

# Scripting the Body

## The Simultaneous Study of Writing and Movement

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### Abstract

The following essay explores the relationship between the language of movement and the language of text, their interconnectivity and infinite reflective possibilities. The essay first moves through a philosophical exploration of language and performance theory and then into a personal account of how these ideas can affect teaching. The essay culminates in a selection of writing and correlating choreography assignments that can be used by modern dance composition teachers who wish to enrich their daily curriculum.

**W**e write everyday. We write notes to ourselves, lists of things to buy, e-mail messages, letters, and even checks. We write so much, in fact, that we clearly differentiate the *act* of writing from the *art* of writing. Likewise, we move everyday. We wash dishes, unlock doors, pet dogs, shake hands, nod and smile. Though we differentiate between the *act* and the *art* of movement, the borderline can be fuzzy. There has long been debate within the modern dance community over whether the simple act of walking down the street is in some way part of an art form, say, the art of moving. Not one of my dance

composition classes has run its course without this discussion.

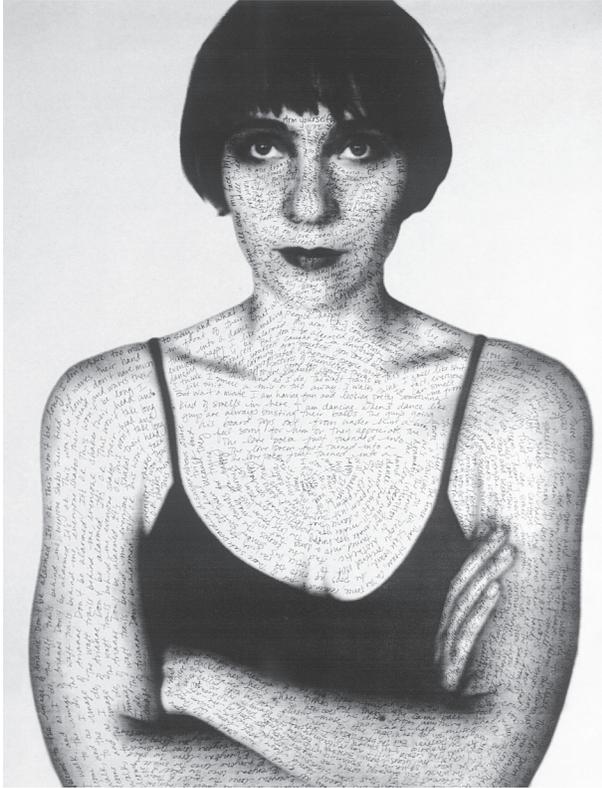
During these discussions, I am often drawn to introduce my students to some basic semiotic theories regarding the arbitrary nature of naming or the relationship between thoughts, sounds, and words. But most popular are the discussions that ensue after I bring up the topic of binary pairs or studies in oppositions and then the quote, "To draw boundaries is to manufacture opposites."<sup>1</sup>

We ask each other then, what are the differences between the act of movement and the art of movement? Likewise, what are the differences between the act of writing and the art of writing? An act (of walking or writing or anything) may or may not be done without conscious forethought or awareness of how it will appear to an observer. On the other hand, an art requires conscious forethought and a distinct awareness of how it will appear to an observer. The art of writing requires an implicit reader just as the art of movement requires an implicit spectator. In my composition classes, I liken the spectator to the reader. The spectator "reads" the text of movement just as the reader of a book reads its text.

Reading is, unto itself, a creative act. According to Dr. Regina Pally<sup>2</sup> in her article for the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, "The brain constructs perception with rules built into the constructive process." In other words, we create perception. As you read these words, your brain is taking in the patterns of neural stimuli. Your brain then compares this information to similar patterns in its memory and when a match is made, a perception is created. As we

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**Figure 1** *Scripting the Body*: The body carries with it numerous cultural codes that influence how we define ourselves. The title slide emphasizes this as well as the relationship between writing and movement.

read text, in any form — be it a series of movement phrases danced on stage or a series of word phrases placed on the page — our brain goes through this sequence and, in turn, creates the perception of that text. Any text requires this creation on the part of the reader to live.

As artists, then, how do we construct our art to move the audience the way we want them to be moved, given that the value of our art is always in relation to the reader/observer? This is the challenge we have been crowned with as the sons and daughters of the post-modern era. As we create art, we must be conscious of these challenges, and as we teach art, we must use them as the outline for a new curriculum. We owe it to our dance students to use curriculum that draws on the rich history of dance while simultaneously moves dance forward toward new ways of thinking about and experiencing a truly contemporary art form.

As a modern dance composition teacher, I have often found myself existing in that slippery space between the act and the art of both writing and dance — dabbling in both as avenues to both. I have found myself decidedly unsatisfied with the typical “dance the haiku poem” assignments that I

grew up doing in dance composition class, yet eager to incorporate writing exercises into performance studies. I always keep in mind that my goal as a dance composition teacher is to lead students toward a certain kind of awareness that uses the system of language, its signs and signifiers, as a model for art making. The model of communication, imaginatively manipulated, can shed light on the machinations of the choreographic playing field. It can also enable dancers to affect how audiences read their dances.

Most students of linguistics focus on the arbitrary nature of the way in which we, as a culture, understand language. However, as everyday writers and speakers, we understand language to be fixed and commonly understood. Yes, there are certainly slippery spaces within written language. But I think we all can agree that modern dance is one of the most ambiguous, fleeting, and arbitrary of all art forms. Can we then, as teachers of modern dance composition, teach our students to use textual anchors in order to contextualize their dances so that all is not simply left to ambiguity? Unless, of course, ambiguity is your intention as a choreographer (you will always get those). In this case, I always say, “If ambiguity is what you want then that is what I want to get as your reader. Don’t let me hang on to one little thing.” This is a challenge I throw out to my students precisely because it is one I take very seriously.

But the question remains. How do we move forward toward a new understanding of movement language? *Scripting the Body* is my attempt at answering this question. It is a course curriculum that I first began to develop with a DURFEE Scholarship in 1997, while I was an inter-school MFA student in Dance and Critical Writing at The California Institute of the Arts. The grant funded the development of this curriculum for a summer course I taught to adolescent girls living in the Los Angeles inner city. The course focused more specifically on how the lines between body language and spoken word could be blurred. We spent a lot of time exploring body image. We discussed feminine identity and the consumption of stereotypes through media. One exercise that was found to be particularly useful involved snippets from MTV — some music video clips, some commercials, some docudramas, and even cartoons. The students watched them with the sound off and discussed what they saw. They then wrote down the text they thought was being said and then I had them write the text they wished was being said. We read them out loud along with the visuals. Then, at the end of the class we watched the visuals with the sound on.

The girls were right on-target with the text they thought was being said. They could literally hear what was being said by looking at the visuals. They could hear the lyrics to a song by looking at the imagery depicted. And not surprisingly, the text they wished had been said gave the visuals a sense of magic and hope the girls relied upon to maneuver through their worlds. It was a very important lesson. We simultaneously witnessed the power of body language and creativity. It was with this in mind that I began to formalize course work that simultaneously focused on both writing and movement. The writing would anchor the movement and the movement would free up the writing. To return to Ken Wilber again, we would, in fact, draw no boundaries but let everything exist in slippery space where words move and movements speak. If words were doomed to sit locked onto the page, then we would free them and let them resonate in the air with dance and vice versa.

Often, when I talk about the integrating text with movement people ask me, "Shouldn't dance speak for itself?" My answer is undoubtedly, yes. All artwork should speak for itself. But how it speaks is a matter of a very subjective definition. There is danger in creating a scenario where dance must be autonomous from other art forms in order for it to be "pure dance." In my opinion, the "purest" form of a dance is when a choreographer sets out to communicate something and does so in a manner, structure, and location where this idea is best manifested. Sometimes this means pirouettes and grande jettes in a circle on a stage, sometimes it means speaking while holding a pose in an all white gallery, and sometimes it means being very quiet in a spot light while brushing your hair. As teachers of dance, it behooves us not to offer students definitions to choose from, but rather to teach them to examine *the nature of defining* as part of their process of creation. It is my belief that we, in the dance community, are no longer in a position where we need to protect what we have established by defending the integrity of an abstract idea of purity. A more proactive approach is to create dances that show an awareness of these ideals and the problems inherent in them. It would benefit our art form greatly to create an artistic dialogue that reflects the complicated history and theories that make up contemporary concert dance.

When I was developing *Scripting the Body* course work, I wanted to create a curriculum that helped choreographers to position themselves in relationship to their work, their world, and their

art form. The thinking was that this curriculum would encourage students to gain perspectives on themselves, their environments, and the way in which they relate to language as a tool that helps them move through their lives. But most importantly, I wanted to create a curriculum that not only taught choreography students how to create dances but also taught students how to be responsible for their dances – the way they are responsible for their words. If they can do this, they will undoubtedly have more awareness of the audience's potential perceptions of their work and therefore be able to control these perceptions more acutely. *Scripting the Body* helps a choreographer to create work that she or he is connected to from the ground up and some might say from the outside in; always keeping in mind: who, what, when, where, and why – the grammar of their work.

### **Scripting the Body Assignments**

The following is an outline of a few of the exercises that make up *Scripting the Body*. Each exercise has a writing and choreographic component that relate to each other. The writing component is done first, followed by the movement. Some exercises I have created, others I have borrowed from teachers that have inspired me. I have taught all of these exercises to a range of ages and have identified exercises that work better with specific age groups. Some exercises are geared for generating dance material, others for freeing creative impulses, still others for re-defining existing dances. The exercises are categorized in four areas: Identity Work; Time & Space Relationships; Seeing, Feeling & Thinking Movement, and Exercises to Generate Personal Voice. These are the nuts and bolts of the curriculum. The assignments work best when taught in tandem with discussions on the concepts discussed in this essay. Of course, I urge anyone who uses the assignments described in this curriculum to twist, turn, and revise them if necessary for their setting and their student population.

#### **I. Identity Work**

##### *The Write Stuff (Ages 11 and up)*

Write three sentences that describe something about yourself. In the first sentence, include a comma somewhere. In the second sentence, include a colon. Conclude the third sentence with an exclamation point.

Choreograph a movement for every word you have written. String them together by adding transitional movements and by incorporating the grammar and syntax of your sentences.

*I Am... (Ages 9 - 17)*

Use the title, "I Am..." as a jumping off point for an open writing assignment. It can take whatever form you would like: a list, poem, or paragraph. At least one page should be filled.

Have the dancer say the words "I am..." before she/he performs the solo they are working on. Discuss how this contextualizes the piece.

*Letter to Myself\* (Ages 11 and up)*

Write a letter to yourself on a loose-leaf sheet of paper. Put today's date on the letter. Put the letter in an envelope and write your home address on the envelope. Put a stamp on the envelope. Write on the back of the envelope when, in the future, you would like to receive this letter. It could be five years, ten years, or five months. Whatever you want. Give me (the teacher) the letter and I will send it to you by the date requested.

Ask students to choreograph a short study using the format of a letter as a structural device. For example, instruct them to have a short introductory phrase or salutation – it could be an entrance, then a main body consisting of two developed movement phrases – like paragraphs, finish the study with a conclusion or farewell. Always make sure to include your signature!

*Map of my Body† (Ages 11 and up)*

With text, imagery, and color create a map of your body paying attention to "internal" versus "external" space.

Use the imagery to generate two separate movement phrases, one inspired by the space depicted inside the body and one inspired by the space depicted outside the body. Project the visual image via a slide as a back-drop for the performance.

*Map of Concerns‡ (Ages 16 and up)*

Choose something that concerns you. It could have something to do with the choreography you are working on or it could be personal. Use a large piece of paper. Let your ideas and visual images go down on the paper. Let everything about this concern find its way onto the page. Use colors, pictures, drawings, and collage. Pay

special attention to spatial relationships. Put down your thoughts in written words, poems, lists, or phrases. Create a key for the map. When it is done, consider what its title might be, if there is a beginning or an end, a central point or theme, a turning point or core idea. When you have done this, write a brief description of the map, discussing how you interpret it.

Use the map as a score for a large group improvisation. Title the improvisation: "These are our concerns."

**II. Time & Space Relationships***Repetition‡ (Ages 11 and up)*

Do an open writing assignment on any subject, but you must keep the pencil moving at all times. Whenever you get stuck, repeat the last word you wrote over and over. Begin and end with a repetition of words.

Perform an improvisation while applying the same rules. The performer must move constantly, when the performer feels stuck or at loss for movements they must repeat the same movement over and over until they "un-stick" themselves.

*Writing with Time in Mind‡ (Ages 11 and up)*

Pick a phrase related to time, for example, yesterday, right away, before, once, soon, too long, forever, in a second, and so forth. Do an open writing assignment by beginning with this phrase and repeat it when you are at loss for words rather than stopping. Have fun with it. Let it become the thread on which your writing hangs.

Perform an improvisation inspired by the phrase you chose relating to time. Whenever you get stuck, stop moving and verbally repeat the phrase until you feel ready to begin again.

*Timed Writing‡ (Ages 11 and up)*

Write for 10 minutes and stop. Five minutes – stop. One minute – stop. Thirty seconds – stop. Try this sequence writing the same story each time and different stories each time.

Use the title, "One minute and thirty five seconds," and choreograph something that will work with the title. In order to generate movement material for this dance, improvise by moving constantly for ten minutes and then freeze. Then move for five minutes and freeze, one minute and freeze, and thirty seconds and freeze. Try this sequence

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\* The writing portion of *Letter to Myself* is inspired by Nancy Reuben, a former Social Living teacher at Berkeley High School.

† The drawing portion of *Map of my Body* is inspired by the work of Anna Halprin, a choreographer and dance teacher based in Northern California.

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‡ The writing portion of this exercise was introduced to me by Mady Schutzman, Assistant Dean of the School of Critical Studies at California Institute of the Arts.

moving in the same way each time and then contrasting ways each time.

#### *My House*<sup>§</sup> (Ages 11 and up)

Describe the rooms in your house. Describe the feelings you get when you are in different rooms in your house. How do you feel when you are in your room as opposed to the living room? Describe the objects in the room that feel significant to you. What do the objects symbolize to you?

Create short dances for each member of your family, placing each one in a different room in your house.

#### *Dream Space* (Ages 11 and up)

Describe a dream you have had this week. Include images, characters, impressions, possible meanings.

Recreate your dream through a series of tableaux. Use props and additional performers, if necessary. Pay attention to transitions!

#### *The Reality Is...* (Ages 11 and up)

What is your reality? What does "reality" mean to you? How do you negotiate with your reality, change it, flow with it?

Create a movement phrase based on pedestrian movement, in real time.

#### *Isolation/Inclusion* (Ages 11 and up)

Write about a time when you were alone. Only when you are done, read what you have written. As you read, circle the phrases or words that stand out to you. Do the same with a story about when you were in a large group of people. Compile two new lists of phrases and words from each story.

Give each student a word from someone's two lists. This is their cue card for movement. They should then choreograph a short phrase with this word in mind. Students perform their short phrases all together on stage. Direct them to perform very close to each other, then spread out across the space and then with one person alone and the rest of the group very near to each other. At any time they can speak their word out loud.

#### *Personal & Public Space* (Ages 11 and up)

Divide your paper down the middle titling the left side "Personal" and the right side "Public." Write straight across the page switching whenever you run

into the dividing line. The left side is used to describe something very personal and unique to you while the right side is used to describe a public space or an anecdote publicly understood. Only when you are done, read what you have written. Notice if/how transitioning from one side of the page to the other affected how "public" and "private" were expressed through your writing. In other words, did the transitions affect the two opposing concepts?

Take the class on a tour of the school campus. Each student picks a site they wish to explore through movement. Using their text from the "Private" side of their paper, they generate a short movement phrase in the site. When everyone is done creating, the class goes on a tour of all the sites and observes each person's movement phrase. Special attention is paid to how the "Private" material is affected by being performed in a "Public" space.

#### *Mood Space* (Ages 11 - 17)

Use colored pencils, crayons, or pens to delineate four moods on your page. On top of the color, write words, phrases, and fragments of memories or movements that connect to these moods.

For a group improvisation, delineate four mood spaces in the room. When students are inside these mood spaces, they use the moods as inspiration for movement. When they move from one space to another they must pay special attention to the transition. Often it is here, in transition, where the most interesting work occurs. Have half the class watch and the other perform.

### III. Seeing, Feeling & Thinking Movement

#### *Dance Is...* (Ages 11 and up)

Define the word "dance" in your own terms. Write at least one page on what "dance" means to you. Discuss what kind of movement makes you feel happy, sad, lonely, playful. What kind of movement do you like to watch and what kind of movement do you find boring? Discuss why you feel the way you do about dance.

Have the dancer speak the words, "Dance is" before, during, or after she/he performs a solo they are working on. Discuss how this contextualizes the piece.

#### *Text Collage* (Ages 11 and up)

Fill one page in your journal with words cut out of printed material and which have the theme of "Movement." Use only words, no imagery.

Give each student four cards. The first card has a structural device written on it: theme & variation. The second card gives them an emotional landscape: uncertain. The third card gives them a

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§ *My House* is inspired by Kim Epifano, a choreographer and dance teacher based in San Francisco.

quality: sustained. The fourth card gives them a body part: fingers. They arrange the cards in a fashion that is meaningful to them and use the arrangement and words as a score for a short choreographic study.

*Observations (Ages 11 and up)*

Spend five minutes observing one thing. It can be an object, a person, or a living thing. While you observe, do not take notes, simply watch quietly. Do not engage in conversation if you are observing a person. Pay special attention to movement, stillness, shape, and form. After five minutes, write down everything that comes to mind about the time you spent focused on the one thing. Write it all down on paper.

Take the class to another class; it could be another art class, a physical education class, or an academic class. Have the students observe quietly and write down every gesture or movement they see.

When you return to the studio, have the students use the list they have created to generate a short movement phrase. If you can, perform the phrases for the class you observed.

*Left Handed Writing<sup>11</sup> (Ages 11 and up)*

Do an open writing assignment with your left hand or if you are left handed write with your right hand. You can write on any topic.

This assignment drives most people crazy because it forces the writer to return to a long forgotten time in our lives: the period where we learned to write. Kinesthetically remembering that struggle is significant in relation to dance technique and choreography in that it returns us to a very humble time in our lives. At the same time, we see how much we have been able to learn in only a short time. Look — we can write! Reminding students of the Left Handed Writing assignment in the middle of a difficult dance combination will immediately relax the class. It reminds us that practice will get us somewhere. We have proof!

Have students choreograph a “Wrong Dance,” or a dance they consider to be ugly, confusing, or disconnected.

*Visual Poem<sup>11</sup> (Ages 11 and up)*

Try to write a silent poem with images and words or fragments of words. The ultimate goal for a vi-

sual poem is to keep the gaze sufficiently engaged so that we do not feel the need to speak the text we see on the page.

Make a loud dance without using sound.

*Dance Review (Ages 11 and up)*

Write a critique of your own dance. Discuss what you think the dance is about from a critic’s point of view. Include discussion of the music, lighting, and costuming and how it worked with the dance. Talk about how the dance made you feel and what questions it brought up.

Read the critique you wrote to the audience before or after you perform the dance.

*Conversations (Ages 11 and up)*

Write a fictional conversation between two people. Make sure to include a high point, or climax, within the conversation. Is it an argument? An interview? Lots of long monologues? Lots of short statements? Pay extra attention to rhythm and dynamics. Does someone have the upper hand in the conversation or is it an even flow of information?

Use the conversation as a structure for a duet. Include fragments of text. Begin and end with salutations.

IV. Exercises to Generate Personal Voice

*In the Voice of...<sup>11</sup> (Ages 11 and up)*

Write a story of one to two pages in length. It could be fictional or autobiographical. Pick one author, any author, and read a few pages in order to get a feel for his voice or tone. Then write two pages of your story in the voice of the author you have just read. Suggested authors: Jamaica Kincaid, Ernest Hemingway, Annie Dillard, John Updike, Charles Dickens.

Begin with a discussion on personal styles of movement pointing out that each one of us has a distinct way of moving and choreographing. Perhaps you have already noticed this through other studies. Break the class into pairs. Direct each pair to create a short movement phrases in the voice (style) of their partner. This can get very funny and eye opening — it can also be hurtful to some people. Make sure your class is ready for this assignment. You can also direct the class to generate a movement phrase in your voice. This is a great way to find out how your students perceive your style of moving and teaching.

*Memories (Ages 11 and up)*

Write out a list of ten memories from the past. Choose three and make a new list with these three. Write out each of the three chosen memories.

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<sup>11</sup> The writing portion of this assignment was introduced to me by Mady Schutzman, Assistant Dean of the School of Critical Studies at California Institute of the Arts.

Create an autobiographical solo including text from the Memories assignment.

### *I Have to Tell You Something (Ages 11 and up)*

If you were to tell your audience anything before dancing what would you say? Write a monologue, story, or poem that relates somehow, even if abstractly, to the dance you are working on.

Have student speak the phrase, "I have to tell you something," before, during or after a solo they are working on. Discuss how this contextualizes it.

### Summary

Both writing and dance are unique forms of communication. Exposing dancers to the writing assignments I have outlined helps to open them up to the range of possibilities, but more impor-

tantly helps them become aware of dance as a syntax of communication. The goal of this writing curriculum is to heighten the dancers' awareness of the ways the audience may perceive and interpret their work and through that knowledge help the dancers gain more control over their choreography and the perceptions that they impart. The writing assignments get them thinking. The dance components of each exercise get them communicating.

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