

The Master of Rejection:
Tere O'Connor as a Representation of the New Postmodern Choreography in
New York City
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In this thesis I propose to reveal and evaluate new trends in the realm of contemporary dance-making in New York City, through the work of choreographer Tere O'Connor. More specifically, I intend to inquire how concepts of gender, race, and class, as well as other social discourses, pertain to the process of dance-making and how these can be read as postmodern. By closely reading three of the choreographer's works, engaging with performance theory and gender theories, and conversing with the choreographer and his dancers, I hope to challenge Tere O'Connor's theories of choreography while examining how these apply to his overall works. His approach to composition, memory, audience, and the choice of dancers, will function as pivotal points in my discussion of his work as epitomizing a contemporary approach to postmodern choreography.

My research will begin with a working definition of postmodernism as this applies to dance in New York City, specifically examining the role of narrative and the audience. An exploration of "resistant" postmodern dance will follow, weaving in what O'Connor views as his own resistance and how this comes into play in his works. *Frozen Mommy* (2004), one of O'Connor's more recent works, will be closely read, using movement and theoretical analysis, to examine its value and approach, and evaluate its validity as a postmodern work.

Rammed Earth, the artist's current work in progress will then be analyzed, drawing insights from an earlier analysis of works (the anti-narrative approach, the ongoing use of the audience as an integral part of the piece, and the dancers' sense of humanity, among others). O'Connor's incorporation of architectural elements in this work, along with his distinctive use of dancers will be considered as part of his resistant

methodology of dance-making. This will include observations from the studio, working on *Rammed Earth. Lawn* (2003), an earlier work, will function as a turning point in the thesis. From concentrating on how gender, class, and relationships are used in *Rammed Earth* and *Frozen Mommy*, *Lawn* will provide an examination of the more formal and content-dense material of O'Connor. Though the artist still considers the piece to be free of narrative, *Lawn* is more physically descriptive and can be analyzed differently from the other pieces. *Lawn* will also allow for a more political/social reading of O'Connor's work. Given that it has been reviewed mainly as a narrative piece, it will function as a final questioning of O'Connor's anti-narrative trajectory.

The main sources for this thesis consist of recorded material of the three works discussed, as well as other works of O'Connor's. Also included are interviews conducted with the choreographer and with four of his dancers: Heather Olson, Hilary Clark, Matthew Rogers, and Christopher Williams. Although synthesized with theoretical material about postmodernism, performance, the audience, gender, dance, and other texts to produce a contextual argument, I have tried to maintain as much as possible the subjects' authentic intentions, in the context in which the interviews were conducted.

Resistant Postmodern

Similar to other forms of art since the 1960's, dance has been characterized, in specific contexts, as postmodern. In New York City, this characterization bears unique implications as postmodern choreography has gained recognition and respect as a legitimate form of dance-making. Among the early generation of postmodern choreographers, the best known is Yvonne Rainer, one of the organizers of the Judson

Dance Theatre (1962-1964), “an incubator of postmodern dance.”¹ Rainer introduced combinations of movement that broke with traditional ideas of functionality, purpose, and intentionality, while adopting an attitude of everyday casualness. She was partly influenced by Merce Cunningham, an avant-garde choreographer, who began developing choreographic techniques such as “chance” procedures in the early 1950’s. About these procedures he once said,

The feeling I have when I compose in this way is that I am in touch with a natural resource far greater than my own personal inventiveness could ever be, much more universally human than the particular habits of my own practice, and organically rising out of common pools of motor impulses.²

Embodying those techniques—intensifying the kinetic and theatrical experience and the human situation on stage – enabled Cunningham to create drama. Cunningham and O’Connor are thought to set up a tension between content material and notions of performance.

Reacting against a modern dance defined as romantic, designed, narrated, determined, and transcendental,³ postmodern dance tends to express the opposite qualities: it is para-physical, a term that sets postmodern dance outside of the borders of the body, yet corporeal (presenting a conflict), motivated by chance, anti-narrative, indeterminate, and immanent - a dance that is not necessarily physical or perceivable.⁴ In

¹ Wendy Perron, “The Woman Who Changed Everything,” *Dance Magazine*, July 2006 : 60.

² Merce Cunningham, in Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image* (New York: Morrow, 1988), 286.

³ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 43.

⁴ Although Harvey uses these characterizations for art in general I find that they can as well be applied to dance.

her book *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, Sally Banes discusses the evolution of postmodern dance in New York City, or what is considered to be “The Postmodern.” According to Banes, since historical modern dance cannot be characterized as Modern, the term Postmodern is misleading. Therefore, what is considered to be postmodern, is actually the Modern: “In dance, the confusion the term “post-modern” creates is further complicated.... Thus in many respects it is post-modern dance that functions as *modernist*.”⁵ Rather than discarding the history of the “Modern” as evident in New York “modern dance,” Banes severs the connection between Modern dance and Postmodern dance as relying on each other and suggests a different discourse between the two, one that insists upon their independence. It is especially interesting to consider her argument in relation to O’Connor’s work, given that he finds the mere categorization of any work, his own in particular, an intellectually futile exercise. Although Banes does not discard the idea of the modern or postmodern in general, but only their connectedness, and therefore, the chronology they allegedly share, she eradicates at least one category’s validity – which leads closer to O’Connor’s position.

In his analysis of Susan Leigh Foster’s *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subject in Contemporary American Dance*, Philip Auslander identifies resistance as a particular form of postmodern dance. This strategy includes:

The assertion and disruption of a linear narrative; the aforementioned refusal of mastery over the body; the engagement of the audience in the process of composition through the dancers’ gaze; the ‘situat[ing] of dance as one discourse among many and its deprivileging through

⁵Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, ed. Denise Lucciono and Sally Banes (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 20-21.

intermedial approaches...and metacommentary on the dancing itself which provides the spectators with a method for seeing 'how, ultimately, all interpretations, including their own, would be woven together in one collective fabric.'⁶

This idea of “resistant” postmodern dance, fits easily with my own reading of O’Connor’s work as postmodern, and more specifically, resistant. It is through this double lens that I wish to analyze O’Connor’s choreography and the large question of dance-making in New York City. It can be argued that the postmodern as a whole, and postmodern dance in particular, already implies a form of resistance. However, without formally applying semantics, I would argue that adding the term “resistant” to the category of postmodern dance emphasizes it as being more than postmodern (pro-postmodern if you would like). O’Connor himself perceives this categorization as unnecessary, and even as something “critics have invented to be able to talk about dance.”⁷ However, analyzing and re-conceptualizing the choreographer’s dense ideas seems impossible without a theoretical framework.

Feminine - Heavy Choreography

According to the Tere O’Connor Company’s website, “*Frozen Mommy* is an evening-length work stripped bare of any theatrical spectacle or hidden narrative. In imitation of the way the human mind formulates thought, the work sets movement elements of great disparity into close proximity to create meaning.”⁸ What that meaning is, exactly, O’Connor does not say. Nor does he want his audience to be certain of that meaning. In a collection of entrances and exits, the five cast members of *Frozen Mommy*

⁶ Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997) , 75.

⁷ Tere O’Connor, interview by Noa Mark, New York City, 17 November 2006.

⁸ Tere O’Connor Dance website, <<http://www.tereoconnordance.com>> (10 November 2006).

take on five awkward personalities that seem to derive from their real life characters.

Calling “enter, enter, closer” to verbalize their actions, the dancers slowly construct their safe space, one that resembles a big playground.

In one moment, they stagger on the floor, all the way to the stripped back wall. One does not get to see such behavior in “real life.” However, the way they carry themselves, casually and weighted into the floor, suggests an embodiment of some internal and authentic experience. Accompanied mostly by their own voices, they create internal alliances of two couples and a fifth dancer, who remains the outsider for most of the piece. Holding hands with Christopher Williams, dancer Hilary Clark tries to communicate something to him. She pulls his hand down, as children do when they try to get their parents’ attention, and then, almost screaming, she describes what she “sees”: a sky, a moon, and stars. “Twinkle, twinkle little star” she screams, creating a funny, distorted sound. Her character, now more defined than the others, resembles a caricature.

Clark’s eccentric character and how it makes its way into O’Connor’s work seem to reflect greatly on his perception of women. Using a dancer who looks different from the model of slim and athletic dancers suggests more than an aesthetic statement, identification with this specific woman. Growing up surrounded by women, O’Connor learned to appreciate the important role women played in his life. “From a very young age, having many mothers around me, I had great trust in women, and was able to see the unspoken alliance between them.”⁹ His adoration of women, evident in almost all of his works and in their titles, functions as a feminist manifesto that will be continuously explored in this thesis. It is ironic though, that despite his great esteem for women, the

⁹ O’Connor interview, 17 November.

female dancer in *Frozen Mummy* is the one who cries for attention. In this scene the female is a caricature, a needy and grotesque character – hardly the depiction of a strong woman.

Stream of Consciousness

In his *New York Times* review of *Frozen Mummy*, Jack Anderson wrote that “as the work progressed, the frequent pauses began to suggest that the performers were still dancing even though their bodies stayed still. That is, their thoughts were moving.”¹⁰ *Frozen Mommy* reflects a division between reality and illusion. The participants, though, are not only the dancers, but the audience as well. In this work, O’Connor undresses the stage (there is no “offstage”) and by doing that, to some extent, exposes his dancers. Although they obviously take on different characters, they are in many ways, themselves. They have no “costumes” and are given the freedom to perform wearing their own clothes every night, as if to deepen their personal engagement in the piece. The embodiment of both an awkward character and a personal, real-life identity relates to O’Connor’s theory of working in what he terms stream of consciousness. According to this theory, the mind in any given moment is preoccupied by more than one thought. Instead of rejecting the multiplicity of thoughts and feelings they produce (confusion, disorientation, etc.), we should embrace the “stream” and allow it to take us to places we could have never gone with only one dominant thought.¹¹ Challenging one’s mind and thoughts and accepting (rather than rejecting) a collection of thoughts, “stream of consciousness” is an example of O’Connor’s resistance.

The long pauses in the piece seem to be the places where the dancers are caught up

¹⁰ Jack Anderson. “As the Thinkers Stand Still, Their Thoughts Step Lively,” The New York Times, 14 December 2004, Arts review.

¹¹ O’Connor interview, 17 November.

in that stream of consciousness, projecting it out to the audience. One such pause comes at the end of the piece, when the dancers face the audience with one hand on the pelvis, standing in complete silence for three minutes. Gazing out into the space, they project great energy, without moving at all. In an interview, Heather Olson, one of O'Connor's dancers, has said that she uses that long pause to reminisce about her mother and family. She is thinking, almost dreaming about "being an old woman who had never danced in her life, and is now realizing she never will."¹² The use of intimate experience is encouraged by O'Connor, who believes that internalizing and thinking about personal experiences allows the dancers to convey emotion with full intensity.

In another very satisfying moment, the five dancers, facing each other, move in unison to a musical score. Essentially, they keep repeating identical movements, but their circular use of space and their individuality layer the repetitive material. Walking the phrase, almost hopping it, they move heavily into the floor, constantly tilting to one side. Their upper backs hang over their spines like shirts on hangers as they go through the phrase, suggesting exhaustion. Still, they project vitality and energy. Two dancers, Heather Olson and Erin Gerken, continue the flow of movement, shifting to a more "modern dance" vocabulary. Their movement, initiated by their fingers, creates different paths in the space. More and more, their upper backs are utilized to achieve mobility and their hands gain momentum as they twist and turn, taking their heads and pelvises with them.

¹² Heather Olson, interview by Noa Mark, New York City, 3 November 2006.

Elaborating on Ann Cooper Albright's argument of how cultural identity, gender, and sexuality are foregrounded through the dancing bodies,¹³ O'Connor rejects the idea of making dance to music: "[I] don't understand any art that uses another form of art to explain it. Music is important in my work, but it only serves the structure."¹⁴ Albright contends that, although exposed to manipulations of dominant ideologies, dancing bodies constantly challenge and destabilize rigid compartmentalization and hierarchies established by these ideologies.¹⁵ Music then, although not necessarily rigid but certainly an ideology, is the influence or manipulative agent that O'Connor resists utilizing. Although he includes music in his work, he does so only after the piece is completed, usually a week or two before its premiere.

Music, claims O'Connor, is there to serve the structure, the choreography, rather than the other way around. The question, then, is how O'Connor can maintain his original idea once the music is added to the dance. I could not help but noticing that in some parts of *Frozen Mommy*, for example, the dancers were in perfect sync with the music, which implies that the music's meter served as a form of rhythmic support - the exact support O'Connor rejects. Would the first and fifteenth performances equally detach the dance from the music? The tension between unison, musical harmony, free association, and the resistance that O'Connor insists on, complicates but also reinforces an impulse to make order out of an intentional chaos.

A heart-breaking duet between Erin Gerken and Matthew Rogers takes place downstage left. It is unusual, because even though they are a man and a woman, and one

¹³Ann Cooper Albright. *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*, (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 32-3.

¹⁴ O'Connor interview, 17 November.

¹⁵ Albright, 33.

would therefore expect them to project a very specific sexual dynamic, they convey a self-motivated and highly individualized energy – each on his/her own, detached from one another. Pounding Rogers’ back to the floor, as if to escape his grip, Gerken appears mentally, and therefore physically stronger than Rogers – more dominant. He holds her shoulders very gently, a grasp that seems easy enough to escape. Her aggression creates a rhythm of violence; they are attached the whole time, bouncing brutally into the floor, until they exhaust themselves. Williams joins them and helps lift them up. They then materialize into a mixture of people, with no discernible identity or gender, each performer maintaining their ambiguities as men and women.

The Architecture of Dance

“Rammed earth,” O’Connor explained to me one evening on the subway, is a concept taken from the construction world. Made from cement, water, and a mixture of dirt, the combination can be used as a substitute for concrete in structures that do not need to withstand high forces. Rammed earth is an organic, natural, and environmentally friendly product that is becoming more and more popular within the architectural community. “Organic” to O’Connor means uncontrolled, uncalculated, and growing on its own terms. The beauty of the mixture, says O’Connor, is that it can be created from materials already available.¹⁶ The natural process of obtaining the materials, mixing them together, and creating something new is what the choreographer finds fascinating. Much of his work, however, is inorganic (following his own definition of organic). Even in *Rammed Earth*, in which he claims to be using a great deal of improvisation, he is

¹⁶ Tere O’Connor, interview by Noa Mark, New York City, 19 October 2006.

constantly making phrases and teaching them to his dancers - a very calculated, precise, and inorganic process.

O'Connor's ideas come from different sources. According to one of his dancers: "he creates from where he is in life in that specific moment - what he thinks is interesting to him in that period of time."¹⁷ Unlike many choreographers, O'Connor refuses to videotape material developed in rehearsals. What stays in his physical, bodily memory is what he perceives as the important material.¹⁸ After viewing *Lawn*,¹⁹ a piece filled with dense ideas about the environment and our cynical use of it, one is hardly surprised that O'Connor, implicitly if not explicitly, remains concerned with organic processes that relate to the physical world that we inhabit.

In *Rammed Earth*, a work in process, O'Connor utilizes the same technique as the construction process he described to me on the subway. In the studio, he claims to offer his dancers only what is "available" to him, allowing them the freedom to translate it, reform it, and create the material anew. The most intriguing aspect of this work then, is the choreographer's total embrace of a new language created by his dancers and by him. Influenced by architecture, O'Connor consciously employs elements from the architectural world to create his work, using rhetoric, imagery, and physical structure to complicate it.

In the studio, O'Connor asks his dancers to dance a section he calls "The Fabric,"²⁰ a structure on which he will later elaborate. "Fabric 1" (the multiple titles, "secret language" between him and the dancers, symbolize the evolution of the piece)

¹⁷ Matthew Rogers, interview by Noa Mark, New York City, 26 October 2006.

¹⁸ O'Connor, interview, 17 November.

¹⁹ This piece will be explored later.

²⁰ O'Connor explained to me that this is only a working title.

begins; the dancers are using a recurring motif, a movement phrase they have learned from O'Connor. Typical of O'Connor, the movement is so dense that it looks improvised. It also looks different on each of the dancers, and their faces are totally focused. They seem perplexed not for any inner, emotional reason, but rather because of the immense amount of material they are required to remember. It seems like they are going through a complicated thought process, as well as a physically challenging one. Heather Olson later explained to me that the multiple thought processes required of them are part of the "stream of consciousness" that O'Connor likes to work with.²¹ In this extension of his "rammed earth" theory, he presents an idea or a phrase to his dancers and continues to elaborate on it by instructing his dancers to think about different things simultaneously. Thoughts other than the phrase itself allow the dancers to generate material based on the phrase he has taught them and further layer the structure of the piece.

Predictable Ideologies

By rejecting the "conformist"²² language of dance and embracing new ones, O'Connor "resist[s] normative social and aesthetic ideologies."²³ This idea implies that physical bodies, dancers, and more specifically dance, are subject to predictable ideologies, a concept from which O'Connor tries to distance himself. It could well be that O'Connor's postmodern images make his work innovative, an example being his comparison of a completed building to a completed work of dance. The structure of a building – its elements, curves, hallways, blocking walls, and open space – are not alien

²¹ Olson interview, 26 October.

²² "Conformist" is used here to emphasize the dichotomy between the conventional dance vocabulary and the choreographer's use of a new language.

²³ Ramsey Burt, "Genealogy and Dance History: Foucault, Rainer, Bausch, and De Keersmaeker," in André Lepecki, ed., *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 29.

to him, and he is not afraid to speak that language in the studio, instructing his dancers to think structurally. He pushes their physical limits by asking them to think as an overall collective arrangement rather than individuals.²⁴ He approaches them as a unified and coherent structure. Rather than asking them to make individual adjustments or changes, he refers to them as a group.

Interestingly, his highly individualized dancers are far from conventional.²⁵ Carefully chosen by the choreographer, they display quite different characteristics. They vary in height, body weight, and in their movement choices. It is evident that some are classically trained and therefore demonstrate a remarkable technical ability, whereas others are more theatrically expressive, which seems to compensate for their lack of technical prowess. Another difference is their movement quality. Unlike the theatrically expressive Clark, for example, who moves in an abrupt manner, Olson carries herself lightly, using time generously.

Because of these differences their communication becomes fascinating. O'Connor seems to recognize his group's unconventionality and uses it to unify his piece. By asking the dancers to think as one, broaden their compositional horizons, and imagine their physical, individual bodies affecting each other, he creates a work that not only focuses on choreographic structures but also deals with human contact and physical existence. The dancers' physical differences make their interaction uncomfortable because they are not physically homogenous and therefore are challenged by, for example, their different

²⁴ Rehearsal, Mark Morris studio, Brooklyn, 19 October 2006.

²⁵ His choice of dancers will be examined in more depth later on.

weight.²⁶ However, after making initial adjustments, they are able to produce a coherent, fluid assemblage, led by O'Connor.

As indicated by his working title "*Rammed Earth*," O'Connor aims at using available material and creating an unexpected outcome. By utilizing expertise from other disciplines, he tries to broaden his creative vocabulary. At one point during rehearsal, he reaches for his leather bag, grabs two white strings and hands those to his dancers (who seem to be familiar with the strings). Each of the dancers, scattered throughout the studio, now holds a section of the string. With miniature steps, one of the dancers moves within the architectural form that is created by the white string, weaving his way in and out of the others' strings and changing the structure. Another dancer, manipulated by the first one, now struggles to gain back her territory. Lowering her pelvis, she changes her height and uses the strength and mobility of her upper back to lift the dancers who stand in her way. Soon, they all move, holding the white strings in their fingers, reorganizing the structures. Interestingly, as time passes, and the movement gains momentum, one begins to see only the white strings, stretched the entire time, and how they affect the space they move in.

"Think about the whole architectural structure, not only your own space,"²⁷ O'Connor tells his dancers, asking them to produce what Ramsey Burt suggests is "enduring" and continuously affecting.²⁸ Using a poststructuralist methodology to analyze the work of Yvonne Rainer, Burt suggests that by fragmenting accepted forms (for instance, of dance-making), dance can operate as a signifying practice, and therefore, as a

²⁶ In one moment Rogers had to lift Clark, and it was obvious that her heavier body affected his movement.

²⁷ O'Connor interview, 19 October.

²⁸ Burt, 29.

signifier.²⁹ Burt refers to the different ways in which physical bodies in performance can become essential tools and as a result “sites of resistance.”³⁰ Within the context of struggle and rejection, the physical body can be transformed into a statement - political or social, corporeal or mental.

In an essay on postmodern dance and architecture, critic Roger Copeland addresses the similarities and differences between the two. Because they possess a historical tradition of the modern, he asserts, they are “the only two arts ... in which the term [postmodern] can be said to serve an unambiguously necessary function.”³¹ In a discussion with O’Connor, the choreographer claims to derive inspiration from architecture in general, citing the celebrated postmodern Prada Store in Tokyo, designed by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron in 2003.³² His perception of the dance-making task as similar to the task of designing a building functions not only as an analogy, but also suggests a discourse between the two art forms. Although Copeland’s statement may be conceptually dubious since it argues that only architecture and dance share the history of the “modern” (diminishing histories of other art forms, such as painting), it should be considered in this context. To feel the space or to fill it (two phrases often used in the dance world) are expressions that acquire a different meaning in O’Connor’s work. To understand the relationship between dance and architecture in his choreography, one must examine the common language the two share.

Jacques Herzog, one of the Prada store architects, describes his building as “an interactive optical device. Because some of the glass is curved, it seems to move as you

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁰ Ibid., 29.

³¹ Roger Copeland, “Postmodern Dance, Postmodern Architecture, Postmodernism,” Performing Arts Journal, 7 (1983): 28.

³² O’Connor interview, 19 October.

walk around it. That creates awareness of both the merchandise and the city—there [is] an intense dialogue between actors. Also, the grid brings a human scale to the architecture, like display windows. It [is] almost old-fashioned.”³³ The vitality with which the architect describes the building, as a breathing, changeable entity in dialogue with the world around it and the people who visit it, recalls O’Connor’s theories of dance-making. O’Connor does not consider himself merely a dance-maker. In fact, he has even been quoted as saying he is “half 1950’s-housewife, half-artist.”³⁴ O’Connor’s identification with Herzog’s and Meuron’s Prada store is contradictory because it represents many of the things that he claims to be “resisting,” such as consumption and compartmentalization. Although the building can be analyzed independent of its location and function, its rationale and intention serve essentially to support a culture of consumption.

Artificially Organic

During the rehearsal of *Rammed Earth* that I observed, O’Connor gave the dancers set movement phrases. After these were taught, the dancers received specific directions for improvisation. In one exercise, for example, four dancers were clumped together holding hands, and the words “sew” and “people” were spoken with different vocal qualities intermingling with each other. One dancer used his head to reach another dancer’s foot, which was then lifted in the air and manipulated. Another dancer formed imaginary scissors with her fingers, using them to “chop” the body parts that prevented her from reaching a desired place or creating a certain structure.

³³ Jacques Herzog, Galinski, <http://www.galinsky.com/buildings/pradatokyo/> (15 November 2006).

³⁴ O’Connor interview, 17 November.

Multiple steps, quick changes of rhythm, a swift transformation in a dancer's character, are all modifications the choreographer uses to create depth and layer his work. Rehearsing a single phrase he has taught them, the dancers interpret O'Connor's material with a very specific energy, abundantly detailed. "Fabric Out of Order" is now rehearsed. The choreographer explains that it is the seed material that will now be danced out of order and improvised. Movements that seemed rather arbitrary before, like the touch of a dancer's leg on another dancer's head, now acquire greater meaning. This is surprising, since I know it is an improvisation. Even so, it seems that the movement is more sensual and the physicality between the dancers pushed to an extreme. Although it is less cohesive, in the sense that one can identify the uninformed quality often seen in improvisation, the section is filled with sexual energy.

Divorced from emotion, the dancers say "all timer, my old dead friend," without reference to anything. It is in this moment that the observer can feel confused and overwhelmed by a stream of messages. What occurs in the studio is an improvisation not only directed to the movement but also generalized through the application of conceptual, theoretical ideas. These ideas stem also from his multiple identities as an artist. In the studio and in interviews, he takes on the different identities: of a choreographer, a film director, a musician, and an architect. Confronted with these multiple identities, O'Connor explains that he views dance, or dance-making, solely as a tool. Almost arbitrarily he chooses to use one particular medium to express himself as an artist. Dance then, is only an instrument, not his subject matter. Once again, O'Connor is resisting yet another category.

“Well, he does call me Pam.”³⁵

In a conversation with the dancers after a rehearsal, I tried to discuss some of the ideas I thought I had seen in their improvisations. The issue of gender and sexuality immediately came up. Observing the dancers, I had become aware of the gender ambiguity the dancers and the dance had projected. Usually, when men and women, regardless of artistic choices, are clumped together, some kind of sexual energy is communicated. This case was different. Without doubt, one noticed budding relationships between them, but gender was rather arbitrary.

Interviewed by Gia Kourlas in *The New York Times*, O’Connor once said: “The idea of women... is very important in my dances. Basically, everyone [is] a woman in my work. They become men and women, but in the beginning they [are] all women.”³⁶ This type of feminist manifesto is evident throughout *Rammed Earth* and helps explain some of his choreographic choices. After I had asked dancer Matthew Rogers if there was any specific reason why he was constantly being lifted during the rehearsal, he answered very sincerely, saying that “in [Rogers’s] secret personality, [he has a] desire to be lifted, to be a ballerina.”³⁷ This may well reflect O’Connor’s identity as a gay man. Although O’Connor rejects the idea that his dances embody an explicit feminist manifesto, he identifies himself as a feminist by giving women a “heavy,” strong voice in his work.³⁸ Rogers’ suggestion reveals another important aspect of O’Connor’s work – the great role his dancers play. Although this can be said about almost every choreographer working with intelligent, thoughtful dancers, O’Connor is able to create a sense of gender play

³⁵ Rogers interview, 29 October.

³⁶ Gia Kourlas, “Giving Birth to ‘Baby,’ In Front of Everyone,” *The New York Times*, 19 March 2006, 30.

³⁷ Rogers interview, 29 October.

³⁸ i.e.: “I make feminine-heavy works.” O’Connor interview, 17 November.

because the people in the studio are allowing him to. More than depicting different characters, the dancers are those characters as much as O'Connor is.

In *Frozen Mommy*, the intense trio of female dancers in the piece reveals much about gender-struggle in O'Connor's work. The three, located upstage right, dance in unison, occasionally screaming loudly, depicting three distinct women. With the use of gender, it seems, O'Connor tries to repair an established imbalance. According to Olson, his recurring treatment of these issues (mother, baby, family) relates to his feeling of being "cheated."³⁹ He grieves at not being able to reproduce and have a child (O'Connor himself had discussed this in our conversation), translating his sense of powerlessness to gender-centered dances.

Where is the Mother?!

The titles of O'Connor's works, the material with which he works, his relationship with his dancers, and his feminist perspective suggest that O'Connor is in an ongoing conversation or maybe conflict with his own sexuality/gender. Mother, baby, and cold weather are themes that have preoccupied the choreographer over the years. These themes function as different lenses through which he sees the world. They do not, he argues (quickly rejecting yet another concept), constitute subject matter. His work has no subject matter just as music does not have any explicit subject matter, so the title is not explanatory of the dance; it rather represents a journey away from language.⁴⁰

O'Connor's rejection of what Ann Cooper Albright calls "dominant ideologies" is partly related to his perception of the audience and its function in his work. At this point, it is quite clear that Tere O'Connor rejects almost everything and anything that might

³⁹ Olson interview, 3 November.

⁴⁰ O'Connor interview, 17 November.

categorize him as “something.” It is for that reason that his work falls squarely within the category of “resistant postmodernism.”

Lawn

At the center of the stage hangs a big video screen, framed by green leaves, looping a video recording of members of O’Connor’s company. They are cutting vegetables, watching television, working on the computer; captured in the most ordinary activities of everyday life. O’Connor introduces not only the dancers and their “realness” through the video, but also the medium of film through his dancers.

This time, O’Connor’s archetypal female figure is rather different from her earlier representations being a comically presented grotesque blonde male, who is dressed like a woman, peeps from behind trees, and drives an SUV. Through the satirical representation of this “witch/woman” and her humorous actions in the footage, O’Connor depicts a dichotomy between the film – a representation of “real” life and what happens on stage – a critique or commentary on that existence. The dichotomy between the “documented” medium of film and the ephemeral medium of dance also conveys O’Connor’s constant shift between his identity as a man and his identification with women, which he constantly explores. After a while, the two worlds start colliding, overshadowing one another.

Throughout the piece, one can identify a pattern of duets. This time, however, there is no gender ambiguity. To stress that, in one “duet” a man and a woman are seen at the screen seated naked by a table, set with a white map and two plates. Courteously, they use a knife and fork to cut yellow garbage bags, their main course, which they seem to like the taste of. Aesthetically pleasing, this scene seems extremely literal. In a work that

deals with the environment, it clearly represents recycling; yellow garbage bags, people, or even gender - all are possible.

With the video now in the background, two female dancers sing in an almost whisper-like quality: “beautiful, beautiful.” Walking slowly downstage in a fragile, feminine, and delicate way, they continue singing while dinner is being served on the screen, adding an almost tragic feeling to the odd scene. The idea of beauty, inserted into an awkward and not so compelling image of eating garbage bags, both deepens and disrupts the relationship between the film and stage, like a push and pull relationship that blurs the line between reality and dream-like existence. In this sense, memory, an element O’Connor appreciates highly, works independently, almost automatically. The audience’s memory, too, is called into play; it now has to follow two separate, rather than parallel ephemeral stories.

“ALL OF THIS CAN BE YOURS,” says the screen, accompanied by the dancers gesturing in a Victorian way with their right hands moving toward the audience. The screen then changes, showing footage of a chaotic highway, suggesting a second irony between what society values but may in fact be destructive. Interviewed by Theodore Bale in the *Boston Herald*, O’Connor says that he “has been looking for a language that would have come up if [he] had not learned anything about dance...this imaginary world where a family gets up after dinner and they say to each other: ‘Let’s keep working our dance!’ And then they present it to their neighbors.”⁴¹ This idea of a family is not apparent on stage when six skilled dancers execute a complicated and dense movement. The dancers’ hands are exceptionally noticeable; they move in a linear, dissected way,

⁴¹ Tere O’Connor. quoted in Theodore Bale, “Dance; Message Melts into Poetry on Stage ‘Lawn,’” *The Boston Herald*, 16 July 2004, e22.

arms separated from palms, separated from fingers. As if zooming in on an image, this detailed movement unveils another layer of the piece.

It was a relief for me to hear that *Lawn* was O'Connor's least favorite work. The film and dance did not support each other and actually weakened the whole structure. "At the reference level, film is a wild dog without a leash,"⁴² says O'Connor, referring to the medium's attachment to memory and narrative. In an effort to take the signifiers that surround us – like the environment and destructive modern living – and put them through a choreographic blender, O'Connor seems to have created what he rejects the most, a narrative. However, while admitting that "[i]t was hard [to] tak[e] it away from 'story,'" he still insists that "there [is] no story."⁴³

Rejecting the Narrative

"Any dance that I see, which aims to generate/project a narrative of some sort, is, I think, a bad dance."⁴⁴ As this statement and others make clear, O'Connor explicitly rejects the concept of narrative in his work. In his mind, there is no such thing as an authentic narrative, one that can convey an actual story. Instead, O'Connor perceives narrative to be a working tool that allows him to play, arrange, and rearrange elements that can then take on different forms. Set loose, these forms are divorced from any specific meaning or premise.

Dancer Heather Olson justifies this stripping of dance of any sort of narrative by comparing the process to what happens in dreams: "Dance pieces have narratives the way that dreams have narratives; it's not logical, not linear."⁴⁵ O'Connor's harsh reaction to

⁴² O'Connor interview, 17 November.

⁴³ O'Connor interview, 19 October.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Olson interview, 26 October.

explicitly narrative dance works is problematic. By discarding them, O'Connor argues against the validity or quality of works from *Swan Lake* to *Appalachian Springs* without any consideration of their intrinsic value. Surprisingly, in a discussion about postmodernism and various categories of dance, O'Connor mentioned that he felt more a part of classicism – symbolizing formality and restraint, than a part of postmodernism.

The same intellectual rejection applies to theme and variation, concepts that O'Connor claims have a “common goal” orientation that he relates to capitalism.⁴⁶ He argues that theme and variation inevitably place too much focus on the product. He does feel however, that theme can deliver more content and subject matter than variation. Thus, he argues, theme is more important than variation, since variation always leads one to the goal-orientated path, yielding limited analytic value. Capturing what the path is, rather than focusing on the product, becomes the political action that O'Connor claims to take in the studio and that reflects how he feels about life. This theory presents an authentic way to think about O'Connor's work. Throughout his career, he has redefined and questioned seemingly fixed notions like theme and variation as well as memory and human experience.

Dance scholar André Lepecki once said that the convergence of dance and academia is interesting because, while dancers generally perform for members of the academy, dance scholarship reflects the first time that dancers have asked members of the academy to perform for them.⁴⁷ Tere O'Connor asks for the same role-swap from his audience and from the media and intellectual bodies of material he uses in his work. By intentionally blurring sexual identities, mixing gender roles, extending memory

⁴⁶ O'Connor interview, 19 October.

⁴⁷ André Lepecki, New York University, Tisch School of the Arts, <http://www.tisch.nyu.edu/object/LepeckiA.html> (19 November 2006).

processes, and allowing for a multiplicity of characters to exist in his work as a reflection of his perception of life, his dances function as a critique. In that sense, O'Connor is a great critic, whose ability to capture oddness, awkwardness, and sometimes ugliness, becomes increasingly captivating.

This thesis proves the field of contemporary dance to be an interdisciplinary one. O'Connor is a choreographer who views himself as a "universal artist" in the sense that he utilizes dance to communicate social, political and humanistic ideas. His eloquence aids and advances the examination of worldly events and structures to a theoretical, yet extremely visual level. Rejection alone, it appears, may stand as a valid agenda in its own right.

"No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery... no to moving or being moved."⁴⁸ Tere O'Connor is not the first dance-maker to maintain an artistic agenda that calls for rejection. His obsession with resistance, however, as crucial and fundamental to his work, makes his rejection extremely effective. Intimately working with five dancers who are not only his "employees," but also his friends and colleagues, and allowing their distinctive characters to play a central role in the process, deepens the artistic statement he is able to convey. Seated with his back to the studio's mirror, instructing his dancers, O'Connor uses two different lenses. He simultaneously challenges and confronts both "realness," asking his dancers to look deep into themselves and connect to their most authentic sensations, and

⁴⁸ Yvonne Rainer, "Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Matresses Called Parts of Some Sextets," in Mariellen R. Sandford, ed., Happenings and Other Acts (London: Routledge, 1995), 166.

“fantasy,” creating an imaginary world in which gender and sex are fluid, ambiguous, and even mixed.

O’Connor is a man and a feminist in the male-dominated dance world of New York City. Although not regarded as a “mainstream” choreographer, he considers what he has to contribute to the world very carefully in the sense that his movement vocabulary, along with the sub-context of his work, suggests numerous complex ideas. Passionately breaking mental (stream of consciousness), and choreographic (using architecture as a valid methodology of dance-making) boundaries, referring to them as unnecessary and restricting, he expands the audience’s experience of dance to a mental one, or to a simple stimulating set of images – allowing the audience to decide on the quality of that experience.

Tere O’Connor is a master of rejection, but also a master of contradiction. While he rejects many theories of dance-making, such as explicit use of narrative and incorporation of music during the choreographic process, he embraces methodologies such as stream of consciousness and body architecture. The coexistence of ideas and the contradictions embodied on O’Connor’s “universal rejection” is what I have tried to challenge throughout this thesis and have come to appreciate as extraordinary.

* * *

Further research would analyze O’Connor’s recently commissioned work for the Lyon Opera Ballet (*Like Two Kevins*, 2006), and his appointment as a professor in the University of Illinois’s Dance Department. In the context of such a paper, I would examine the extent to which O’Connor is able to maintain his rejection of institutions

while becoming a part of them, along with his theories of teaching ballet and composition classes as set methods. On his company's website O'Connor writes that he is interested in

[R]ejecting a "good/bad" paradigm, his desire is for artists to create problem-solving systems based on the structure of their own thought process and to rigorously pursue the "science" of their poetics....The process involves locating, through a hyper-personal investigation, the seeds of a universal voice....The goal is to gain the objectivity necessary to scrutinize the referential arena of one's work resulting in dances whose legibility is found in exactitude of structure - detached from denotative interpretation of "symbols."⁴⁹

I am interested in further challenging the idea of objectivity O'Connor claims is necessary for a dance work to be considered legitimate. How one attains such objectivity and whether such "neutrality" is even possible, are questions that future research might fruitfully pursue.

⁴⁹ Tere O'Connor Dance website. <http://www.tereoconnordance.com>.

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