FIGHTING EPHEMERAL WITH EPHEMERAL: DANCE IMPROVISATION AS PERFORMANCE

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Creating works of art is an arduous and time-consuming task. Depending on the art form, the creative process often results in a work of relative permanence such as a sculpture, a film, or a poem. These works live on, offering themselves to be analyzed, critiqued, and enjoyed by an indefinite number of people spanning generations of time. The dance artist does not have this luxury. A choreographer faces the same labor-intensive task of realizing and creating his work, along with the additional step of setting it on a group of performers. The result of this work, however, is typically made manifest only through a live performance. The dance artist cannot display his choreography in a museum and leave it there for people to view at their leisure. Dance is an ephemeral art form. When the show is over the work essentially ceases to exist. The amount of time spent creating a work rarely matches the amount of time spent displaying it to the public. Thus a relatively small population is able to view the work, leaving the rest of the population unaware that it ever existed.

I have spent the past few months researching the use of dance improvisation as a performance art. One of my greatest discoveries has been the efficient use of time that is intrinsic to this work. In comparison to traditional choreography, where months are spent generating and setting the specific steps to a fifteen minute work, my improvised performances employ the use of spontaneous choreography. The time of inspiration, of technically realizing, and structuring the movement, and the time of performance are all wrapped into the same instant. Spontaneous composition in a performance setting is a skill that requires years of practice. Similar to a team sport, one learns the rules, the general mechanics, becomes familiar with their own individual style as well as of their team mates, and then plays with all of this information.

An improvised performance is comparable to a game. The objective is clear, there is a general outline of how to accomplish this objective, but the particular steps taken to attain the goal, as well as the outcome, are unknown.

They are realized within the moment that they occur. Once the team has a grasp of how they operate together, they proceed to play a season’s worth of games together. The next day the newspaper will print the score, but the actions that created that score are ephemeral and exist only in the memories of those present at the game (even if the game is recorded, the camera can only capture a small portion of the entire event, and only in a two-dimensional format).

This method of dance performance offers a solution to the unbalanced ratio of time spent in rehearsal to time spent in performance. In fact, rehearsal and performance are effectively the same thing. If I am in a public space rehearsing a movement score for the first time, is it not a performance? The rehearsal process is just as ephemeral as the performance itself.

My intention is not to discredit the validity of choreography, but rather to plead the case for improvisation as an equally valuable means of performance. Choreography is invaluable to this art form for many reasons that are well established within the dance community. I have found that improvisation performances provide an excellent means of increasing public exposure to modern dance.

Over the course of this semester I have performed approximately ten times in a variety of settings. My hope is that the audience I generate will not only enjoy my performance, but will then want to attend other modern dance performances in the future. My goals within this work are to make the general public excited about modern dance, and to further justify improvisation as a valid means of performance within the local dance community.