The Aesthetic of Failure: Authenticity, Effort, and Imperfection in American Contemporary Dance

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The Aesthetic of Failure:

Authenticity, Effort, and Imperfection in American Contemporary Dance

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Dance Honors Thesis Ann Kloppenberg
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Introduction

This research examines a slice of American contemporary dance artists and their audiences. American postmodern choreographers such as David Dorfman, Heidi Henderson, Sara Hook, and Paul Matteson use what I am calling the aesthetic of failure as a method to punctuate their work, momentarily blur clarity, steer the viewer’s gaze, make space for live choice making, and in some cases draw laughter. Almost any emotion can be associated with failure: anger, grief, hilarity, absurdity, etc. The underpinning of failure in live performance is the medium of the craft, human bodies. Consider the phrase “humanly possible:” jump as high as humanly possible, run as fast as humanly possible, or step as far as humanly possible. All of these phrases assume there is a line between possible and impossible, and, therefore, a line between success and failure. If a dancer jumps as high as he can, what he cannot do is what he failed to do. Failure in all instances defines limits and defines what is possible, not unlike gravity. Failure in dance has many faces, most of which portray either legible awkwardness or bare the realities of physical impossibility.

The term aesthetic of failure refers to a choreographic value system that includes the visual residue of effort or polished awkwardness in performance. The purpose of this research is to situate, define, and unpack the impact of the aesthetic of failure. My goal is to establish where it comes from, what it is, and what it does. To do this I will contextualize the beginning of the aesthetic of failure along side the emersion of postmodern dance and the Judson Dance Theater in the early 1960s. The intentional use of failure in performance breaks the constructs of clean-
lined and precise dancing that viewers often associated with ballet and commercialized dance. Though it is often still categorized as defying convention, the *aesthetic of failure* has been a defining quality of the postmodern dance field since its birth. Work that includes the *aesthetic of failure* requires dancers to access honest effort and eliminate artifice. As a result of dancers’ performative authenticity, viewers potentially experience a deeper catharsis than in conventional performance. Employing the *aesthetic of failure* demands that dancers are truly taking risks, exposing vulnerability, conjuring undesirable physical sensations, or performing the unbeautiful.

It is important to distinguish movement that *reads* as failure from movement that *is* failure. The *aesthetic of failure*, for my purposes, does not refer to “actual” failure, as in not meeting the expectations of the choreographer. Much of postmodern choreography requires a kind of planned failure. Today’s dance artists including David Dorfman and Sara Hook ask the artists performing in their work to put their bodies on the line as they attempt in earnest to accomplish impossible feats. As a result, they reveal authentic effort and exhaustion. Other choreographers, such as Monica Bill Barnes, dream up real life scenarios to access and then polish wacky movement vocabulary. Movement may be strictly constructed to appear misplaced, painful, or wrong. The *aesthetic of failure*—which I also refer to as performed or performative failure—presents itself in three categories: *allowance*, *demand*, and *placement*.

Dancers performing failure must cultivate honesty to eliminate artifice. The effectiveness of each performance lives in the authenticity of the physical experience. It hinges on commitment to fluctuating physical extremes. Dancers must be willing to lose their balance and must be unconcerned with hiding what some might read as flaw. Leaving the body open to precariousness is a skill. The technique for exposing the messy edges of physical limitation has to do with fresh exertion. It requires genuine curiosity in the assigned task and a non-judgmental
attention to the result. For example, improvisational artist and teacher Chris Aiken explains, “I
don’t feel the need to create chaos and failure and mistakes…It’s just that when they inevitably
happen, I’m not at all interested in hiding it.”¹ These instances are categorized as the allowance
of failure.

The demand of failure refers to choreographic structures that are intentionally so
challenging that dancers can never fully execute them. If collisions, incomplete gestures, or
falling does not occur, then the choreography is not fulfilled. If the task is impossible, and the
intent is authentic, the result reveals effort. Sara Hook explains that performing her work is
“dependent on the commitment to [the] gauntlet and coping with the results…rather than
replicating or representing the gauntlet.” She calls this “the aesthetic of the attempt.”² In these
instances, the movement does not symbolize something else, there is only what is happening.
The demand and allowance of failure are closely related, but are separated by the sense of
urgency. As Aiken suggests, allowance of failure is a bit passive, permitted but not forced. The
demand for failure implies a steadfast commitment to the impossible.

It is certainly impressive to see a dancer flawlessly perform his craft. Ballet dancers bound
through space, seem to suspend in midair, and execute movement in ways only their specific
training could produce. Although it is less legible, the choreography of dance artists like Monica
Bill Barnes is similarly virtuosic even in moments that appear ungraceful. Barnes describes her
work as choreographed “within an inch of its life.”³ She regularly includes distorted facial
expressions, tripping, and misguided effort to unleash her dancers’ charming goofiness. Barnes’
careful codification of specific vocabulary such as seductively licking their shoulders or getting
punched by an invisible fist, are examples of what I’m calling the placement of failure.
This research also includes a close reading of Monica Bill Barnes’ most recent work *Luster* (2012) to examine the ways in which her work employs the *aesthetic of failure* in process and performance. Barnes describes her work as, “dealing in that everyman category.” She wants everyone in her audience to feel, “a sense of empathy and familiarity.” Barnes described some of the vocabulary in her work as “humiliating” for the performers but then corrected herself, and replaced humiliating with “humanizing.” When Barnes sees people stumble or fall outside the performance arena she often thinks, “I do that all the time!” Her automatic response to failure is, perhaps, where she finds a connection between humiliation and humanity.

Polishing movement means risking the loss of authentic looking failure more than the other two categories I offer. The placement of failure may sometimes bleed into disciplines like clowning, vaudeville, or even slapstick comedy. Although the *placement* of failure is the most specifically planned of the three categories, dancers must still employ authentic visceral sensations of fear, falling, or rejection to effectively perform the vocabulary. The *placement* of failure can also reveal itself through *tonal imperfection* meaning a full-bodied awkwardness, hunched posture, or excessive tension.

Though these three categories, *allowance, placement, and demand* may at times overlap, their distinction is vital to understanding the choreographic and performative skills necessary to create an *aesthetic of failure*. The way in which the *aesthetic of failure* is employed has to do with the value system of the choreographer and his interest in authenticity, effort, polish, mess, and their place in dance performance.

Sara Jane Bailes’ *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* establishes “representational failure” in
performance as falsity in depicting an alternate reality beyond the actual stage. A New York City production of *The Lion King*, for example, fails to embody lions on the savannah because the performers are actors on a stage. According to Bailes, an artist engaging in the poetics of failure: “greets the dilemma of representational failure with an eye to confronting it…in order that its innate precariousness will not so much haunt it as be consciously deployed in the production of the event.”6 Choreographers using the *aesthetic of failure* bask in the precariousness of live performance and excavate the ambiguous space between failure and success.

Bailes further asserts that performing intentional failure—a planned stumble or misstep—presents a double failure in that the performer is failing to truly fail. These dizzying layers of failure are helpful in understanding what performed failure in dance is *not*. Though the *placement, allowance, and demand* of failure is planned, the dancers are not trying to *represent* failure. Rather, dancers performing failure dissolve those layers by accessing the power of purposeful effort against the limitations of the body and, as a result, reveal failure. Performed failure is ubiquitous in today’s dance field, whether codified, improvised, or as the result of intentionally misguided effort. My work unpacking the *aesthetic of failure* focuses on the skills, intention, and impact of the evocative patterning that wrongness carves.

Postmodern dance is a young field with undefined edges. Scholars Sally Banes, Ramsay Burt, and many others regard The Judson Dance Theater era as the birth of postmodern dance. The emergence of the Judson Group in the early 1960s established the continuing project of redefining what is “allowed” in dance performance. The work of Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Robert Dunn, and Trisha Brown among innovative others reflects the many experiments that constitute the reinvention of dance. Their work was a reaction to the egocentric value systems of early modern artists such as Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey, and Paul Taylor who were every bit as
groundbreaking in their time. Modern choreographers rejected the limitations of ballet and developed new technique to create a unique voice that could read through a company of strictly trained dancers. The Judson artists rejected all dance technique, drama, spectacle, and what Burt refers to as the “soupy questions inherent in the modern dance aesthetic.” Instead they became focused on “the clarity and directness of movement as unembellished activity, and the dancer’s actual weight and physicality.”\(^7\) In general, postmodern art is self-aware, skeptical, and reveals its process. Artists composing postmodern dance look to eclecticism, bricolage, parody, and the mundane, as ways to rearrange what Steven Best and Douglas Kellner call “the debris of the cultural past.”\(^8\) The fundamental characteristics of postmodernism and the work of the Judson artists laid the groundwork for today’s use of performative failure.

The experimentation of the Judson dancers yielded revolutionary notions of dance performance as task-oriented, improvisational, unpretentious, cognitive, and even casual. They removed representation and narrative to let action of the body be the focal point. In Trisha Brown’s solo *Accumulation with Talking Plus Watermotor* (1978), she was interested in what happened to her performance quality when she fused three previous projects. In the new version, she executed a simple accumulating gesture phrase\(^1\) while simultaneously speaking aloud about what was happening onstage at that very moment. The combination of task and improvisation, made Brown unable to successfully complete the movement, but she was intrigued by her stumbling and by “just how very live this whole thing is.”\(^9\) This kind of unfiltered liveness between performer and audience subverted the standing conventions of concert dance.

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\(^1\) An accumulation of gestures is a string of any number of low effort movements—for example raising the knee to the elbow or putting a wrist to the forehead—in a known sequence and then performing them in an accumulating pattern: 1; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3, 4; etc.
In other spheres of dance with more commercial success such as The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, The American Ballet Theater, and especially the popular television series *So You Think You Can Dance?*, dancers fight against their perceived flaws, actively push against gravity, against falling—failure isn’t allowed. In postmodern choreography, elaborate and overlapping instructions require a seamless connection in the dancer’s mind and body. In real time, dancers must perform as much specificity as possible, accept difficulty, make choices, and find solutions to problems as they arise. The *aesthetic of failure* dissolves the illusion of a second reality outside of the performance situation itself. Performing dance as an authentic experience of physics effectively dissolves what Bailes calls the “ineradicable difference” between the “actual and represented real,” in performance bringing the audience and performers to a shared present tense. Dancers do not imagine they are swans or princes; they embody movement structures and engage in elaborate tasks in real time. Performatively, choreographers using what I am calling the *aesthetic of failure* disrupt the anticipated duality of live performance and the expectation that the dance is telling a story. I am arguing that the dissolution of duality creates more widely affecting performances that access a range of visceral, emotional, and kinesthetic response.

In the performance of traditional American ballet and modern dance, a specific physical technique or codified movement vocabulary acts as the foundation for choreography. Plot, role, emotion, or quality, is then layered on top, separately. Dancers performing this work must execute the skill and simultaneously participate in the premise of the dance. Unlike Brown’s solo, participation in a larger narrative means actively imagining a different world outside the performance situation of performers, audience, and the stage. Dancers working in the Judson lineage interrupt the dual reality by taking sincere physical risks. Over the past fifty years,
postmodern dance artists have interrogated the action of the body to reinvest in the project of defining dance. Embracing failure as a way to learn the boundaries of embodied life is necessary to continuing that project.

Today’s choreographers are curators. They often work to maintain a rehearsal environment for the dancers identities to reveal themselves and then carefully select and edit movements that arise. Setting the challenge and solidifying structure is the job of the choreographer. Dancers are expected to be individuals, make bold choices, and offer an aesthetic point of view. It is the dancers’ responsibility to provide earnest effort, necessary technique, and, in the case of trained dancers, biomechanical intelligence and efficiency. In Ted Gioia’s discussion of improvisational jazz music in *The Aesthetic of Imperfection*, he describes mistakes in performance as moments to see the artist, not just the art.\(^{11}\) Paul Matteson suggests it is also the choreographer’s responsibility to use failure to shape the work strictly enough to maintain clarity, yet allow for deviation and experimentation, even in performance. He believes failure can be punctuation, a way to direct the eye, but must be used skillfully.\(^{12}\)

Specificity of intention and awareness is undeniably linked to new somatic training methods of today’s dancers presented in Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettl-Fiol’s *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*.\(^ {13}\) This training allows for deeper textural articulation of movement quality and vocabulary in performance. As I mentioned, ballet involves a foundation of movement technique with emotion layered on top. Performers of postmodern dance, especially those using the *aesthetic of failure*, must access and manipulate the innate connections of their body, mind, and energy to integrate the emotional and physical intention of the movement. More importantly, this training allows dancers to uncover the ways in which bodies on the brink of failure restart, try again, and move forward.
On the difficult but imperative skill of learning from mistakes, Kathryn Schulz, self-titled ‘wrongologist’ and author of *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, offers the comforting advice, “wrongness is a window into normal human nature—into our imaginative minds, our boundless faculties, our extravagant souls…it is ultimately wrongness, not rightness, that can teach us who we are.” However, Americans have a particular way of interacting with failure. We think ourselves the best nation in the world, but also celebrate our undying work towards a “more perfect” union. These competing notions shape the American experience; we constantly reevaluate ourselves in the terms of our success and our eternal imperfection.

Even in the context of American identity and postmodernism broadly, performed failure can be difficult for audiences to digest. It is not uncommon to hear the feedback, “I didn’t get it. What was it about? What did it mean? Was she supposed to do that?” John Burrows, author of *A Choreographer’s Handbook* asserts, “Audiences like failure, so long as they know you’re failing.”¹⁴ In the late 1990s, Leila Sussman’s research on modern and postmodern dance audiences was inhibited by how difficult it is to survey audiences with language that everybody understands. In *Dance Audiences: Answered and Unanswered Questions*, she explains that when it comes to dance, phrases like modern and postmodern are not readily understood.¹⁵ Audiences often do not possess the knowledge or expectation that dance can be anything but beautiful and impressive movement that tells a story. Many audiences anticipate a legible virtuosity, precision, or flamboyant presentation. They often feel unequipped, confused, or even disappointed by postmodern dance performances. The prevalence of commercial dancing leaves audiences expecting acrobatics and a narrative, and anxious when they do not “get” it.

Recent research on kinesthesia and mirror neurons helps us understand the physical experience of audience members while they watch. In *Choreographing Empathy* Susan Leigh
Foster distills the concept of kinesthesia as the system that integrates sensory information about joint and muscle positioning in relationship to itself and the external world. Our mirror neurons fire to match those of moving bodies we see around us. Mirror neurons account for our ability to sense, read, and understand body language in our daily lives. Watching failure in performance evokes visceral followed by emotional response, which can cause a sense of discomfort or empathy that the audience did not expect. According to Foster, the connection of such research to failure in performance is rooted in the premise that, “empathy emphasizes not only emotional but also physical sensation.”16 This definition of empathy helps us understand why seeing imperfection is beautiful, cathartic, and calls for persistence.

Feeling wrong is visceral, held in the body. Schulz writes, “being wrong makes us cringe and slouch down in our seat; it makes our heart sink and our dander rise.”17 Joseph Hallinan, author of Why We Make Mistakes: How We Look without Seeing, Forget Things in Seconds, and Are All Pretty Sure We Are Way above Average, writes that mistake-making is rooted in being “blinded by the effects of habit and hubris,” and that humans are ultimately, “hobbled by a poor understanding of our own limitations.”18 Wrongness, according to these scholars of failure, matches sensations of being ‘blinded’ or ‘hobbled,’ it makes us ‘cringe,’ ‘slouch,’ and ‘sink.’ These physical manifestations of wrongness prove the ever-present ability for bodies to express failure.

Schulz is also interested in the complications of operating within a culture that “simultaneously despises error and insists that it is central to our lives.”19 For example, students are told to learn from mistakes, but also to be measurably successful. Being successful, getting good grades, means making as few mistakes as possible. In a product-oriented environment such as a school or an office the value of failure is often lost. It takes persistence, discipline, and
maturity to separate the delayed gratification of gaining knowledge through mistakes and the quick payoff rooted in accuracy. The presence of failure in dance is connected to this delayed gratification; choreographers are committed to experimentation, taking risks, and are willing to be wrong. This laboratory-like attitude towards choreography uncovers new expressive and communicative possibilities of the body. While I still assert the aesthetic of failure lacks representational performance qualities, the practice of performing and watching failure trains our fearlessness towards failure in our lives by means of catharsis and metaphor.

In Human Error (1990), psychologist James Reason names two types of error, latent and active, based on the location of the causal mistake. Consider two plane crash scenarios. If an aircraft manufacturer made mistakes in the construction of the plane, they are latent errors. However, if the pilot fell asleep and crashed the plane, this would be an active error. By Reason’s standards, the aircraft manufacturer’s error is latent because its effects were not felt until much later than the moment of error. To briefly frame these concepts in performance, compare a ballet dancer falling out of a pirouette that was meant to end in arabesque and a dancer given the impossible task of remaining upright while being repeatedly shoved to the ground. In the first case the error is active, perhaps connected to nervousness or fatigue, but certainly not the choreography. In the case of the second dancer, given an impossible task, the error is latent and resides in the choreography itself. Here, the choreographer instituted a system in which the dancer would inevitably fail over and over again, thus succeeding in performing the aesthetic.

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2 Turning movement with one leg bent with toes perched on the knee of the standing leg
3 One leg extended straight back often parallel to the ground or higher
Mistakes yield information which does not detract from, but rather, increases knowledge. Trial and error expands our understanding of what is possible and therefore, what is real. Dance artist Radmila Olshansky offers, “there’s a beauty in [ballet] because life isn’t like that. But also life isn’t like that so it’s also interesting to see how life is.”21 The idea that dance can reveal something about what life is, versus a fantasized version of it, means that instead of representing with bodies, postmodern dance artists using the aesthetic of failure are presenting bodies.

In On Beauty and Being Just, Elaine Scarry tells us that “the desire for truth” is directly connected to our search for beauty in all things. With, “electric brightness,” finding beauty in failure gives us, “the experience of conviction and the experience, as well, of error.”22 Failure in dance performance trains audiences to find beauty (or sentiment, or catharsis) in new physical imagery. Performers interacting with failure remove the illusion of ethereality to reveal a broader range of physical vocabulary and expose new territory of embodied response.

Rehearsing and performing failure requires a difficult inquiry. Bailes suggests the poetics of failure are connected to the “unbearableness of finality.” She continues, “What must one do in order to live with or prepare for endings? How can the individual inhabit this condition well without succumbing to despair?”23 Performing failure turns the dancer into an everyday hero. Gone are the days of dancing princes and princesses. Dance writer Philippe Noisette suggests, “Fairy tales have gone sour.”24 Even so, there can still be a kind of magic in imperfect performance. Dancer Paul Matteson of Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance and David Dorfman Dance is delighted when he sees performers “come off [balance] but then heroically make it work.” He concludes that such a valiant moment in dance, “just makes you fall in love.”25 The aesthetic of failure celebrates the inevitability of error and the stunning perseverance of the human spirit.
Chapter 1

The Foundation of Failure: The Judson Dance Theater

Images of the 1960s in the United States remain iconic. Political noise and civil unrest inspired legislative, social, and artistic revolutions. Dance was no exception. In 1960, a group of artists gathered in New York City’s Greenwich Village for a series of composition workshops led by Robert Dunn that would soon revolutionize what counts as dance. The group called themselves the Judson Dance Theater, a reference to their primary rehearsal and performance space, the Judson Church. New movement vocabularies exploded from the their commitment to rethinking choreographic process, what performance can look like, and who gets to dance. The research conducted by Robert Dunn and his participants Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Judith Dunn, and the rest of the Judson group was predicated on the expectation that dancers deconstruct assumptions of dance. The Judson artists worked radically against standing conventions of performance to create a wider and more elastic range of movement vocabulary and rehearsal processes. The Judson Dance Theater put high value accessing mundane movement and un-training dancers through task-oriented choreography and improvisation. Modified performative values and experimental spirit are at the root of performed failure in American contemporary dance.
Greenwich Village in the early sixties was a Petri dish of artistic investigation that marked the beginning or continuation of the postmodern era for many forms. In theater, the avant-garde community turned to spontaneous performances, known as *Happenings*. Pop Art, quickly rose to an influential stature in the artistic community. Iconic Pop Artist Andy Warhol regularly hosted and collaborated with Judson performers. The renewed commitment to reimagining structure and process allowed multi-disciplinary artists to collaborate and combine genres. Without the blending of art forms the Judson Dance Theater would not exist. According to Sylvia Harrison in *Pop Art and the Origins of Post-modernism*, postmodern art “renounces the ‘intellectual and emotional’” and “replac[es] it, presumably, by a craftsman’s satisfaction ‘in doing.’” Postmodern artists were not interested in burdening themselves with expressing truth with their finished products; they became more concerned with questioning the boundaries of their form *through* the process of creating.

*Becoming Postmodern*

The beginning of postmodern dance was defined by the departure from strict techniques, codified movement, and hierarchical organization common in ballet and early modern dance companies. In the first half of the twentieth century, modern dance choreographers focused on creating highly metaphorical and often narrative pieces. Modern dance artist Martha Graham exemplified this in choreographed retellings of Greek tragedies. Each was an attempted depiction of universal human nature. Modern dance artists like Graham, Jose Limon, and Alvin Ailey were constantly working to create “the great work, the masterpiece” According to postmodern theorists Best and Kellner modern art seemed “stale, boring, pretentious, and elitist.” They write:
“Elitism became the corresponding attitude of high modernism and the modernist artist, whose genius and purity of vision was incomprehensible to the layperson. Leading modernists sought to form their own private language, their own unique vision and style that expressed their singular self.”

What modern dance choreographers had in common was their desire to be original and groundbreaking, in the bounds of highly stylized, technical, and virtuosic movement.

In a 1996 interview, Judson artist Steve Paxton admits he was overwhelmed by the heavy content of Martha Graham and Jose Limon and, “didn’t know how to utter in movement deep emotional events that seemed to be tantalizing [the] work.” He was put off by this type of dance psychology and forced universality of performance. When Paxton arrived in New York City, he says modern dancers “weren’t interesting athletes,” but rather, they “wanted to express things.” Paxton believes that religion and conservative society enforced a series of taboos on the body. He blames these taboos for limiting exploration of humans’ physical capabilities. He believes that, “the culture doesn’t understand the body.” Thus, Paxton approached Dunn’s workshop as an “investigation of body” and actively focused on “not producing art” (emphasis added). Their research focused on “deep internal, self interrogation” and “revelation.” At the time, dance to meet the needs of the dancer was revolutionary.

The egalitarian and Zen philosophies that would soon infiltrate the American dance scene were in opposition to the structural hierarchy of modern dance companies. Trisha Brown explained the atmosphere of the modern dance world as one where, “you’re not awarded for imagination, you’re excused.” Best and Kellner explain that postmodern artists, “renounce, implode, deconstruct, subvert, and parody conventionally defined boundaries such as those
between high and low art, reality and unreality, artist and spectator, and among the various artistic media themselves. The Judson era artists incited a search for a new kind of dancing identity that was not concerned with creating spectacle but instead in exploring territories of daily life and athletics that were previously excluded from concert dance.

**John Cage and Merce Cunningham**

The legendary partnership of composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham introduced elements of chance that were highly influential in both fields. Cage was interested in live choice making. He created musical scores that omitted certain aspects such as the, “ordering of sequence, pitch variation, or cues,” to force the musicians to make new decisions each time they performed. Cunningham’s choreography obliterated narrative by randomizing the sequence of choreographic events. Using chance in the process added spontaneity and risk-taking to rehearsal. Cunningham’s work stripped dancers’ emotion and focused on the action of the body. However, Cunningham still valued polished technique and singular aesthetic voice. Both Cunningham and Cage had a massive hand in the birth of Judson Dance Theater.

Composer Robert Dunn, Judson’s initial leader and teacher, was one of Cage’s students. Although the Judson the artists were trained in a variety of disciplines, those trained in dance gained most of their professional experience performing for Cunningham. Dunn began teaching his influential workshop in the fall of 1960. Turning Dunn’s avant-garde music compositions into usable choreographic methods was an arduous translation process that took years. He felt driven by an obligation to liberate his students from the technical constraints of modern artists.
like Louis Horst and Doris Humphrey who valued performative illusions and feigned perfection. Horst, Martha Graham’s musical director, believed that as a dancer, “You must do the impossible. A dancer is an aesthetic acrobat—must be…A quarter of an inch makes a difference—that sort of exactitude makes it professional. Nothing casual should happen on stage anyway.” Dunn found these expectations suffocating. Though he rejected these standards of perfection, he was not entirely sure of how to proceed. The collective that would eventually become The Judson Dance Theater rejected attitudes like Horst’s, but were not rash in developing their new definition of dance.

Choreographer and Improvisation teacher Judith Dunn, Robert Dunn’s wife at the time, explained that he “posed questions arising out of the most basic elements—structure, method, material.” Furthermore, “Evaluation in terms of ‘good or bad,’ ‘acceptable-rejected,’ were eliminated from discussion and analysis replaced them.” Dunn knew that he was teaching an evolving art form. He required that each dancer be his own artist and contribute to a dynamic bricolage. Dunn’s workshop, the centerpiece of the Judson dancers’ investigations, was intentionally never institutionalized, but rather remained permeable. The revolving door of artists kept the ever changing, always-unfinished spirit of the work alive. In The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training, published in 2008, Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettl-Fiol affirm Judson’s lasting impact by referring to postmodern dance over the last half-century as “post-Judson.”

**Something to Fail: Out of Narrative, Into Task, Improvisation, and Falling**

Many Judson choreographers were interested in the way bodies instinctually perform both the mundane and the extreme. The techniques used to perform Judson work often had more
to do with external accomplishment—say putting on socks in Paxton’s *Flat* (1964)\(^{46}\)—than with internal accomplishment of position—such as an arabesque or pirouette. Task dances contained an internal drama in the movement that was neither precious nor artful.\(^{47}\) When provided with a task or a job—put on clothes, climb a ladder, catch a body—movement is generated based on necessity, rather than dramatically executing particular positions in a singular way. The goal of task dancing is to access the body’s ability to act with agility and effort, but not necessarily like a dancer. Both improvisation and task-dance were major tools used by the Judson choreographers to find this newly desired authenticity. During Dunn’s workshop the group would construct assignments. For example, dancers would make a dance about “nothing special” or connect imaginary dots on the floor.\(^{48}\) These assignments or games acted as the structure for the dancers’ varied performative experimentation. Generating dances without particular occasion was in complete opposition to the grandness that plagued modern dance. Task dancing effectively removed pretense and existed simply as physical action.

While Robert Dunn disapproved of Improvisation as an answer to a compositional assignment, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Judith Dunn and other Judson dancers developed training and performance methods concurrently with Anna Halprin and other west coast dancers.\(^{49}\) Rainer felt strongly about the committed choice-making necessary for Improvisation, and its relationship to failure. According to Aiken, Rainer believes, “in that moment of wholly committing to something you may realize that the world has completely changed and you are completely hanging out to dry…But you’re already in it so its to late to change.” This is the moment when “regret rears its head.” Ultimately Improvisation artists can never “get rid of regret, though you have to develop a relationship to it.”\(^{50}\) Rainer’s assertion that improvisers must develop a relationship to regret further confirms the necessity of full presence.
in performance. Of course, we all develop a relationship to regret in our lives. However, the investigation for Rainer is figuring out how to move past regret and continue reinvesting in the performance.

Paxton was interested in “something basic and psychological in people while they’re in a situation, which they’re not controlling. While they’re being surprised, how they cope.” Putting reality on stage forced dancers to find a new performative focus. Paxton was interested in deep attention to “their muscles and their senses” and using that focus as the theatrical event. Focusing on the action of the body affords an audience the phenomenon of watching live human choice. Judson’s celebration of liveness represents a renewed interest in the skills of the nervous system.

The Judson Dance Theater focused on process and investigation, not results. Failure was allowed. Bales and Nettl-Fiol argue that the relaxed torso in Judson performance represents a form of falling, “a metaphorical falling away from old ideas, limitations, and approaches, and may also suggest vulnerability, humility, or passive resistance.” Postmodern dance instructors often teach floorwork that requires spreading weight into the floor and allowing the body to fall. When dancers learn to settle weight into the floor, they obtain a stronger foundation and clear point of departure. The importance of feeling attached and being unafraid of the floor is paramount to taking risks with weight. Spreading weight into the floor means dancers invite gravity into the work, and learn to dance without the fear of falling. By welcoming the effects of gravity, dancers accept failure.

Judson dancers stripped away the technique their bodies knew, in order to explore the unknown. In addition to pedestrian movement like walking, running, sitting, and lying down,
many Judson choreographers such as Rainer and Paxton became fascinated by the role of “the unguarded body” in sports. They took inspiration from “hurled,” “splatting,” movements and “raw wind-ups and follow throughs.” In a piece choreographed by Judson dancer Deborah Hay, *Would They or Wouldn’t They?*, the four dancers performed a series of tasks within a loose structure. Of the four dancers, the two women were trained and the men were untrained. To highlight this contrast, “[a] few times a man caught a woman as she dropped, only for both of them to collapse in an untidy heap on the ground.” The lifts “parodied moments of partnering in ballet and in Cunningham’s work.” The untrained men were “endearingly clumsy” and caught the women in a “dysfunctional, comic way,” as if it were a “clumsy accident.” Ultimately the performers were seen as “real people engaged in real actions.” Task-dance, improvisation, and falling were meant to free dancing bodies from training but not from artistic integrity.

*Judson Values: Redefining What’s Allowed*

In a sense, the Judson Dance Theater was born from failure. After being rejected from various studios and performance opportunities in New York City, the Judson dancers were forced to find their own arena to display the work. Dunn’s workshop was seen as, “a genuine alternative to current dance world,” that valued inclusivity. Many Judson dancers quickly became focused on a performing body more closely linked to the postures of daily life. Undecorated movement is a pillar of the Judson tradition. The choreographers were focused on understanding the simple and uncelebrated patterns, postures, and vocabulary that already existed in the moving body. In keeping to their standard of authenticity, dancers would never “suppress any nose wipes or hitchings-up of pants.” No longer focused on the execution of a
single technique, their work connected the intention of the mind and body for performance in real time.

Paxton refers to the group as a “loose amalgam,” with “people coming and going,” and making “good and bad work.” The “small and participatory” nature of the Judson Group from its genesis, so valued by its artists, allowed for inevitable collaboration among them. Without such respect for each others’ artistic endeavors, their differing and developing values could have torn them apart. The inherent conflict in performative belief systems among the dancers fueled their conviction. Steve Paxton always wanted to be working with a group of artists to constantly remind him of the blossoming range and possibilities of the form.

Paxton saw the work as “always problematic, always new.” According to Paxton, Cage’s legacy lies in the question: What happens if you remove human taste from the process? Paxton asks, “when the mainstream work is so heavily encrusted with a predilection toward choice and taste making…one just can’t help but be curious, what would happen if this basis for the work were taken away? What would remain of dance itself? What would still occur?” Paxton and the rest of the choreographers at the Judson Church used these inquiries to reduce dance to its fundamental qualities.

Rainer was similarly interested in the deconstruction of movement. She believed that any movement could be interesting, even convalescing. Combating the modernist focus on artistic expression of beauty, Rainer saw ugliness as avant-garde and failure as captivating. In a 2001 interview with Sally Banes, Rainer told a story of a non-dancer performing an entire ballet piece live with a projected video of a professional, male ballet dancer performing the same material:
“It’s a failure but it’s fascinating because she is so involved.” By 1965, Yvonne Rainer solidified her performance inquiries in her famous *No Manifesto*:

NO to spectacle.  
No to virtuosity.  
No to transformations and magic and make-believe.  
No to the glamour and transcendency of the star image.  
No to the heroic.  
No to the anti-heroic.  
No to trash imagery.  
No to involvement of performer or spectator,  
No to style.  
No to camp.  
No to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer.  
No to eccentricity.  
No to moving or being moved.\(^67\)

This aggressive rejection of traditional performance values illuminates Rainer’s simple yet rebellious artistic intentions. In 1968, Jill Johnston wrote:

The new choreographers are outrageously invalidating the very nature of authority. The thinking behind the work goes beyond democracy into anarchy. No member outstanding. No body necessarily more beautiful than any other body. No movement necessarily more important or more beautiful than any other movement.\(^68\)

The Judson-era was certainly one of rejection, reversal, and reevaluation of the tenets of dance. While this work seems somewhat negative, again, the goal was inclusion: the inclusion of all movement as dance, the inclusion of all bodies as dancers.

Judson dancers were not satisfied with making dance look different, they also wanted audiences to look at dance differently. The Judson artists did not depend on audience acclaim. Instead, the audience was brought in simply to watch the results of their investigations. Judson
artists often performed in the round or within a horseshoe as opposed to a “proper stage” or proscenium. For Trisha Brown’s 1970 piece *Floor of the Forest*, the audience filtered around a raised rectangular structure gridded with rope. Viewers had to stretch to see above the structure, or bend to look below it as dancers traversed the grid and put on giant clothes hanging from the ropes. Judson artists explored new angles for observation but they also welcomed smaller audiences and smaller performance spaces. And with their physically riskier choreography, performers were unable to hide any fumbles, stumbles, or otherwise “flawed” performance moments by traditional standards.

Exploding conceptions of what movement counts as dance and how audiences see dance has added an intangible humanity to dance performances in the Judson lineage. In ballet performance, perfectly executed movement demonstrating technique and prowess is still the norm. The influence of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and the Judson dancers inspired postmodern dancers to perform on stage as complex and thinking people, not just refined parts. In the foreword of *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s*, Mikhail Baryshnikov describes his response to Judson’s work as: “Maybe I don’t actually like that, but it’s about me.” Indeed, the internal investigation and focus of Judson dancers was a process of “digging into themselves and into reality.” The aesthetic of post-modern dance today has developed beyond that of the Judson Dance Theater. Though born from their practices, the performance of failure in today’s postmodern dance contains its own aesthetic, voice, and purpose. Post-Judson choreographers maintain the commitment to rigorous exploration and authenticity that leads to the *aesthetic of failure*. 
Chapter 2

Today’s Dance Artists: Failure as Legible Humanity

The Judson Dance Theater kicked down the doors of limitation and a high bar for innovative dance making. Today’s dance artists working in that lineage—hereafter referred to as postmodern, contemporary, or post-Judson—are creating choreography that while cohesive, values disruption of the conventions that still bind traditional and commercial forms of American dance. The proscenium arch, formal curtain calls, narrative, and a high level of linear polish are no longer performance necessities in postmodern work. Instead, artists are making dance that values active problem solving—the process of figuring out—and exposes it. The continuous search for new movement and new principles of dance making requires risk, trial and error, success, and failure. I use artist interviews in conjunction with performance theory texts to define the logic behind the aesthetic of failure and expose pertinent dance-making methodology. To understand the use of the aesthetic of failure, it is also vital to track shifts in dancer training and professional climate. Rigorous commitment to exploration means accepting the imperfection inherent to the pursuit. Today’s choreographers’ focus on the process of dance making, fosters a rehearsal environment conducive to honest and unguarded dancing bodies.

Sara Jane Bailes writes that failure “can be conceived of abstractly or understood as a concrete example of a physical or material effect, usually indicative of one that falls short of an
aim, intention, or specific criteria,” but, ultimately, she suggests that defining failure should not be attempted, that the definition should be fluid. However, I argue that the aesthetic of failure presents itself in postmodern dance in the following three categories: allowance, demand, and placement.

The allowance of failure refers to a choreographer’s value system privileging real effort over consistent execution—an attitude especially prevalent in improvisational performance. Making spontaneous decisions is a pillar of the practice and, of course, not every choice is the right one. Early in Chris Aiken’s career, he was advised to repeat moments of failure over and over again to make them seem purposeful. However, through the continuation of his Improvisation career he has come to believe that: “making a spectacle out of failure feels like a missed opportunity to something about the poetics of failure.” According to Aiken, performers should not hide from or try to cover up mistakes, but rather mistakes should be thought of as an inevitable part of spontaneous choreography. Even “wrong” choices are actually right ones because they are allowed to happen. Heidi Henderson, choreographer/artistic director of elephant JANE dance, says that her most difficult movement has a “70% success rate.” By not making the movement easier to ensure correct execution, she is accepting that she and her dancers will sometimes fail. In Henderson’s choreography, failure is allowed. Messiness is not the goal, but sometimes reveals itself as the residue effort.

There is a fine line between difficult tasks in Henderson’s choreography that allow imperfection, and tasks that are truly impossible—that demand failure. Choreographers that demand failure often ask dancers to perform movement material with many layers of challenges to ensure the dancer’s execution is never effortless. A dancer might be asked to perform a movement phrase but only travel in one direction, to imagine the ceiling is only four feet high, or
any number of additional challenges. A choreographer might also alter the movement’s speed, timing, musicality, syncopation, or breath pattern. The complexity of detail and intention in the choreography becomes a deliberate obstacle course, meant to create a physical experience. For example, Choreographer and teacher David Dorfman’s evening length piece, *Underground*, involves stamina-oriented structures in which the dancers execute huge, sweeping movement traveling back and forth from one side of the stage to the other in a highly populated space. Performing the section demands physical endurance and causes actual and visible exhaustion. Dancers performing this choreography end up hurling, splaying, or altering the movement. The choreography of this section of *Underground*, categorized by the attempt to complete a fraction of the intended motion, exemplifies the *demand* of failure.

Angie Hauser says that in her work with Bebe Miller, “If I’m not colliding with Darrell Jones and dealing with things I’ve never dealt with before, then I don’t feel as though I’m doing the choreography.” In instances that *demand* failure, like the *allowance* of failure, authentic effort is the primary goal. However, the distinction is: in dancing that demands failure, the effort must be so great and the tasks so hard that success is impossible. Choreographer Sara Hook’s idea of a performative gauntlet helps define the *demand* for failure. When dancers become able to perform her work flawlessly, she raises the stakes. She makes the tasks harder to reinstate the *aesthetic of failure*. The *demand* of failure is categorized by choreography in which the stakes are constantly raised to force exhaustion and urgency.

The *placement* of failure refers to the insertion of movement vocabulary or tone that appears awkward, pained, silly, non-dance, or mistaken. A dancer might be asked to deliver a goofy smile, walk with her knees turned in, or trip over an invisible rock. Moments of placed failure may derive from task-oriented or improvised dancing but are then refined to achieve a
specific aesthetic effect. In *A Director Prepares*, Anne Bogart describes the actor’s experience with repeating once-unplanned material: “[w]hen an actor achieves a spontaneous, intuitive, or passionate moment in rehearsal, the director utters the fateful words ‘keep it’… The actor must now find a new, deeper spontaneity within this set form” (Bogart, 45). This same moment exists in a choreographic process when flawed material becomes ‘set.’ Performers must surprise themselves, find freshness in each performance, and train their awareness to engage with repetitive and specific vocabulary. Unlike the *allowance* and *demand* for failure, which require internal effort and live decision making, the *placement* of failure denotes a kind of external polish and a high level of performative specificity to make the movement appear mistaken.

The *placement* of failure also includes what I am terming *tonal imperfection*. This refers to general awkwardness, oddity, or as Dorfman suggests, “might even look pained, or what we might think of as ugly, or not beautiful, or extremely asymmetrical.” Henderson illuminates the slippery nature of defining what counts as imperfect. Though it often comes up in reviews of her work, Henderson explains, “I still deny the word awkward… if that’s awkward then what’s the definition of grace? So, to me grace is about paying deep attention, and specificity, and perfecting something… awkwardness to me implies not doing something well.” In this light, *tonal imperfection* will be defined as a performance quality outside of ballet’s clean-lined and precise aesthetic, but also as subjective, decided by the viewer. I do not mean to shove everything that is not ballet into the category of failure. However, the idea of *tonal imperfection* helps to understand why certain movement, which may not read as explicit failure, is still relevant to the *aesthetic of failure*.

Today’s choreographers are curators. They arrange and highlight the artistry of their collaborators. Choreographers including Dorfman, Henderson, Hook, and Paul Matteson value
the exposure of effort, flaw, imperfection, mistakes, exhaustion, sloppiness, and messiness. Many of them echoed the importance of performativity, specificity, generosity, honesty, and effort necessary to produce what Aiken calls “a certain heroism.” In reference to mistakes in performance, Hauser believes, “there’s nothing like failure to make you feel alive.” Failure in performance creates heightened sensation of liveness and draws a visceral investment by performers and audience alike.

Layers, Levels, and Limits of Choreography

Henderson justifies the “messiness” in her work with: “I think it’s because it’s people, right?” This delightful response makes presence of the aesthetic of failure in dance seem obvious. Paul Matteson is adamant about the use of mistakes and failure in performance:

I love seeing struggle, real struggle. I love the poignancy of over effort… That feels personal to me. That tendency cracks me up in a way. There’s something I find light about it. Like when you think you’re doing it to an extreme but actually it defeats itself, there’s some universal human struggle or human tendency. And then, in that, you sort of honor the mistake and kind of focus on it to see it rather than hide it. In some way I think that can get you passed a way of living or a way of understanding that what you’re doing is about achievement…So there’s not this idea of dance as this elite or ideal person, it’s a real person.

There is a glaring assumption that seeing a ‘real person’ perform is valuable. The artistic principle held by Dorfman, Henderson, Matteson, Hook, Barnes, and Aiken—that expressing the individuality and humanity of dancers enhances the performance experience—is not universal to
all dance forms. Aiken, Dorfman, Henderson, Hauser, and Hook, among others, are making work
that celebrates diverse action of bodies and does not exclude that which traditional dance and
modern society have deemed unfit for the stage. For example, Aiken is compelled by “art that
allow[s] the frailty of the human condition to be observed and examined.” The value of the
aesthetic of failure is that artists test the edges of embodied life and invite viewers to do the
same.

Failure is useful. Bailes offers, “strategies of failure in the realm of performance can be
understood as generative, prolific even; failure produces.” There are many strategies for
inciting challenge, generating movement, and encountering risk, the goal being tapping into the
productive value of failure and exploiting it. Many choreographers including Dorfman,
Matteson, and Henderson encourage their dancers to explore, make bold decisions, and take
risks. Sometimes the choices get cut, but other times they provide insight that the choreographer
would otherwise not possess.

Dorfman, like many of today’s choreographers, describes his rehearsal process as
participatory and contributory. He often begins a rehearsal process with a few ideas and
phrases but then waits for surprises, mistakes, and chance connections that catch his eye. He uses
positive reinforcement whenever possible to create an environment in which dancers feel
comfortable taking risks. Similarly, Paul Matteson is interested in a rehearsal environment
“where the dancers feel permission to break the rules, or to follow impulses, make choices within
the assignment, so that somehow even [when] of performing there’s adaptability. There’s a now
time and something that’s not so precisely set that there’s choice, timing choice, focus choice, so
that there’s play.” Matteson and Dorfman’s affinity for play and positive feedback are vital in
the process of welcoming new material, seeing all movement as performance worthy, and utilizing the energy of the live moment.

Henderson sees the work of today’s choreographers as refining the expression of their individual choreographic voice. Best and Kellner articulate that, “The [postmodern] artist is no longer the originary and unique self who produces the new in an authentic vision but, rather, a bricoleur who just rearranges the debris of the cultural past.” Today’s individuality has to do with being a collaborator and providing a distinct perspective born from varied experiences. In early modern dance, each dancer was not expected to express his own individuality, but rather echo that of the choreographer. The dissolution of hierarchy in postmodern art yielded a shift that supports the individual voice of each dancer. Heightened respect for the individual mover fosters a more equitable rehearsal environment in which choreographers have access to the tendencies—and even the quirks—of the dancers they employ.

The New Dancer Training: Somatic Practices and Individuality

Taking risks is unnerving. Phrases like ‘leaving your comfort zone’ and ‘taking a leap of faith,’ reveal the metaphorical—and in many cases physical—movement required of taking risk. We fittingly refer to particularly risky decision making as “gutsy.” Hook reminds herself and her dancers regularly to work against the performative instinct to try to perfect the execution of each movement, to not “escape the difficulty.” To Matteson, “performance [should] be a little bit of a risky endeavor.” Attempting the impossible or repeating a mistake requires a training regime that allows the body to surprise itself, to be shocked, to stumble, or to fall safely and efficiently. On the role of dance training, Aiken explains, “I really appreciate skill and detail and having
command of your body but only so far as it allows you to deal with the unknown. " Today’s postmodern dancers are trained to redirect and spread their weight into the floor and to negotiate real, physical risks. It is not the same “pedestrian” skill set that the Judson artists put on the stage.

Dance artist and MFA candidate Kris Pourzal believes dealing with the unknown in performance is about, “accepting life instead of expecting things from life.” Pourzal is arguing that the quicker we can absorb information in the moment the more present and able we become. Being ready for anything, and allowing a performance to really happen anew each time is paramount to authentic performative failure. These skills can never be fully mastered. Teaching one’s self to recommit and reengage is useful in every aspect of life. Pourzal’s point, ultimately, is that we must be aware of what is actually happening around us—not what should or could be—as a method for finding presence in performance and life.

Dancers’ somatic cross training allows for deeper and more specific textural articulation in performance. In an interview with Nettl-Fiol, Martha Myers explains that somatic practice, “explores beneath the level of gross muscle action, to deal with subtleties of individual movement, deepening awareness—the critical ability to sense and respond to micro-movement of the soma.” The goal, according to Myers is to “‘unravel’… old habitual neuromuscular patterns, and replace them with new more efficient ones.” Just like attempting impossible tasks, somatic practices allow dancers to engage in the eternal process of internal investigation.

The inclusion of somatic training works under instinctual and developmental movement patterns and gives bodies access to biomechanical efficiency. However, Aiken points out that, “To think of it simply in functional terms is a denial of who we are as human beings… It isn’t
about proper and efficient use: it’s about expressive and poetic use in my mind.” Somatic training gives us access to efficiency but also reintegrates the mind and body to fail smarter, to allow for quick and specific decision making in rehearsal and performance. The new dancer training cleanses the body of patterning allowing real life and real time emotion to infiltrate the moving and performing self.

Somatic training does not cause failure, but it gives dancers access to it. In *Thinking Through the Body, Educating for the Humanities: A Plea for Somaesthetics*, Richard Shusterman writes, “true to its essential ambiguity, the body also clearly symbolizes our unfreedom: the bodily constraints on our actions; the corporeal bulk, needs, and failures that weigh us down and limit our performance; the relentless degeneration of aging and death.” Somatic training strengthens dancers’ attentiveness to limitation and awareness of embodied embarrassment, awkwardness, and surprise in their daily lives. Heightened awareness allows them to produce those sensations while dancing.

Many dancers also cite the important role of their training in martial arts, volleyball, swimming, gymnastics, or soccer as valued aspects of their embodied selves. Each person’s physical history informs their body’s knowledge. According to Veronica Dittman in *A New York Dancer*, each dancer trains to develop his or her, “best self, wholly unique.” Today’s dancers use somatic training practices including yoga, pilates, and Alexander technique to unlock the deeply engrained neuromuscular patterning and collect mechanical information about their individual, anatomical physics.

Individuality comes at a price. Despite shifts in training to accommodate specific choreographers or collaborating dancers, Dittman writes,
I still doubt we can achieve the type of bone-deep unison that comes naturally to a company of dancers who share both a uniformity of training and a long, consistent history together. Much of the group work created in the situations described here celebrates (albeit sometimes secondarily) the individuality of the members of the group, a choreographic characteristic that springs naturally from the process…

…That magical unison is a powerful thing, and not to have it as a tool at our disposal is a loss, but I’m not prepared to say that the current state of the group as a collection of individuals represents a degeneration or downturn.95

The loss of unison Dittman articulates can be read as yet another type of failure. If audiences expect sharp unison, postmodern dancers will always fail to meet their expectations.

In his choreography, Dorfman is interested in “doing away with weightlessness” to “thwart ease.”96 The physical diversity of his dancers, like many postmodern companies, is responsible for unison dancing to appear less synchronized than the Alvin Ailey or Martha Graham companies. While no dancer is doing anything wrong, the variations within their choices when they are on stage as a company, as Dorfman himself suggests, could be read as imperfection.97 However, the differences in execution of movement highlight the individuality and stunning full-bodied commitment of each dancer. Viewers looking for sameness see difference as a mistake, but others discern the similarities of effort and intention, read individuality, and consider it powerful.

Sara Jane Bailes argues that, “engaging with failure indexes the attempt to begin to acknowledge both our individual and social lack of mastery instead of constantly asserting the illusion of power through authority.”98 The disruption of authority’s illusion is ever present in the
performance of failure. Authority’s relationship to performance is connected to the premise that a perfect performance impresses the viewer and proves technical prowess. Performing more traditional movement material requires years of training in at least one discipline to infuse patterns of biomechanics, and a particular way of moving the body, that are not specific to the individual. In today’s field of postmodern dance, “performers craft their training from what suits them.” They become authority on the development of their own physical skill sets.  

**Economic Realities and Responsible Failure**

Though New York City still reigns as the hub of post-Judson dance, the economic conditions are not what they were in the early 1960s. Most dancers cannot live cheaply enough to dance exclusively; in almost all cases they must obtain a second or third job. Dittman explains, “The ceiling on success in [post]modern dance is so low now that it’s almost impossible for ‘emerging’ choreographers to make the next step toward paid work for their dancers.” Dittman refers to many dancers as having “slash” careers, for example, dancer/bartender/yoga instructor. The pressures of a dancer’s life, while crippling at times, may ultimately be freeing. The financial challenge of dancing in New York City “gives rise to much more interesting questions” about how the intelligent dancing body can make a living.

Dancers today are working for decades longer than dancers of the early twenty-first century. The track for the many artists who continue in the field earn MFAs and work in higher education. As a result, small liberal arts colleges and a few large universities house a large portion of choreographic exploration. According to Dittman, small group collectives and college dance environments create a dance community, “used to collaborative, interactive choreographic
processes.” Considering the longer dancing careers and highly collaborative environments rooted in collegiate values it makes sense that risk, experimentation, and failure are staple characteristics of the form.

Postmodern dance making is more comparable to experimentation in a laboratory than the creation of pop-culture sensations. Fitting into their Judson lineage, many choreographers inherited a value of process. During my interviews, artists who flawlessly articulated their methods and principles of making were hesitant when answering questions about audience. There are a lot of factors at play here. Many choreographers seem to have accepted the general unpopularity of their work in mainstream art culture. Expectations of fame and fortune are, aptly, low. Today’s choreographers present research, not necessarily entertainment.

The human body is not perfect and therefore, neither is its movement. Nevertheless in Paul Matteson’s experience, “a lot of audiences still don’t want to see effort or see struggle. They still have that idea of dance as they want to see beauty and that you’re defying gravity.” The dance community accepts that certain bodies trained in certain ways can seem to defy gravity, however, gravity’s real impact is now equally—if not more—valued. The Judson era prompted the turn towards highlighting the body’s susceptibility to physics. Choreographers are less inclined to want audiences to think work is “good” or “impressive” but do expect active engagement with and also honest distraction from the work, allowing responses that emerge to simply be.

Today’s choreographers do not create choreography with translatable meaning, and, therefore, they must frame their thinking about the audience carefully. Matteson believes that thinking too much of the audience stunts the growth of the work. He explains, “when I’m making
a piece I’m really thinking about my interest in compositional integrity, and really bringing ideas alive. I get worried when we talk about audience. I want to make a clear composition and a clear piece that has texture and range and for me an interesting piece.”  While narrative is often absent, Philip Noisette author of Talk about Contemporary Dance insists, “contemporary dance is not synonymous with chaos.” The idea of responsibility is important, Matteson and Barnes both believe in the ability of performative failure and mistakes to win over the audiences and make them root for the performers on stage. Choreographers can use failure as visible punctuation and contrast to steer the viewer without pretense. The placement and pacing of such moments, however, cannot be haphazard.

Matteson believes that, “there’s a way that you have to take responsibility for these mistakes. As a performer and a choreographer, if you start putting in mistakes, you can do it in a lazy way or a way [that] really shap[es] your piece.” He uses the example of a Cunningham solo in which a female dancer performed a computer-generated series of movement only possible if danced by a superhuman. The performer’s undying effort won over “this huge audience of mostly non-dancers” who “just rose up in applause.” Framing the essential is a prevalent reason for using the aesthetic of failure in postmodern work. Many choreographers including Matteson, Dorfman, and Kendra Portier, among others, use repetition and recontextualization of specific movement to highlight the virtues of effortful vocabulary, giving the audience many chances to see what the dancers are “doing” or to examine their physical intention. Seeing that type of movement again and again, both within work and overtime, is indeed helping audiences feel that they can adequately decipher the work.

All this begs the question, what does it take to teach audiences to see the work the way they should? Choreographers have been using program notes, post-show question and answer
sessions, Artist Statements, websites, social media, and even text within the performance to help audiences understand what is happening on stage. Henderson believes it is necessary to see lots of work to find pieces that let the individual “in” to the rest of the field. There are methods to watching work with this kind of aesthetic that shed the psyche’s demand to find specific and literal meaning in each moment.

The fear surrounding failure is ever present in an artist’s life, and for that matter, everyone else’s. Its incorporation into the artistic work is inevitable. Indeed, according to Sara Jane Bailes “the artist’s life [is] one that is often defined by or associated with commercial, professional, and personal failure.” She also discusses, “The discourse of failure as reflected in western art and literature seems to counter the very ideas of progress and victory that simultaneously dominate historical narratives… Failure challenges the cultural dominance of instrumental rationality and the fictions of continuity that bind the way we imagine and manufacture the world.” Perhaps, unlike Henderson’s assertion that dance has nothing left to reject, it is instead cultural constructs of success that choreographers are actively fighting against. Today’s dance artists use the placement, demand, and allowance of failure as a method for testing the edges of physical limitations. Dancers are breaking the boundaries of beauty and perfection by highlighting the poignancy, humor, and freshness of physical honesty.
Chapter 3

Watching Failure: The American Dance Audience

To situate the aesthetic of failure in a larger domain of American culture, audience’s experience must be examined. Figuring out what audience thinks is difficult, because of course, “the” audience is not a single unit. Unpacking viewer experience means thinking about individual history, education, taste, and memory. Each audience member arrives with his own cultural past and exposure to dance, both major factors in the quality of the viewing. Gathering data on postmodern dance audiences has been particularly challenging for dance scholars. In Vanishing: Dance Audiences in the Postmodern Age, Jan Van Dyke explains that while postmodern dance attendance is declining, the number of postmodern dancers is rising. If the aesthetic of failure is a defining quality of postmodern dance, and audience attendance is down, how if at all, are the two connected? What is performed failure doing? How is it read? To what effect?

Many cultural forces including the prevalence of technology, religion, and the media impact the way we look at human bodies. Our neuromuscular makeup and understanding of the body is altered by these constructs. As a part of this research, I conducted an audience survey during the Colby College Dance Department’s Fall Concert Project 49. Audience responses confirmed my suspicion that this viewership would be uncertain about their responsibility to
decipher meaning. One audience member remarked, “I think my mind tries to find ‘meaning’ by assigning pattern to randomness, or to repetition.” Her recognition of this phenomenon is impressive, and the phenomenon itself is human.

In classical theater, a character’s failure is a revered plot point. Peripeteia, the ancient Greek theatrical term for “a sudden reversal,” literally means “turning around,” marking the “moment when a character discovers for himself for his own wrongness.” In *The Art of Being Wrong*, Henry Shukman uses the story of *Oedipus Rex* to highlight the popular presence of peripeteia in theatrical literature. Even though viewers know the story well, the moment when Oedipus uncovers his disturbing past is the highlight of the performance.

Fast forward to contemporary American entertainment, and viewers still love seeing failure in reality TV and popular comedy. It would seem then, that dance would be able to harness such a tendency. Perhaps in part due to commercialized dance, spectacle-based entertainment, and the residue of modernist aesthetic, today’s dance audiences are sometimes slow to appreciate the contrast, empathy, and humor conjured by performed failure. Although dance makers have worked in the Judson lineage for over fifty years, in general, audiences have yet to catch up.

Dance writer Leila Sussman argues the main problem with studying modern and postmodern dance audiences is the inability to survey audiences with language that is universally understood. In 1989, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) tried to calculate the size of modern dance audiences. The surveys were discarded, though, because too many interviewees took modern dance to mean musical-comedy dance. The phrase “modern dance” is not as clear
a category as ballet or tap dance, leaving those who wish to study audiences with a near impossible task.

In *Kinesthesia, Empathy, and Related Pleasures: An Inquiry into Audience Experiences of Watching Dance*, Matthew Reason and Dee Reynolds points to dance scholars’ recent interest in the mirror neuron system—the physiological response to witnessing movement. This research provides tangible ways to understand the process of watching moving bodies. Mirror neurons are the system of “circuits in the brain that are activated when both performing an action and when observing actions of others.” Reason and Reynolds explain that as a result of the mirror neuron system, audiences experience “inner mimicry,” which gives “spectators the sense that they were actively participating in the dance and directly experiencing both its movements and their associated emotions.” Reason and Reynolds debunk the myth that inner mimicry, “depends on an unproblematic transition from the visual to the muscular and also from the muscular to the emotional, on the basis that the spectator’s emotional associations with movement (arising from paths traced in the muscular system) would be the same as the dancer’s.” The transitions that Reasons and Reynolds refer to vary in each performer and viewer relationship.

While audience responses to a piece of dance often fall within a thematic family, the exact interpretation of content may differ based each viewer’s embodied experience. For example, a dancer getting may get a laugh from the whole audience. One viewer might chuckle and think of his son’s childhood football team. Another might think the Marx brothers inspired the joke. Neither viewer is necessarily wrong. Rather, their neuromuscular pathways sparked different memories about silly and tough physicality.
Most people have no idea this is happening, that their bodies understand the movement before they even try to articulate the experience. The lack of awareness about the mirror neuron system correlates to Paxton’s argument that “the culture doesn’t understand the body.” Dance with the aesthetic of failure confronts each audience member with images of imperfection or wrongness. They often try to logically process the movement instead of allowing their bodies to viscerally experience it. In Against Interpretation, Susan Sontag calls the attempted translation of art’s literal meaning “the revenge of the intellect” against embodied response.

The aesthetic of failure can evoke any number of emotional responses depending on the way it is used. An audience member at Project 49 reports, “I was nervous and frustrated for the person who looked like they needed to catch up. Too much empathy can be stressful in a performance.” This viewer’s assumption that the dancer was doing something wrong, “needed to catch up,” created the sensation of nervousness and frustration regardless of choreographer’s intention. It is possible that the choreographer intended to elicit such a visceral and empathetic response. Not all choreographers use the aesthetic of failure to conjure uncomfortable viewing experiences, others use it to dissolve pretention and create a friendly connection between viewer and performer. Addressing another moment in the show, a viewer wrote that, “The ‘accidental’ touch made it seem like anyone could join in—you don’t have to know what’s going on—just join in—welcome.” Though the viewers interpreted both moments as tinted by failure, each moment sparked a different type of reaction. Though the aesthetic of failure can be used to different ends and has varied meaning for each viewer, American connotations and fears of failure shape the context of the work.
American Failure: Use and Connotations of Flaw

In *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure*, Tim Harford explains that, “Evolution is effective because, rather than engaging in an exhaustive, time-consuming search for the highest peak—a peak that may not even be there tomorrow—it produces ongoing, ‘works for now’ solutions to a complex and ever-changing set of problems.” Similarly, American ideology and goals for progress are centered on trying our best while accounting for human flaw. The preamble to the US Constitution begins, “We the people of the United States, in order to form a *more* perfect union…” (emphasis added). From the outset, this culturally sacred document reminds us of our imperfection, but then unites us around the virtuous task of reaching toward a utopian society. Nevertheless, we hate being wrong.

Many Americans look to the arts to shed light on human truths, struggles, and misfortunes, but also have a tendency to find cynical pleasure in the misfortune of others. In *The Power of Failure: 27 Ways to Turn Life's Setbacks into Success*, Charles Manz uses *The Ugly Duckling* to highlight the presence of positive literature on flaw. That story has been used for generations to teach children about the potential for unconventional beauty, the virtues of patience, and the importance of faith in the expiration of misfortune. Stories like this rally readers around the intrinsic value of imperfection and celebrate the capacity for change. The sense of unity and compassion in this storybook scenario—and in the performance of failure—is quite different from Americans’ relationship to failure in reality TV. Readers want the Ugly Duckling to succeed, while reality TV viewers are most excited by catastrophe.

In general, Americans are enthralled by the failures of celebrities and reality TV stars. There are countless television shows, movies, and websites predicated on the failure of the
characters; *Meet the Parents, Home Alone, Survivor, FML,* and *Texts from Last Night* for example, as well as a range of makeover shows like *Tabatha Salon Takeover* and *What Not to Wear* in which failing businesses and poorly dressed Americans are ridiculed for their professional and fashion errors and then made anew by the experts. With the help of photo-shopping, lip-syncing, auto-tuning, personal trainers, and personal chefs, the American general public expects a level of aesthetic perfection from its celebrities—though their failures seem exceedingly enjoyed. All “reality” television is constructed to foreground the “true” lives of the participants. Nevertheless, the best ratings come from the most outrageous and embarrassing characters and situations. Their failure proves their humanity, which is perhaps why we are so obsessed with their imperfections.

Our enjoyment of celebrity failure exists separately than that our own. In *Better by Mistake: The Unexpected Benefits of Being Wrong,* Alina Tugend notes, “in this fast-paced world of increasingly complex choices, every day decisions seems like potential mistakes.”

The lives of many Americans are spent balancing tasks of texting, emailing, phone calls, and to-do lists. Such a high volume of choice means a heightened risk for error. According to Schulz, “This is the perceived wisdom about error: that is it dangerous, humiliating, distasteful, and, all told, un-fun in the extreme.” Within the multitude of potential errors—clicking ‘reply all’, calling the wrong number, or forgetting a name—there is a huge range of possible impact. Sending the wrong email could cost someone’s job, while calling a wrong number might only cost a few wasted seconds. The more dangerous end of the spectrum creates a heightened neurosis in the American work force. Tugend explains that when “a worker blunders, [he] has to decide whether to cover it up or make good.”

Heath argues that the stress surrounding errors
distracts from new tasks, potentially producing more error, and also wastes valuable time that could be better spent innovating.

American culture is in part defined by the struggle between the knowledge that mistakes can teach and the fear that failure can devastate. Operating between these extremes, many Americans constantly negotiate possibilities of risk and reward. The recent surge of publications by scholars of failure asserting the importance of process and human error is taking a stand against today’s high pressure, high stakes, and product-oriented society. The American obsession with the failures of celebrities and reality TV personalities plays a part in quelling personal anxieties about failure. However there is a distinct falseness and separation from those people to our actual lives. Seeing failure performed live, earnestly and unedited, provides a more personal and meaningful purging of emotion. Though the audience may not be personally involved with the performers themselves, they share the experience in a way a television cannot provide.

Schulz points to the myth that we each see the world through unobstructed, unfiltered, “translucent window” as fundamentally unsound. She debunks the idea of translucency and proposes a powerful alternative: “The miracle of your mind isn’t that you can see the world as it is. It’s that you can see the world as it isn’t.” Our impaired ability to reconstruct past and imagine future creates a lens through which our perception of the present is born. Schulz writes, “Far from being a moral flaw, [failure] is inextricable from some of our most humane and honorable qualities: empathy, optimism, imagination, conviction, and courage.”

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4 Though the work of Schulz, Tugend, Charles Manz, and Tim Harford may sometimes operate as self-help or pop-psych. However, I am calling them the scholars of failure. Their extensive research and deployment of examples—including airplanes, tattoos, doctors, and the workplace—serve as anthropological and philosophical scholarship revealing and redirecting their audience’s understanding of universal human flaw.
comforting words offered in literature on failure seek to empower readers against the potentially stifling fear of failure. Failure is not particularly soothing for the individual, but an aversion to risk-taking would stunt human ingenuity and creative growth. These writers are advocating that we worry less about imperfections and more about harnessing our potential for risk-taking to access the accolades of ingenuity.

In *Celebrating Failure: The Power of Taking Risks, Making Mistakes, and Thinking Big*, Ralph Heath argues that the best professional environments demand fierce creativity, aggressive commitment to new ideas, and willingness to take risks. Heath suggests that employers call full office meetings when they mistake to immediately accept guilt and manage the fallout. Admitting a mistake demonstrates the employer’s willingness to take personal blame and to obliterate the time-consuming anxiety that can created by waiting for a mistake’s discovery. Heath also asserts that going public with failure breeds freedom. The freedom comes when a blunder is pinpointed, accounted for, and any anxiety is eliminated without punishing the mistake-maker.¹³⁴

Tugend even suggests that, “In order for companies to accelerate their own learning and increase their competitiveness…they must make what he calls deliberate mistakes—that is, try something that common wisdom says won’t work.”¹³⁵ Many scholars of failure suggest that teachers, like employers, maintain work environments that reward intelligent risk-taking over objective rightness. An atmosphere that honors courageous thinking would shed a more positive light on failure. According to Tugend, this type of learning environment would lead to “accepting—not just giving lip service to—the truth that we all are human and imperfect.”¹³⁶ Accepting imperfection is empowering. Neutralizing the fear of failure and trimming time-consuming regret creates space for unconventional decision making.
In today’s socioeconomic climate, it is more common for Americans to see mistakes of other students, co-workers, celebrities, or even family members as means to separate themselves from their own fears. Rarely do people include themselves in celebrations of human flaw. Contemporary choreographers including Dorfman, Matteson, and Hook are working against the negative connotations of failure and committing to taking risks, raising the stakes, and welcoming the results. If dancers accept that they will learn from mistakes, a commitment to risk, effort, and failure reveals a dedication to learning.

Questioning limitations, and revealing the raw edges of embodied possibility has been celebrated in postmodern dance since its beginnings in the Judson Church. At the time, postmodern dance artists’ use of casual movement and ugly posturing were huge performative risks. The legacy of Judson’s performed failure implicates choreographers in the process of excavating all human movement in the continuous experiment of making and performing dance.

**Commercialization of the Dancing Body**

In *Killing Us Softly 3*, writer and lecturer Jean Kilbourne discusses the onslaught of digitally enhanced images of female bodies in advertising and their effects on women. She asserts that advertising reinforces the false image of normalcy that dangerously misrepresents female sexuality and relationships, and consciously depicts the unattainable physicality of thin, long legged, and flawless women. Kilbourne concludes, “The body we see doesn’t exist.” The commercial image of beauty has a parasitic effect on the interpretation of a body in daily life and in performance. Kilbourne also describes the media’s not so subtle messages that women, “should not be too powerful” and “shouldn’t take up too much space.” These media enforced
norms, in addition to stereotypes of emaciated ballerinas, play a significant role in a viewer’s understanding of who is “allowed” to dance.

My Project 49 survey asked audience members to describe the sensations associated with what they perceived as planned or unplanned “mistakes” the performance. Responses included nervous, startled, abrupt, disconcerting, uncomfortable, fearful, awkward, painful, unprofessional, noticeable, and melodramatic. One audience member wrote, “I go to the theatre too see well put together performances – not well put together messes. I can see messes in the real world. No need to put them on stage.” Some spectators referred to themselves as “traditional” or “old-fashioned” for not “preferring” mistakes on stage. As Kilbourne’s media research proves, expecting and desiring perfection in performance of the human body is not old-fashioned at all. Preferring polished dancing bodies is inseparable from the commodification of the human form. The expectations of dancer bodies are culturally determined and extend the trend of stifling the female body.

In postmodern dance, despite external forces, the use different size and shaped bodies is the new normal. In Wendy Perron’s Any Body Can Dance, she describes the careers of four dance artists: a very tall woman, very old man, a disabled woman, and an overweight man. Her article demonstrates the widening possibilities for diverse bodies in the postmodern dance world. Camille A. Brown, Dorfman, Henderson, Matteson, and Pourzal all value the physical differences of their collaborators and celebrate each of them for their beauty, their imperfection, and the intersection of the two.

In Some Steps Towards a Historical Epistemology of Corporeality, Hanna Järvinen explains, “bodies and bodily experience are historically specific rather than universally alike.”
Viewers who prefer a traditional dance aesthetic of polish and technical virtuosity may not realize the larger cultural forces hardening that ‘tradition’ of female bodies. America’s current standards for the female dancing body are not yet free from the mid-century modern and ballet aesthetic. I argue that preferring clean-lined, effortless movement and flawless dancing bodies is not ‘traditional’ at all.

Commercial dancing in music videos and on television seems to filter out failure. The brand of choreographic precision in performances by celebrities like Beyoncé and Shakira and on reality TV programs such as So You Think You Can Dance? is a mixed blessing. While commercialized dancing contributes to audiences’ exposure to dance, they are also perpetuating the generalization that ‘good’ dance must be impressive, virtuosic in a particular way, and musically driven. Reinforcing the expectation for acrobatic movement dilutes the power of long stillness, slow development, and sometimes messy execution in postmodern dance. Dancing that engages with failure investigates the wide range of content that bodies can portray and accomplish, as opposed to seeing ‘good’ choreography as the best list of tricks. Commercial performances tend to cover up any evidence of real weight making the movement appear effortless. This dancing must be legible from far away because the venue is quite different. Dance reality TV shows are stadium events—popcorn and all. Dorfman suggests that in these instances, the movement has to be huge and spectacular if the performer has any chance of projecting the performance into such a huge space. Choreography with the aesthetic of failure is often better seen up close. The physical exertion necessary to redirect weight, the detail on the faces of thinking individuals, and of course, the sweat, cannot be seen from afar.
**Sensing Wrongness: Wile E. Coyote’s Death Wish**

Schulz uses the *Looney Toons* character Wile E. Coyote and his habit of chasing the Roadrunner off cliffs to illustrate the physicality of wrongness. It is not until the animated icon looks down and realizes he has run too far, that he is reminded of gravity and plummets to the ground. Colloquialisms about true-life realizations of wrongness include ‘pulling the rug out from under you’ and ‘knocking the wind out of you.’ While these are not as extreme as the Coyote’s fate, removing the foundation or breath expresses the all-encompassing shock of even a subtle shift in one’s understanding of reality. Though the Coyote’s level of commitment is comical, his repetitious failure teaches viewers about replenishing effort, tireless determination, and the renewal of hope.

In one of her TED talks, Schulz explains that internal feelings of rightness do not necessarily correlate to realities of the external world.¹⁴¹ She asks the audience what being wrong feels like. Responses include “dreadful” and “embarrassed.” Schulz corrects them and explains that those feelings are not connected to *being* wrong, but rather to the *discovery* of being wrong. She concludes: “Being wrong feels like being right.”¹⁴² Making a choice implies commitment. Finding out the wrong commitment was made is the jarring part. Likewise, when watching a dancer fully invest in the impossible, just as we feel the discovery of our own failures, we feel the dancer’s discovery of physical limitation.

Performing the *aesthetic of failure* often requires the same intensity and physical risk as slam-dunks and football tackles. Each has intention, risk, and result. Athletes shooting baskets and ending plays have the same sense of urgency and commitment as dancers performing the *aesthetic of failure*. In sports the stakes are clear, and the rules are relatively static. In
postmodern dance, however, choreographers are constantly changing the rules and raising the stakes, to keep the creative and thinking bodies of their dancers at attention. Dancers, like athletes—and Wile E. Coyote—are choosing to put themselves in precarious positions. They are trained to make smart choices within that split second between risk and result.

The choreographers are responsible to structure a certain experience and the audience members are responsible for allowing connections and meaning float to the surface of their experience. Dance artists are asking themselves profoundly difficult questions: How do we harness inevitable error for eventual self-betterment? How can we recover from devastating failure and maintain confidence in risk-taking? These questions are everybody’s questions, and everyone lives by different answers. Therefore, it is not surprising that viewers’ kinesthetic understanding of failure and risk-taking in dance varies.

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson describe skills necessary for effective communication: “You also need patience, a certain flexibility in world view, and a generous tolerance for mistakes, as well as a talent for finding the right metaphor to communicate the relevant parts of unshared experiences or to highlight the shared experiences while deemphasizing the others.” Much of today’s choreography does not contain a singular point of communicative meaning, but rather acts as a vessel for the viewer to experience personal and embodied significance. While this may be more egalitarian, it demands further attention from the audience. Postmodern dance can be an overwhelming experience. Knowing what to look at, how to understand meaning, and feel comfortable is sometimes problematic. Additionally audiences often feel an obligation to the choreographer to get it “right.”
Of course, there is not an objective “right” answer in interpreting a piece of art. Another Project 49 audience member wrote, “There seems to be a context within which the movements fit, some movements seem like they weren’t planned but not exactly accidental.” Bailes proposes, “Perhaps a poetics of failure is simply the distinctive framing of this space, between what is unintelligible and what wants to be understood” Using failure to blur clarity can disrupt monotony and force the audience to reset their attention. While the aesthetic of failure is often used to a specific end, it is also be used to cultivate ambiguity.

Matteson and Henderson agree that while many people need to see their work more than once to watch it with a critical eye, some people are ‘open’ enough too ‘see’ the piece right away—they already feel comfortable in the room and with the material. Ultimately, audiences share the responsibility to know when dancers are failing. They are responsible for recognizing authentic effort. If a dancer accesses the aesthetic of failure, it is legible. Audiences must use their innate understanding of bodies to read that exertion and gather personal meaning.

A full reading of audience opinion will always be elusive. Nevertheless, a general impression can be gleaned based on cultural context and exposure to the work. Employing the aesthetic of failure is an inclusive practice. Dance artists welcome diverse bodies and innovative movement in the work. As evidenced by Americans’ relationship failure in the workplace, reality TV, and images of the female form, the general conceptions of failure are not as rosy. While some audiences are uncertain of how to read the aesthetic of failure, in the right context, choreographers can use performative failure to bring audiences fearlessly into the work.
Chapter 4

Polished Imperfection: Monica Bill Barnes’ *Luster* (2012)

Monica Bill Barnes, artistic director/choreographer of Monica Bill Barnes & Company has a particular affinity for mistakes. Barnes’ work features dancers contorting their faces, stumbling, flashing their bellies, shrugging, and seductively licking their shoulders. The company’s dancing is both humorous and poignant. Failure and imperfection are the context through which virtuosic moments become far more profound. The work often includes, “the styles of vaudeville, the circus and slapstick comedy.” Barnes work has received popular and critical acclaim. In addition to their engagements at theaters across the country, the company recently performed during a live episode of *This American Life*. In 2010, critic Jennifer Brewer called the company’s Bates Dance Festival performance “alternately awkward with intentional missteps, and elegant with powerful turns and balances” making her style “believable and very human.” Barnes describes her work as, “dealing in that everyman category, where you want people to have some sense of empathy and familiarity.” Here I will provide a close reading of Barnes’ most recent work, *Luster* (2012), to illuminate her masterful use of mistakes, imperfection, flaw, and failure as valued aspects of the aesthetic landscape of the piece.

Barnes’ work is known for its sweet and kitschy awkwardness, charming showgirl and circus allusions, strikingly individual performers, and sharp shifts in performance quality. Her
work has risen in popularity because she has managed to polish, package, and project failure while maintaining postmodern experimental and risk-taking values. The choreographic process usually lasts about a year before Barnes feels ready to perform a piece. It then takes another six months of performing it for the piece to solidify and for her to understand what the work is. While developing material in the studio, Barnes often reminds herself that no one has to see it yet. This reminder affords her the time to experiment and play without worrying what the audience might think. Excluding the audience from the initial choreographic process eliminates the pressure to make a certain kind of dance. Though sometimes she creates material to show off the dancers’ technical prowess, she has noticed that most of the “dancey” phrase work falls away leaving in their place moments she thought “would never see the light of day,” like balancing a chair between her teeth in *Mostly Fanfare* (2010).\(^{149}\)

Monica Bill Barnes solidifies her choreography well before performance, locating it under the *placement* of failure category. Without over acting, dancers must rediscover each moment of performed failure as if it were the first time with committed absurdity at precise musical cues. The moments of awkwardness often appear in unison, erasing their potential to seem unintended. Awkwardness in unison also highlights the high value Barnes assigns to the material by ensuring the audience knows the dancers are intentionally failing. By parodying performative grandness, Monica’s work allows dancers to embody and project failure.

She believes, “the element of failure is always touching, so when it succeeds we're invested in it – because we see the potential of it not always going well.”\(^{150}\) Far from isolating her audience, Barnes wields this *aesthetic of failure* to connect the viewers to each other and the performers.
The one thing that I’m never interested in is having an audience member feel sorry for us. I think that’s a very sort of dead end theatrical situation…like watching a ballet dancer go up on pointe, and then they fall off their pointe. That just kills me, that sort of cringe inducing situation makes me feel awful as an audience member. Those are the times I just so wish I hadn’t shown up to this, because now I just feel so badly for that performer. I don’t think there’s anything interesting to be gained in that relationship.151

Barnes employs the *aesthetic of failure* to get the audience on her side. Carefully planned failures force audience members hold their breath, laugh, root for the performers, and hope for the best.

*Failure in Luster (2012)*

Barnes’ most recent work, *Luster*, is brimming with task-oriented movement, mistakes, exhaustion, awkwardness, and endearing comedy. This duet, performed by Barnes and her longtime collaborator and rehearsal director Anna Bass, originally 22 minutes, has since been pared down to about nine minutes. The long version I will focus on premiered at The American College Dance Festival in 2012. Throughout *Luster*, Barnes and Bass access *tonal imperfection* with many moments of placed failure. The dancers exude a sort of proud nerdiness. We get the sense that these dancers weren’t the ‘cool kids’ in high school. Maybe they were picked last in dodgeball. The use of timing, relationships, props, action, music, costume, and lighting all accentuate the *placement* of failure, which is structured in roughly three parts.

The first section consists of a long entrance and preparation punctuated by unison gesture phrasing and audience participation. All of this is paired with an extended live recording of Tina
Turner’s *Proud Mary*. The next section sees a stark mood and musical change. Beginning in low blue light the dancers carry their chairs and cardboard boxes into the house. They place the chairs on the aisle stairs and climb to stand on them, slowly scanning the crowd. After a few moments, they nervously bow, drawing applause and laughter, then quickly return to stage, set their chairs down upstage, and sit. The light quickly shifts to only top light, exposing their muscul arity. After a witty and rhythmic phrase, accompanied by the sound of their squeaking sneakers, the two begin running in big, perfectly parallel laps around the whole stage. The stunning monotony of the circles is punctuated with both classical and postmodern virtuosity. The third and final section is again seated, task-oriented, and performed with an overdramatic and self-congratulatory silliness contrasting Lionel Richie’s *Angel*.

The piece is full of actual and mimed tasks including carrying a mini-proscenium, adjusting chairs, unpacking boxes, holding and throwing flowers, removing coats, bowling, catching a miniature curtain, replacing a tooth, jogging, throwing a partner, drinking water, taking pictures, dusting chairs, lint-rolling the curtain, vacuuming the lit part of the stage, spraying hairspray, applying chapstick, jumping jacks, tying shoe laces, wiping sweat, and blowing their noses. Unlike the task-oriented work of the Judson era, Bass and Barnes employ sharp adjustments in their bodily tension and facing making their movement more bizarre and funny than these tasks would be if executed normally.

The piece begins, in silence, as the two carry an eight-foot tall puppet-theater proscenium, complete with red velvet curtain and tassels, from the back of the house down sixteensome steps. Light comes up on the short staircase leading to the stage. The two, clad in matching long, black, quilted down winter coats, carry the proscenium up the stairs to the center stage, and lean the cumbersome structure against a supportive frame of dark metal pipes and clamps. They
turn away from the proscenium toward the audience ready to begin dancing before realizing the detached proscenium is precariously tipping towards them. Based on their simultaneous sharp look backwards at the structure, they knew it would fall despite their feigned surprise. Nevertheless their urgency to catch it gives the moment the nervous energy of a near miss. After just barely catching it, the two hold it in place and pantomime a plan for a solution. In this piece, *tonal imperfection* is gleaned at times from the dancers’ excessive tension, slightly concave posture, speed walking steps, and clown-like over effort. Right away the two establish *tonal imperfection* that is maintained throughout the piece.

To solve the hazardous set piece problem, the two call for help. Bass fetches an audience member to hold the proscenium in place and instructs him to shake his hips. After bringing him into their weird little world, Bass and Barnes step away with a sharp grapevine and exit the stage, leaving the audience member looking wonderfully foolish. The dancers return with chairs, stand
on them, and use the stranger to balance as they reinforce the metal and plywood structure. They carefully climb down, cautiously remove their hands and those of their new assistant, and slowly step back as the now secure structure stays in place, this time, a success. They return him to his seat and continue the piece.

While most of the failure in this piece is placed, the movement is never executed poorly, but rather with a goofy, sometimes poignant, physicality. A clear moment of *tonal imperfection* is the removal of their long black coats. After grabbing each others’ hands and nodding, the two stand face upstage, and with huge, exaggerated movement, unzip and remove the ankle length jackets to reveal glittering cocktail dresses: Bass in red, Barnes in gold. Then, the two petite women perform a series of utterly hilarious funky and caricatured hip-hop gestures with musical precision and exaggerated conviction. They cover their faces with their hands and bounce their hips and rib cages horizontally while slowly removing and extending a flexed left hand as though bracing themselves from their uncontrollable jive.
As this section concludes, Barnes wields a power drill and Bass removes the curtain from the miniature proscenium and folds its—an impossible task as the curtain measures almost twice her height. From upstage, Bass tosses the balled-up curtain through the small structure, which engulfs Barnes entire upper body before she manages to pack it away in a cardboard box. Then, with a sense of over-preparation and over-effort Bass pushes the painted plywood proscenium off its metal frame to Barnes waiting downstage. The two then fold the proscenium in half and scuttle to the wings stage right to hand off the unwieldy L-shaped structure to two stagehands. This moment is an example of Barnes’ exaggerated subversion of theatrical convention. The stagehands are seen—a mistake in conventional theater—as they step on stage and into the light to retrieve the folded puppet proscenium. The dancers then take a knee and extend their arms towards the exiting stagehands, drawing applause for these often unsung heroes.

The most stunning placement of failure lies in one of the most “dancey” parts of the show. During the second section, in a short, self-consciously balletic duet, Barnes grasps Bass’ waist as she strikes a classical attitude. Bass cocks her head back just a little too far marking a shift from the comedic failure of the beginning of the piece to a more touching type of
imperfection. In this moment, her poignant confidence shines from her small body and straight up. Bass keeps her chin held high.

The most obvious moment of placed failure comes as Bass in a deep second position plié, prepares to catch Barnes running across stage. Barnes leaps into Bass’ arms, which then crumble under Barnes’ weight. Barnes tensely slides down back to stand on her own feet. The anti-climactic and obviously failed lift resolves in a squeaky shuffle.

Another example of placed failure is when the dancers run many circular laps of the stage, then continue running but reorient their torsos, which are then almost parallel to the ground with their arms reaching downward. They seem to be repeatedly tripping yet constantly braced to catch themselves. This continual tripping is only successful because of the precise embodiment of the sensations of falling. Barnes and Bass rehearse and train rigorously for the access to this kind of unnerving physicality. In addition to practicing lots of yoga, according to Christina Robson, a member of Barnes’ company, “Every rehearsal is full out. You are performing in rehearsal. You cannot just show up and do the moves. The moves are tied to your
emotional experience and to get those two to hum together Monica likes to pull out all the stops in rehearsal and do rehearsal runs in complete show mode.” Barnes, Bass, and the rest of the company are stellar technicians and could flawlessly execute the most difficult choreography. For Barnes’ work, however, the company must harness or deviate from their dance training at any moment to best execute the polished placement of failure.

Polishing Flaw: Effort and Individuality

Barnes earned an undergraduate degree in philosophy, which continues to influence her work. In interviews, she often explains the similarities between the practice of philosophy and choreography in that both are articulate ideas and explore human relationships to environment. Barnes elaborates, “I have the opportunity to get up in front of people and move around…And that situation endlessly interests me, in the way that I think philosophers are endlessly interested in thinking about whether we exist or don’t exist.” The endless interest she describes reflects the
rigor with which today’s choreographers are testing the edges of physical limitations and the boundaries of theatrical conventions. Barnes’ effort to articulate herself in performance is evident, but so too is her goofy and genuine excitement for the experience. The residue of “generous” performance, as Barnes and Bass often describe it, is often comical and sometimes bittersweet.

Considering *Another Parade* (2009), dance scholar Debra Cash’s notes, “Much of this young choreographer’s concerns have to do with the heightened experience of performance…and how authenticity is challenged and heightened by that artificial relationship.” The work, “zeroes in on awkwardness, earnestness, and the steps that can be missed.” Barnes continually questions what is exciting about live performance. Because her performances have “a plan,” she explains, “the possibility for that plan to not work out the way you planned it is sort of infinite…I think in some ways seeing something perfectly performed is somewhat less thrilling.” She uses the example of spectators at high school championship baseball game versus the World Series, “there’s something about the high school baseball game where you just feel like there’s so much more at stake, oddly enough, than these professionals who are being trained by the best people in the world to do their job as flawlessly as possible.” Ideas of risk and stakes are ever-present in the aesthetic of failure. In some cases, like the falling proscenium, dancers must craft the stakes to welcome the potential for embodied imperfection. Additionally, by piling on layers of *tonal imperfection*, Barnes erodes the idea of dancer as ideal body and heightens the absurdity of their shameless effort.

Unlike many companies with standing repertories such as Alvin Ailey, Trisha Brown, and Paul Taylor, Monica Bill Barnes does not continue performing the same work for more than a few years. She likes that when audiences see her work today, they see what she is interested in
today; and if they saw her work five years ago they were seeing what she was interested in five years ago. In addition to evolving choreographic interest, Barnes agrees that perhaps there is a limit to how many times a performer can conjure a trip, fall, or punch while accessing all sensory elements of the experience’s physicality. She calls this the “shelf life of physical strain.” The polish loses its shine after a certain point. A specific failure can only be performed so long.

All of Barnes’ dancers are “so unique to themselves, you don't mix up who's who. If I were to lose some of the performers, I don't know if I would remake the piece as it comes from the specificity that the individuals bring to it.” Barnes prefers not to restage work even when spaces in her company have turned over. She most often takes those opportunities to retire a piece and create new material for new personalities. In the choreographic process, according to Robson, Barnes “dreams up most of the scenarios. As performers we find our way into the scenarios (party scenes, bar scenes, trying to impress a boy you like) making our own choices along the way as to how we would each authentically respond.” Robson explains that during the rehearsal process, Barnes “trusts us a lot to make responses that fall into the spectrum of ideas she's looking for.” The trust and reliance on each dancer’s ability to hit the comedic and emotional mark is paramount to the effective performance of failure. Each dancer must access her own embodied sensations of failure, rather than putting on someone else’s. Dancers are allowed to experiment within the prompts Barnes gives them in rehearsal, but in most cases they become more specific and polished for performance.

When teaching master classes at colleges and dance festivals, Barnes and her company members lead exercises focused on accessing failure to perform mistakes. Exercises include being rejected by invisible dance partners and walking with another dancer, tripping, and then explaining herself. In this way, Barnes teaches techniques for cultivating failure by offering
specific tasks like tossing a circus performer or waving to someone who does not notice, and then letting the individual experiment and hone their interpretation of those moments. Failure in Barnes’ choreography is skilled, virtuosic, and polished but must be accessed by the individual before a choreographer can mold it. While ballet instructors teach tendus to train dancers’ feet, Barnes’ exercises train dancers to embody failure.

In describing her choice of movement vocabulary, Barnes thinks “humiliating” is too strong of a word but that perhaps “humanizing” hits the mark. “I very purposefully got interested in finding ways to connect the audience to the performers by reminding them that we are more similar to you than we are dissimilar. We are really up here trying something that we hope goes well but it may or may not, so isn’t that sort of exciting to be a part of?” Barnes’ careful placement of failure as a means to connect the audience to the performer resonates with the postmodern dance concept of presenting people as opposed to representing with people. For Barnes, it is paramount that we understand the humanity, effort, and wit of each individual in her company. Though her work is on the glitzier end of the postmodern spectrum, her rise to popularity proves that when used responsibly, the aesthetic of failure can spark both sidesplitting comedy and tender courage.
Conclusion

Dance performances that include aesthetic of failure deviate from what Bailes refers to as, “the culinary effect of most popular theatre which simply ‘fed’ the audience much as a meal restores the body without demanding anything of it.” She writes, “theatre mishaps, as with all slips, often induce a sense of clammy discomfort and palpitation.” Indeed, failure is not always easy to watch, but it does not intend to be. Today’s choreographers are not looking to simply entertain. They twist nerves and excavate fears as a kind of purging. They conjure failure to cleanse, and then tackle new questions. The aesthetic of failure creates a curious space in which instincts overtake intellect. The placement, demand, and allowance of failure evoke visceral reactions; logic does not always take part in the viewing process.

Near-perfect technique can be attained by years of specific and often dangerous training. But that’s old news. Today’s artists are asking how we train dancers to remain open throughout the soma to express the ever-widening range of movement and emotion—failure not excluded. Today’s artists engage in new performance principles, vocabulary, and challenges to access authentic mishaps and blunders. They are taking risks in rehearsal and transferring that spirit, effort, and commitment to the stage. What the viewer sees on stage is a mover trained not only to fail, but more importantly, to start again. The “show must go on” mentality in performance is certainly not new. However, today’s brand of choreographers and performers are inviting failure’s fertile territory into the process. By facing age-old fears of embarrassment and rejection
head on, dancers perform the syncopated ebb and flow of effort, success, and failure. As audience members, through kinesthetic experience, we are exposed to sensation, dreams, and memories. The audience and performer share an embodied and projected experience on the level of neuromuscular patterning, our visceral understanding of the moment.

The Judson Dance Theater rejected artifice engaging with chance and the unremarkable. Judson laid the foundation for today’s aesthetic of failure by means of task dancing, improvisation, falling, and casualness. Today’s artists are excavating the present tense by taking genuine physical risks, incorporating the unbeautiful, and performing flaw. Audiences are sometimes confused and overwhelmed, but not all hope is lost. People are catching on, slowly but surely, and realizing that dancing can be about real bodies not tricks.

The aesthetic of failure pushes the boundaries of dances’ by simultaneously recognizing the infinite and the finite. In some ways, infusing the field of dance with failure is a major risk. With multiple exposures to a choreographer’s work, audiences do eventually develop a sense understanding and engagement. However, at the moment audience attendance is down. The big questions then, are, do we care? How much does pleasing the audience matter? Is a continuation of Judson experimentation ideals and rejection of spectacle—however audiences respond—admirable? To what extent do artists have to give audiences what they want to keep the field afloat? To me, the seeing diverse bodies performing the aesthetic of failure is invaluable. Showing audiences what today’s bodies really are, what it means to be strong, mobile, courageous, and vital, is an immense service. The aesthetic of failure could potentially help subvert the exceptionally high rate of body image problems nationwide—or more realistically, in the dance world.
We live in a socio-political climate where the future seems bleak and the unknown is frightening. The terror and bigotry spewed from our media can wear us down, and suck our powers of empathy dry. The onslaught of advertisements purporting success as a commodity-ridden lifestyle—often categorized by a high paying job, property ownership, and a nuclear family—stifles our ability to forgive our ever-present flaws. The rising presence of international tension and powerful technology, paired with the ongoing congressional stalemate can make things seem unreal. Seeing the ‘real’ in live performance, as opposed to shrink-wrapped perfection, is more comforting, cathartic, emotionally useful, and—dare I say, therapeutic.

It is hard to look at bodies full of lives, stories, and memories, and leave one’s self open to the physical experience they have on stage. Audiences should not be bogged down by excavating meaning in individual movements, but instead trust that their bodies process structure, tone, quality, patterning, and pacing of movement, and decipher meaning all their own. Bailes suggests that, “these performances can still remind us, however well they have failed, of the need to become attentive to what is evidenced by the broken, lapsed moment in our personal, artistic, social, and political lives.” Choreographers including Dorfman, Hook, and Matteson accept that the messy edges of moving bodies will never truly wipe clean. Instead, they are digging into failure and developing ways to earnestly reveal it.

Pourzal describes today’s dancer as “fully present in performance experience.” Being present, he suggests, has to do with accessing a certain level of consciousness. He argues, “a lot of times when we think about being performers…we think about entering a certain head space or body space where we are showing something as opposed to sharing something.” As an audience member, Pourzal looks for, “an idea of what this person crafted for me, to have a certain experience, but within that they are giving themselves permission to kind of roll with the
punches, or fall.” Acknowledging the relationship that Pourzal articulates between intention and performance is vital to understanding the aesthetic of failure. To some viewers, performative mistakes seem like wrongness instead of honesty. It is the responsibility, as Matteson suggests, for choreographers that use failure to shape the rules of their work strictly enough to allow for deviation and experimentation in performance. It is that experimentation within the work that Pourzal is compelled to when watching dance.

Expectations dictate that in performance, dancers must prove their worth via skill. It is the same expectation viewers have watching the Jason Bourne series. Audiences certainly cannot participate in the same chases and shootouts as the protagonist does, but they still expect Bourne to succeed. Today’s live art is not an action movie. Contemporary choreographers are not interested in adding to the vast and (ironically) monotonous pool of spectacle that is American visual culture. Choreographers are asking, what can our bodies do? How do we access emotion but not narrative? What are our edges of success and failure? What is possible? Postmodern dance turns the every man into the protagonist, not the expert, not the super hero, and not the princess. Today’s dance artists value the excavation of the real body, the every day body. They value the human, not the superhuman.

The aesthetic of failure forces audiences to feel more than admiration, more than “wow.” As they are exposed to the work, people are starting to connect to the heroism, generosity, authenticity, and emotionality of the aesthetic. The common feeling of audience members that they don’t “get” what the dance is “about” will hopefully dissipate. Dance audiences will start to realize that there is no prior knowledge necessary to view failure in dance. Existing as a moving body is all the information necessary to gather meaning from postmodern dance.
While David Dorfman both seeks and welcomes the *aesthetic of failure* in his work, he speculates that perhaps the virtuosity of the movement does not read as well on video. The high stakes and effortful performance of postmodern dancers does not include clean and linear formations that would read on a two-dimensional screen. Dorfman suspects this sometimes hurts their chances for grants or other performance opportunities.\(^{165}\) Much of postmodern choreography is difficult to access on video. Artists such as Barnes and Dorfman prefer viewers be in the room. Limited access to video, though, could have a negative impact on advertising and exposure possibilities. Imagine if postmodern dance videos went viral. It makes sense that dance artists would not want audiences to watch the work online and not buy tickets, but I wonder if posting full works to their websites would provide audiences with enough exposure to not only buy tickets once, but to keep coming back. I maintain my argument about the importance of liveness to fully experience the work. Nevertheless, easy access to videos would expose audiences to what postmodern dance actually looks like. Seeing the movement on video would expand audiences’ retinal vocabulary and, therefore, their ability to find meaning in the movement.

Contemporary choreographers take no convention for granted. Consider Paxton’s claim that postmodern choreography is “always problematic, always new.”\(^{166}\) Leila Sussman asserts that unlike ballet, each postmodern dance presents “a new language to decipher.”\(^{167}\) Although movement is often called vocabulary, language is too singular a concept to describe the experience of live dance. Artists are making performative experiences that articulate many languages to many senses, creating what dancers often refer to as the ‘world’ of the piece. As the postmodern dogma of exploration suggests, dance artists are not looking for a permanent set of rules or hierarchy to live in. Rather, each choreographer takes the opportunity to reevaluate the
performative “rules” for every piece to establish a new world. The Judson Dance Theater broke many “rules” of ballet and modern dance, and it also implicated choreographers in constructing their own set of rules for each piece. Rules and principles are developed by constantly asking questions like: Where are the dancers on stage? What are their limitations? From where does the audience see? What do they see? What information do they have? How do they interact with the work? Where are the performers looking? At every moment, what is their intention? Is it legible? Does it matter? These questions among many others help craft the rules for each piece. The message that audiences need to hear is that they too are responsible for interrogating the work, and likewise to arrive at their own conclusions.

Failure in dance in some ways feels like the ultimate rebellion. The lack of adherence to traditional performance structures creates a more dynamic relationship between audience and performer. The physical and metaphorical space between dancer and watcher expands and contracts and is filled with new energy at each performance. Performing the aesthetic of failure requires excavating reality and reinventing the present. Using somatic and improvisational training, dancers access clear intent and embodied tone. Dancers closely observe real life embarrassment, false hope, and ultimately failure as material to apply authentically on stage, reinventing the present tense.

Steve Paxton worked in a conglomerate of artists to remind himself of the range of aesthetic points of view and artistry. Judson’s respect for collaboration fostered the beginnings of a dance community in which individuality is a core value. In The Body Eclectic, the authors assert that today’s dancer must be his own artist, choice-maker, and ever ready for collaboration and improvisation. In her “Business of Dance” course at Bates Dance Festival each summer, Kim Konikow emphasizes that each dancer is his own general contractor. Each
dancer must manage who he works for, his projects, finances, injuries, and priorities. There are no easy answers; there is only hard work, self-respect, and intelligent risk-taking. Luckily, today’s artistic climate supports that reality.

Charles Manz begins his introduction with the French proverb, “Only he who knows nothing makes no mistakes.” The idea that wisdom lies in awareness of the unknown aligns with Joseph Hallinan’s assertion that the connection between mistakes and intelligence is often misconstrued. He argues that many see making mistakes as unintelligent when in reality, we must actively search for problems and take immediate action if we are to ever find solutions. Philosopher Augustine’s theory “fallor ergo sum,” “I err, therefore I am” implicitly states: error is proof of being alive. The evolving human species will always be flawed and will continue to develop “works for now” solutions. The infinite process of finding problems and temporarily patching them, bring us ever closer to a reality that none of us can define, but we all innately seek. This process, perhaps most simply defined as survival, can be exhausting, terrifying, and isolating. Yet we all experience it. We fear it even though it is part of being human. Shusterman calls this “our profound reluctance to accept our human limitations of mortality and frailty, which the body so clearly symbolizes.” Astronomer Carl Sagan declares, “We make our world significant by the courage of our questions and by the depth of our answers.” We must accept our fate and continue to push boundaries if we are ever to make our own discoveries.

In today’s technology ridden society, searching has become expecting. We impatiently expect the right answer right away—from ourselves and our iPhones. Searching for information once meant a process, a journey with an end. A thoughtful hypothesis followed by opening a book, or a calling an old friend could yield a new, shiny piece of information. Swelling sales of smart phones and obsessive use of social media reflect a community with answers available at
their fingertips (note the use of physical feature to suggest minimal effort.) We no longer search for answers; we wait for them. Waiting causes anxiety, fear of the unknown, and perhaps worst of all, complacency. Implementing the *aesthetic of failure* is a commitment to searching, to asking, to taking risks, and not waiting for the right answers. The *placement, allowance, and demand* of failure represent both an aesthetic and pedagogical value system. The journey of rediscovery implemented by the Judson Dance Theater brings exploration and research to the forefront of choreographic thought. Today’s dance artists exemplify experimental values by welcoming failure in their investigatory training and rehearsal processes.
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36 Best and Kellner 39-40.
37 Paxton
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41 Banes, 1987, 11.
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