

Choreographing Emotion: The Process of Creating *ViewFinder*

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Photographer Diane Arbus said that in art “You really have to face that thing.” In the effort to recreate the effects of emotion-inducing psychological stimuli through movement, I discovered the necessity of personally encountering emotion in order to choreograph dance that would inspire it. The creative process paralleled my own growth of emotional discovery and led to a work which actively draws the audience in to consider their own perspective.

ViewFinder was inspired by my background in psychology. Originally conceived to mimic scientific studies of emotion through movement, this project in choreographing emotion took a personal turn to become a genuine process of questioning, discovery, and sharing of my own perspective of emotions. *ViewFinder* invites the audience to explore their own perspectives in dance and life by providing them with options as participants. They may use the capturing lenses of the cameras provided, or they may choose to examine the piece without the restriction of the frame, becoming part of the fleeting experience inherent to dance itself. The long process of developing this research and creative focus challenged my own viewpoints as a choreographer and person, tracing a journey of personal blocks and growth as I altered my own perspective and began to ask audiences to consider their own.

ViewFinder was initially inspired by psychologists’ collections of multimedia emotional stimuli that I was introduced to as a lab assistant. The International Affective Digital Sounds (IADS), the International Affective Picture System (IAPS), the Affective Norms for English Text (ANET), and the Affective Norms for English Words (ANEW) were all developed at the University of Florida’s NIMH Center for the Study of Emotion and Attention (CSEA), and my mentor there, Dr. Andreas Keil, encouraged me to consider them further. These stimuli captured my interest as they quantified and categorized cues for emotions; they have been developed as systems for inducing emotional states in study participants. As a dancer and psychology major, I was interested in this very different handling of emotionality and the possibility of combining the scientific method with the creative process and associative nature of art. I intended to reinterpret this psychological subject through dance, to translate the scientifically-defined elements of emotions into dance movements that were to measurably induce emotions just as the affective stimuli systems did. I had hopes to quantify the effect of dance on the audience through the Self-Assessment Manikin used by CSEA to measure the emotional dimensions of valence, activation, and control in its studies (Figure 1).

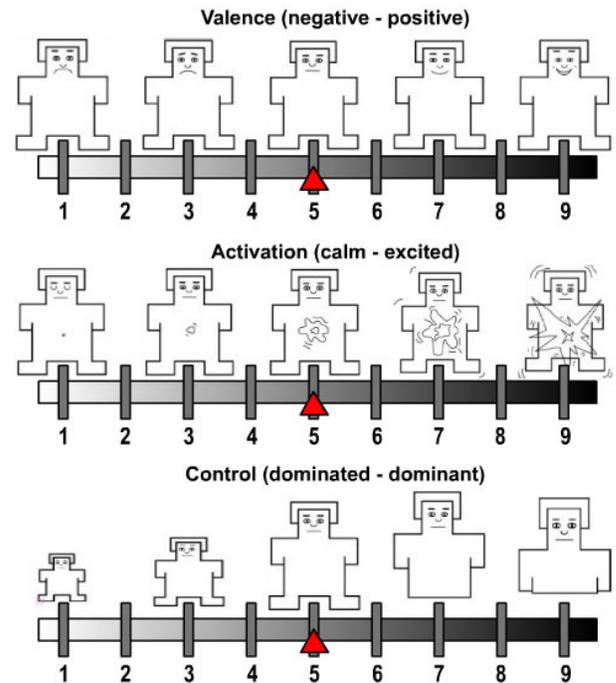


Figure 1. Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM). Source: <http://www.salleurl.edu/tsenyal/true/imatgesTRUE/plugins/pluginSAM.jpg>

In my first semester working with dancers, I explored the three dimensions that CSEA used to describe emotions, recognizing that these dimensions failed to match up with more common categorical understandings of the five most commonly accepted basic emotions: happy, sad, angry, fearful, and disgusted (Mikels, Fredrickson, Larkin, and Lindberg 1). I researched aesthetic elements that contributed to emotional art and looked for them in the stimuli, asking for my three dancers—Molly Nichols, Marissa Maxcy, and Chelsea Moehlenbrock, all dance majors at the University of Florida—to use those elements in improvisation with certain emotional intentions in mind. When focusing on happiness, for example, we explored different kinds of laughter we heard and saw and played games to create an environment of fun to foster positive emotions. As we did these things, my awareness of the breadth of the topic I’d set out to cover grew. My initial

wariness of exploring more than one basic emotion was amplified when I considered that within each basic emotion there were also countless possibilities for its portrayal and reception. I understood the highly individual nature of emotional experiences and the personal expression of emotion, yet I sought to collapse that variety into a single universal communication system. As I discovered the boundless area I'd set myself in as a choreographer, I simultaneously put myself personally into a similar unbounded, new territory through both dance and a new volunteer experience.

Unrelated to my choreographic explorations, I began training to be a volunteer counselor in these early stages of my project's progress, and I was immediately exposed to a whole new world of emotions. These emotions were given labels, generally very intense words such as "devastated," "stuck," or "overwhelmed." Unlike the stark images of "scary" snakes and "happy" sounds of carousels from my stimuli collections, the experiences of this counseling training were difficult to define or pinpoint yet were also so individual and specific. Each training role play was a unique and rich experience, a case study rather than one trial out of thousands on a single stimulus. As an artist, I began to realize the importance of working with the specific rather than the general. As photographer Diane Arbus described it, the more specific the artist's focus becomes, the more generally the work can be received: "you really have to face that thing" (1). Facing emotions head-on was something I was able to do—not through quantified standardized stimuli but through the mess of working with actual people in the confusion of their real emotional states.

In my second semester of working with dancers, returning dancer Chelsea Moehlenbrock was joined by UF dance minor Camille Tinnin, and I began to explore this more personal view of emotion. Various lines of choreographic material were generated through use of my own emotional memories, free-association compositional activities based on the stimuli, and other improvisational exercises with specific goals set to create relationships within and between the dancers that would embody the movements of emotions. I began to build a storyline out of these materials to describe my own process of realizing the distance at which I held emotions from myself and the challenge of overcoming that. Through the creative process, I realized the need to specify further. Joanna Mendel Shaw, UF School of Theater and Dance visiting guest choreographer, observed a showing of the piece and encouraged me, in scientific terms, to narrow my experimental focus. She encouraged me to choose a particular language, as she saw my diversified work as having three: those of memory, measuring, and feeling. Rather than choose one mode of communication as she recommended, I realized that my own point of interest was my dilemma between two of these in particular. The development of the piece became about the conflict

between my scientific "measuring" perspective that came more naturally and comfortably to me and my artistic "feeling" perspective, which I was only beginning to tap into through counseling training and a separate, meaningful solo work. All along I had been struggling between these two frames of mind without acknowledging it, and that creative block began to relieve as I allowed the project to take this into consideration. Through all of this, I was wary of my developing viewpoint. When I spoke with my mentor, UF Dance professor and choreographer Neta Pulvermacher, she continually encouraged me to recognize the value in a changing perspective and to take this alteration to the plan as a gift. By not limiting myself to what I had planned with my original perspective, I allowed this project to change me and to become what I needed it to be.

As the creative process continued to develop, I became interested in how we record our experiences. I found that our records, such as the CSEA stimuli, are an abstraction of a full experience into a clear and unchanging reminder, and there are losses of information that go along with that representation. In exploring this, I recorded sounds from rehearsals, took photographs, and edited videos to play with the reduction of information that occurs when we attempt to make an experience quantifiable and repeatable (Figure 2). As the stimuli reduce a truly genuine emotional experience into a two-dimensional photograph, four-second sound clip, or single word, I wondered about how we abstract life—and dance—when we attempt to quantify it as I had sought to do with my original project proposal. Through my explorations of other media, I realized the potential of using photography within the dance to represent one of my conflicting perspectives.



Figure 2. Experimentation with photography and dance. Chelsea Moehlenbrock in rehearsal, January 2011.

I invited UF photography major Lydia Challenger to be part of the work in order to share our perspectives on each

others' arts and to bring her expertise in capturing movement in images. She became part of the choreography, representing my "measuring" perspective, while Camille came to represent my developing "feeling" perspective that begins to abandon measurement and observation to become engrossed in the experience itself. As Chelsea draws cues from her environment to improvise in a truly unpredictable and genuine way, she embodied a pure experience that the others respond to, and I asked Camille to follow her. Camille begins with measuring movements and gradually transitions to more and more "tracking." This term is borrowed from Joanna Mendel Shaw, who asks dancers to follow others' movements. I describe this for my purposes as a growing desire to share in time and space with Chelsea such that Camille moves closer in proximity to Chelsea and repeats her improvised movements with less and less time delay (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Lydia Challenger tracking Chelsea Moehlenbrock's movements in dress rehearsal, April 2011. Photograph by Lydia Challenger.

The genuineness of the challenge in this task is intentional, and when the dancers sometimes collide, it reminds me of how in my counseling experiences sometimes a client and I find ourselves at odds in an attempt to share emotions. This kind of event indicates even a small lack in "tracking" attentiveness on my part, or Camille's, and we must not lose focus on empathizing fully with the other person in order for the understanding and flow in the conversation or dance to be recovered. Meanwhile, Lydia continuously photographs this process, acting as William James' observing "I," watching her counterpart's dealings with their mutual subject of interest.

This tracking goes on for some time through the improvised first half of the dance and shifts at a transitional point. At this point, Camille is so close to Chelsea that their hands meet and Chelsea's internal focus opens to recognize Camille's close presence. Here, they interweave their hands in discovery of each other. They begin a cooperative duet of the continuing struggle for Camille to stay alongside Chelsea, including the interdependence of weight-sharing, following movements, and personal contact. Finally, they come close to each other, and each begins to touch the other's face in an extended period of intimately tracing the other's features in a recognition and appreciation of each other's existence. To me, this extended intimate moment feels like the rare, special times when a client and I see each other more honestly after the frenzy of colliding emotions, and we recognize the value in what we each bring to the relationship.

With early public showings, I realized that the audience wasn't identifying with Camille through her struggles and relationship with Chelsea as I'd hoped; even with some rearranging, feedback still did not indicate a connection with the dynamic perspective I hoped the audience would relate to. In order to more directly connect the audience with the processes that informed and became central to the piece, I wanted to more directly involve them, challenging them to actively engage in the piece. This was accomplished by giving them single-use cameras with an implicit choice between capturing the moments of the dance on film, or experiencing the dance by observing it up close (Figure 4). By asking the audience to enter the stage, with Lydia modeling the measuring photographic role, and Camille embodying the process of becoming engrossed in feeling Chelsea's movements, I made the audience actors within the dilemma (Figure 5). Feedback on early showings of this stage of the work indicated that participants felt more engaged in the piece and more sensitive to the proximity of the dancers and the details of their intimate arrangements. Watching their involvement, I saw some of them taking risks to move closer to the performers, yet I also heard comments of surprise at

Lydia's boldness in doing the same; the participants felt the tension of the opportunity and challenge that they were part of through the dance. Audience members especially responded to the moment when Lydia moves between the dancers near the end of the piece when photography gives

its final attempt to capture the full, intimate essence of the moment. Audience reactions throughout this process show that they were actively considering where they stood within the work, and with this consideration they could then move into more deliberate choices of how to experience it.



Figure 4. Contact sheet of developed film from audience perspective within *ViewFinder* in performance, April 2011. Photographs by unknown audience-photographer.



Figure 5. Audience-photographer interacting with *ViewFinder* in performance, April 2011. Photograph by Lydia Challenger.

A related visual art work I created, *ReView*, was displayed in the lobby during performances and invited further audience participation (Figure 6). *ReView* featured Lydia's photographs from rehearsals and dress rehearsals of *ViewFinder*, printed on photo paper, vellum paper, and transparency sheets. I encouraged audience members in the lobby to manipulate and shuffle the images to create layered images from their own perspectives. As an exercise in creativity and curiosity, I allowed subjectivity and spontaneous urges to impact the seemingly objective and unchangeable photographs. By layering a high-contrast transparency over a soft vellum image, for example, viewers could reveal or obscure visual elements of their choice, creating unique interpretations based on existent stimuli. This ever-changing part of the project furthers my theme of the flexibility of viewpoints and the importance of each person's active role in choosing his or her own view.



Figure 6. Layered prints used in *ReView* lobby display.

When talking with a client as a volunteer counselor, it is a privilege to come so close to them and to know their feelings so intimately that I genuinely empathize and truly feel along with them as they share their story. With *ViewFinder*, I welcome audience members into the intimate meeting space of the dance and the dancers and offer them the opportunity to be part of the story of the dance. They may choose among these roles: as a photographer to preserve the action or as an observer to simply let themselves observe and thus feel something or nothing. They may realize where they are comfortable or curious about being in relation to the staged work as an embodiment of a real-life choice. All of these implicit choices are important to the individual audience member's placement between the poles of measuring and feeling. Rather than promote one above the other, there is simply a recognition of the distinction and potential conflict between the two and the need to intentionally draw from either as appropriate.

ViewFinder does not end with either feeling or measuring prevailing. Rather, the performers representing

these two modes of being, Camille and Lydia, share Chelsea's gaze as the piece comes to a close. They each have a role in the whole and the struggle may not be over, but recognition of options is the first step to beginning to balance them. Similarly, my recognition of my dual abilities to measure or truly feel emotions can be useful to me as a person, choreographer, and aspiring professional counselor: I can be aware of where in the spectrum I tend to fall, what circumstances trigger that place, and where I might instead choose to be. In the end, this piece did for me what I hope it will do for those who experience it.

In the final performance, as I became an audience-participant myself for the first time, I felt a strong tug between the desire to capture my favorite moments and to abandon the lens-restricted view to experience and viscerally respond to what I saw and sensed in the performance space with the dancers. This brought me anew into my viewing and feeling possibilities, even though I was seeing my work for the hundredth time. As the value of the CSEA stimuli from which the project was conceived are filtered through data form and are reconstructed by

each study participant, so was the original topic of this project run through my own lenses to take on new significance in the creation of this work. Through this choreographic research process I experienced the dilemma that would be illustrated and embodied by the piece itself,

and I emerged with a new sense of the depths and multiple avenues of experiencing. This exploration and reaching towards genuine encounter is a process that I will continue to engage with in dance and life.

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