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Exploring the Lost Art of Attention Through Making: *Undivided*
By Sydney Franz

*Rather than you determining the content of the work, maybe,
be determined to allow the content of the work to come forward through you.*
- Tilman O'Donnell

I.

I have always known I wanted to create a show for my thesis, even coming in as a freshman and hearing that we would need to do a senior thesis project. I've been exploring choreography since I was very young, and my interest in it has never waned. I remember being around 10 years old and I loved choreographing my own floor routines for gymnastics- my sport of choice at that age. I had been competing in gymnastics for several years, so I knew the aesthetics and required elements well. Sometimes these routines were never performed anywhere outside of my bedroom, but I found opportunities to perform them at my gym a couple of times. After I had created a few solos, I began expanding to include my best friends, creating my first duets and trios. At the time, I didn't even know I was choreographing, I just thought it was fun and people seemed to enjoy it. Then going in to high school, I was faced with an opportunity to choreograph on my fellow students for our spring concert. I leapt at the chance. I ended up choreographing pieces for the spring concert for all four years, and was appointed co-dance captain of our company at school my senior year. With that position, I choreographed a wide variety of dances throughout the year for pep rallies and small performances and was then able to finish out the year creating a 10-minute work entitled *Can't Help*. While I had received positive feedback on my choreography throughout the preceding four years, this piece brought in a lot of positive responses for me and solidified my confidence that I could have a future as a choreographer.

In my professional practices class for graphic design, we were given an entirely open assignment as our final project. One of the first steps was to come to class with three problems I want to solve. These problems could be anything, from social/cultural problems to product-based problems to self-branding problems. My teacher followed this prompt with "What makes you unique

as an artist, and how do you capitalize on that?" In order to explore this question, he asked me to write my own obituary to help verbalize how I want to be remembered and defined. He also requested that I write everything down that I have ever enjoyed doing, and what makes me happy. After writing on all of these prompts, the problem that was most interesting to me was investigating common misconceptions and misunderstandings about introversion. As I explored it through mood boards, reading, and writing, my interest and ideas progressed into understanding the power of quiet, with the connection being the basis of quietude as a source of rejuvenation/recuperation for introverts and wondering if there could be positive effects on the general population if our society encouraged rather than discouraged the inclusion of "quiet time." In a book titled *Quiet*, the author Susan Cain writes about today's global society as "a world that can't stop talking." In response to this claim, I wondered- what if the world could quiet down a little bit and actually listen more? What problems and misunderstandings could be solved if people actually paid more attention to them?

I decided it was time to begin thinking through these questions physically, so I invited Nicole Closson and Gigi Todisco into the studio with me to improvise on the most basic levels of these questions. I began by guiding them to investigate volume: to know what it feels like physically to speak through the ranges of extremely quiet to as loud as possible, and then a little louder. This included scale of movement as well as complexity of movement as the dancers attempted to overwhelm their senses in their loudest states. Once we felt we had a basic understanding of these experiences, we moved on to exploring them in partnership. At first, all three of us were in the space attempting to find cohesive conversation amongst all members, but it quickly felt too complex for these early stages so I stepped out to watch and film, and I am ultimately glad that I did. At times I allowed their conversation to flow naturally, but then I started introducing the choices to not listen or to try to get the other to listen if they're not. This quickly stirred up new qualities of movement as well as genuine emotional responses from the dancers, which were exciting to see. Based on all of this early exploration, I felt confident there was something there for me to continue delving into. This led me to my overall desire to cultivate an experience for people to find quiet and encourage listening from all those who encountered the final product of my project. I was interested in both bringing this

issue into people's awareness as well as giving them an opportunity to experience the payoffs of fully devoting attention to something.

Wanting to create a new choreographic challenge for myself, I decided I wanted to create a work closer to a full evening length piece. I did not want to create a show with several separate pieces- I wanted to make one cohesive piece that could become or be developed into a show that stands on its own. While I have choreographed a 10-minute piece before, I have never choreographed anything beyond that, nor have I had the opportunity to replicate that duration since coming to college. At the front end, my first concern was having enough time to actually achieve this goal in a way that did not sacrifice the quality of the work for the length. Therefore, I tried to confirm my cast in the summer of 2015 and have rehearsals planned as soon as school restarted, so that we could maximize our time working together and creating. My original cast was Anna Chorneyko, Nicole Closson, Olivia Hegleson, Sarina Ramirez-Ortiz, and Gigi Todisco. I found out shortly before returning to classes that Olivia would unfortunately not be able to join us the coming year, quickly followed by Nicole feeling she would not be able to commit the time either only a few weeks into the semester. Thus I faced my next challenge- finding enough people to support a work of this length the first time I had ever tried it. I ended up meeting freshman Kelly Choi in my ballet class that fall, and after some good recommendations from fellow classmates, I asked her to join us. Thus I solidified my final cast by mid October. I knew moving forward that I would need to be as time efficient as possible while still feeling I had no time limit, the latter of which was relatively easy starting out since April felt very far away when we began in August. At this point, I had not decided when or where we would be performing this work, or what type of space I was creating for. I wanted to use a gallery space, but was also considering a theater, but then didn't know if it would be best to do it on or off campus. I was also contemplating how much visual arts were going to be involved in the environment of the performance- whether we would be sharing the space with artwork or not. These were all decisions that ideally should have been made earlier in the process than they were, but I was still happy with how everything worked out.

We had our first full rehearsal on Sunday September 13, 2015. I came with three full pages of notes to talk about with the dancers as ideas to help us gain a similar ground of understanding before diving in to any of the movement. I knew it was more than any of us would be able to hold on to, but I believed at least some things would stick for different people and we could continue revisiting the information as it became more embodied. One of the main concepts includes choreographer Deborah Hay's idea that "The whole body at once is the teacher" (*My Body the Buddhist*, 103). We also referenced a Zen poem from Lao Tzu that reads:

Do you have the patience to wait
'til your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
'til the right action arises by itself?

These two references work together as stepping-stones for us to find a way to dance and create from a place that feels more like listening than speaking over what our bodies have to teach us. The Zen poem works like proposed instructions to attempt to access the ways we can listen to our bodies, our teachers. Last summer I attended a month-long workshop at the San Francisco Conservatory of Dance, where I met former LINES dancer, choreographer, and teacher Christian Burns. He told us that we, as individuals, have value. Every experience we've had lies in the library of our bodies- on our skin, in our bones, in our muscles, in our cells. This is all part of our dancing, and we cannot and should not try to separate from it. In an interview with the Michigan Quarterly Review, Batsheva dancer and choreographer Bobbi Jene Smith, she says:

Trying to erase that gap between off and on stage is a state of mind that helps me to bring everything to the table or to realize that everything is already there. We are all containers. My memories are in my skin whether I want them to be or not. I carry them with me and I dance with them. They reference inside of me and I craft them and form them and ride on them. There is so much movement all the time, everywhere.

I find that this awareness of our life stories being inherent to our bodies beyond the capacities of our minds is not often discussed in dance training or performance, at least not in my experience. I have

only found this viewpoint emphasized in certain circles of my dance education, and I feel it is something that really needs to be encouraged and cultivated in performers. I wanted to explore and cultivate this ability to listen in myself and the other dancers that would be joining me in the process of creating my thesis project. This gets me to the how- how can we get ourselves into this listening state of being and out of a thinking-based state of being?

On a broad scale, I have noticed that tasks can often free dancers improvisationally from the traps of overthinking while dancing. Through working with Burns last summer, I discovered that the task of listening to one's own weight as it engages with the floor was a successful means of getting me to listen into movement rather than move from my thoughts. I found I was able to surprise myself by engaging with my weight, and I found a great sense of connection and empathetic possibilities with others when we began engaging with each other's weight. This stood out as the key into my explorations for this project.

Therefore, our tasks for this first rehearsal, or workshop I suppose is the better term, were extremely simple and introspective, drawing from the practices of two influential teachers of mine- Burns and former Forsythe dancer Tilman O'Donnell. We began scattered throughout the room, eyes closed, feeling the subtle shifts of weight that naturally occur in our feet as we constantly fight to keep our balance in a still standing position. We then went more internal, trying to feel where our plumb line, the imaginary line that drops directly through the center of our bodies from the top of the head down between the feet, is located. Then, rather than understanding this line as a passive element of space, we shifted our perspective to access its energy, serving as a type of energy core directly related to our relationship to weight and gravity. O'Donnell calls this "centering." Once everyone felt they were able to successfully feel this, I directed them to attempt to move this energy out of their bodies into the space in front of them. After some time working with this and allowing the eyes to open, we introduced this idea into a partnership. The task now became, can both partners stay open and focused long enough for them to move these energies, with their whole bodies all at once, forward in space to meet that of their partner? The dancers were free to change partners as they agreed it was time for their current partnership to dissolve, meaning they could be working with any one person for any amount of time or alone. Through all of this, I encouraged an attitude of

lighthearted investigation, as there was no reason to feel a lot of pressure to make it happen. That would actually become detrimental. As I stepped out to watch everyone work, it was fascinating how I could literally see whether the dancers were aware of their entire bodies or only a part or were holding back. Locked knees, sending the chest and head forward without the lower body, and tension in the back of the neck were some of the more obvious giveaways. I could also see when it was working. Standing in a place where I could directly see in the space between partners, I could feel when their energies were close or met, and I could feel when one of them got distracted by something and their energy pulled away. Over time I quietly encouraged the dancers to watch each other as well as I directed and guided one pair at a time. The other dancers began to be able to see all of this too. Anna described the sensation of her energy coming close to another's as a burning in her chest. I felt something similar- it often felt like a tingling and burning focused behind my breastbone that would spread throughout the rest of my body. Nicole commented that she felt a tingling in her stomach and in her hands.

As we continued working like this throughout the following weeks, we progressed the exercise with action, as the connections started coming faster as the dancers became more in tune. The first progression was that when the connection was felt, both dancers would take one step forward at the same time. The trick to this, however, was to remain in a place of listening to the energy and impulses felt inside one's own body, rather than just trying to achieve the task of stepping with one's partner by watching for visual cues. This became a training to trust one's physical impulses and stop filtering action- to listen to one's body, the teacher. We progressed by spreading the partners farther apart, turning them to face away from one another, increasing the single step to a full walk which should also be stopped in unison with a partner, and then including turning back to face the partner after walking the agreed upon distance. This was most of the work we did in our first two meetings, focusing on cultivating our listening skills and duration of attention, both within ourselves and with others.

Finally we began learning some phrase work. The first material I taught I pulled from footage of an improvisation I performed in Italy at the end of the summer under the direction of choreographer and teacher Ivan Perez, former dancer of Netherlands Dance Theatre. He worked with

me to cultivate what he calls “open body” improvisation, which encourages the dancer to move without filters or limitations, moving through open channels of the body rather than thinking through and planning movement in the mind. I selected this material because it felt like a relevant place to start. We called this phrase “Floor Phrase 1.” I then taught them another phrase that I had created in January of 2015 that I felt needed to be explored further, which we then called the “Ticking Phrase” because of the small, tight movements and shifts that characterized its opening. In teaching this material, I focused on displaying the movement with my body and trying to answer questions physically rather than verbally, so that we could encourage a more visually based learning than audible. Every time I taught material, I gave the dancers time to explore it on their own and repeat it multiple times without pause to continue training the attention.

On October 25, Kelly had now joined us, and we began by spending time improvising with the idea of engaging weight. We started simply by feeling where our weight takes us when we do nothing but release muscular control of the ankles and follow that. When dancers started to get lost or go on what we call “auto-pilot,” where the dancer is just moving through habits and no longer paying attention to their bodies, I encouraged them to go back to that simple beginning. We continued working in this way for about 25 minutes so that we could really practice this task. Then I brought us back to the idea of centering and the central power core plumb line that we had found access to. I had the dancers pair up and stand shoulder to shoulder with their partner. Their instructions were to do nothing but stand, keep their eyes forward on the horizon, and listen to their weight and their partner’s. This was our ultimate exploration of the Zen poem I cited earlier about remaining unmoving until the right action arises. Over time, the partners began shifting subtly in unison, like they were one body negotiating its weight. As I encouraged them to allow the weight shifts to be more free in scale, the movements became larger, occasionally including a lifting of the foot, a swing of the arm, or a full dive of the torso. We were creating small duets based purely on listening, and it was surprisingly fascinating in its simplicity. Sarina described watching Kelly and Anna like watching seaweed in the ocean being moved by unseen currents. It was truly mesmerizing to watch and do, so we ended up spending over 30 minutes on this task alone.

In the next rehearsal, I had us test out an exercise I learned from Burns, which I believe he also credited to another teacher, called “bursts.” The premise of the exercise is that the dancers begin in a line, and when the time begins, they are instructed to make as many decisions as possible until I tell them to stop. They don’t have to be good decisions, they just need to be made. I told them to just think “change, change, change, change, change.” The first run lasts for 10 seconds with no other guidance. We repeat the 10 second interval again, this time including the desire to make connections with other dancers or relate to them in some way. Then we increased the time to 30 seconds, and I reminded them that finding stillness is also a choice, as is the decision to remain in stillness. I saw the first great shift in the energy and connectivity of the group after this run. When the time increased to one minute, I encouraged them to make more conscious choices about timing that promote contrast in the group, i.e. not deciding to start moving again out of stillness just because everyone else does, unless you think that is an interesting idea. We kept increasing the time to 90 seconds, 3 minutes, and 5 minutes as the compositional decisions became richer. I continued encouraging them to look for opportunities to contrast what others were doing as well as find time to be still and listen, but I also encouraged them to start trying to join what others were doing at the same time they were doing them by copying the weight patterns of another dancer in time with them. The progress was amazing to see in such a short time as the dancers skillfully took in every suggestion I made.

After the bursts, I jumped in and taught another phrase, which I called the “Wide Phrase.” This material played on quick changes between expansiveness and compactness, height and groundedness, and simplicity and complexity. It also very much encouraged what many call “living” or “active” stillness, where the dancer is just as active and attentive in stillness as they are in motion, being ready to do anything at any moment. After giving time for the dancers to get this material in their bodies and review the phrases we had already learned, we began creating our first set of weight phrases. As a group, we selected a short piece of one of the phrases we knew well: the beginning of the Ticking Phrase. I then asked the dancers to spend time with me analyzing the weight shifts and patterns that existed within that phrase. Once we all agreed on an underlying structure, simplifying the movement to nothing but the shifting of weight, I asked everyone to find new movement that could sequentially exist with that same structure or weight pattern. This felt much like our

improvisations focused on engaging our weight, except this time the weight was predetermined. After some time, we came back together and showed and filmed our phrases individually. I then asked them to create a tight group upstage and perform their phrases in time with each other, using weight as their cue. The result was yet again a wonderful surprise. The group had a feeling of unison even though none of the dancers were doing the same movement. There was exciting diversity and connections that appeared and fluctuated amongst the dancers. While going in I was not sure this would become anything of interest, I was very pleased at the success of my experiment. This became a process of movement generation and abstraction that we continued to use throughout our process.

As we continued exploring and abstracting our movement and improvisational practices that had been introduced thus far, I also began introducing opportunities for us to put them all into practice by opening the space for full group improvisations. During these filmed improvisations, we could utilize learned material, weight improvisations, centering practices, weight phrases, and any other ideas we had touched upon with an overall emphasis on listening to and trusting the body. When going back to look at thesis improvisations, small stories would begin to emerge both on individual levels and overall group levels, and as we progressed further and further into the process and our familiarity with each other and the content, the stories grew more prevalent and clear.

In one of the last few rehearsals of the fall, we were missing Anna and Sarina, leaving only three of us in the room. We decided to move forward and develop combined phrases out of the material we now knew quite well: the Ticking Phrase and the Wide Phrase. I instructed them to attempt to weave them together evenly in sequential order, meaning they should pull the first move from phrase a, then the first one from phrase b, then the next one from phrase a, then the next one from phrase b, etc. until they had completely finished both phrases. Gigi and Kelly worked together to develop one while I created my own as well. Once they were complete and filmed, I asked Gigi and Kelly to develop a duet out of this new combined phrase. They brought the duet to me, and after some guiding and editing, we had created and set our first "chunk." When Anna returned, I watched Kelly and Anna perform their weight phrases in unison and played with their spatial relationship to each other. I then asked them to create a duet based on that experience, creating another chunk for us to utilize in our overall composition.

Upon returning in the spring, now rehearsing very Thursday evening instead of Sunday morning, I taught two new phrases that I had developed over the break- the “Goopy Phrase” and the “Pressing Phrase.” After getting these in our bodies, we spent time reviewing everything we had created and learned in the previous semester to start piecing elements together. While we had experimented with piecing elements into a longer collection at the close of the fall semester, we had not created anything we decided to keep, so we were starting fresh but full of previous trials. In the second rehearsal alone, I assembled what we would then perform for *IMPULSE* and the spring student concert, *Passages*. I eventually titled this section, *If a Tree Falls...*, clearly alluding to the rest of the saying, “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” This title sort of popped in to my head as I was discussing the work and concepts with my dancers. I liked that it highlighted the concept that there are connections, ideas, and possibilities that we may be missing because we simply aren’t there to notice them. And by that, I do not mean physically, I mean mentally, as in we are often too busy to stop, be quiet and pay attention to pieces of our lives waiting to be noticed.

If A Tree Falls... was relatively seamless in its assembly. We found the space to freely try out different possibilities of spacing, material, and timing, and when I liked something, we kept it. When we reconvened the following week, we revisited what we had assembled and did a very small amount of editing and clarifying and decided that the ending we currently had and were planning to continue from was actually functioning as the end, and we really did not need to go on. This was a great moment of allowing the work and our bodies to tell us what was required (or not required) rather than me forcing us to continue on because I wanted it to be longer or include more elements. This was a mentality I would have to continue engaging with throughout the rest of my process. Once we had reached this point, I began emphasizing more consistently the words of Tilman O’Donnell that had largely catapulted me into this project: “Rather than you determining the content of the work, maybe, be determined to allow the content of the work to come forward through you.” In other words, listen to your body, listen to the work, and allow the stories that exist within and on you as well as within the dance to come forward and be seen.

We then used chance procedure to select a list of tasks from a long list I had assembled. Our final list was- throw it away, big jump, send 3 points away from each other, stand, cut it, catch something, explode, relocate your ribs, slide your chin and knee across a surface, try to get someone's attention, dodge something, shrink, follow, resist a pulling force, and move ever part of your body at once. We then each created individual phrases based off of this list of tasks, and ultimately created a quartet with Gigi, Kelly, Anna, and Sarina out of them as well, emphasizing that they play with timing and tasks as their relationships to one another.

As we continued developing our "chunks" and solo materials, I gave them all names and wrote them out on a piece of paper. Then on a plane back from St. Louis, Missouri, I used my deck of cards as a means of chance procedure to determine the order in which we would see all of these chunks. I orchestrated a couple of choices and modified the details of some, but ultimately allowed chance procedure to keep me from having too much control over creating a story and relationships intentionally. I wanted to know that they could come forward even without being orchestrated.

III.

The final work titled *Undivided* runs right about 40 minutes in length. We performed it on April 9, 2016 in the Strub Theater at 8:30 pm. The entire performance felt incredible. All of the dancers were clearly engaged and present the entire time. It felt alive, spacious, and exciting, while also very calm. I feel very satisfied and fulfilled by the final product looking back on it now, and I felt the same that night. I definitely feel that it accomplishes all of the goals I set out for myself, and even goes beyond that. It is a full work of art that I am proud of in its current state, and still feel a desire to revisit and continue expanding. There are so many different ways that the material could have gone, and I would be interested in exploring many more of them. I would also be interested in cultivating more of the cast's compositional skills in improvisation so that we could potentially add on an improvised section to the work that could exist either on the stage with the rest of the work or never leave the studio, but still contribute to our overall understanding of these practices and possibilities. I

also would love to take this work outside the context of school and present it to an audience that doesn't know me or my work. I want to know how people will respond to this work in Los Angeles, on the East Coast, in Europe, in the Northwest, and beyond.

Ultimately, I feel that we were all able to perform this work in a place of allowing our bodies to tell our stories. We didn't need to know the details of every story mentally in order for them to become present in the piece, and I think most of the time we did not. I wrote in my notebook early on in the process the following proposition:

I think dancing and performance can be much more about listening than speaking. I think the beauty of movement/dance can be witnessed in seeing the physical manifestation of the dancer's attention and ability to listen and respond rather than them constantly telling us what they think they have to say. The body knows how to express; we just need to let it. This is in large part what I wanted to investigate going in to this project. Can I really create a story without knowing what the story is on the front end? Can dancers perform work without putting a story on top of it and instead allowing the story to arise from within? The answer I have come to at the conclusion of this process, is yes.

IV.

Moving forward, I plan to start submitting excerpts of this work to festivals and finding opportunities to show it to new audiences. I also plan to initiate new choreographic explorations on new bodies and bodies that I know well. Amongst my plans to start presenting myself as a choreographer, I also plan to start working as a dancer as soon as possible. I am currently searching for a company that feels like the perfect fit for me, and when I find it I plan to join it. I want to do commercial work, musical theater, dance theater, and concert work. Overall, I want to find people to work and study with that challenge and excite me. I do not yet know where all of this will happen for me, or even that it will necessarily happen all in the same place. I can see myself spending more time in Los Angeles, as well as exploring San Francisco, New York, and Europe. Ideally, I'll spend time in all of these places.

Looking farther into the future, I plan to have my own dance company. I would also be interested in teaching workshops at this point in my career and traveling to teach students in multiple languages and locations, though I do not intend to be identified as a teacher more so than a choreographer. I envision this company being relatively small, no more than 10 people, especially in its early years. I feel like the members will be primarily people that I know well or that I have worked with before, introducing members I know less well over time. I see us becoming a touring company, sharing our work to audiences around the world. I don't know where this will happen yet- only that it will. If I ever go to graduate school, I do not foresee this happening in the next 5 years. Beyond that I really don't know. I am open to going to graduate school to explore choreography or any other kind of art really, but it does not yet feel necessary to my path.

The last four years were filled with a lot of turbulence. There were many times when I didn't want to stay in school, or stay in the dance major, or stay at this school, but looking back, I am beyond thankful none of that ever stuck. I don't know what my life would be like if I hadn't finished all four years at LMU, but I feel that the fourth year was in many ways essential to my becoming who I am today as a person and as an artist. There was a shift in this fourth year, of mindset, confidence, skills, perspective, or some combination of all of these. I feel ready to move forward from this time and start enacting my career as a professional artist.

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