

# **The Moving Canvas Project: exploring choreography and disobedient drawing**

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## **Abstract**

These images and supporting paper presented by Hubbard and Keeley offer new insights relating to the relationship between movement, drawing, textiles, and choreography. The Moving Canvas Project is a participatory research project with an adult community dance company where the dancers explore the act of drawing and moving simultaneously. This emergent knowledge is underpinned by theoretical frameworks, in drawing performance (Foà et, 2020), costume design (Barbieri, 2020), and movement improvisation (Buckwalter, 2010; Burrows, 2010; Doughty, 2019). The paper discusses a series of workshops where the process of creating textile design for costume and choreography for performance occurred concurrently. The authors present a balanced evaluation of the outcomes, sharing several observations regarding behaviour, performance, and overall aesthetic that emerged when dancers are asked to wear plain cream-coloured jumpsuits and draw on them whilst moving. It explores what influence the two disciplines had on each other and how dancers play with autonomy and collectivism as they draw on themselves and one another. The transient nature of movement creates a dissonance with the permanence of the drawing, which is left as a mark on the dancer's disobedient bodies. It is within this dynamic interplay between movement and mark-making that a performance emerged.

## **Introduction**

This participatory research project investigates drawing as an agent for creating choreography and textile design. It explores the creative outcomes produced by instructing a cohort of proficient dancers to wear cream-coloured jumpsuits and draw on themselves and each other using coloured marker pens while improvising movement. The research question that drove the project forward was:

In what ways do the communal activities of drawing on the self and others, through movement activities in The Moving Canvas Project embody the paradoxes of both connection and division; uniformity and autonomy in creating choreography and textile design for performance?

We refer to these cream-coloured jumpsuits as wearable canvases. The project is grounded in the foundational principles as outlined in Maryclare Foà et al's book *Drawing Performance* (2020) which presents a comprehensive examination of the narrative surrounding drawing performance, viewing drawing as an inherently performative act. Foà et al discuss the distinct types of mark-making including the embodied mark, the conceptual mark, and the unexpected mark and locates the body as a canon for performance and drawing (2020). Foà et al, also offer a comprehensive lens through which to examine 'the body as a movement and a performative tool' (2020, p.28). Additionally, our research draws on the work of Barbieri (2020) whose research reports a sequence of different workshops addressing movement as drawing and drawing as movement. Barbieri positions her work using Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that our body develops to the environment it is in (Moya, 2014).

The Moving Canvas Project focused on movement and drawing as a catalyst for choreographic development and textile design. This approach underscored the body's innate motivation for movement influenced by the pens held and the marks made. Foà et al, refers to this as the 'physicality of drawing' (2020, p.71). The Moving Canvas Project explored the somatic and experiential nature of performance drawing and further fleshed out the relationship between the disobedient bodies of the improvisation mark-maker when inhabited by dancers with purpose and direction. This disobedience comes from the improvised movement which has no direct path but evolves through the spontaneity in the moment. Figure's 1 and 4 present the depiction of gestural drawing and movement and figure 2 and 3 demonstrates the evolution and outcome of the wearable canvas throughout the duration of the research project.



Figure 1: The Moving Canvas Project. (2023). *Dancers Performing The Moving Canvas* © The Moving Canvas Project

### **Project directive**

In May 2023 we began working with an adult contemporary dance company, named Co Evo. The project lasted 10 weeks and had a cast of 12 dancers. Co-Evo are based at a UK dance agency, Pavilion Dance South West, and they meet weekly under the direction of Claire Benson. The dancers audition for their place at the start of each new term, committing to the project in the term ahead. Whilst Co Evo is a community dance company, every member has some form of

dance training, with most having an undergraduate degree in dance. The dancers are proficient in dance technique and learning set choreography, but for most, movement improvisation had been used as a tool to create choreography, rather than a method to be used in performance. In addition to this challenge, most of the dancers had little to no experience of drawing. The Moving Canvas Project, with improvised movement and drawing at the centre of it, presented a significant challenge to the dancers' usual working methods. The dancers took part in an audition and taster workshop for this project to introduce them to some of the techniques we would use throughout the project, and to build the project with them, as the participatory nature of the research project was key to the research team. During our time with the company, we asked the dancers to draw on wearable canvases while dancing, to observe what marks and movements they made. While these dancers were given direction in the actions they took, the project also encouraged disobedient behaviour through the free expression of the movement, and through an improvised score.

Over the first five weeks, we offered a range of different activities in drawing and movement improvisation. For example, the 12 dancers would often work in pairs, with one partner improvising through movement, whilst the other partner traced the movement with a pen, either on the wearable canvas jumpsuits or on the papered floor. From this, we observed and documented the participants as they utilized these resources and exercises. At times, the dancers followed our directives, interpreting the tasks as we expected, creating long lines, scribbles, dots, and dashes that felt representative of the moving body in front of them. However, sometimes the dancers rebelled by responding through words, colouring in larger sections of the floor paper or drawing on their skin in response. As the dancers moved, the canvas of the jumpsuits would fold and shift, creating an unstable canvas surface where the lines created by the pens would jump and disobey the action of the drawer. It was often the disobedience of the materials or the dancers themselves that created a new exercise or opportunity to be explored within a forthcoming session. During the exercises, music was used to support the movement and drawing by providing variance in tone, texture, and tempo. Music was not integral to the tasks, but some dancers found the music helpful as an aid to movement. The music used in the workshop varied in style and genre, and at times we worked without music at all. We observed that sometimes the dancers would clearly use the rhythm or tone of the music which translated into their rhythmic moving or drawing, and at other times the music presented another element to rebel against or disobey.

We were interested in ascertaining what impact, if any, the different practices had on each other and if the act of drawing itself transforms the mark into lines and the body into action (Foà et al, 2020). Participants were allocated two water-based marker pens in colours exclusively designated for each dancer to use. At times, they would dance with a single pen and sometimes they would dance with two, one in each hand. By using a colour-coding system dancers were able to trace where and who they had marked and respond and react, accordingly with the artistic process. Throughout the 10-week duration, the canvases remained unwashed, though hygienically maintained, thereby facilitating the organic growth of marks being made. Weekly, we meticulously documented the evolution of these drawings. Figure 2 demonstrates the transformation of one such canvas, portraying the evolving visual narrative. Figure 3

demonstrates in detail, the free-flowing lines after 8 weeks. Dancers utilised these developing marks as a landscape of memory, crafting movement and dance phrases from them and observing both their conflict and possibilities. The movement improvisation and drawing activities served, as Jonathan Burrows states in *A Choreographer's Handbook*, as a place from which to deviate from when a possibility arises, and to return to when all gets lost (2010). The dancers were actively encouraged to not only draw on their own canvas but to extend their scribbles onto a papered dance floor of 10m by 9m, and the canvases of the other dancers. We observed unique shapes and gestures in both their movements and the marks they made. As Buckwalter (2010) observes, dancers who work with improvisation might define their work through a desired aesthetic or to reveal something about the process through their movement. The Moving Canvas Project was presenting a process through performance, that would reveal the symbiotic relationship between mark making, textile design and choreography.



Figure 2: The Moving Canvas Project. (2023). *Wearable Canvas with Drawing Record over 10-week workshop practice* © The Moving Canvas Project

The phenomenological interaction between the act of drawing and their embodied experience of wearing the canvas created distinctive movements. Simple gestures such as holding a pen and reaching to draw on the back of another dancer gave rise to previously unseen and unexpected silhouettes. Figure 4 illustrates the experience of the dancer as a kinesthetic inhabitant of the wearable canvas. As they attune to the marker pens in their hands and the sensation of the

pressure of the pens through the canvas on to their skin an interplay unfolds as they become both the mark-maker and dancer at the same time. Barbieri (2020, p.197) wrote that her work aimed to 're-define costume as agent and instigator in making performance'. In The Moving Canvas Project, the dancers were the creators of the textiles, handing them the role of costume designer, whilst performing movement, which extends Barbieri's claims further by combining the role of choreographer, performer, and designer in one. We observed that each dancer strived for their autonomy by determining their movement and drawing, but simultaneously produced connectivity as an ensemble, whereby they contributed to the textile design and choreography of everyone else.

This project was developed using a Participatory Research model, where the dancers explored and determined the trajectory of the research project alongside the development of the artistic outcome. By working in this shared way, the dancers as participants could co-create the choreographic and scenic landscape, and as such, created their world, relevance, and experience within the research project. 'By sharing leadership in research, Participatory Research "contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons, their communities, and the ecosystems of which they are part"' (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p.6, cited in Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020, p.1). During the initial delivery of the project, we adapted the workshops and activities in response to our observations and the feedback from the dancers. After an initial five-week period we started to see movements formulating that could be worked into set choreography. During the five weeks that followed we worked with the dancers to create a performance. The dancers sourced from the dance phrases and movement that had evolved through the workshops and creative process. This manifested in a 20-minute public performance as seen in figure 1 and 4. The performance was accompanied by music sourced after the choreography had been made; this music added a performative environment and experience for both dancer and audience but did not drive the structure, movement or drawing results featured in the performance.



Figure 3: The Moving Canvas Project. (2023). *Detail of dancer's canvas after 8-weeks of drawing through improvised movement.* © The Moving Canvas Project

### **Case Study Observations and Theoretical Framing**

When looking through the lens of a costume designer we see similarities with the research of Barbieri (2020) seeing 'the responsive bodies of participants [as] critical ... fundamental, concrete, kinetic and affective material amongst materials'. From the perspective of the performer, one dancer commented 'This project has allowed me to explore in a completely different movement context... it's not just any marks ..., the marks have been created through the movement that we've made in this [choreographic] process' (personal communication).

Foà et al highlights the work of Scheemann (1973 – 6) who uses their own body as a primary source and material for making drawing beyond the conventional understanding of what a drawing might entail. Scheemann *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973 – 6) actively explores the relationship between the body as a subject and drawing device (Foà et al, 2020) in an analogous way to the dancers in the Moving Canvas Project who submit their body to being both mark-maker and canvas. The dancers perform two operations simultaneously here, as Doughty's writing illuminates; they notice something sensory, and then they notice how they choose to respond (2019). At times, the dancers would disregard the instructions of the task in favour of following a sensory desire, and then notice that by following the sensations of the drawing on their body, they had evolved the task. In this way, the dancers have been both the creators of the drawing and movement, and the receptacles of sensation as a result of the drawing and movement. The observation of this cyclical sensorial process was a prominent finding within this case study.

During the early weeks of The Moving Canvas Project, dancers experimented with basic paper-based drawing, where the boundaries of the paper contained their lines, dots, scribbles, and doodles. As quickly as this activity begins, the dancers subvert and challenge the boundaries of the paper by immediately moving their whole bodies as the pen, hand and arm traces the paper. As the drawing moved off the paper and onto the wearable canvases these sensory responses become more exaggerated. As Foà et al. further elaborates on the significance of Scheemann's work, where the artist is not only portrayed as an artist creating the work but also embodying it (2020). Similarly, in The Moving Canvas Project, dancers utilize their bodies as the principal medium through which they express their artistry either in the form of movement or canvas.

As the drawing activity moved from paper to wearable canvases, we observed that the pressure of the pen and shape of the drawing was directed into the body, of the self, or of another dancer. Here the desire of the dancers to move from and with the pressure of the pens is rewarded as the connection between drawing and moving becomes even clearer, for both mover and observer. The bodies are receptacles for sensation, which lead to choreographic output, and simultaneously the drawing of a textile design as seen in detail in figure 3. Sondra Fraleigh (2019) suggests that the dancer in improvised performance is practicing a form of active embodiment, where the body is coming into being and going away, seemingly at once. We offer that in addition, the drawing on the canvas jumpsuits and the papered floor were also coming into being and going away in the same act as the movement. The transient nature of movement inherently presents a challenge in leaving a lasting trace or tangible evidence, the wearable canvas became a platform for the accountability of the dancer's movement. We observed these highly articulate and experienced dancers having the most disobedient bodies as they attempted to stick to the original instructions drawn on the canvas, with their bodies itching to move more fully. This displacement between disobedience and guidance is what created a performance that was partially improvised alongside some set choreographed material.



Figure 4: The Moving Canvas Project (2023). *Gestural Drawing*. © The Moving Canvas Project

## Conclusion

The dancers improvise with both movement and drawing simultaneously to create a scenic landscape on the paper; to create the textile design on the wearable canvasses; and to create choreography through the act of drawing on themselves and one another. As described in Foá, M. et al, (2020) 'Dislodging traditional assumptions about drawing signified by 2-dimensional mark-making on a flat surface' this research project utilizes the dancer's body as the canvas, transforming the drawing platform into one that is in motion. This approach forces the medium to be in a state of transit, where a deliberate mark may be displaced or altered by the movements of the canvas as it slides, shifts, or gestures in unpredictable ways. The interaction between the dancer's movements and the application of the pens creates a unique and ever-changing artistic mark, pushing the boundaries of conventional drawing techniques and exploring new choreographic processes. As seen in figure 4, the dancers draw from their body onto another canvas, which connects them through physical proximity and through the shared act of drawing; drawing becomes a performative tool. The canvas in figure 4 is made up of six moving bodies, so its surface is ever changing, unpredictable and disobedient. The boundaries of each individual body and canvas slip and reshape, creating both the individual and the collective identity as each dancer responds to and creates sensation through drawing and moving. This dissonance between individual and collective identity is further extended by the dancers having choice over how long their interactions with one another last, and their position within the line. The movement flows

from the pressure of the pen on the body, and as more dancers join the mele of limbs, pens, and canvas; the dancers appear as one unified entity as their movement causes both connection and separation, as seen in figure 4.

This project challenges more traditional approaches to textile design for costume, drawing and choreography, as it creates a process by which all these elements can be created simultaneously. Similarly to Barbieri (2020), we found the performative act of drawing engaged the body of the performer in movement and drawing as they became equal partners in the performance. We discovered the dancers' experience was transformed by the role of mark-maker in performance and blurred the line between the role of costume designer and choreographer. We found that the transient nature of dance, which leaves no permanent trace, becomes visible through the wearable canvas that serves as a tangible platform for accountability and visual exposition. In images 1 and 4 we demonstrate that through simultaneous improvisation with movement and drawing, dancers create a unified expression, connecting through physical proximity and shared artistic action of the drawing. Paradoxically, images 2 and 3 share the dancers' unique drawings created through a rebellious individual encounter, with no canvas the same. These contradictory states of obedience and disobedience, individualism and collectivity are representative of the body's expression through the drawing, as evidenced and celebrated within the process and product of The Moving Canvas Project.