



BodyCartography Project's
closer, Washington, DC, 2017.
Photo: Jonathan Hsu

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INTIMATE CHOREOGRAPHY
AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE AUDIENCE

BodyCartography Project's closer

If I hold you any closer, I'll be in back of you.
—Groucho Marx

I. "CAN I DANCE FOR YOU?"

Two dreams of contemporary dance arrive in glorious contradiction in BodyCartography Project's *closer*. One is an urge to dissolve the boundary between performer and audience; the other is to intensify that distinction. One is to emulate the collective ecstasies of social dance; the other is to set dance apart as a laboratory for observation of clinical findings. Dream one longs to bring us all to the party under the mighty god of the disco ball. Dream two values dance as a one-way window for inquiry, a sealed room for experiments, all in service of delivering a brilliant philosophy lecture in gestural disguise. Disco groove and lectern pronouncement: can a dance put on glitter and a lab coat at the same time?

The actual movement of BodyCartography's *closer* and the formidable conceptual ideas guiding the dancing succeed in integrating these contradictory impulses. The dance company, based in Minneapolis and led by Olive Bieringa and Otto Ramstad, does so not by arriving at a resolution, but rather by suspending us in the approach. The dancing in *closer* intensifies the competing impulses of contemporary dance—to collapse art and life into a seamless, transcendent whole; to distance art from life in order to feel both more profoundly. Which is to say, *closer* creates a pas de deux between Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht, between a theater of cruelty and a theater of alienation effects. This is a piece that, as its name suggests, is about getting closer to things without ever closing them out. The point is neither to make the boundary between performer and audience meaningless nor to keep it rigidly in place. Instead, *closer* asks audiences to join the dance at the threshold between performer and spectator.

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In doing so, it raises questions about the responsibility not of art, or of the performer, but of the audience. What does it mean to watch dance-based movement, aesthetically, ethically, politically? How does a viewer of dance grapple with its histories of objectification, particularly of the female body, but also of bodies more generally? How does an observer respond when dance reaches out across the fourth wall, or when it retreats back from it? When a dance comes closer, to use BodyCartography's term, by playing with different scales and settings of performance, how should the watcher respond? Overall, what does an audience member owe the dancer and the dance itself (for they are not necessarily one and the same)?

In *closer*, BodyCartography addresses these questions by powerfully moving in two directions at once: the company uses proximity as a means for creating a wide-open space of exploration; simultaneously, BodyCartography proposes certain kinds of distancing as opportunities for making intense connection. The piece is set up in two parts. The first is a series of site-specific performances that feature one performer dancing for one audience member. In November 2016, BodyCartography worked with Shoshona Currier, then director of performing arts for Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, to present these one-on-one events throughout the city at parks in various neighborhoods as well as the interior of the ornate Chicago Cultural Center downtown. The work then culminated in an ensemble performance at Links Hall under the direction of Bieringa and Ramstad, with lighting by Mike Wangen, sound by Justin Jones, and costumes by Anna Marie Shogren.

Both the one-to-one and ensemble events begin with a deceptively simple question: "Can I dance for you?" On the surface, this is a very direct request, but the more one considers the question, the deeper and richer it gets. It is at once a gift and a

demand, an offering and a requisition, a sacrifice and an arrogation. In distinction to social dancing, which can certainly be directed at another yet just as easily might be done purely for self-expression, theatrical dance, by its history and its structure, asks for attention. “Can I dance for you?” is perhaps among the main urges to dance at all in theatrical modes. On one level, by merely attending any dance performance at all, an audience member has already said yes to this question. But by asking “*can* I dance for you” instead of “*may* I dance for you,” BodyCartography intensifies the expectations of responsibility for the audience member. “May I dance for you” suggests the dance will go on even if the viewer declines to say yes. The shift to “can I dance for you” implies that without a yes, it is impossible for the dance to proceed. The observer must explicitly give over attention and presence to BodyCartography’s dancers; one must risk trusting them. Whether when following an individual dancer around Hamlin Park, as I did when I attended the one-to-one segment, or at the start of the group performance at Links Hall, “Can I dance for you?” becomes a question that sets the stage for considerations of the responsibility of the audience. Once one says “yes,” one has moved closer to the heart of *closer*.

II. A WALK IN THE PARK

Hamlin Park is located on the north side of Chicago, in an affluent neighborhood just west of Wrigley Field. It is a classic urban park, with a semi-enclosed baseball field, a playground, and winding asphalt paths. The trees always look slightly tired, as does the turf, with patches of dirt and mud among the blades of grass. There are various low brick walls, scraggly shrubs, and wooden benches with a slat missing here or there or someone’s name chiseled into the side. Hamlin is well worn, but beautifully so, a testament to the quotidian sturdiness of public city nature and culture. Its forte is not glamour but functionality. Yet it has its charms. In addition to an outdoor swimming pool, it also features a classic Progressive Era fieldhouse designed by Prairie-style architect Dwight H. Perkins. The upstairs loftlike auditorium is a magical space. It feels like a clubhouse and has long served as a center for dance in Chicago.

When I arrived at Hamlin Park on a warm fall day, BodyCartography had set out a table and a sign announcing the staging of *closer*. The feeling was somewhere between the sign-up table for a 5K run and a PTA bake sale, in a good way. The dancers were distinguishable from everyday people using the park because they were sitting or standing near the table, stretching and staying loose in sweats or Lycra, talking to each other as they did so. What also distinguished them were their bodies—these were athletes with long limbs and a spring in their steps. So too, they possessed a certain look of concentration, their neck muscles and backs tightened, a focused gaze in their eyes. While others at the park seemed fully in repose—off duty, talking on mobile phones, walking dogs, looking after children while sipping a to-go Starbucks latte—the BodyCartography ensemble seemed ready to get to work.

Think of what follows as a contemporary dance walking tour. After I signed a sheet on a clipboard, Olive Bieringa told me, “This is Justin. He is going to dance for you. Feel free to follow him as close or far away as you like and he will bring you back here in fifteen minutes.” Justin’s back was to me and he stood, stretching his long arms up over his head, bending elbows this way and that, testing the air, the mood, the dynamics of the moment. He was taking his time. It was nothing short of awkward. And perhaps this was the point. To get closer in *closer* to the dynamic between performer and viewer requires a confrontation with—and an overcoming of—the awkwardness of the theatrical gaze, made all the more intense by its setting in a public place such as a park, where passersby are technically not part of the one-to-one performance.

As Justin slowly considered his next move, I did too. I circled around to see Justin from a different angle. He lifted one foot up, kept the other planted in the city park dirt. We were just to the side of the winding asphalt pathway. His form echoed the small oak tree next to him. It had lost most of its leaves; just a few were still dangling from their stems. A metal baseball bat pinged. Children chattered in the playground. The chain-link fence ended in a seemingly arbitrary place in the field next to us. A plane flew across the face of the moon, which had risen in the afternoon sky. The scales of *closer* came into contact with those of an alter ego performance that might have been titled *further*. Near and far jangled together, interwoven, their differences intensified by appearing simultaneously. Who was on that plane? I wondered. What could they see of the city from their vantage point? Where were they headed as they soared east toward the airspace above Lake Michigan?

Looking back toward Justin, earthbound, I began to consider what I had gotten myself into. Suddenly the lines between the performance and its setting were blurred. Were we in the front of the house? Backstage? Nowhere? Everywhere? Was I even part of the performance now in its site-specific location, no longer audience member but dancer of a sort too? I was a spectator made spectacle, inside myself yet seeing myself from without. What were the dog walkers on the path thinking of Justin and me? Never mind that, what was Justin thinking of me? Was I living up to my part of *closer*? Was I being a good viewer? Was I doing him justice as a performer? Proximity and distance came into a new dynamic in what was nothing less than a duet—performer and audience member—between Justin and me.

Thrown into the site-specific space of Hamlin Park, we had to trust each other. At first, that trust was tentative, but it would soon be tested and solidified. Across the path from where Justin stood, a boy and father were kicking a soccer ball. The ball rolled away from the boy, hitting Justin in the leg and coming to a rest next to his foot. The boy wasn’t sure what to do, frightened by these strangers and what they were up to in the park. Justin stayed focused on his meditative tree pose. It was my job, I realized, as audience member, to let the boy know it was alright to retrieve his ball. In this public place, I was part of the performance. I knew the rules of the dance, its procedures and



protocols. As such, I had a kind of agency to act—it was incumbent upon me to do so. “Yes,” I said to the boy. “It’s ok to get your ball.” The boy grabbed it with his hands and clutched it to his belly. He looked up curiously at Justin and then ran back across the path.

Justin remained in his pose, treelike, his back to me, looking away. Then, suddenly, he took off down the path. I was behind now. Far behind. Further away from him. I followed, quickening my pace to reach him. I caught up to Justin in a more isolated corner of Hamlin Park. Moving closer, I saw that he had reached down and picked up a long stick. He leaned over, tilting it into the ground and tracing a circle around a rock and pebbles in the dirt, creating a kind of mysterious runic symbol, like a special consecration of the ritual unfolding. Was I to look at it? Or was this a violation of his private consecration of Hamlin Park? I sensed it was something Justin was doing for himself. I could witness it, appreciate it, but only across the boundary between us. The one-to-one experience of *closer* had led, intriguingly, to greater distance. I could watch, I could make my own meaning of his improvisations, actions, movements, and gestures, but I could never fully know them. We were in this together, but there was a difference between us. Proximity is not universality. Its emotional, affective, sensorial, and intellectual riches are found in the approach that never quite fully arrives.

As I moved closer to Justin, I felt the distinctions between us continue to expand. While for a moment I had felt part of the dance, no longer audience member but fellow performer, now I felt back in the role of spectator. I considered the differences of our bodies, mine stouter, paunchier, older. I considered my lack of access to the knowledge that Justin possessed, which I would never be able to access because I had not trained as a dancer. Did I envy him? Perhaps for a moment. But *closer* now made me consider that dance is not about equality between performer and viewer. It is not a form for leveling

closer, New Zealand,
2016. Courtesy of
BodyCartography

the playing field. And anyway, if we were all the same in our movement, our bodies, our knowledge, our perceptions and perspectives, how boring life would be! Instead, *closer* let me arrive at the boundary between performer and audience. I saw that my role as observer was crucial, indeed essential. There needed to be a receiver of his performance even if the process of creating and receiving became, in the context of Hamlin Park, part of the performance itself. Without it, there was no getting *closer* to whatever it was we were pursuing.

As Justin continued to improvise his stick-rock ritual, lifting the stick up to the air now as if to salute the sun, the differences and discontinuities between us gave way to something else: something like a conversation, a democratic exchange made possible only because we were not all for one or one for all. We had entered the country of dance, the state not so much of being as of becoming. We were not equivalents, but partners in a shared project, a kind of search party to discover what the boundaries were in the country of dance, where the frontiers stretched out and where horizons dimmed. We could investigate what kinds of liberties existed in the territory of *closer*, a place where one arrived by never quite arriving, but always exploring more. What sorts of freedoms beckoned here in the sovereignty of these fifteen minutes? And what might be built, temporarily, before it faded away, all the more powerful for its impermanence? In the interregnum of *closer's* one-performer-to-one-audience-member arrangement, what lasted?

One thing to land on here was the power of appreciation—more accurately of respect for Justin's artistry as the performer, for his commitment to the pursuit of clarity, his openness to his surroundings yet insistence on getting closer to what was going on within himself. Learning from him, I slowly began to realize that I had the opportunity not only to look outward, toward Justin, at our shared surroundings, but I could also look inward. I began to feel more empowered to let my own mind wander, to daydream. The intensification of partnership in pairing one performer with one audience member gave way to an enlarged sense of awareness not only of the world around and beyond, but also of the world within. Justin's choices became opportunities for my own deeper self-investigation. This was not abandonment of the performance, but perhaps its fullest realization. In getting closer to *closer*, I was getting closer to myself.

I was able to achieve this closeness only by first gaining distance on myself through the performance's structures and Justin's improvisations within them. The dance not only established a relationship between dancer and watcher, then; it also rearranged the space within me as the watcher. I heard the sound of my own footsteps on the peat as I stepped across the dirt below a tree. I heard the muffled, Doppler-effect sound of a car radio passing by on the avenue, leaving in its wake the undulating waves of an electric guitar solo. Little ripples on the surface of a mud puddle next to me. The thick, aged, gray bark of the older trees. Light around the veins of a semitranslucent leaf, pale yellow, slowly losing its color. The glint of sunlight off the aluminum poles of the baseball backstop. The rattle of a child's training wheels as she biked past. The

blueness of the afternoon sky, at once unreachable, soaring far beyond what I could grasp, and yet also stretching down, unfurling weightless and with ease, arriving in the pastoral setting of the park. A Saturday, fully oxygenated. Nothing at all to see here, and yet, at the same time, everything.

This was what I approached: an appreciation of another person as gifted dancer and thinker. An enhanced sense of our site-specific surroundings. A sense of shared mission and camaraderie within that context. And then, getting closer to this state of becoming that was *closer*, I was able to value, and evaluate, my own experiences more expansively.

Bringing my focus back to Justin as performer, I realized that he had set off again, now running back toward the sign-in table. He picked up momentum, running, slowing to roll and jump back up again to his feet. He arrived at a long, winding brick wall, considered it, crouched against it, leaned into it, tested its solidity, its capabilities. At the wall, this demarcation between path and field, Justin suddenly leapt up, grabbed a tree limb, and dangled for a moment before falling to the ground. Did he see something up there? A vista? He relaxed his shoulders and broke into a smile, making eye contact for the first time.

III. WILDERNESS PRESERVE

“This is Anna. She is going to dance for you. Feel free to follow her as close or far away as you like and she will bring you back here in fifteen minutes.”

The next dancer I witnessed as part of *closer*'s one-to-one segment was Anna Marie Shogren. We were off, but this time in the opposite direction, away from the fields at Hamlin and toward the basketball and fenced-in tennis courts. Anna played with tempo as she walked, quickened her pace, then ran. She looked back at me, almost nervously, then sprang forward, catlike. Her movements were tense, coiled, fierce. It was hard to tell if she was on the prowl or fleeing from a predator herself. There was something wilder at play in her performance than in Justin Jones's more meditative, contemplative mode, an edginess, perhaps a hint of anger, certainly a little more danger in the air. Things were not so relaxed. What was surprising was that she also welcomed me to experience these energies with her, turning back toward me with the hint of a smile on her lips, even as she raced away.

As with Jones's performance, perhaps even more so, I was forced to consider the obligations an audience member has to the performer. What is the imaginary contract signed between the two once the dance begins, particularly when it is improvised on the moving stage of a public space? How does trust develop? In the intimacy of a one-to-one performance, one had to face up to its relational dimensions more viscerally. Particularly in a site-specific space such as a park, you cannot hide in the dark of the theater. You gaze at the performer. But the performer gazes back. You are both on display.

closer, Washington,
DC, 2017.
Photo: Jonathan Hsu



In contrast to Justin's quieter, more inward approach, powerful for its gestures toward privacy and how my role as audience member might be to respect his privacy, Anna intensified the question of what the contract is between performer and audience by pushing her movement outward toward the world around us. She brought the viewer into a kind of wild state of engagement in part by providing a space of distanced safety—as if to say, I am going to try some weird stuff, I might push the boundaries a bit, but will you be there to witness it, and even to intervene if things get out of hand?

At first, she returned to the wall at which Justin had ended his dance. She shifted weight and balance against it, pushing the wall and being pushed by it. The differences between her and Justin were telling. While he moved slowly, smoothly, evenly, with an emphasis on grace and poise, Anna's movement was herky-jerky, unpredictable, darting, as if she might surprise even herself by something she did. For Justin, the wall had been an opportunity; for Anna, the wall was a problem. She expressed a sense of need. There was an urgency to achieve a new state of being, and to identify the limits on that project. Could she punch through the boundary of getting closer rather than play along, over, or around its fortifications?

Perhaps the performance took on this more fraught quality for me as the viewer because I am a straight man and she a female dancer. But perhaps not. After all, there is an erotics in any encounter between a performer and viewer regardless of gender identity or sexual preference. Nonetheless, from my vantage point as audience member growing more aware of the question of my obligation to the performer, Anna's choices to emphasize wildness raised the stakes on our differences in gender. This was a performance that pushed and challenged, that pressured and dared. There was an aggressiveness to it, as if she were looking for trouble. There was hurt there too, and vulnerability intermixed with courage. Some kind of reconnaissance was going on here: of move-

ment, of me as viewer, of the spaces we were moving through, of their lurking dynamics of power, domination, order, the imposition of norms.

Anna moved out again toward the basketball court, and for a moment I thought she might try to join the game of the young, male players. Then she turned around one of the poles and crossed over to a set of scraggly bushes at the edge of the chain-link fence that enclosed two tennis courts. I walked quickly around the basketball game to catch up to her. As I got closer, she leaned against the fence, testing its sturdiness. Then she dove into a pile of leaves that had collected at the base of the bushes, as if to cover herself in them. Mulch, compost, earthworm, mushroom, beetle, ground cover, star seed—whatever was naturally wild, fermenting, decaying, organic, and also generative, Anna claimed as hers in this moment.

I was reminded of the famous section from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* when he writes of how we all “need the tonic of wildness.” Thoreau imagined this as an urge to grasp the sublimity of nature in all its awesome beauty and terror beyond the ken of human understanding. To experience “the tonic of wildness” was

to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable.¹

For Thoreau, “We can never have enough of nature.” And this was where Anna went, far from my gaze, into the leaves.

Then, after resting there a moment, she sprang up and moved to the back of the Hamlin Fieldhouse where the garbage dumpsters and the janitor's entrance are, the backstage of backstage, if you will. And there, as the afternoon sun sent soft rays of light through the taller trees above Hamlin Park, she fell into an exploratory dance that explored equilibrium. Standing now, tracing her feet across the pavement, she raked dried fallen leaves with her sneakers, seeming to enjoy the sound they produced.

Then Anna ran up a ramp into the lobby of the Hamlin Fieldhouse, pushing open the door. It was quiet in the lobby; no one was there at this moment. She touched the walls and moldings, getting a feel for the place. A random folding chair sat below one of the large windows, in front of a radiator grill, and she sat on it a moment, taking in her surroundings. The air was different than outside. It was thicker and cooler all at the same time. Here was a refuge, perhaps, but one very different from the leaves outside, lacking their connection to the Earth, nature, and wildness. In this space, Anna seemed trapped, and so she made comedy out of the limits imposed by the lobby. This reminded me of a wonderful moment, caught on video, of Anna dancing at the Chicago Cultural Center, where BodyCartography had staged another site-specific installation

closer, Washington,
DC, 2017. Courtesy of
BodyCartography



of *closer*'s one-to-one performances. In the clip, she walks her viewer down a hallway to one of the Cultural Center's large, ornate, domed rooms, the kind of space you picture old Chicago civic leaders having a banquet in when the building opened in 1897. Instead of taking her audience member from the cramped hallway into the open room, Anna uses her body to close the large metal fire door. She stands up against it, taking stock of her own entrapment. Her knees begin to wiggle, then her shoulders. The hollow metal begins to rattle a bit, like a steel drum. She stretches her arms up to flatten herself against the door. Then she seems to get an idea. She steps back, pauses, then hurls her entire body forward, leaping up and crashing into the door. The reflections of the florescent lights in the hallway glimmer a bit as she bangs her body against it. One, two, three, four, five, six times. Then she calmly stops and civilly opens the handle on the door, beckoning her viewer to enter through it with her. There is something quite dramatic about this sequence of movements: it is an expression of pain, a sadness too. It is an arrival at an impossibility of breakthrough.

Crucially, it is also very funny. It mixes absurdist humor with dead serious movement exploration, an intriguing combination that brings one closer to the line between the domesticated and the wild. The impositions of human habitation were all around us, but Anna's choices as performer and mover kept discovering the edges where nature persists. At the edge of the wall, just outside the fence, behind the building, in the corners of the lobby, other energies, other reserves persevere.

Out the front door of the Hamlin Fieldhouse and down the stairs we went, the performance completed, back to the sign-in table.

IV. NOTEBOOKS IN HANDS

“Can I dance for you?”

Once again, the question, a simple approach that opens up an expanse of other questions, possibilities, dilemmas, opportunities, and inquiries. For the group performance of *closer*, the ten dancers entered the box theater space at Links Hall. The audience had been asked to sit in a circle around the dance floor. Each performer approached an individual audience member and asked, “Can I dance for you?” Improvisations ensued, as did awkwardness. How were we to receive these invitations, these requests? Were we to watch as individuals or as representatives of the audience, that mass of eyes taking in the show? Were we to join the dancers, become part of the dance, or remain spectators? What were we to do with our own bodies?

Things felt spur-of-the-moment, yet also, as the dancers begin to move, quickly connections began to situate us. The dancers each brought their individual practices, their disciplines, their approaches, their trainings, their experiences to the performance. Their prior conversations with each other, previous performances of *closer*, all the rehearsals and discussion that had taken place before this improvised beginning provide the framework for expressing what was on their minds and in their bodies now. The background emerged in the foregrounding of that simple question: Can I dance for you? Improvisation turns out to be embedded in a rich context. Yet we the viewers were only just beginning to acclimate ourselves to the demands of BodyCartography’s intimate choreography. We still did not quite know what to make of what we were seeing, nor what the rules were for our seeing. This uncertainty made the beginning of *closer* thrilling. What was going to happen?

In a filmed version of *closer* at Links Hall, from another performance than the one I attended, each dancer’s particular interests quickly emerged at the start of the piece. Otto Ramstad examined centripetal and centrifugal forces, spinning in as many ways as one might spin; Justin Jones was curious about verticality, horizontality, lines, and stretch; Alana Parekh bent her arms in a sort of contorted prayer, and sought to make direct, friendly connection with the viewer; Darling Squire covered his face and tiptoed around one audience member; Olive Bieringa concentrated on floor work, in smaller, quieter movements; Hope Goldman, Anna Marie Shogren, Sarah Baumert, and Amelia Charter paced the room, looking for opportunities for movement here or there, defining and redefining the boundaries and borders, the geometric shapes of bodies in the space as they walked; Joanna Furnans moved to a darker corner, found a rhythm in a back-and-forth saunter that even got a few audience members joining her in the movement, then moved forward toward another audience member and stepped back quickly in a series of short leaps, purposefully thudding, as if she were a fencer on the retreat from a parry.

Patterns began to emerge, little duets and trios, imitations and reactions among the dancers. Ramstad and Jones quickly assembled alongside Furnans, tracing the

angles of her leaping retreat with their arms, like two squires accompanying a sire. Squire and Parekh danced together, he lifting her, spinning her under his arm, then leaping sideways past her. Goldman, Baumert, and Charter joined Bieringa on the floor, spreading out in loosely related forms of crawling, wiggling, squatting, and stretching. The solos, duets, and trios continued, full of little ideas.

Then the dancers themselves began to sit among us, and Ramstad soloed, spinning around the center of the dance floor. There was a wonderful corkscrew quality to his improvisation, created by the way he used his arms to frame his body. There was also a quality of the solo, which was not a solo but rather an interplay with some other force or entity or even being, with which you sensed Ramstad dancing, taking into his body or reacting against. In this way, his solo, like so much of *closer*, edged away from what it was, moved toward a boundary, toward, in this case, a duet.

For all this richness of movement and activity at the start of the performance, we in the audience still did not quite know what to do yet. What was our role here as audience members when asked to be danced for? Were we being asked to dance *with*, as would be the norm with social dancing? “Will you dance with me?” would have been the question then. Were we being asked to judge the dancing with approval, applause, a reaction of some kind? We were not quite sure. How much should we sit still, or stand up? Should we move around, or not? The uncertainty at the start of *closer* served at once to distance, perhaps even to alienate, and yet it also brought us into the piece.

As Ramstad soloed, exploring the quality of spinning, twisting, dancing with and against other forces—gravity, air, memories, audience, ground, the future—the other performers quietly took out notebooks and pencils. Sitting on the floor among us, they jotted a few things down, but mostly watched Ramstad intently. He completed his captivating solo and the other dancers began to offer commentary through wireless headsets: they felt excited by his speed changes, craved more volume in his movements toward the end; loved the structures of weaving, and the capacity to see his whole body at times, yet only parts of his movement; thought about the moments of stillness among the seeming chaos of motion; wondered where the motor of his spin came from, what was generating the energy, how he was within himself, yet seeing outward; excited by the ways his hands were leading what he was doing, and how he exited from the dance with a kind of hello, curious about the oppositional elements in his presentation.

Now we were watching them watching the dance. They were bringing the audience in closer by pushing us away one step further. We could watch them watch, and in doing so, witness one version of what an audience member might do, how we might receive the movement being presented, being offered. They modeled ways to see movement, to speak of it, to take it in and translate it into language, to respond to the dancing body with generous critique. By pushing us a step back to observe observation, BodyCartography brought us closer to *closer*.

Ramstad stood up again, restaging his solo. He began more slowly this time, as if working in the comments of the other dancers, returning again to some of the motions



closer, New Zealand,
2016. Courtesy of
BodyCartography

he had performed the first time, but also introducing new ideas, such as a wonderful falling to the floor and rotating in a more squarelike pattern instead of in the circles of his first solo. He moved more often in and out, behind and through the spaces between the audience members sitting around him. “Yes,” the other dancers remarked. “Yes.” “Yes.” “Yes.”

V. TWILIGHT

Shift the question “Can I dance for you?” to “For whom do you dance?” This second question has a million ever-shifting potential answers. One dances for oneself, for the audience, for loved ones, for the dead, for posterity, for everyone and everything, for no one and nothing. One just dances. One dances justly. Look this question in the eye and it has no set answer. It is unquestionable.

The next sections of *closer* placed the audience in a more conventional positioning in relation to the performers. The light shifted to purples and blues as if to accentuate the space of the stage, with viewers still surrounding the dancers but now in darkness, as a more traditional audience would be. James Blake and RZA’s “Take a Fall for Me” began playing on the sound system. Olive Bieringa led a trio of female dancers—herself, Anna Marie Shogren, and Sarah Baumert—in a set of movements that began on the ground and slowly rose and sped up into a series of windmill rotations of arms, torsos, hopping, and skipping. There was breath in this sequence, a feeling of pulsation and rhythms emanating from the body. Placed in relationship to the music, a feeling of longing came across as well.

The mood was intimate here, the body language raw, vulnerable, tender, emotional. One could take it in precisely because of the distance that the lighting, music, and movement established. We were meant to watch her without being as implicated in the dance. The audience grew closer by being rendered more distant. By the end of the section, the three dancers were making contact, holding hands, leaning on each other’s shoulders, arms. Bieringa ended up in a headstand, the other two performers

supporting her. A jazzy “Take the A Train” piano riff tumbled out over a hip-hop drum beat. The dancers split apart from each other, their movement becoming more frenetic, springlike, sped up. The music suddenly stopped, although the movement did not, and we heard the breathing and rustling of bodies in motion. They returned to the floor, seating themselves among the audience.

All was quiet in the twilight. Otto Ramstad popped up from behind audience members, in a corner of the room. Justin Jones joined him in a duet. From female to male. Eventually they wound up on their backs, torsos raised, making bridges across the floor, reaching out toward audience members, then turning back to each other in the silence. The light grew redder, pinker. Eventually the floor became dotted with circles, as if the heavens at dawn. Bob Dylan’s “All the Tired Horses” from his 1970 album *Self Portrait* began playing on the speakers. A female choir (Hilda Harris, Albertine Robinson, and Maeretha Stewart) sang “All the tired horses in the sun, how’m I supposed to get any riding done?” as strings and an organ began to simmer into the soundtrack. Ramstad and Jones joined feet, slowly pivoted and shifted in various acts of balance against each other, then spun out, arms leading them into brief solos, then back again into reactive duet, attuned to each other’s shaping of space. The dance ended in a kind of sidestepping sway, calm and peaceful.

Over the speakers, the music shifted to Neil Young’s “Out on the Weekend,” a song that, like Bob Dylan’s “All the Pretty Horses,” comes from the early 1970s heyday of hippie-ranch sunset-style singer-songwriter rock (*Harvest*, released in 1972). It is defined by a wonderful interplay of a triplet bass line by Tim Drummond, echoed by Kenny Buttrey’s incredible drumming. Bieringa, Shogren, and Baumert joined Ramstad and Jones on the floor as each dancer found their way into this rhythm. Some dug into it with their legs, moving in sync with the tempo and pulse of “Out on the Weekend.” Bieringa found a way in by crouching slightly and spreading her arms up into the air. Shogren, Baumert, and Jones seemed to seek out the subtler accents and suggested offbeats within the groove of the music.

BodyCartography must have liked the groove of “Out on the Weekend” a lot, because they extracted it to play as the rest of Neil Young’s song faded. We were now fully in a more conventional mode of performer-audience contemporary dance viewing. No breaking of the fourth wall here, but instead the pleasurable experience of collective attention focused on the performance at center stage. Here, in the distance, connection, a different register of intimacy. Trust built out of the currency of attention. Consecration by concentration. The light grew starker, losing its colorful hues and starry celestial patterns as Drummond and Buttrey’s groove began to get garbled and fanned through various sonic filters, as if its steady pulsation were leaking out into the universe. Entropy. But also peaceful natural decay redux.

The dancers each settled into sculptural stillness, holding poses of various difficulty: up on one foot, down on a knee, arms twisted above the head, knees pushed

in to one another, up on toes, arms shaky, bodies rocking slightly, shaking, backs bent or contorted. Each in place, as the lights slowly faded. Then, the dancers all began to vibrate their bodies intensely as the song faded to silence. The lights came up to a stark white.

And then we were plunged into blackness.

VI. DARK MATTER

People were groaning. Were they having sex? Had *closer* arrived at its destination: an orgy? A dancer sliding along the floor bumped into my leg. Or was it another audience member? What had I gotten myself into here?

No, this was not an orgy. While it teetered on the edge of the sexual, there was something else going on here. The total darkness rapidly dissolved the boundary between performers and audience, while at the same time accentuating the boundary. This was a vulnerable space of performative ambiguity. We were strangers. We had entered into an intimate setting. We had done so by losing our eyes. The optic is the dominant mode for receiving dance as theatrical performance: we see a show, bodies carve out space with motion, feelings arrive and touch us emotionally or semantically through our vision of them. In BodyCartography's darkened theater, however, the audience couldn't see their hands before their faces. The ordering of bodies and space by visual parameters became disorganized. We had to turn toward other senses to make sense of things. Sight would no longer do.

There was no more distance here to measure between performer and audience, at least not optically, and yet at the same time, we had entered what felt like infinite space—in a way, there was only distance, all around, forever. We could not place ourselves visually. So in place of seeing, we activated other senses: our ears, our noses, our touch and skin. We had to hear distance and proximity now, make contours of space and relationship with our ears. The skin came alive more fully. The nose too. The dancers' breathing started to take on a different meaning: it was not carnal, but rather a way to structure the darkness, to give it shape and form. Breath made the terrifying infinite human. It was the pulse beneath the pulse of "Out on the Weekend." It was the lengthening and retraction of Ramstad's corkscrew spins. It was the back-and-forth of all the vibratory energies that allow BodyCartography's *closer* to approach the audience and pull us with them toward the darkness that surrounds all life.

Suddenly, dim light. As if in a dream, Sarah Baumert had stood up. She was spinning, wildly, freely, in the night, like a top coming off its axis. Her arms flailed, her head and neck bended, her waist twisted, her feet pivoted and shifted.

Darkness again. Then a bit of light again. More dancers spinning, shifting, turning, generating energy, gyrating. Darkness.

When the light came on again, dim, ghostly, the ensemble members were on their



closer, New Zealand,
2016. Courtesy of
BodyCartography

backs, assembled in a group, like a school of fish, wriggling and pushing their bodies forward with their feet and legs. They turned on their sides, inching across the floor, collapsing on their fronts, no arms or upper bodies involved in their slow but steady momentum. They reached audience members on the side of the circle. Some moved out of the way. Others sat in place, waiting to see what happens when BodyCartography arrived at their edge. The dancers slowly rotated back in the other direction, stopping at the center of the floor. Synchronized now, they began a sequence that slowly brought them to their hands and knees. They arrived at another edge, where audience members were sitting. The dancers sat too now. Their pace accelerated as they reassembled from a group to a line. The distance between them grew as they rose to their feet, one after another, stretching out again in the light, our eyes adjusting to their visible presence.

VII. ANTIFASCIST DANCE PARTY

The sound started, first a hum, like the kind you might hear from a generator. A buzzing. Then a slow but steady thump thump of a synthesized bass drum. The dancers approached audience members. This time they did not ask “Can I dance for you?” but instead invited audience members to move from the outside of the circle to the center of the dance floor. As the beat quickened, the roles were now reversed: the dancers were on the outer ring, the audience in the middle.

The full ensemble began dancing around the audience in a kind of maypole ritual, walking the circle, stepping forward and back in choreographed sequence. They knew the dance. We in the middle, the audience, did not. It looks ritualistic, but is it meant to be Dionysian or Apollonian? Were we dancing to celebrate life or, like

the *Misirlou*, about to watch the dancers (and maybe some of the audience members) plunge to their deaths off a cliff? Were the dancers trying to cast a spell and mesmerize us—reversing the direction of the gaze by trapping us in the middle while they twirled freely on the margins? Or were they welcoming us into a communal celebration? Who was doing what for whom here?

At first, there was something ominous about the encircling of the audience by dancers. Nothing unfriendly or untoward occurred, but there was a moment when it felt like the viewers were being rounded up. This is always the danger of intimate choreography. The willingness to cross the fourth wall, to invite a murkier relationship between performer and audience, can become manipulative. “Can I dance for you?” moved past rhetorical question to assertion, to command. I will dance for you. You will be danced for. And, now, as the beat picked up and the dancers started to march in toward the audience and back to the edge of the room, perhaps also another demand: you will dance for us.

But another question quickly moved to the fore: will you dance *with* us? The beat broke through to double time with a kind of electronic crystal shatter. The lights swirled, as if from a crystal ball. The ensemble danced in toward the audience and back out to the edge, breaking out of their choreography. Free form! Informal time! Fittingly for its name, *closer* arrived at an ending but never reached it; it merely moved on to something new. Theatrical dance over, social dance just beginning. Power is always at play in both, but power is not a bad thing—it is a force to draw closer, to wield with honor and obligation, to assert and let go with judgment. And these things Body-Cartography does, revealing that from the movements between proximity and distance of performer and audience member, we all become something different from what we began as: we become more responsible for our own freedom, for our willingness to exchange it relationally, to grow closer to one another, to forge bonds, and to let them go when needed.

The dancers passed out cans of sparkling water. Smiles, small talk, laughter. The music pulsated and dazzled. A few audience members broke out their moves. But the feeling as a whole was centrifugal. We began to break away from each other. Some slipped out to the bar or out the door into the night. But a few lingered. Some just stood together and talked. Some just stood, letting the ambience surround and envelop them. All was fine and acceptable now. Whether closer or further, with one another or on our own, we were free to move.

NOTE

1. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), 415.