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Introduction to "AGA Collaborative: Walking in the Academy" by Jeanmarie Higgins

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Artists/scholars working in higher education face unique challenges meeting research requirements for tenure and promotion, particularly in universities that cling to traditional models of sole-scholarship. In this issue, Jeanmarie Higgins, currently an associate professor at Penn State University, examines the work of AGA Collaborative, a performance group composed of three dancers at universities that are geographically dispersed; she offers their long-distance collaborative work as a model of creative research that is not only tenure-worthy, but expands both academic and artistic norms in important ways. By applying Marxist and feminist dramaturgical strategies, Higgins positions rigorous, theoretically based creative research as a practice of resistance—one that positions artists in the academy to "make a new path" which values collaboration and collegiality, and thereby enhances definitions of research in and out of the performing arts. We hope this study will provoke development of additional models for artists working collaboratively over distance, in addition to those seeking to expand conceptions of research as creative endeavor within the academy.

INTRODUCED + EDITED BY ANNE FLIOTSOS + ANN M. SHANAHAN

AGA COLLABORATIVE: WALKING IN THE ACADEMY
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AGA Collaborative is a trio of choreographer-scholars who hold appointments in dance departments at universities that place considerable value on faculty research: Gretchen Alterowitz and Dr. Alison Bory at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and nearby Davidson College, respectively, and Amanda Hamp at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque (Fig. 1). This essay discusses Alterowitz, Bory, and Hamp’s collaborative dance practice as both an example and an exploration of academic research expectations for artists. Collegiality and inclusion drive AGA’s research: they plan projects collaboratively and inter-institutionally across geographical distance; decentralize power in order to create productive studio experiences; and develop engaged, critical audiences. As such, AGA tests the academy’s tendency to prize single authorship and expertise, while working productively within its terms. Along the way, AGA creates new dances that are a product of a research process that fellow dancers and choreographers can adapt to their own artist-scholar practices. This essay begins a conversation about how performing artists provoke the tenure system in ways that can help a range of junior faculty members to position their research outside of the expertise model. Most importantly, AGA Collaborative’s work invites discussion about integrating collaboration and collegiality into tenure discussions, assessing performing artists’ working methods alongside their peer-reviewed dance and theatre pieces.

As dramaturg for AGA, I introduce them within discourses of critical theory, much as I might respond in rehearsal to one of their dance works in progress. Specifically, I propose that AGA are "tacticians," in Marxist theorist Michel de Certeau’s sense of the term, who navigate the "strategy" of the academy. In a celebrated essay, “Walking in the City,” de Certeau describes looking down at New York City from the top of its tallest building. From this vantage point, the city appears frozen in time, a map of itself. Although they are unseen to the viewer, millions of people down below are in motion, walking through the streets in a tangle of intersecting paths, activating the city with their footsteps. Imagining these vantage points reminds us that we cannot understand a city by knowing its map. To know a city, you have to walk it. "Walking in the city" is a metaphor that reinforces that everyday living, though invisible, is mighty in its multiplicity, and that activities like cooking, shopping, and artmaking are ways to understand society that have nothing to do with the maps and plans made by the powers that be. Further, although walkers cannot change the map itself, they do give back to the city by navigating its spaces in beautiful and unexpected ways. Likewise, AGA activates the academy’s guidelines for institutional success, revealing how performing artists interpret research in ways that the founders and keepers of universities could not have imagined.
In contrast to striving to establish individual expertise, AGA commits to a feminist studio practice. I use the word “feminist” not only to describe the trio as a group of three women, but also to call to mind feminisms’ ongoing critique of traditional notions of progress and arrival, a critique that offers fluidity and process in place of these terms (Kristeva). Further, AGA’s dance works engage the effects of the academy’s expectations of progress on the physical, thinking, and creating lives of women. Within this framework, they make dances with a variety of subjects: the effect of aging on a dancer’s practice; the interrelationship of technology and intimacy; women and sports. The subjects AGA takes on—time constraints, competition, and the (often maddening) whims of technology—address pressures that all performing arts scholar-practitioners face in the academy, particularly the role that collaboration plays in our successes.

I position my own collaboration with AGA as dramaturg as a site of resistance to these pressures, particularly single-authorship. Along with Bory and Hamp, I am currently pursuing tenure. (Alterowitz was awarded tenure in 2015.) Elsewhere I have written about the skills needed to practice dramaturgy—from the archival research skills needed for dance reconstruction (“Iconicity”), to the critical theory skills needed to integrate university productions into department curricula (“Rehearsal Skirts”), and on the dramaturg’s facility with integrating theory into studio practice. My role with AGA calls on the dramaturg’s skills of rigorous listening and reflection, generative skills that do not technically generate, emulating a key characteristic of arts-based research: “to raise significant questions and engender conversations rather than to proffer final meanings” (Barone and Eisner 166). The following section introduces the body of AGA’s work to date as a series of conversations about subjects familiar to researchers both inside and outside of performing arts disciplines.

**AGA: WORKS**

An emblematic AGA moment occurs at the close of their 2013 piece, and how to be in two places at once. The three dancers crouch/walk from upstage to downstage, each dancer forming a discrete column, shuffling toward the audience in a crouch, their arms encircling their heads. They speak to each other at jagged intervals, “I can’t see you.” “Are you there?” “Wait, you’re frozen.” “Oh, that’s better, I can see you now!” all the while peering into the audience as if searching for each other. We sense that the dance is winding down; the lights are fading and the dancers are running out of space to travel. Will they be able to see each other in time to connect? This moment encapsulates the trio’s praxis, both their working method as collaborators across distance, and the themes of their dance works, including time pressures, the uses of technology, and the challenges of collaboration. Since 2012, AGA has made five dances: like a turtle without a shell, or crow’s feet (2012); and how to be in two places at once; hours, lawns, and in-between (2014); placed (2015); and win. place. show. (2016), all of which engage time as a compositional component both as an abstract concept worthy of open exploration, and as a real, material force that governs dancers’ (and others’) lives.
To make these dances, AGA collaborates across distances over the course of an academic year, gathers for several weeks in the summer at one of their home institutions to compose a dance, holds showings for invited audiences hosts talkbacks, revises, and holds more showings. They return to their home institutions, continue to rehearse over video chat, and then present their works-in-progress at one or more of their universities. They also tour, present works in performance venues and at academic conferences, and have used their methods and works as springboards for college residencies. This is to say that about half of AGA’s collaboration happens outside of the studio, sometimes together and sometimes with each choreographer in a different geographical location. Internet tools like Google Hangout, Vimeo, and Skype make their research possible, but more than this, technologies have come to shape their research.

The thematic concerns of the delights and frustrations of geography and technology (among others) have built over the four dances they have created since 2012. Turtle/crow is a thirty-minute piece in twelve parts. A major theme is the effect of time on a dancer’s body; in an early sequence, each of the three dancers falls to the floor and stands up again, quickly and continuously, while reciting the years from their birth to the present day, as in “1978” (fall) (recover), “1979,” (fall) (recover), et cetera. The cumulative effect is the pain that dancers incorporate into their practices as they age. In a later sequence, Hamp asks, “What would a greeting card say?” Alterowitz and Bory speak a range of answers, from sense to absurdity (“Forty is the new thirty.” “Don’t worry about getting old—It’s too late for that.” “Fifty-two is the new twenty-nine.” . . .) as they repeat a sequence built from movements seemingly drawn from dance classes—balletic turns, modern stomps—that have etched their way into their dancing and thinking bodies.

In a body of works that always address the passing of time, AGA has developed a contrapuntal theme of “stopping to notice.” To wit, a complementary interest of turtle/crow is “thinginess;” in Bill Brown’s sense of the term, the idea that objects turn into things through our attention to them. The dance opens with a still three-and-a-half minute moment underscored by Clem Snide’s twangy 2001 alt-rock song, “No One’s More Happy Than You,” the three dancers downstage, all looking at a simple piano bench. Those three-and-a-half minutes develop both boredom and interest in the audience; we are bored at the sameness of the movement—when will the piece “start”—but disarmed by the aura the bench develops under the dancers’ gazes (Fig. 2).

Because AGA is founded on the productive realities of its group members living in different geographical locations, the effects of these distances have become a key analytic for their dance research. And how to be in two places at once engages this idea directly, exploring the intersections of technology and intimacy. As its title suggests, this thirty-minute piece directly engages time, but it also builds on the iconic “bench-staring” opening moment of turtle/crow. Two places employs a mise-en-scène of technological devices and screens whose auras are just as crucial to meaning-making as their ability to hold cameras and project images. Throughout the dance, the “thing-ness” of the technological devices is maintained; dancers must pick them up and move them from place to place. Electric cords must be avoided by the dancers’ feet; buttons must get pushed else the stage lose its lighting, and if the laptop fails (which, of course, it often does), then the projected images will not be there. Each thing on stage begins to develop a personality; we begin to experience the tripod, for example, as a well-meaning but faulted collaborator whose triumphs and mistakes create the piece’s most poignant moments. In a dance made up of processions from one place to another, punctuated by scenes of aching intimacy—in one sequence, Bory and Hamp use their bodies to compose family portraits on a projection screen that meanwhile shows a four-foot high image of the inside of Alterowitz’s mouth—the failure of technology is a shared experience that strengthens the dancers’ relationship (Fig. 3).

Although time and its pressures are themes that run through all of AGA’s works, 2014’s hours, lawns, and in between takes time as its primary subject. In hours, lawns, AGA’s engagement of time is at once more abstract and more concrete than in previous dances, as the trio explores the extremes of mechanical timekeeping and the ways that nostalgia pulls past times into the present through the body. The mise-en-scène signifies a relentless succession of days. The dancers measure time with lighting that appears to move from sunrise to sunset many times during the ten-minute piece; their feet mark time in taps and slides. Twice in the dance, Bory runs around Hamp and Alterowitz in imitation of a second hand; and several movement sections are accompanied by nostalgic ways of recording time, underscoring, as they had in turtle/crow, the uses of boredom—“Ninety-nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall; “One-Mississippi, Two-Mississippi, Three-Mississippi”—in a short meditation on the dual productivity of pastime as nostalgia, and timekeeping as a strategy of power (Fig. 4).

AGA’s 2015 piece, placed, is in direct relationship to what de Certeau might term the “strategy” of tenure. More than in previous works, placed introduces the idea of competition and achievement directly. This is most apparent in the dance’s set and costumes—the stage holds 150 four-inch trophies in a grid that resembles swimming pool lanes or a sprinting track. The dancers wear matching tracksuits that recall “I ate fruit for breakfast,” and the past, “I don’t worry about getting old—it’s too late for that.” “Fifty-two is the new twenty-nine.” . . . as they repeat a sequence built from movements seemingly drawn from dance classes—balletic turns, modern stomps—that have etched their way into their dancing and thinking bodies.

AGA: WORKING

AGA's working methods are driven by their dancemaking values—which include a democratic decision-making process, and working slowly in order to generate, process, and incorporate ongoing dramaturgical, personal, and audience responses. As AGA describes itself:

Our choreographic collaboration emphasizes the process of dancemaking and the other possibilities of creating a shared space... Our work presents multiple perspectives, layers of meaning, and a range of experience that are beyond the reach of a single choreographer. (AGA)
I would characterize the method that proceeds from these values as a sort of "dialectical flow." In a typical working day, this process of composition asks each member to form questions, create prompts (movement scores), improvise and respond with the group, and reflect on these discussions in writing. In turn, this writing—on the endpoint of a "leg" of this composing process—begins another cycle of questions, prompts, compositions, discussion, and writing. What one would normally call "composing" usually happens at the end of this cycle (and typically at the end of a day), AGA building phrases from movements generated from movement scores. Individual dancers' movements are strung together to form a phrase. That phrase could be included in a variety of groupings and tempos in the final dance—infrequently, as a unison sequence or, more frequently, as a phrase performed by one or two members in staggered fashion, in counterpoint to a task of the third member.

Of course, AGA's process is like many others; all dance composition is in some way movement that answers a question. Yet some principles and practices distinguish AGA. First, AGA's initial work in forming the research question and composing pieces to bring into residencies happens in separate locations, thus AGA has specifically theorized their working method given the choreographers' academic context. Next, the trio's egalitarian way of working privileges silence over speaking, stillness over movement, and listening over argument. As a result, their studio work is meditative. Conversations give each member an opportunity not to advance an idea but to consider the ideas of others. Ensuing discussions consistently open further possibilities rather than foreclose on possible meanings. It follows that the trio holds off on composing anything that might be called a phrase for as long as possible. This type of care could be gazing at a bench read as empathy, noticing that competition among faculty for the academy provides not only colleagues but studio practices to fit traditional publishing agendas. These resources can include funding, studio space and publicity, but even more valuable, perhaps, are colleagues. For performing artists, collaborators are necessary. As dance theorist Susan Kozel writes, the academy provides not only colleagues but a context for collaboration to succeed:

What the academy provides for artists, performers and musicians can be answered in many ways but I prefer a simple response: the academy provides the opportunity to develop methodological rigour, conceptual depth, a refinement of practice, and community. A corpus of knowledge and a corps of colleagues. (205)

AGA is certainly an inter-institutional "corps of colleagues" in Kozel's sense of the phrase, a group of artist/scholars who share the pursuit of rigorously theorized artistic research. But AGA has also developed a corps of collaborators and audiences—from peer and student co-investigators, to audiences at talkbacks, to dance and performance studies scholars. Moreover, each member publishes essays on contemporary dance—queer ballet (Alterowitz), autobiographical performance (Bory), and experiential aesthetics (Hamp). Thus, as is true of many if not all performing artists in the academy, AGA's "corps" extends to their teaching, service, and scholarly research. This is an obvious point to anyone who engages in performance research—actors, directors, choreographers, dancers, playwrights, dramaturgs—but it is worth stating directly and frequently: it is not possible to achieve singular expertise in the performing arts without a corps of collaborators. AGA's works and process make this idea legible.

CONCLUSION

In a construction that can resonate with performing artists in academic settings—particularly those whose primary modality is moving and movement—de Certeau proposes walking as a metaphor for creative subversion within an official system. The figure of the walker illustrates that top-down power relationships are not always so self-evident. Walkers' power is in the "writing" they do within the organizations they navigate—writing that points to alternative ways to read society. Although this relationship might seem adversarial, the relationship between walkers and the strategies they navigate is actually one of interdependence: "The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them)" (101). Just as AGA does not take its artistic identity from the academy, then, neither do they live outside of it. In other words, as liberating as it might be to view the artist as resisting the notion of
society as a set of powerful institutions that police the body, it is important to stress that central to walking is the “fact” of the map that gives rise to it; in order to manipulate a system, de Certeau argues, the system must first exist. Likewise, despite and due to the existence of the tenure system, artists offer alternative ways of doing and sharing research that question what it means to know something. In some cases, this means that through pursuing their own research questions, artists’ work will make the academy’s vulnerabilities, limitations, and potentials legible.

AGA’s allegiance to interdependence, collaboration, and a dialectical composing process contrasts the discourses of independence, hierarchy, singular authorship, and expertise under which artists are expected to flourish in the academy. With their focus on listening, patience, and reflection as methods of creation, AGA reimagines what is possible for the academy to count as distinction and expertise. Specifically, AGA’s work opens ways to discuss performance as research in the academy, giving artists in the collaborative arts a way to talk about collaboration in rigorously theorized ways. Talking about research can change how we think about research. As Berg and Seeber write:

Because research is what gains most visibility in the current university, it offers a particularly fertile site for resistance. We can choose how we talk about our scholarship to each other and more publicly... Instead of “I am producing...” we might say to ourselves and others, “I am contemplating...” or “I am conversing with...” or even “I am in joyful pursuit of...” (56-7)

In addition to creating new dance pieces, AGA creates relationships, questions, and conversations, as so many artists within and outside of the academy do. Should relationships, questions, and conversations count toward tenure? AGA works within the academic system using “tactics” to point to how this system can support a wider range of goals than it perhaps says it does. As we have seen, this system can support a wider range of goals and highlight artistic achievement.

WORKS CITED


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VIDEO OF AGA COLLABORATIVE


http://www.agacollaborative.org/and-how-to-be-in-two-places-at-once-2014/10/30/and-how-to-be-in-two-places-at-once-excerpts

http://www.agacollaborative.org/like-a-turtle-without-a-shell-or-crows-feet-2014/10/30/like-a-turtle-without-a-shell-or-crows-feet-2012-excerpts

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