

Delicious Confusion
embracing the unknown

Kathy Leiner

I question my ability,
our ability,
to live within the unknown.

How do we approach the unknown? Today we find ourselves in a reality that often offers ease of expectations, clear boundaries, and the instant gratification of accessing answers. Does it become more and more challenging to allow ourselves to be vulnerable through not knowing? And, when we feel we don't have enough information and become unsteady, do we ultimately diminish our engagement in the moment of a new experience? Or do we embrace the delicious confusion of not knowing?

Whether in daily life or art, these issues consistently surface and flow into my choreographic work. Together with my ongoing research into Black Mountain College, they have influenced my process and performance experiments. From its inception, BMC exemplified a community that embraces experimentation and the vulnerability of living in the unknown. In 2003, the allure of Black Mountain College pulled me to a precipice, and I began my journey down a path filled with ever-increasing intrigue. I realized that the more I learned, the less I knew. And yet, I continue to travel willingly into the depths of Black Mountain College history as a source of inspiration for my choreographic explorations. My piece, *HappenChance, an exploration of the unknown interiors of person, place, and thing*, was inspired on many levels by BMC, and I invite you to move into the unknown of a conversation, into the process of exploring process and see where we might land.



(All photos by Peter Brezney from, *HappenChance*, 2016 at the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center)

The artistic process is a collaboration, a myriad of life experiences, layered, intertwined, and knowingly or unknowingly filtered into creative work. Three lesser-known women woven into the fabric of the Black Mountain College's dance history: Elsa Kahl, Betty Jennerjahn, and Katherine Litz*, enriched the development of dance at the college and various aspects of their work sparked new avenues of inquiry for my work. Undoubtedly, the well-known experimentation and collaborations between Merce Cunningham and John Cage also had an impact on my exploration, but uncovering the women's work intrigued and moved me forward into new ways.

*Influence from the work of Elsa Kahl, Betty Jennerjahn, and Katherine Litz

Elsa Kahl: Accessibility and conviction.

She offered movement training by adapting her training in Eukinetics to make it accessible to the whole community. The approach, given Ms. Kahl's high degree of dance training, didn't have an elitist approach. She valued the development of movement skills for all disciplines and levels of ability. And, her convictions were so strong around matters she found important that it ultimately led to her decision to leave the college, but demonstrated her dedication to social issues.

Betty Jennerjahn: Multi-media experience

She was a dancer who explored multi-media through the Light Sound Movement Workshop with her husband, Pete. Their experiments brought group experiences to students from various disciplines whose work became quite influential (Ruth Asawa, Robert Rauschenberg, Sue Weil, and Nicholas Cernovich (WRA 1948-49 class rolls).

Katherine Litz: Process of discovery, collaboration, and the individual.

Her collaboration and the use of an ongoing conversation between artists in work like "The Glyph" and her concept that "the discovery of a way to work is the most important factor to a dancer's point of view, and a point of view is the most important factor in creative dance development." And that her "greatest interest lies in the development of the dance imagination peculiar and natural to the individual."



In my experiment, *HappenChance*, the performers and the audience were invited to negotiate the “delicious confusion” of the unknown throughout a 48-minute performance. I created *HappenChance* as a site-specific piece for the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. The location was designed and installed in an effort to invite the audience to engage* with the happenings in the space while having only a few simple rules, limited access to answers, and a list of choices. For my research, engagement is: *Being present in the time/place created, and to having some level of emotional involvement in the experience of art.*

At this point, I invite you, the reader, to make a choice as an active participant in the conversation on the screen before you:

Watch the link below now.

Watch it at any point within your reading.

Don't watch the link.

Move on to something else in your day

The opt-out is not a challenge, but rather a choice, an option that will undoubtedly shift your experience in some way.

Task at Hand, a mini-documentary of the performance *HappenChance* (found below this essay), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66yY3LTD1oU>

Now, you have watched, or not, or perhaps you are across the room now, in the kitchen trying to find something for dinner, and have forgotten the words waiting upon the screen. Either way, you made a choice; you are the author of your experience. Whatever the words say to you now, having seen or not seen, the video will inform the meaning you assign to my intention. By giving you a choice, I invite you to be an active participant.



Following the approach of *Death of the Author*, by Roland Barthes, we open up the idea of the reader as an active participant in determining the meaning of the text. Rather than the reader trying to discover the meaning and intent of the author, the reader becomes the author through the process of assigning meaning to the text. The author gives up control once it leaves her/his hands and the reader/audience, brings their meaning. In HappenChance, the approach echoes this idea choreographically.

Curious about, *Death of the Author*? Feel free to step out of this conversation and read: http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf

As a choreographer, the process, the meaning, and the intention of my movement may be more or less accessible to the reader/audience, depending on his or her experience and my approach. But how can or do we see the audience as the choreographer? Audiences typically would not expect to see themselves as the author/choreographers of the work, but what if we upend expectations? The idea of the audience as a choreographer is harder to establish when we approach dance from the perspective of a proscenium/stage, where the viewers expect to sit, watch, and receive. But I question these assumptions and recognize that the audience will experience the performance in the moment and have ownership of that moment in time and space. So it becomes theirs to interpret, theirs to embrace, and theirs to experience as an individual.

In alternative spaces such as in the BMC museum space for HappenChance, it becomes somewhat easier to shift perspective and expectations. But the shift can challenge the audience's comfort level with movement in a non-normative space. HappenChance offered choices and the potential for the audience to have a more active role as co-creator or even choreographer. The line between performer and audience became undefined and fluid, and in the vulnerability of the unknown, people could choose to engage in the experience or not. They might not see themselves as performers, but nonetheless, they were IN the performance space and part of the experience, like it or not.



Some artists go for this approach just to alienate an audience or raise the level of discomfort and push boundaries. Since by contrast I try to encourage engagement, I must work to find the line between the comfort zone and something new and allow audience perceptions to broaden without provoking them to retreat to the known. Herein lies the excitement of approaching vulnerability and the potential for new experiences to enhance connections. If we physically put the audience in the space, will they engage beyond the physicality, and connect intellectually and emotionally, too? Will they *be present in the time and place created and have some level of emotional involvement in the experience of art?*

HappenChance offered engagement with the unknown of the moment. It attempted to bring the “audience” into a conversation with the people, places and things in the space. And you as the reader at this moment have an advantage over the live audience because you know my intention. The evening event provided limited information: posted instructions and lanyards for each guest as their map to “guide” the experience. The forty-eight attendees were left to their own devices on how to interpret the information. In this moment you are left to your own devices. You have the option to refer back to the link and watch the video for more explanation of the physical space and other aspects of the work, OR you can imagine the *Rules* posted in large old typewriter font greeting the audience as they enter the space on a cold December night. And picture the *Lanyard* with black cord connected by a clip to a white, narrow cardstock piece of paper with photos on one side and the words diligently typed by an old typewriter, faint but visible.

Rules

- A) *Do Not Move Chairs*
- B) *Lanyard is your Map*
- C) *Change location during the music (3 minutes)*
- D) *All of the above*
- E) *None of the above*

Lanyards

Side 1-

Stop with 2 hands

create a circle Contemplate

Follow

Write one word

Side 2-

A photo of chairs side by side to

Wander

A photo of chairs facing opposite directions

A photo of chairs in a line all facing forward

The interpretation of this information, the map, was up to the participants. The dancers moved in silence for 7 minutes, and the audience changed locations for 3 minutes during the music. So who is the performer and who is the audience? Yes, everyone, the participants, the authors, the choreographers, all build a shared experience, through a dynamic relationship within the space of the work.

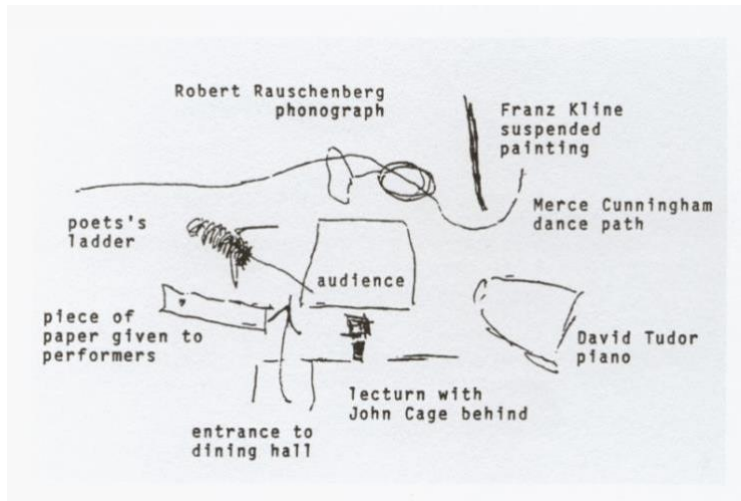
I should note that the four dancers had choices too. They were given a score, an outline of movement questions, as a starting point during the rehearsal process and they developed individual and collaborative responses over several months. The questions responded to research and encouraged the dancers to become coauthors/collaborators of their experience during both the rehearsal process and the performance event. As with Katherine Litz, my interest lies within the “...development of the dance imagination, peculiar and natural to the individual,” and gave agency to all participants. The ownership ups the vulnerability, and lessens the control over the event, but it increases the excitement of every performance being new and unrepeatable.

Creating a structure for participants to experience allows for chance happenings, things the author/choreographer can't control and can't predict. Some might argue that structure diminishes creativity but building structure to address our questions enhances possibilities. I wouldn't say, let's give the participants enough rope to hang themselves, instead let's provide the participants with enough rope to find their way. The structure of HappenChance gave ownership of the experience leaving for areas of exploration. If we spoon feed the experience through too much information and control, we move away from joint authorship as we assert too much control over the participant. Conversely, without some score, structure, or information to follow, the participants might be devoured by the unknown and disengage completely.

Often chance is interpreted as something random and unstructured. But if we look to John Cage's Theater Piece No. 1--the first Happening--we see structure used for the media chosen, the timing, and the placement of objects and people in space, to allow for chance happenings and choices for both the audience and performers. Typically, audiences defer to the known when placed in site-specific work. They defer to proscenium-based modes of participation, stand in one spot, view from one side, lurk on the edges of the action. But with performances like Happenings and HappenChance, the audience is placed in the space within the performance event. So what do we lose from an experience if we stay on the periphery and don't consider ourselves as part of the moment?



Why care, why take the risk to actually step into the moment and be vulnerable? HappenChance asked how much information do the participants need to engage with the experience? How can we soften the boundaries between the "audience" and "performers" and create a moment of shared experience, a moment of connection? HappenChance harkened back to Cage's exploration by offering various orientations of the chairs, of the people, and the activities, to raise questions and prompt multiple opportunities for interactions.



M.C. Richards, floor plan of John Cage's *Theater Piece No. 1* (1952)

If you have not done so I invite you to watch (again, found below this essay):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66yY3LTD1oU>

And consider:

Dance is not separate from the physical self; it's not something to be placed on a wall, a table, or a page. Choreographers may draw, write, record, put movement on another's body, but words, photos, or videos, can't capture the breadth of a movement piece in space and time. The fleeting, elusive essence of dance is uncapturable, even when someone hopes to share an experience of a live performance after it has happened. And when the moment passes, the dance can live on deep in the muscles, bones, and memory.

Dance can be a doorway through which we open ourselves to the unknown. Dance can be a way to be with our vulnerability and connect with others in time and space, in the very moment of its happening. As obvious as this may seem, it is a good reminder as we leave this screen.

Do we allow the "delicious confusion" of the unknown to entice us, or devour us?

Do we bristle and fall with new risks and challenges?

or

Do we soften, embrace, and engage with the unexpected to allow our vulnerability to connect us to others and the self we don't yet know?

Do we step knowingly into the unknown?