Mapping the Unruly: Imagining a Methodology for the Archiving of Performance

By

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I. Introduction: Can We Archive Performance and for What Future?¹

In the field of dance archiving, library repository systems and archival institutions offer strategies for preserving dance legacies through “systematic, safe, and secure” methods of archivization (Aldrich 1).² Archives offer controlled environments where archivists and conservators carry out the cataloguing and preservation of key elements, selected as valuable through an appraisal process by the institution. By minimizing exposure to environmental variables, carrying out conservation and storage actions, including the rehousing of archival documents and the preservation and digitization of particular artifacts, the archive acts as a scaffold for preservation, attempting to slow time. The archive becomes a staging ground in which the preservation of documents attempts to offer a stable return from the instability of performance. These archives act to willfully control the fragility of time.

Dance Heritage Coalition’s (DHC) preservation manual for the dance field, “Beyond Memory: Preserving the Documents of our Dance Heritage,” states that it is imperative to document the work of performers we lose to age and AIDS and to “preserve that documentation in a systematic, safe and secure way,” thereby lessening “our dependence on the human chain of memory” (Aldrich 1). The DHC manual presumes that by directing efforts towards the preservation of documents, the archive will save performance from being

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¹ In 2015, I was invited to speak as a panelist in the *Storytelling in the Archives* forum at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), where curator Ana Janevski posed a series of questions, including: “Can we archive gesture and movement and for what future?” (Janevski). This title draws inspiration from Janevski’s prompt.

² In the 1990s, several organizations were established in an attempt to protect the history and heritage of performance, so that performance wouldn’t be lost for future generations. For example Mathew Reason cites The National Initiative to Preserve America’s Dance (NIPAD), the Dance Heritage Coalition, SAVE AS: DANCE, and Preserve, Inc.—whose slogan is “assuring dance a life beyond performance”—as institutions whose primary goal is to ensure the protection of existing documentation through various preservation efforts (84).
lost, likening the archive to a replacement system for memory. The field of archiving has been historically and methodologically linked to forms of writing, deriving its practices from the archiving of books and manuscripts. While library repository archivists use systems of identification and classification for documents, strategies for capturing non-verbal embodiment at the site of the archive have not been invented or developed.

As an artist-archivist, I have witnessed the ways in which improvisational knowledge is transmitted through physical presence and embodiment. Social memory becomes the locus of a body-to-body archiving, allowing for the continued transmission, transmutation, and liveness of embodied knowledge. In performance, particularly in social dance forms, memory is a medium that takes place within, between, and through bodies; it mutates and becomes transfigured through the social. This project complicates the idea that an archive should lessen one’s dependence on memory, because memory is the very survival tactic of particular disenfranchised performance communities. Mapping the Unruly: Imagining a Methodology for the Archiving of Performance responds to the many complexities involved in documenting, preserving, and historicizing works that come to life through unruly and ephemeral states of being. In theory and in practice, this thesis imagines the transmission of performance in a generative space between embodiment and documentation. In this introduction, I provide an overview of the strategies two major organizations use in archiving dance and time-based media. Drawing on performance studies theories, I demonstrate the limitations of aspects of these practices and argue for a methodology that values the relation of memory, transmission, and embodied practice in the practice of archiving performance.

Performance studies scholars’ theoretical views, which place value on embodied forms of knowledge, have something to offer the frameworks developed by dance archivists
at the DHC and NYPL. I am particularly drawn to performance theorist Diana Taylor and her scholarship around performance as an episteme and way of knowing. According to Taylor, “we learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action, through cultural agency, and by making choices” (Archive XVI). In her book, The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas, she writes:

> The rift . . . does not lie between the written and spoken word, but between the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge. . . . Embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archive’s ability to capture it. But that does not mean that performance—as ritualized, formalized, or reiterative behavior—disappears. Performances also replicate themselves through their own structures and codes. (19-21)

How performance as an embodied episteme comes to life at the site of the archive is part of the inquiry surrounding this project. Taylor explores the ways in which performance is transmitted through embodied “acts of transfer” and the “repertoire.” This thesis operates from the understanding that embodiment and documentation are not “static binaries,” but “coterminous systems that continually participate in the creation, storage and transmission of knowledge” (Taylor, “Save As” 2).

Another central concern that lives at the heart of this project is the way in which value is ascribed to performance through an archive’s appraisal process. An appraisal includes the identification of materials offered to an archive to determine if there is sufficient value for the material to be accessioned. In DHC’s “Beyond Memory” manual, in a section entitled “Determining Permanent Value,” the following criteria is recommended for appraising materials:

> Do the materials give evidence? In other words, do they provide adequate and authentic documentation of your organization?  
> Do the materials provide information that warrants transmission to future generations?
Are the materials important as artifacts? What would the loss of these records have on the documentation and understanding of your company, work, or organization? To what extent does the information in your records duplicate or complement information in other types of documentation? In terms of uniqueness, reliability, and completeness, how important is the information contained within your records? Do your records protect the legal rights of anyone? Determine whether or not the documentation is in usable condition. (Aldrich 5-6)

At the level of language, these criteria foreground authority, authenticity, consistency, and accuracy, rather than the “partiality, fluidity, and randomness” of performance (Reason 89). According to DHC, the process of determining value is “perhaps the most important responsibility that archivists have, one for which they equip themselves through education and training” (Aldrich 5). Beyond this statement, it is unclear what this training includes. The implied rigor to is left to speculation. How might the study of performance as an embodied episteme inform the quality of these appraisal processes? How might it alter the way in which value is ascribed and assigned to archives as institutional sites for cultural memory?

In Marika Cifor’s essay, “Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse,” she reviews the ways in which an appraisal is “an archival relation that has an impact upon all subsequent relations between individuals, communities and records” (9). Introducing affect theory to archival discourse, she proposes that archives might, “collect and appraise in more socially conscious ways that extend concepts of who and what is of value” (Cifor 9). She writes,

Affect is a force that creates a relation between a body and the world. It is at the core of how we form, sustain and break social relations, differences and individual and collective identities. Archives are in large part about creating, documenting, maintaining, reconciling and (re)producing such relations—between records and people, ideologies, institutions, systems and worlds—across bounds of time and space. (Cifor 8)
Applied to archiving, affect may offer receptive, feeling-based, and qualitative tools for re-imagining the ways institutions give and withhold resources, and preserve value and cultural memory. Affect offers an ethical relation that, when addressing the aesthetic practices and embodied knowledge that lives within artists and communities, invites a framework for the “construction, distribution, mobilization and circulation” of performance practices through an archive (Cifor 8).

**Comparative Analysis: Dance Heritage Coalition and the Variable Media Network**

In this next section, I conduct a comparative analysis of the DHC and the VMN as a means to locate my own methodology. As an artist-archivist working in performance, film, and the visual arts, who has trained alongside archivists handling experimental film and video, I have found a connection between the archiving of time-based media and performance. Many time-based media archivists and conservators work with film, digital media, and installation as ephemeral formats. These archivists determine the appropriate preservation measures based upon the variability, fragility, and ephemerality of each medium, and upon an active discourse with each artist. This approach is exemplified in the Variable Media Network (VMN), a project that emerged in 2003 from the Guggenheim’s Film and Media Arts Program, designed by former curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Jon Ippolito. One of the main differences between the DHC and VMN is that the VMN works in close proximity with each artist to outline variable preservation strategies; this process is initiated through an “ethical will” in the form of a questionnaire. Jon Ippolito writes of the preservation strategy as looking for medium-independent behaviors:

When we first conceived of the questionnaire, we tried to work within familiar art historical categories such as photography, film, and video. We quickly realized, however, that medium-specific pigeonholes were as transient as medium-specific artworks; as soon as video became obsolete, so would a video-based prescription for
re-creating an artwork. To circumvent this problem, we decided to explore medium-independent, mutually-compatible descriptions of each artwork, which we call behaviors. (48)

The word “behaviors” offers a performative, temporal, and qualitative relation that when assigned to archival classification systems might maintain a level of complexity in the description of time-based works. Part of this framework is to bring attention to the ambiguity and mutability of time-based media artworks, where, according to Richard Rinehart, digital media director of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive at the University of California, “There is no longer one monolithic original artifact, and there is no longer one silver-jacketed preservation method” (25). By contrast, the DHC proposes that, “Although documentation strategies, materials and resources will vary, the basics of organization, preservation and access remain the same” (Aldrich 1). With the VMN, there is variability in place of assigning proscribed protocols.

In researching the case studies of the VMN, many of the preservation recommendations take the form of questions. In documenting Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s signature candy spills, the VMN asked the artist a series of questions about emulation, storage, migration, and reinterpretation and noted his response. For example, in thinking through the future emulation of the candy, archivists asked, “Once candies are discontinued, should a substitute candy—most closely resembling the original—be found? If so, which aspect is the most important to imitate: the wrapper, the appearance of the confection, or the flavor?” (“Felix Gonzalez-Torres”). The inquiry-based approach to preservation gives agency to the artist as the primary interpreter for the work, avoiding assumptions that might be made around the reinterpretation. By contract, DHC’s online booklet outlines, “steps you can take to get control of the materials you already generate” (Aldrich 2). Here the purpose seems to
be one of control without a consideration for the artist, or the cross-disciplinary parameters of particular works.

The DHC’s recommendations for preserving performance attempt to systematize heritage, history, and memory, and in doing so, fail to form a qualitative relation to artistic form, practice, and embodiment. Rather than foregrounding the interests, needs, and concerns of an artist, their practices prioritize the document. The VMN, on the other hand, exhibits an awareness that preservation measures can be taken too far. Along these lines, Richard Rinehart acknowledges, “preservation is an interpretive act,” asking, “Do we want to preserve this art or keep it alive” (25)? However, while the VMN variable media project is conceptualized as dynamic and expansive, there remains a gap around the archiving of liveness, human bodies, and embodied practices. The performance category on the questionnaire relates primarily to instruction and task-based performance scores, asking about the instructions, props, sets, costumes, performers, etc. What the form doesn’t consider are the improvisational or emergent structures that arise from performance, or the relation to memory, transmission, and embodied practice. This is where my methodology departs.

**Mapping the Unruly**

*Mapping the Unruly: Imagining a Methodology for the Archiving of Performance* develops an experimental hybrid framework for the archiving of performance, asking if we can archive performance and for what future? Developed as a thesis project in three forms, this thesis both differentiates and blurs the boundaries between the practices of the artist, the archivist, and the curator to create a dimensional archiving of choreographer Melinda Ring's 1999 work, *Impossible Dance #2 (still life)*. This piece was originally part of a larger series
created by Melinda Ring.\textsuperscript{3} The thesis explores Melinda Ring’s work in particular as a site from which to examine broader issues about archives, transmission, and memory. Ring’s unruly dances resist codification and order. Straddling sculpture, site work, and performance, her dances evoke a composed rupture that lends itself to a precarious impossibility. This impossibility becomes fascinating to archive.

Over the past year and a half, Melinda Ring and I have been in close proximity through the shifting terrain of her artistic process. During this time, she has been involved in building two new works: \textit{A dark cloud, walks into a room} (2015-2017) with performers Talya Epstein, Maggie Jones, and Molly Lieber and \textit{Shiny Angles in Angular Time} (2015-2017) with Renée Archibald.\textsuperscript{4} Across multiple conversations, studio visits, and individual time spent writing and researching, I developed three hybrid archival-curatorial projects that respond to her work \textit{Impossible Dance}. Rather than proscribing an already-established system of organization to the archiving of Ring’s choreographies, I place the form of the archive in direct conversation with the complexity in her practice and work. I look to see how the archive might reflect something about the way an artist is working. The form the archive takes might be wildly different from something that I do with another artist, which asks for a fluidity, flexibility, and variability. The primary thrust of this methodology relies on an adaptive, improvisational approach that gives attention to the artist’s practice, artworks, and materials.

My thesis describes a prismatic approach to the archiving of \textit{Impossible Dance}, which manifests in three forms: a performance transmission structure, a digital publication, and a printed book. Chapter One describes the creation of a transmission structure called \textit{gifting}

\textsuperscript{3} For the remainder of the thesis, I will refer to \textit{Impossible Dance #2 (still life)} as \textit{Impossible Dance}.

\textsuperscript{4} These pieces are currently in development. Ring has not premiered final versions of either work.
that results in a live performance. In this project, Melinda Ring gifted the improvisational forms and structures from *Impossible Dance* over a three-month rehearsal process with movement artist Kai Kleinbard, which he re-imagined in performance in 2015. Chapter Two explores the creation of a digital publication entitled, *transitional object archive*, which uses photography, oral histories, and descriptive writing to archive the objects that emerge in Ring’s *Impossible Dance* and *A dark cloud, walks into a room*. Chapter Three proposes the archiving of *Impossible Dance* as a printed book that recalls and documents the process of gifting as a *gift artifact* to be distributed and exchanged, published by 53rd State Press. Each of these forms plays with the impossibility in archiving the unruly—a conceit staged to intervene in institutional approaches that privilege the codifying of form over the nature of improvisational experience. Additionally, my approach asks how the archiving of the impossible might press against what is possible and legible in the field of archiving.

With respect to the blurring of roles, this project responds to my observations of the dance and visual arts fields. Typically, in fine art institutions the role of the conservator is linked to preservation, which is independent from the curator’s role of presentation. In this thesis, I explore the role of archivist-curateur as a hybrid practice, rather than a separated binary. Archiving offers an intimate and material relationship to the objects and documents from performance. Curating brings a framework that looks at aesthetics in relation to art historical lineages and contexts; writing practices, interview gathering, and studio visits with artists are also part of this work. Artistic practices, particularly those surrounding performance and improvisation, bring an understanding of embodiment, artistic form, aesthetics, and improvisational structuring. This project experiments with the interfacing of these three roles to offer a methodology for the archiving of performance.
I come to this work as an artist, drawing upon two decades of experiential research in improvisation, somatic practices, movement analysis through the Alexander Technique, postmodern dance, and immersive study in social dance forms including voguing, and eccentric dance. Dovetailing these studies is my work as an artist-archivist with archivist Jon Gartenberg, choreographer Cathy Weis, and Trisha Brown. Influenced additionally by Susan Sgorbati, the creator of emergent improvisation, these practices inform my ability to recognize pattern, including the structuring of emergent behavior in complex systems. Rather than attempting standardized approaches to organization and classification, I look to map the aliveness of performance in an emergent whole, placing value on creative practice, embodiment, and aesthetics.

This approach to archiving looks at the knowledge embedded in artistic forms, complex systems, and improvisation as structuring tools for the shaping of an archive; I imagine this methodology as a complex system, in which the interacting components come to form a collective network. I see this system as engaging a kind of porosity, which allows for a multiplicity of perspectives and relations that emerge from the result of embodied, experiential and collaborative practices.

The primary thrust of my inquiry will rely on an adaptive, improvisational approach that follows a given set of principles: transmission, mnemonics, description, and animation. Transmission involves the body-to-body transmission of the embodied knowledge that emerges from performance practice. Mnemonics investigates the documents and objects that surround performance work and their relationship to memory, approaching these materials as retrieval systems for the senses. Description draws upon oral history gathering, experimental writing practices, and artists’ notebooks to explore a generative space around language. The
practices that inform this methodology, including transmission, mnemonics, and description come to life through the fourth principal, I refer to as *animation*. Animation involves any process of reconstituting the archival materials; this can be through performance, curation, and exhibition making (digital, printed, and live), drawing upon principles of montage, assemblage, interpretation, and translation. For me, the archive is alive through an animation, through a subjective handling, through a becoming.

This staging of the archive captures the unseen resonances from an artist’s creative practice to offer an emergent, living archive for the work from which it can be curated, activated, animated, and framed in ways that allow for its futurity whilst remaining critically engaged with its past. In these projects, I don’t attempt to preserve ideas of originality; instead, I’m interested in extending and expanding the life of *Impossible Dance* iteratively. Foregrounding the constructed nature of archiving, I play with the performativity and subjectivity embedded within the role of archiving—the fact that these aspects are always already happening.
II. “She’s Just Impossible”:
Gifting as Experimental Transmission

Dance is impossible like an unruly teenager needing just enough freedom balanced with just the right guidance to flourish. I love her. She can be so beautiful, so full of energy and potential. Her desires, my desires for her, can be frightening. How can I be ultimately responsible for this unpredictable creature? It’s maddening.

She’s just impossible, I don’t know what to do with her!
—Melinda Ring, “Impossible Dance”

My first memory of Melinda Ring is from a movement class at Bennington College in 1997. She had just arrived from Los Angeles. I remember her leaping without bending—peculiarly, unseemly high, like a gazelle. She wore leopard print leggings. I remember her final thesis concert, Party Scene (solo), performed in a white room with ghostly shadows and voices of people, as if at a party though absent from the space. Ring creates visual worlds composed from haphazard rupture—imperfect precision.

Now, some sixteen years later, after having followed her work for a decade in New York City, I am getting to know Ring more closely through my curatorial proposal that involved the gifting of her 1999 work Impossible Dance to movement artist Kai Kleinbard. The gifted iteration was performed at Danspace Project in December 2015 as part of Movement Research’s Fall Festival, vanishing points, which I co-curated with Beth Gill. While developing the programming, Gill and I shared many ideas; her encouragement and co-facilitation of my initial gifting concept enabled the completion of this first iteration. Since then, I have continued to develop gifting as part of this methodology. Gifting is a unique archival-curatorial structure, which manifests as a process of dialogue and exchange, inviting an artist to pass on an original work to another artist who re-imagines it as a new iteration. I intentionally designed the structure of gifting to take place between three parties: upon my invitation as the archivist-curator, Ring gifts the forms and structures from the
improvisational solo to Kleinbard, who then performs the new iteration as a gift for the audience. Here, the gift flows in a circular, rather than in a reciprocal direction. Allowing the gift to exchange hands is to keep the gift in motion—to keep it alive.

*Impossible Dance* gives space to dance’s unruly impulses. Referring to her original creation, Ring describes the dance as “constructing something from zero. An improvisation starting in a state of not knowing, in a state of patience, accumulating actions, editing and testing the limits of memory, towards making something complete” (Ring, ”Impossible”). Formally, *Impossible Dance* is thirty-minute solo improvisation, situated in a three-walled room made of clamped together theater flats, that involves the accumulation of objects (furniture and found objects) and gestures in the space. Moments of slowing and pausing combine with physical disorientation, in which the improviser moves off-kilter through disorderly accumulation. The dance requires the splitting and layering of multiple kinds of attention and memory. Ring no longer constructs improvised work. “*Impossible Dance* was the most complicated of these dances and it was the last” (Ring, “Impossible”).

The gifted iteration of *Impossible Dance*, performed by Kleinbard, incorporated structuring elements from Ring’s original dance, while aberrating in his style and vocabulary of movement. What remained in Kleinbard’s iteration was the thirty-minute solo improvisation, in which he enters and exits in this partially-constructed room—which Ring had re-assembled as the site for the gift—also accumulating objects and actions in the space. To prepare for this performance, Ring worked in close proximity with Kleinbard transmitting the forms and structures from *Impossible Dance* over a three-month period. Ring began by learning about Kleinbard’s approach to movement and improvisation, observing his investigations in the studio, and offering ways of disrupting his movement tendencies. In
speaking with him after this process, he explained, “I was . . . starting to break habits of my body movement. Moving my arms more. Using my back more. Being more multidirectional . . . I started to learn about different spatial arrangements” (Kleinbard, “Interview”). In addition to responding to his movement patterns, she introduced a series of improvisational prompts and exercises that explored both the qualitative characteristics of the dance and the structures of the dance. One example is an investigation of stopping and starting, which Kleinbard relayed,

We played a lot with stopping and going and not moving, pausing. And, this idea of a speedometer: being still 0-10 as fast as I could go and really working through the increments of the numbers. It’s really weird to move in a 1 or 2. It’s easy to move in a 5. It’s easy probably to move in a 10, but what’s a ?? What’s an 8? (Kleinbard, “Interview”)

This exercise prepared Kleinbard for the composing of still lifes—structures in the dance Ring uses to describe the sculpting of durations of time. Here the stillness becomes an equivalent to negative space; it also slows the timing in such a way that gives parity to the performer and the found objects and furniture. Over the rehearsal period, many structures were amassed that built layers of complexity; this process established the difference between Kleinbard’s innate sense of composition, and the forms and structures of the dance. His learning of these practices became a form of embodied archivization of Impossible Dance.

The curatorial structure of gifting is the foundational premise for the transmission component of my archiving methodology. This project explores performance as, to return to Diana Taylor’s work, an “episteme, way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis” (Archive XVI). Utilizing the forms and structures from improvisational practice as a vehicle for exchange, gifting looks at the “vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” through layers of reiteration (Taylor, Archive 2). Expanding
upon gift economies, improvisational systems, and notions of experimentation, agency, and
authorship, this transmission structure looks to foreground the sociality embedded within
artist-to-artist exchanges, while also offering a non-codified approach to archiving and
transmitting performance works over time.

Susan Sgorbati, Director of the Center for Advancement of Public Action at
Bennington College, first introduced me to this piece through a vivid retelling in 2000. When
I began considering ideas for the festival, Impossible Dance resurfaced in my mind. What I
remembered was a collection of details from Sgorbati’s description of the dance: a pink
suitcase installation, the act of dressing and undressing, slow motion—the influence of
Ring’s time at Min Tinaka’s farm upon her work—and the sense of wonder with which
this dance had left Sgorbati. Even though I invited Ring to gift Impossible Dance in the
festival, a series of emails revealed that I had not seen Impossible Dance.

This is interesting. The dance you’re thinking about is actually called Pink Lady.5 It’s
a much simpler proposition to give this dance to someone than Impossible
Dance; which is a long and quite complex improvisation. . . . I got quite excited
imagining putting this up in St Mark’s Church. And also, at the same time, a little
frightened at the idea of what it would take to give this dance to someone else.
Pink Lady is really just as you described it, dressing and redressing (in pink), rolling
into a space with the pink suitcase, which is filled with pink clothes and has a radio
program of romantic songs emanating from it. (Ring, “No subject”)

As Gill and I noted in the program for the festival, “the space of misremembering became
quite rich. At one point, Ring remarked, ‘What if I gift the dance that is Cori’s memory? As a
kind of mutant hybrid?’ Through a series of conversations,” the gifting for Impossible Dance
began to take shape (“Impossible Dance”).

The impulse to work with Ring grows out of my fascination with her choreography of
disorientation, which stretches our capacities of perception through weathered gesture, visual

5 Pink Lady was part of a larger collaboration between Melinda Ring and visual artist Liz Young
rhythm, and spaces of unknowing. While the content in Ring’s work isn’t explicitly political, her use of form points to a kind of politics, and this is what draws me to her work. Ring disrupts habitual, linear ways of reading and seeing by evoking ruptured states and spaces that are unruly, thrashing, and feminist. For example, during the opening duet of *Hmmm...,*(2009) I remember witnessing messy, complicated, wild bodies flinging and throwing themselves into unruly states. In *X* (2010) and *Forgetful Snow* (2014), she constructs movement vocabularies that are on the verge of rupture. Her sense of architecture, volume, scale, space, inside and outside, borders, centers, and impossibility are carefully crafted, but also destructively scored. In *A dark cloud, walks into a room*, objects and performers share parity, in a bizarre world of intercorporeality. She eschews dichotomies between subject and object, exposing matter in a vibrant state of becoming. Her work takes place in ambiguous spaces and resists singular narratives and hierarchies. By allowing disorientation to occur, normative assumptions, value systems, and meanings have the potential to be re-wired. Disorientation becomes a politic for bringing new possibilities into reach.

**Experiential Research**

Several lines of inquiry, including my experiential research in improvisation, Trisha Brown repertory reconstructions, time-based media archiving, and immersion in the NYC voguing and house dance cultures have been influential in the shaping of the gifting proposal. In this section, I describe how my background comes to bear on my approach to archiving *Impossible Dance*.

As an artist practitioner, I come to this work having studied, performed, directed, and taught improvisation for the past twenty years. Beginning in 1995, I met Nina Martin, an
improviser, teacher, and founding member of Channel Z and Lower Left. Martin’s approach to improvisation draws upon her work with Elaine Summers, Mary Overlie, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Simone Forti, and Deborah Hay, among others. Later, as a student at Bennington College, I worked with Susan Sgorbati, who studied under Judith Dunn and Bill Dixon, in her Emergent Improvisation ensemble. Sgorbati’s approach to improvisation draws upon her close collaboration with Gerald Edelman, Nobel Laureate and Director of the Neurosciences Institute in La Jolla. Reflecting upon his research on consciousness and embodiment, along with her decades of experiential knowledge in improvisational systems, Sgorbati has created a framework for understanding improvisation as a “complex, interconnected system, where there is enough order and interaction to create recognizable pattern but where the form is open-ended enough to continuously bring in new differentiations and integrations that influence and modify the form” (Sgorbati, “Practice”).

It is through this work that I began to understand how to track simultaneous layers of pattern inside improvisational systems. Reading spaces of transition that form and reform, in which no single author directs the visual landscape, requires a perceptual and sensorial engagement with the accumulating and ever-shifting information arising from an improvisation. Being able to perceive of the compositional structuring in its dynamic unfolding is a form of articulation that separates the emergent forms from particular gestures, choreographic vocabularies, and ways of moving. Improvisational systems are processual by nature and require a receptive mode of listening and responding. They create a counterpoint to linear hierarchies; emergent structures are alive through temporally dimensional states of becoming. The forms have enough structure and enough space to allow performers to come to the material with agency. While gifting can be applied to choreographed works to a degree,
my intention is to present this structure as a framework for transmitting improvisation.

Improvisation enables transmission structures, such as gifting, a framework for carrying forward emergent forms in their complexity, rather than the reproduction of choreographed gestures through mimicry and appropriation. In this way, gifting is critically distinguished from repertory processes (the dominant contemporary form of “living” choreographic archives) that codify particular choreographies and forms.

Working intimately with the Trisha Brown Dance Company as a performer for five-years, I witnessed the complexity involved in restaging performance as repertory. When I entered the company, I danced original cast member Eva Karzcag’s role in Set and Reset (1983). I spent hours upon hours learning choreographic phrase material and ensemble forms in the absence of Karzcag. With the aid of videotape and multiple witnesses giving corrections, I was instructed to learn Karczag’s inflection of the Set and Reset phrase material as form, particularly her spatial, geometric, and affective renderings. In 1982, at the time of the initial construction, Brown was working mostly with a cast of dancers who shared backgrounds in improvisation and somatic practice, in addition to classical forms. Brown created the piece incrementally through non-verbal structured improvisations, in which proximity and tactility acted as a cuing system for the Rube Goldberg, cause-and-effect logic of the piece. The dancers were given permission to enter into the piece playfully with their own movement inflections. Studying the piece twenty years later, we were instructed to return to the “definitive version” analyzing the video recordings taken during the building process in the studio. A fear of failing to represent the choreography with a fidelity to an original permeated the reconstruction process. As a result, this diminished a sense of agency for me as a performer. I wondered why didn’t we engage in discussion during the
reconstruction process for Brown’s *Set and Reset*. What did it mean to transmit this piece as repertory over twenty years later? Was it even possible to imitate Karczag’s movement affects as learned choreography? These experiential understandings have led me to seek out forms of transmission that allow for agency, improvisation, and interpretation—where value is placed on qualitative forms of exchange and reiteration, rather than on form, geometry, and imitation of choreographic grammar.

During this time, I also held an archival apprenticeship with former Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) curator Jon Gartenberg, a film historian, archivist, and distributor.6 I was drawn to embody and understand Brown’s kinetic and visual lines of thinking, while simultaneously learning how to track patterns in time-based media archives in the cataloguing and preservation stages. In my time off from Brown’s company, I would meet with Gartenberg in his office on 96th and Amsterdam to work on a variety of film and video projects. We would discuss the performative nature of work by such filmmakers as Ken Jacobs in his *Nervous System* series. As Gartenberg writes in his essay, “The Fragile Emulsion,” “*The Nervous System* brings a pair of stop-motion film projectors into a kind of congress” to underscore the “fundamentally ephemeral nature of the film going experience” (145-6). The subtle changes that emerge, result from the “moment-to-moment shifts of alignment introduced by the projectionist-performer” (Gartenberg 145). In these kind of experimental films, “[F]ilmmakers treat the film emulsion as a living organism. It is an organic substance, a shimmering silver onto which they directly imprint” (Gartenberg 142). The filmmakers’ actions merge and interact with the emulsion, exploding the surface of the film through mark making and tactility. Through conversations with Gartenberg, we explored

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6 Gartenberg was one of the archivists involved in the Variable Media Network, discussed in the introduction.
preservation and reconstruction through ideas of temporality, and imperfection. These conversations informed my work as a performer in Brown’s choreographies; I approach reconstructions through their fluid variability. This is a perceptual approach I have carried with me into the gifting proposal.

Though I would return as archive director in 2009, in 2006 I left the Trisha Brown Dance Company. I immersed myself in the NYC house and voguing communities, studying intensively with legendary House of Ninja voguers: Archie Burnett, Benny Ninja, and Javier Ninja, as a way to disrupt my own cultural upbringing and layers of assumptions as a white postmodern practitioner. In hindsight, these studies are part of a ten-year trajectory in which I use my body as a site of and vehicle for critical examination of the postmodern aesthetic of my training. In contrast to the problematic way some pioneers of the Judson Dance Theater have used authenticity as a concept linked to non-stylized or “neutral” behavior, with House of Ninja, I experienced a deep rewiring of my aesthetic assumptions by placing myself in proximity with bodies that are unlike my own. The most powerful of these experiences was Archie Burnett’s, grandfather of the House of Ninja’s, “reading” of me in his voguing and waacking class in 2008. While working on runway walks, “I chose to walk in . . . a way that was . . . not stylized, or at least my understanding of something not being stylized . . . Archie caught it right away . . . he was able to completely mimic and replicate my non-stylized walk” (DeFrantz). In one instant, Burnett radically reshaped my assumptions around a postmodern idea of neutrality. Moving with passive weight, relaxation, and a deadpan expression were equally a choice, style, and affect. Over the next five years, I studied and danced with Burnett and other members of the House of Ninja in house clubs, and classes. The learning that takes place through dancing, through a body-to-body connection with others, is a cellular,
energetic, molecular learning in which transmission occurs differently than through verbal exchange.

Working in both postmodern dance lineages and social forms emerging from diasporic traditions, I’ve experienced the contrasting ways in which artists conceive of authorship. An artist like Trisha Brown, for example, has filed copyright registrations for the majority of her choreographic works and maintains single authorship. As a result, reconstructions of her work by other people hover around a fraught politic that searches for an authentic or “definitive” representation of the work. By contrast, the embodied knowledge that emerges in forms like voguing and house dance, mutates, moves, and transforms as they are carried on over time. Here, bodily archives act as portals, carrying forward the improvisational ways of knowing that occur between bodies and particular communities. In Choreographing Copyright, Anthea Kraut talks about the “alternative system of copyright” that operates inside social dance cultures. She writes,

[J]azz and tap dancers effectively registered these moves with their peers, who in turn protected their informal copyrights by collectively policing the performances they observed. The fact that the policing was enacted physically—rather than . . . sending a cease and desist letter—suggests how critical embodiment was to this system. (Kraut 141).

Kraut offers the example of the Lindy Hop, which developed and spread through a practice of “trading” steps. As Lindy Hopper Frankie Manning put it, “If another person learned your step . . . it could spread, and the dance could advance . . . If we couldn’t steal, I don’t think Lindy hopping would have lasted as long” (qtd. in Kraut 135). As in the case of Lindy Hop, the improvisational forms and structures offer an embodied episteme that is kept alive through the formation of the social. Instead of there being an original company or original work, there are originators. In each dancer, there is a social responsibility for being
accountable to lineage; the traces of particular dances and forms are part of a socially held body. There are stakes to performing stolen movements that can result in “vocal, corporeal, and immediate” responses (Kraut 141). This active policing of form and lineage within particular communities are part of their continued survival and transmission; movements behave as mnemonic reserves that are passed and kept alive corporeally. Applied to the frame of gifting, I am interested in the way in which the accountability of the social provides a way of understanding an ethics of exchange as rooted in cultural memory; the social allows improvisational systems to remain alive in their constant transmutation and reconfiguration.

**Elements of Gifting**

The first premise of the gifting proposal is to initiate a process of exchange that redirects the way authorship is typically attributed within concert dance settings. I invite the two artists to enter into a “call and response of cross- and inter-authorships” in which the gifting and receiving artist are non-hierarchically positioned. The dialogue requires a qualitative proximity in which each person’s embodied knowledge becomes the fodder. There needs to be a complicity in the exchange, in which the desire to give, receive, and continue to transmit emerges from a place of agency. In this process, Ring transfers her accumulated history of practices, trainings, and lineages to Kleinbard who meets this gift with his own entangled history. The histories, alive within each person, come together to form a complex entanglement. A fulcrum emerges between the two people—between the memory of the former version of the dance and the future imagining of the dance. Sensing what is alive in the other, each artist looks for points of convergence, overlap, and divergence. In reconfiguring the work into a new iteration, the receiving artist teaches the gifting artist about the unseen spaces of the work. In seeing the work changed by the receiving artist’s
inflection, the giving artist responds. The transmission moves in a dimensional orb; each artist transmits ways of knowing that become reconstituted in the other. Knowledge is assembled through a collective effort, which, according to Diana Taylor, requires a “series of back-and-forth conversations that produce multiple results . . . Back and forth. The versions change with each transmission, and each creates slips, misses, and new interpretations that result in a somewhat new original” (Archive XX).

The gifting proposal works to disrupt the kind of transmission practices that take place in museum and concert dance contexts by untethering them from an adherence to ideas of “originality.” In French historian Paul Connerton’s book How Societies Remember, he describes memory as being “sedimented, or amassed, in the body” (72). In contrast to “environments of memory” that are created by archives, museums, and monuments, performance forms engage with the gestures, practices, and improvisational ways of knowing that occur through a social memory. The movement of forms and practices through the social allows performance to remain alive.

In modernist forms, there is a tendency towards claiming values of “originality, the transgressive, and, again, the ‘authentic’” (Taylor, Archive 9). According to Diana Taylor, this “emphasis on originality, ephemerality, and newness hides multiple rich and long traditions of performance practice” (Archive 9). Ideas of individual originality are key to Western art practices. In Anthea Kraut’s Choreographing Copyright, she discusses how “copyright law’s fixity and originality requirements, as well as its emphasis on individual rather than communal creativity, privilege a Western approach to art-making” (7-8).  

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7 According to Kraut, “[A] large body of scholarship has demonstrated that black vernacular traditions are not only collectively created, orally transmitted, and improvisational, but also make regular use of ‘signifyin’ or intertextual techniques. Consequently, the reasoning goes, they fail to conform to the very structural elements of the copyright system—such as the requirements of tangible
Copyright law only protects original choreographic works that are fixed in a tangible medium of expression, including video, notation, and textual description. Kraut makes the argument that “much of copyright’s value for choreographers lay in the way it enabled them to position themselves as possessive individuals and rights-bearing subjects rather than as commodities and objects of exchange” (xiii). Exploring the tensions around copyright, as it relates to performance and ideas of originality, she also finds the “relationship between the original and the copy in American performance” to be “haunted by the legacy of slavery and its cultural corollary, minstrelsy” (Kraut 98). While there isn’t room to expand upon this history in this writing, Kraut’s exploration of originality raises questions around the institutionalization of performance; in the case of minstrelsy, “originality” becomes a construct that strips authenticity and authorship from dispossessed people.

When enacted within museal contexts, the curating of transmission involves a complex negotiation around the ethics of exchange. According to Carrie Lambert-Beatty in “Performance Police,” the museum “produces, a particular set of terms. The coordinates it gives for performance are not presence and trace, or embodiment and image, or immediacy and mediation—but circulation and restriction.” With gifting, my intention is to create a horizontal platform of exchange in which the embodied technologies that emerge from improvisational practices can be shared and re-imagined to remain differently, instead of

(written) form, and minimal standard of originality” (130). Kraut raises important points about originality in American culture, particularly related to the history of minstrelsy. While I don’t have room to expand here, these ideas are part of a much larger conversation, they inform my thinking about the ethics of transmission. Kraut writes, “‘originality’ for whites meant the impersonation of ‘black’ music, dance, and rhetorical styles. For African Americans who began performing on the minstrel stage beginning in the 1860s, ‘originality’ was colossally fraught. Forced to apply burnt cork to their skin and to adhere to the script established by white performers, black artists performed their own imitations of white imitations. . . . [B]lack performance as it emerged out of minstrelsy, and out of a set of racialized property relations that assigned whites the rights to black labor, was always already regarded as derivative” (98).
reproducing ideas of originality, and restricting the transmission of works through the institutionalization of rights. These practices fall outside the bounds of copyright law, which does not protect the ideas, procedures, processes, systems, methods of operation, concepts, principles, or discoveries: they only protect physical representations. Here, the forms, structures, and technologies of improvisational systems act as forms of knowing, requiring their transmission, and constant reconfiguration to remain alive.

Also related to questions of originality, the idea of literary translation is a useful framework for thinking about gifting and reiteration. In Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei, Eliot Weinberger and Octavia Paz suggest that “poetry lives in a state of perpetual transformation, perpetual translation: the poem dies when it has no place to go” (180). Applied to the gifting process, the gift interpreter extends the life of the original through “perpetual translation,” archiving the work through the body. Not unlike the unruliness of Ring’s Impossible Dance, some translations are “constantly rebelling” (Weinberger et al. 184). There is a force, energy, and mattered exchange in which the “living matter” of the work “functions somewhat like DNA, spinning out individual translations, which are relatives, not clones, of the original” (Weinberger et al. 184). A straight attempt to translate the original is not only impossible, but results in stilted representation. In literary translation, authors play with rhythm, texture, diction, and syntax, within a particular idiom, honoring the original, whilst departing in ways that are generative. Like literary translation, performance

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8 Borrowing from Rebecca Schneider’s concept, “performance remains differently,” gifting archives an original differently. For Schneider, “To the degree that it remains, but remains differently or in difference, the past performed and made explicit as (live) performance can function as the kind of bodily transmission conventional archivists dread, a counter-memory—almost in the sense of an echo” (Performing 105).

9 My thinking is also informed by Walter Benjamin’s important essay, “The Task of the Translator” in which he establishes translation as an art unto itself. According to Benjamin, “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as
transmission relies on a sedimented and interactive approach that “becomes itself through messy and eruptive re-appearance” (Schneider, *Performing* 102). This is a process of transmutation where the “bodily, read through genealogies of impact and ricochet, is arguably always interactive” (Schneider, *Performing* 102). In this spirit, gifting relies on an interactive structure of exchange, in which an original is cast differently through transmutation.

In understanding gifting as an archival-curatorial structure of exchange, I find that transmutation can occur through ethical structures of exchange that are qualitative rather than financial, allowing for a widening frame of social relations. In “The Spirit of the Gift,” Marshall Sahlins discusses French sociologist Marcel Mauss’s influential writing in *The Gift*. For Mauss, exchange moves through the three acts of giving, receiving, and repaying. According to Sahlins, “[Y]ou give something to me; your spirit (*hau*) in that things obliges me to reciprocate” (160). Though Mauss’s research is based on “archaic” societies, his ideas are relevant to gifting through this ethical structure of exchange; no one is supposed to commercially benefit from the gift. Often connected to fertility and ecology, there is a regenerative quality in gift exchange, in which the gift grows through its circulation. As part of this dynamic, there is an ethics to the exchange, “one man’s gift should not be another man’s capital” (Sahlins 160). Mauss refers to this structure as a “total social phenomenon,” in

though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully” (“The Task” 260). Translation creates a relationship between languages, passing not unlike the gift, “from one language into another through a continuum of transformations” (“On Language” 70)

10 In *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, Lewis Hyde talks about the circulation of the gift, “In all we have seen so far—the Gaelic tale, the Kula ring, the rites of the first fruit, feeding the forest *hau*; and so on—fertility is often a concern, and invariable either the bearers of the gift or the gift itself grows as a result of its circulation. . . . Living things that we classify as gifts really grow, of course, but even inert gifts, such as the Kula articles, are felt to increase—in worth or in liveliness—as they move from hand to hand” (32).
which “every exchange . . . cannot be understood in its material terms apart from its social terms” (qtd. in Sahlins 183).

Exemplified in the Kula, the ceremonial exchange in the Trobriand Islands, which was studied by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, “the Trobrianders circulate several necklaces made of shells from island to island in a clockwise direction, and bracelets counterclockwise” (Risaliti et al. 291). The ownership of these items is quite transitory; the articles are never kept for longer than a year or two. The gifts are not useful as necessities, “but they are culturally indispensable, because these exchanges serve to bind together a society dispersed among islands” (Risaliti et al. 291). In this example, gifting cultivates the creation of social relations, enlivening encounters across geographies and cultures. In using a gifting framework, this project resists capitalistic structures of commodification and distribution. Gifting cultivates qualities of regeneration, in which improvisational knowledge is transmitted, rather than preserved, or treated as a commodity or value at another person’s expense. In this way, gifting is a practice of producing social, economic, and qualitative relations.

The primary elements of gifting involve dynamics around authorship, originality, reiteration, gift economies, and sociality; all aspects present during the exchange between

11 Throughout various periods in art, Mauss’s ideas of gift exchange have been a central object of discussion in contemporary art practice and theory, particularly in the 1990s. One example of this interest in gifting is the 2001 exhibition and volume *Il dono: Offerta ospitalità insidia/The Gift: Generous Offerings and Threatening Hospitality* (Risaliti et al.), which includes curated discussions in anthropology, philosophy, literary theory and contemporary art.

12 In *Choreographing Copyright*, Anthea Kraut acknowledges how, “The steady give-and-take of dance steps among black vernacular dance communities arguably bears a closer resemblance to a gift or barter economy, in which dance material is exchanged for reasons other than profit. In genres like tap and jazz dance, the rules of the game mandated that a ‘stolen’ step remain in circulation by being ‘re-gifted’ in reinvented form. Transactions in these expressive traditions were thus ‘caught up in circuits of reciprocity’ involving ‘chains of debt and return.’ The apparent misfit between copyright and African American vernacular dance would thus seem to be a matter not only of aesthetic but also economic principle” (137-138).
Melinda Ring and Kai Kleinbard. Gifting enables an original work to morph or shape-shift through another artist’s reiteration. From my vantage point in the audience at Danspace Project in 2015, Kleinbard’s performance heightened a sense of danger, precarity, and impossibility, which was accomplished through his use of objects. In a conversation with Susan Sgorbati at Bennington College, I remarked,

> What’s really interesting is that Kai’s physicality, with his background in martial arts, lent itself to a kind of virtuosity. . . . They [the objects] were never centered. They were always falling. There were always too many piled on top of each other. I know part of Aikido is learning what your opponent’s balance point is, so I think he was doing this with the objects—tipping the balance points. (Sgorbati, ”Interview”)

As part of Kleinbard’s training and background, he was able to take a massive amount of weight from the objects, while manipulating them in precarious positions; this gave the piece a quality of danger. When he lay under the pile of objects, the feeling of impossibility was palpable; I wondered if he would ever get out from under the pile. Had he been instructed to move like Ring, he may have never discovered his own relationship to the objects. His quality of physicality extended the meaning of the impossibility, renewing the life in the work. This quality of regeneration is an essential structural consideration that lives at the center of gifting as an archival-curatorial proposal. With the spirit of keeping the gift in motion, the next iterations may involve Kleinbard gifting Impossible Dance to another artist, an interdisciplinary gift exchange in which the receiving artist will reinterpret the work in a different discipline, and the continuation of this structure with other artists.
III. Towards a Transitional Archive: 
Objects and Photographs as Mnemonics

For [A dark cloud, walks into a room], the paper is acted upon. In being acted upon, it’s given a new value. It’s waste that has value. I can’t store it, or collect it in ways artists conserve their artworks. . . . At the end of my last residency, . . . [r]eluctantly, I finally crammed it all into a trash barrel, felt like I had killed it.
—Melinda Ring

In Chapter One, I describe the archival-curatorial structure of gifting, which utilizes the forms and structures from improvisational practice as a vehicle for exchange. Gifting centers the body-to-body transmission of performance through a regenerative approach to the archiving of improvisation. Exploring the objects and documents that emerge from performance, Chapter Two focuses on the second principle informing my methodology, referred to as mnemonics. Mnemonics is a term I use to describe the documents and objects that emerge from an artist’s work and practice and their particular relationship to memory. In performance archives, these documents can take the form of sculpture, video, film, sets, costumes, drawings, writings, scores, notations, and audio. Guiding questions framing my research include: How do these materials act as retrieval systems for the senses? How are they embedded with embodied experience?

The primary thrust of this inquiry relies on an adaptive, improvisational approach, which responds to the unique material emerging from an artist’s practice and work. With each artist, I look at these documents and objects as evidence of particular ways of working. Foregrounding the formal structures that emerge from an artist’s practice and work, I seek to model the archival container in relationship to the form and content of the work.

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13 Refer to Appendix A: Transcript from interview with Melinda Ring, pp. 76-77.
14 I put this method into practice in 2009 as their archive director of the Trisha Brown Dance Company in a cataloguing and preservation initiative to archive the choreographies in Trisha Brown’s oeuvre. Drawing upon my embodied relationship as a dancer in the work, background in the archiving
In Melinda Ring’s choreographic work, found objects, furniture, and fabricated sculptural objects act as a mnemonic for accessing and remembering movement. For the performers, these objects trigger kinetic memories, assisting with the retrieval of information while dancing. In Ring’s current work, *A dark cloud, walks into a room*, she has fabricated a series of brown paper blankets. I’m interested in the ways these materials become a record and history of movement, bearing the weight, pressure, and touch from the performers’ gestures. In this chapter, I discuss my creation of a digital publication entitled, *transitional object archive*, which uses a three-part structure: photography, oral histories, and my own elaboration through language to archive the use of these objects as mnemonics. Looking at the objects used in *Impossible Dance* and *A dark cloud, walks into a room*, I consider how these materials might live inside an archive.

As part of curating the work, I wanted to revisit the site of Ring’s first performance of *Impossible Dance* at Bennington College in 1999, seeing if the memory of the original space might provoke any new findings. In a weeklong residency at Bennington College in February 2017, Ring, Kleinbard, and I photographed the enclosure and series of objects from *Impossible Dance* to document the transitional objects that appear and disappear from this improvisational work. Exploring the idea of relations in the archive, Ring and I collaborated on a documentation structure as a fluid exchange that mirrors that which occurs within the context of rehearsal, photographing the objects from multiple perspectives. During this process, I captured audio-recordings from improviser and performer Kleinbard describing his

of time-based media works with archivist Jon Gartenberg, and understanding of Brown’s artistic practice, I looked to articulate a space between documentation and embodiment. In the Trisha Brown Archive Dossier, I write, “Brown’s interest in uncovering an alphabet of movement and her attention to gesture in accumulated form are paramount in the way video and film are utilized to document her process. Her process has evolved through multiple modes of capture, in which the many years of video documentation, along with her writings and drawings, encapsulate her elusive, improvisational approach to moving” (‘Trisha Brown’).
embodied experience with the objects. Last, using what is known as “thick description,” I began playing with my own subjectivity, interpretation, and positionality in the practice of describing objects. Made famous in the 1970s by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose ethnography was written in this style, “thick description” has gradually come to mean a way of writing qualitatively with great detail and context. By representing multiple voices in a kind of polyvocality, my project documents a multiplicity of origin stories relating to the objects’ use. Drawing upon the power of words to expose the vibrant nature of “thing-power,” a term coined by political theorist Jane Bennett, I attempt a fluid archiving of materials left at the edges of choreographic practice.

Form and Structure: A Digital Assemblage

This archive builds upon the formal properties of digital space, photography, and textual description to reflect the “unruly, impossible” nature of Ring’s interdisciplinary work. Playing with representation in a fluid capacity, I will situate the photographs, written descriptions, and oral histories in a digital archive to create a dimensional portrait of the work. Foregrounding subjectivity, this project plays with the constructed nature of an archive as a generative space. Formally, the project responds to the artistic properties of an artist’s work through collaborative and immersive exchange. In its construction, the archive borrows upon Jane Bennett’s notion of a “joint agency of that occurs between person-place-and thing” (“Powers”).

In her essay “Time-Based History: Perspectives on Documenting Performance,” Nik Wakefield talks about the way in which the “processual nature of performance” is alive “through its various iterative appearances: plans, scores, experiences, documents, and memories. Each becoming is a transitional process” (173). The linking of a “multisensory,
cognitive, affective, spiritual” series of “becomings and appearances” forms the foundation for what has been “called ‘forms’ in art history” (Wakefield 173). In performance, form is living, transitional, and temporal. Citing the work of French art historian Henri Focillon, Wakefield argues that “form is what goes on living, is what remains, because it continues to change” (173). She points out that “this is not deterministic, because form is life, so it moves, changes, and even acts” (Wakefield 173).

Sharing this perspective on form as living and transmutable, this project echoes the transitory and temporal nature of Ring’s relationship to objects. This project relates photography—as a temporal medium—to the material presence of objects, inviting a re-thinking of objects as monumental and fixed in form. Borrowing from Rebecca Schneider’s description of the “cross-temporal” properties of photography, what she characterizes as the way photographs speak to future witnesses, this archive invites multiple conceptions of what might be considered live. In an interview with Diana Taylor, Schneider calls into question the idea that cameras create images that are not live, raising the specter of a “future witness” to the event (via the photograph) to ask “whether this event is really only delimited to this time now and is not live after this event” (Schneider, “Interview”). The future witness engages in a temporal relationship, extending the duration of the initial photographed event. Similarly, my transitional object archive invites a “cross-temporal” relationship in the way the photograph occupies the memory of objects and performer, and the space of a future witness. The digital site acts as a temporary exhibition space, allowing for multiple viewings across

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15 In this interview, Schneider goes on to say, “If we don’t make liveness only mean now, a lot of things come undone with that. It can become very slippery . . . If we allow time to be porous, if we can touch historical moments porously through engagements of the live with the no longer live, where we don’t delimit it all to just death – that’s dead and this is alive – but let ourselves have cross-temporal conversations with things so that we now talk to a future. . . . These things are knitted . . . they are very cross-constituted” (Schneider, “Interview”).
time and space. The lives of the objects, via the photograph and digital space, extend into further futures. The purpose, which is manifold, is to stretch the life of the objects by allowing them to remain as a mnemonic reserve for Ring’s choreographic work. The visual and textual information create a thickening that asks the viewer to pause and slow the encounter. The aesthetic ramification for slowing is to expand spaces of receptivity and empathy. Particularly in a digital era, with its emphasis on speed, it is important to ask how might we slow the navigating of the virtual.

As the archivist-curator of this project, my intention is to preserve and foster the qualitative relations between the performer and objects, rather than the objects themselves. In Impossible Dance, Ring works with found objects, sourcing and returning them to each location. Once the materials are photographed and exhibited online, they will be discarded or returned. This goes against the grain of a library repository archive, which is structured to facilitate preservation of and access to archival items. As mentioned in the introduction, these archives act as a scaffold for preservation, attempting to slow the effects of time on the objects through the minimal exposure to heat, humidity, and other environmental variables. The transitional object archive acknowledges a temporal transiency, only attempting to slow time for the viewer. In this project, the digital site acts to hold the presence of the objects’ vibrant power, while allowing their physical remains to be returned, in the case of found objects, or discarded in the process.

Towards an Object Relations

Reflected in the form of this project are the ideas of psycholanylist D.W. Winnicott, whose research in child psychology has influenced artists and theorists such as Maggie Nelson, Wayne Koestenbaum, and Eve Sedgwick, among others. Using Winnicott’s notion
of a “holding environment” and “transitional object,” which I describe below, I propose for a method of archiving that embeds a fluid exchange of transitioning at its core.

Winnicott’s object relations theory explains how objects play an essential role during all stages of human development. According to Winnicott, a “transitional object” allows for the separation of the mother so that a child can soothe themselves through the object. These objects are our “first possessions.” During infant development, these objects take the form of a favorite toy, stuffed animal, a blanket, and no matter how scrappy or smelly or dirty, they hold vibrancy, meaning, and importance. These weathered objects are alive through a complex entanglement that lives between the person and the object. The meanings that emerge in relation to the object are a result of a complex set of relations: proximity, tactility, the ability to internalize, to create value, to discover agency, desire, and to animate the inanimate. This complex system offers a mattering to seemingly insignificant matter.

A child’s interactions with objects, which assemble and form over time, constitute a mnemonic reserve that allows them to navigate inside and outside, intimacy and separation. This object relating takes place inside a “holding environment,” which is meant to enable the infant to transition and separate from the parent. The environment supports three functions identified by Winnicott as “holding,” “handling,” and “object-presenting,” terms used to describe the slow weening that occurs between the mother figure and the infant. These stages allow for a physical and environmental containment, which acts as a continuity to the envelopment in the womb.

My purpose for applying these terms to the structure of this archive is to enable Ring to transition towards the discarding of her material—a goal that she expressed at the outset of

16 For Winnicott, infants emerge through a transitional phenomena, where “perhaps a bundle of wool or the corner of a blanket or eiderdown, or a word or tune, or a mannerism—that becomes vitally important to the infant for use at the time of going to sleep, and is a defense against anxiety” (5).
the project. The digital site provides a holding environment that holds, handles, and object-presents. This interface, still in the design stages, enables a space of encounter in which the user can experience the relations present between the objects, performers, and the ideas in Ring’s choreographic practice. Functioning as a simple gallery, the user will be able to enter the world of each object visually,aurally, and linguistically. The first encounter will involve a gallery of images, revealing each object photographed at the item level. In clicking further, the next series of images will reveal the objects in motion with the performer as a complex series of entanglements. These photographs will be accompanied by audio files of Kai Kleinbard describing his kinetic memory of each object. My own elaboration, in the form of dense written descriptions, will provide material for the viewer to read and linger on, as an attempt to slow the viewer’s navigation. The descriptions will be available as the viewer clicks on each image.

My intention is to summon sensorial, dimensional, and fluid relations. Performance is transitional by nature and the archiving of these forms benefits from an understanding of emergence, mutability, and ever-fluid transitioning. Using the frameworks of the “holding environment” and “transitional object” provides one answer to dance’s ephemerality that doesn’t attempt to save performance through the preservation of its documents. My approach is one of animation, rather than preservation.

**Disorientation**

*Impossible Dance* involves a messy accumulation of objects and actions that come into the space gradually. In this work, Ring uses physical and kinesthetic disorientation as a form of orientation; this tension is central in understanding how to document the objects from this piece. In Kai Kleinbard’s performance of *Impossible Dance*, he enters and exits from a
partially constructed room, maneuvering the objects and furniture precariously. Allowing the force of gravity to collide with his sense of orientation, his head is never upright. He composes relationships between himself and the objects that are always slightly skewed. In speaking with Ring about disorientation, she indicates,

I made a note one day while working with Kai, “not always top”—your head doesn’t always have to be on top . . . I started to equate a kind of rationality of the head being at the top of the body. It’s the primary place where everything comes from. If the head isn’t on top, I don’t know, you start thinking out of your ass (laughs) or something like that. (Ring, “Interview,” 3 Mar. 2016)

The effects of these kinds of postures register subliminally—it’s very unconscious, something an audience can feel. In talking with Ring about the piece, she describes the multiple layers of disorientation that are happening simultaneously. She says, “I created an impossible situation. It’s what I want a dance to be. . . . I like it that way” (Ring, “Interview,” 7 Mar. 2016).

In witnessing Kleinbard’s performance, I remember this process involving the disruption of control. In one instance, he hangs precariously in the doorway, head drooping below his center of gravity. Falling, he drifts to the edges, but never beyond the fourth wall of the partially constructed room. He uses all aspects of his body to meld with the objects, touching multiple surfaces and edges simultaneously. In one moment he seeks to pull all the furniture in a large haphazard tangle through the small doorway. The surfaces of the objects explode with energy. Gravity is a reminder of the real. Towards the end of the piece, Kleinbard lies halfway through the door, a large metal table and wooden chair collapsed on top of him. The entire pile of stuff appears to be breathing. By allowing disorientation to occur, Impossible Dance encourages viewers to “see obliquely,” which is a new way of
looking at the world. This dynamic is echoed in Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*, where she writes,

> Disorientation could be described here as the “becoming oblique” of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior, as that which is given, or as that which gives what is given its new angle. (162)

This oblique seeing, at the level of perception, is an essential part of Ring’s choreographic work. In *Impossible Dance*, the body literally moves in precarious angles, lending itself to imperfection and clumsiness. When harnessed as a composing tool within the improvisation, this oblique seeing captures the imperfect spaces of memory.

**Photography as a Strategy of Oblique Seeing**

In keeping with formal properties of *Impossible Dance*, Ring and I have collaborated on an approach to documentation that reflects her interest in disorientation. As the archivist-curator, I am interested in seeing what happens when Ring documents the work from her perspective. Foregrounding the artist’s practice is a primary aspect of this methodology. The purpose of our experiment isn’t to document the dance.¹⁷ We are interested in seeing if it is possible to document the behaviors and “intra-actions” between Kleinbard and the objects, while adhering to the formal aspects of the work, which involve disorientation and a messy accumulation. Intra-action is queer theorist Karen Barad’s term for describing the way in which, “Reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but “things”–in-phenomena. The world is intra-activity in its differential mattering” (“Posthumanist” 817). How might the notion of intra-activity inform the practice of documentation and archiving? Applied to *Impossible Dance*, Barad’s term invites a breaking

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¹⁷ A document of this kind might involve a stationary wide shot, which captures the choreographic form, including the placement of the movement in space, the entrances and exits, along with a close-up camera that captures details.
down of distinctions between object/subject and offers a performativity to the way the objects, document, and performer are already “intra-acting.”

On the first day of our residency at Bennington College, Ring and I met to re-construct the enclosure from the original piece. Ring selected a series of nine 4’x8’ theater flats, painted in a variety of ways. No alterations were made to the paint color. Grouping them together by color and size, Ring made decisions about the placement of each flat. In two hours, a partial room was constructed. After constructing the room, we pulled a series of found objects and furniture from the furniture room, props room, soft goods room, and chair room. I created an item-level index of the objects from each space. A partial listing includes: trash can lids, mop, broom, various sized sticks, metal bucket, plastic milk crate, stuffed animal, white PVC pipe, green hose scraps, rope scraps, wooden chair, plastic white chair, metal folding chair, bench, small wooden table, carpet roll, and so forth. I watched Ring make quick and perceptive choices, wondering how she determines which objects are suitable. Later in an interview, I query Ring about the selection process. She describes,

There is a sort of selection process. I wouldn’t have filled the room with chairs that are all one color. I balance out the color of the [theater] flats. This establishes something. There’s always a white chair. It’s important that some objects are white. There is an intuition around the selection. I look to create variety, bringing attention to a variety of shapes and color, without being too clever.18

Before shooting, Ring and I reviewed the method of documentation. After a few trial and error experiments, Ring decided to operate two cameras simultaneously: one from the object’s perspective, and one from her perspective. This is in keeping with the “dual mind” that Impossible Dance requires; it structurally asks the performer to engage a disruption of habits and impulses while simultaneously accessing a composer mind. We both decide that a

18 Refer to Appendix B: Iteration History, pp. 78-82.
schism of multiple layers of attention occurring simultaneously is apt for the process of documenting—enacting the very embodiment that the piece calls for.\(^{19}\)

During three days of shooting, Ring fastens her small GoPro camera to a variety of objects. This camera records *Impossible Dance* from the object’s perspective, creating a reference point to its own conditions or circumstances. In some instances, Ring tapes the GoPro camera to the object in a way that references itself—inside the metal bucket, inside the plastic bag—so that a portion of the object becomes visible in the photograph.\(^{20}\) This camera is controlled through an application on Ring’s phone. Ring simultaneously operates another small digital camera, photographing from inside the enclosure. Her interest is to give preference to the life of the objects, rather than shooting the actions of the dance. In the process of shooting the following strategies emerge. In one approach, Ring actively frames Kleinbard and the objects as an assemblage, approaching the documentation compositionally. As another technique, Ring takes several shots to form an action series or animation between the Kleinbard and the objects. Ring moves three-dimensionally around Kleinbard and the objects. The point of view of shooting captures the objects off-kilter. Disorientation is the intentional orientation for the documentation style.

When there is parity between Kleinbard and the objects, the performer-object-environment assemblage is revealed. Throughout the process, I discover that the photographs are most dimensional and engaging when Kleinbard is given agency to enter into the lived improvisations of the piece. Also, by having two sets of photographs from two different perspectives, the exchange between the performer-object-environment becomes animated. The object-oriented photographs capture Kleinbard’s actions and the environment. Ring’s

\(^{19}\) Refer to Appendix C: *transitional object archive* – photography, written description, and oral history offerings, pp. 83.

\(^{20}\) Refer to Appendix C.1: Photographs shot from the object’s perspective, pp. 84.
photographs document the object-performer assemblages.\textsuperscript{21} These two sets of photographs speak to one another.

Ring and I additionally constructed a makeshift and partial white cube space, within the black box theater. Familiar with the aesthetics of documentation in fine art contexts, in which sculptures are installed in pristine white cube gallery spaces, we decided to leave all the seams in the floor visible, not attempting to be too tidy. Here the size and scale of the objects were not necessarily self-evident. Ring photographed each object at the item level. In looking through the two sets of images, it became clear that the photographs of the performer-object-environment assemblage are closer to the aesthetic nature of \textit{Impossible Dance}. The single object photographs omit the performed relations; in these photographs, the objects appear flaccid and lifeless.\textsuperscript{22}

By playing with perspective and point of view, what becomes legible or illegible through the documentation can radically alter the remembrance of a dance. Subjectivity and randomness are imprinted in these photographs, revealing the ways in which the methods of shooting shape how a document comes to be.

\textbf{Written Descriptions: Words as Sticky Substances}

In the written descriptions, I experiment with political theorist Jane Bennett’s notion of “words as sticky substances” by approaching the archiving of Ring’s objects at the “level of their sensuous specificity” (“Powers”). Bennett proposes that “words can be deployed as sticky substances to slow the perceptual transformation of thing-power . . . into human-powers: imaginative projection, artistic production, use or aesthetic value” (“Powers”). Textual description of this nature is rarely in finding aids or library database systems. A

\textsuperscript{21} Refer to Appendix C.2: Photographs shot from Melinda Ring’s perspective, pp. 86-87.
\textsuperscript{22} Refer to Appendix C.3: Photographs of the makeshift white cube space, pp. 88.
finding aid typically provides an overview on the collection (for example, information about
the creator, dates, size and scope, and sometimes an abstract), a summary on the method of
arrangement, a historical overview (describing the biographical and/or historical details and
significance as they pertain to the collection), various restrictions and rights, a listing of
exhibitions and publications, and an inventory by box, item, and/or folder level.

In the New York Performing Arts Library cataloguing records, the following fields
come to represent the objects and documents from performance: description (usually
pertaining to the size, format, total running time of the document), type of content, a
summary (giving the details of the collection summary), contents description (usually related
to a performance program with details such as title, artists, performers, date, location), credits,
performer listing, genre/form designations, added author, added titles, and a unique
cataloguing number. These details enable the objects to be tracked within the library database
system through all phases of preservation and access.

While a database with standardized nomenclature is absolutely necessary for the
efficient identification and location of material, enriched textual information has the potential
to provide an animation of the material. My approach takes an authorial and editorial role,
rendering the presentation of the archived materials through a particular voice. Many would
suggest that this inserts too much interpretation into a space that should be objective, neutral,
and democratic. While this may be true, I have found that notions of neutrality and
democracy are laden with complexities around issues of representation, and that they, when
invoked, preserve certain orders, hierarchies, and meanings. Summoning the philosophies of
Karen Barad, my intention is to call “into question the dualisms of object/subject,
knower/known, nature/culture, and word/world,” and to look for linkages across the
seemingly “disjoint domains of words and things” ("Posthumanist” 811). Here, this digital site functions formally as a publication. My authorial rendering is an attempt to honor the vibrancy of matter, to thicken relations, and to offer poetic prose as a formal strategy for revealing the embodied experiences that surround these objects.23

**Thing-power**

In “Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter,” a talk given by political theorist Jane Bennett at the New School in 2011, Bennett discusses her notion of “thing-power” in relationship to hoarding. Bennett proposes that a hoarder is “bad at subtraction, but good at reception.” A hoarder has an unusually porous receptivity towards the “somatic affectivity of objects” which draws them into the enchantment of things. For Bennett,

> Thing-power entails the ability to shift or vibrate between different states of being, to go from trash/inanimate/resting to treasure/animate/alert. Thing-power is also a relational effect, a function of several things operating at the same time or in conjunction with one another” ("The Force” 354).

Thing-power and vibrant materialism offer tool for thinking about porosity as a characteristic of Ring’s approach to objects. For Bennett, all bodies (human and non-human) are intercorporeal. We “have a membrane around us, a membrane around all bodies, and they’re somewhat porous” (Bennett, “Powers”). For Bennett, there is a “certain porosity intrinsic to any material body, be it this one [pointing to her own body], or metal, or plastic . . . It’s in the nature of bodies, again I’m invoking Spinoza here, to be susceptible to infusion, invasion, collaboration by or with other bodies” (“Powers”).

> “Porosity” perfectly articulates Ring’s enigmatic composing of dancer-object-environment. In *A dark cloud, walks into a room*, the paper blankets, fabricated from brown paper bags, are clouds. They are animate—light but holding form. They appear as if piles of

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23 Refer to Appendix C.4: Written description – Words a Sticky Substances, pp. 89.
bodies, rubble enveloped in crinkles that hold their shape. Time slowly elapses as the performers stumble, twirl, and stomp in a windswept world of torn paper blankets. The paper blankets, like trash, take on their own vibrational qualities. In a parallel journey, Bennett comments on her 2002 walk through the Chesapeake Bay:

> When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me. . . . I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics. (*Vibrant* 5)

This trash has a shimmering force, oscillating in a network of relations. This force, which can be likened with *chi*, life force, or energy, moves through all matter. In *cloud*, invisible forces penetrate all aspects of the space, holding all matter in equal rapport. This intercorporeal relating taking place between the objects and performers is like imprinting—“each bears the imprint of the other” (Bennett, "Powers").

For Bennett, thing-power bears resemblance to David Thoreau’s notion of the wild, an unbound force that extends beyond human boundaries. According to Bennett, wilderness is a force that is “intrinsically resistant to representation” (*Vibrant* xv-xvi). This task of enunciating that which defies or resists representation requires a receptive rather than subtractive relationship to perception. In Bennett’s lecture she suggests, “Let’s try to sharpen our understanding of the vitality of things by thickening our description” ("Powers").

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24 Bennett uses “shi” instead of the more common “chi” to refer to the same concept. She writes, “Shi is the style, energy, propensity, trajectory, or élan inherent to a specific arrangement of things. Originally a word used in military strategy, shi emerged in the description of a good general who much be able to read and then ride the shi of a confederation of moods, winds, historical trends, and armaments: shi names the dynamic force emanating from a spatio-temporal configuration rather than from any particular element within in” (Bennett, *Vibrant* 35).
thickening the descriptive text typically used in an archive, there is the potential to channel the vibrational power of matter.\textsuperscript{25}

Evoking wildness at the site of an archive is part of the ongoing research of this methodology. How can language, which so imperfectly represents non-verbal experience, incite bodily responses? In thinking through ways of enriching the descriptive text used in performance archives, I call forth a visceral, vibrational slippage between experience and language.\textsuperscript{26} Drawing upon the qualitative, affective, social, and embodied dynamics of words through their rhythm, tone, texture, nuance, inflection, and punctuated gaps and pauses, my intention is to evoke writing that is bodied and musical.

*Transitional object archive* is a hybrid archival-curatorial framework that responds to the objects choreographer Melinda Ring has gathered, fabricated, or created in her works *Impossible Dance* and *A dark cloud, walks into a room*. Constructed as a digital archive using photography, oral histories, and textual description, this project plays with the intermingling of matter, imagining Melinda Ring’s use of objects as thing-power. Complicating distinctions between object/subject, I form an archive of relations that relies on the transitional nature of the objects from performance.

\textsuperscript{25} In calling upon the liveliness of matter, it’s necessary to foreground why matter often slips into the background. In Bennett’s New School lecture she exposes the following impediments: “One source of the tendency is a philosophical cannon that is based on the presumption that man is the measure of all things. Another source is a default grammar that diligently assigns activity to subjects and passivity to objects. And of course, the third impediment is what Bergson identified as the pragmatic bias built into the way we perceive, the physiological structure of perception, screens out the vitality of materiality. It sort of focuses on how we can use stuff and that brings to the fore it’s passive quality” (Bennett, ”Powers”).

\textsuperscript{26} Refer to Appendix C.5: Transcript from oral histories with Kai Kleinbard, pp. 90.
IV. Book as Gift Artifact: 
Locating Description in the Tactile

In this chapter, I continue my exploration of objects through the creation of a book as a transitional object. Here, the book gestures back towards the performed iterations of Impossible Dance in the ways it archives and recalls the work in printed form. In designing this project, I imagined this book as performing several functions: acting as an object, site, archive, and souvenir, but ultimately as a gift artifact. A gift artifact considers the transmission and documentation of ephemeral forms through printed matter; as a gift, it is meant to move between hands—to be kept in motion. The liveness of exchange, including the potential interactivity with the reader, allows the document to remain living. I imagine the book as choreographic space, and as a continuation and translation of the gifting process; the book extends the life of Impossible Dance—further gifting the work through printed form. This third project will be published by 53rd State Press, designed by Melinda Ring, and conceptualized and edited by me.

These projects are conceived as a series of loops, enabling the transmission of Impossible Dance to live across multiple avenues of exchange. I see each of these experiments as sedimented, layered through various forms, structures, and contradictions. For example, if Chapter Two lays out a transitional framework for the archiving of tangible objects, then Chapter Three lays out a tangible framework for the archiving of the intangible or unruly. While Chapter Two described a digital project, Chapter Three moves back to analog. My approach to the archiving of Impossible Dance is to look at each project as a network of relations, rather than adapting a singular or fixed approach. These projects nest and enfold into one another.
The gift artifact acts in tripartite relation to the other hybrid archival-curatorial projects, completing the cycle of transmission and object relations. Chapter One detailed the structure of gifting as a process, which relies on a qualitative proximity between two artists. The second project, *transitional object archive* discussed the archiving of objects through a relational perspective. The focus of the final chapter is one of tactility. Connected through the movement of the gift, the book project completes the cycle initiated through the gifting of *Impossible Dance. Mapping the Unruly* moves through a circular methodology, echoing the practice of gifting itself.

**Performing Publishing**

Publishing as artistic practice is not a new concept for interdisciplinary artists. In her essay, “The Artist and Bookmaker,” Gwen Allen details the trajectory of artist books and magazines in the visual arts in the 1960s and 1970s. One pertinent example is *Aspen* magazine. Allen writes,

“This quirky, implausible publication was founded in 1965 by a woman named Phyllis Johnson, who envisioned it as a truly multimedia experiences that would exceed the limits of the traditional codex form. As she explained, “You don’t just read it: You hear it, hang it, feel it, fly it, sniff it, fold it, wear it, shake it, even project it on your living room wall.” (14, 16)

This activating of “multimedia experiences” was one of the projects of *Aspen*, along with other book and magazine projects during this era—intervening into publishing as an artistic medium, while also invoking a sensorial engagement for the reader. In recent years, the

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27 This fall, I attended a seminar course taught by Ann Butler, director of library and the archives at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, in which she pulled a copy of Laurence Sterne’s comic meta-novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, first published in 1759. While much of the interest in artist publishing can be attributed to visual artists in the 1960s and 1970s, Butler cited this as the earliest example of self-publishing. Butler also presented *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, edited by Annette Gilbert through the Steinberg Press in 2016 as an overview on artist publishing.
performative function of artist publishing has expanded as issues of archiving and documentation proliferate. One example includes the Brooklyn collective Ugly Duckling Presse, who recently published *Costume en Face: A Primer of Darkness for Young Boys and Girls* by Tatsumi Hijikata, as part of The Emergency Playscripts. As the first English publication emerging from Hijikata’s complex artistic practice, series’ editors, Yelena Gluzman, describes her purpose in publishing performance texts “that lie outside conventional acts of notation” (Hijikata 139). Bearing close relationship to the publications by Ugly Duckling Presse is *Emergency INDEX: An Annual Document of Performance Practice*, conceived of by editors Gluzman and Sophia Cleary. As a conflicting endeavor, *INDEX* turns to the materiality of language to provide an alternate channel to performance, providing a sprawling index of performances with descriptions by the artists who made them.

While the function of this thesis is not to expound upon the history of artist publishing, I am interested in bringing to light what Paul Soulellis refers to as “performing publishing,” which is “our ability, as artists, to disseminate a notion as an array of possibilities that amplifies and expands along networks.” Soulellis speaks to the hybrid space between online and print. Still, while my gift artifact lives only in print, the notion of

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28 Stephen Barber describes the efforts of Ugly Duckling Presses in his review of *Costume en Face*. Barber writes, “The Emergency Playscripts series is an innovative collection of volumes published by the Brooklyn collective Ugly Duckling Presse. Each of the five books published so far is concerned with the multiple dilemmas attached to the transcription of performance, choreography, and music, together with the theoretical and conceptual implications of text as the residue of an act. . . . The word ‘Emergency’ in the series title, derived from the series’ origin in a now-defunct performance broadsheet, Emergency Gazette, perhaps implies (beyond evoking the taped vocal ‘transcripts’ of urgent medical situations) a last-ditch effort to seize the traces of performance before they vanish. The series notably probes the uncertainties of authorship (such as that oscillating between choreographer and dancer) and its experimental forms that incorporate the many sources of performance and their transformation into the notation of gestures and words” (192).

29 One example of a hybrid digital and print publishing platform is Present Tense Pamphlets, edited by Mashinka Firunts and Danny Snelson. They describe the project, “In the tradition of Charlotte Moorman’s Avant-Garde Festivals, Dick Higgins’ Great Bear Pamphlets, and La Monte Young’s An Anthology of Chance Operations, the Present Tense Pamphlets feature an expanded array of score-
disseminating an array of possibilities is central to this project. My interest in the gift artifact is to draw upon the performativity involved in re-envisioning publications as alternative spaces.

53rd State Press is another important location for non-traditional means of conceptualizing published performance texts. Knowing this, in 2016 I approached interdisciplinary artist, editor, and publisher Karinne Keithley Syers about publishing the gift artifact of *Impossible Dance* through the 53rd State Press, which publishes “new plays and performance texts that interrogate, challenge, renew, and emblazon the language of performance” (“About”). Sharing an affinity for untraditional modes of archiving, Syers and I are positioning this project as part of her Dance Pamphlets series, which is an “open-form series of approaches to dance documentation, recall, query, and notation” (“Dance Pamphlets”).

Performing publishing speaks to the third component of my experimental methodology for archiving performance, *description*. Influenced by my work with Melinda Ring and also poet Susan Howe, I am defining “description” as the impossible and yet pleasurable process of ascribing language to the unruliness of performance. I’m especially drawn to Susan Howe’s writing around impossibility. In “The Talisman Interview, with Edward Foster,” she says:

> So I wanted to write something filled with gaps and words tosses, and word touching, words crowding each other, commands and dreams, verticals and circles. If it was impossible to print, that didn’t matter. Because it’s about impossibility anyway.

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30 Melinda Ring and I met with Karinne Keithley Syers in 2016 to initiate the project. We looked at Ring’s chapbook for her choreography *Forgetful Snow*, which was published by Contact Quarterly and edited by Lisa Nelson in 2015.
About the impossibility of putting in print what the mind really sees. (Howe, *The Birth-mark* 175)

Likewise, I see the impossibility of description as a potentially fertile and generative space in which to play. In this experimental methodology, I expand upon the standard metadata practices used in archive repository databases through practices of subjectivity, oral history gathering, mapping, and thick description—some of these were also utilized in Chapter Two. Subjectivity involves the conscious relationship of an archivist’s positionality and how this manifests in provenance records, finding aids, metadata tags, descriptions and annotation. Oral history and interview gathering acknowledge the social context of creation, offering multiple perspectives and narratives around the representation of a work, which results in a polyvocality, rather than the assumption of one fixed narrative, or origin story within a creative process. Mapping deals with the recognition of emergent patterns within an artist’s creative practice and relies upon an artist’s notebook as a primary document, along with immersive conversation between the archivist and artist. Not all of these methodologies are employed within each archive project; they are meant as a fluid set of practices that can be applied within each context and circumstance. I see description as a performative function that, when applied to archiving, extends the liveness of the work.\(^{31}\)

In working with artists, I find that the materiality of the words on the page, their color, size, texture, placement on the page, often act as mnemonics—triggering particular kinetic

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\(^{31}\) The coining of the word *performative* has its roots in British philosopher J.L. Austin’s speech act. In the conventional examples of a marriage ceremony, for example, the words “I do” have an assertive, doing power, and they carry legal weight. In this example, a performance utterance is the doing of an action. Influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler, I am most drawn to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *queering* of Austin’s speech act. For Sedgwick, *queer* refers to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (8). For me, this quote speaks to the nature of performance as being un-fixed and mutable.
and embodied memories. My role is to act receptively as a witness, while the artist moves through a recollection process, recognizing the emerging patterns and structures. I refer to this process as mapping. First, I lead the artist through a series of simple questions to trace and map various patterns in their thinking. Sometimes I begin with broad strokes, asking the person to describe their interests in a stream-of-consciousness series of associations. As patterns begin to emerge between creative ideas, I ask the artist to describe various elements in further detail. Once we generate a map of content, I look for recurring words, ideas, linguistic phrases, and signals of repetition. Within these areas of repetition, I urge the artist to linger on these areas—excavating further meanings, associations, and recollections. Rather than coming in with a pre-determined narrative I am looking to illustrate, I learn improvisationally—allowing unforeseen connections and meanings to rise to the surface of our dialogue. The approach allows for a listening and digesting of complex ideas, which is not linear or narratively focused.

With Melinda Ring and Kai Kleinbard, I began by gathering two separate oral histories, drawing upon Ring’s suggestions to capture a “he said, she said” representation of both of their experiences. Relying on the knowledge imparted in their notebooks, I asked Ring and Kleinbard to narrate their notes captured during the gifting process. Interested in playing with representation in a fluid capacity, I acknowledged Ring’s and Kleinbard’s multiple perspectives and narratives around the work. In the “he said, she said” conversations, the following prompts served as a guide:

What are the composing elements of Impossible Dance?
What is a messy accumulation? Could you talk more about this?
And your manipulation of objects in this piece? Working with found objects?
The process of disrupting and disorienting, breaking down habits?
Is the gifting of this dance influencing you current work? How?

32 Refer to Appendix D: Transcript from interview with Kai Kleinbard, pp. 93-94.
What are the essential elements that always remain through each transmission of this piece?

As a third step, I facilitated a conversation between the three of us. Thinking about circles and orbits, I envisioned this conversation as an extension of this process that cycles between choreographer Melinda Ring, gift interpreter Kai Kleinbard, and myself as a recollection of our initial exchange. All conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed.

In the gift artifact, I will include a curatorial statement on gifting as a hybrid archival-curatorial process, and an edited transcript that braids the multiple interviews I conducted between Ring and Kleinbard into one form. I have also invited Ring to contribute her own writing about *Impossible Dance*, including detailed notes that describe the improvisational practices and structures. Here the writing acts as a mnemonic for the dance; the scores also operate as an extension of the gifting. Ring is interested to see what happens when someone gift interprets the dance from her written descriptions. I will include an “Iteration History”—an interview taken during our residency at Bennington College, in which Ring described the layers of time that have transpired in this dance, how they affected the type of found objects that are sourced, and details about the physical sites in each performance. This document summarizes each performance of *Impossible Dance* including the iterations at Bennington College (1999), Highways in Santa Monica (1999), Headlands Center for the Arts (1999), Danspace Project (2015), and UCLA (2016). Last, will be a transcription of an interview with Susan Sgorbati, commenting on her memory of *Impossible Dance* from Bennington College.\(^{33}\) With the inclusion of this content, my interest is to exploit description in a dimensional way, exploring the archiving of performance practices in printed form.

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\(^{33}\) Refer to: Transcript from interview with Susan Sgorbati, pp. 95-96.
Properties of the Book

Upon inviting Ring to design the gift artifact form, I gave her the following prompts: how does the idea of “dance is an unruly teenager” get translated into a printed artifact? How might the forms and structures from the work be translated in book form, including the messy accumulation of objects and actions, the use of still life, and disorientation? How might the navigation of the book disorient the reader? How might the tactility and materiality of the book summon something of the physicality of the work?

During conversations, Ring recalled a large, nearly foot wide orange book she has saved over the years in her storage facility. She had always planned to annotate or record thoughts and reflections from her performance work in the book, keeping it as a kind of archive, an encyclopedia of her work. In ruminating on the idea of tactility, Ring suggested she reinscribe the written material (including the interviews and writings listed above) with her own annotations in the form of marginalia. Here is a description of Melinda Ring’s book design concept:

What if we source a grouping of found books; it could be an edition of encyclopedias, or something else that comes as a set. Our book would be a limited edition. Limited to the number of books in the set. Or, some kind of book series that changes with each individual iteration. What if the book is very ordinary. From the outside, it isn’t anything special. Collaging the inside, we lead the reader through a series of foldouts, cutouts, insertions of various kinds. We subvert the typical navigation through the book in a way that somehow reflects the structure of Impossible Dance #2. Perhaps it looks like I have inscribed the book with my own notes, marks — marginalia/annotations to Cori’s text — that reveal the conversation normally erased in the editing process. Each book is unremarkable, plain, ordinary, but also a sculpture. If we included a detailed description of instructions, I’d be curious to see if someone might create their own version of Impossible Dance. (Ring, “Re: Interview”)

Ring’s idea for the book to be ordinary in some way shares a likeness to her method of sourcing found objects and furniture in Impossible Dance—working with what’s available, rather than utilizing precious objects. In Gwen Allen’s essay, “The Artist as Bookmaker,” she
talks about the transition in artists’ book projects in the 1960s and 1970s away from what she describes as, “livres d’artisrs—luxury editions with lavish, handmade illustrations” to “a new down-to-earth and egalitarian attitude” (19). In Ring’s conceptualization of the gift artifact, she strikes a contrarian cord between value and waste. The book, as a found object, is something that is common, found, and inexpensive. Depending on where it ends up being sourced, it may also be waste. The book’s value is derived through a haptic treatment of her own inscription and mark making. This tension between waste and value relates further to ideas of vibrant matter discussed in Chapter Two. The book is ordinary, but it is imbued with Ring’s unique inscriptions. In connecting these two disparate ideas, Ring looks to alter our perceptions around value—how value is evaluated, by whom, under what circumstances, with what kinds of materials, and so on.

**Tactility**

The book, as a gift artifact, is meant as a continuation of exchange; through tactility, the reader can come in contact with echoes of the work, even though removed from performance. In curator Christina Davis’s opening introduction to Susan Howe’s lecture at Harvard University on October 16, 2014, she describes a relation between tactility and literature. Davis remarks,

> A little over a hundred years ago, Helen Keller published a series of essays called *The World I Live In* which focused on the hand, on the epistemology of the *manus*, from which she reminds us we derive the words manual, manufacture, manacle, manuscript. And on a practice of apprehending the world through touch, what Susan Howe might call my “looking glass hands.”

This seeing of the work through the “looking glass hands” is a sensorial process the gift artifact attempts to summon. Calling upon the book as a physical object, Ring transmits the physicality of *Impossible Dance* with its ruptures and discontinuities. The feel of the book
through its weight and material surfaces becomes a choreographic space to animate. The book, conceived of as an archive, is worn by the hands that touch it. Keller writes, “My world is built of touch-sensations, devoid of physical color and sound; but without color and sound it breathes and throbs with life” (7). How might this book, with its “tactual qualities,” breathe and throb with life?

**Situating Memory**

In order to see how tactility might function in the book, I first examine how tactility operates within the performance of *Impossible Dance*—how it situates memory. Enacted inside a room within a room, the enclosure echoes the feeling of a house. The structure is built from three walls and a door, which centered in the enclosure, can be entered and exited from. The size of the room is small, containing enough space for a single person to move around. The proportions of the walls are built a few feet higher than a standing person, a similar wall height to those found in standard homes. The feeling of a domestic environment is evoked through structural echoes: the walls, the door, the furniture, and the proportions of the room.

At the start of Kleinbard’s 2015 version, we see him enter into this room slowly moving between pieces of furniture and accumulated gestures. Kleinbard’s embodied navigation within the space reveals his knowing of the environment. The enclosure acts as a locus, spatializing memory—his gestures are inscribed through his relationship to the room. According to Kleinbard, *Impossible Dance* requires the surrounding walls; without them he is lost. “It reminds me of practicing in a room that’s enclosed, then you go onstage and there’s a room that’s enclosed. Even though there’s a big theater, the enclosure creates the reminder, the memory of being in a studio practicing” (Kleinbard and Ring). Gaston
Bachelard describes the spatial memories we develop and ways that we “write a room,” “read a room,” or “read a house” (14). We are engraved by the spaces we’ve inhabited and can tactilely remember. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard writes,

> But over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. . . . We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark to the distant attic. . . . the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the other houses are but variations on the fundamental theme. (14-15)

While Bachelard’s passage centers on the house we’re born in, this dynamic is also present within the structure of *Impossible Dance*. Here, the enclosure holds all the memories of rooms inhabited prior. In the rehearsal process, Ring and Kleinbard work in a small practice space, proportioned similarly to the size of the enclosure. During the final performance, the dance is displaced into a larger theatrical site and the enclosure creates a reminder of this prior space. The enclosure contains rooms nesting within rooms within rooms. It behaves as a situated memory site, bringing layers of past experiences into one spatial frame. The constructed set acts as a physical and material mnemonic, allowing Kleinbard to actively track his place within the improvisation. This idea is echoed in Helen Keller’s writings from *The World I Live In*. In her book, Keller writes:

> I move around my house, touching object after object in order, before I can form an idea of the entire house. . . . It is not a complete conception, but a collection of object-impressions, which, as they come to me, are disconnected and isolated. But my mind is full of associations, sensations, theories, and with them it constructs the house. (12-13)

Like Keller’s description, the touching of “object after object,” coupled with an imagined composing, allow for a continuity that enables Kleinbard to navigate the improvisation. In composing relationships between himself and the objects, Kleinbard’s handling of objects marks the activation of memory. Rather than replicating gestures as choreography, Kleinbard
moves through a “disorderly accumulation, something more like a pile of dirty dishes in a sink than Trisha Brown’s exact additions” (Ring, ”Impossible”). 34 Weight and touch act as sensational grounding moments, allowing him to revisit and relive gestures. Proximity, gravity, and the haptic enable memory to remain animated and engaged.

The enclosure utilized in Impossible Dance offers a stable frame that locates and spatializes memory. Within this frame, memory becomes a fluid reconstruction act reconfigured through the act of performance. 35 Ring’s enclosure creates a stable architectural frame that allows the dancing to morph and change iteratively. The improvisation can never be replicated. Inside the site of performance, Ring invites memory and its mutations to be explored tacitly, sensationally, and relationally.

In the gift artifact, the book acts as an enclosure, attempting but failing to hold the unruliness from performance. In researching the relationship between wildness and constraint, I was drawn again to Susan Howe, whose poetry speaks to a wildness that lives within the enclosed spaces of libraries and archives. In her essay “Incloser,” Howe explores Webster’s definition of enclose, a synonym for inclose. The synonyms, “to environ” and “to encompass,” similarly speak to the expansive framing of the physical space in Impossible Dance. During our interview at Bennington College, Susan Sgorbati describes the enclosure in the dance as giving a stable frame that allows us to see the unruliness of the dance; the visual constraint allows the complexity to emerge. The frame, she argues, ultimately recedes into background, setting it up “as a painting, where the foreground was the impossibility” (Sgorbati,

34 Ring differentiates her process from postmodern choreographer Trisha Brown’s Accumulating Pieces from the 1970’s that involved the incremental and serial accumulation of choreographed gesture.
“Interview”).

In “Book-Parks and Non-sites: Susan Howe’s Scripted Enclosures,” Rendell Olsen connects Howe’s poetry to his description of a book as “an enclosure or provisional park for an already existing wilderness that cannot definitively be contained.” Like Impossible Dance, the strategy of the enclosure is to frame an “already existing wilderness that cannot definitively be contained” (Olsen). This is an important structural aspect of the gift artifact. The façade of the book is ordinary and fixed. The marks and erasures occur within the interior. Once entered, this interiority is imbued with wildness. The wildness is only released through the seemingly invisible, constraint of the frame. Olsen describes similar phenomena in Howe’s approach to “move ‘incloser’ to the enclosures of words (physically: libraries, conceptually: dictionaries) and free them or at least regard them so closely that their boundaries and apparently known reference points begin to disappear.” In the gift artifact, the outside of the book becomes an enclosure. Like the dance, it situates memory in the tactile. Here, the book acts as a site and locus for memory, enclosing the unruliness within a frame that can be easily handled and exchanged.

**Marginalia**

*A margin is a border, edge, brink, or verge of land. In botany a margin is the edge of a leaf. In books the margin is the edge of a page, left blank to be filled in with notes.*  
—Susan Howe, “Submarginalia”

What better way to conceive of the book as a tactile object than to inscribe the gift artifact with textured marginalia, inviting Ring to mark up the margins, and perhaps even the surfaces of the book? This idea emerged while editing the interview transcripts; Ring commented on how she’d love to mark them up—to correct, alter, and refuse statements made in the interviews and writings I’d prepared as the editor. In thinking of this book as an
archiving of *Impossible Dance*, I’m aware of the potential for participants to stumble over issues of representation. Language has the power to ascribe meaning, place emphasis, and highlight certain narratives, sometimes through the erasure of particular details. This has been forefront in my mind while working on this collection of interviews and writings for the gift artifact. As this methodology seeks to foreground an artist’s practice, I was drawn to idea of including Ring’s material inscription. In archiving the unruly, there are times I must dip into irreverence—knowing there is something at stake in inviting wildness.

In Susan Howe’s essay “Submarginalia,” she includes a section entitled “An Idea of Wilderness.” In it, she indexes an unkempt list of marginalia tactics. She writes, “blizzards of anecdotes, anagrams, prefatory poems, dedications, epigrams, memories . . . puns, paradoxes, ‘antiquities,’ remarks, laments, furious opinions, recollections, exaggerations, fabrications” (*Birth-mark* 30). These inky interventions are touches, gestures, wild fabrications that weather the margins. In conceptualizing of my book as an archive, these unruly gestures are one way wildness might show up at site of the archive.

This gift artifact creates tensions around issues of authorship. As an archiving of performance practice, this book has a bodied connection to the presence of the artist, inviting Ring to reinscribe the book to her liking. These marks bear a resemblance to marks made through drawing; they are singular, embodied, and lack a citational origin. Ring’s presence as the maker of *Impossible Dance* in the book is essential; her haptic and material marks act as the embodied locus of transmission. While the book situates the Ring, her body, and her mind as the primary artist, the gifting of her written practices and instructions to anonymous readers to be re-authored invites the dissolving of a single authorship. Ring maintains her
relation to the work as a point of origin, while inviting exchange and revisions through the social. Here, citation emerges through the continued gifting and exchange.

Connecting to the philosophies posited in Roland Barthes’s famous essay, “The Death of the Author,” the gift artifact invites a generative space for the artist and the reader. In this writing, he proposes, “the true locus of writing is reading” (Barthes 5). His argument is built on the notion that all writing consists of citations, formed and reformed by previous authors; the true locus is situated in the reader, a person “who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted” (Barthes 6). Barthes describes the reader in a state of reception. This principle is equally important to my conception of this book, as the book attempts to facilitate a sensorial, and interactive exchange between the artist and reader through the transmission of the scores and instructions from Impossible Dance. The space of the book acts as a site for the work, giving the reader an embodied experience of the dance. The interest is for this space to engage further iterations of the dance. In keeping with the ethics of gift economies, my interest is to keep the gift in motion, so that a single reader doesn’t benefit commercially from the gift. Rather than using the words “citation” and “appropriation,” I use the word, *gifting*.

This chapter offers a series of guiding principles for imagining the book as a generative space—claiming a space not typically reserved for dance's ephemeral mark making, or its unruliness. All written content and design ideas have been gathered; the book will go to design this spring. The classification systems informing how performance collections in library repository systems are structured emerge from a long history of archiving books and manuscripts. In some ways, this project returns performance to a form

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36 Gehard Matter expands upon this history in *The Dynamic Library*. He writes, “These systems were then use to organize libraries. But the 18th century, reference libraries became fully established,
acknowledged in library science structures, as a kind of archival drag. The gift artifact wears
the cloak and form of the traditional archival material—that of books and manuscripts. Here I
attempt to remove the dichotomy between writing and embodied practice, as described in
Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire*. My approach to writing is tactile as will be
the reader’s interaction with the book. The gift artifact connects a loop back to the initial
gifting structure. Drawing upon the circulation and distribution offered through publishing,
the gift artifact continues the transmission of *Impossible Dance* through the formation of the
social. The impulse is not to cloister this work into archival storage, but rather to extend the
transmission of *Impossible Dance* through a tactile, interactive, embodied handling. I see the
book as a body—a body, being handled by bodies.

complete with splendid baroque architecture. The Imperial Library in Vienna is just one example –
princes, kings, and emperors build baroque libraries in order to present their knowledge to the world
as accurately as possible, and in the most dignified setting. In this world order, each subject and every
book had its proper place. In order to find a given book, you had to know its place in this linear
formation, even if it was in the very last row. . . . [I]n the 19th century, books begin to disappear in to
close stacks. The only books that remained in reading rooms were reference volumes and book
directories in the form of catalogs. One in the same book canal be listed on several card catalogs –
knowledge's new deputes – and organized into different classification systems. This, however, meant
that the book was reduced to a call number, which became the only detail readily accessible to library
users. . . . and still the library strove to maintain a concrete order a crush shelves, stocks, and catalogs.”
(qtd. in Astrom 33-34)
V. Conclusion:

Animating Impossibility—Archive as Embodied Portal

Moving between theory and practice, I enacted a series of discreet projects with choreographer Melinda Ring to form the experiential content. The following four principles: transmission, mnemonics, description, and animation form the primary scaffolding for this experimental methodology. Being in close conversation with Ring’s work, as the basis of my experimental phase, has allowed me to test each part of this evolving methodology. During this process, she has provided feedback, critique, and dialogue, which have been crucial during this phase of the work.

In developing this methodology, I see that performance requires multiple strategies for archiving as it resists being rendered into reproducible forms. These four principles live as overlapping structures, nesting in multiple layers, where each principle becomes inflected in the other. In the gifting structure, Ring transmits the forms and structures from Impossible Dance, along with her improvisational practices accumulated over years of work. This process of transmission acts as a mnemonic reserve for recalling the memory of the dance. Kleinbard draws upon this reserve, internalizing these practices into his own work, which culminate in his own reconstitution, or animation of the work. In the transitional object archive, I began with the principle mnemonics, looking to see how the objects in Ring’s choreographic practice might act as a retrieval system for the dance. In developing the form

37 For the thesis project component, here is the status of the three projects. The gifting of Ring’s Impossible Dance was performed on December 5, 2015 at Danspace Project as part of the 2015 Movement Research Fall Festival, vanishing points. The digital photography archive, transitional object was developed during a residency at Bennington College from February 17-23, 2017. All photographs and oral histories were taken. The final image selection, along with written descriptions will be assembled into a digital site by August 2017. With regard to the gift artifact, the archiving Impossible Dance in printed form, the book design concept has been created, all written content has been gathered, the publisher has been secured. Ring and I will meet with 53rd State Press in May 2017 to begin design.
and content of the digital archive, I played with the thickening of description to call upon the objects as examples of vibrant thing-power, and the animation of the objects through Ring’s photography and Kleinbard’s oral histories. The culminating digital archive acts to transmit the transitional nature of Ring’s work with objects. The gift artifact project extends ideas of writing and description, typically in positioned in counterpoint to the embodiment of performance, through tactility. This tactility acts as a mnemonic reserve to transmit the principles of the dance. This prismatic methodology is in service of animating the archive through a reconstitution of the archival documents and materials, allowing it to live on through new iterations. Creating this complex performance archive, I initiate a translation process, offering a delivery system for the future exhibition and arranging of materials within hybrid archival-curatorial frameworks.

In reflecting upon the development of this methodology, I have found that archiving performance asks for an embodied navigation in which the relations between the roles of artist, archivist, and curator become activated. This embodiment comes alive through a qualitative exchange, relying on dynamics of proximity, relationality, and tactility. Proximity involves being in closeness with an artist, the work, and practices that surround the work. Relationality has to do with understanding the ways materials in the archive touch one another, the way they emerge from particular contexts, and the idea that documents and objects come to matter through complex entanglements. Tactility is the way in which touch has the capacity to locate physicality and situate memory.

In working with Melinda Ring, the first part of my practice was to build a rapport across multiple studio visits and conversations, coming in close proximity to her artistic practice. I spent time learning about her approach to embodied and improvisational practices,
her relationship to various modes of documentation during her creation process, her
collaborative relationships, artistic influences, and the forms and structures that emerge
temporally from her work over time. This slow reading of Ring’s practice required a
receptivity that strengthened over time. I also found myself in complex negotiations around
the ways her work is represented, which resulted in a conscious understanding of the
subjectivity and positionality an outside figure brings to an artist’s work.

In a conversation with Melinda Ring at Bennington College on February 17, 2017,
she expressed, “I feel you're trying to find a curatorial way of archiving forms that are not
fixed. You’re trying to develop a methodology for archiving where archiving and curation
meet each other.” I was pleased to see our alignment in understandings. In these projects, my
intention is to expand the practice of archiving to make room for the curatorial. The
curatorial does something that can assist with the archiving of performance, in that it brings
an understanding of relationality. For me, curating involves the building of assemblages by
bringing an artist’s practice into relation with other disciplines, art historical time periods,
theoretical frameworks, sociopolitical contemporary contexts, and/or invented prompts. A
curator, almost like a time traveler, can move across time periods, aesthetics, and disciplines
in a search of unforeseen connections. Some of these relations are fictional provocations that
ask a viewer to come into contact with history in new ways. In this way, there is a flexible
irreverence built into curating in which the practice isn’t beholden to factual accounting or
truth telling. Narratives are supple and fluid.

Tactility involves the process of coming into contact with an artist’s material,
including the physical and embodied practices, and the documents and objects that emerge
from their practices. Exploring the performance remains, or the objects and documents from
performance as vibrant matter, I disrupt the embodiment/document divide. Tactility offers a physical embodiment. When applied to the handling of archival materials, and when it comes into relation with performance practices, tactility allows a continued presence of the body.

**Formation of an Embodied Portal**

I chose to archive *Impossible Dance* through three overlapping structures: a performance project, a digital archive, and a printed book. In field-testing this approach, I see the resulting methodology as a complex system. My intention was to map the aliveness of *Impossible Dance* in an emergent whole, maintaining an embodied and agential set of relations. The methodology is composed of nested temporal layers that become a kind of *embodied portal*, a space where porosity allows for a fluid exchange of pasts, presents, and futures. This embodied portal is a site for reconfiguration.

This reconfiguration occurred through interdisciplinary practice. Working in close relationship to Ring, using photography, found objects, written material in printed form, and so on, we extended the disciplinary reach of *Impossible Dance*. The different forms of documentation respond to each other, forming a complex whole. Rebecca Schneider discusses this phenomena as a “temporal inter(in)animation,” writing:

> How can we account not only for the way differing media cite and incite each other but for the ways that the meaning of one form takes place in the response of another? Relatedly, how can we account for a temporal inter(in)animation by which times touch, conversations take place inter-temporally? (*Performing* 168)

Moving the work into new forms, the archive allows for a seeing and remembering of the work from new angles, where the various forms of media (the live, the digital, and the printed) relate “inter-temporally.” In these projects, Ring and I took pleasure in the ways documentation from performance is often imperfect and flawed. Rather than attempting to
systematize an archive of perfectly restored originals, we created a transitional space of new iterations.

**A Consideration of Ethics**

In this process, I was moved to discover how archiving can benefit from this embodied navigation of proximity, relationality, and tactility. It becomes a kind of somatic archiving. Processing archival documents through a sensory and felt approach offers a continuation of liveness to the archiving of performance documents. My next step is to consider how this methodology will be applied within library repository and museological frameworks, foregrounding the artist’s presence, along with the embodied practices that surround a work, and the awareness of an archivist’s own subjectivity and positionality. I will also continue this work with a series of other artists. Rather than applying the exact forms of the performance, digital site, and book, which have been idiomatic to Melinda Ring’s *Impossible Dance*, I will carry forward the principles of transmission, mnemonics, description, and animation as a living archives methodology.

In working on these projects, I have experienced the multiple ways ethics lives at the center of my inquiry. In the gifting process, a fundamental aspect to the structure was to facilitate a horizontal dialogue that allowed Kleinbard to re-imagine *Impossible Dance* within his aesthetic approach to movement. If Ring had directed from a hierarchical position, he might not have had the agency to take *Impossible Dance* further through his own iteration. This kind of regenerative exchange is part an unfolding ethics these structures look to facilitate.

In working with the photography project at Bennington College, I found that a porous relating between the performer and object offered an entangled relation true to *Impossible
Dance. As part of the experiment, there were a series of photographs in which Ring attempted to highlight the object. These documents gave too much power to the status of the object and reduced Kleinbard as the performer to the background. The three of us each found that Ring’s idea of parity was not only an essential aesthetic, but also ethical relation that broke down a subject/object binary.

Writing about the ethics of matter, Karen Barad says, “All bodies, not merely ‘human’ bodies, come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity—its performativity” (“Posthumanist” 823). As archivists are often the custodians and caretakers of the “valuable” objects from our culture, something can be gained in approaching objects in a spirit of “intra-activity.” In archiving, attempts at “objectivity” can lend a stiffness that calcifies the liveliness of performance and its materials. In carrying out these projects, I pursue an ethics that allows for the vibrancy and temporality between objects and performers, where artificial distinctions between object/subject and knower/known are dismantled.

The proposal for bringing awareness to an archivist’s subjective layers of interpretation is to acknowledge complicated issues of representation. Video, film, photographs, programs, press clippings, and so forth, are but some of the types of material that emerge from a choreographer’s practice. These materials are charged with layers of representation. Who is documenting the work? From what positionality? How does a filmmaker’s or videographer’s seeing of a performance influence or change the thing they are attempting to represent? These are all questions that speak to the complicated nature of documentation, ethnography, and performance archiving. Archives play an active role in producing the subjects they come to represent.38 When the constructed nature of an archive is

38 Representationalism has received significant challenge from feminists, poststructuralists, postcolonial critics, and queer theorists. The names of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler and
visibilized and played with through the inscription of the archivist, there is room for an affective and qualitative relating. Archives are inscribed and constructed through the archivist; how we relate to this inscription and how it manifests into form is the site of ethics.

**Why Impossibility?**

*Impossibility* is the gift Melinda Ring has offered to this methodology. Initially my connection to this work relied on the tracing of intuitive threads. In revisiting the power of *Impossible Dance* with Susan Sgorbati at Bennington College in February 2017, it was the notion of impossibility that remained. This was equally palpable in her retelling of the piece to me in 2000. *Impossible Dance* has lived on through the nature of its own impossibility. In asking Sgorbati what this word means to her, she said:

[It’s] outside of a frame of coherence or order or pattern. It’s different from the unknown. Unknown would be going into this space you’ve never been before, but impossible seems to suggest that it’s a challenge of which most people will say you couldn’t do. . . . It's something beyond human life. You know you can you can’t humanly execute whatever this structure is that has presented itself. . . . Since it has to be an imaginary space . . . what do you draw on then? . . . [Y]ou have to literally experiment to find something that was not there before. (Sgorbati, “Interview”)

How to make the impossible possible is a practice Ring has formally engaged since 1999. In *Parables for the Virtual*, Brian Massumi writes, “The impossible is not the opposite or simple negative of the possible. It is the indeterminate but positive potential for possibilities to be added to particular contexts” (241). This impossibility is a practice, something to play with in daily life that offers a potentiality. Setting out to archive performance is in and of itself a kind of impossibility—it is complicated and there is no simple formula. The archiving frequently associated with such questioning. Butler sums up the problematics of political represensationalism as follows: “Foucault points out that juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent. Juridical notions of power appear to regulate political life in purely negative terms . . . the subject turnout to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation” (qtd. in Barad 804).
of the impossible presses against what is possible and legible in the field of archiving. I am
reminded here of Rendell Olsen’s description of a book as “an enclosure or provisional park
for an already existing wilderness that cannot definitively be contained.” The creation of
porous enclosures or holding environments, alongside performance’s wildness offers a
relation that doesn’t destroy dance’s unruly impulses. Eliciting the impossible at the archive
is to invite performance to continue to live in its wildness. This impossibility is a potentiality
worth practicing.
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Appendix A: Transcript from interview with Melinda Ring

November 8, 2016.

Cori Olinghouse: What about your relationship to sculpture?

Melinda Ring: I’m in a transitional place in my work. A relationship to sculpture is problematic for me. It’s another field with its own expectations that I’ve been able to be free of. Partly my relationship to objects has related to practical issues around resources, and not being able to afford storing things. Impossible Dance came from a time when I was working with things that were available to me. This attitude comes directly out of dance improvisation. Now my relationship to sculpture is becoming more complex. As I’ve become more ambitious and exacting about the circumstances in which my work is presented, the objects and materials. I’m beginning to feel their value. This change, which might be leading me into the field of sculpture, intrigues me.

CO: With your recent work A dark cloud, walks into a room, you’ve been collecting scraps of brown paper bags and fabricating them into paper blankets, painting them at times.

MR: For cloud, the paper is acted upon. In being acted upon, it’s given a new value. It’s waste that has value. I can’t store it, or collect it in ways artists conserve their artworks, because storage becomes another action acting upon it. At the end of my last residency, I had accumulated a huge amount of this painted torn brown paper. Reluctantly, I finally crammed it all into a trash barrel, felt like I had killed it.

CO: When did this collecting begin?

MR: I’ve been collecting things all along. In Forgetful Snow, I saved all the foam core boards that broke. I collected all of the remnants from each performance. My husband threw them away because of our storage problems. I was really upset with him. I wanted more time to consider them as trash or not trash. Anyway this is something that really can’t happen while they are sitting in a storage locker.

CO: What about influences from sculpture?

MR: I don’t relate overtly to the idea of influences.

CO: Obliquely?

MR: People, works, act as touchstones. I don’t go in dilettantish, but I do take what I need. I’m not interested in everything.

CO: I know you worked with Paul McCarthy. What about him?

MR: There are some works he’s made from the detritus of performance. He might use the word crap. Working with him definitely made me consider the question of when something becomes an art object. When I performed in the Whitney Biennial on Martin Kersels’ performance environment/sculpture 5 Songs, part of his piece was a small storage room filled with stuff the invited artists could use for their performances. When it was my turn, some of these things had been kind of trashed. I wanted to replace Martin's objects with some of my own. The Whitney’s art handlers came to temporarily remove his stuff, carefully placing each item from the room: dirty cotton balls, wadded-up Kleenex, bits of hair pulled-out of a wig (and all the other good, nice objects) into a special cart on top of a blanket. By mistake they also included the lid from a plastic bin I had brought
with me. All became equally important works of art. But yes, knowing Paul McCarthy has been tremendously influential.

CO: All these strange issues of care.

MR: It makes me think of Sarah Sze with her millions of pieces of things. And Matthew Barney’s sculptures made from Vaseline. Warhol’s Time Capsules. How are these objects cared for? There’s so much work being made where issues of care come into play.

CO: I’ve always been interested in the destruction in your work. That these objects aren’t saved or preserved. It’s interesting in considering how to approach archiving the objects and remnants from your choreographies.

MR: As choreographers, we have to make peace with ephemerality. The keeping or valuing of things past the moment it happens isn’t always possible. I’m interested in the line between the performance world and the art object world. For Paul [McCarthy], when he works in various processes, whether it’s bronze sculpture or the making of a performance, he treats all materials with equal value. He sees the value in the process he’s enacting. It’s similar with Jackson Pollock. He changed the game for art, in this way. The process, the action of painting was what became important.

CO: The performativity…

MR: Yes, the will towards something…

CO: What is your relationship to the objects in cloud?

MR: It’s a notion of parity. The piece borrows from my earlier ideas of still life as in Impossible Dance #2 (still life). In this way, it might be considered part of the project of the Impossible Dances. The environment, the situation of the objects—they have performance moments. There is parity with the performers. The dancers become embedded in the room. The room shares equality with the performers. The room is an object in and of itself.

CO: There is liveliness to the objects and materials. They often seem to be a record of the choreography. I love this about your way of working with material.

MR: I remember a woman who I often saw in my neighborhood when I lived in Santa Monica. She had trains of shopping carts. They were all curated. For example: all Coco-Cola cans, or tinfoil, or crumpled brown bags. A series of differently curated collections. This relationship between trash and value. I love that there’s a world where someone can gather up a bunch of junk, save it in the trunk, and make $10,000.
Appendix B: Iteration History

Interview with Melinda Ring documenting the iterations of Impossible Dance, February 23, 2017

Performance chronology

1999
Impossible Dance #1 and Impossible Dance #2 (still life) (1999)
Concept, improvisation, and performance by Melinda Ring, 55 minutes long
Bennington College in Bennington, VT on June 11-13, 1999
Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, CA July 8-10, 1999
Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito, CA on August 29, 1999

2015
Impossible Dance #2 (still life) (1999/2015)
Original concept and improvisation for Impossible Dance by Melinda Ring (1999)
Gift Interpretation and Improvisation by Kai Kleinbard (2015)
Gifting as a curatorial structure of exchange by curator Cori Olinghouse

The first gifting of Impossible Dance #2 (still life) occurred on December 5, 2015 at Danspace Project as part of the 2015 Movement Research Fall Festival, vanishing points, curated by Beth Gill and Cori Olinghouse. The evening, Impossible Dances: Past and Future included Impossible Dance #2 (still life) and cLOUD, an impossible dance from the future.

2016
Impossible Dance #2 (still life) XL (2016)
UCLA, Glorya Kaufman Dance Theater
Concept and direction: Melinda Ring
Performers: Barry Brannum, Casey Brown, Hannah Clark, Lluvia Ibarra, DaEun Jung and Harvey Peralta
*For this iteration, Melinda Ring drew upon the gifting at Danspace Project to build this work with undergraduate and graduate students at UCLA.

Melinda Ring, artist notes

Impossible Dance was a series. Impossible Dance #1 was a dance to a really short and fast piece of music, I Kick My Hand, composed and played by Nick Didkovsky on electric guitar. He never played live for any of my performances. This piece was made through improvisation. Each version I danced was very similar—some things always happened the same. Certain things had to happen at particular places in the music. I was trying to dance the music, which was so fast that it was really difficult to contain it all. When I told Nick I was calling the piece Impossible dance, he said that the music was also an impossible piece of music.

Impossible Dance #2 (still life) was a new dance, shifting gears, but continuing with ideas of impossibility. The statement about unruliness was a general feeling I had about making dances.39

39 Ring’s statement on unruliness: “Dance is impossible like an unruly teenager needing just enough freedom balanced with just the right guidance to flourish. I love her. She can be so beautiful, so full of energy and potential. Her desires, my desires for her, can be frightening. How can I be ultimately responsible for this unpredictable Creature? It’s maddening. She’s just impossible, I don’t know what to do with her!” (“Impossible Dance”)
There was a kind of slippery connection between these two dances. There may have been a #3 and #4, but they aren’t important.

After graduating UCLA and coming back from Japan where I was working with Min Tanaka on his farm, I started making site-specific dances. I rehearsed at La Boca in Los Angeles where there was a fireplace, French doors, an adjacent office space, windows that opened, different doorways; it was a room with a lot of character in it.

Prior to Impossible Dance #2, I was working with improvisation. Thinking of structure as a kind of net—the net being a frame of time. Things would happen in a certain time and in between those events, there was an open area, more or less open, sometimes not so open. I was working with some people in Los Angeles, but primarily, I was doing solos.

In Impossible Dance #2, the idea of the net changed. This was the beginning of a need for things to be impossible. The accumulation was kind of an impossible thing to do. This improvisation was much longer, but maybe this isn’t true. The openness and its length made it different. I wanted it to be more open. In my mind it was much more open, but in reality it probably wasn’t that much more open.

I worked with the idea of starting from zero. I found this difficult. There’s often something I get attached to. Now, working as a director, I can see from the outside. This idea of starting from zero is that the beginning needs to be really minimal. It’s hard to direct oneself, to be really pure—fanatical. I remember rehearsing the skills of the dance. With the Impossible Dances, I didn’t have to be responsible to other people. As the performer and creator, the decision-making was all mine, while the performance was happening. If I were to edit the series, I would probably say that Impossible Dance #2 was the first in the series.

Iteration history

Bennington College, June 11-13, 1999

I created the piece here, and then performed it at Highways, and Headlands as a solo.

The enclosure has to be a certain size in relationship to the body, while the amount of space around the enclosure can change size. It’s a room within a room. At Bennington, I wanted to make a solo for Martha Hill. The impetus for building the room was that the space felt too big.

What I recall about the furniture—there was a small sturdy table and several chairs. All chairs with backs, probably not arms. This may or may not be true. It also may or may not be true that there was a folding chair among them. It felt great to have an office chair—to have something on wheels is really good. The need for the table has always remained. It makes it possible for the figure to come off the ground. It’s a heavier object; it changes the kind of action that happens when it comes into the room. I sourced all the furniture from things in the theater. Things that had a feel about them, a “this will do.”

There is a sort of selection process. I wouldn’t have filled the room with chairs that are all one color. I balance out the color of the [theater] flats. This establishes something. There’s always a white chair. It’s important that some objects are white. There is an intuition around the selection. I look to create

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40 Referring to Melinda Ring’s original press release for Impossible Dance #2 (still life) when she danced it at Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, California, in 1999. Ring talks about “…constructing something from zero. An improvisation starting in a state of not knowing, in a state of patience, accumulating actions, editing and testing the limits of memory, towards making something complete.” (“Impossible Dance”)
variety, bringing attention to a variety of shapes and color, without being too clever. Wabi-sabi interior decorator [which refers to a concept in traditional Japanese aesthetics that centers around imperfection and transience].

There were nine 4’x 8’ theater flats all together (one door, two corners, three on each side). The door wasn’t necessarily in the middle at Bennington. I would need to refer to a photograph or video to double check. The door opens into the room. This is important, so that it’s possible to animate the door without walking through the door.

**Highways Performance Space, July 8-10, 1999**

At Highways, I added sound. The sound was created from multiple sources (music, sound effects, and songs). The sound played on cassettes on multiple decks through a mixing board, which was made into loops. A friend of mine who isn’t a dancer, but a visual artist Liz Young operated the sound, which followed the same accumulation structure as the dance. There was a similar improvisation happening. In the layering between sounds, Liz would bring up a slider to decide volume or what happens next.

At Highways, the theater was much smaller. The objects were more familiar. The furniture came from La Boca. There were white chairs that Liz and I covered in brown fake fur that we had used in *My Dora Jarr* (1998). There was also this very specific table that we has used in the *Log Ladies*. At La Boca we used this table for a lot of different things. The furniture felt familiar like home.

For Highways, I went to scene shop to rent the flats. I didn’t repaint any of them. I used a door with a light in it.

I began with Impossible Dance #2. While the stagehands were breaking down the enclosure for *Impossible Dance #2*, I did a dance in the remaining doorway frame as a silhouette to a kind of driving drumming music. The stagehands moved all the flats upstage along the back wall, so I could perform *Impossible Dance #1* with more space.

**Headlands Center for the Arts, August 29, 1999**

At Headlands, I performed in a room with a lot of features. It was similar to La Boca. There were two extra office spaces and two different doors. You could enter through the office or into the main building. There were windows and funny cabinets inside the office. The building, which is a former military space, is the only building Headlands uses but hasn’t renovated. It’s progressively dilapidated. You can see the studs in the room. While people were coming in, I installed myself in one of the office cabinets as a kind of installation of myself. I don’t know if that’s a separate dance. Maybe I have a program somewhere I could refer to.

In this version, there was no enclosure, no flats. The floor was very dirty. It used to be an equipment shed. I spent a great deal of time to clean a 12’ x 12’ space on the floor. I used one of the rooms as the behind space. When I came back later, during another residency, this space was filled with junk and being used as a storage space. At headlands, I sourced materials from different buildings. I also gave Headlands a list of things I needed. There’s always a strong table. Maybe some stuff came from

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41 The *Log Ladies* were fictional characters we played who checked-in people coming to an art opening. The ladies would check your name in wrong, cross your name out and give you a new name. Someone would go off with a nametag like, “Hello my name is *Sweet Sunshine.*”
the house I was staying in. I used the same collection of sounds as I did at Highways, with fellow resident artist David Cale improvising as Liz Young had.

At Highways, Bennington, Headlands the objects were furniture. There was a color palette. Things were found.


The enclosure was set on an angle was to accommodate site lines for audience members. With Kai [Kleinbard], I was interested in using other types of objects, not just furniture. The decision-making included his feelings about the objects as we curated and collected them together. Once we had sourced everything, maybe I said, “yes/no” or “you should definitely use this thing.” The objects came from Kai’s space in Gowanus—one day there was a lot of stuff in the hallway at his workspace. I also brought some stuff, including some objects from previous works. This version came after the creation of Hmmm... (2009). It seemed fine to bring stuff in with other qualities, such as a potted plant, a tarp, wallpaper (stiff, drapery)—which now seem essential, and poles—which don’t seem as essential. I prefer a pole, but maybe we used a broom. One of Kai’s chairs was an office chair. We also used some chairs from the Danspace dressing room.

With Kai, the objects became subverted. I was looking for things that had a quality. For example, having something big and flat. In organizing these things, they were an extension of the furniture. Looking for a variety of textures, colors, and how something rests or fails to rest. For example, a plastic bag fails to rest—there’s this sense that it can’t be set-up. Some things have structure. With other objects, the structure is flimsy, changeable, plastic. Some things should feel too big to handle. The unwieldiness of them, the fact that they are bigger than the doorway becomes another kind of issue.

Kai and I also spoke about wanting something that was soft. We might have talked about pillows. Kai’s hat and hoodie became part of the dance. This was something that developed in rehearsal where his hat dropped off at some point. He almost seemed naked without it. He looked like a different character. It was a big change. I’m sure this is only part of his version. Also, of having something wrapped up—the choice to roll the object up or leave it unrolled. Rope became very important in the next iteration at UCLA.

The importance of the doorway became clearer as the piece has continued on. The area behind the doorway is important as a playing area. The potential of that area wasn’t clear to me at Bennington. I probably didn’t play with this back area initially. This became more part of the dance beginning with Highways.

There was no sound in this version.

Impossible Dance #2 (still Life) XL
UCLA, Glorya Kaufman Dance Theater, 2016

“Together these six dancers and I have reconstructed and enlarged Impossible Dance #2 (still life), a solo improvisation I danced in 1999. [...] In repeating the process here at UCLA, I was interested how a group of dancers might together fulfill the job Kai and I had done as soloists and yet remain individuals—individual unpredictable creatures.” —Melinda Ring program for UCLA

In terms of objects, there was probably more restraint about the stuff between Kai’s version and UCLA. There were so many people at UCLA, 3 undergraduates and 3 graduates. Also the dance building was so clean. There wasn’t much extraneous stuff lying around. The grad students were bringing me things from their lounge. Hannah, an undergrad, was very interested in finding things—she seemed to have special knowledge of where crap was hidden.

I remember a rope, a small heavy table, chairs, balloons, a stick, giant plastic colored bowls, a big roll of paper—the kind you would serve popcorn in, a piece of theater equipment, and something on wheels. UCLA is the first version where I additionally bought some things including, some wallpaper, rope, and balloons. The rope was telling in terms of the simplicity of the things I bought for UCLA. I kept stopping at a party store in Los Angeles. I wanted to have something that occupies the volume above. I wondered which kind of balloon would be great to buy if you only had one. I found a Mylar balloon. It came down to the “O,” “I” or “1.” The “O” was a framing device, had the interior and exterior space. In the end, I wasn’t allowed to use the Mylar balloon because of the theater’s fire codes. There were also tape balls, in which I wound paper into a lump, covering it with masking tape. It became a lumpy form. After this version, I feel there has to be a pole, a rope, a remnant of wallpaper, a strong table that ideally can be lifted by one person and is big enough to stand on, and chairs, including a chair on wheels.

As for sound, I used a very minimalistic and accumulative sound score. The sound person put nine files of one sound on his computer. When a performer enters into the space, a new file gets added. At the end as the performers leave the stage, one by one; sound is taken out with each departure. The sound is basically a white noise, something that felt like air molecules. In Forgetful Snow (2014), I worked with light that had a tremendous filter on it. Similarly, the sound at UCLA was meant to make the air feel heavy. There were two other sounds: a brief parrot call that occurs two-three times and then three and half notes from the beginning of The Blue Danube that is cued five minutes before the end of the piece. There’s a little skip at the beginning. It almost starts, but then stops.

I reconfigured the nine theater flats into three playing areas to accommodate the six performers. The door was one like you might find at Home Depot. It was great, very generic. The flats were all black. They had been left behind by Pina Bausch’s company.


Final thoughts
There is supposed to be a kind of simplicity in doing this piece; ideally, the objects are found. The mentality of this dance is not to struggle with putting it up. For me, this is why it makes sense to gift this piece. That lack of struggle for someone to obtain it should mirror the lack of struggle to put it up. If a version is created without the enclosure, there needs to be a very particular space. It is essential that there is a back area, behind a door or door-like open, to be used. Maybe an outdoor performance is the next iteration. If that’s the case, I might want to attend to the color of the flats.
Appendix C: *transitional object archive* – photography, written description, and oral history offerings

![Image](image_url)

Ring, Melinda (Artist), Fig. 1 (Enclosure from *Impossible Dance*), Bennington College, 2017

The following is an offering of the component parts for the *transitional object archive*, which includes photography by Melinda Ring, my own written descriptions, and oral histories with Kai Kleinbard.
Appendix C.1: Photographs shot from the object’s perspective

Ring, Melinda (Artist), Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 (Photographs shot from inside metal bucket)
Bennington College, 2017
Ring, Melinda (Artist), Fig. 4 (Photograph shot from inside mop),
Fig. 5 (Photograph shot from hose), Bennington College, 2017
Appendix C.2: Photographs shot from Melinda Ring’s perspective

Ring, Melinda (Artist), Fig. 6 and Fig. 7, (Kai Kleinbard-object assemblages), Bennington College, 2017
Ring, Melinda (Artist), Fig. 8 and Fig. 9, (Kai Kleinbard-object assemblages), Bennington College, 2017
Appendix C.3: Photographs of the makeshift white cube space

Ring, Melinda (Artist), Fig. 10 (makeshift white cube), Fig. 11 (life preserver), Fig. 12 (white plastic chair), Fig. 13 (metal sink), Fig. 14 (brown desk), Bennington 2017
Appendix C.4: Written description – Words a Sticky Substances

This description is my own elaboration through language responding to Ring’s fabricated paper blankets from *A dark cloud, walks into a room*.

Brown paper placed in layers, also strewn on the floor give texture to the ground space. In some images, this material appears as a collection of waves, condensed and flipped over on the horizontal plane and flattened. In others the images are bodied, wrought by textures dancing underneath the surface. In person, the material is animate and vibrating. The interior of these fallen shapes are filled and then deflated, as if containing an internal respiratory system. The paper bits have been taped together from brown paper bags with seams re-stitched. The actions of the dance tear them to pieces. They are worn, embedded with the actions enacted upon them. A record and deposit for movement. Photographed from the floor level, the perimeter of this material is alive with edges that curl like lace. Some are documented with a blurry camera focus, obscuring the shapes further. The blending of foreground and background spaces, seem to bring the past and future into a liminal blur. All sense of time passing has become collapsed—the still life of a durational object caught in pause. Some of these images echo shells, leaves, fossils, bark, seaweed, coral. Some pieces look charred. As a collection, this grouping of imagery appears like a landscape. An archive of paper articulated, as if to say something. The movement of the paper blankets in wreckage is somehow affirming. The material vibrates slightly and appears to have a sense of life. The paper is responsive and empathetic to the surrounding forces that act upon it. Can something inanimate be empathetic? The small movements emanating from the paper read like utterances. These are weathered objects. They are in a state of transition and they never fully form into being. These materials exist in a state of contradiction, appearing lively and decayed simultaneously. These are objects that have been acted upon by feet, hands, bodies. The have endured the movements of dancing, handling, storage, transport. Also, air.
Appendix C.5: Transcript from oral histories with Kai Kleinbard

At Bennington College on February 20, 2017, I asked Kai Kleinbard to recall his kinetic memory of working with the objects. In the final digital archive, these will play as audio files.

Plastic bag.
Kai Kleinbard: It was big and clear and it was large enough to fit inside of and I felt like it was a membrane so that I could stretch myself into it and push myself through it and manipulate it. And it also made a great sound because it was always moving, creating kind of this crinkling sound. So, you can either move inside of it and make a sound or drag it against the wall and make a sound. It almost reminded me of an accordion. It deteriorated as you danced in it. So, it really changed as the piece went on.

It deteriorated by…first got stretched and then my limbs started to poke through it. The holes got larger and larger and then finally it rolled down to like my feet. Once it rolled down to my feet, I couldn't really use it anymore, because it was already done—the moment. Then to climb back into the bag would have felt like I was trying to do something rather than it just being something of interest.

As I was working with the barrier I could feel there are moments like you're stretching into it. You can really feel a sense of like push and tug through your body, which kind of gives a nice feeling of information.

Small objects.
KK: There are a number of smaller objects to play with. There are these gloves—the glove was kind of interesting because you can put it over something and it acts almost as like this imaginary hand. I found that when I put it on the long bench, it almost made it so that I could drop the bench in that leg. It would soften the landing. Sometimes the objects can team up with each other and they become new objects. The cushioned bench is created with just a glove.

The toilet paper was also interesting because the toilet paper acted as a sound buffer. So you would think that this big object when dropped would make a big noise but instead it was very silent. It was really interesting to me because it dropped onto the toilet paper. The toilet paper also left a trail of itself as you moved it around, as it got torn. So it left an imprint of its location in space.

The magazines were kind of cool because you could throw them through this hole. They also make a lot of interesting noises. I always find that I wind up walking on the magazines almost like they're little slippers.

Sometimes it's hard to remember the objects. When I'm dancing I try not to see them as objects—as like “oh this thing is a stool.” I make them unnameable. So they all are just things that I find. They don't really have a name anymore. So it's hard to like recall what object really was. It's more like a mass.

Life preserver.
KK: The life preserver was interesting because it's really a weird looking object. It looks like a donut and it's soft but will swell back up into its regular shape. So, there's a timing in it that's interesting. Like the way you throw it on the ground and just plops there. But it does have like elasticity and buoyancy. I think it's deflated. And it also since it's a loop, it goes around things and it can like almost acts like a dry land bracelet for all objects.
Ring, Melinda (Artist), Fig. 16 (plastic bag), Fig. 17 (glove-bench), Bennington College, 2017
Ring, Melinda (Artist), Fig. 18 (life preserver-Kai Kleinbard-office chair assemblage), Bennington 2017
Appendix D: Transcript from interview with Kai Kleinbard

February 20, 2017

Kai Kleinbard: For me, objects have become more interesting to move around and have fun with. It's tricky because it's like learning how to draw without seeing what you're drawing or writing a poem. I remember this teacher I had, Marie Howe who asked me to write a poem without putting any metaphor or simile in it. Writing a poem without putting in any metaphor or simile is to just write the description of what you see.

With the objects, you're just trying to see what’s in front of you and not project some kind of image or idea that's of your own kind of making. It's a lot like what a therapist tries to do in therapy. When working with a client, a therapist tries not to project his or her own shit on the client. Similarly, I'm trying not to project my own shit on the objects. I'm just trying to interact with them and stay curious about what they do as I’m interacting with them.

Cori Olinhouse: What happens through the encounter with the objects? Do you find that you and the objects start to become another kind of like composite being? Does it become like an extension of you? I'm curious if you could describe what the encounter is between you and the objects.

KK: Well, it's interesting because I feel like it's not about the object. It's really like you're encountering yourself constantly and the object only heightens or changes how you encounter yourself. You see an object and you sit in it and then your body changes. The object has a certain amount of push or pull on you. And so, that just gives you different information about how your body wants to move and you stay curious about that effect on your body.

That's why I think that it's hard to separate the human and the object, you know see two different things, because the object is dead unless you’re there. To make it interesting, you enliven it. This actually was an experience today – there was a moment when I was playing around with the tarp, and Melinda reminded me not to animate the object. I remembered to go back to it not being about the objects at that moment. When I was first dancing this [Impossible Dance], it was all about the objects, because you’re given a stimulus and you want to just play with the objects. But, it’s never just about the objects. You’re always staying inside your own interests and the object is just act as a kind of mirror.

CO: I’m really interested in the way matter is more animate in our daily lives than perhaps we give credence to, when we’re moving around objects and furniture and things. I’m curious in your navigating and encountering of the objects, if your sensation is that they’re dead. Or is there a kind of liveliness? Is there something about their energy that becomes present for you?

KK: I think a lot of it has to do with the relationship of the object and what you’re doing and what you’re seeing. You see an object, but it's not just by itself. It's in a pile and it's under something and that informs you.

I remember when I was doing this trance one time, I had a vision where I saw myself working, maybe trying to communicate with a kid, and I remember it was hard. And then I had this idea that if I just put my head on the ground and suddenly the world is so big. And then I was like oh I got to see everything from the point of view of a child. Everything is so big and it's how you look at. It that's how you see it.
So, I think you can make an object what you want it to be by how you see it and it’s context. I guess there are two things. One, you know an object can be casting a weird shadow and it looks scary. Or an object is jagged and it gives you a reminder. So there's an unexpected memory in an object that you don't know. But then there's another part of you that can also create something out of an object. When I do this dance sometimes, what I’ll do is make myself move in slow motion and I forget that I’m moving and the object suddenly looks like it’s looming in front of me and moving on its own accord. And I can create that and almost freak myself out knowing that it’s not really doing that, but almost giving it life through my own imagination.
Appendix E: Transcript from interview with Susan Sgorbati

February 23, 2017

Cori Olinghouse: Let’s start with—this can be somewhat stream-of-conscious too—with your memory, your recollection of *Impossible Dance*.

Susan Sgorbati: I remember very distinctly the title and I remember her improvisation work, which to me seemed directly related to the title. I remember a set that was very distinctive that really set up a room, which at that time seemed unusual. That it was an impossible dance. And that was a really interesting concept with improvisation. How would you set up improvising that was seemingly impossible?

CO: How did you read this idea of impossibility? How was that happening? Was there something in the movement dynamic? Or the way she was working with the objects or the sound?

SS: It felt like there was always this challenge about gesture or phrasing, paying attention to how things unfolded…the structure of room and the structure of the music dictating one thing and her almost impossibly trying to embody those things. On a lot of different levels it felt like it was very physical, as in physical phrasing, a lot of dynamics. I remember speed being another challenge, articulation being a challenge. Not all of a sudden just looking like she's just throwing herself all around. It seemed like it was very particularly articulated. It was like multi-tasking or something that is too much to have to focus on at once, which was another part of the impossibility for me, as the viewer. But then it had this meta-narrative, which I'm not sure she was interested in, but it stayed with me because it's as if we're all trying to do our impossible dances. Dance is so complex to begin with. In a way, you can never fulfill what you set out to do. So there's always this challenge. And she made it really just clear and present, obvious.

CO: It sounds like you're saying is that she kind of visibilized something about the impossible nature of performance or of making and of improvising…What space was it in?

SS: Martha Hill. I remember that because it's such a big black box. And that's why it made sense that she created the room that there was a frame to see this in, because it set it up as a painting, where the foreground was the impossibility.

CO: How do you mean?

SS: Well, because the room was built, she didn’t get lost in the space. She became a portrait in front of room that then became…as if it was a painting called “The Impossible.”

CO: So the enclosure created a kind of stability…

SS: Almost like a photograph. It created the framing…your eye wasn’t going to wander anywhere else. That’s true about complexity. In order to be able to see it, you have to have constraints. She set up those constraints that really allowed you to be able to see the unruliness. If the unruliness had been floating everywhere in space, it wouldn’t have seemed so impossible.

CO: What do you remember about the objects?

SS: You know I don't remember a lot, which is interesting. I just remember there were objects. Somehow she worked with them and somehow that became more of the complication of everything.
CO: One thing we've been talking about a lot as we are photographing them is this idea that we're not tracking their dimensions. Normally, with a conservator or archivist, in the case of a sculpture—they're tracking everything about its size, etc. We're interested in the fact that you can't always place what they are.

SS: Yeah, that’s why I don’t think I remembered them. I don't remember objects that would have suggested to me actual things. I just remember there were objects and that they were part of sections of things that unfolded.

CO: This is what I’m learning from the way Melinda is working with objects. There starts to become this dynamic or almost part of composing strategy where the objects and the human become intermeshed or interrelated. It’s almost like a compositional assemblage. It requires the person to animate the object. Kai [Kleinbard] explained that he has to perceive of the objects as unnamable. This is what allows him to stay active in his curiosity about them.

With Kai’s version, he started to work with the objects even much more than Melinda. What’s really interesting is that Kai’s physicality, with his background in martial arts, lent itself to a kind of virtuosity. Their precariousness visibilized his precariousness. They [the objects] were never centered. They were always falling. There were always too many piled on top of each other. I know part of Aikido is learning what your opponent’s balance point is, so I think he was doing this with the objects—tipping the balance points.

SS: Interesting. It makes sense to me. Really going back to my memory, I don’t remember having names for the objects.

CO: But you remember that there was this matter that was there.

SS: That’s right. It wasn’t a pristine space.

CO: Could you talk a little bit about what impossible means to you?

SS: I think the way that I see impossible…the meaning that’s usually conveyed is outside of a frame of coherence or order or pattern. It’s different from the unknown. Unknown would be going into this space you’ve never been before, but impossible seems to suggest that it's a challenge of which most people will say you couldn’t do. It’s like a door…something is shut down about structure. It's something beyond human life. You know you can you can’t humanly execute whatever this structure is that has presented itself. One, I think that that's an interesting concept to set out for reality. Two, that once you say you're going try to solve that, what does it mean by taking down that constraint and having to imagine? Since it has to be an imaginary space, to some extent, that you could solve something that has been defined as impossible? What do you draw on then? What level of complexity are you in that is different than what you thought you were in before because you’ve set it up where there is no understanding of the complexity of the impossible? So, you have to literally experiment to find something that was not there before. So, I find that really interesting and challenging. I always thought that’s what Melinda set out to do. There was an element of maybe she calls it unruly, of this is just not containable, this is not something you can make work. Then, what happens to you when you give that up and you say I’m going to try to make it work anyway?

CO: Yes. Great, thank you Susan.

SS: Thank you, Cori.