic choices. The dance artists describe how the audience brings out the "hammy, shticky, your shtick" (Swartzman, personal communication, August 6, 2010), or induces the "fight/flight response" (Wass, personal communication, July 24, 2010). Study participant Eric Geiger, a member of the LIVE ensemble, states, "So, with the [audience] laughs you know something is going on, and it pulls me back to what's going on that I don't know about. So, it's communication from [with] in the audience (personal communication, May 29, 2010). This vibrant relationship between performer and audience, which is part of the mix in the self-organizing dance, may explain the continuing vitality of this dance form. Dance scholar Susan Foster describes the dynamic collaboration between the artists onstage and the audience as follows:

Improvising choreography empowers the viewer in several ways. First, it presents a process that engages audience members intimately in the vital assessment of what might happen next . . . Viewers do not sit in their seats, the



recipients of a finished work of art. Instead, their consciousness expands out of passive reception of an event and towards active engagement in the actual making of the event. (2002, p. 242)

Not only do the research participants articulate the relationship described by Foster in the above quotation, they also express how they nurture an audience to develop diverse perceptions and reactions when viewing spontaneous performances. Leslie Seiters and other members of the LIVE ensemble spoke in the post-performance interview about guiding their audiences towards a greater repertoire in their engagement and provoking them to disrupt habitual and comfortable responses. Thus, the audience for ensemble improvisational dance is a choreographic force in the performance event. These concentric rings of complexity made up of artist~ensemble and ensemble~audience set the stage for a co-created choreography: collaborative and unpredictable. The conversation that dances between performers and audience occurs in an ever-renewing place of potential that offers ground for an expansive communal becoming.

### **Implicit Choreographies:**

#### **Prior Experience as Ground for Spontaneous Choreography**

In Chapter 1, I present how my preliminary research led me to design my field research. This embedded nature between past and present also supports my discovery of the central role of prior experience, which is ground for habituated knowledge and patterns at play in the spontaneous choreographer's dancemaking. From the information in Tables 4, 5, and 6 in Chapter 4, one can see the wide variety of previous dance studies

the participants listed as being important and supporting tools for their work in improvisational performance.

### **Individual Epistemology: Dancing the Implicit Dance**

Prior experiences create unique epistemologies embodied within each performer.

Choreographer and study participant Lisa Nelson writes:

In a study of the process of sensorial perception, I found a filter for looking at the roots of our dance behavior. Genetic and learned skills of survival — our deepest patterns and habits — give instruction for what we need to know, *how* [emphasis in original] we look at things, and the subconscious process of editing spontaneously in order to make meaning out of any moment. The Tuning Score is extrapolated from this study. (personal communication, September 13, 2010)

Nelson suggests here that, in the case of a spontaneously composing dance artist, the patterned perceptions of the artist become her individual epistemology and inform how she perceives the unfolding dance. I follow Nelson and suggest that a dance artist with primarily a contact improvisation background may see a body on stage as affording (Gibson, 1986) a surface for rolling. Another dance artist with different training might see an opportunity for creating a line through space. In our interview when speaking of the importance of prior experience and how it functions in spontaneous ensemble composition, Nelson said in our interview, “you can only see what you already know” (personal communication, July 11, 2010). Nelson’s view correlates with philosopher Alva Noë (2004) who writes, “The world shows up for us in experience only in so far as we understand, that is, know or anticipate it . . . the world shows up as blank and flat until

we understand it" (pp. 122-123). Nelson and Noë's views indicate the importance of prior experience in the preparation for spontaneous composition.

Therefore, the research data imply that, in the midst of a complex ensemble improvisation in performance, the choreographer is operating on both implicit and explicit levels simultaneously. This implicit~explicit flow is further described as important since, in the fast-paced environment of ensemble improvisation, the artists enact many decisions in a pre-reflective state. Thus, implicit or tacit skills are at play along with explicit decision making by the ensemble members. The data reveal that participants often commented that the dance was complex beyond their com(pre)hension and that they were not able to consciously track everything they were doing *in the moment*. The question arises: What do these artists do *while* they are not fully aware of what is happening? This study suggests that they enact an implicit choreography.

Though the exhilarating sensation that one can experience from improvisational dance often feels like an immense freedom, I now, after this research study, advocate that prior experience and dance techniques already studied provide the ground for the implicit choreographies that dance artists bring to their performances. Thus, prior experience is essentially the preparation for improvisational dance. From my experience, the sensation of freedom often comes from the permission to spontaneously compose from one's individual epistemology. The data reveal that the actions taken in the often pre-reflective state of improvisational performance positions the dance artists to draw on and *do what they know*. Therefore, each dance artist spontaneously creates a dance in new and often

surprising ways from her own individual epistemologies that are put into play *in the moment* of performance; these epistemologies may or may not be shared with other members in the group, depending on the backgrounds of each.

The ensemble members' diverse epistemologies interact in the dance and ultimately affect the emerging dance in performance. Thus, the preparations that these dance artists seek before improvising in performance are important, since it seems that the habits of action and perception cultivated and habituated in previous dance studies may become the vocabulary and compositional choices initially relied on in performance. In other words, from my research I advocate this: we do what we know.

According to dance scholar and Feldenkrais practitioner Dr. Frances Bruce, we cannot change until we become aware of our habits. Bruce writes:

[The] challenge involves accepting that knowing what one is doing is a primary condition for being able to learn to do something differently. Inasmuch as we tend to be least aware of that which is most familiar, learning how to engage with other ways of perceiving, acting, and thinking begins with developing awareness of how we do what we habitually do. (2003, p. 201)

As noted by many participants in this study, the social aspect of the ensemble motivates the participants, as it provides a place for them to identify habits of behavior and dancemaking, thereby creating an opportunity for self-reflection. Further, by becoming aware of habits via feedback from the ensemble, an opportunity arises for changing behaviors or perceptions.

After discovering from my research how participants sense their habits traveling with them into the dancemaking process and, then, how reflection with other performers

opens space for breaking these habits, further questions began to emerge: If prior experience creates the patterned behaviors and perceptions which are the ground for spontaneous choreography, what kinds of knowledge prepare one to spontaneously choreograph in performance ensembles? What habits are helpful to embody as a spontaneous choreographer in ensembles? Perhaps the ontology of the ensemble performance is truly a *slice of life* from a moment in time where various epistemologies mingle and the artists and audience are witness to what happens. Perhaps it is as Nelson suggested earlier in this chapter: ensemble improvisation is where one “unite[s] the choreographic act with the experience of dancing” meet.

### **Ensemble Epistemologies: Coming to Know One Another**

In Chapter 1, I frame the process of an emerging “collective knowing” through my research of the literature concerning the phenomena of group cognition. Theiner, Allen, and Goldstone (2010) write of the “division of cognitive labor among cognitive agents” resulting in “interactions among the agents that lead to enhanced group capacities without the express intent of the agents” (p. 379). I use the term *ensemble epistemology* to describe this collective knowing within the ensemble. Interestingly, I discovered during the research process that this collective knowing can accrue both for those ensembles meeting on stage for only one night (albeit to a lesser degree) and for those ensembles having extended time working together. However, it seems that, the more time spent together, the more members of an ensemble might develop an in-depth ensemble epistemology.

For some of the participants in the study, a lack of shared ideas about spontaneously composing an ensemble dance created confusion in performance and tension in the post-performance group interview. For example, the SFDI faculty ensemble, which performed on the second night of the Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation, identified instances of confusion when ensemble members were unclear about the intentions of a fellow ensemble member in performance. Ensemble members had an exchange in the group interview that clearly demonstrated a lack of understanding between ensemble members about choices made in performance. In this case, an ensemble epistemology was not a resource that could be easily accessed. However, the post-performance group interview did provide an opportunity for the ensemble to explain their dancemaking methods to one another within a particular configuration of the ensemble that would probably never again come together.

The conversation between ensemble members made clear that the dance artists have different compositional goals for the emerging dance and bring diverse, and not necessarily shared, compositional tools to the performance event. Issues of “academic” and “non-academic” compositional aesthetics arose for the members of the SFDI faculty, which suggest that members view the concept of composition differently. For instance, SFDI faculty ensemble member Aaron Swartzman responds in the study’s questionnaire:

I don’t consider myself academically versed in composition, and consider this a strength of mine, as I don’t like the tendency towards creating checklists of what makes good performance and then trying to check those boxes that I see in some more academically trained dancers. (personal communication, August 15, 2010)

The data reveal that, for some of the participants, these differences can make developing a sense of ensemble based in mutual understanding of the compositional tools at play in performance more challenging.

### **Ensemble Aesthetic: Many Choreographers – One Dance**

In my research process, the concept of an ensemble epistemology seemed to naturally expand to include the notion of an *ensemble aesthetic*. As I conducted my data analysis of the study's ensemble performance videos, I realized that the spontaneous choreography emerging from each ensemble had its own signature that appeared as the dance unfolded.

Since a self-organizing system can express more and different characteristics than its constituent parts, I began to think of the unique ensemble signature as an *ensemble aesthetic*. I use the term *aesthetic* here following the definition espoused by philosopher Mark Johnson (2007). Johnson, in *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, suggests that a helpful definition of aesthetics is one that moves beyond a linguistic or philosophical understanding of the defined construction of beauty into how the artist enacts a process of embodied meaning. I use the term *ensemble aesthetic* to describe the distinct characteristics of the emerging ensemble dance. Thus, from the ensemble emerges a unique dance with expressive qualities different from the individual aesthetics of the artists co-creating the dance.

While viewing a video of their performance, members of LIVE Dance Theater seemed to be coming to know themselves anew as an ensemble while they observed

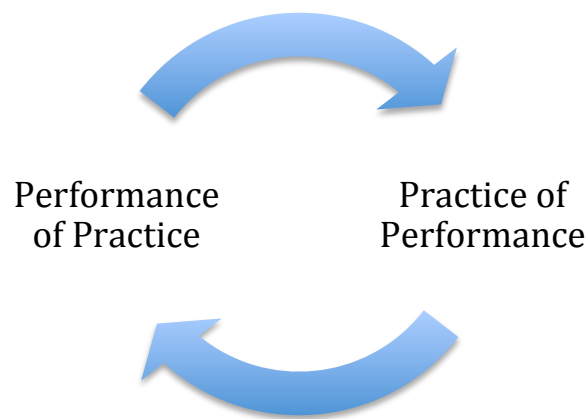
characteristics that the choreography exhibited. LIVE ensemble member Geiger states, “It looks so different than how it feels . . . it’s [the dance] so independent!” (personal communication, May 29, 2010). In the post-performance group interview with the LIVE ensemble, the ensemble agreed that their non-linear actions and the independent, stand-alone nature of the choreographic material seemed to be an emergent aesthetic of the ensemble that the members had not planned. Based on this data and other similar data from my analyses of the performance videos, I used the term *ensemble aesthetic* to describe the dance’s expression resulting from the self-organizing process of the system. In this way, I understand the ensemble to have its own capacity to manifest an emergent aesthetic.

### **Recursive Praxis: Staging Practice**

Many participants in this study recognize the enigmatic aspects in their desire to perform their spontaneous dancemaking as practiced in the studio. Study participant and SFDI Faculty ensemble member Rachael Lincoln recognized the paradox when she described the transition from studio to stage as “the performance of ‘not performing’” (personal communication, June 13, 2011). The data clearly support that the theatrical setting of the performance environment (especially through interactions with a live audience) unavoidably changes the studio practice. However, as the dance artists in this study continually seek a *staging of practice*, they manifest a recursive process that affords the potential for becoming more familiar and perhaps more adept with the transition from studio to performance.



Using the definition of *recursion* from Humberto R. Maturana, a neurobiologist and systems theorist, I understand the recursive dance practice as one that not only repeats the act of dancing together but that it also “form[s] the basis for future conversations [dances], the elements of our conversations [dances] refer to themselves and build on each other, – that is recursion” (Maturana & Poerksen, 2004, p. 85). Due to the recursive nature of this praxis, themes such as the *performance of practice* and the *practice of performance* emerged as the data reveal that the performance environment with a live audience changes the dance that the artist hopes to bring into performance. Thus, it seems that artists require a *practice of performance* to come to know their practice in the complex performance environment.



*Figure 6.* The staging of practice: Recursive dancemaking.

The notion of a practice of performance disrupts ideas of performance as only a place for presenting pre-scribed choreographies; rather, performance becomes a place of learning. The transiting of the studio practice into performance creates a need for the artist to practice performance in order to understand the effects of performance on their studio practice. Dance scholar Deborah Jowitt quotes choreographer Dana Reitz as saying that she is "becoming sharper by performing and not just rehearsing" (Jowitt, 1980, p. 29). Reitz suggests that performance is an environment that informs her dance practice; in performance, she is learning "to be sharper" in a way that she cannot learn in her studio practice alone. I found that it was much the same with many of the participants in this study. These artists seem to need the practice of performance in order to deepen or even to understand more fully their choreographic process. In this way, the recursive process expands to include the audience as collaborator and in a process of learning along with the artists.

In seeking the recursive dynamics of performance, this study also reveals that the participants who sought out the practice of spontaneous ensemble dance in performance did not seek a static certainty; in fact, they describe investigating a dance from a voluntary state of unknowing: an unstable and uncontrolled state of dancemaking. In this way, study participant Rebecca Bryant's earlier question, "What kind of crazy person decides to improvise with an ensemble?" (personal communication, July 24, 2010) foregrounds the complex challenges that the lack of hierarchy in spontaneous, collaborative ensemble dancemaking presents. The uncontrolled nature of the endeavor

creates openings for change. This practice thus provides the ground for profound self-learning and opens an opportunity, as described by many of the artists, to trust oneself in unknowing.

The dance artists speak through the data of embracing uncertainty in order to deepen their self-knowledge and find new ways of thinking about what it is to make a dance and, for many, how to live life. The ambiguity or uncertainty introduced by spontaneous ensemble dancemaking creates an opening for self-reflection that is the result of the sociality of the process. The communal aspect of the ensemble and performance environment thus is a mechanism that gives feedback to the individual artist as she meets herself (and not the same self) repeatedly in this recursive process. The research participants discuss how observing oneself while engaged in this recursive process is to configure the social aspect as a reflective environment, a sort of mirror whereby the artist can check internal assumptions against information flowing from the ensemble and the performance environments. This social aspect allows these spontaneous choreographers to perceive their habits of perception, both helpful and unhelpful, in order to develop better strategies and to make changes in how they navigate this complex world of spontaneous dancemaking.

### **Dancing Together Through Time**

In this study, artists from the different ensembles engaged a recursive process in different durational timeframes. The SFDI Faculty ensembles, which only came together for one night, have a short cycle of recursion, though the individual SFDI Faculty artists

discuss maintaining a recursive cycle within their individual practices. The artists in the LIVE and Lower Left ensembles, through their commitment to maintaining recursive praxis through time, offer themselves extended possibilities for change and movement toward unpredictable futures.

No matter the duration of these ensemble processes, they all seem to offer the artists profound opportunities in which to experience a transformational process. The data suggest that the longer the time an ensemble worked together, the more likely its members would develop what I term an *ensemble epistemology*. In the case of the SFDI Faculty ensembles, which met for only one night in performance, they understandably lacked intimacy with one another's individual epistemologies, thereby making the development of an ensemble epistemology less likely.

Members of the LIVE ensemble had much more familiarity with one another's choices since they had been dancing together for over a year and, though they did not rehearse scores per se in their weekly meetings, they did become more familiar with each other's epistemologies and customary choices in performance. The Lower Left ensemble members showed the greatest amount of familiarity with the compositional strategies used in performance since they have been dancing together for ten years and, as seen in the data, their rehearsed scores were recognized and acted upon when they spontaneously emerged in performance.

For instance, before their performance at the P.O.R.C.H. festival in Germany, Lower Left members rehearsed what they called the "*Arm Dance*," with the ensemble

standing in a closely packed line while the performers moved their arms within the kinespheres of the persons next to them. At one point in the performance, which was analyzed for this study, the possibility for the score emerged when two people were side by side. The rest of the ensemble recognized the possibility of the configuration, joined the line, and performed the improvised score for “*Arm Dance*.”

It would seem natural that an ensemble whose members have practiced together for a long duration would be at an advantage over an ensemble that came together for only one night. However, though time together seemed beneficial for those ensembles practicing over time, it was not a necessary ingredient for developing a sense of ensemble. Dance artists in the SFDI Faculty ensemble who performed on both evenings described the first evening performance as more successful than the second evening, even though the ensemble met onstage for the first time. This outlier in the data suggests the need for more research in order to understand what epistemologies are compatible for facilitating the development of a sense of ensemble in performance. A question arising from the data follows: How important is the shared understanding of the tools or epistemologies that dance artists bring into the ensemble performance in order to move the emerging dance from a low recursion rate (trying to reach a sense of ensemble) to a higher one (attaining a sense of ensemble)?

### **Social Nature of the Ensemble as Ground for Transformation**

As mentioned earlier, the sociality of the ensemble affords the dance artist feedback with which to examine her habits of dancemaking in order to refine her

choreographic strategies. Many of the participants in this study credit the social dancemaking model with powerful and far-reaching consequences for them as artists.

In *Places of Learning* (2005) Elizabeth Ellsworth, Professor of Media Studies at the New School, foregrounds the social in the quest for the unknown. I apply Ellsworth's concept of the social in learning to communal dancemaking. Ellsworth writes:

What we cannot know requires us to constantly traverse the porous boundaries between self and other, individual and social, personal and historical. We cannot know self in absence of separate different others. We cannot know others in absence of self . . . We think only in relation. We think only in process and in the constant movement across the boundaries between our inner and outer realities, and that movement, in its very crossing, reconfigures those boundaries and what they makes [sic] of our selves and of others. (2005, p. 61)

LIVE member Liam Clancy speaks to Ellsworth's concept of social learning through porous boundaries between self and others when he describes his reasons for engaging in social dancemaking:

To consistently ask what is possible for me as a performer. I'm deeply interested in the idea of availability. How much can I make my performing 'self' porous, and keep the border between audience and myself open in both directions. Not just this presentational, ultra-confident performance style that I have learned and mostly engaged in. The part of our practice that is performed in front of an audience allows me to continually grapple with this. Less about how much can I allow myself to be seen, but rather (and this is a wish) how much can my presence in performance allow the work that is unfolding to be seen/experienced. (personal communication, June 28, 2010)

Clancy's words describe a practice of openness that leaves behind the certainty of what he knew from his previous involvement with more traditional dance practices and positions him for a profound reconfiguring as a dance artist.

Social theorist Brian Massumi values Clancy's openness to change through his migration from former to new ways of being. Massumi writes: "It is only by leaving [one's] history to reenter the immanence of the field of potential that change can occur" (2002, p. 77) Study participants, by engaging in communal dancemaking, enter Massumi's field of potential where opportunities for change are afforded by a migration from old to new, assisted by the social interactions inherent in the dancing ensemble.

The ensemble experience seems, for many of the study's participants, to afford a place of fluid motion between states of being – states not confined to the body, but encompassing the mind and spirit as well. Ellsworth and Massumi both describe conditions for transformation of self and it seems, from the participant's responses, that communal dancemaking provides "a fairly safe place to experiment with changing habitual tendencies in art making and in living" (personal communication, Rachael Lincoln, June 13, 2011). Study participant and LIVE ensemble member Mary Reich extends the potential of the ensemble experience when she describes the ensemble experience as not only a place to learn about one's self but as also offering a container for moving beyond oneself into spiritual engagement. Reich describes the potential of engaging in ensemble dancemaking thus:

Mostly it is to experience serious play with adults. To create on the spot with others that brings forth magic and mystery. After every practice there is a mystery as to what occurred and how did that take place and I love experiencing that. If spirituality is attending to what is larger than us, then I would say it is a spiritual experience for me. A church of creative force I get to step into no matter what state I arrive in. (personal communication, June 10, 2011)

Reich's social practice within the LIVE ensemble is a place for spiritual aliveness with potential for “magic and mystery,” which for her seems to be a ground for her own becoming.

Many participants in this study described profound crossings between their communal dancemaking practices and aspects of their more quotidian existence. It is as if the skills learned in their social dancemaking enhance other aspects of their lives. In summary, ensemble members enter the sociality of the ensemble with their histories; however, if they remain open to the possibilities for transformation that the ensemble offers, there is a potential for change. The ensemble becomes a portal into a possible transformation.

### **Implications for Further Study**

My research affords many areas from which to extend knowledge for the dance field. These areas include: explorations into interactive audiences in performance, notions of composition and autonomy, pedagogical approaches to improvisation~choreography, and further research into aspects of spontaneous ensemble dancemaking discovered in my preliminary studies. In the next section, I discuss these potential areas of future research in more depth.

### **Audience as Choreographer**

Further research might examine the co-creative dynamic that operates between the emerging dance onstage and the audience. In this dissertation study, the research participants suggest that the audience not only observes the performance, but also



actually affects the development of the emerging dance. Continuing field study of audiences participating in spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance would serve to inform this phenomenon. A deeper understanding of the dynamic interaction between audience and dance artist might spur an innovative reimagining of the staging of practice in performance.

### **Composing Autonomy: Spontaneous Ensemble Dancemaking**

Other possible future research areas suggested by this study concern frictions between *academic* and *nonacademic* practices of composition that were described by some participants. Perhaps this binary can be considered as a tension between *naming* and *not naming* the tools of ensemble improvisation. Both Sgorbati (in Chapter 1) and Nelson suggest that naming elements of composition may be useful for spontaneous ensembles. Nelson in her system of Tuning Scores writes, “As they [calls within the Tuning Score] are meant to be communications, agreeing on their definitions is practical” (personal communication, September 13, 2010). I extend Nelson’s idea of agreement on definitions within the ensemble to include the communicative potential of nonverbal actions by dance artists in performance. How is this explicit communication effected within an ensemble?

As reported by participants, some resisted an agenda for naming or identifying the elements of what they do as an infringement on their autonomy within the ensemble. Ideas of performing something akin to anti-composition surfaced in the data. Further research into this tension between the urge to create a shared compositional language and

the urge to remain open and free could provide new methods for discussing composition as well as provide an opportunity to research the historical pathways that have brought improvisational dance to this point in time.

From a historical perspective, the interplay between structure and openness forms a continuous narrative between the 1960s Happenings, Judson Dance Theater, Grand Union and, in the 1970s, Contact Improvisation performances. This narrative continues to move through the practice of ensemble improvisation today. This uneasy nexus at the heart of “naming what we do” and resisting the urge to get “a hold on” this phenomena would be a fruitful area for future study.

The tension between compositional concerns and maintaining maximum autonomy is present in the phenomenon of spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance. Notions of developing a language (naming) to describe elements of spontaneous ensemble dancemaking are, in a sometimes uneasy, relationship with notions of conserving the value for freedom and openness in the form and thus, provide a valuable research subject. From this study, it seems as if the format of early, improvised ensemble dancemaking and Contact Improvisation concerts continue to influence the work of spontaneous choreographers today. However, in this study, though many participants are well acquainted with Contact Improvisation, it is not the primary focus of the dance artists. As I discuss in Chapter 1, without the clarity supplied by the vocabulary of Contact Improvisation, participants in this study come to the performance event with expanded and different ideas about how to compose spontaneous ensemble

choreography. Further research into these different notions of composing spontaneous choreography would be valuable for the field.

Many of the participants in this study list Contact Improvisation as an important tool for their dancemaking (see Tables 4, 5, and 6). However, as discussed in Chapter 1, none of the ensembles defined their performance as a practice of Contact Improvisation. In his essay, *10,000 Jams Later: Contact Improvisation in Canada, 1974-95*, Peter Ryan quotes Steve Paxton as saying, "I don't think the idea of composition has occurred to more than two in a hundred of contacters, or composition in the way that dance as art uses it" (2001, p. 419). Addressing this issue of composition in the practice of Contact Improvisation, Cynthia Novack (aka Cohen Bull) in *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (1990) writes that, "the lack of conscious compositional focus in the [Contact Improvisation] form represented spontaneity in life, a literal 'going with the flow' of events, just as the dancers followed the flow of their physical contact" (p. 11). Paxton and Novack articulate a possible point of friction within improvisational dance ensembles, where historical ideas of dance composition and freedom rub against each other as the dance form evolves and changes. In 1990, Novack asks, "How is cohesion maintained as more and more people experiment with a dance form?" (1990, p. 215) Twenty-three years later, this dissertation study continues to ask similar questions.

### **Creating a Sense of Ensemble**

The research design for this dissertation set a space for discussing the different performance ensembles of spontaneous dancemaking and the effect that length of time may have on the ensemble dancemaking processes. However, importantly, an outlier in the data suggests that it is possible for an ensemble to come together onstage and compose a cohesive dance without having ever danced together as an ensemble. This possibility suggests that further research into those skills and compositional concepts that facilitate conditions for the emergence of a sense of ensemble would be valuable for the field. As part of this research thrust, it would be helpful to question which, if any, are the essential skills in the practice of spontaneous ensemble dancemaking in performance. Dance scholar Melinda Buckwalter has made a valuable contribution in her book *Composing While Dancing: An Improviser's Companion* (2010), and further research focusing on ensemble improvisation forms would advance thinking in the field.

### **Pedagogical Approaches to Improvisation~Choreography**

Many in the dance field consider improvisation and choreography as discrete dancemaking methods. This study disrupts that binary and suggests that a new paradigm positioning improvisation and choreography as a complementary pair could profitably inform current pedagogic dance practices. By classifying study in improvisation and choreography as different subjects, many higher education dance curricula accentuate the binary. Curricula often consider improvisation a form in which to become uninhibited in one's movement, an inhibition brought on, often times, by the student's earlier dance

training. Alternatively, curricula value improvisation in order to discover original movements for later use in “set” choreography. Further, choreography instructors teaching traditional methods of dancemaking often discourage improvisational choreographic methods as somehow not appropriate or not producing “real” choreography. As this study proposes, the *continuum of deliberation* runs in both directions and choreographic methods are not easily separated, rather they are presented as a complementary pair. Reconfiguring the binary of improvisation/choreography as the dialectic improvisation~choreography clarifies these choreographic methods as inseparable elements of dancemaking. The paradigm I suggest in this dissertation, positioning improvisation and choreography as a complementary pair, could spawn an inclusive pedagogy that supports students preparing for future dance practices within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By breaking up the choreography/improvisation binary, future choreographers could develop possibilities for how any and all dancemaking methods might support their aesthetic aims.

### **Researching Spontaneous Ensemble Dancemaking**

Finally, narrowly focused symposia on ensemble improvisation dancemaking methods as a subject featuring the artists, ensembles, and dance scholars working in this area would promote innovations in dancemaking practices. In addition to the artists included in this study, it would be valuable to extend this research to include artists such as Penny Campbell and ensembles such as The Architects and other ensembles investigating this dancemaking method. A symposium format with performances, lecture

demonstrations, panels, and presentations of scholarly and first-person artistic research would be helpful for opening spaces for new ideas and input into the issues within this area of dancemaking.

### **Conclusion**

Not only do many of the participants in this study report growing as dance artists and human beings through the process of spontaneous ensemble dancemaking, but they also make the world a different place. This sense of growth and changing perspective perhaps is what continually motivates these professional dance artists to continue their practice of ensemble improvisational dance in performance despite the reality that this form often does not result in major grants, sizable artists fees, or critical reviews.

However, professional dance artists continue to practice this social dance form for the benefits it provides. These benefits include: improving dancemaking abilities, changing habitual patterns made possible through the reflective ensemble process, and engaging audiences that continue to participate in this interactive dance form. The participants in this study further articulate spontaneous ensemble dance as, in Massumi's words, "a field of potential" wherein, through the social and recursive process of ensemble improvisation in performance, a transformation can happen. This potential transformation is noted as arising out of the self-organizing ensemble and the knowledge gained as having value across these artist's lives as self-organizing human beings navigating within a self-organizing world. This dance form calls both professional dance artists and audiences to partake of its potential perils and triumphs as co-creators in their own transformation.

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APPENDIX A  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



**Institutional Review Board**

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619  
940-898-3378 Fax 940-898-3416  
e-mail: IRB@twu.edu

May 6, 2010

Ms. Nina Martin  
TCU Box 293449  
Fort Worth, TX 76129

Dear Ms. Martin:

*Re: Ensemble Dance Making: Spontaneous Choreography in Performance*

The above referenced study has been reviewed by the TWU Institutional Review Board (IRB) and appears to meet our requirements for the protection of individuals' rights.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt PRIOR to any data collection at that agency. A copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp and a copy of the annual/final report are enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. The signed consent forms and final report must be filed with the Institutional Review Board at the completion of the study.

This approval is valid one year from March 5, 2010. According to regulations from the Department of Health and Human Services, another review by the IRB is required if your project changes in any way, and the IRB must be notified immediately regarding any adverse events. If you have any questions, feel free to call the TWU Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely,

Dr. Kathy DeOrnellas, Chair  
Institutional Review Board - Denton

enc.

cc. Dr. Penny Hanstein, Department of Dance  
Dr. Penelope Hanstein, Department of Dance  
Graduate School



APPENDIX B  
STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

**Questionnaire for Nina Martin's study:  
Ensemble Dance Making: Spontaneous Choreography in Performance**

Many of these questions are intentionally broad and some may be unanswerable. If you cannot answer a question proceed to the next. Thank you for your participation.

1. Why do you engage in ensemble improvisational dance performances?
2. When was your first experience of ensemble improvisation in performance? From that time to the present has the experience changed for you? If so, how?
3. How would you describe your sensation and/or body state when performing with your ensemble?
4. Do you have performance goals for yourself, for your ensemble? If so, what are they?
5. Do you have particular skills and/or a set of improvisational tools that you rely on in performance? If so, please describe them.
6. What combination of information and/or experience has been most helpful in preparing you for this performative dance practice? What is the source of this information/experience? (i.e., teacher, book, past experiences.)
7. How do you come to understand/make sense of the intentions of other members of the ensemble in performance? And also, their intentions over the course of the performance?
8. How do you experience decision-making and taking action in relation to the ensemble during performance?
9. If you were to think about your performance experiences over time what patterns, preferences and/or choices do you see recurring for you in performances?
10. How do you think of ensemble dance created in performance? (i.e., as process, free dance, composition, choreography or something else?)
11. What constitutes your experience/study in dance composition? Does this knowledge have applications for you in ensemble dance created in performance? How so?

12. In the moments of performance do you spontaneously attempt to create structure or form with the elements of the dance (movements, phrases, themes, sections, overall structure, beginnings middles and ends) over time? If so, how do you attempt this?
13. Do durational lengths of time such as 10 minutes, 30 minutes, or 1 hour present different challenges in organizing in-the-moment improvisational performances?
14. Does this ensemble dance practice in performance ever disappoint you? If so, why?

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you again!