

## MATERIALS

### No Context—A Dance Catalogue and Performance

Victoria Mohr-Blakeney

*No Context* or *Studio Place* or *Decentralize* or *We Actually Maybe Right Now Have Everything We Need* was a curated performance featuring dance artist Amelia Ehrhardt and a catalogue by the same title. *No Context* took place at the George Brown School of Design on March 25, 2015, in partial fulfilment of the Masters of Fine Arts in Criticism and Curatorial Practice program at OCAD University. *No Context* was co-curated by the Nomadic Curatorial Collective: me, Erin McCurdy, and Cara Spooner. One of the aims of *No Context* was to offer a response to the following questions: How does curatorial writing function in the context of contemporary dance? How might curatorial writing and the dance catalogue support contemporary dance?

Cara Spooner, Erin McCurdy and I met at “Envisioning the Practice,” a conference on curating performance held at the University of Quebec (Montreal, 2014) and organized by Canadian dance curators and scholars Dena Davida and Jane Gabriels. At the conference, McCurdy, Spooner and I began to discuss the shortage of examples of curatorial practice in the field of dance in Toronto, as well as a lack of critical writing on dance curation in Canada and more broadly. Shortly afterward, we founded the Nomadic Curatorial Collective.

We approached dance artist Amelia Ehrhardt to invite her to create a new choreographic work in response to archival documents from 15 Dance Laboratorium, Toronto’s first dance artist-run centre, which ran from 1974 to 1980. Ehrhardt was a clear choice for the collaboration due to the conceptual, postmodern aspect of her practice in both the form and the themes that her work undertook. The idea to commission a young Toronto dance artist came from a desire on the part of the Nomadic Curatorial Collective to open up a conversation between the formal, political, and aesthetic trends of 15 Dance Lab and the present (rather than remount a specific work or series of works). The *No Context* performances took place in March 2015 at the George Brown School of Design, which is located directly across the street from the original site of 15 Dance Lab.

Our decision to produce a catalogue alongside the performance enacted a central tenet of the Nomadic Curatorial Collective: to produce curatorial writing in the field of dance. The design and printing of the catalogue was a complex process that involved a series of important collaborations.

In our research, we engaged with library and archival research practices including an investigation of dance catalogues as primary sources at the Art Gallery of Ontario archives, Dance Collection Danse, UQAM special collections, Vincent Warren Dance Library, Ecole de Danse Contemporain Library, Artexpte, and general university collections. Throughout this research, we examined local, national, and international dance catalogues to familiarize ourselves with current and historical trends in dance catalogue production. Our research methods included investigating scholarly publications in the field of dance history, dance theory, archival theory, and poststructural theory. In addition, we conducted

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interviews with Miriam Adams (co-founder of 15 Dance Lab and Dance Collection Danse), Amelia Ehrhardt, and Selma Odom (editor of the first dance catalogue published in Toronto). Throughout the curatorial and research process, the Nomadic Curatorial Collective engaged in regular meetings, documentation practices (meeting minutes and tape recordings), and conferences to openly share research in progress. McCurdy, Spooner and I also engaged in a three-way roundtable reflecting on the process of curating *No Context*, which was included in the final *No Context* catalogue.

We wanted the form of the catalogue to align aesthetically, formally, and theoretically with Ehrhardt's work, and with the central ideas behind *No Context*. We felt that in order to pose our questions about the relationship between text and performance effectively, the catalogue and the live performance had to interact in the same space, and audiences had to have the ability to hold the catalogue in their hands and refer to it instantly, even as the performance was unfolding. This created an interesting paradox: for the catalogue go to print on time and to work with a designer to perfect the layout, all the writing and catalogue content had to be completed and edited six weeks before the live performance occurred. Since it was a commissioned work that Ehrhardt was still developing, the writing would have to be completed while the live performance was still in the rehearsal process. This ended up becoming essential to the theoretical underpinnings of the project: it meant that it was a logistical impossibility for the catalogue to provide a definitive interpretive analysis of the work, which gave us a chance to revisit one of our central questions: how can curatorial writing provide context and supportive frameworks for embodied practice rather than an analysis of the work? In this case, the logistic practicalities of catalogue publication and the publication timeline actually clarified our theoretical approach to the form and content of the catalogue. This approach also exposed the limits of the catalogue.

The structure and content of the *No Context* catalogue are devised to point to the instability of writing, and the instability of interpretation (in this case, both the artist's interpretations of archival documents and the curators' interpretations of Ehrhardt's work). In the catalogue, subjectivity and positionality are accentuated in a variety of ways in an effort to communicate these interpretive instabilities over an authentic or "true" interpretation of either the archival documents or the live work itself. There are a number of writing forms represented in the *No Context* catalogue: descriptive prose, written and oral interview excerpts, excerpts of archival reproductions, and excerpts of a transcribed three-way conversation. All written documents (single authored or co-authored) are written in the first person singular or first person plural. The aim of this choice was to indicate both the subjectivity and a multiplicity of subjectivities of all contributors. Similarly, the full title of the live performance and catalogue, *No Context* or *Studio Place* or *Decentralize* or *We Actually Maybe Right Now Have Everything We Need*, does not label the work in a definitive way, but rather points to multiple and simultaneous significations.

Employing specific terminology characteristic of curatorial practice and the catalogue genre alongside trends and vocabulary in dance writing, the *No Context* catalogue contains a heterogeneous mix of terms that originate from both curatorial practice and the field of dance—an intentional movement between modes.

These are some of the strategies I, along with my collaborators, incorporated into the structure of the *No Context* catalogue in the hopes of inciting complex interpretive strategies on the part of readers. The catalogue serves as an opportunity to examine how the unenhanced weight, mass, physicality, and anti-illusionist qualities of postmodern dance could be reflected in the writing. In addition, we questioned whether or not it would be possible to de-emphasize the structures that

enable powerful illusionist narratives in catalogue writing. Some examples of this approach include the strategies previously mentioned: incorporating multiple authors and perspectives, destabilizing traditional narrative structures by way of excerpts and interrupted texts, including multiple narrative voices, and featuring a variety of written forms to emphasize the subjectivities present in multiple perspectives. Another important trend in postmodern dance that serves as a key theme in the *No Context* exhibition is intertextual referencing.

One of our attempts to renegotiate the function of writing in the context of dance was to reconsider the effect of textual narratives in relationship to embodied practice. It is worthwhile to examine how narrative functions in curatorial writing and whether or not nonnarrative structures impact the relationship between text and dance in new and interesting ways. The *No Context* catalogue presents an opportunity to juxtapose narrative voices in a fragmented, interwoven, nonhierarchical manner, as well as to combine these textual narratives and fragments alongside archival documents and photographs. These components work together to create complex and nonlinear narratives and interpretive experiences on the part of the reader, allowing readers to draw connections across narrative voices and textual, photographic, and archival media.

The dance exhibition catalogue offers a unique space in which to influence, manipulate, and potentially subvert how dance and writing interact. This intervention is achieved by creating gaps, fissures, and instability within the text, by destabilizing narrative and objectivity, and by using writing to gesture toward embodied practice as a primary site of knowledge. Conscientious approaches to dance catalogue production provide an opportunity for readers and viewers to create complex and nonlinear narratives and interpretive experiences, and to make new connections across media. This offers an opportunity for practical and theoretical expansion in both the fields of contemporary dance and curatorial practice.

## Credits

Catalogue Title: *No Context* or *Studio Place* or *Decentralize* or *We Actually Maybe Right Now Have Everything We Need*

Photo Credits (all): Erin McCurdy

Artist in Photos: Amelia Ehrhardt

Catalogue Concept: Nomadic Curatorial Collective

Catalogue Editor: Victoria Mohr-Blakeney

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I learn about the utopic impracticalities of Studio Place. A proposed dance centre, whose most striking feature is that it never happened. Lawrence and Miriam Adams, co-founders of 15 Dance Lab, lost the bid to Toronto's Young Place Theatre.

Studio Place. A vision that exists now only as an 8 page typed document, hugged in a laminate folder in a cardboard box. The trace of an idea that never lived. Archives are complicated things. They house our pasts. They are idiosyncratic and incomplete. They are simultaneously precious and mundane. They are irrelevant until they are essential, always waiting to fulfill the desperate, spontaneous needs of the present. Out of the mountains of archival documents professionally stored at Dance Collection Danse, the majority of 15 Dance Lab's ephemera sits in three uncategorized cardboard boxes.



Studio Place Proposal Cover Page, 1976, Lawrence and Miriam Adams Portfolio, Dance Collection Danse



But time is not a straight line. A spiral more like. Because there are moments, such as these, when we loop back so close that we feel like we can reach out and grasp the past. From across the street, we peer, we squint, we wait.

Forty years have passed.

But it is only a gesture. Worse. An idea. We cannot go back. The temptation to re-create is misleading. If I were to walk up to the old door to 15, what would I find?

Decades of accumulation, a stockpile, a storage locker of material memories.

“Can we take a look?”

McCurdy and Spooner and I asked on a reconnaissance mission to retrace the old 15 Dance Lab. The landlord shook her head. It was too full of her husband’s things to even open the door.

It looks like we are all hanging on to the past. What is remembered and what is forgotten and the faintly drawn line between the two.

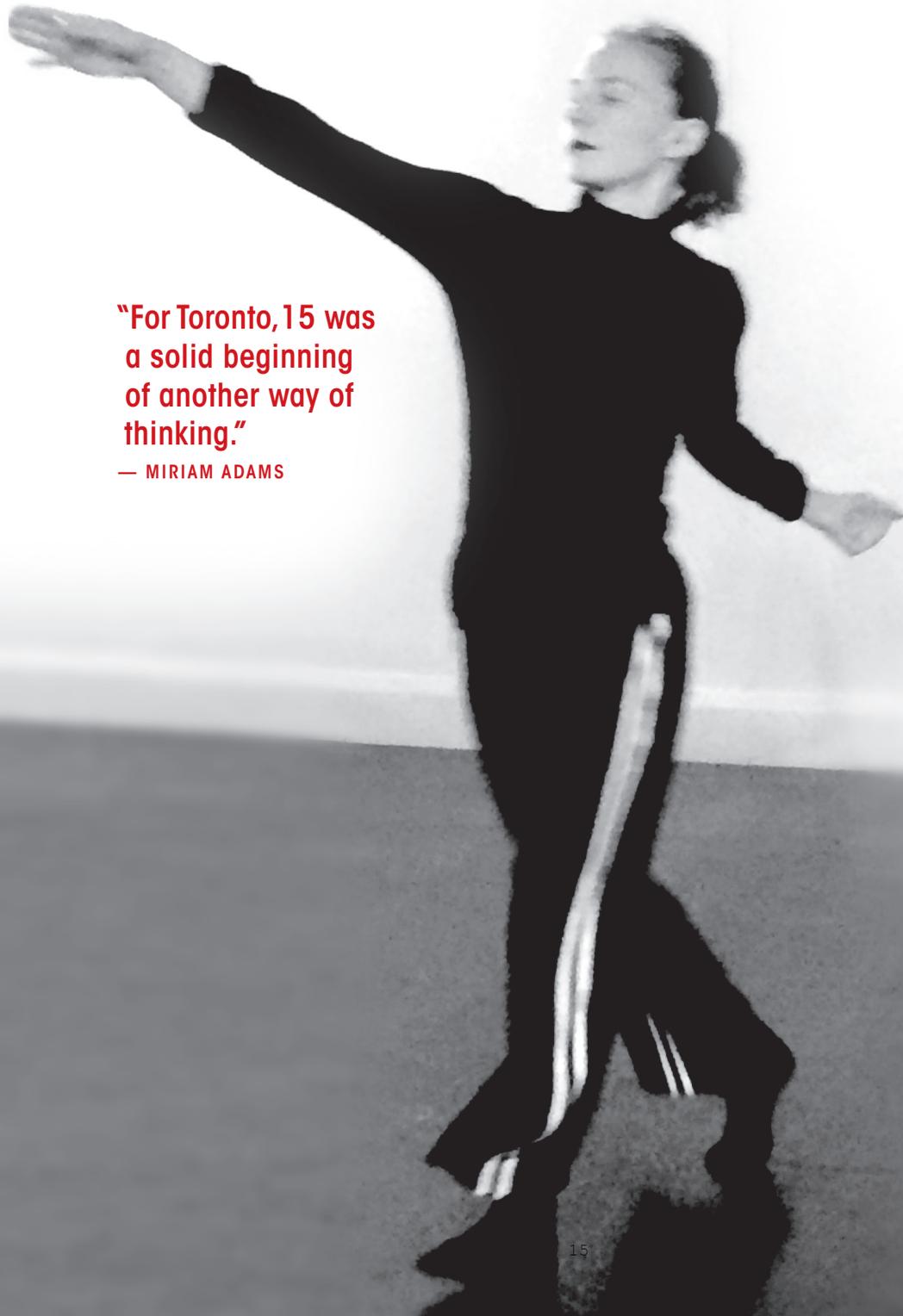
Photograph of Stanley, Lawrence Adams, Miriam Adams, Mr. Dog, and Jackie Malden Outside 15 Dance Laboratorium, 1975, Lawrence and Miriam Adams Portfolio, Dance Collection Danse



## Excerpts from an Interview with Amelia Ehrhardt

It's a funny legacy, postmodern dance in Toronto, because it is unquestionably there but has an invisible history. My good friend Niomi Cherney talks about wanting to teach a history of experimental dance in Canada as a Forgotten History—this whole realm of work that was quite well-documented and subsequently archived, and yet somehow doesn't really get taught. In school, I learned about the history of the term Dance Artist, and a bit about how Lawrence and Miriam Adams had left the Ballet, that they had done this thing called 15, but not so much about the actual work that came out of it. So I feel like one delight about this project has been revisiting this legacy and re-learning it via the actual ephemera it produced. I've of course been very influenced by postmodernism in dance, Judson Dance Theatre, the turn to pedestrian movement and all of that, so it is nice to look more closely at what was happening here, in this field.

-Amelia Ehrhardt



**“For Toronto, 15 was a solid beginning of another way of thinking.”**

— MIRIAM ADAMS

But just as I drift into the speculative futures of the past, Ehrhardt pulls me back into the present with the liveness of her own struggle. A female artist trying to make work and live in this city. And I wonder—who failed whom? Did the present fail the past, or vice versa?

Still Ehrhardt dances. Her motion is careful yet irreverent, a sort of sloppy precision that seems impossible to get to the bottom of, or to clutch with the fastidiousness of language.

Still she makes work in Toronto. Still she moves. Until of course eventually she, like everything else, including 15 Dance Lab—stops.

But until then Ehrhardt moves in the face of stillness. A moving landscape, my words forever searching before, beside, and beyond her, trying to calculate, to conclude, to catch a glimpse. To keep. To hold.

Or is this all about letting go?

As I write, *No Context* is still evolving, shifting, and coming into being. In many ways this is a blessing in disguise because it makes it impossible to write Ehrhardt down, to pin her between my wrist, thumb and index finger, to compulsively proofread her again and again. *No Context* is alive. This writing is by necessity incomplete, a fragment, a sketch, a frantic yet measured gesture towards liveness.

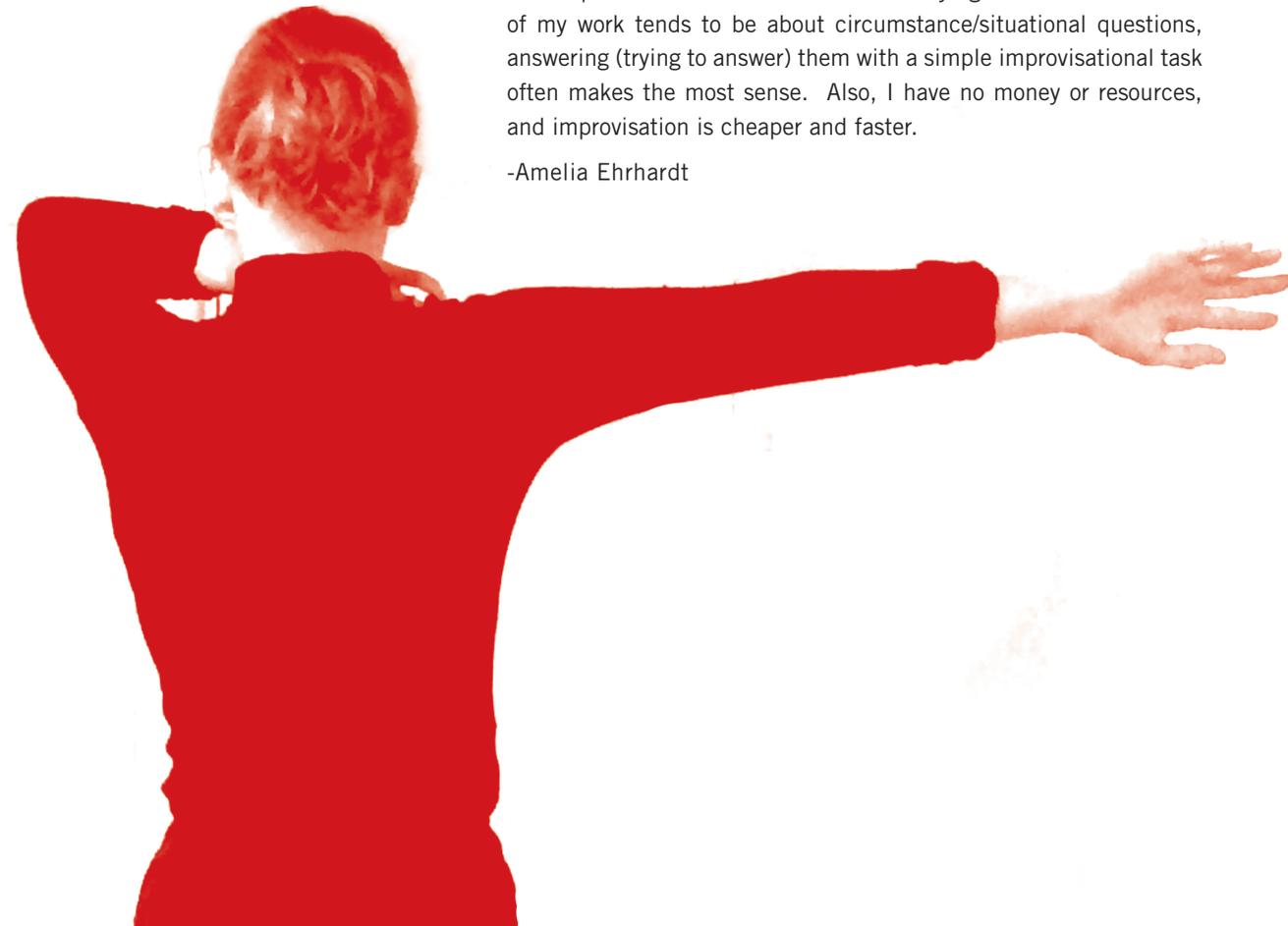
**“We ran it until 1980, so six years.  
And some of the work was god-awful  
and some of it was fantastic.”**

— MIRIAM ADAMS

I've been describing my approach to working for a while now as psychedelic minimalism. At what point is minimalism almost disorienting, almost hard to see? It's less about extreme clarity and more about so little that it's invisible, or so much that it's all the same thing. It's like fighting to find layers to peel back and being left with something devoid of content. Or maybe it's like listening to twenty people speak at the same time. It's important to me that my work is unclear.

I tend towards improvising in everything, but lately this has started to feel like a crutch, and I am trying to challenge myself to do more set choreography—this is what I've been doing with this other work of mine, *Traditional Dance*—but improvisation often feels like a much quicker route towards what I am trying to do. Because a lot of my work tends to be about circumstance/situational questions, answering (trying to answer) them with a simple improvisational task often makes the most sense. Also, I have no money or resources, and improvisation is cheaper and faster.

-Amelia Ehrhardt



I think a lot about the role of women in dance in Toronto 40 years ago and today. It looks like in the 70's in Toronto there were actually more women in positions of creative power in dance (and performance in general) here, whereas now there are so few women at the creative head of institutions and organizations.

Quick stats: the Dance Transition Resource Centre reported in 2005 that 71% of professional dancers in Canada were female, yet at the time of the report, 66% of the organization's member companies were under male artistic directorship. Dance Theatre Workshop in the States has a good one: "In 2000, of the 18 modern dance choreographers who received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, 13 were men"—The men received a total of two hundred thousand dollars with a typical grant of 10 grand, and the women received a total of 45 grand with a typical grant of five thousand dollars.

(Statistics can be misleading and manipulative but still so powerful. Yvonne Rainer says something good about this in *MURDER and murder* but I can't remember what).

And then Toronto - well, we barely have positions of creative power in dance here anymore (not many Artistic Directors left eh), but I would argue that they are still male-dominated (certainly the, you know, paid ones).

Ugh. In general, on lots of levels, I am sick of the way that we deal with gender in this form and think a big conversation about it needs to happen. There is a serious glass ceiling. We continue to promote the idea that because it is harder for young boys to get involved in dance as kids, because of social norms, they are disadvantaged in the professional context. This is baloney. In professional dance, men are typically more valued (paid higher), and work more often than women because there are fewer of them. However in professional sport, for example, women are typically less valued and work less often, because there are fewer of them. Women represent the vast majority of this field and represent a minority of Artistic Directors, presented choreographers, and generally, female independent dancers have fewer contracts than their male counterparts. We still live and work in a world in which men can be loud, opinionated, disagree a lot, and do things their own way, and women have to fight to do this or pay for it, or have this be one of their "personality quirks."

-Amelia Ehrhardt

## Choreographers at 15 Dance Laboratorium

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Kyra Lober  
Mimi Beck  
Louise Garfield  
Judy JarvisX  
Ingrid Remkins  
Jennifer Mascall  
Joan Phillips  
Paula RossX  
Carolyn Shaffer  
Janice Hladki  
Johanna Householder  
Elizabeth Chitty  
Margie GillisX  
Steve Paxton  
Nancy Stark Smith  
Mitchell Rose  
Marie ChouinardX  
Cynthia Mantel  
Barbara Zacconi  
Lawrence Adams  
Margaret Dragu  
Miriam Adams  
Susan Aaron  
Jill Bellos  
Irene Grainger  
John Faichney  
Lily Eng  
Peter Dudar  
Charlotte Hildebrand  
Nancy Scheiber  
Bettle Liotta  
Roberta Mohler  
Brenda Neilson  
Nikki Cole  
Patrick O'Hara  
Muna Tseng  
Joe Starr  
Alice Rosenberg  
Holly Small  
Gordon Dowton  
Kay Purdy  
Kilina Cremona  
Grindl Kuchirka  
Bryan Hayes  
Belina Weitzel  
Dena DavidaX  
Theresa Kowall  
Luba Dobal  
Keith Urban

Sallie Lyons  
Melodie Bengner  
Maxine Heppner  
Slade Lander  
Margaret Atkinson  
Anita Shack  
Susan Cash  
Savanah Walling  
Leslie Manning  
Martha Lovell  
Patricia White  
Ernst Eder  
Carol Eder  
Anna BlewchampX  
Paul Dwyer  
Ricardo Abreut  
Terrill Maguire  
Susan McNaughton  
Jean-Pierre PerreaultX  
Judy Marcuse  
Jo Leslie  
Andrew Harwood  
Alice Frost  
Sarah Shelton Mann  
Martha Bell  
Susan Daniels  
Simmie Airst  
Joann Anderson  
Menaka Thakkar  
Kathryn Brown  
Douglas Hembourg  
Cornelius Fischer-Credo  
Rina Singha  
Linda Moncur  
Alan Risdill  
Paula Ravitz  
Stephanie?  
Grant Stitt  
Joe Bietola  
Barbara Stowe  
Christopher HouseX  
John Miller  
Robyn Simpson  
Peter BonehamX  
Sylvie St. Laurent  
Gabby Miceli  
Alexandra Langham  
Lu Levine



My process really started in the archives at Dance Collection Danse and has remained oddly text-based. My initial archive-dig sessions at DCD were so rich, and I got so excited and had so many responses to what I was looking at but my reactions were all very text-based. I felt I had a lot to say about what I was looking at but that most of it was in words, and for a while going into performance felt disingenuous. I tend to work beginning to end (come up with a title first, and create work from start to finish) and it has certainly been the same for this. One day, while at Dance Collection Danse, I suddenly went sort of, aha, and opened my shitty computer and started writing. I've been working on that same document since. Because the bulk of the work of this work has been creating the text to be read alongside it, the act of writing has felt very choreographic. Sitting on my couch banging out words has been how I've shaped the movement: although it is improvised, I feel like the phrasing and shaping of how I'm flopping around is very much in response to the speed, tenor, and cadence of the text. But, I am trying very hard not to um, you know, be literal with my movement. It's actually quite difficult!

It's been nice to work on something where I get to openly have a really direct dialogue with dance history. My work is always like this and I have always, always been a huge dance history nerd, and there are so few living representations of historical dance work that are not ballet or other culturally specific historical forms. Creating this has been a nice way of feeling like I can, in some way, activate historical work, although I am not personally performing or even directly citing any of the work performed at 15. Maybe someday I'll really regret having had all my opinions printed in a risograph catalogue.

— Amelia Ehrhardt

## *NO CONTEXT: AN INCOMPLETE RECOLLECTION BY NOMADIC CURATORIAL COLLECTIVE*

Victoria Mohr-Blakeney (VMB): When did we decide to commission a contemporary artist - as opposed to an original artist - from 15 Dance Lab? Does anyone remember?

[laughter]

VMB: We really sort of rolled around the idea of what it would mean to approach an original member of 15, or someone who was creating at that time, to ask them to recreate work, to really get us into this complex challenge of how do you re-visit the archive in that way? And how do you re-mount and how do you re-enact? And I think we realized that we were less interested in the authenticity of an original and revisiting an original, and more interested in what a dialogue with the present would look like.



EM: We're still in the middle of it...

CS: We're still figuring out...

VMB: Wait - so this is an incomplete recollection? That goes very nicely with what we're trying to highlight here.

EM: Especially since we can't really remember what happened last June and July, when we first started working on this project.

VMB: It's shocking how little we remember.

EM: Because things change and you go with them, and then this path you were on just erodes, and you can't even recall what it was in the first place.

VMB: And that's where all of a sudden Derrida—not to bring him into this—starts to make sense.

CS: Don't bring Derrida into this!

[laughter]

VMB: This idea of the archive co-determining the event. After this, the catalogue will become our memories, in so many ways.

[...]

EM: Our catalogue is going to determine how we remember the history of this project. It influences how the public sees our process, but also how we'll remember it. Using the analogy of the family photo album—the pictures in the album are the moments that you remember from your childhood.



**“You often don’t know what you’re doing, you just know you’re doing it.”**

— MIRIAM ADAMS

CS: Well there’s a sequence also—you read page one before you read page 50—

VMB: —yes, exactly. It’s how we read. How can you destabilize a convention that is so ingrained and what does that look like? And can we achieve that in our catalogue? Can we destabilize that certain way of reading?

EM: Even thinking that maybe it was the blessing, dealing with un-catalogued boxes at Dance Collection Danse. That they weren’t framed for us...

VMB: That’s true.

EM: They’re just boxes filled with paper that has not yet been organized in the archive. Organized loosely in that they relate to 15 Dance Lab, but aside from that we were kind of free to wander through the pages.

VMB: That’s true!

EM: But with Miriam there to consult with us—someone who has a lived memory of what happened, and can tell you the story behind the documents, instead of the title of them. *Her* story behind the documents.

[...]

VMB: In a way the miracle is that it was archived, and that it was all kept. And that’s where we have Miriam to thank. Because—for one thing—without that we have no show.

[laughter]