

## Research Paper

Form and Content: A Methodology for Finding and/or Making Meaning  
in Dance

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## Form and Content: A Methodology for Finding and/or Making Meaning in Dance

"What was it about?" is a question that frequently follows modern dance performances. The idea that a dance is always *about something* is common. Yet, the answer is often complex. A dance may have an intricate narrative, explore a deep theme, or it may not be *about* anything. Generations of modern dance artists have grappled with this question in various ways, resulting in a long discourse on the ideas of form and content, and how we get at meaning. Choreographers such as Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham have taken contrasting approaches to form and content—both get at meaning in different ways. And both are esteemed, renowned choreographers.

The discourse on form and content is the core of my research. I began this research with the intent to dissect form and content. I wondered how form and content are approached in dance. What are the meanings of the terms “form” and “content?” How do artists deal with the relationship between form and content? How do I experience dance in terms of these concepts? Does a hierarchy exist between form and content? As I dove into these questions a new challenge emerged. The concept of "meaning" is woven into ideas of form and content and I quickly discovered that it must be addressed. The unfolding of my research continued and the focus expanded to include the idea of meaning. What is meaning? What makes dance meaningful? How do we find or create meaning? After deep explorations of these questions, I argue that the dissection of form and content helps us to find and better understand meaning in dance.

At the outset, it is necessary to define form, content, and meaning. According to Dictionary.com, form is "the structural element, plan, or design of a work of art" or the "manner of coordinating elements." Contrarily, content is "the events, physical detail, and information in a work of art" or the "meaning, significance, substance or gist" (Dictionary.com). To be put

simply, form is the construction or the container while content is the substance, or even more simply, form and content can be described as the *how* and the *what*, respectively. Although the definition of content uses *meaning* as a descriptor, meaning has a different definition. Meaning, as Dictionary.com states, is "the thing one intends to convey" or "the thing that is conveyed." This definition poses a slight problem. In dance, as in most art forms, the "thing one intends to convey" could be vastly different than "the thing that is conveyed." It is clear that meaning is a part of content, but it is also a separate concept. I acknowledge that these concepts are slippery, so for the sake of this paper I approach form, content, and meaning as separate and distinct entities.

### **Theories of Form and Content**

Navigating through ideas of form, content, and meaning is a thorny task. Understanding the historical context and changing viewpoints surrounding these concepts makes their relationship clearer. Voices from three points in relatively recent Western history offer a sample of differing approaches to form, content, and meaning. Louis Horst and Doris Humphrey represent approaches from the 1950s. Although their writings were published at the end of the 50s and into the early 60s, their books were written primarily through the 1950s. Writings from Susan Sontag and Ben Shahn are central to the relationships between form, content, and meaning from the 1960s. Lastly, Lynne Anne Blom, L. Tarin Chaplin and Valerie Preston-Dunlop are representative of the 1980s. These voices provide a framework through which to examine the changing approaches to form, content, and meaning in modern dance and art in general.

Susan Sontag, American writer, filmmaker, teacher, and activist, states that the earliest theory of art came from Greek philosophers, who believed that all art was imitation of reality, or

mimesis (3). Plato considered all art to be a lie and therefore useless. For Plato, material objects are mimetic objects, or imitations of forms or structures. Therefore art becomes "an imitation of an imitation" (3). If art is an imitation of an imitation, then it is neither useful nor true. Aristotle shared similar opinions; however he valued art for its use as a form of therapy. Art, Aristotle argued, "arouses and purges dangerous emotions," giving it its use (4). The opinions of both philosophers are the roots of the assumption that all art is figurative, meaning that art is merely an imitation of reality (4). Sontag, writing in the 1960s, claims that the then current ways of viewing art, with consciousness and reflection, are a result of these early Greek theories, which necessitated the defense of art. The Greek philosophies discussed by Sontag provide information on the beginnings of varying approaches to art. The voices to follow, while not directly connected to Greek philosophies, evolved over generations from these earliest known viewpoints.

### *1950s*

*The Art of Making Dances*, written by Doris Humphrey and published in 1959, and *Modern Dance Forms: In Relation to the Other Modern Arts*, published by Louis Horst in 1961, are two classic samples for examining form and content in the 1950s. Louis Horst was an influential musician and teacher (Humphrey was a student of his) who worked with many seminal choreographers. Horst published his work two years after Humphrey, but his ideas were forming for years before he published his work.

Theme is at the heart of Horst's argument. Horst writes, "to compose is not an inspirational experience. Composition is based on only two things: a conception of a theme and the manipulation of that theme" (23). However, Horst's idea of theme is rooted in form, coming

out of his practices as a musician. To "compose" implies arranging parts in relation to other parts to create a whole. This process is carried out using "basic rules of form" set forth by Horst (23). These include musical forms such as the three-part form, theme and variations, the rondo, homophonic forms, and many others (23-26). While experienced artists can break from these forms and take "poetic license," the beginner must stick to these laws of composition that follow musical form (27). Lastly, Horst addresses emotional content in dance. He recognizes that emotional content can emerge in dance, "but within these emotional expressions there is always the hard and mathematical core of the framework" (24). The emphasis of Horst's teaching is on form. While he acknowledges that content exists and plays a role in dance making, for Horst, the priority is creating structure and clarifying form.

Doris Humphrey, a seminal modern dance choreographer certainly influenced by her teacher Horst, produced a compilation of her approaches to choreography that she set forth as a guide for other choreographers. This writing was published a year after her death. Throughout the work she discusses the various elements of dance necessary for successful choreography and presents a set of rules to follow. Humphrey begins her discussion on the craft of choreography by examining the four elements of dance: design, dynamics, rhythm, and motivation (46). These elements are the "raw materials" that are so fundamental to dance that any choreography that does not balance these four elements is weakened or impaired (46). Within Humphrey's detailed discussion of these elements are topics such as symmetry, use of space, phrasing, and music.

Humphrey's approach to form and content is interspersed throughout this text. Her writing suggests that form is a tool used for structuring and making sense of dance. Structure, presented as forms such as "ABA," is necessary to create continuity and a sense of build in a work (Humphrey 149). Humphrey states that without a clear structure or form a work cannot be

exciting (149). She questions if it is even possible not to have structure or form. In her discussion on design, which includes guidelines for using symmetry and asymmetry, phrasing, and space, Humphrey adds to her ideas of form. Each of these features of design in Humphrey's guidelines should be used dynamically so the dance does not become lifeless (159). In Humphrey's discussion of content, she states that subject matter is not entirely important. Because audience members will not know explicitly what the choreographer was thinking when he or she made the work, they will only care about the aesthetics (26). However, Humphrey writes that there must still be motivation behind each movement. The subject matter is not the most important factor of dance making, but "a movement without a motivation is unthinkable" (110). Every movement must have a purpose and should only be created when the intention is clear. A lack of motivation or purpose behind movement creates "the really dull and unforgivable dance ... which has nothing to say beyond the mere fact of being alive" (110). "Intention" gives a dance its purpose, which can be equated with content here and is necessary, for Humphrey, in the creation of movement.

Humphrey articulates what she perceives as important elements for successful choreography that spell out an approach to form and content with an overarching aesthetic goal. Both form and content are presented as tools for choreographing rather than the focus of dance making. Without structure or motivation, a dance is lifeless and dull. However, at the heart is Humphrey's main emphasis on theme. She argues that without a theme, dance fails to say anything to the public (Humphrey 28). As I see it, Humphrey's use of the term theme is synonymous with content. Although the choice of subject matter is not important, a theme is required in order to communicate to the public. The theme that is communicated to the public is content. Throughout her work there is a significant emphasis on both form and content in order

to achieve great aesthetics, but underlying her work is a slight emphasis on content over form. In Humphrey's approach to choreography, content takes the form of both intention and theme. If a work lacks a theme or intention, no amount of form can save it.

Both Humphrey and Horst present sets of rules to follow when choreographing; however, Humphrey and Horst differ slightly in their priorities. For Humphrey, the focus on form is to serve a theme, while Horst's focus is more on form for itself. Despite their differing priorities, the rules they present for dance making are similar because of their student-teacher relationship. Humphrey declares, "symmetry is lifeless ... Monotony is fatal ... Two-dimensional design is lifeless" (159). Similarly, Horst questions, "Is its rhythmic structure distinct and effective? ... Is the demand of contrast adequately respected, and the bane of monotony avoided?" (26). These declarations and questions presented by Humphrey and Horst provide a guide to choreography. This kind of stance on choreography provided a launching point for postmodern choreographers to react with new forms and new approaches to choreography.

### *1960s*

Susan Sontag, who published her essay *Against Interpretation* in 1966, was part of a movement that departed from previous modes of thinking about form and content, like the approaches of Horst and Humphrey. Sontag points to a time when art was not asked what it said, but rather what it did (4-5).

In her investigation of Greek philosophies of art, Sontag identifies a separation between form and content. Greek philosophies caused the need for art to defend itself and its value against claims that art is merely mimesis and representation, and this caused the parting of form and content. Prioritizing content over form in order to 'prove' in some way that art is useful and

meaningful was the root of this separation. Form and content have been separated in the mode of thinking that Sontag describes. After the separation, it was assumed that all art *is* its content and that all art must *say* something in order to preserve its value (Sontag 4). While the separation of form and content came out of Greek philosophies, Sontag argues that this way of thinking still exists in the '60s, the time period in which she was writing.

For Sontag, content in art is problematic because when it becomes overemphasized, it leads to interpretation. Once interpretation begins, a pattern develops of approaching art with the goal of interpretations (Sontag 5). Sontag defines interpretation as, "a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code" (5). The interpreter then becomes a translator and without realization, alters the work. Because interpretation is a modern way of understanding, it is routine to search for meaning in all art, according to Sontag. This "violates art," taming it into something manageable and comfortable, depleting and reducing the world into a collection of "meanings" (Sontag 7, 8, 10). In response to the interpretation epidemic, Sontag calls for "a flight from interpretation" (10). Her remedy was to focus more attention on form and to find a more descriptive language to talk about art.

Ben Shahn, renowned American artist, has a conflicting viewpoint in his book *The Shape of Content*, claiming that it is not possible to separate form from content. Shahn writes, "form is the very shape of content" (53). Form turns content into an accessible, material entity and gives it permanence (Shahn 53). For Shahn, the separation of form and content articulated by Sontag is a "sorry divorce" based on aesthetic opinion. Form cannot exist without content. Shahn writes, "form is the shape of content ... if the content of a work of art is only the paint itself, so be it; it has that much content" (60-61). All art has content, even if that content is the series of brush strokes. Even abstract art, which often strives to be content-less, has historical content, Shahn

argues. This work could not have come at any other point in history; abstract art had to have been preceded by Freud, Picasso, Kandinsky, Klee, etc. (Shahn 61). A departure from content is a departure from artists who came before. This departure could not exist without these preceding artists. Therefore, art that strives to be content-less gains content by departing from previous ideas.

Although the arguments of Shahn and Sontag seem conflicting, they share ideas of how art should be experienced. Sontag presents the idea of "transparence," meaning, "experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are" (13). Her aim for art is to "show *how* it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show *what* it means" (Sontag 14). This idea coheres with Shahn's arguments about content. Shahn states that content can be anything: "whatever crosses the human mind may be fit content for art" (72). In creating and examining art, one must first see what *is* and go from there.

### *1980s*

Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, dance professors and scholars writing in a period after Sontag and Shahn, discuss the role that form and content play in the creative process in their book, *The Intimate Act of Choreography*. Like Doris Humphrey, Blom and Chaplin state that every dance must have an intention. This intention can be anything, such as a focus on form or a specific content, and it can change, but it is necessary that it become clear at some point in the creative process (8, 9). In addition to stating that we must know the intention of our work, Blom and Chaplin write that we should know the meaning as well: "let's face it, we should know what we are trying to say with movement" (8). Knowing the meaning is a part of the choreographer's responsibility, leading them to weave interpretable content into their work (8).

Blom and Chaplin also discuss form's role in the creative process. Form is essential to art, providing both the generation and structure of material (Blom and Chaplin 83, 85). Because form is inherent in life, "as basic to art as it is to life," it is always present in dance and it is up to the choreographer as to how it is used (83). Blom and Chaplin argue that form is an intrinsic feature of art; "form grows with and supports an idea" (85). At some point in the creative process, form, if at first prioritized over content, becomes a support to the content. Blom and Chaplin discuss form primarily as it pertains to content and imply that form cannot be the main idea or main feature of a dance. This point of view is interesting because at the time this work was published, in 1982, artists like Merce Cunningham and Trisha Brown had already created work focusing on form *as* content.

In the text *Looking at Dances*, Valerie Preston-Dunlop also discusses the concept and development of form in dance. Preston-Dunlop offers many of the same ideas as Blom and Chaplin, but takes a slightly different approach to the concept of content in structure in dance (Preston-Dunlop uses the term "meaning" synonymously with "content"). After presenting numerous ways to structure a dance, Preston-Dunlop asserts, "structure carries meaning" (147). Because our bodies have inherent structures, similar to the argument about nature from Blom and Chaplin (explained above), our work will automatically have structure. The artist can choose to make work according to the natural structures of our bodies or go against them. Preston-Dunlop writes, "if you structure your work according to the innate structures of a human being you will enhance a theme of human experience. If you structure your work against the innate structures then the form will not conjure human experience, but be form for its own sake. And why not" (148). Either choice directs the experience of the work for the choreographer, dancers, and viewers. In this way, all structure inherently has content because it stems from this initial

choreographic choice to work with or against human structure. Even if structure is left to chance and not individually chosen, like in the work of Merce Cunningham, the use of chance is a *choice*, and places the structure in opposition to the natural, inherent structures and imbeds that form with content. This idea is reminiscent of Ben Shahn's argument about abstract art: that it originally sought to depart from content and instead focus on form, and that goal in itself gives the work its content (61). In the same way, Preston-Dunlop argues that choreographers who choose to structure work against the innate structures of nature, to create form for the sake of form, are working with content from the start.

### **Case Studies**

The voices discussed above are representative of how form, content, and meaning have been considered at various points in history. While these are singular voices, they discuss ideas of form, content, and meaning at a broad level. To further investigate the relationship between form, content, and meaning I explored four choreographers—Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker, and Pina Bausch—to understand their approach to this intricate and complex relationship. I chose each of these artists because of my interest in their work and my ability to see their work live, dance in their work, or in some cases, both. Additionally, their work and philosophies vary from each other. For each case study, I investigated their ideologies surrounding form and content, their creative process, and the resulting works they created.

#### *Merce Cunningham*

Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) was a dancer and choreographer at the forefront of the postmodern movement in dance. After creating over one hundred pieces of work, Cunningham

still has viewers and scholars engaged by his work. Questions of content and meaning often arise after viewing his work. Is there meaning intended in his dances? Or was the movement really created solely for its own sake? Cunningham enlisted processes in choreography that challenge scholars with the classification of his work as modernist, post-modernist, or neo-classicist (Drown 17). Joan Acocella, dance critic, and Marilyn Vaughan Drown, dance scholar, discuss the nature of Cunningham's work and the possibility of finding meaning within it in *Merce Cunningham: Creative Elements*.

Chance played an essential role in Cunningham's creative process. Chance operations in his choreographic process ranged from determining movement sequences to creating the movement itself. Cunningham used chance procedures, such as rolling dice, to randomly determine various elements of composition in each work (Drown 18). In addition to chance, Cunningham also worked extensively with collaborators, including visual artists, designers, and composers (18). Although Cunningham worked closely with these partners, their contributions were made separately from the dance, rather than created alongside it. For example, Cunningham's dancers often did not hear the music or see sets or props until the performance (18-19). This process, with an element of chance in itself (as no one knew how the elements would fit together) aimed to produce an equal relationship between each element of the work and, when experienced together, created a sense of cohesion despite being developed separately (19).

Around the 1980s Cunningham began using "LifeForms," a computer program designed at Simon Fraser University in collaboration with Cunningham (Acocella 12). This program could be used to create any element of a dance, including minute details such as the movement of a wrist. The program offered a list or "menu" of possibilities for each movement (12). Because the

program had no preferences for certain movements or patterns, Cunningham used it as one method to break his work away from the cliché or accustomed itineraries of theatrical movement (12). Cunningham's use of chance, computer programs, and separation of production elements in collaborations forced his choreography to move beyond the limits of his imagination and conventional patterns, while also straying from anything that would impose a particular meaning on his audience (12).

Because Cunningham was constantly experimenting with his work, he avoided choices that would allow audiences to use familiar methods of deciphering meaning. Because of his use of chance, many viewers assume that Cunningham's dances have no meaning. However, both Drown and Acocella argue that there is a way to interpret the works of Cunningham that leads to complex and profound meaning (Drown 17-18). Acocella describes a "new emotionalism" that many viewers and scholars interpreted in Cunningham's work beginning in the early 1980s (14). According to Acocella, the perceived shift in the 80s toward a "new emotionalism," led many to believe that Cunningham, although he denied this assertion, had begun to tell stories with his work (8). To assume that Cunningham's work was created without meaning is, according to Drown, an incorrect assumption (Drown 17).

Both authors make cases for interpreting Cunningham's work, and two common elements string their arguments together. First, both authors use the term *meaning* but are often referring to *content*, as in a story, narrative, or intended emotion. Second, they center their discussion on specific movement rather than overarching ideas when discussing meaning, or content. The ideas and narratives that Drown and Acocella distill from the work are brought about entirely by the movement itself. Acocella writes that the "new emotionalism" stemmed from "images [that] were not mimetic images ... but dance images ... In these works, then, dance is not simply the

medium; it is the story" (14). In interviews, Cunningham denied the use of narrative or story in his work. However, he recognized that his work could evoke such interpretations. Movement is naturally expressive and, according to Cunningham, there is no such thing as an abstract dance (7). But, Cunningham's work was never explicitly expressive of anything in particular (7). Instead, Cunningham's goal was for each dance to have a life of its own. For Cunningham, a dance does not need anything else but itself (Drown 21, Acocella 15). While a dance can have other elements, such as music, sets, costumes, etc., Cunningham says that all a work needs is a life and what makes the work alive is the dancing (Acocella 15).

Cunningham did not create dances with particular meanings in mind, but that does not mean he was not interested in meaning. Drown states that Cunningham was interested in audience interpretations of his work, which he knew were based entirely on personal responses (Drown 19). Additionally, being a dancer and being a dance maker inherently have meaning because each is a significant vocation (18). The movement, which is "expressive, regardless of intentions of expressivity," has the potential for evoking meaningful experiences for both the dancers and the viewers (18). This is not unique to Cunningham's work, but he was highly aware of potential for meaning and meaningful experiences for dancers and viewers, and addressed it in his discourse. The elements of Cunningham's work, such as chance or collaborative production elements, create a particular experience for the dancer. The experience and significance of "being a dancer" in Cunningham's work produced a layer of meaning in the work (18).

Having learned and performed Cunningham's work, *Canfield MinEvent*, I have a firsthand account of the significance of "being a dancer" in a Cunningham piece. My experience, like his dances, took on its own life. *Canfield*, like all pieces in Cunningham's repertory, was not built with a particular story in mind, but my own meaning continued to unfold as I became

submerged in the work. The meaning that developed for me through my time with the work emerged out of the challenges of learning both the Cunningham repertory and the Cunningham technique without any previous experience. Carol Teitlebaum, a former Cunningham dancer who was in charge of reconstructing the *Canfield MinEvent* at Franklin and Marshall College, told our cast that meanings will surface and they will be different for each of us. Every dancer comes to the work from a different place and therefore has a different experience. Teitlebaum explained that *this* is what makes the work interesting. The audience is not watching a story; they are watching dancers living inside the work. Through the work of Cunningham, we see that even when a choreographer focuses solely on form and intends no content, the dance can still be meaningful.

### *Trisha Brown*

Sitting on the warm, wood floors of Studio D at Gibney Dance Center in New York City, my fellow "Group 3" dancers and I dutifully combed through the structure we had just been given, trying to make sense of it in any way possible. Forward to 1, forward to 2, forward to shuffle, reverse to 2, forward to shuffle, forward to the bead, stillness, reverse to 2, forward to shuffle, reverse to "now," forward to the insert, repeat from beginning, face a different front. This structure, created in collaboration with my group of dancers and former Trisha Brown dancer Lance Gries, was based on Trisha Brown's *Son of Gone Fishin'* (1981) and introduced me to the complexity of Brown's work.

Trisha Brown (b. 1936) was a post-modern choreographer, known for her use of formal devices in her work (although she is still alive, she is no longer choreographing). *Locus* (1975), like many of Brown's pieces, exhibits one of her complex structures used in both creation and

performance. In "Choice/Form in Trisha Brown's *Locus*: A View from Inside the Cube," Mona Sulzman, former Brown dancer and performer in *Locus*, describes the devices used by Brown throughout the process of creating and performing the work. The formal devices used by Brown in *Locus* also allude to larger themes in the use of form in dance. A close examination of Trisha Brown's *Locus*, as described by Sulzman, reveals one of these larger themes—a dichotomy that exists within form, between constraint and freedom.

To create *Locus*, Brown used a strict structure to generate movement. The movement is organized around an imaginary cube with 27 points spaced evenly around the cube. Brown paired the 27 points with the letters of the alphabet—1 being A, 2 being B, etc. (27 is the space between letters or words)—and used written statements to generate a series of numbers or points. Each point was moved through, touched, looked at, or jumped over, one point at a time or in clusters—based on an order of letters dictated by the written statements. While spatial designs could be repeated, gestures or movements could not (Sulzman 118). After generating and sequencing the movement, Brown organized the phrases into a larger structure. In this larger structure, the cubes formed a grid and the dancers moved from one cube to another and changed facings using the original phrase material. Further, *Locus* was divided into three parts. First, the dancers performed the original phrase material from start to finish in unison. Second, the dancers each performed four different sections of the original phrase material; although they began and ended their sections at the same time, they performed different phrases of movement. The third part, or the "free" section, was mostly improvisational in terms of structure and sequence. The dancers could use any phrase material at any time, all while changing facings and moving through cubes.

The dichotomy between constraint and freedom appears first in the process of creating *Locus*. Sulzman writes, "[one] becomes overwhelmed by both the constraint of repetition and order and the limitless potential of the creative medium involved" (123). In *Locus*, written statements that order a set of points predetermine the movement's goal, duration, and sequence. These predetermined aspects of the piece create a tight framework to work within; however, the possibilities for movement within the framework remain limitless. Additionally, these restraints open doors to undiscovered possibilities. According to Sulzman's experience, the cube confines movement but the confinements and structure "mines and expands the creative resources" and opens the dance to new possibilities (123-124). Limiting a set of choices, like sequence or use of space, requires problem solving and leads to discoveries of movement potential. Brown's use of constraints bears similar motivations to Cunningham's chance procedures. Both methods push the artists to break out of habits and mine creative potential.

Sulzman's accounts from inside *Locus* provide another way of looking at the dichotomy between restraint and freedom. In the third section, the "free" section, the dancers improvise using phrase material within the structure created by Brown. The structure requires the dancers to use only the original phrase material and remain in cubes; however they are free to sequence the movement in any order, move through the cubes in any order, and change facings at any point. With this freedom, each performance yielded new combinations and patterns. Solos, duets, trios, and unison emerged unexpectedly while spatial patterns were constantly evolving. The freedom that emerges within the structure of *Locus* creates an intense and complicated world of possibilities. In an account of a performance experience Sulzman writes, "I stay with the movement and Elizabeth. Spatially, I take this movement from cube to cube, right between Judith and Trisha, and move closer to Elizabeth, who soon joins Trisha, who has left Judith who

has—oh, she's dancing with me!" (127). In addition to observing the complex structure of the piece, the audience watches the dancers thinking and making choices. As the piece evolves and takes new paths through the open system, the dancers' thought processes have to evolve and follow those paths.

Sulzman defines Brown's forms in *Locus*, with their complex structure and rich possibilities, as an open system (124). While there are clear rules and restrictions that govern choices, the open system of the work leads to an overwhelming number of possibilities. However, because of the pre-imposed restraints, every choice and every movement always "belongs, fortuitously and intentionally, to the total network of forms, patterns, and choices that act upon one another" (Sulzman 128). Sulzman's accounts illuminate a dynamic relationship between restraint and freedom. Rules and structures set forth constraints to work within, which lead to new discoveries and possibilities for movement, but those movements still exist within the world of the work. Additionally, this world is made up by rules and logic, and logic has implicit meaning.

Brown's work was created with formal devices and experienced from the inside, at least by Sulzman, as formal. However, as a viewer my experience with the work was more than formal. At a concert of three of Brown's proscenium works (at Bryn Mawr College in October 2015)—*Set and Reset* (1983), *If You Couldn't See Me* (1994) and *Present Tense* (2003)—my experience wavered between focusing on form and focusing on content. I noticed the formal devices being used and they led me to content and meaning. In *Set and Reset*, the dancers flowed on and off the stage, lingering in the edges of the space for much of the piece. As the activity moved on and off stage, I was able to catch glimpses of movement happening behind the sheer, almost see-through, wings. This spatial choice and set design led me to question if I was seeing

the whole piece. Was something happening off-stage? If yes, was there a reason that I wasn't seeing it? Ideas of visibility, privacy and permission flooded my mind. The formal devices that composed *Set and Reset* started to transform into content and meaning as I watched the dance unfold. Trisha Brown's work provides more examples of how dances can be created while prioritizing form, yet ultimately allow content and meaning to emerge from the form.

*Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker*

Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker (b. 1960) is a modern dance choreographer currently active and based in Brussels with her company, Rosas. Dance scholar Renate Bräuninger analyzes de Keersmaeker's choreographic process in her article, "Structure as Process: Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's *Fase* (1982) and Steve Reich's Music." In examining *Fase*, Bräuninger shows how formal devices were used in de Keersmaeker's creative process, which created a non-formal experience.

In the making of *Fase*, a series of four pieces, de Keersmaeker developed choreographic counterparts to Steve Reich's music, "Fase." While she used the musical structure as a guide, she did not translate the precise structure into her choreography (Bräuninger 56). Throughout *Fase* (the dance), de Keersmaeker played with creating independent structures guided by the music, progressing through a series of movement "cells" to differentiate the structures (53, 56). These structures and cells, composed of simple movements that build to form phrases, are repeated throughout the pieces. In *Piano Phase*, a nine-minute piece from the four-piece series, two dancers perform a simple step sequence, which is repeated, unvaried, throughout the first half of the piece (53). In the second half of the piece, the quality of the phrase begins to shift with the addition of elements such as low arabesque and moments of pause (55).

Although there are shifts in the movement phrases of *Fase*, one of the main features of these pieces is repetition. The fast and long-lasting repetition creates a challenge for the performers, so the audience sees their intense concentration. Bräuninger states that this feature of complex and enduring repetition in the work gives de Keersmaecker's pieces "expressive potential" because, while her devices are formal, the intense concentration of the performers creates an emotional intensity that has a "performative impact on the audience", such as inducing a trance-like state (52). Furthermore, structure as process, the compositional principle used by de Keersmaecker in *Fase*, can result in an affective response by audience members (49). Bräuninger, referencing numerous dance scholars, describes affective, or emotional, responses to de Keersmaecker's work as "emotional intensity reminiscent of a trance-like state" (48). This is often brought about by the constant repetition of both de Keersmaecker's and Reich's work.

Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker's *Fase* shows one way postmodern choreographers responded to modern aesthetics, demonstrated in part by the classic works of Doris Humphrey and Louis Horst. Humphrey, who emphasized content, and Horst, who prioritized form, presented a guide to creating dance. The lists of rules for composition and the outlines of structures, themes, and other choreographic elements, helped to provide a platform for postmodernists to react to. De Keersmaecker's heavy use of repetition is one of the departures from the ideas set forth by Horst and Humphrey. Although de Keersmaecker's work consists of long stretches of repetition, the "bane of monotony" (Horst 26), as perhaps Horst may have seen it, was not "fatal" to her work. Instead, Bräuninger argues that her use of repetition evokes a trance-like state from the emotional intensity of the work (48). After seeing *Fase* on film and *Rosas Danst Rosas* (1983) live (at Fringe Arts in Philadelphia in October 2014), I can attest to the trance-like state that Bräuninger describes. While watching the intense repetition of both of

these works, I lose my sense of time, awareness to my surroundings, and the ability to control or remember thoughts. According to Bräuninger, this affective response from the continuous repetition is unlike a response to the expression of emotion through mimesis. Instead, this kind of “trance-like” affective response can only be evoked through formal devices (60). De Keersmaeker's work is yet another example that shows how creating with a focus on form can lead to content and create meaningful experiences for viewers.

### *Pina Bausch*

Rehearsals with Pina Bausch are full of questions rather than answers. How do you cry? What don't you like about your body? What moves you? Pina Bausch looks at her dancers as people who have their own stories, personalities, and answers to these questions (Klett 80). Bausch (1940-2009), a German choreographer, was a leading founder of the style called dance-theater or "tanztheater," and had a company, Tanztheater Wuppertal. Unlike the other case studies discussed so far, Bausch prioritized the content of her work over form with Tanztheater Wuppertal. Bausch played with content in three ways: overarching themes, dancers' personhood, and audience experiences.

In Bausch's creative process, themes were explored before a piece of work came into being. During the creation of the classic, evening-length piece *Kontakthof* (1978), themes of "tenderness," "desire," and "I show myself, introduce myself" were explored for three weeks of rehearsals before *Kontakthof* began to take form (Klett 74). In all of her works, Bausch used specific themes in rehearsals to prompt improvisations, collecting the material and ideas that emerged out of each dancer's individual response (Klett 75, Climenhaga 59). The ideas used in rehearsals developed into larger concepts or variations of a concept that formed the foundation of

her works. While Bausch's works are grounded in these overarching themes, her pieces were not planned out ahead of time. Instead, the end result came from a process of unfolding that occurred during Bausch's rehearsals. Each piece began from a starting point that was explored, changed, and expanded (Hoghe 67).

Although Bausch prompted her dancers with specific themes and questions that she selected, she relied on her dancers' individuality to create complexity in her work. Bausch's greatest resource for creating works was her dancers (Climenhaga 60). Each responded to Bausch's questions differently and had her or his own relationship to the questions and to the world (59). Dominique Mercy, one of Bausch's dancers, noted that during rehearsals each dancer would carry out a personal investigation of a theme that Bausch provided, but, ultimately, the final product was never discussed with Bausch. Neither the dancers nor Bausch discussed the resulting subject or story of any personal investigations, improvisations or choreographic works (Williams 105).

To go through explorations together, simultaneously uncovering fears, joys, sadness, and interests, brought the company closer to a "collective expression of a more universal truth" (Climenhaga 60). The culmination of individual explorations into a collective expression carries private fantasies, fears, and secrets into a larger experience (Cattaneo 87). In the end, although the material of Bausch's work grew from each dancer's individual exploration, the work and the themes or feelings expressed in the work are not private or exclusive. Bausch writes that her dances, which often highlight the human condition and problems with it, "[are] not a private thing; there are certain feelings that belong to all of us" (Bowen 101). Bausch's work celebrates the richness of feelings that all humans share (101). By creating work from her dancers'

personhood, Bausch presents universal truths. This aspect of her work lays the foundation for how audiences experience her work.

The feelings and themes expressed in Bausch's pieces prompt distinct, individual responses to the work. The images and scenes in her pieces aim to convey the feelings or themes she played with in the creative process, but these opaque images remain open to different interpretations and ways of seeing. Although Bausch worked with specific themes, she stated that she "often [had] something else in mind [than what people thought], and mean[t] something different" (Hoghe 65). Bausch created images that would remain open so as to avoid direct interpretations or force specific meanings upon the audience (65, 66). Raimund Hoghe, dance scholar, provides a description of a scene from *Kontakthof*:

An old record: "Pull me close, so we can dance the tango."  
 Friendly, smiling couples stand across from each other and touch.  
 A man takes a woman's hand and bends her finger backward. A  
 woman approaches a man and bites his ear. Men and women pinch  
 each other's armpits, push their eyes closed, pluck out a hair or pull  
 a chair out from under them and then calmly walk away, arm in  
 arm. (67)

In this scene, questions of tenderness are raised and abstracted. Odd moments such as pinching each other's armpits or plucking out hairs offer questions of what tenderness is and when it becomes something else (67). These moments may evoke similar questions for viewers, but are answered and interpreted differently by each audience member. My experience as a viewer of Bausch's *Kontakthof* illustrates how this dynamic works. When I saw the work live (at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November 2014), I experienced the themes of tenderness and desire, being struck by the individuality and vulnerability of each dancer. I encountered some of the themes of relationships and intimacy that Bausch explored, but I experienced the themes in my own way. Because my brain often works in formal ways and is drawn to structures and

patterns, I understood and experienced these themes in relation to the spatial and temporal patterns that I saw.

Bausch also considered the audience a part of her creations, the viewer's experience adding a layer of content to the work (Bowen 102). Her avoidance of revealing explicit meaning or interpretation ensured that the audience had to rely on their own feelings. Bausch felt that if viewers knew what she felt or what she wanted in each piece of work, they would look at the work through Bausch's eyes instead of their own (102). With every performance, Bausch asks the audience to listen to their own imaginations and feelings. Understanding her work, or any work, is a product of looking inward and listening deeply to your own experience, fantasies, and feelings as they respond to what is presented (104). Bausch says, "There is something happening inside. You only understand if you let that happen, it's not something you can do with your intellect" (Williams 104).

The work of Bausch, while meticulously and carefully constructed, emphasizes content over form. Bausch's work exhibits clear use of form in its clean and purposeful structure, but it serves as a container or vehicle for content. The content in Bausch's work resides in themes, dancers' personhood, and the audience's experience. From the start, the core of the content is the themes that are based in the questions Bausch asks about the human condition. The first rehearsals of Bausch's work are centered on specific ideas or questions, posed to and explored by her dancers. Her dancers' responses to a theme create a second layer of content. Attached to the original content are the dancers' own feelings or experiences, sprouting from the mingling of their life histories and the prompted theme. This content is constantly evolving as company members retire and new ones join. Ultimately, the audience encounters these two layers of content, which trigger their own feelings and experience with the work. Like the dancers,

viewers bring their own lives to the performance, which influence the way they see and respond. This is true of any artist's work, but Bausch considered this while creating her work. The audience's responses and interpretations add this third and final layer of content to Bausch's work. Bausch's prime medium is the human being and its complications (Hoghe 100). Her quintessential quote referring to people, "I am not so much interested in how they move as in what moves them," exemplifies her interests and her work (Climenthaga 60). Through her work with Tanztheater Wuppertal, Pina Bausch explored and exposed people and the complexity of the human condition.

Pina Bausch, unlike the other artists examined here, focused on the content of her works, and form was simply a vehicle to present that content. But, like the others, she constructed her work to remain open, to allow audiences to create their own ideas of content and meaning. Bausch demonstrates how dance makers can prioritize content over form while still allowing room for the creation or discovery of new content and meaning by audience members.

All of the artists presented here created their bodies of work with their own processes and their own approaches to content, form, and meaning. Each of these artists builds their work with a focus on either form or content, but one underlying concept is threaded throughout the ideas of Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, and Pina Bausch. They all emphasize the importance of revealing the authentic experience of each dancer in their work. This focus can elicit a strong emotional and profound experience for the audience. Although each artist's creative approach is different, the potential end result is the same—meaning.

### **Finding and Making Meaning**

Form and content were two seemingly polar concepts to me before this research. One deals with structure while the other with substance. However, my investigations into the ways artists deal with and talk about form and content have made it clear that these polar concepts cannot be separated. Art, specifically dance, cannot exist without one or the other. Even when one of these ideas is separated out and prioritized, the other emerges. As Ben Shahn argued, form is the content and content is the form. A story or narrative can be the form. Content can be the series of brush strokes or the movement sequence determined by chance operations. "Hiking the horizontal," a model created by choreographer and dance scholar Liz Lerman, can be applied to the relationship between form and content. This model puts everything on equal ground, thus getting rid of any hierarchy between these concepts; one is not better or more advanced than the other, as I have often thought of it. Instead, artists can, and do, explore the ambiguous middle ground between the two whether they intend to or not.

Artists can approach the creative process from different directions, emphasizing form over content, content over form, or finding a middle ground between the two. But, no matter how these concepts are approached, the result is the same: a mixing and melding of form and content that leads to meaning. If form and content are an inseparable duo, then the question turns to the idea of meaning. How does meaning emerge from form and content? Does approaching dance making with a focus on either form or content affect the way meaning is created or conveyed? The answers to these questions, if there are answers, are slippery.

Meaning can be interpreted in two ways: that which is intended and that which is conveyed. A meaning that a choreographer intends to convey could be very different from the meaning that an audience member perceives. In addition to these differing forms of meaning, there is also meaningfulness, which is important to distinguish. A dance could be *meaningful*, as

in having personal significance, to a choreographer, dancer, or viewer without having *a meaning*. What makes a dance *meaningful* is the experience that one has while watching the work. Having a meaningful experience with the work, connecting to it on some level, does not necessarily indicate that a specific meaning, or any meaning for that matter, was ascertained. *Meaning* is more concrete, a "*thing* that one intends to convey," a product of form and content. A dance maker can start her or his creative process with an intended meaning or it can unfold in the process. Finding specific meaning as a viewer can be much more difficult.

Form and content play an important role in finding meaning in dance. Meaning can be directly tied to the form and content of a work, or the form and content of a work can provide ways for meaning to be revealed. First, ideas from the historical voices provided in this paper show how meaning can be tied to devices of form or to expressions of content. A choreographer's approach to dance making is one element of meaning in a work—the first seed of creation. Every dance inherently reacts or responds to previous dance forms or philosophies, and thus has historical content. For example, a Trisha Brown work such as *Locus* is a dance built on structural devices. This postmodern work is in some way reacting to the approaches to dance making before it. Brown's work could not exist without the work that came before. Therefore, this historical content is built into her work. Additionally, the form chosen gives meaning to the work. The type of structure that is used impacts the work in deeper ways; forms that mimic the natural structures of our bodies enhance themes of human experience, while forms that go against these inherent structures create form for the sake of form (Preston-Dunlop 148). Revisiting *Locus* provides an example for this idea. Brown created *Locus* using the cube with 27 points: a formal device. This formal device dictated the creation and order of the movement,

going against the inherent, natural structures of the body. Examining form for the sake of form creates a kind of meaning.

Furthermore, form and content can provide ways for meaning to be revealed. Cunningham's work is one example of how meaning is revealed through form. Cunningham did not approach the choreographic process with specific content or a story in mind; instead, he created his works through formal devices usually dictated by chance operations. Cunningham's structural devices were his method of manipulating the expressive qualities of movement (Drown 18). Drown writes, "the choices Cunningham makes regarding the way his dances are choreographed and the way they are presented become important aspects of meaning" (18). Because Cunningham relies on form to control the expressiveness of movement, the work is free and open to individual experiences and interpretations. Viewers, dancers, and collaborators can find meaning in the work as they engage with it, precisely *because* the experience of engaging with it is *meaningful*. Movement is meaningful. Watching movement is meaningful. Dancing movement is meaningful.

Pina Bausch used form and content to control intended meaning versus conveyed or perceived meaning. Bausch always had meaning in her work, but the intention was to compel audience members to find their own meaning. While she worked first with content, the forms, which shaped the content, unfolded throughout the process. Bausch manipulated the use of form and content to create openness in her work for viewers to find their own meaning. Thus, the meaning that Bausch used to create the work, or the intended meaning, and the conveyed meaning that the audience experienced in her work might differ.

In the beginning of this research journey, form and content were two separate entities in my mind. Now it is clear that these concepts are woven into an intricate web that inherently

produces meaning in dance. Form and content are the vehicles through which movement is created and presented, providing endless ways to see and experience dance. Movement can both carry and produce meaning, and how it does depends on the ways it is shaped through form and content. Dissecting form and content, and examining the ways they are approached, considered, and utilized in dance, help us to understand how to find and create meaning in dance.

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