

# UC San Diego

## UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

Convolutd shape : : how bodies move through space

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1f44f19x>

### Author

Abdul-Sabur, Jamilah

### Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Convoluted Shape: How Bodies Move Through Space

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Jamilah Abdul-Sabur

Committee in charge:

Professor William Norman Bryson, Chair  
Professor Charles Crandall  
Professor Camille Forbes  
Professor Jennifer Pastor  
Professor Shahrokh Yadegari

2014



The Thesis of Jamilah Abdul-Sabur is approved and it is acceptable in quantity and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

---

---

---

---

---

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2014

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Abstract of the Thesis.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Memory and Morphology.....	4
Non-fluency and Intuition.....	5
Dissolving into Phase.....	6
Haunting and the Uncanny.....	9
Exploring Haunted Spaces.....	11
Gesture and Embodying Space.....	12
The UPIC and Lizards.....	16
Bodies Leave Traces.....	18
The Grotesque.....	22
References.....	24

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Jamilah Sabur, “Playing Possum”, Single-channel video, 09:54, 2012 .....	1
Figure 2: Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty from Rozel Point. Box Elder, UT .....	7
Figure 3: Jamilah Sabur, “Bisecting Spiral Jetty,” Performance, 2011 .....	8
Figure 4: James Traficant, Ohio Congressman, 1995 .....	9
Figure 5: Jamilah Sabur, “ <i>Jackrabbit Attic</i> ”, Site-specific intervention, Wondervalley, CA. 2011 .....	19
Figure 6: Jean Cocteau, Blood of a Poet (film), 1930 .....	20
Figure 7: Jamilah Sabur, “Jackrabbit Cellar”, video-still, 2011 .....	21

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Ricardo Dominguez for his considerable support as my Visual Arts First Year Review committee chair and MFA advisor. Through many discussions on gesture, things convoluted, and the poetics of life—his thoughtful insight and care has proved to be invaluable.

I would also like to acknowledge my dear friend Liam Kavanagh for our deep conversations on language and embodiment and all things in between. I will be forever grateful.

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Convoluting Shape: How Bodies Move Through Space

by

Jamilah Abdul-Sabur

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2014

Professor William Norman Bryson, Chair

I produce work consisting of propositions and sketches tied together with the theme of how we (subjects — both humans and other animals) negotiate our way in



space. My aim is to refashion the viewer's umwelt<sup>1</sup> through invitations to muse on creatures of fantastic consciousness and intrusions on normalcy. My disjunctive fictions, inspired by set design principles, recall the poetic spaces that unintentionally develop in planned dwellings, are haunted by themes of dehumanization, the dichotomies of human and non-human movement, and other elements grotesque and morbid.

The structure of dreams and waking life overlap via the common cognitive element of dis- or re-location into unlocalized but embodied spaces, such as one might inhabit when effortfully retracing an event from the past or negotiating the animated, sculpted memories that make up our dream-environment. The experience of going inward, replaying an event, embodying the event through haptic perception describes the gap and time delay I am interested in. Convolved shapes and spaces are the most engrossing— putting myself, and the viewer, into heightened contact with, multiple sensorial dimensions.

---

<sup>1</sup> The semiotic world of a creature, which is the means by which it negotiates the unconceivable totality of the environment. Some creatures may experience little more than their own motion and the smell of their prey. Jakob von Uexküll, "A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds," *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, ed. and trans. Claire H. Schiller (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1957), pp. 5–

## Introduction

All this did not satisfy me. I saw how everything could be described, but not how it could be organized; I did not know what name, what title, to give it all. It was very simple, I just had to refer to the division of traditional actions into techniques and rites, which I believe to be well founded. All these modes of action were techniques, the techniques of the body.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1: Jamilah Sabur, "Playing Possum", Single-channel video, 09:54, 2012

---

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Mauss, The Notion of Body Techniques (1934)

*What Where*, the last play by Samuel Beckett, opens with a voice emanating from a dimly lit megaphone: "We are the last five." *Bam, Bom, Bim, and Bem* are the only four human bodies throughout the performance. The voice from the megaphone tells us that it is spring and then the light turns on. Bom enters from the north and is questioned by Bam as to the results of an interrogation. We do not learn much about the nature of the interrogation, only that "he" was given "the works", he "wept", "screamed" and although he "begged for mercy" he still refused to "say *it*". The voice is frustrated with how this scene is playing out and makes them start over. This time Bam wants to know if Bom attempted to revive the man. Bom claims that he couldn't then Bam accuses him of lying saying that he had been given the information and he would also be subjected to the same interrogation until he confessed. Bim appears and asks what details he needs to obtain from Bom. Bam maintains he only wants to know: "That he said *it* to him." Bim wants to make sure that is all he needs to obtain and then he can stop. Bam tells him, "Yes." Bam's voice repeats, "Not good, I start again". Bim then asks what is he to confess. Bam tells him that he needs to confess that he said "it" to him. Bim asks if that is all and Bam says "and where" Bim asks again and Bam says yes. Bim then calls Bom to come with him and they both exit.

The play follows a seasonal pattern. The same scene is now replayed, only now it is summer. The scene looks exactly the same as before. Bim reappears and is questioned. Bam wants to know if he said "it" but the voice is again unhappy and makes them start again. This time Bim is asked if he managed to find out "where" from Bom, which he had not, as he had not been asked to. In the end Bem appears and is told to find out "where" from Bim. Bem and Bim both exit as before. We are again informed that time has passed. It is now autumn and Bem returns to report he has been unable to

extract "where" from Bim. The voice no longer needs to hear the complete interchange and jumps to Bam accusing Bim of lying and threatening him with "the works". Since there is no one left to carry out his orders Bam escorts Bem away himself. The voice tells us that winter has now arrived. Bam appears from the west and waits with his head bowed. There is no one left to ask if he got the information or to accuse him of lying if he has proven as unsuccessful as the others. The voice tells us that he is alone now, "in the present as were I still." Bam switches the light off and leaves the scene.

Beckett's *What Where* entered my mind during a recent lecture on "Self-Deception in Aviation and Space Disasters" given by leading evolutionary theorist Robert Trivers. Trivers' work on the logic of deceit and self-deception in human life, and Samuel Beckett's *What Where*, are stimulating encounters with the way our mind creates distorted perceptions of reality. Trivers argues "in order to deceive others, we often deceive ourselves first. To lie to others, we hide our intent to deceive and the details of our deception; we selectively recall information and bias our arguments. But deception is more than a verbal game. Trivers marshals evidence spanning everything from immunology to neuroscience to group dynamics...between deceiver and deceived at every level of biological complexity."<sup>2</sup> As with many of Beckett's works one clear interpretation of *What Where* has proven elusive. Perhaps, it is a portrait of a single consciousness engaged in self-reflection or self-deception. The structure of the play was inspired by Austrian composer Franz Schubert's *Winterreise (Winter Journey)* composed in 1827, a song cycle for voice and piano, a setting of 24 poems by Wilhelm Müller. The modulation of the intonation in the voice shapes a psychological space that is of intense melancholy. "Having longed for death, he is at last reconciled to his loneliness. The cold,

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Trivers, *The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2011)

darkness, and barren winter landscape mirror the feelings in his heart, and he encounters various people and things along the way, which form the subject of the successive songs during his lonely journey.”<sup>3</sup>

## **Memory and Morphology**

falling off failing in motion.

gradual. ceaseless movement.

each swing is smaller than the one before.

wasting. wearing. rotting. ruined.

are you watching the words?

faint vibrations gesturing in the background as you hear them while watching them.

it becomes more than visual in the sense of the senses.

Ritual or Language?

Mythology is formed by memory. Memory shapes beliefs. Memory becomes mythology.

Memory is ritual.

---

<sup>3</sup> Richard Capel, Schubert's Song (London: Ernest Benn, 1928)

## Non-fluency and Intuition

Time is something I think about constantly—we hear disjointed sounds all the time and we filter what we want to process but disjuncture and non-fluency surrounds us always. You can see time in objects and memories, but the embodied moment of time is what interests me most. Let me explain what I mean by non-fluency. We are inseparable from our environment. People in sensory deprivation chambers experience, within a short time, the need to create intense fantasies in order to preserve their sanity. Our physical body is part of our environment as well. In a dream or daydream we become agents immersed in environments that exist in between creation and memory. We can feel brick walls solidly, though they are as ephemeral as any other whim or remembrance. Our figure can be a flat archetypal statuary entity that we can move in and out of; or we can shift into a more nuanced, identifiable character with defined traits not necessarily our own. However, I perceive dreams to be no different than reality in the way that we process events. There is a time delay and that gap is what interests me most—the non-fluidity and cognitive dislocation that can be experienced through the animation of sculpted memories that make up our dream environment. The non-fluidity and cognitive dislocation that we experience when trying to process or retrace an event from our past or recalling a dream we had recently—to go inward and replay an event visualizing, but embodying the event, switching between first, second, and third person simulation.

I am really obsessed with interior spaces of architecture—the stuff you don't pay much attention to. To give an example: the interiors of uncommon spaces like that of a dryer vent, or the cracks and crevices of a boiler room. I'm enthralled especially when I find clumps of dust, mold, or calcium build-up. It is possible to see time in these things—

the structures become more than static buildings—one can begin to recognize them as living entities. To see time—the soggy water-damaged ceiling brings me closer to certainty. Experiencing reality—to know that I am grounded and moving with time not just at its periphery—I can see the memory in objects—time is composed of memories. When you examine unfamiliar territory—you see memory in front of you. Memory might be unreliable in the sense that you may not always have the ability to put things in words again, as the images in your head have begun to disappear. But those fragmented images are the traces of what has built you. You are memory. Memory might be unreliable if we only rely on language but intuition guides us through the hours. Memory is embodied and the decisions we make are guided by memory. Intuition is a sort of memory that gives us a feeling that this will work, or that won't work. Now what happens in these interior spaces where no one looks? There is a creature living inside the crack.

### **Dissolving into Phase**

In some of my performances I perform blind. I wear a mask. The initial impulse came about when I visited Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*<sup>4</sup> in spring 2011—it was my first performative gesture. I had no idea what would come of it, this piece. But I wanted to record it to keep the image of the memory a little bit longer. I didn't want people to see my face. Initially, because of my race. I'm guilty of doing it all the time when I experience work from artists of color. The ability to look at their work without thinking in language is so hard since identity is shaped by language. A language not your own, that you're stuck with, that is if you want someone to speak in language with you. It's not so

---

<sup>4</sup> ***Spiral Jetty*** is an earthwork sculpture constructed in April, 1970 that is considered to be the central work of American sculptor Robert Smithson. Built on the northeastern shore of the Great Salt Lake near Rozel Point in Utah entirely of mud, salt crystals, basalt rocks and water, ***Spiral Jetty*** forms a 1,500-foot-long (460 m), 15-foot-wide (4.6 m) counterclockwise coil jutting from the shore of the lake.

much about making judgments because that requires consideration. It's more that we're conditioned by language and shifting from the common cultural mode of communicating is difficult since most of us have been brought up in a society that favors the external language mode instead of self-contained interior being with your sensations. I'm in search of a language that is multi-synesthetic.



Figure 2: Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty from Rozel Point. Box Elder, UT





Figure 3: Jamilah Sabur, “Bisecting Spiral Jetty,” Performance, 2011

The sightless mask became an unexpected tool to explore gesture in the fullest extent. I discovered that I was in love with the bodily shift that occurred when wearing a sightless mask. The first encounter at *Spiral Jetty* was an experiment. I tied an 8-pound iron shoe to each foot and wore the sightless mask of my face—the task was to start from approximately 70-feet in the water away from the outer ring of Smithson’s spiral form constructed out of large basalt rocks. I was blind, it was 38 degrees that afternoon in Utah—the weights on my feet created a suction-like effect standing in the silty water. I could not move initially, out of fear—where I was standing was not at all deep but my mind kept lingering on the possibility of walking too far west and drowning in the Salt Lake. I stood there for about 10-minutes before walking forward—lifting the first leg felt like magic. My body was still in shock, and my leg felt so heavy, I remember feeling gravity. The added weight from the iron shoe shifted my senses around—I was walking blind and it felt more present than ever. Everything beneath my feet felt like it was apart of me—I could isolate the features of the ground in a way that felt like I was inside of it.

Feeling the ripples in the water, the stickiness of the sand, the vibration from the emanating sound of my iron shoes hitting the rocks—I shifted into the landscape.

### Haunting and the Uncanny

So one day a possum fell through the ceiling.

Internal.

Of or situated on the inside—the rotting wall is internal to the "body"—the wall is the wall, exterior factors (repeated actions—the dripping of water) affect (infecting attacking) the wall. *It* (repetition of the dripping water) is causing it to break down.



Figure 4: James Traficant, Ohio Congressman, 1995

“Beam me up!” I was probably 8 years old when I first watched Ohio Congressman Jim Traficant on C-SPAN closing his daily speeches with Captain Kirk’s command to be transported back to the Starship Enterprise, “Beam me up.” Traficant, a former sheriff, was the man on the House floor often dressed in a white polyester suit with big gray and white hair, resembling the fur of a possum, and with a demeanor similar to that of Warner Bros. character Foghorn Leghorn, the loud and obnoxious rooster. Threatened opossums, especially males, will growl deeply, raising their pitch as the threat becomes more urgent. Traficant was an endearing dissident but at his hearings before the House he was a boisterous brute.

So one day a few summers ago a possum fell through the ceiling. The ceiling was in the home of a woman I cared for named Betsy, an Alzheimer’s sufferer. Betsy responded to reality but I had no way of knowing if she understood it. She would say things like “look at all those idiot places” when reviewing her photos hanging on the wall, or she’d have to write my name down in order to know I was Jamilah.

Betsy had an interrupted relationship to language and Traficant appeared to have an interrupted relationship to reality—it’s this disjuncture I’m interested in—the thing in between language and reality. In my own work, I find that I’m interested in imploding a gesture into a very static moment—the smallest kernel of stillness, and then I find a way burrow deeper into the gesture, making the gesture expand and open up even more—and then breaking into smaller gestures. I’m trying to re-establish the time and space of memory. Memory becomes an indictment of language in all the ways language breaks down. The possum crashing through the ceiling was surreal; it was as if it entered this space from some mythical realm. Coming home from school as a child to watch this man on C-SPAN, presenting himself as this out of this world character, disrupted my sense of

reality. There is a funny unlikely connection between the two memories. Traficant and the possum seemed so out of place. In my work, I reassemble the strangeness of memories not in a linear way—I try to embody the memory, the moments that stay with me—like a lizard sticking to my skin.

Haunting is an ontological space for me. That state of being that is always returning and unforgettable. I find that I resuscitate the undead (memories) as a material form, sometimes embedding it within historical manifestations or echoes. I feel free in reverie. But is reverie more than the things in themselves?

### **Exploring Haunted Spaces**

Most of my work has existed in the form of installation and video, although I've never really thought of them as my primary media. I don't really see a difference in the way I construct a sculpture, space, or performance. Everything has always felt propositional. I find that I am constantly looking and observing—waiting. There is an intimate quality to what is productive for me—letting the organization come—letting it do its work on me. There are usually three things I explore in my work—space, gesture, and then layering a figure/avatar, creating micro-encounters and micro-materializations. The work is always fragmented, convoluted shapes and spaces are the most engrossing—the work is about the textures and encounters of these materials, objects, and gestures. I find myself looking at the textures and encounters in multiple forms with a desire to dig into the techniques on the deepest scale, creating new compositions. The thing I end up with is often bodily. Non-representational. The thing that you feel when you are in a state that is direct and present. It is not anything in particular yet your entire body is responding and reverberating once you stop thinking in language and just be with it—

images, smells, tastes, sounds and the other responses and tasks that occur from your biological organ systems. There is a desire to explore and dissect the machination of the memory or reverie. This ends up becoming a ritual of the dislocated with qualities of extreme absurdity and extreme desolation.

The relationship between things of the world, the way things are told and our understanding of them, are a part of our condition, a part of our being alive. The attention to the phenomenal world concerns the present and how we think of it. This present is the matter of both the past and the future, and its interpretation is constantly in flux.<sup>5</sup>

What other psychological freedom do we have than the freedom to dream? Psychologically speaking, it is in reverie that we are free beings...We can only explore this inner world of freedom if we let the organization come to us, let it play upon our imagination, let it do its work upon us.<sup>6</sup>

## **Gesture and Embodying Space**

An overarching concern has been how we (subjects — both humans and other animals) negotiate our way in space. By overlooking the immediacy of how our bodies move and exist within natural space, and the intimacy of our personally imagined (but “low-fidelity”) spaces, we seem to run the risk of forgetting our connections to our bodies, each other, and ourselves in more senses than we can easily imagine. Another source of cultural-historical discontinuity in our imagined life is ubiquitous networked media, occupying our attention in public and private spaces. With these rapid metamorphoses

---

<sup>5</sup> Craigie Horsfield, *Relations* (Exhibitions International, 2007) 43.

<sup>6</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) 101.

of human communication, are we witnessing a rapid period of dehumanization, or perhaps a too-little examined shift in what it means to be human. When I think of the over six billion people sharing this earth, I do wonder how much our relationship to the environment will change in the future. Living in the U.S. I see so many people glued to their iphones or ipads in places that seem so inappropriate, or to think of the 19-year old soldier remotely operating a drone thousands of miles away from the human target. It's not the mere fact of using these devices in these spaces, what perplexes me most is to think about how rapidly our sense of time and space have changed in adapting to these technologies and to imagine how our physical bodies will change in the future I have to say is daunting.

Authority does its best to order its domain according to laws, using police, prisons, taxes, and most importantly education the transmission of images, and ideas through schools, governments, and people who are happy with things just the way they are "supposed to be". But forcing the others into conformance depends not only on the strength and length of the arms of the laws, but perception, not only of sight of actions, but the knowledge that they represent violations of or threats to authority. How does one live outside the panopticon? Not just evading detection, but also really live, while one's life is and must be outside of it. The space of experience afforded us by our memories and fantasies are such a place, but life can only be lived so well without contact with reality, re-living is not living.

The cracks in-between walls where no one thinks look, wants to look, or can be bothered to look are the places available. Ideas shared among other deviants from authority, but unknown to authority can be given physical form even in broad daylight, otherwise there is disguise. These considerations can be related to Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, which deals with the poetics implications of less abstract dwellings. The same

considerations he finds are true for humanly dimensioned residents of the would-be panopticon. The founders of Butoh, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kuzo Ohno sought to alter the existing sign systems and create new technologies of the self, “in order to combat an age in which forms of power were trying to adjust the body to new forms of production.”<sup>7</sup>

I feel connected to Butoh. As I watch a recent Butoh performance by NYC based Vangelina Theatre I am just plugged in. The abstract distant sound wraps itself around the nine dancers. Eight grotesque creatures surround the female figure in the center—the dancers slowly transform into the material component of their costumes, which seem to be constructed from cheap brown packing tape. The figures transform into the form of the crinkle sound inbuilt in the brown packing tape. The backward snail-like walking of the unmasked female dancer in the center along with the uneasy gait of the other dancers amplifies the ineffable sound produced by their costumes. Her eyes are closed and I feel like I am moving with her. I am mimicking her gesture, mentally (it’s embodied). The more I watch this performance I wonder why it feels so familiar—*déjà vu*.

I think back to the Japanese video game, *Silent Hill 2*. The central dancer in the Vangelina Butoh performance reminds me of the main character in *Silent Hill 2*. The character is roving through Silent Hill guided by his memory in hopes of locating the secret place where he and his dead wife would spend time together. As you navigate through this third-person game, you encounter fragmented bodies of humans and other beings that seem to be in a slow state of decay and at the same time merging with the residue of decay, which haunts the town. How would I describe the movement of a being composed of 4 human legs? As a human wrapped in layers of brown packing tape from head to toe trying to walk in a straight line across a space? I find that I have a lot in

---

<sup>7</sup> Yoshiki Tajiri, Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2007)

common with the early exponents of Butoh, in the way that I explore gesture. The work of Ushio Amagatsu, choreographer, dancer and designer of the 1970s Japanese born troupe Sankai Juku, and third generation Butoh-dancer Minako Seki resonates with me deeply. In Butoh the body is dismembered and (re)-membered— but not in form of representation and not language. This conception can be related to Antonin Artaud’s idea of taking the body to pieces and putting it back together again. Exploring Artaud and Butoh, using the expressive potential of the body— you do something and then you feel it. The spaces I construct tend to be grotesque. I find that I hint at or suggest a “place” rather than show it. The basis of my technique is rooted in dance—the essence is a series of gestures. I devise ways to explore the unconscious mind.

The thing with Butoh is that it is not one thing. Butoh, a dance form developed by Tatsumi Hijikata in the late 1950s of Japan, urges exploration of the unconscious mind, of suppressed urges, of constrained impulses. The founders of Butoh, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno searched within themselves—their memories to create a new form of being. In a recent interview choreographer and designer Ushio Amagatsu suggested that Butoh dancers should work from their own memories, their own experiences—their age [predecessors of Amagatsu] and experiences were different from his and he [Amagatsu] was constantly searching for his own style. “The look of Butoh— its typical white makeup, its distorted facial expressions, its jerking, twisting movements - is recognized internationally, but incommensurate awareness exists regarding Butoh's philosophical import and the psychological transformations that can occur from Butoh training.”<sup>8</sup>

In a recent paper, Kasai & Takeuchi claim Butoh pays great attention to the least attended aspects of the mind-body. Tremors, tics, jerks, facial or bodily distortions,

---

<sup>8</sup> Toshiharu Kasai, Kate Parsons, “Perceptions in Butoh Dance.”



falling down, or any other involuntary movements are appreciated as ways to liberate the mind-body. They are used as keys to examine the unconscious mind by experiencing the very reactions or movements that are often prohibited or suppressed under the social norm of movements in each culture.<sup>9</sup> In Butoh you are just going deeper. It's anarchy. You're just letting things go through you. Most dance and theatre is almost always on a word like level. I'm going to become anger—now express it. In Butoh you have the ability to become something without acting it but embodying it in some way. In general, most people are compelled to find meaning in things classified as performance or art—my problem with language originates from this observation. Our bodies are complex entities and for some reason we neglect our senses. “What does it mean?” I've heard in the background from viewers of dance performances, art exhibitions, etc. Spending time watching documentation of Sankai Juku performances lately, I realize it defies description—verbal language.

As I watch the dancers shift into and out of and through space, it's as if my brain is just operating in the mode of image thought and sensory thought, not language thought at all. Zen masters often say that you can't talk about certain experiences, it's not ineffable its just too intimate, internal to be restated in anyway is absorption—the state one hopes to embody.

### **The UPIC and Lizards**

*Playing Possum*, 2012, *Moon Tendon*, 2013, and *Grazing Entrails*, 2013 all include musical compositions by Jon Forshee. Forshee's three pieces entitled, *Sinew*,

---

<sup>9</sup> Toshiharu Kasai and Mika Takeuchi, “Mind-Body Learning by Butoh Dance Method,” Proceedings from the 36th Annual Conference of the American Dance Therapy Association. October 11-14, 2001. Raleigh, N.C., U.S.A.

*Tendon*, and *Ligament*, were composed in 2006 with UPIC, a computerised musical composition tool, devised by the composer Iannis Xenakis. Physically, the UPIC is a digitising tablet linked to a computer, which has a vector display. Its functionality is similar to that of the later Fairlight CMI, in that the user draws waveforms and volume envelopes on the tablet, which is rendered by the computer. Once the waveforms have been stored, the user can compose with them by drawing "compositions" on the tablet, with the X-axis representing time, and the Y-axis representing pitch. The compositions can be stretched in duration from a few seconds to an hour. They can also be transposed, reversed, inverted, and subject to a number of algorithmic transformations. The system allows for real time performance by moving the stylus across the tablet. A sinew, tendon, or ligament is a tough band of fibrous connective tissue that usually connects muscle to bone and is capable of withstanding tension. *Moon Tendon*, 2012 was composed with Forshee's *Tendon* as the nucleus. *Tendon* for me was very circular and distant—I could only think of locomotion—in multiple forms. In physics, motion is a change in position of an object with respect to time and its reference point.<sup>10</sup> Motion is typically described in terms of displacement, direction, velocity, acceleration, and time. Images and simulations of walking, pacing, spinning and the moon were all in my mind when I choreographed the gesture and constructed the scenes for the video *Moon Tendon*.

In *Grazing Entrails*, I found myself responding to the evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers. "Spending hours peering into the world of his lizards, like Hamilton and Maynard Smith (and Darwin before them), Trivers came to believe that behavior was as

---

<sup>10</sup> Motion (physics) <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motion\\_%28physics%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motion_%28physics%29)>

much a product of evolution, as were eyes and ears and fingers and tails.<sup>11</sup> Reading about Trivers and his work, I was taken most with his time with the lizards. I just saw a man, really immersed in a lizard world during the late 60's and early 70s in Jamaica. It triggered a lot of memories for me—growing up with them—afraid of them—but always fascinated by their little eyes and bodies. The little creatures always seemed to be so present, scared yet dominant somehow. I was flooded with so many lizard gestures, I began to write what now seems to be an intermezzo.<sup>12</sup> *Grazing Entrails* will eventually be reformed into a live performance once it's ready. The piece is a dedication to Robert Trivers.

### **Bodies Leave traces**

Bodies leave traces—memories, imprints, and objects. *Jackrabbit Attic*, (2011) an on-going site-specific intervention I am working on near Twentynine Palms, California, which takes a desert cabin, locally known as a Jackrabbit cabin, as its locale. It is near the Salton Sea in the heart of the Mojave Desert, an abandoned homestead named Wonder Valley. It was as if this cabin structure was frozen in time. The arrangement of the furniture was as if they hadn't moved. But there was so much movement in the space—debris and desert foliage moved through the structure constantly. The lizard that was there one week was gone the next. The dry salty desert is what keeps this

---

<sup>11</sup> Oren Harman, *The Price of Altruism: George Price and the Search for the Origins of Kindness* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010) 273.

<sup>12</sup> In music an intermezzo in the most general sense, is a composition which fits between other musical or dramatic entities, such as acts of a play or movements of a larger musical work. In music history, the term has had several different usages, which fit into two general categories: the opera intermezzo and the instrumental intermezzo.

structure visibly alive. For me the desert is psychological; the jagged landscape is as uneven as a dream. I've been thinking a lot about temporality, how to exist and not be temporary.



Figure 5: Jamilah Sabur, *“Jackrabbit Attic”*, Site-specific intervention, Wondervalley, CA. 2011

Thinking about duality I'm enthralled by the harsh weather that carries with it its preservative salt. I was walking, and walking on dead fish, this substance, this thing that has intact anatomy becomes the floor, the ground in the space. The dead fish haven't been removed from Salton Sea; you can see that this dead thing exists. The Wonder Valley Jackrabbits in Twentynine Palms, about 100 miles north of Salton Sea, are similarly preserved by the elements. I constructed a set informed by my trip for a video, *“Jackrabbit Cellar,”* 2011. After shooting the performance I went back to the desert in October of 2011 in hopes of leaving something that looked like it belonged. The Wonder Valley Jackrabbit cabin that inspired me became the site where I wanted to leave something. I transferred the palette of the set from the video by painting the exposed studs of the Wonder Valley structure in the same colors.

Gaston Bachelard describes the house as a vertical being: “verticality is ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic.” I should see this house as vertical but I immediately walk from the road into this space that feels like an attic. This encounter is somewhat horizontal. This attic is distorted. My body does not move through a small opening but a rather large opening. Dwelling on form, landscape and movement—the Wonder Valley

Jackrabbit intervention and the set constructed for the video “Jackrabbit Cellar” are mirrors of each other—a metaphorical diptych. I began to think of the cabin site as an attic. Attics and cellars are two spaces that don’t exist in the Wonder Valley structures.



Figure 6: Jean Cocteau, *Blood of a Poet* (film), 1930

In my favorite scene from Jean Cocteau's 1930's “Blood of a Poet” the main character looks through a peep hole and we enter an interior with a fireplace and ladder with a little

girl wearing something that resembles a ceremonial sash in a V-shaped format, draping from both shoulders to her stomach like a large necklace with jingle-bells sewn into the fabric of the sash. She also wears jingle-bell bracelets around her wrists and ankles. An older woman, a governess-like character, is reprimanding her in the scene. The little girl gestures, then her body is placed on top of the fireplace mantel. She then drifts up the wall and out of the frame. The scene last only about 2 minutes—the little girl is gone forever.

I dwelled on that moment for some time and I started to imagine a simulation of a little girl falling inside the wall and over time the jingle-bell sash across her body shifts and turns into a wart-like mass covering her hands and face distorting her likeness. In my video piece "*Jackrabbit Cellar*," I made a costume inspired by this little girl from Cocteau's "*Blood of a Poet*." The gestures that I performed in "*Jackrabbit Cellar*," were shaped by a vision I had of a figure falling inside of an in-between interior space.



Figure 7: Jamilah Sabur, "*Jackrabbit Cellar*," video-still, 2011

Thinking about Bachelard's conception of the house as a metaphor of the body, I constructed a set that was similar to a cellar, so the gestures I performed in the piece were similarly informed. If we think of the house as a vertical being and as a metaphor for the body—the attic is on top, which can be considered as our consciousness—the mind—the part of the house where all of our thoughts are clear. The cellar is the foundation to the house—our consciousness is grounded in our bodies—we touch the hot sand with our feet—we locate ourselves through sounds entering our ears, vibrations passing through our skin. Thus in "*Jackrabbit Cellar*," both characters that I performed were blind. In my performances, I often wear a mask to restrict my sight—relying on haptic perception, the process of recognizing objects through touch, the most solid sense. The cellar is usually a place in the house where we seldom inhabit; there is unease when we navigate the foundation. I made a mask covered with jingle-bells and wore gloves covered in jingle-bells—it was a sensory play. I could not see through the masks but I had to rely on haptic perception, the recognition of object through touch. The figures I created and inhabited in the video were like fragmented bodies.

### **The Grotesque**

Why are we drawn to the grotesque? Grotesque, which originates from the word grotto is associated with hidden spaces like the womb, caves, and graves. The human mother carries her child inside darkness; the child holds the vibrations traveling through its spine—touching the outside safe inside. I think we have an impulse towards experiencing (feeling) fear and safety and the grotesque lies in-between. We can hear the concern in our mother's voice when she tells us not to go any farther. We hesitate, and then proceed deep into the unfamiliar. Mother is now upset, possibly fearful but we are running from her voice, we want to know why she is telling us no. The fear arouses

us into proceeding deeper into the unknown. We encounter curious creatures and textures. Our stomach turns over and our hearts begin to beat faster. Our skin feels prickly. Our body feels present and is safe. We know that danger is going to be there ahead of us or the weird thing is walking towards us but we revert to our childlike self running away from mother as she yells no, don't go too far—we hear her but want to see how far the path leads. What's there? Why is she telling us no? We're curious. The uncanny fascinates us—It's an experience, sensational—a feeling, not a word. It's so familiar but I can't seem to explain where it's from. To run so far to the edge knowing that we can retreat to the womb—a mixture of curiosity and fear—the feeling of the uncanny when we see mutants. “Like the grotesque, dreams, and jokes thrive in dislocation and disjuncture, putting established realities in flux.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Frances Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 16.



## References

Bachelard, Gaston. Poetics of Space. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

Capel, Richard. Schubert's Song. London: Ernest Benn, 1928.

Connelly, Frances. The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harman, Oren. The Price of Altruism: George Price and the Search for the Origins of Kindness. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.

Horsfield, Craigie. Relations. Exhibitions International, 2007.

Kasai, Toshiharu., Takeuchi, Mika. "Mind-Body Learning by Butoh Dance Method," Proceedings from the 36th Annual Conference of the American Dance Therapy Association. October 11-14, 2001. Raleigh, N.C., U.S.A.

Kasai, Toshiharu., Parsons, Kate. "Perceptions in Butoh Dance."

Tajiri, Yoshiki. Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism. New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2007.

Trivers, Robert. The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

Mauss, Marcel. The Notion of Body Techniques. 1934.