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Immersive Concert Design: How immersive and haptic experiences affect a
dance audience's ability to co-author meaning

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

By

Koryn Ann Wicks

Thesis Committee:
Professor Chad Michael Hall, Chair
Professor John Crawford
Professor Lisa Naugle

2017

DEDICATION

To my love,

Thank you for your patience these past two years and for your contributions to this thesis

To my parents,

Thank you for raising me with the strength to take on a project of this scope

To my sister,

Thank you for always believing in me

To my cast,

Thank you for embarking on this amazing journey with me

To my friends and family,

Thanks for making it all worthwhile

It Probably is Amber if it Holds You Still Forever

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Immersive Concert Design: How immersive and haptic experiences affect a dance
audience's ability to co-author meaning

By

Koryn Ann Wicks

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Chad Michael Hall, Chair

This thesis explores the use of immersive and haptic experiences within
concert dance and how these experiences enable audiences to co-author the meaning
of a work through physical participation. Immersive experiences are generated when
audiences are empowered to share a performance space with performers. Haptic
experiences engage with our sense of touch and are fore fronted when audiences are
allowed to move around within a performance. These kinds of experiences encourage
co-authorship by empowering audiences to participate in and affect the outcome of
performances. They also encourage co-authorship by prioritizing interpretations
based on somatic and self-referential forms of knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

On a damp spring day in 2011, a charitable friend with a spare ticket took me to a strange dance concert in an abandoned warehouse in Chelsea. We were greeted in a speakeasy-style bar, taken to a freight elevator, instructed to don masks, and set loose to wander a massive, 6-story space throughout which dancers enacted scenes from *Macbeth*. I was blown away; I had never experienced such freedom as an audience member.

Sleep No More is produced by Punchdrunk productions, a British theatre company that creates large scale immersive works.[1] The company is under the artistic direction of Felix Barrett and associate artistic director and choreographer by Maxine Doyle.[2] *Sleep No More* is an immersive production based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; it was originally staged in the UK in 2003,[3] before travelling to Boston, then Manhattan, where it currently resides.[4]

Sleep No More left a lasting impression on me. It also sparked my curiosity, leading me to ask, how does the inclusion of immersive and haptic experiences within a dance concert affect the meaning we derive from a performance? Immersive experiences are generated when audiences are invited to enter the action of a performance. Haptic experiences are experiences related to our sense of touch, including our sense of balance and our sense of ourselves in space (proprioception). Haptic experiences are fore fronted when audiences are immersed in a performance and given corporeal freedom (the freedom to

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[1] Punchdrunk. Punchdrunk. Accessed Oct 30, 2016. http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk.
[2] Ibid.
[3] W. B. Worthen, "'The written troubles of the brain': *Sleep No More* and the Space of Character," *Theatre Journal* 64 (2012): 82, Performing Arts Database.
[4] Adam Alston, "Audience Participation and Neoliberalism Value; Risk, Agency and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre," *Performance Research* 18, no.2 (2013): 129, Performing Arts Database.

move about). Immersive and haptic experiences offer unique opportunities to co-author the meaning of a dance performance by allowing physical participation, creating opportunities for interpretation based on somatic and self-referential forms of knowledge, and by generating a shared kinesthetic language between performers and audience members.

Sleep No More is the most successful immersive concerts I have seen. The performance is housed in a warehouse space reimagined as the McKittrick Hotel. The space includes a bar (with a live jazz band), ballroom, garden, graveyard, and a labyrinth of rooms. Every inch of the space is meticulously designed. As an audience member, you can access the performance from a variety of vantage points. You enter the production via an elevator that is operated by an attendant who does his best to separate couples and friends by letting them off on different floors. Audience members are masked throughout the performance.

During my fateful encounter with *Sleep No More*, I was separated from my date and set loose in a strange corridor leading to vacant children's rooms. My first steps into the space were tentative; the overall atmosphere was eerie, not knowing what to expect, I crept forward like someone in a haunted house anticipating the next 'scare.' I wandered, gradually gaining my bearings and confidence. Eventually I stumbled on a dancer; it was Lady Macbeth. I watched. Then a few people stumbled upon me watching and slowly the audience grew. Eventually, the dancer left the space and we followed. We were led to other dancers, other spaces, other scenes. At one moment, I was lucky enough to be pulled into a closet with a dozen or so audience members to watch a breathtaking duet by two male performers. I have heard, that if you are even luckier, performers will pull you into private spaces and offer one-on-one performances.

Despite the growing visibility of immersive concerts like *Sleep No More*[5,6] there is very little academic literature on the subject in the discipline of dance studies. Given that the study of immersivity in dance is still emerging, research for this thesis has been taken from a wide range of subjects including theatre and performance studies, aesthetic philosophy, and studies on engagement with the arts.

The written component of this thesis is accompanied by an immersive dance concert. The writing is divided into two parts. Part I: Research, deals with my research on the topic of immersive theatre. Part II: Practice, describes the design of my thesis concert and how my research informed my process.

Part I is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 defines immersive theatre and places it in a historical context. The evolution of immersive theatre coincided with the rise of theories of performance that define performance as an event rather than an art-object.[7] Throughout the 20th century, dominant theories of reception were based on a clear distinction between audience members and art-objects; meaning was contained in the art-object and read or decoded by the beholder.[8] Beginning in the latter half of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st century, developments in performance practices challenged traditional theories of reception. Performance events built upon the presence of both performers and spectators led to the development of theories of reception based in experience rather than intellectual interpretation. The foregrounding of experience in art interpretation made room for co-authorship between art makers and spectators.

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[5] Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 25.
[6] Andy Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 7-10.
[7] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 4-9.
[8] Ibid., 17.

Chapter 2 outlines aesthetic theories relevant to understanding the use of immersive and haptic experiences in concert dance. Theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte offers a theory of performance that places experience and co-authorship at its center in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance*. She describes performance as an event characterized by a feedback loop between performers and audiences. This concept was developed in response to experimental theatre and performance art by artists like Marina Abramović and Richard Schechner. Fischer-Lichte's theory addresses the use of immersivity, interactivity and physicality in performance. I use Fischer-Lichte's aesthetic theory to examine the role immersive and haptic experiences play in concert dance by emphasizing her discussion of the role of the body and haptic sensations in the process of co-authorship. This exploration is further developed through the lens of Josephine Machon's theory of (syn)aesthetics. Machon is a theatre scholar who developed (syn)aesthetics to analyze performances that engage all our senses. (Syn)aesthetics emphasizes the experiential quality of performance and contends that all our senses are engaged in the process of meaning-making.

Chapter 3 uses *Sleep No More* as a case study to analyze the use of immersivity and physical participation in a dance concert. Analyzing academic responses to *Sleep No More* demonstrates how immersive and haptic experiences provide unique opportunities for co-authorship.

Part II of this thesis discusses the design of my immersive thesis concert, *Keepsake*. In it, I describe how my research from Part I informed my use of immersivity. Part II also draws on Gareth White's *The Aesthetics of Participation* to address the unique challenges posed by immersive productions. Through the generation of immersive and haptic experiences,

Keepsake invited audience members to co-author the meaning of the work through physical participation.

In concluding, I suggest that immersive concert design, with its emphasis on participation and co-authorship, offers a uniquely engaging form of arts appreciation for today's audiences. Concert designs that facilitate participation and offer readings based experience and a shared kinesthetic language may offer audiences new avenues for connecting with dance.

PART I

CHAPTER 1: IMMERSIVE THEATRE

Definition

The term 'immersive theatre' is a relatively new term; it was integrated into academic and artistic discourse around 2004 and infiltrated the language of theatre criticism around 2007.[9] The term is used to describe a wide variety of performance practices today. Although there is no agreed upon definition of immersive theatre, Josephine Machon's definition from her book *Immersive Theatres* covers a wide range of performances and practices that operate under this banner.[10] Machon is an associate professor in the School of Performance and Media Arts at the University of Middlesex London.[11] Her books *Immersive Theatres* and *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* provide in-depth investigations into the use of immersivity in performance. Machon defines immersive theatre as a continuum along which artists, "combine the act of immersion - being submerged in an alternative medium where all the senses are engaged and manipulated - with a deep involvement in the activity within that medium."[12]

Immersive theatre is often described in contrast to 'traditional theatre.' In this context, the term traditional theatre refers to performances in which audience members observe the performance from a fixed vantage point and participate via watching, listening

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[9] Machon, *Immersive Theatres,* 65.
[10] Ibid., 22.
[11] "Dr Josephine Machon. Middlesex University London." *Middlesex University London.* Accessed January 4, 2017. https://www.mdx.ac.uk/about-us/our-people/staff-directory/machon-josephine.
[12] Machon, *Immersive Theatres,* 21-22.

and interpreting the performance.[13] This notion of traditional performance is actually a misnomer given the widely varied structures performances and behaviors of audiences over the course of Western history. For this reason, this paper uses the term 'orthodox performance,' as defined by Richard Schechner in his book *Environmental Theatre,* to describe performances that designate audience seating and limit audience participation.[14] Richard Schechner is a practitioner of experimental theatre whose work in the 1960s and 1970s laid the foundations for many of the practices used in immersive theatre today. Schechner is now a professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.[15]

One of the most striking differences between immersive performances and orthodox performances is that whereas orthodox performances separate performers and audience members, immersive theatre places performers and audience members in the same space.[16] In an orthodox performance, actors perform on the stage and audience members observe from fixed seating. In immersive theatre, this division of space is broken down, and performers and audience members interact in any number of spatial arrangements. Immersive theatre injects agency into the act of watching by inviting spectators into the performance space and allowing them to move about the performance. In doing so, immersive theatre empowers audience members to curate their experiences by giving them control over their sight lines and physical engagement within a production. An audience member's kinesthetic participation in a performance affects not only his/her experience of

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[13] Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 54-55.
[14] Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theatre*, (Milwaukee: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 1994), xv.
[15] "Richard Schechner - NYU Tisch School of the Arts." Accessed January 14, 2017. https://tisch.nyu.edu/about/directory/performance-studies/3508301.
[16] Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 55.

the work, but also the experiences of fellow audience members. In immersive performances, audience members become actors in the production as their choices are witnessed by the rest of the audience.[17]

The designated seating in orthodox theatre encourages separation between the art-object (or performance) and observer (or audience member). This separation favors interpretation based on semantic readings of performance (the reading of text, signs and symbols to decode meaning).[18] Interacting within the drama of an immersive production blurs the distinctions between performers and audience members. This complicates the division between the art-object and observer and thus complicates distanced semantic interpretations of the performance. According to Machon, the most central feature of an immersive performance is "the involvement of the audience, ensuring that the experience of the audience evolves according to the methodologies of the immersive practice."[19] This means that the audience cannot experience the event without participating with it, and that their experience is altered based on their participation. The participatory nature of immersive theatre allows audiences to experience performances in individualized ways and thus derive individualized interpretations.

The spatial and interactive components of immersive theatre offer new modes of interpretation by engaging with all the senses. In orthodox theatre, the senses of sight (watching) and hearing (listening) are prioritized in the audience's engagement with the performance. This emphasis aligns with the dominant theories of performance in the 20th

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[17] Lisesbeth Groot Nibbelink, "Radical Intimacy: Ontroerend Goed Meets The Emancipated Spectator" Contemporary Theatre Review 22 no. 3 (2012): 412-413. Taylor and Francis Online.

[18] Fischer-Licthe, *Transformative Power of Performance*, 17.

[19] Machon, *Immersive Theatres,* 69-70.

century which drew clear distinctions between the art-object and observer and emphasized semantic modes of interpretation. Limiting participation to stationary watching and listening tends to favor intellectual participation in the act of interpretation.[20,21] In immersive theatre, the audience is fully immersed in a production that engages not only sight and hearing, but all of our senses.[22] This kind of engagement invites new modes of interpretation based on sensed experience. As Machon writes:

> this play of the senses, the reawakening of the holistic sentience of the human body allows for immediate and intimate interaction with the performance event. It also gives credence to new ways in which humans 'think,' the ways in which we are able to experience and interpret a work of art.[23]

Although immersive productions can engage all the senses, this thesis focuses on the use of haptic senses in the appreciation of immersive work. This focus enables me to ask questions about the role immersive practices can play in a dance concert. Dance is an embodied art form, it lends itself well to interpretation via our haptic senses because of its bound relationship to the human body. [24]

Historical Perspectives

It is important to acknowledge that the emphasis on stationary watching and listening observed in orthodox theatre is a relatively recent development in the history of Western

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[20] Lynne Conner, *Audience Engagement and the Role of Arts Talk in the Digital Era.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 57-61.

[21] Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics*, 60.

[22] Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 75.

[23] Ibid., 82.

[24] Matthew Reason and Dee Reynolds. "Kinesthesia, Empathy and Related Pleasures: An Inquiry into Audience Experiences of Watching Dance." *Dance Research Journal.* 42 no.2 (2010): 49-79.

theatre. Susan Kattwinkle, editor of *Audience Participation, Essays on Inclusion in Performance*, reminds us that:

> The passive audience really only came into being in the nineteenth century, as theatre began its division into artistic and entertainment forms. Practitioners and theorists such as Wagner, with his "mystic chasm," and Henry Irving with [his] darkened auditoriums, took some of the many small steps in the nineteenth century that physically separated the audience from the performance and discouraged spectatorial acts of ownership or displeasure or even vociferous approval.[25]

Cultural historian Lynne Conner describes the cultivation of a passive Western audience in her book *Audience Engagement and the Role of Arts talk in the Digital Era*. She claims that passive audiences are detrimental to the development of vibrant artistic communities built on what she calls, "arts talk." Conner defines arts talk as the process by which audiences talk about and socialize around art to derive meaning from it.[26] She believes that many of the trappings of orthodox performance limit arts talk by placing restrictions on audience behavior and sociability.[27] Conner contends that limited opportunities for arts talk in artistic communities in the United States has contributed to the dwindling levels of theatre attendance observed in the United States today.[28]

Lynne Conner is not only a historian, but also a director, community theatre activist and playwright.[29] In 2008, she took a leadership role in the Heinz Foundation's *Arts Experience Initiative,* a grant program designed to help arts presenters improve their patrons' qualitative experiences of performances and exhibits.[30] Participants in the initiative

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[25] Susan Kattwinkel, introduction to *Audience Participation: Essays on Inclusion in Performance*, edited by Susan Kattwinkel, (Conneticut: Praeger, 2000), iv.

[26] Conner, *Audience Engagement*, 24.

[27] Ibid., 60.

[28] Ibid., 3.

[29] "Bio: Lynne Conner | Theater and Dance | Colby College." Accessed January 14, 2017. http://www.colby.edu/theaterdance/people-2/bio-lynne-conner/.

[30] Lynne Conner, "Arts Experience Initiative" The Heinz Endowment (2008).

developed outreach programs based around Conner's 'arts talk*.'* The study's findings

support Conner's claims that opportunities for active forms of participation and meaning-

making are essential to our enjoyment of art.[31]

In *Audience Engagement and the Role of Arts Talk in the Digital Era*, Conner describes

how current perceptions of the audience's role in performance contrast the behavior of

audiences throughout most of Western history. For example, we take for granted that

audiences sit to watch a performance. Conner describes a rich history of audiences with

corporeal freedom beginning as far back as ancient Rome and as recent as the American

vaudeville theatres of the 1920s.[32] Conner also dispels the notion of a 'traditionally' silent

audience. She describes a history of vocal audiences engaged in the act of social

interpretation through public response going as far back as Ancient Greece and continuing

into the 18th century.[33] The behaviors of these vocal audiences included currently

recognized forms of appreciation like applause, as well as other forms of participation like

hissing, verbal exclamations, public critique and social mingling.[34]

Conner's history of Western audiences is full of amusing anecdotes about unruly

patrons. In ancient Greece, an audience became so hostile after being offended by one of

Euripides' plays, they forced the action to a close, and the playwright had to come on stage

and beg the audience to allow the production to continue.[35] During Italian operas in the mid-

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[31] Conner, *Arts Experience*, 43.
[32] Conner, *Audience Engagement*, 43.
[33] Ibid., 46.
[34] Ibid., 46-49.
[35] Ibid., 47.

18th century, wealthy citizens who owned their boxes would eat, drink, gamble and socialize throughout the course of a performance.[36]

In the United States, stationary, silent audiences were developed alongside a high/low art binary that emerged in the late 19th century.[37] Described in detail in Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, audience etiquette came to be associated with social class.[38] Highbrow art was defined as the cultural domain and demanded appreciation through measured etiquette and appropriate readings of the art-object.[39] Lowbrow art was labeled entertainment and thought of as the domain in which people sought distraction. Lowbrow art was seen as demanding less sophistication and intellect; therefore its rules of engagement were less stringent.[40] The strict etiquette demanded by the institutions of highbrow art helped to scalarize art and remove it from the experiences of everyday life.[41]

The emergence of immersive theatre

Challenges to the passive audience emerged in the mid-20th century with the advent of performance art. Artists began working in performative mediums that dispelled the notion of art as a fixed object to be enjoyed through distanced observation.[42] Alan Kaprow (often cited as the father of performance art), created a series of participatory, performances he

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[36] Ibid., 43.
[37] Ibid., 64.
[38] Lawrence, Levine. *Highbrow Lowbrow*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
[39] Ibid., 184-200.
[40] Ibid., 200-219.
[41] Kattwinkel, *Audience Participation*, iv-xvi.
[42] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 11.

called Happenings in the late 1950s. During these events, distinctions between the audience and performers were blurred and any action could be considered part of the performance.

Kaprow believed that art's communicative function could only be achieved via experience born out of participation.[43] He inherited this conviction from American philosopher John Dewey and his theory of art as experience.[44] Dewey believed that in order for an artistic work to maintain relevance it needed to allow for interpretation within the context of its viewers' everyday lives.[45] In Dewey's theory of aesthetics, art appreciation lies in the experience of confronting art and engaging with it; meaning can only be derived from a personal experience with the art-object.[46] For Dewey, experiences are generated via any range of mental or embodied activities, a central theme of Kaprow's is that art should be experienced through active, physical participation. Kaprow believed that participation, "engages both our minds and bodies in actions that transform art into experience and aesthetics into meaning."[47] In doing so, "our experience as participants is one of meaningful transformation."[48]

Beginning in the 1960s, Richard Schechner helped develop a form of theatre he termed environmental theatre. There is a great deal of overlap between Schechner's environmental theatre and immersive theatre. Schechner's six axioms of environmental theatre are:

1. The theatrical event is a set of related transactions

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[43] Jeff Kelly, introduction to Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life, by Alan Kaprow, ed. Jeff Kelly (London: University California Press, 2003): xviii.
[44] Ibid., xxvi.
[45] John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Perigee, 2005), 9.
[46] Ibid., 39.
[47] Kelly, Introduction to *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, xviii.
[48] Ibid., xviii.

      i.   Among performers

     ii.   Among members of the audience

    iii.   Between performers and audience

    iv.   Among production elements

     v.   Between production elements and performers

    vi.   Between production elements and spectators

   vii.   Between the total production and the space where it takes place.

2. All the space is used for the performance

3. The theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in a "found space"

4. Focus is flexible and variable

5. All production elements speak their own language

6. The text need neither be the starting point nor the goal of the production. There may be no verbal text at all.

Of the related transactions described by Richard Schechner in axiom 1, he identifies the first three transactions as primary to orthodox theatre and the last three as secondary. Schechner argues that by emphasizing all transactions equally, theatre practitioners can create performances that engage their audiences in a more dynamic way. He argues that:

> once fixed seating and the automatic bifurcation of space are no longer present, entirely new relationships are possible. Body contact can occur between performers and spectators; voice levels and acting intensities can be varied widely; a sense of shared experience can be engendered.[49]

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[49] Schechner, *Environmental Theatre,* xxix*.*

Schechner's work in environmental theatre emphasized experience and offered opportunities for physical participation. This participation often included opportunities for decision making and empowered audience members to affect the trajectory of the performance. For example, in his piece *Dionysis in '69* audience members participated in various forms of ritual through song, dance, and even nudity. One evening, a particularly rowdy audience stopped the performance by abducting one of the performers and taking him from the theatre.[50] During another production, *Commune*, audience members were asked to move to a specific place in the performance space to represent a group of villagers. During one performance, a group of audience members refused to participate, the players discussed and debated with the patrons (for over an hour) until a compromise was reached.

By immersing audiences in a production, Schechner sought the creation of a democratic form of theatre. Schechner believed environmental theatre could inspire political engagement outside the theatre by awakening a spectator's sense of agency.[51]

A comprehensive overview of the history from which immersive theatre evolved is beyond the scope of this thesis. Artistic movements that contributed to the rise of immersive theatre include feminist theatre, installation art, and the integration of digital art with performance. Feminist theatre is credited with bringing a focus to experience, hybridized practice and the body as content and form in the performing arts.[52,53,54] Installation art made art inhabitable and enfolded the viewer within the artistic experience.[55] The inclusion of

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[50] Ibid., 40-41.
[51] Schechner, *Environmental Theatre*, xx-xxiii.
[52] Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics*, 26-29.
[53] Judith Sebesta, "Audience at Risk: Space and Spectators at Feminist Performance," in *Audience Participation*, ed. Susan Kattwinkel (Connecticut: Praeger, 2003).
[54] Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century*, 20.
[55] Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 33-35

digital video and sound in performance has been harnessed to enhance the experiential

nature performance and challenge traditional assumptions about spectating.[56,57]

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[56] Ibid., 35-37.

[57] Sarah Rubidge, " Sensuous Geographies and Other Installations: Interfacing the Body and Technology," in *Performance and Technology*, ed. Susan Broadhurst and Josephin Machon (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

CHAPTER 2: CO-AUTHORSHIP IN IMMERSIVE THEATRE

The spread of performance practices utilizing audience engagement and immersion has inspired theories of aesthetics that account for audience participation.[58] Placing the audience within the performance and offering opportunities to respond to performers complicates modes of interpretation based on intellectual distance.[59] As immersive theatre practices gained notoriety, so did aesthetic theories based in co-authorship, a concept rooted in the idea that the existence and meaning of a work of art is a joint construction between the observer and art-object.

The theoretical foundations of this thesis are based on the work of Erika Fischer-Lichte and Josephine Machon. Fischer-Lichte describes co-authorship as an essential feature of performance and experience as essential to interpreting performance. Machon's theory of (syn)aesthetics describes how all sensations can be engaged in the process of co-authorship and meaning-making. My investigation into how audiences co-author meaning in immersive performances will begin by looking at Fischer-Lichte's aesthetic theory and follow with an examination of how (syn)aesthetics emphasize the audience's physicality in the process of interpretation.

Erika Fischer-Lichte on co-presence, co-subjects and co-authorship

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[58] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 16.
[59] Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics*, 20-21.

Erika Fischer-Lichte is a professor of Theatre Studies at the Freie Universitat Berlin

and Director of the Institute of Advanced Studies on the Interweaving of Theatre and

Cultures.[60] She describes co-authorship as follows:

> The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators enables and constitutes
> performance. For a performance to occur, actors and spectators must
> assemble to interact in a specific place for a certain period of time… The latter
> [spectators] no longer represent distanced empathetic observers and
> interpreters of the actors' actions onstage; nor do they act as intellectual
> decoders of messages conveyed by the action of the actors… Instead their
> bodily co-presence creates a relationship between co-subjects. Through their
> physical presence, perception and response, the spectators become co-actors
> that generate the performance by participating in the play.[61]

Co-presence, quite simply signifies the physical presence of both actors and audience

in a performance event. A performance fore fronting co-presence designates both

performers and observers as subjects (co-subjects). This notion contrasts classical theories

of reception that designate the art-object as subject and the audience members as distanced

observera. Given that the existence of the performance is dependent on the presence of both

performers and audience members, and that both performers and audience members

constitute the subject of the performance, performers and audience members are co-actors

in the performance. In other words, the reorganization of the art-object and distanced

observer binary to an event based on the co-presence of co-subjects reimagines audience

members as co-authors. Participatory forms of theatre that emphasize the co-presence of co-

subjects increase opportunities for co-authorship by forcing audience members to confront

their role within a performance through participation.

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[60] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*.
[61] Ibid., 32.

On participation

Theories of reception based on co-authorship acknowledge an audience's agency within a performance. For Fischer-Lichte, this agency exists even in the context of orthodox performances. She describes how, "whatever the actors do elicits a response from the spectators, which impacts on the entire performance."[62] Fischer-Lichte describes this feedback loop as the essence of performance.[63]

Although co-authorship is present in all forms of performance it is emphasized when audiences are challenged to make decisions and actively participate in a performance. This can be done by confronting the audience with diverse social frames. The term frame, as used here, refers to a sociological term describing how we navigate the variety of social situations we encounter in our daily lives. We frame our social interactions in terms of pre-established relationships and etiquette in oto help guide our behavior.[64] The rigid rules of spectatorship required by orthodox theatre have constructed a strict theatrical frame that most individuals reference when deciding how to act during a performance.[65] This theatrical frame tells us we should be prepared to sit quietly, observe, listen and interpret. Immersive and participatory theatre upset these expectations and demand decision making and participation.

Fischer-Lichte uses descriptions of Christoph Schlingensielf's *Chance 2000-Campaign Circs '98 and* Marina Abramović's *Lips of Thomas* to describe how disrupting the theatrical frame affects an audience's experience of a performance. In *Chance 2000,* audience members are immersed in a circus-like setting and confronted with frames resembling a performance,

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[62] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 38.
[63] Ibid., 38.
[64] White, Gareth. *Audience Participation in the Theatre, Aesthetics of the Invitation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013), 34.
[65] W Ibid., 35-36.

political rally, freak show and social gathering at different points in the performance. In this

performance, each frame offers audiences new opportunities for responding to the work.

Fischer-Lichte describes how during this show:

> [the audience] could not react "automatically," that is to say according to a given set of rules. Instead, the spectator had to make choices and evaluations… When Schlingensielf treated the disabled performers rudely, the audience had to decide whether to treat the situation as a theatrical or social interaction.[66]

Similarly, during Marina Ambromović's *Lips of Thomas*, the audience is confronted by

both the theatrical frame and the frame of everyday life. During the piece, Abromović causes

herself physical harm. She drinks and eats in enormous quantities, smashes a crystal glass,

cuts and flagellates herself then lies down naked on an immense block of ice.[67] The theatrical

frame dictates that the audience remain passive as the events of the performance unfold,

however the reality of watching a woman cause herself physical harm plays at our emotions

and begs for a response in the frame of everyday life.[68] During *Lips of Thomas*, the everyday

frame took over. 30 minutes into Ambromović's laying on the ice, audience members rushed

to her and ended the performance by wrapping her in coats.[69]

Confronting audiences with different social frames forces them to make decisions

about their behavior/participation within a performance. The decisions made by each

individual audience member will shade the meaning they derive from the event. Challenging

audiences to make decisions about their behavior emphasizes the co-authorship of the

meaning of a performance.

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[66] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 48.
[67] Ibid., 12.
[68] Ibid., 13.
[69] Ibid., 12.

Although Fischer-Lichte acknowledges audience agency in all performances, she is careful to note that the co-presence of audiences and performers does not imply equal relationships between co-subjects.[70] The ways in which artists manipulate the co-presence of performers and audience members influences the ways in which audiences participate in performances.[71] In *Chance 2000* co-presence is emphasized by the introduction of diverse social frames. In *Lips of Thomas*, co-presence is emphasized by the audience's proximity to real, visceral violence. These performances addressed co-presence in different ways to inspired different kinds of reactions from their respective audiences.

In any performance, participation is designed before the audience enters the performance space and audience agency is limited by that design. Audience participation determines the ways in which the audience becomes the subject of a performance and how the audience co-authors the work. In a performance like *Sleep No More*, participation is defined by the freedom to move around and explore. In this kind of performance, audience members' experiences and interpretations will be affected by whether they choose to follow a crowd or investigate on their own, how close they stand to performers and whether or not they respond to a performer's outstretched hand.

On theatrical processes

Fischer-Lichte describes how the use of participation in performances engages with three theatrical processes: The role reversal of audiences and performers; The creation of a community between audience members and performers; and The creation of various modes

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[70] Ibid., 40.
[71] Ibid., 40.

of physical contact that explore the interplay of "proximity and distance, public and private, or visual and tactile contact."[72] The role reversal of audiences and performers is created by the co-presence, co-subject, and co-actor relationship described above. In performances that require participation, audience members are no longer distanced observers, they must make decisions and co-author the performance.

The formation of a community between audience members and performers is driven by the feedback loop between them. Of this community Fischer-Lichte writes:

> The community is based on aesthetic principles but its members experience it as a social reality... the communities are not the result of clever staging strategies... Instead they occur due to the specific turns the autopoietic feedback loop takes. It is an opportunity for actors and spectator to physically experience community with another group from which they were originally excluded.[73]

The creation of a community within a performance affirms the co-authorship of the event. When we conceive of performance as an event constituted between audiences and performers, then each iteration of a production is the collaboration that happens takes place within a unique social, political, and communal setting determined by the conventions of the performance and participants within it.[74]

The creation of various modes of physical contact refers to the inclusion of haptic experiences within a participatory or immersive performance. The co-presence of spectators and performers in the same space implies the possibility for physical contact.[75] Our physical, kinesthetic and haptic senses offer new modes of interpretation that are based on our understandings of gesture, space and proprioception. According to Fischer-Lichte:

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[72] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 40.
[73] Fischer-Lichted, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 55.
[74] Ibid., 59-61.
[75] Ibid., 61.

Sensations and emotions are thus regarded as meanings that are articulated physically and of which one becomes conscious only through their physicalization. These physical articulations, such as irregular breathing, breaking into bouts of sweat, or goose bumps, should not be seen as symptoms or a sign of emotions located elsewhere… emotions are generated physically and… we become aware of them only as physical articulations. In this sense, emotions can indeed be transmitted without having been 'translated' into words.[76]

According to Erika Fischer-Lichte, by engaging audiences in the three theatrical processes described above, "spectators do not merely witness these situations; as participants in the performance they are made to physically experience them."[77]

On self-referential forms of knowledge

By foregrounding experience, participation in performance also invites interpretation and meaning-making based on self-referential forms of knowledge. Self-referential knowledge is based on our experiences. Erika Fischer-Lichte describes theatrical interpretation based on self-referential forms of knowledge as "[t]he sudden, unmotivated emergence of a phenomenon that directs the spectator's attention to a particular gesture…As a result, the spectator's perception might gain a special quality which precludes the question of other possible meanings…"[78] The privileging of self-referential forms of knowledge in immersive and participatory forms of performance stand in direct contrast to the semantic, art-object observer conceptions of meaning in art. The use of immersive and haptic experiences in concert design invites audience to inject their own experiences into the process of meaning-making by prioritizing audience experiences throughout the performance.

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[76] Ibid.,151.
[77] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 40.
[78] Ibid., 141

Josephine Machon on (syn)aesthetics

The physicalization of meaning in performances that include physical participation is also discussed by Josephine Machon in her book *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance.* Machon describes (syn)aesthetics as an aesthetic theory for engaging with performances, like immersive theatre, that engage all the senses.[79] (Syn)aesthetics engages with both semantic and somatic ways of knowing through the "fusing of sense (semantic 'meaning-making') with *sense* (feeling, both sensation and emotion)."[80] Machon contends that (syn)aesthetics accommodates the dual engagement of our intellectual and embodied knowledge experienced during our encounters with immersive theatre.[81] (Syn)aesthetics understands the body as a sentient conduit for communicating and *interpreting* human experience[82] and challenges the emphasis on intellectual interpretation in semantic forms of theatrical interpretation:

> (syn)aesthetics endeavors to embrace the sensual immediacy of the performance event via highly charged vocabulary that is embedded within academic analysis. It thus enables a talking about it that plays with the senses in the very act of that talking because immersive performances prioritize interpretation through visceral sensation.[83]

Synaesthesia

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[79] Machon, Josephine. *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2009).

[80] Ibid., 14.

[81] Machon, Josephine "Space and the Senses: the (syn)aesthetics of Punchdrunk's site-sympathetic work" *Body, Space and Technology*, 7.1 (2007): 1. Ebscohost.

[82] Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics*, 68.

[83] Machon, "Space and the Senses," 2.

Synaesthesia is a neurocognitive condition in which an individual's senses are confused or fused. Synaesthetes often see numbers and letters as being attached to certain colors. Recent research into this phenomena suggests that all individuals experience synaesthesia to some degree, and that "the process of isolating sensation within perception and analysis is somewhat artificial, the product of learning to distinguish between the senses in order to simplify experience."[84] Machon contends that experimental performance work that engages all the senses enables individuals to engage with their latent synaesthesia.[85]

In describing (syn)aesthetics, Machon writes a history of aesthetic theories that prioritize the body as the primary site of interpretation. It includes Nietzsche's idea of the Dionysian artistic impulse, the playtexts of the Russian Formalists, Barthes pleasurable texts, Cixous and Irigarays' ecriture feminine, and Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty. In tracing this lineage, Machon writes that:

> These theories embrace intertextual practice and celebrate the interface between, and flux within, linguistic, corporeal and technological approaches, serving to support (syn)aesthetics as a new form of aesthetic interpretation and the (syn)aesthetic style as an exciting performance mode.[86]

(Syn)aesthetics in practice

Machon describes three strategies for the creation of (syn)aesthetic work. These are the (syn)aesthetic hybrid, or the fusion of various design and performance techniques to engage all the senses[87]; the use of the body as a communicative tool capable of being read via

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84 Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics*, 15.
85 Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics*, 16.
86 Ibid., 35.
87 Ibid., 55.

both intellectual and felt impressions[88]; and the use of the visceral-verbal playtext to awaken visceral responses to writing and verbal delivery.[89]

The (syn)aesthetic hybrid refers to the integration a wide variety of design and performance techniques including, but not limited to, the use of speech, movement, sound, scenic design, lighting, video and digital media.[90] In a (syn)aesthetic work, design elements are fused in order to generate a visceral quality within the production:

> it is the distinctive nature of the exchange within the (syn)aesthetic hybrid that procures a defamiliarized mix of the aural, visual, olfactory, oral, haptic and tactile within the performance enabling a (re)cognition of form due to the unsettling and/or exhilarating *process of becoming aware* of this special fusion.[91]

Within the (syn)aesthetic hybrid, the body acts as a carrier of meaning translated through various sensual languages including those based in our verbal, haptic and olfactory senses.[92] The body, rather than representing a narrative or textual source, speaks for itself. In doing so, it invites free association and co-authorship in the act of meaning-making.[93] The body can also carry with it a vast amount of information and meaning in the form of gender, race, physique and physical ability.[94] According to Machon:

> the actual body in (syn)aesthetic performance proves itself to be a chthonic conduit, an experiencing agent for the performer and audience alike. The body provides a means by which there is a return to the primordial within fused multisensory cognition, with an emphasis on the haptic and tactile.[95]

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[88] Ibid., 62.
[89] Ibid., 69.
[90] Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics*, 56.
[91] Ibid., 55.
[92] Ibid., 62.
[93] Ibid., 64.
[94] Ibid., 64.
[95] Ibid., 67.

Machon also contends that the communicative function of the body can be amplified via the use of digital media. As an example, she describes the use of video in Curious' *Vena Amoris.* In this performance, an image of a performer's body is live streamed in extreme close up and projected in the performance space. In this context, the use of the camera provides a degree of intimacy and proximity to the body that might otherwise be unavailable.[96]

The visceral-verbal playtext refers to a use of language that breaks away from narrative, conventional dialogue and linguistic conventions to upset semantic modes of meaning-making.[97] These texts are often ambiguous to allow freedom of interpretation. Their opaque meaning picks at the unconscious of the audience and begs to be felt rather than understood.[98] When performed vocally, the visceral-verbal playtext "exposes feeling and experience through its rhythms, its sounds, its connotations so that the powers of 'intoxication' serve to 'subvert reason' in interpretation."[99]

The work of Josephine Machon and Erika Fischer-Lichte help us understand how immersive and haptic experiences create opportunities for the co-authorship of meaning in performance. Their theories emphasize how audiences can develop meaning based on self-referential knowledge, felt experiences and participation.

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[96] Ibid., 66.
[97] Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics*, 70.
[98] Ibid., 70.
[99] Ibid., 78.

CHAPTER 3: *SLEEP NO MORE, A CASE STUDY*

The role that immersive and haptic experiences play in concert dance can be examined through Punchdrunk productions like *Sleep No More*. *Sleep No More* is an immersive dance concert based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The production has been written about by Josephine Machon, Adam Alston and W.B. Worthen. Each scholar takes a different approach to analyzing the company's immersive practices, but all emphasize the use of physical participation and haptic modes of engagement with the work in their reading of the production.

Josephine Machon

In her book *Immersive Theatres,* Machon interviews Felix Barrett, Punchdrunk's artistic director. Machon asks Barrett to identify what qualities makes Punchdrunk's work immersive. Barrett answers that the audience's freedom to self-determine is at the heart of Punchdrunk's immersive practice.[100] Barrett is interested in letting the audience decide for themselves where to go, look, and explore rather than 'telling them' where to focus their attention.[101] Barrett argues that self-determination allows the audience to forget they are an audience and change their "status in the work," becoming part of it rather than a voyeur outside of it.[102] In Punchdrunk's work, the audience is given agency to "define and choose

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[100] Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 160.
[101] Ibid., 161.
[102] Ibid., 159.

their evening;"[103] they are given freedom to co-author their experience through their movement.

Machon contends that immersive theatre engages with the full range of senses.[104] Barrett and Doyle describe Punchdrunk's immersive practices as designed to fight against audience apathy and to engage viewers in a way that forces them to respond instinctively rather than intellectually.[105] In *Sleep No More,* being so close to the dancing body allows for "a sensuous interpretation of abstract ideas in the corporeal and intellectual experience of the audience."[106] When I experienced *Sleep No More,* at one point, I chased a performer down a dark hallway as they fled the scene of a murder; this is a much different experience than watching the same action transpire on stage. I felt my heart beat rise, I saw the room whiz past me, I felt the urgency and speed of scene.

Machon asserts that the human body in performance provides a conduit for lived experience that can be transmitted to the audience and used as a means to appreciate the work through visceral sensation.[107] Barrett and Doyle agree and contend that portraying the action of *Macbeth* through dance helps audiences to experience *Sleep No More* somatically.[108] Text was featured more prominently in Punchdrunk's early productions, however Barrett found that the use of words took the audience out of the physical experience of the production.[109] He describes how, "the audience would be there, tuned into the pulse and rhythm of the building and the work then as soon as the text kicked in… they would go back

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103 Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 160.
104 Ibid., 75.
105 Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics*, 89.
106 Ibid., 68.
107 Ibid., 67.
108 Ibid., 97.
109 Ibid., 97.

to autopilot, back to being an audience member, and physically their response would change."[110] Barrett and Doyle contend that dancers' intelligence is embodied and that this quality enables a language of the body that speaks to our haptic sense as well as our intelligence.[111] Barrett describes how,

> with *The Tempest*, we had one dancer who played one of the goddesses...in terms of what the audience members could read into it and with their working knowledge of the text you could see a million things inside this one performance... The movement alludes to something then it shifts and melts...[112]

The use of dance in *Sleep No More* promotes a felt experience of the production through the use of haptic language. It also privileges the agency of the audience member by allowing corporeal freedom and inviting multiple readings of the performance.

Adam Alston

Adam Alston makes a socio-economic analysis of *Sleep No More* in his article, "Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, agency and responsibility in immersive theatre." Alston argues that immersive theatre reinforces 'neoliberal values' by rewarding 'entrepreneurial participation.' Alston identifies the key values of neoliberalism as enterprise, entrepreneurialism and opportunism.[113] He argues that *Sleep No More* reinforces these values by privileging "participation based on self-made opportunity."[114]

Adam Alston also claims that *Sleep No More* and similar productions play to the kinds of hedonistic desires profited upon by the "experience industry."[115] Alston identifies the

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[110] Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics,* 97.
[111] Ma Ibid., 97.
[112] Ibid., 97.
[113] Alston, "Audience Participation," 132.
[114] Ibid., 128.
[115] Ibid.,

experience industry as "a grouped set of businesses that produce and usually look to profit from the provision of memorable or stimulating experiences, such as theme parks, strip-clubs and role-play adventures."[116] Alston places immersive performances within this domain because of the way these performances extort experience by implicating the audience in the action of the performance. For Alston, the experiences derived from immersive theatre are narcissistic because the enjoyment derived from them are "bolstered by receiving the fruits of one's own participatory effort."[117]

In order to align immersive theatre with neoliberal values, Alston relies upon descriptions of immersive performance as a physically sensory experience that demands participation on the part of the audience. He writes, "[a]ttention tends to be turned inwards, towards the experiencing self." He also notes the primacy of haptic sensory experiences in immersive theatre stating that:

> immersive theatre may be distinguished by the sensory acts that it demands of audiences, such as touching and being touched, tasting, smelling and moving – the latter often (but not always) being characterized by freedom to move within an aesthetic space."[118]

Although Alston's overall assessment of immersive theatre is negative, his descriptions of *Sleep No More* are similar to those of Machon and Barret. Alston defines *Sleep No More* based on its emphasis on audience participation and haptic experiences.

W.B. Worthen

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[116] Alston, "Audience Participation," 131.
[117] Ibid., 131.
[118] Ibid., 129.

W.B. Worthen explores the sensory and haptic aspects of *Sleep No More* by looking at how the production deals with the theme and character in *Macbeth*. Worthen describes how design elements in *Sleep No More* create physical manifestations of theme and character. He argues "*Sleep No More* reifies Macbeth's interior world as 'immersive' performance space, materializing elements of the play's verbal texture as objects in a thematically resonant environment."[119] Worthen identifies this practice as creating "sensory poetics" that help convey the thematic elements of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.[120] For Worthen, Shakespeare's text is made physical in *Sleep No More,* and therefore available through haptic experiences (the audience is allowed to touch and handle set pieces in *Sleep No More*).[121]

Worthen's examination of audiences' interaction with *Sleep No More* focuses on the agency of spectators. Worthen argues that physical participation and corporeal freedom in *Sleep No More* allows audience members to weave their own "poetic associative narrative," by roaming throughout the performance and stumbling on the action of the text outside of the temporal plot.[122] He also hints at how *Sleep No More*'s use of dance might create a shared sensual language between performers and audience. He notes that, "the choreography...foregrounds performance as doing, here and now, a practice we share with the performers."[123]

Although Machon, Alton, and Worthen's analysis of *Sleep No More* differ widely, each of author identifies audience agency and haptic engagement as essential to reading the performance.

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[119] Worthen, "The written troubles of the brain," 86.
[120] Ibid., 87.
[121] Ibid., 96.
[122] Ibid., 87.
[123] Ed. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey, *Engaging Art* (New York: Routeledge, 2008).

PART II

CONCERT DANCE AND IMMERSIVE CONCERT DESIGN

My thesis concert, *Keepsake*, took place April 14th and 15th, 2017 in the Experimental Media Performance Lab (xMPL) at UC Irvine. In designing *Keepsake*, I emphasized the co-presence between co-subjects (dancers and audience members) described by Erika Fischer-Lichte by creating a performance space in which dancers and audience members shared the same space. This co-presence invited opportunities for participation, role reversal, community and physical proximity.

Keepsake incorporated a wide range of design elements including film, projection, interactive media, scenic design, lighting design, live accompaniment and text. My use of a wide variety of mediums was inspired by Josephine Machon's theory of (syn)aesthetics and engaged with all three strategies she outlines for creating (syn)aesthetic work.

During the creation of *Keepsake*, I found myself confronted with a number of questions about how to introduce the audience to the act of participation. To navigate this landscape, I turned to Gareth White's *Audience Participation in Theatre; Aesthetics of the Invitation*. White's aesthetics of participation provided a framework for designing audience participation.

Co-Authorship

Keepsake accommodated an audience of 60 people. The set design included four small scenic clusters and a handful of chairs on the periphery of the space. The set was designed to offer seating to those who wished it, but to encourage movement from most of the audience. The choreography moved between improvisational tasks in which the dancers moved freely

throughout the space, choreographed pieces in the middle of the space and small vignettes on the various scenic clusters. This staging immersed the audience in the spatial, scenic and performative elements of the piece. The audience was also immersed in the performance through various digital installations. For example, as the audience entered the performance, and throughout the first 10 minutes of the piece, their movements were captured on an overhead camera and streamed onto a wall projection. This footage was framed in a photograph of vintage picture frames which was also projected on the wall. The use of digital installations highlighted the audience's role as co-author and subject by providing another opportunity through which to become aware of their participation.

The staging of *Keepsake* was designed so that audience members could not take everything in at once. The movement of the dancers and placement of scenic elements was intended to encourage movement and generate curiosity so that people would feel empowered to curate their experience of the performance by moving about it.

Each section of *Keepsake*, incorporated some kind of participation based in haptic experiences with the dancers and other audience members. Many of the improvisational tasks performed by the dancers included gestural interactions with the audience such as handshaking, slow dancing and pushing or pulling. For example, during a transition between the second and third section of the piece, dancers grabbed audience members and pulled them through the space as they searched the stage with their gaze and gestures. This transition was choreographed so that the audience could experience the confusion and impatience the dancers were embodying. Regardless of that intention, an audience member's decision to allow one's self to be pulled, to resist, or to run with a dancer ultimately shaded their experience of that moment and its meaning in the piece.

Self-referential knowledge

  Keepsake explored nostalgia through an immersive dance concert. The choreography leveraged common language and experiences through the use of identifiable gestures, set pieces, costuming, music and interactive elements. The concert followed a non-linear narrative and dancers morphed in and out of different roles and stages of life throughout the performance. Most of the references in *Keepsake* were designed to be widely understood by the audience so as to encourage audience members to develop their own readings based on self-referential forms of knowledge.

  During one section, the choreography, projection, interaction and design elements were combined to give the feeling of being at a high school prom. The section included disco balls, slow dancing, pop music and flowing skirts. Most audience members who attended *Keepsake* could relate to the experience of a prom or school dance and were able read these elements within that context. Despite these common references, the meaning of the prom section could be interpreted in many ways depending on an audience member's personal experiences in that kind of setting and his/her vantage point at that moment in the concert. At the end of the prom section, a soloist, Samantha Scheller, performed a solo set to a recording of her voice telling a personal story about young love that didn't work out. As the solo progressed, the other dancers pulled audience members to a set piece designed to look like a prom table and socialized with them, eventually crowning a prom king. Some audience members were completely absorbed by Samantha's performance, others tried to watch respectfully while being encouraged to goof around with the rest of the cast. Any reading of this section depended on an audience member's vantage point within the scene, their

personal experiences with young love and school dances, and how they were engaged with the cast at this point in the performance.

Immersive (syn)aesthetics

Keepsake conforms to Josphine Machon's definition of an immersive performance by immersing the audience in the world of the performance and engaging them in the action of the performance. *Keepsake* fulfills the criteria of a (syn)aesthetic performance by engaging diverse design elements to create a (syn)aesthetic hybrid, prioritizing interpretation based on a combination of intellectual and physical sense and integrating visceral verbal playtexts.

Keepsake incorporated a wide variety of choreography, participation and design elements. By using so many different mediums, the audience was engaged with a variety of sensory information simultaneously. For example, during the first section of *Keepsake,* there is an interlude during which dancers and audience members run laps around other dancers performing set choreography. During this section, there is also a video of the beam of light from a 35mm projector projected against one of the theatre walls, a flickering lamp shining from above, and the sound of a 35mm projector playing. These elements engage the audience visually, auditorily and physically simultaneously. The unique combination of design elements creates a distinctive experience of this piece based in visceral memories.

Another strategy for the creation of (syn)aesthetic work described by Machon is the use of the body as a primary site of meaning-making. Throughout *Keepsake,* the dancers embody characters from different stages of life (children, teenagers, adults); they encouraged the audience to participate in this performance by engaging with them through gestures and games. At the top of the show, dancers invited the audience into the space by

walking up to audience members and guiding them into the space while shaking their hands. This interaction began slowly and dryly, with the dancers walking briskly through the space, wearing suit jackets and holding muted expression. Slowly, this interaction grew so that the dancers offered subtle opportunities for weight share with the audience, spun them under their arms, and began to play games by tagging them or dodging between them. Gradually, this shift in energy grew until the scene became light and child-like. The dancers began to run, chase, and play games with the audience; the participation became more playful as the audience experienced the shift from adulthood back to childhood.

The final strategy described by Machon in her discussion of (syn)aesthetics is the use of visceral verbal playtexts. Throughout *Keepsake*, I included recordings of Sam Alper reading excerpts from his poetry collection *Your Hair Is Longer Than the Story of My Life.* Alper's writing exemplifies the visceral-verbal playtext. His poetry is non-narrative and ambiguous. He employs imagery, direct address, rhythm and alliteration in such a way that conjures memories of experiences and feelings. When reading his poetry he performs it in a unaffected, colloquial style that is relatable. In his poem *Happy Birthday Sophie* he writes "our love makes us as one and my ego shatters into coins." This line conjures the feeling of romance alongside the image of the classical Nintendo character Mario losing coins after being hit by an enemy. This odd combination of recollections produces a unique interpretation from each listener depending on what love made them feel whole and whether or not they've played video games. The similar rhythmic structure in the first and second half of this line and his delivery in the recording convince us that one action is the necessary and logical reaction to the other thus encouraging the listener to develop their own meaning.

In *Sleeping with Machines* Alper writes "I had gotten use to taking the computer to bed with me, gotten used to waking up beside it, as foreign closed as someone met drunk the night before." Again the images in this line bump against each other and invite two different kinds of memories into our mind simultaneously. The reading of this line is almost confessional and implicates us as someone who would understand these experiences. Again, the text invites and encourages interpretation based on self-referential knowledge and felt experiences

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Gareth White, Navigating participation

In designing an immersive dance concert, I felt it important to address the audience's role in the performance. I believe that participation without clarity or direction can become confusing or frustrating, and I wanted to avoid such responses in *Keepsake.* The book *The Aesthetics of Audience Participation* by Gareth White, provided language and methods for understanding how audience participation affects a performance and how to effectively design audience participation.

Like Erika Fischer-Lichte, Gareth White acknowledges that all audiences are, in some form, participate in the performances, but he limits his discussion of participation to performances in which the audience participates in the action of the performance.[124] White points out that this kind of audience engagement uses participation as aesthetic material within the performance.[125] He also contends that audience participation must be crafted. He

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[124] Gareth White, *Audience Participation in the Theatre* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 3-4.
[125] Ibid., 9.

uses the term 'procedural author,' taken from video game design, to describe the process of

creating opportunities for participation within performance.[126] White describes how:

> Interactive work is prepared so that it has gaps to be filled with the actions of the participating audience members… and gaps that require the thought and felt response of the audience to make sense out of its various material. So a significant part of the work of an interactive work consists of creating the structure within which these particular gaps appear, and the work of the interactive performer consists of repeating this structure and allowing the participants to fill the gaps in different ways in each fresh iteration of the work.[127]

In *Keepsake,* the dancers and myself were the procedural authors. I designed the kind

of participation the audience would experience throughout the show and the dancers made

decisions about specific instances of participation during each performance.

Invitations and episoding conventions

Gareth White draws on Goffman's frame analysis to describe the necessary shifts

audiences must undergo in order to engage with a performance as a participant. Goffman's

frame analysis is used to parse the "divisions of roles" between actors and spectators during

a performance.[128] During an orthodox performance a spectator plays the roles of

theatregoer, onlooker and patron. White contends that participatory theatre expands upon

the role of the spectator by introducing new participatory frames through invitations and

episoding conventions.[129]

Episoding conventions are "the signals or conventions through which an activity is

'marked off' from other activities, from the 'ongoing flow of surrounding events, this might

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[126] Ibid., 31.
[127] White, *Audience Participation*, 30.
[128] Ibid., 36.
[129] Ibid., 37-41.

be the opening of a curtain in a theatre or the opening remarks of a conversation."[130]

Episoding conventions tell us how to behave in a given situation and enable us to move through life without having to overtly remind ourselves and each other how to behave in different social situations. Gareth White describes how, in the case of participatory theatre, episoding conventions are not always clear and must be addressed in order to help audience members understand their role in the performance.[131] This is done through invitations.

In participatory theatre, invitations can be overt, implicit, covert or accidental in nature.[132] An overt invitation is a literal communication with the audience describing their role in the performance. An implicit invitation is communicated in a gesture or episoding convention during the performance. A covert invitation occurs without the audience's knowledge, for example when a performer is planted in the audience. An accidental invitation occurs when the audience interprets something as an invitation that was not designed to be read as such. All types of invitations occurred in *Keepsake*, however the procedural authorship emphasized overt, covert and implicit invitations.

The first invitation employed by *Keepsake* was overt and took place long before the performance. The audience was prepped for participation by the printed materials used to advertise the concert. On our postcards, *Keepsake* was billed as, "an immersive exploration of nostalgia." Including the term, "immersive," prepared audience members for some kind of participation. Another overt invitation took place as audience members waited to enter the theatre. For 15 minutes before each performance, one of my dancers, Rad Thialan, performed an improvisation with an interactive dance on film that could be fast forwarded, rewound

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[130] Ibid., 37.
[131] White, *Audience Participation,* 39-40.
[132] Ibid., 40.

and paused with his movements. At various intervals, Rad invited audience members to control the system and coached them silently with his movements. Throughout the dance on film, the following text was overlaid on top of the footage: "Keepsake is an immersive concert. Inside, you are invited to move about the space as the dancers guide you. The dancers may invite you to participate through physical contact". While the text acted as an overt invitation to the audience, the interaction between audience members and the video installation acted as a covert invitation. The digital interaction introduced the audience to the concept of interacting with the performers before actually initiating any physical contact.

During the actual performance of *Keepsake,* invitations for participation were initiated implicitly by referencing colloquial gestures. Gareth White points out that harnessing a common language like everyday gesture in the act of invitation improves an audience's understanding of their role in the performance. He says:

> ...prior experience of the actions invited will make a successful performance...more likely, familiarity—which can be read as the anchoring of the frame in shared resources of performances and traditions--also has a great influence on the perception of difficulty of the act.[133]

The gestures employed throughout *Keepsake* implied participation by drawing on social frames and episoding conventions used in daily life. The audience understood to respond the dancers' outstretched hands with a handshake or to pose for a picture when one of my dancers waved a camera in front of them. The use of colloquial gestures in *Keepsake* helped the audience bridge the gap between their expectations of performance behavior and the participation asked of them during the performance*.* Gestures like handshakes, guiding

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[133] White, *Audience Participation,* 81.

the audience by the arm, and slow dancing made the role of audience members clear and easy to interpret.

White is careful to point out that no matter how planned or designed the participation within a performance is, each actual instance of participation is co-authored by the participant, who ultimately makes the decision about how to respond.[134]

Dealing with unpredictability

The unpredictability of audience participation was addressed during the rehearsal process for *Keepsake* by developing an improvisational language based on spontaneity and collaboration. Each rehearsal included improvisational exercises that asked the dancers to respond to unpredictability. Often, I would divide the cast in two and give them opposing tasks. For example, one half would have to try to get a person to move somewhere specific while the other half would have to try to arrest that process. We also brought guests into rehearsals at various stages to receive feedback on the clarity of the invitations and participation.

There were inevitably instances where the audience did not respond as predicted. During rehearsal, the dancers and myself developed three strategies for dealing with this. 1) Standing your ground; waiting longer than comfortable for the audience member to respond in case the audience member has not understood the opportunity. 2) Responding to the audience member's response whatever it is. The dancers were encouraged to respond in character to the audience's decisions. If an audience member refused to dance with one of the dancers, the dancer had the option to react by acting indignant or hurt. 3) To address

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[134] White, *Audience Participation*, 31.

another member of the audience instead. Some people are simply averse to audience participation. During rehearsals, we discussed the issue of consent as a cast and agreed that rather than forcing an audience member into extreme discomfort, it is preferable to turn your attention to another person.

Audience as subject

Like Erika Fischer-Lichte, Gareth White contends that using the audience as aesthetic-material in a participatory performances makes audience members subjects in the performance.[135] This was true in *Keepsake* in that the audience's interpretation of the performance relied on their physical participation with the concert and self-referential knowledge. Gareth White describes this kind of authorship in terms of embodiment:

> [t]he performance emerges from our own body, and is sited in our body, the same site from which we 'watch' the performance. At the same time our social self is recognizable as the source of the performance… making choices and the action that we witness emerging from our body… Thus, the participant is simultaneously *the performer… the performance… .and the audience.*

In *Keepsake*, not only did audience members become subjects in the performance, but the audience as a community became part of the performance in the way they distributed themselves around the performance space. The audience's decisions to spread out, clump together, and move about the space influenced sight lines, the sense of community among audience members and the dancing itself (at times, dancers had to adjust their path or the scale of their movement to accommodate the audience). Combined, these factors affected the overall tone of the piece. Gareth White draws attention how crowds affect participatory theatre in relation to affect and crowd theory. White uses the term intercorporeality to

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[135] White, *Audience Participation,* 30.

describe the phenomena of "bodily resonance," and "affect attunement" that occur in social

settings.[136]He describes how:

> An audience member immersed in a performance, anticipating each word and move, and responding in synchrony with other members of the audience as a whole is in a mutual incorporation with the performers and those... with them in the auditorium.[137]

This effect can help audiences feel a part of something larger and breed community and

empathy among participants and performers.[138] Of this effect, White writes:

> [i]n audience participation this can bring advantages and disadvantages. A crowd that has identified with each other and begun to share responses that approve of a performance can be more likely to give similar approval to invitations to participate...Alternatively a crowd...might react badly to an invitation for individuals to participate...A crowd can also magnify adverse reactions.[139]

> In *Keepsake*, lighting, scenic elements, sound and movement were designed to create

a sense of familiarity and ease among audience members. Participation was also designed to

allow audience members to participate at their own comfort level; thus relieving some of the

risk of creating a reactionary audience.

Risk

In engaging with participatory theatre, audiences take physical, social and emotional

risks.[140] These risks are at times inherent in the act of participation, and at times merely

perceived by audience members based on their own preconceptions or comfort level with

performance.[141] Two potential risks identified during the process of creating *Keepsake* were

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136 White, *Audience Participation,* 126.
137 Ibid., 128.
138 Ibid., 128.
139 Ibid., 137.
140 Ibid., 77.
141 Ibid., 77.

the physical safety of audience members in close proximity to dancing and the challenge of

creating an environment in which audience members felt safe participating in a dance

performance.

According to Gareth White, the physical risks in participatory performance must be

addressed during the process of procedural authorship.[142] When considering immersive

dance performances, participation must be designed according to the audiences' skill level

and staged so there is no risk of collision. In *Keepsake*, audience participation was limited to

movements and interactions that the average individual experiences every day. The

choreography was staged so that the audience was pushed to the edges of the space during

large scale choreographic sections. In rehearsal, we conducted exercises that prepared

dancers to perform in close quarters, surrounded by unexpected bodies.

The social and emotional risks in *Keepsake* were addressed using some strategies

described by Gareth White and some strategies developed over the course of rehearsal. As

described above, audience participation was limited to familiar actions with clear episoding

conventions that the audience could easily understand.[143] Furthermore, much of the

participation was controlled by the performers; the dancers determined who they would

approached to shake hands with, share weight with or dance with. White points out that

this kind of control gives performers the opportunity to intuit audience members who are

keen to participate and those who prefer to stand back and observe.[144] Throughout the

rehearsal process, the dancers were coached to approach the audience members with

confidence and a clear sense of intention. This presence was developed to minimize

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[142] White, *Audience Participation,* 78.
[143]   ., 81.
[144] Ibid., 88.

embarrassment by presenting a clear and trustworthy invitation to the audience. We also developed strategies to create the illusion of having the audience make the first move in moments of participation. For example, when the dancers invited audience members to slow dance, they would take an audience member's arm and place them on their bodies before holding their dance partner.

FINAL THOUGHTS

My research has given me insight into how immersive concert design can help audiences engage with dance in our contemporary, digital and participatory culture. Observing *Keepsake* from the booth during performances, I was delighted by how engaged the audience appeared to be with the performance. As the audience entered the theatre, they took in the space wide eyed, pointed things out their friends and responded excitedly to the dancers when they were approached. Throughout the performances, it was amazing to watch how the decisions of audience members informed the dancers and the performance as a whole. I received a great deal of positive feedback from audience members about *Keepsake*. Many audience members expressed their joy at feeling part of the performance and their relief at being empowered to direct their action and attention during the show.

My research has lead me to believe that allowing audiences to experience dance through immersive and haptic experiences helps them get more out of a performance. These opportunities empower audience members to co-author meaning rather forcing them to interpret an art-object they may have little context with which to understand.

In 2008-2015, when I was living in New York , I was disheartened by how isolated the dance world appeared to me.[145] When I performed in or attended shows, it seemed that it was only dancers attending performances. When I encountered *Sleep No More*, I was energized by the enthusiasm the performance garnered. The young, sold-out audience with

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[145] Brown, Wolf. "How Dance Audiences Engage: 2010 Field Study Summary of Key Themes and Observations." San Francisco: Wolf Brown, 2010. Online PDF.

whom I attended the performance that fateful evening in 2011, seemed so moved by the production; I left inspired to try and understand how I could make dance that engaged and excited audiences in a similar way.

In our society, most performances still limit the audience's role to that of a distanced observer. This kind of participation stands in contrast to our increasingly participatory world in which individuals are taking on the roles of makers, curators and participants in their cultural life. The 2012 *National Survey of the Arts* found that attendance at benchmark arts events (classical music, opera, jazz, and ballet) were either dwindling, stagnating, or hanging on to an aging audience. In contrast, participation in the arts was much higher, whether that be online in the form of watching videos, by creating one's own music, or taking an arts class.[146] Immersive concert design, with its emphasis on participation, may offer new avenues for audience engagement.

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[146] National Endowment for the Arts. *A Decade of Arts Engagement: Findings from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2002-2012.* Washington: National Endowment for the Arts, 2014, Online PDF.

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