



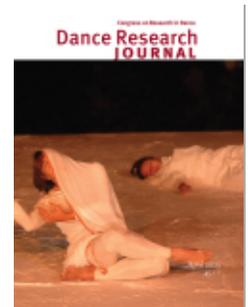
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**Composing While Dancing: An Improviser's Companion, and:
I Want To Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom
(review)**

Ann Cooper Albright

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Composing While Dancing: An Improviser's Companion

by Melinda Buckwalter. 2010. Madison, WI: Wisconsin University Press. 232 pp., illustrations, glossary, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paper.

I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom

by Danielle Goldman. 2010. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press. 186 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index. \$60.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper. doi:10.1017/50149767712000137

Improvisation is an elusive subject. Despite the fact that much late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century dancing is deeply

intertwined with a variety of improvisational practices, there is a regrettable paucity of books dealing with this slippery and yet seductive topic. Even though there has been a veritable explosion of dance scholarship over the past three decades, the written texts dealing with movement improvisation are still limited to various how-to manuals for dance educators or books that deal with one particular individual without situating their work within a historical and aesthetic context. There are, of course, a few memorable exceptions, such as Susan Foster's delightful and brilliant exegesis on the work of Richard Bull (*Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull*), but these are few and far between.

Fortunately, 2010 was a banner year for dance improvisation, producing two new books: Melinda Buckwalter's *Composing While Dancing: An Improviser's Companion* and Danielle Goldman's *I Want To Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*. Melinda Buckwalter is a dancer, writer, and contributing editor to *Contact Quarterly*. She has personally studied with many of the twenty-six dance artists whose teaching and performance work she documents in her "Improviser's Companion." Danielle Goldman is an assistant professor at The New School, and her contribution to the literature on improvisation is an academic text that began as her dissertation in the Performance Studies Department at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Both books reflect the specific orientations of their respective writers: one is interested in getting more people moving and improvising, and the other is interested in building an intellectual analysis of the notion of "freedom" in dance improvisation via a series of case studies. Understandably, these books are directed to pretty different audiences, and it is unlikely that there will be much cross-over between those two readerships. This is unfortunate, for it is high time we close the gap between the language of practitioners and that of theorists in order to begin a dialogue within improvisation that includes both the kinetic pleasures of the moving body and the valuable insights that critical theory can bring to practice.

On its back cover, *Composing While Dancing* promotes itself as a "practical primer to the dance form." By introducing the life work of twenty-six artists whose teaching and performing focuses primarily on improvisation,

Buckwalter highlights the importance of this multifaceted exploration in contemporary dance. Her user-friendly, “how-to” approach is underscored not only in the enthusiastic tone of the writing—punctuated by exclamations such as “If you aren’t already, start improvising!” (5)—but also in the manual-like organization of the information. In addition to sections dealing with various approaches to space, time, music, shape, and image, there are short biographies of the artists, a glossary of terms, and a section at the end of each chapter featuring “practices for future research.” These simple step-by-step instructions [“How is time passing for you right now? Think up a movement practice for yourself that might shift the way you feel time. See if it works . . .” (73)] are surrounded by short tidbits of personal and poetic reflections in her self-described “Field Notes” and “Interludes.”

Each chapter is primarily composed of short segments that document the practices that fit within its thematic rubric. For instance, in the chapter on “Dancing Takes Shape,” we are exposed to glimpses of the work of Anna Halprin, Deborah Hay, Eiko and Koma, Steve Paxton, Richard Bull, Keith Hennessy, **Nina Martin**, Penny Campbell, Susan Sgorbati, Mary Overlie, Lisa Nelson, Prapto, and Barbara Dilley—all in twenty pages of text! Needless to say, none of these mini-discussions (sometimes a mere two paragraphs) is able to develop into a nuanced, complex, or critical evaluation of an artist’s work or a comparison of different approaches to the exploration of music. A number of these artists show up in many other sections as well, making for an oddly erratic flip book of information, and also a certain amount of repetition. It is hard to get a sense of the complexity of someone’s work by reading two or three paragraphs in four different chapters. **For instance, Nina Martin’s work with improvisational ensembles is touched on in Chapters 1–5 and 7,** while Pooh Kaye is mentioned only briefly in a section that discusses using objects in improvisation. Given the ridiculously truncated nature of those two paragraphs representing Kaye’s film and performance work, one wonders why Kaye was included at all—until a glance at the biography section reveals that she and the author collaborated on a duet while Buckwalter was in graduate school at Bennington College.

The author’s choice of the artists included is explained in her introduction: “The dance-makers included here are not an exhaustive list of those working in the field of improvisation by any means; the selection represents the web of my relatively local activities, mostly confined to the East Coast of the United States. My selections represent only specific cross-sections of the artists’ work” (4). Here, personal preference stands in for the writer’s methodology in peculiar and opaque ways. Given the glaring omission of any African-American improvisers (such as Dianne McIntyre or Ishmael Houston-Jones) within this book, the short section in the Introduction, “Gaining Cultural Perspective,” presents an obfuscated apology for not bothering to research further than the author’s proverbial neighborhood. **Also, the uneven and sporadic discussions of the central figures such as Nina Martin, Lisa Nelson, and Steve Paxton make it difficult to develop any sense of continuity within the work of individuals who are discussed at some length.** As a book, *Composing While Dancing’s* structure is awkward, and I feel that the list-like delivery of information would be better served in a Web site format, where hyperlinks could facilitate reading about an individual artist’s work across chapters based on thematic concerns.

The most compelling chapters in *Composing While Dancing* are the later ones on “The Eyes” and “Performing Science.” I was particularly interested in the rich discussion of Lisa Nelson’s work in a subsection entitled “The Kinesthetics of Seeing.” As a longtime coeditor of *Contact Quarterly*, Lisa Nelson is one of the most important, yet frequently unrecognized, figures in the development of contemporary improvisation. Her work in video and her focus on how we learn to see movement has influenced multiple generations of dancers, improvisers, and choreographers. The descriptions of her “Tuning Scores”—her signature approach to spontaneous composition—open up a much-needed discussion of representational images that balances the book’s emphasis on sensation and improvisational process.

I also appreciated that *Composing While Dancing* was, as the author explains, “researched with my body.” The “Field Notes” sections in each chapter are particularly evocative. In these, Buckwalter reflects on her own experience learning from many of the artists profiled.

I was especially drawn to her discussions of the moments when a particular approach to improvisation created a bit of friction for her, and rubbed against her kinesthetic preferences. For instance, in speaking of Nina Martin's "Ensemble Thinking Workshop," she writes,

However, a few dancers from somatic studies backgrounds (like myself) had trouble separating the compositional dialogue from the developing of movement material; the two were entwined in our training. . . . I was reserved but willing to go for the ride, and though I found it difficult at times, I was curious about how the other side of the coin liked to work.

And it did end up working for me. I found that I had to let go of my comfort zone at first, but what I knew deeply still served me. Martin's work offered me a way of getting up to speed—if reluctantly—and taught me, most importantly, how to shift gears. (72)

Improvisation as a negotiation of friction, of uncomfortable or difficult situations—what Danielle Goldman characterizes as "tight places"—is the central theme of *I Want to Be Ready*. In this book, Goldman refuses the all-too-common assumption that movement improvisation, by removing the most obvious structures of technique or composition, leads to an expressive freedom unfettered by society or history. Instead, Goldman claims improvisation's potential as a strategic practice of intervention into these power regimes, describing it as "a full-bodied critical engagement with the world, characterized by both flexibility and perpetual readiness" (5). Following Houston Baker's use of the term "tight place," she asks, "Who moves and who doesn't?" in order to highlight the ways in which one's socio-historical position affects one's mobility, both figuratively and literally.

Through a series of case studies that, once again, were chosen on the basis of personal preference ["Early in this project, . . . I decided

to write only about improvised dancing that I wanted to spend time watching" (139)], Goldman argues that improvisation constitutes a technology of selfhood precisely because of its appetite for movement in the presence of constraints. *I Want to Be Ready* looks at examples of this response-ability from different social and theatrical performances in the second half of the twentieth century. She analyzes the improvised dancing at New York City's Palladium Ballroom in the 1940s and 1950s, the connections between the 1960s' nonviolent protest techniques and certain aspects of the training in Contact Improvisation, various collaborations between dancers and jazz musicians, and Bill T. Jones's return to improvisation in his "The Breathing Show."

Although improvisation is a woefully understudied field, the books that do exist represent the Judson Dance Theater and Grand Union, Steve Paxton and the development of Contact Improvisation, and that generation of like-minded dancer/improvisers from multiple perspectives. Even the improvisational work of Bill T. Jones has received a fair amount of press. But little has been done with movement improvisation's relationship with music, or the group of dancers working in collaboration with jazz musicians in the 1960s and 1970s. Therefore, it was with a sense of relief (finally!) and a great deal of scholarly curiosity that I read Chapter 2, "We Insist! Seeing Music and Hearing Dance," which focuses on the performing and teaching work of Judith Dunn and Bill Dixon, as well as that of Dianne McIntyre's group Sounds in Motion.

In this chapter, Goldman rewrites the narrow and often white-washed history of post-modern improvisation that begins with the members of Robert Ellis Dunn's famous choreographic workshops at the Cunningham studio. Along with Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Simone Forti, Deborah Hay, Elaine Summers, and the like, Judith Dunn (who was married to Bob Dunn at the time) was also attending Bob Dunn's composition classes and dancing with the Cunningham company. Soon, however, she met Bill Dixon, a multifaceted African-American musician working with various writers, poets, and media artists in the black vanguard. Besides performing together in a number of different venues, Dixon and Dunn taught together extensively,

including at Bennington College, where Dixon founded the Black Music Division.

Dianne McIntyre's work with musicians and dancers in her company Sounds in Motion has also been under-represented in the history of improvisation, and in dance history in general. Fortunately, this is beginning to change, mostly because McIntyre keeps working well into her seventh decade. Goldman's elucidations of how McIntyre negotiated the racism of modern dance, as well as the politically charged sexism of the time (which equated blackness with masculinity), show how connected the strategic skills of improvisation were with McIntyre's ability to survive in a context that often excluded women. In addition, the descriptions of McIntyre's seminal collaboration with Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach help to bring attention to this less well-known chapter of American dance.

Dianne McIntyre moved back to Cleveland from New York City about a decade ago, and since then I have had the pleasure of getting to know this fierce and determined doyenne of African-American dance. Seeing McIntyre continue to perform improvisation and choreograph for others at an age when most people have retired (her most recent premiere was the choreography for a new choreo-poem by Ntazake Shange) made me fully appreciate Goldman's comment in the book's conclusion that: "Improvised dance literally involves giving shape to oneself and deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape. To go about this endeavor with a sense of confidence and possibility is a powerful way to inhabit one's body and interact with the world" (146).

I read these two books on improvisation while teaching physical mindfulness and Contact Improvisation for seven weeks in Greece (the first three weeks in Athens among the demonstrations). Certainly Goldman's ideas about improvisation as a negotiation of "tight places" resonated in this context of austerity and revolt. Sometimes space was materially tight, with thirty-three people crammed into a small studio, and at other times it was psychically tight, because many of the participants were grappling with a feeling of apathy. Working with various communities of professional and student dancers, it was clear to me that improvisation opened up spaces that were more meaningful in the present context

than some of the more traditional modern and ballet dance techniques, which still dominate in many dance schools in Greece. Indeed, the skills embedded in many techniques of contemporary improvisation provide important strategies for making connections between our physical experiences of dancing and how we live in the world. In that sense, I found the thoughts of anthropologist Angeles Arrien cited in the last pages of Buckwalter's *Composing While Dancing* (157) particularly useful when introducing a round robin at an Athens Contact Jam. I suggested that we follow her cardinal rules:

1. Show up.
2. Pay attention.
3. Tell the truth.
4. Don't get attached to the results.

As both these books make clear, this is excellent advice for dancing as well as living in the twenty-first century.

Ann Cooper Albright
Oberlin College

The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance

by Elina, Gertsman. 2010. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols. 356 pp., 149 b/w ill. + 45 color ill., 4 fold-outs, appendices, bibliography, notes, index, € 85.00 (approx. \$125), cloth.
doi:10.1017/S0149767712000149

Dancing with death has continually captured the choreographic imaginary. As morbidly parodic as prancing skeletons may seem, post-medieval dance appropriates the medieval macabre to serve specific aesthetical, cultural, and political agendas. The Willis of *Giselle* (1841), by hybridizing *choreomania* (dance mania) and the *danse macabre*, heighten the dark side of Romanticism. Mary Wigman's *Totentanz* (1917) employs spirit possession and the occult to underscore the inner struggle between death and the dying. Marcia Siegel has demonstrated how Kurt Jooss's *The Green Table* (1932) drew inspiration from the *Totentanz* cycle at Lübeck (1989,15–21). Kate Elswit has examined the choreographic experiments of Weimar Berlin in which the medieval motif served as a starting point for an eventual erosion of allegory (2009, 78–80). Realigning the theme