Three days until **Elevate Chicago Dance** marks the culmination of a multi-year **Regional Dance Development Initiative** (RDDI), jointly produced by **Chicago Dancemakers Forum** (CDF) and the **New England Foundation for the Arts** (NEFA). Produced and curated by **Peter Taub** and lasting three full days, Elevate intentionally highlights works by current and former recipients of CDF’s $15,000 Lab Artist Awards, given annually since 2003. Featured artists also include nearly all of the Chicago-based individuals selected to participate in the RDDI Chicago Dance Lab the previous summer — an immersive, 12-day program held on campus at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign.

Chicago submits its proposal to be the site of a future corporate campus for Amazon. The city’s bid reportedly offers $2 billion in incentives to the online retail giant, in exchange for as many as 50,000 well-paying jobs. Amazon receives 238 proposals over the course of four days; Chicago, underlining its seriousness, throws its hat in the ring on day one.
October 17, 2017

- Two days until Elevate Chicago Dance, a citywide festival of public and invite-only performances and studio showings, which is held in 10 venues and features the work of more than 150 performers, representing nearly 40 dance artists and organizations.

- *Condé Nast Traveler* publishes “The Best Big Cities in the U.S.” by Katherine LaGrave, who confirms Chicago as the winner of the publication’s 2017 Readers’ Choice Awards survey, after tallying “hundreds of thousands of votes cast.”

October 20, 2017

- We learn that 25 Chicago restaurants will be starred in the 2018 Michelin Guide, chasing *Bon Appétit’s* summer 2017 announcement that Chicago is the “Restaurant City of the Year.”

- Day two of Elevate Chicago Dance.

October 23, 2017

- *The New York Post* calls Chicago “the city to visit right now.”

**Prologue**

Accolades, signs of success, and public-relations wins are nice but, in the long run, it isn’t about who comes in first, second, or last. For nearly 50 years, Chicago has simply been known as “the city that works.” The motto it adopted in 1871, after flames consumed more than three square miles of the city, leaving more than 100,000 of its residents homeless, was “I will.” Determination is hard-coded into Chicago’s DNA, a quality expressed daily by its actors, architects, designers, directors, educators, musicians, visual artists — and by its dancers.

At 11:05am on Saturday, October 21, artist **NIC Kay** crossed East 70th Street in Chicago’s Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood and it was a very grand crossing, indeed. It occurred toward the end of *pushit: an exercise in getting well soon*, Kay’s 30-minute solo processional into and out of the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative. “What’s awesome about this project,” said Kay about *pushit*, “is that there is no getting well soon, which is why we have to practice.”

This clear-eyed vision — this steadfast focus on the long term — shot through all three days of Elevate Chicago Dance, which convened approximately 40 local, regional, and national colleagues working in choreography, curation, direction, education, engagement, presenting, research, and residency programs. In addition to enjoying the festival’s formal
and informal presentations of work, this esteemed and diverse cohort participated in structured and unstructured exchanges, with the artists as well as with each other, imagining ways to leverage their own and combined resources to advance healthier, more vibrant, and more sustainable dance communities, within Chicago and with points of connection to the city from beyond it.

Journal I: Experimentation

NIC Kay, pushit: an exercise in getting well soon. Photo by Zachary Whittenburg.

Date  Saturday, October 21, 2017
Location  Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative
Program  Artist Talks, Studio Showings, Networking
Access  By Invitation

The Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative is the result of a transformative renovation of the Dante Harper Townhomes, a Chicago Housing Authority development completed in 1981 and boarded up in 2007. Thirty-six units of public housing distributed among seven
two-story brick buildings, DA + HC represents the collective efforts of Rebuild Foundation, Brinshore Development, and Landon Bone Baker Architects. In a 2014 interview about the collaborative, Rebuild founder Theaster Gates said that “beautiful things should happen in black space, because violent things happen everywhere.”

Despite some recent and positive portrayals listed on the first page of this report, “violent things happen everywhere” summarizes more than one prevailing, persistent narrative about Chicago, commonly told and heard in places outside Chicago by people who don’t often visit Chicago. A frequently and affectionately shared quote about the city, from Nelson Algren’s essay, *Chicago: City on the Make*, is itself centered on a violent image: “Like loving a woman with a broken nose, you may well find lovelier lovelies” than Chicago, wrote Algren in 1951, “but never a lovely so real.” A generation earlier, Carl Sandburg gave the “storming, husking, brawling, City of the Big Shoulders” another aggressive slogan it has since eagerly adopted. Chicago is, has been, and may always will be known as, among other things, a place of violence.

The ways in which the city’s dancemakers reflect or refute that fact generate many of the ways in which their works are richly unique and engaging. Whether literally or abstractly, politically or poetically, creative minds and capacative bodies rooted here reckon with lived experiences. “There are legacies of the past that we’d like to imagine are in the past but which are really ever-present,” said Kay, before adding that *push it* was more meaningful and effective as an interpretable image — nodding toward freedom and joy — than it would be as a polemic against systemic oppression. Ten chalky white and one disco-mirrored, 11 helium-filled balloons tethered by ribbons around Kay’s neck engendered senses of floatation and of being off-balance, calling points of reference including *Moonlight*, the Middle Passage, Jim Crow, and swimming pools to both mind and body at once. “I keep everything neutral” is among the lines in the O.T. Genasis track, “Push It,” softened and extended by Knxwledge as the score for Kay’s solo performance. Moving forward through space between the asphalt and a wind-tossed bunch of balloons, Kay’s journey carved a linear channel out of time and space inside of which a person could simply be.

Far more physical effort went into performer Anna Martine Whitehead’s crossing of the studio space at DA + HC earlier that day. Prone below her, choreographer Onye Ozuzu (2016 CDF Lab Artist), also dean of the School of Fine and Performing Arts at Columbia College Chicago, pushed Whitehead’s reluctant feet forward using her shoulders. Each step required Ozuzu to reposition and reorient herself on the floor; even though Whitehead was hardly moving, Ozuzu could just barely keep up. In short order, Whitehead began to walk on top of Ozuzu’s body as it rolled over and over, her weight being borne by Ozuzu’s shoulders, lower back, inner thighs, and points between. Her palms on the floor, Ozuzu trembled as she lowered herself into a push-up position with Whitehead standing squarely on either side of her spine. This was the labor of movement being shown in an excerpt from Ozuzu’s *Project Tool* which, among many things, looks closely at the movement of manual labor.
“I wield a tool in hand,” said the five performers (Ozuzu and Whitehead, plus Keyierra Collins, Keisha Bennett, and Jessica Marasa) in broken unison. “It has a handle. It has a blade. It has a weight. So do I.” They used hand tools and advice from carpenter Bryan Saner to construct three hexagonal sections of wood flooring, like giant tiles, each made up of two trapezoids about six feet wide, which lock together. (As Project Tool progresses, the group will continue to construct additional tiles, eventually building a “library” of portable, modular dance flooring.) With one palm on her lower abdomen, Ozuzu explained her research into generations-old, ancestral, sometimes ancient, choreographies of handiwork. “The primary relationship is to self, then self to tool, then tool to impact.” The tiles were evidence of the bodies’ actions upon materials; the choreography of Project Tool, set to a score by Damon Locks which slid into and out of a 5/4 and other tricky time signatures, was evidence of the bodies’ actions upon each other. Back to back and seated, Ozuzu and Marasa pressed themselves together in some form of isometric pairing or reverse mitosis. Ozuzu later revealed the origin of their duet was in aikido, and talked about her motivation to expand her self-sufficiency and acquire survival skills in a secondary relationship, perhaps, of transitive access to power: vulnerability to autonomy, autonomy to effectiveness, effectiveness to potency. “I’m as dangerous as I am today,” she concluded, “and more dangerous than I was yesterday.”

At one point during her improvised solo performance, All That I Remember, Jessica Ray appeared to be sobbing, kneeling with her forehead resting on her left forearm, shaking quietly with her right palm pressed into the floor. The cycle of her shaking then gradually grew in amplitude while slowing in speed, until it was as if her right arm was “jumping” off the floor, throwing her torso upward and her head and hair back. Through escalation, the isolated pulsations of her tricep went from suggesting an emotional state to demonstrating a somatic one. She then stood, looked straight ahead with determination, and exited the studio space. Visible through a north-facing window, NIC Kay was kneeling outside, shooting video of their balloons bouncing around against the sky, one of which popped during Ray’s performance.
Ray spoke of her appreciation of the logistical simplicity of the project, created through a Co-MISSIONS residency at Links Hall, and presented without music or other audio. “It felt good to respond to the tech rider [from Elevate Chicago Dance] and be able to say, ‘No, I don’t need that. No, I don’t need that. No, I don’t need that. Yes, whatever space will be fine.’”

Jumaane Taylor (2017 CDF Lab Artist) improvised a similarly pared-down tap performance, accompanied by keyboardist Justin Dillard on a wine-colored Hammond Sk2 organ, patched in places with black gaffer’s tape and plugged into a small amplifier. Taylor spoke of Chicago-based jazz saxophone players Fred Anderson and Von Freeman, and of the intimacy between artists who share forms and media. “We can say ‘worldwide community’ when it comes to jazz, but it was really just a handful of cats eating together and sleeping together.” He chuckled. “I mean, not really — you know what I mean.” Taylor’s feet snatched extraordinarily clean, clear rhythms out of the thin air between Dillard’s notes as he alternated between dancing on two portable wooden floors, one larger and thinner, the other raised and hiding a microphone. Both platforms grew spotted as droplets of sweat fell from Taylor’s nose, brow, and beard.

The morning’s showcase at DA + HC having run late and the next group to reserve the studio eager to take over, Taylor and Dillard wrapped up, but not until after Taylor took the opportunity to let the group know he was a local. “I’m from 79th and King Drive!” he exclaimed, naming an intersection just southwest of DA + HC, at the opposite corner of Greater Grand Crossing.
The morning prior featured three presentations in the pine-beadboarded Sky Room of a recreation center built around 1950. Sunlight streamed in as Rachel Damon (2010 CDF Lab Artist), artistic director of Synapse Arts, explained the benefits of being one of 31 Arts Partners in Residence at Chicago Park District properties like Loyola Park. Nearby and meanwhile, dancer Kate Matteson Campana wrapped Gretchen Soechting in a loose net of grey satin ribbon, as Laura Tennal lengthened the net’s other end by using her arms as knitting needles. Damon listed some particulars of her company’s residency, such as the five-dollar drop-in modern dance classes it offers, before the dancers shared six minutes of the half-hour work Soften Every Edge, for which the airy textiles were created.

Excerpts followed from Light Hand, a work in progress premiering in June 2018 through Pivot Arts, a contemporary and multidisciplinary presenter whose programs are found, as is Loyola Park, on the city’s far northeast side. Tennal and three more ensemble members — Cat Miller, Amanda Ramirez, and Megan Rhyme — lined up for a test of the wireless
speakers each wore around her chest in a holster. Checking for connections between the
dancers, two phones, and two laptop computers, Damon called out their names:

“Do I have Megan?” she asked, as the sound of small bells emerged from the speaker
Rhyme wore.

“Yes.”

“Do I have Amanda?” she asked, as the sound of snapping fingers emanated from the
speaker Ramirez wore.

“Yes.”

Joined by dancer Dylan Roth, the group dispersed across and through the light-filled
space, interacting with more of the arm-knit textiles, some hanging from the room’s
rafters, some Burgundy-colored. Headfirst undulations of the performers’ spines made
them appear to weave their bodies through the air, unraveling and “reraveling,” or moving
like the soundwaves spilling outward from their costumes.

Next, Ginger Krebs (2015 CDF Lab Artist) advanced the slides on a flat-panel display
wheeled into the center of the Sky Room, while naming subjects of her interest during the
process of creating Soft Parade, which included:

The body as a symbol,

The theater of public relations,

The violence and vulnerability behind status,

The “peripheral or invisible labor that maintains an image,”

On Aggression, the 1963 book by behaviorist Konrad Lorenz, and

The idea, inspired by rococo decorative arts, that “glory can weigh you down.”

The excerpt shown from Soft Parade, an ensemble work of dance-theater originally
premiered in 2014, began with the sound of pea whistles being blown too softly to blast.
(Outside the fieldhouse, a dog whimpered.) David Smith, on clarinet, and KG Price, on a
snare drum, sputtered into a martial waltz as Krebs and six more performers in a line
approached the audience, each alternating steps and pauses in a unique pattern so that
they traded places, like a sliding tile puzzle with a life of its own.
Krebs, a sculptor and visual artist in addition to a choreographer, made garments and accessories for *Soft Parade* reaching toward a multitude of reference points. Performer April Noga wore on her back a giant pink and brown prize ribbon with pleated edges. Around her neck, Dani Martinez wore a necklace made of flat images of halved papayas, each surrounded by a gold bezel. Ji Yang sported a pair of ear guards typically used for kickboxing. An acid-green sash of party-banner letters reading “MERIT” crossed Zachary Nicol’s chest, while Jon Poindexter’s left shoulder remained hidden beneath a bright purple epaulet.

Voiced-over text listed goals and hopes in no discernable order. “Bigger breasts. A salary. Instagram followers. Appreciative audiences. A Ph.D.” The laughter of recognition grew louder as *Soft Parade* soldiered on. Concluding her presentation, Krebs drew connections between this earlier work and *Buffer Overrun* (2016), for which she translated some of the figure-ground relationships in *Soft Parade* into a field where performers’ bodies could blend into video projections, a dramatically raked stage, a peripheral darkness, and each other.

Damon, wielding a push broom, swept the linoleum floor clean while five more dancers entered the Sky Room to perform an excerpt from *Genuine Fake* by Joanna Furnans. They walked in patterns while Furnans contextualized the project, for seven dancers in its full form, which premiered at Links Hall in June 2017. (Like *All That I Remember*, *Genuine Fake* was supported by a Co-MISSIONS residency at Links; for full disclosure, I should mention I served as a mentor to Furnans during that creative process.)

Asked about the title of her work, Furnans explained she’d encountered it in a 2016 *Vanity Fair* profile of the burlesque artist Dita Von Teese, who, as it turns out, was quoting a compliment she’d received from the illustrator David Downton: “She’s the real deal — or perhaps I should say, ‘a genuine fake.’” The score by Erica Ricketts contained about as much negative space as did the relaxed textiles Damon’s collaborators were weaving.
earlier; among the sounds gently breaking the rapt silence were what might have been echoes in a hallway, a live lavalier being affixed to a lapel, and the scratch of a phonograph needle as it traced the edge of a record’s label.


*Genuine Fake* remained an atomized, decentralized field of call-and-response activity until the dancers settled into a line of direct address, their arms raised high overhead as if in surrender. Speaking again after the presentation, Furnans explained that she intended that moment in the work — delayed even longer in its full version — to be the first time we in the audience could “really see” the performers, not as abstractions, not as bodies moving within a system, but as people.
At 9:47pm the night before, percussionist Joe St. Charles tapped and thwacked a diverse array of objects around him on tables, while folks filtered into the gallery to settle their bodies among blankets, pillows, and cocoon-like huts in various shades of grey and off-white. Where lighting instruments were tucked behind these linen and burlap soft goods, the effect was similar to seeing sunlight pass through an earlobe. St. Charles hit a variety of glass bowls with small mallets, in and out of tune with the notes he plucked from a zither. One recurring fragment of melody — recorded and looped live — nodded to the motif from “The Dying Swan” by Camille Saint-Saëns.

This was the soundscape for excerpts from The Retreat: One Week, Khecari’s immersive and durational performance in process toward more than 150 consecutive hours of material including, for its observers, “participatory movement workshops, overnight camping, and meals.” As Khecari’s four dancers (John Jandernoa, Chih-Hsien Lin, Amanda Maraist, and Enid Smith) executed floor-bound phrases in the center of the gallery, co-choreographers Julia Antonick (2009 CDF Lab Artist) and Jonathan Meyer (2010 CDF Lab Artist) split hosting duties, offering drinks and making sure everyone had room enough to recline. The dancers’ white costumes (by Jeff Hancock) blended into the room’s walls and décor, while most members of the audience were dressed in dark colors. Piled up along the periphery in an irregular oval, these observers comprised a continuous ring of mottled charcoal. We were the remnants of a fire pit dusted the morning after with fresh snow, or boulders pushed by impact toward the rim of a crater.

Without fanfare, this atmospheric overture gave way to a more formal presentation of Khecari’s choreography. Blue lights in an attic space overlooking the gallery pulsed in time with gentle drumbeats from St. Charles’ kit. We heard the squeak of bare skin on the painted concrete floor as the dancers ramped up the level of their exertion. All eight of
their arms expressed the proximal impetuses of all four of their trunks, agitated from below like the handles of pellet drums. After peaking, these actions resolved into sculpture, as the dancers sat still and facing, each isolated within a pool of light from above — then one last frenzy of logrolling, and the thud of bones on concrete through muscle.

Defibrillator founder Joseph Ravens thanked his mighty team of apprentices for their hard work, then welcomed us into his basement for Against Choreography, by Antibody Corporation’s April Lynn and Adam Rose (2014 CDF Lab Artist). Rose emerged first, between two black paper banners hanging from the low ceiling and marked in white paint with characters from an alphabet he and Lynn invented together. Lurching unpredictably and aggressively around the banners, Rose periodically screeched lyrics from “Free Fallin'” by Tom Petty, who had died just 17 days earlier. Rose, shirtless and lean like a warrior, wore a small speaker on a strap over his shoulder which brought into the environment both white noise and the dark industrial music he composes.

For the second of the work’s three brief vignettes, Lynn came forward through a makeshift curtain. She knelt before another black paper banner, affixed to the floor, dipped a long paintbrush into wet white, and calligraphed more mysterious characters, each one directly on top of the last. She held in her other hand a microphone routed through a vocal filter so as she spoke, her words came out grinding and garbled and gruff.

Against Choreography closed with a third scene bringing together Rose and Lynn, who wore a conservative blazer over the professional attire of a dominatrix. Their musical accompaniment could have been the karaoke version of a bland pop anthem meant to be inspiring, yet instead hollow and derivative, an insincere smile of a soundtrack. We were encouraged to “join the corporation” as Rose jerked his head sideways repeatedly, as if trying to empty his eardrums after a swim. He reached for one audience member’s hand and was denied. He turned, offered a hand to another viewer and was denied again. He ripped the paper banners apart as he danced in malfunction, and as Lynn continued to emcee, presiding over the spectacle.

Through the makeshift curtain we went, passing rows and rows of underground storage as we were led by Ravens to the freestanding garage behind Defibrillator. Inside, designer and architect David Sundry had installed three courses of cinderblocks to make a pen nearly as large as the garage itself. Outside the pen, we crammed ourselves between the bricks and the walls; inside the pen, choreographer Michelle Kranicke (2006 CDF Lab Artist) performed an excerpt from her work Valise 13 alongside Molly Strom and three blonde wooden steps, capped with a prim white threshold. Sheets of immaculate Mylar were draped above the dancers and us, creating a convex mirror that shuddered and shivered whenever anyone moved.
Produced by Kranicke’s Zephyr Dance, Valise 13 “was a succession of separate forays, trajectories, and linkages that became a continuous unfolding of movement, sound, and image.” In addition to the garage-set excerpt restaged for “Elevate Chicago Dance,” there was an installation made for the basement and another in the storefront window of the gallery, right at street level on the bustling stretch of West Chicago Avenue between Bishop and Armour Streets.

Kranicke and Strom moved in loose unison flipped 180 degrees away from each other, then repositioned themselves into perfect alignment. Their bodies remained tied in uncomfortable-looking knots, their faces pressed to the floor — a concrete slab freshly painted yet marred with cracks and pits — and their buttocks in the air. As part of a design credited to Richard Norwood, four halogen lamps shone brightly from inside the walls of the pen; as part of a score credited to Kranicke, we heard planks clapping together which sounded like rough sex, and the tinny, panicked echoes of what sounded like a hummingbird in an empty coffee can. Kranicke and Strom’s duet transitioned into scurrying around the confines of the pen like two bumper cars, and rocking back and forth like they were on the deck of a ship in a storm. Both women managed to exude elegance despite it all.

Back upstairs in the main gallery, all of Khecari’s garments were gone. Stripped of the soft goods, the high-ceilinged main room felt enormous and whistle-clean (especially after our release from the pressure cooker of Valise 13). We were instructed to choose a seat along one of the two longer sides of the space; at either short end stood one of the tall, thick, square partitions that Defibrillator uses to reconfigure itself.

Darling Shear, the performer, soon began a solo called Tech, No-Jesus by Darling Squire, the choreographer. (They’re the same person.) In a hooded coat over a dress and backlit, Darling appeared as an unknowable figure with an indigo ribbon around the waist. “Lordy, Lord,” we heard Mahalia Jackson sing through the sound system; Darling flapped the coat’s heavy fabric and it sounded like a flag in a gale. Transitioning out of the coat, out of the belt, out of the hairpins close to the scalp, Darling stripped down to a tan camisole and a strand of pearls, releasing a halo-esque pouf of orange-tipped hair.
Whiplash pirouettes, slow-drifting poses, and feats of strength took turns inside the choreography. When supine with clenched feet and breathing urgently shallow, Darling could have been Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* on the floor. When standing and quaking, forearms rotated and palms outward, Darling could have been Lavinia facing Demetrius and Chiron.

Darling backed into an observer who nervously smiled. Darling went to embrace Peter Taub, who embraced Darling back with his right hand. Last, Darling went to hold Carole McCurdy (2016 CDF Lab Artist), returned to the center of the gallery, and screamed twice. Darling motioned for all of us watching to sit. Behind the sound of Björk’s voice through the speakers was the sound of a dial-up modem. Darling disappeared into a blackout, back against the wall, then reappeared in black leggings and a black top, mouthing along with Björk’s lyrics. On hands and knees, Darling left for good, crawling in the direction of the gallery’s bar.
High Concept Labs, a glass-walled arts incubator housed inside the cavernous art-storage and studio facility Mana Contemporary Chicago, “increases access to the artistic process,” according to its mission. Over a lunch of local tamales, filmmaker Catherine Sullivan (2016 CDF LabArtist) told me she’d finished principal photography for her latest film, The Startled Faction, and briefed me on how she divides and conquers editing and post-production singlehandedly. Erica Mott (2010 CDF Lab Artist) stopped by to report on her progress in securing the crosses for every T — and the dots for every I — so that her international cast of collaborators on Mycelial: Street Parliament could present the work overseas. Honey Pot Performance artistic director Meida McNeal (2010 CDF Lab Artist) and I chatted about the Arts Partners in Residence at Chicago Park District, where McNeal serves as arts and culture manager in its department of culture, arts, and nature.

Amirah Sackett was born in Chicago and played key roles in numerous hip-hop crews and festivals around the Midwest including Rhythm Queenz; B-Girl Be at Intermedia Arts in Minneapolis; and We’re Muslim, Don’t Panic. She told us after lunch that, “as a Muslim-American, I was caught in that net” between affinities, artistic practices, and cultural...
communities too often defined in opposition to one another. "I need to do something," she recalled thinking, "I'm an artist and I have a voice. Hip-hop is that voice."

She reached out to potential collaborators near and far like Arshia Ali-Khan, who welcomed Sackett’s proposal to the American Islamic College for a fundraiser to benefit those affected by hurricanes in 2017. Three years earlier, Sackett had been one of four artists brought by the American Center of the U.S. Embassy to Dhaka, Bangladesh through a program called “Next Level,” sponsored by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs. Sackett’s recent projects and cultural exchanges are “the most beautiful, most fulfilling work I’ve done in dance,” she said, punctuating her earnest words with staccato hand gestures or “tuts.”

In a demonstration of her cross-cultural choreography — some videos of which have gathered more than 40 thousand views — Sackett presented Qadr, a solo set to Denver artist Aja Black’s cover of “Waiting in Vain” by Bob Marley. “So don’t treat me like a puppet on a string,” sang Black, plaintively, as Sackett, popping, herked and jerked like a marionette. “I don’t wanna wait in vain,” Black continued, as Sackett’s right arm stuttered around in a circle, ticking off each moment in time like a second hand.

Narrating a deck of slides projected onto the wall behind her, Mott summarized her past few years of work as a choreographer and artistic director bridging multiple disciplines to bring complex presentations to carefully selected, resonant sites. ELEMENTAL: Spectacles of Earth, Air and Water (2017) reached more than 350 area students and activated Palmisano Park — formerly a limestone quarry, then a landfill — in the city’s Bridgeport neighborhood. Trials and Trails (2017) transformed Steelworkers Park on the
city's South Side, where 87th Street meets the shore of Lake Michigan, in a continuation of Mott's long-running “Cowboys and Vikings” trilogy. *3 Singers* (2015) employed classically trained vocalists in an interactive, installed “technopera” exploring “the role of women’s rights in the textile industry through three different periods of global history: pre–Civil War agricultural production, the Industrial Revolution, and the contemporary sweatshop.” In Chicago, Mott staged the production at the National Museum of Health and Medicine; in Kraków, Poland, she presented it at the Center for Documentation of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor Cricoteka.

Mott devoted most of her time, however, to her latest project, *Mycelial: Street Parliament*, whose source material includes a “sentiment analysis” of Twitter activity during the first five days of the occupation of Tahrir Square — the first wave in January 2011 of the Egyptian Revolution. She explained the one-to-one relationship between the two groups she brought together: “Every dancer in the work from Chicago has a counterpart in Egypt. Every technology collaborator here has a partner in Egypt.” The work in progress was mycelial in that it united flowering bodies through an invisible web of connectivity; the work was mercurial in that it acknowledged the slippery nature of digital interactions in virtual spaces, offering no easy answers about social movements or political unrest. “I started by looking at who we belong to,” said Mott, “or who we profess to belong to.”
Underlining how dynamically these associations may come and go, *Mycelial* applied data, captured live from performers and observers, to everything from the score (by Mott’s regular collaborator Ryan Ingebritsen and Egyptian composer Ahmed Saleh) to its video projections (by local media artist Hugh Sato and Egyptian engineers Badr AlKhamissi and Ziad Osama), using technologies developed by Tony Reimer (of the Laboratory for Audience Interactive Technologies and the National Center for Supercomputing Applications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) and Egypt-based UI designer Yasser Nazmy. As we wandered throughout the space among *Mycelial* dancers Michelle Broecker, Christopher Knowlton, Matthew McMunn, and Nejla Yatkin, it was clear that our improvised traffic was more than just incidental.

We moved closer to the rear wall of the studio for a presentation by Catherine Sullivan, who makes work for the screen and comes out of a background not in dance, but in theater. “I’m interested in physical idiosyncrasies and unresolved physical behaviors,” she said, adding that she strives through her films to portray “bodies in the presence of questions, trying in some way to cope with those questions.”

In some of the excerpts she screened, Sullivan noted that the sets were commandeered from local stage productions including *Porgy and Bess* at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, *Waiting for Godot* at Court Theatre, and Goodman Theatre’s *stop. reset.* and *Two Trains Running.* “I think of using these as readymade objects, much like you see readymades included in works of sculpture and other visual art forms.” Indeed, Sullivan’s tactic brought those scenes into the vicinity of bricolage, where contrasting aesthetics of artifice kept the films’ actors in psychological suspension.

We viewed clips from Sullivan’s *Ice Floes of Franz Josef Land* (2003), *The Chittendens* (2007), and *Afterword via Fantasia* (2015) before being treated to a rough cut of 13 minutes, or about a third, of *The Startled Faction*, whose characters Sullivan said were perhaps best imagined as “involved in some kind of sensitivity training.” Tight shots showed groups of twos, threes, and fours talking past one another, sometimes through a lens smeared or smudged. One’s fragmented monologue sounded like a confession from a therapist’s sofa: “‘Answer me. Answer me!’ When we were children, this demand was always made.” Another character, offering less-than-helpful self-help, elicited laughs with the line, “Let’s take our minds forward — and our bodies back.” Zachary Nicol of *Soft*
Parade and Genuine Fake was recognizable among the film’s cast, as was Kristin Van Loon of the Minneapolis-based choreographic duo HIJACK. Choreography for The Startled Faction was contributed by Dylan Skybrook, with whom Sullivan and Van Loon collaborated on an earlier film, Triangle of Need (2007).

Closing out the Elevate Chicago Dance visit to High Concept Labs, performers Abra Johnson and Meida McNeal, and sound designer and DJ Jo de Presser, presented the context for and an excerpt from Honey Pot Performance’s current project, ways of knowing. Program notes and projected slides told us some questions at the core of the project, premiering in spring 2018, such as:

“How do we display power when even our discriminate usage of the terms ‘mastery’ and ‘expertise’ reveals troublesome patterns?”

“What are our rituals, our come-back-tos, our ways of sitting deep in our collective practice of making together?”

“What do we know, and how do we know?”

“Mastery...is understanding fit, and flow, and arc,” McNeal said out loud, pressed back-to-back with Johnson. “Mastery is long, long listening the practice.” Both women hummed together, repeating a gentle scoop from a low note up to a higher one. They touched their thumbs and pinkies in a meditative version of “The Itsy Bitsy Spider.” They raised their left arms high and walked forward.

“The hands are but outgrowths of time,” said Johnson, her tone commanding, her elocution strong. “These hands open to embrace you as one of their own.” Presser played
what sounded like a heartbeat through a stethoscope and into a microphone. Johnson spoke of “brighter reds, greener pastures, and purple-crowned black,” and told the story of the consoling words she heard from her father upon the death of her mother’s cousin, Melvin the sailor, when Johnson was young.

McNeal explained how ways of knowing will ask its audiences, welcomed in deliberately small groups, to insert their own ideas, experiences, and perceptions into the work, in “a kind of mashup between the Socratic method and an Afro-diasporic proverb.... Engaging community isn’t easy. We start by learning the landscape.... We’re looking for optimal conditions for mutual benefit. We are creators, creating a journey, and it is good.”

Nejla Yatkin in What Dreams May Come. Photo by Zachary Whittenburg.

Date  Friday, October 20, 2017
Location  Old Town School of Folk Music
Program  Artist Talks, Studio Showings, Lunch Reception, Networking
Access  By Invitation

When NY2 Dance artistic director Nejla Yatkin collaborates with dancers she’s just met, in places she’s never been to before — both of which things happen frequently — she guides them to “use more their senses than technique to respond to the environment.” Through her aptly titled, ongoing series, “Dancing Around the World,” Yatkin gathers movers of all stripes for workshops, flash-choreographing to their strengths and current practices, then sites the result in a public place. (Years ago, I encountered Yatkin roaming Manhattan with a band of dancers.)
In the Myron R. Szold Music and Dance Hall at the Old Town School of Folk Music, we watched footage compiled and edited by Yatkin’s collaborator, Enki Andrews, from “Dancing Around the World” installments in Bologna, Italy, and Köchi City, Japan, where Yatkin’s dancers ranged in age from six to 78 years old. “For me, dance is discover my body,” said a collaborator from Bologna. “How many shapes can do my body?”

Yatkin shared live performance as well — excerpts from her evening-length solo, What Dreams May Come, developed in part through a Princess Grace Foundation–USA Works in Progress Residency at the Baryshnikov Arts Center. Entering a tightly focused, bright light, Yatkin pulled at the hem of her black shirt, bringing it up over her mouth, then her face and, finally, her whole head. Black tape held her mouth shut, sending our attention to her wide-open eyes, through which she looked directly at us in the audience. Reminiscent of the way in which, the night before, Darling Shear circled the room at Defibrillator and embraced multiple people, Yatkin entered the house at Szold Hall. She took the hand of local director and choreographer Frank Chaves and held it to her cheek. She also interacted with, among others, Maggie Allessee National Center for Choreography director Carla Peterson, Chicago Tribune dance critic Lauren Warnecke, Bates Dance Festival director Shoshona Currier, and CDF executive director Ginger Farley. Yatkin’s interventions had a push-pull dynamic to them; she seemed to be (physically) asking her temporary partners to come with her while, at the same time, keeping them at arm’s length.

Setting the terms of engagement for bringing collaborators close is a strategy also employed by The Cambrians, whose creative director, Benjamin Wardell (2015 CDF Lab Artist), volubly outlined his organization’s unique structure. Invited choreographers contribute “raw material” developed with a small cast of dancers for each project, which Wardell and his colleagues then combine and remix to make a performance which in some way expresses or essentializes the group’s dynamic. “The relationship of the performers,” according to a program note, “is the primary content of our shows.”

“I love choreography — don’t get me wrong — but I really love dancer relationships,” said Wardell. Past productions of The Cambrians have employed artists on both coasts of the U.S. and overseas. “The long-term vision is to build an ecosystem inside which we can perform and create, in multiple places and communities.” (The name of the collective refers to the Cambrian Explosion.) A “shared IP culture” allows the contributing
choreographers to retain any material they create, and repurpose it to their own ends and for their own organizations.

The Cambrians’ next venture, Velvet, will feature Wardell dancing with Jonathan Alsberry and Christian Denice, a trio Wardell explained has a lot in common. All three are gay men who were formerly associated with single companies, but who have since cobbled together their own freelance and contract-based careers. Their choreographers will include Autumn Eckman, Robyn Mineko Williams, and three former CDF Lab Artists: Deeply Rooted Dance Theater artistic director Kevin Iega Jeff (2009), Darrell Jones (2006), and Ahmad Simmons (2014). For “Elevate Chicago Dance,” Wardell presented an excerpt with Denice and Lizzie MacKenzie, who for a time were colleagues at River North Dance Chicago, Frank Chaves’ company. The choreography from Simmons put MacKenzie in occasional contact with the floor, between lifts from Denice, Wardell, or both together. Their cool acrobatics rested on the dancers’ expertise in ballet and contemporary techniques.

Selections from two creations found Molly Shanahan (2006 CDF Lab Artist) returning to one well and digging another. Blackbird’s Ventriloquy extends and adds to the inquiries of My Name is a Blackbird, Shanahan’s watershed, improvised 2007 solo engagement; Of Whales, Time, and Your Last Attempt to Reach Me features Shanahan alongside Kristina Fluty, Jeff Hancock, and Megan Klein, and will premiere in March 2018 at the Dance Center of Columbia College Chicago.

The former, she said, “has the weight of a ten-year process and the lightness of being the last iteration of that process.” An artist especially expressive through her hands, Shanahan danced for a time with “finger guns,” then unfolded her remaining digits in a bloom of counting. Sharp and subtle trembling, relatively new to Blackbird’s movement vocabulary, intersected with a characteristic more central to its DNA: the sudden and brief appearance and disappearance of symmetries. Without buildup or warning, Shanahan ended her solo performance with a perfunctory, “I’m done.”

Molly Shanahan in Blackbird’s Ventriloquy. Photo by Zachary Whittenburg.

The Of Whales quartet paid some homage to Stamina of Curiosity, another series of works in the repertoire of Molly Shanahan / Mad Shak, specifically in the way the dancers took turns leading the group in staggered unison — ripples and
richochets of call and response which handily help the audience avoid comparing one dancer to another. Expansive, inflated poses made the dancers in stillness look like Henry Moore sculptures. There was an almost riotous amount of activity in the dancers' heads and shoulders. “This is my real,” they said. “This is my fake.” Leapfrogging each other’s words, they sang stories too tangled together to follow in parallel.

Shanahan addressed a few questions at the end of her time, noting, “I’m looking more and more at precarity, decrepitude, and loss as being part of virtuosity…and vulnerability onstage as a position of privilege.” She was also forthcoming about using characters from her memories of watching television (including *The Incredible Hulk*, Joan Collins as Alexis Carrington Colby on *Dynasty*, and Victor French as Isaiah Edwards on *Little House on the Prairie*) as routes into embodying creatively fruitful states of being. “There’s a longing, and a wondering about who I am,” she said in conclusion.

In and with a wooden rocking chair, **Jenn Freeman** (a.k.a. **Po’Chop**) performed *Dynamite* next, inside an egg-shaped enclosure of audience members on the stage, accompanied by audio from a sermon given recently enough to mention President Trump. “Now why on Earth would Jesus cry?” asked the speaker, whose words imbued Freeman’s movements with aspiration. Her eyes and mouth opened wide as she gestured emphatically, urgently, desperately, conjuring images of a fireside storyteller dispensing life lessons.
“Dynamite” was a nickname for Freeman’s grandfather, Haywood Harris Junior, we learned from a program note. “He’d have me read from Psalms; Psalms 23 was his favorite. He’d have me read it over and over, his rippling velvet voice trailing underneath mine.” In terms of her own favorites, Freeman mentioned being deeply influenced by the writings of James Baldwin and Audre Lorde. When the rocking chair tipped over, Freeman fit her body beneath it like a hermit crab that finally found a suitable home. She then kicked it away.

Po’Chop is a persona from Freeman’s work in burlesque, a form inside of which she found her creative voice and learned how to “demand attention,” although she does hear from some colleagues, “That's not burlesque,” when they see presentations of hers such as Dynamite. Freeman explained that, through participating in the Regional Dance Development Initiative in 2016, she was able to resolve some lingering questions she had “about permission, and about how much I need permission.” The experience also helped Freeman gain new perspectives on her identity as Po’Chop. “I’m more comfortable now with Jenn Freeman being seen and present in the work,” she said. “Which brings a new vulnerability to it, that I needed to unlock.”

Offering advice in response to Freeman’s expressions of “genre anxiety,” Ramón Rivera-Servera, performance studies chair at Northwestern University, suggested that Freeman might consider “claiming burlesque as a methodology” instead of, or in addition to, a performance form.

**Date**  Friday, October 20, 2017  
**Location**  Dance Center of Columbia College Chicago  
**Program**  Performances, Artist Roundtable, Networking  
**Access**  Open to the Public, Tickets $30, Seniors $24

I thought of Ginger Krebs’ explanation of *Buffer Overrun* as a field, rather than figures against a ground, as I watched an excerpt from *The Making*, coming in November from The Seldoms and artistic director Carrie Hanson (2005 CDF Lab Artist). “The Making suggests that our recognition and understanding of others is tenuous and fragile,” read a program note, “based on eyes that become organs either of empathy or division.” The project builds upon two earlier works by The Seldoms that explored power dynamics: *Power Goes* (2015, inspired in part by President Johnson) and *RockCitizen* (2016, inspired in part by the cultural revolution of the 1960s).

Eleven strips of fabric, painted by artist Fraser Taylor, hung around the expansive Dance Center stage. Some included figures reminiscent of Paul Klee, others included dotted-line drawings which brought Philip Guston to mind, and one had six “stories” of windows on it. Part of Mikhail Fiksel’s original score sounded like pizzicato over a car alarm pushed together through a harmonica.
The weight and force of Hanson’s choreography activated the fabric pieces, which weren’t quite wide enough to fully hide any one of the dancers (who were Philip Elson, Sarah Gonsiorowski, Christina Gonzalez-Gillett, Matthew McMunn, Cara Sabin, and Hannah Santistevan). They did, however, obscure some choreographic details, in accordance with another program note about “drawing attention to the perceptual lenses that render a person, a people, a neighborhood, a nation, visible or invisible.” Two subsequent sections will complete the full production of The Making, the second designed by Bob Faust, the last designed by Faheem Majeed, and all specific to spaces within the historic Pulaski Park Fieldhouse (well known for its murals, and coffered and barrel-vaulted ceilings).

We Define Us was another work in progress, from BraveSoul Movement, cofounded by Daniel “Bravemonk” Haywood (2017 CDF Lab Artist) and Kelsa “K-Soul” Robinson. Seven dancers traversed the stage with far more traffic patterning and locomotion than is typical of contemporary hip-hop choreography. Also atypically, the work did not sequence everyone’s power moves and signature tricks; when these did occur, they were thoughtfully integrated with the broader framework. Only at the very end did we see an eye-popping feat of strength: Christopher Ayala’s long-spinning reverse hand glide, into a straight-leg elbow freeze, into a headstand, held perfectly steady and still.

Set to music by Julius the Mad Thinker and Pleasure Prince, We Define Us included the transfixed image of a cyclical chain rescue: One dancer at the far end of a line of six more, holding hands, appeared to be “saved” by their collective efforts, then became part of the rescue effort for another member of the group, and so on.

Taking their bows, the dancers (Ayala plus Lani “Jigg” Anderson, Keisha Bennett, Sophia Bevilacqua, Jhon “Jonny Loco” Munoz, Lam “Sedechu” Nguyen, Maciek “Magic” Smolak, and Destine D’Roc Young) took their knees and raised their fists.
Like *The Making*, **ATOM-r**’s work *Kjell Theory* is site-specific and would ideally have been seen as originally presented in January 2017, at the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts at Madlener House, a grand, cube-shaped mansion built in 1901 and 1902 which combines neoclassical massing and proportions with elements of the then-emerging Prairie style. Like Erica Mott, ATOM-r’s **Judd Morrissey** and **Mark Jeffery** (2012 CDF Lab Artist) often conceive their performance events as part and parcel of where they take place.

Source and reference material for *Kjell Theory* conveyed by program notes included the origin of its title (the name Alan Turing chose for his research into patterns found in fauna and flora, taken from Kjell Carlson, the name of a young man he met during a 1952 holiday in Norway) and *The Breasts of Tiresias*, a play written by Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917 in which “a woman transforms into the male prophet Tiresias while her husband gives birth to 40,049 babies.” Multitudinous digital bodies were on display as pre-recorded video, projected upstage, showed dancers Justin Deschamps and Christopher Knowlton skipping six times in a circle, copied and pasted hundreds of times and arranged in rings forming a virtual globe or sphere. As Morrissey rotated the paddle he held — which had a smartphone or small tablet device set inside of it — the galaxy of identical skipping dancers tipped and tilted in kind, the projection responding live to output from the paddle’s accelerometer and gyroscope.

*Visceral Dance Chicago in Ruff Celts* by Marguerite Donlon with, from left, Joel Walsham, Braeden Barnes, and Noelle Kayser. Photo © Todd Rosenberg.
The screen of another small tablet device lit up inside the back of a harness Knowlton wore, and emitted quiet harmonica-like whistles and toots. Deschamps’ and Knowlton’s extravagant costumes (by Grace DuVal) included skin-colored shorts embroidered with flowers, generating the illusion of them having giant and colorful tattoos on their buttocks and crotches. Morrissey’s costume included oversized epaulets of gold braid, a militaristic note echoed by the large bicorn hat on Knowlton’s head. Deschamps wore a headdress that was more like a ponyhawk. Colin Roberson, an artist and photographer, completed the cast and concluded the excerpt with a solo he executed as if dancing in anger, against his will, while anthemic techno music played.

Choreographer Marguerite Donlon’s own costume designs for Ruff Celts also borrowed from European history: Each dancer in the cast of ten from Visceral Dance Chicago wore a white Elizabethan collar. Created for the company and premiered in April 2016, Ruff Celts is “probably the most fun, sexiest piece in our repertoire right now,” artistic director Nick Pupillo told me during a networking event before the performance.

Ruff Celts, set to a jukebox score of Irish folk music by the likes of De Dannan, Luke Kelly, Kila, and Sinéad O’Connor, bears the hallmarks of Donlon’s style, familiar to local audiences through works she created for Hubbard Street Dance Chicago like Reverse Deconstruct (2002) and Strokes Through the Tail (2005). It has a zippy, step-for-each-note musicality, and limby, Forsythian, post-ballet movement textures garnished with quirky gestures and slant pantomime. In addition here, Donlon has the dancers periodically vocalize, emitting various whoops and squeaks in time with explosive jumps or interactions. Handfuls of chalk dust are thrown about, lending visual fireworks to the fast-moving landscape.

In her opening solo and throughout the piece, River North Dance Chicago alumna Hanna Brictson played to her considerable strengths, as did Paige Fraser and Noelle Kayser in their duet. Mario Gonzalez gave another memorable performance in his later solo, in which he tumbled with remarkable ease and liquidity onto and off of his feet. Those few things said, there wasn’t a weak member of the ensemble of ten, which also included Braeden Barnes, Riccardo Battaglia, Caitlin Cucchiara, Meredith Harrill, Prince Lyons, and Joel Walsham. The men wore black kilts and went shirtless; the women wore black leotards with black knee socks.
blue fish is a solo performance by Art Union Humanscape and performed by its central figure, Ayako Kato (2007 CDF Lab Artist), who, at various points in the past decade, has also brought artists together as a producer and curator of contemporary series. In its April 2017 premiere, which seated the audience onstage along with Kato at the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park, blue fish took advantage of the indoor-outdoor setting by occurring at sunset. Paper lanterns scattered throughout the space glowed brighter as darkness fell; Kato looked directly at us as she spoke scenes from a kind of memoir, in alignment with the way her choreography was like a movement diary.

For the work’s Elevate Chicago Dance restaging, Kato retooled her piece slightly, adding video projections to the upstage screen and attaching wires to a couple of the 23 lanterns, so that they could rise toward the ceiling as the stage lights faded to black. blue fish remains a reflective piece, introspective in its tone, located somewhere between peacefulness and melancholia.

“My grandfather was a fisherman,” said Kato as she walked across the stage, wearing a black sport coat with a lavalier microphone on its lapel. Remembering her days as a student, she mimicked a dutiful march while holding a long tenkara fishing rod against her
shoulder as if it were a rifle. On the screen behind her, moving images of calm waves of water appeared and vanished and reappeared. Wearing only her right shoe, she tipped forward in a penchée and twinkled the fingers of her petite hands. She wiggled her fingers again as she arched backward, then stood, removed her blazer, threw it up in the air and let it fall onto her face. She whipped the fishing rod through the air fast enough to make a sound only once.

As she also did at the premiere of blue fish, Kato invited audience members to join her onstage in a participatory moment, to dance the brief and easy phrase she demonstrated. The group formed a large circle and neighboring people touched their palms together as they leaned right, then left. “You’re supporting, and being supported,” Kato said. “Swim to the core” cued her volunteers to take a few steps toward the center of the circle, and “Swim to the surface” cued them back out. “Turn around,” she said as the group took a few steps to rotate toward their right shoulders. “Look around.”

“I’m looking back,” said Meghann Wilkinson of Lucky Plush Productions, which showed an excerpt from its forthcoming premiere, Rooming House, whose source material loosely orbits the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. “I’m looking at your back,” said Aaron R. White, acting in the Eurydice role for one of a number of hypothetical bodily arrangements, as the cast members discussed how the mythological pair might have been situated relative to each other as they began their doomed exit from the Underworld.
Artist) managed to segue in Roaming House from the ancient tale to Clue, the popular board game (and cult-classic comedy film).

Onstage, White and Wilkinson along with Kara Brody, Michel Rodriguez Cintra, Elizabeth Luse, and Rodolfo Sánchez Sarracino had overlapping, divergent conversations about peripheral particulars of the Orpheus story, not unlike the way Elaine, George, Jerry, and Kramer would go all-in on friendly disagreements about minutae on Seinfeld. We didn't see enough of Roaming House in the excerpt to find out what happens when the logic of myth collides with the framework of a murder mystery, but we did hear the following line of dialogue (which borrows the syntax of making a suggestion while playing a game of Clue): “Orpheus, in the backstory, because of the charisma.”

Hedwig Dances artistic director Jan Bartoszek (2008 CDF Lab Artist) and Maray Gutierrez collaborated with an ensemble of seven dancers on the choreography for Four Strong Winds, first presented in April 2017 and the outgrowth of two earlier works: Trade Winds, by Bartoszek, and Aires de Cambio (Winds of Change), by Susana Pous of Havana, Cuba's DanzAbierta.

Five of the dancers walked onto the stage from the Dance Center’s house, joining the two already there, seated on a pile of fallen, red and orange leaves. Buoyant, continuous, and relaxed dancing by these three men and three women (Jessie Gutierrez, Jesse Hoisington, Taimy Ramos, Alejandro Ransoli, Tory Rumzis, Rigo Saura, and Yariana Baralt Torres) showed off their strong technique and affable personalities.

The world in which Four Strong Winds took place seemed to collide all four seasons at once. In addition to the fallen leaves, we saw umbrellas, dancers in their underwear, dancers in heavy parkas, yellow roses in full bloom, and a large square of bright green AstroTurf; this was, it should be noted, an excerpt from the full 50-minute work which combined the beginning (fall) and the end (summer) of the piece. Part of the score (credited to Eme Alfonso, Michael J. Caskey, James Cotton, Panthu du Prince, and Erica Ricketts) sounded like a marimba being played in a torrential downpour. In one moment, piled under the AstroTurf, four dancers made a small hill for Gutierrez to scramble up and onto, next to Ransoli. The images in Four Strong Winds were vivid and memorable, the connections between those images left open to interpretation.

To close our second evening at the Dance Center, Ayodele Drum and Dance led us through its “African Odyssey” in four scenes. The first, It’s House, credited to choreographer Imania Detry, was meant as an opportunity to fold more contemporary music and movement into a repertoire consisting largely of more traditional fare. As the program noted, It’s House “embodies how African rhythms and dance relate to the Chicago cultural traditions of house music and dance” (which cultural traditions are being catalogued and mapped, incidentally, as a project of Honey Pot Performance). We in the
audience clapped along and sang along, and emphatic and full-throated hollers for the entrance of Ayodele founder **Tosha Ayo Alston** came from both on and off the stage.

*Sewa* followed, a rhythm created by a master percussionist from Guinea, Mamady Keïta, and arranged by Maria Estes and Michael Taylor. Alston herself choreographed another section, *Tiriba*, also sourced in Guinea, from the Landuma tribe; it’s generally celebratory and brings mothers and daughters together, appropriate given the fact that Ayodele’s mission is to “foster community from a feminine perspective through the study and performance of diasporic African drum and dance,” which mission was spoken aloud during the company’s presentation. The group’s finale, the *Banty Stick Dance*, originated in Côte d’Ivoire and is traditionally meant to honor a village’s “elder warrior women.” From her vantage point behind her multiple drums upstage left, Alston was always able to see the rest of the company in front of her. What I will remember is the way she looked at the women dancing and drumming powerfully onstage with her, a look of pride and belief in them, and of determination. The performers listed in addition to Alston and Detry were Sydney Adams, Victoria Boateng, Patrice Gaitors-Toure, Xantia Grant, Rhonda Gray, Contessa Green, Amber Johnson, Ifetayo Kitwana, Saidia Murphy, Eboni Onayo, and Augusta Sciescke.
The late-night showcase on the second day of Elevate Chicago Dance brought sustenance to hungry dancegoers in the form of the La Comodita food truck parked outside Links Hall on North Western Avenue, serving Sicilian arancini in beef ragù and spinach and artichoke varieties. Inside and sated, we settled into the white box performance space for an excerpt from SUNS, a work in progress from The Humans, led by Rachel Bunting (2010 CDF Lab Artist) and part of A Series of Dad Dreams, “conjured and remixed from images and stories” from the life of Bunting’s late father. Certainly, one video projected onto the back wall of the space was the kind of quotidian thing that becomes significant because of the memories attached to it. Shot using a smartphone held vertically, it showed us the view through a car’s open window during a drive through farm country, “Purple Rain” by Prince playing on the stereo. Outside Links Hall, a dog barked.

As in other works by The Humans, the objects and props in SUNS were the focus. Performer Daniel Guidara, shirtless, walked nearby holding a giant dowsing rod wrapped in string lights; in another dreamlike image, performer Precious Jennings placed an illuminated fishbowl (containing a fish) precariously close to the edge of a folding table. Bunting, appearing in the work, balanced a long branch on her head. Brian Robert Hinkle filled in negative spaces, floating among the group as if flying at a different altitude. Jennings, pulling up her hair and removing her costume’s top, voiced a list, saying “I tasted the blood of sewing, cutting, falling, making...of skimming, killing, fucking... The dirty blood of the beet; the yellow, sour blood of the caterpillar... The blood of the sunset.” Upstage, dancers Jamie Corliss and Helen Lee, wearing gold face paint, hewed closely to the wall, more projected images of landscapes pinning them to it like a blanket of pixels.

Representing MOMENTA Dances of Oak Park and the area’s physically integrated dance scene, two compelling solos were performed next by dancer Kris Lenzo, a double amputee and former United States National Team member in wheelchair basketball and wheelchair track. The first, The Journeyman, by choreographer and former Hubbard Street dancer Sarah Cullen Fuller, was set to the fourth movement of Philip Glass' String Quartet No. 5. Lenzo’s astounding upper-body strength allowed him to get into and out of his chair with ease; while away from it, he tumbled and slid in an exploration of memories housed in the body, and shaped by the aging process and cycles of sleep and waking. As the recording’s violinist held the last note, Lenzo pushed off his chair’s handrims and coasted into a blackout, seeming to take off in flight.
Passage Hawk, choreographed by James Morrow, was more a duet between Lenzo and his chair. Long, minor-key swells at the start of the Gavin Bryars score soundtracked Lenzo’s headstands and cartwheels. Removing both wheels from the chair’s seat, he spun each like a coin and lowered his cheek to the floor to watch closely as they settled horizontally. Ronds de jambe showed the significant amount of flexibility and facility still in his pelvis and femurs. Most impressively — and suspensefully — he balanced on top of his chair’s frame and “walked” it, corner by corner, across the floor. Placing the frame on the floor, he grabbed its edges with his hands and pressed his body, upside down, toward the ceiling. He then reassembled the chair and placed it on its side, like a spool; he spun the frame around the stationary wheel-base, in a reversal of what’s typically fixed and what’s typically mobile.

“Make some noise, Links Hall!” Jamal “Litebulb” Oliver (2015 CDF Lab Artist) shouted, as he hyped up the crowd for The Era Footwork Crew’s lightning-fast, Chicago-born alloy of hip-hop and tap. “We’re trying for the simplest way we can live our lives,” he continued;
as if to prove the point, he eventually removed his shell-toed, white Adidas Superstars and socks to dance barefoot a form that's inextricably linked to sneaker culture. The Era collaborators Brandon “Chief Manny” Calhoun, Jemal “P-Top” De La Cruz, and Sterling “Steelo” Lofton followed suit, and I wondered whether I was witnessing the genesis of a new offshoot of footworking. A longtime partner of The Era, Wills Glasspiegel, shot and edited the video we watched of the crew's members taking turns dancing in an alley at night. At the end of their presentation, to a roar of applause, the men of The Era raised their right arms high, bowed once, and promptly exited.

After a short pause to replenish drinks from the bar and reconfigure Links Hall’s seating into a tight, onstage rectangle, we tied off the night with scenes from Search Party, a work in progress being developed through a Sponsored Artist Program residency at High Concept Labs awarded to choreographer Erin Kilmurray. (Early public presentations of material for Search Party occurred at The Homeroom, the Smith Park live-work studio where Kilmurray lives and works.) “This piece exists in the space between a sports arena and the dancefloor of a nightclub,” we learned from a program note. Each of the piece's sections began with or included the addition of a new shape — a box, an X, a diagonal line — to the floor using spike tape, which defined the spatial parameters of that section's dance, not unlike how the center-splitting “cloven marks” give Paul Taylor's Cloven Kingdom (1976) its thrilling compactness.

Arena-meets-dancefloor is a good way to summarize the sound of the songs Kilmurray collected, which songs were the driving force behind its choreographic qualities and effects. The sections set to “Higher Ground” (by TNGHT, Hudson Mohawke, and Lunice, for the all-female ensemble) and “Original Don” (to Major Lazer and the Partysquad, a competitive duet for dancers Alyssa Gregory and Kaitlin Webster) perfectly, physically captured the unrelenting upward energy of those two songs' closely spaced bursts of brass horns. Lizzo's “Good As Hell” provided a good-natured interlude illustrating its catchy chorus:

I do my hair toss, check my nails
“Baby, how you feel?”
“Feelin' good as hell!”

The finale, a solo created with Samantha Allen and performed at Links Hall by Jillian Endebrock, was to “Dancing On My Own” by Robyn and exuded empowerment. It began with Endebrock outside the lines demarcating the dancing space, looking nervous and reticent. By the end, she was running laps and giving high-fives to every single person in the front row.
Conclusions

As is probably clear from the 11,000-plus words above, Elevate Chicago Dance was, in its scope and density, the most comprehensive portrait of local contemporary choreography and movement-based performance in a generation. Yes, there have been larger or longer-running dance showcases in Chicago but, by and large, those were discipline-specific, dedicated to certain forms, and / or have featured artists brought to the city from elsewhere. Furthermore, Elevate Chicago Dance functioned as a portrait of the city itself, through the diversity of artists it gathered and the variety of spaces in which it was held. Because Elevate was Chicago dance in situ, it resisted the notion that impermanent art forms must also be transferrable.

In an urban context, especially one as quintessential — as paradigmatic — as Chicago is, one remembers that architecture and the built environment are what frame contemporary life, and thus also frame contemporary dance. And as now two international, biennial exhibitions on architecture in Chicago have reminded us, that practice is one that nests an infinite number of frames of reference, power, and organization within each other — from beyond the planet itself, to the landmass, to the region, to the population center, to the neighborhood, to the block, to the building, to the room, to the corner, to the chair, to the person who sits in that chair, to the book in that person's hands, to the water in that person's glass — all informed and largely determined by cultural traditions, conflicts, histories, race, class, gender, and so on.

I have written before about some reasons why I believe we in the field of dance are so prone to adopting the burden of such telescoping macroperspectives. Excluding its commercial sector, our field is relatively small, and so its centers of power are held accountable to broad, cumbersome constituencies, often with competing aesthetic, creative, and economic agendas.

From “Who Exactly Are We?” for Audience Architects, March 2013:

Is the “music community” asking itself the same questions [as the “dance community” is], and coming together around efforts to progress fair representation of forms in recording contracts, venue bookings and total downloads? ...It is not, for a number of reasons, one of which being there is no “music community” in any relative sense. There are communities, plural, to be sure, in the music industry; I think of jazz among genres in which most players seem separated by single-digit degrees. Likewise, one imagines that many DJs of Italo disco or baile funk know one another. In Washington state, there exists a Puget Sound Folk Harp Society with its own newsletter, Reigning Harps. But any one subscene is probably not too concerned with what goes on in another.
Elevate Chicago Dance in its inclusiveness certainly courted these tensions and cross-purposes; it is not easy to present a cohesive, integrated picture of dance activity in a city of 230 square miles, especially not one already famous for atomization and segregation. Elevate's ultimate and remarkable success against these odds was due to the balance in emphasis it brought to the three points of curatorial focus I chose as subtitles for this Summary Journal: Experimentation, Process, and Variety.

Questioning standard practices and conventional wisdom about where the boundaries of forms lie can have an equalizing effect, in that it lures all involved parties away from terra firma and the assumptions that live there (provided everyone is willing to set sail). Showing works with widely varying degrees of experimentation together can diminish them all; the more experimental works will appear undisciplined, while those less experimental will seem staid and timid. Especially considering the spectrum of dance forms they represented, Elevate's artists were quite comparable in their adventuring outside those forms as established. This shared and distributed risk allied both performers and audiences across party lines.

Given Chicago Dancemakers Forum's longstanding orientation toward the creative process, it wasn't surprising that Elevate honored it with a position lateral to performance. During the invite-only studio showings in particular, the artists' talks were not subordinate to their excerpts of work; each artist also enjoyed the freedom to sequence and apportion those elements as they saw fit. Some discussed their projects following their presentations, some told and then showed, some combined the two, some incorporated slideshows, some shared video, and some spoke about their work while performing it. Elevate artists proved they were comfortable enough with the unknown and undecided aspects of their processes to name those things out loud to a group of people positioned to provide them with significant opportunities. It takes bravery to open up your creative process to a room full of strangers; what Elevate confirmed is that there are many Chicago dance artists who realize that being transparent and forthcoming about your creative process can be a source of strength, and a way into your work for audiences, collaborators, critics, donors, friends, presenters, scholars, and others.

Parallel to the maxim offered above regarding experimentation, I believe that there is a sweet spot in most cases for the amount of variety in performance programming. Too much can create an unfocused audience experience offering no basis for comparison or constructive dialogue between pieces; too little becomes numbingly repetitive. Even in its variety, Elevate Chicago Dance set and held some useful parameters, while expressing the heterogeneity that is one of our city's greatest strengths.

Not even the most insatiable audience member can sustain indefinitely the pace and volume of dance presented during three days of Elevate Chicago Dance. Not often brought anywhere near my own limits in that regard, even I would have struggled to survive a fourth day so full of action. For some, Elevate might have been overwhelming, but I don’t
know that a more effective overview of contemporary choreography and movement-based performance would be achievable, considering the available time (never enough), resources (always limited), and the fact that coordinating among dozens of busy stakeholders is a guaranteed game of Whac-A-Mole.

Whatever stems from Elevate Chicago Dance, the city’s dance artists and residents needed that concentration of work and spread of venues to reacquaint themselves with the place where they live and move, through the lens of the body. Buildings and distances separate us from each other, which is why a lesser Elevate, held in just one central location, would have been a failure. Visitors to Elevate needed to know where Chicago’s dances get made, and needed to absorb the site specificity key to so many of those dances. Elevate needed to confirm the fact that, at the level of the dancing body, no space is inherently better than any other — and it did.

Elevate was so successful, in fact, at modeling how to bond, dignify, honor, energize, and invigorate Chicago communities through dance, that I struggle to decide upon the better outcome: a world in which Chicago’s dance artists are more frequently seen and recognized elsewhere, or a Chicago whose dance communities and audiences grow ever larger, more robust, and multiply?

I imagine a city that works can work toward both.

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Postscript

Elevate Chicago Dance included two additional events I was unable to attend and so they are not included in this Summary Journal. Held on Thursday, October 19, 2017, these events took place at the Chicago Cultural Center (featuring work by Lin Hixson for Every house has a door, Kevin Iega Jeff for Deeply Rooted Dance Theater, Anna Martine Whitehead, and Sara Zalek) and at the South Shore Cultural Center (featuring work by Groundhog, Kristina Isabelle, Joanna Read for Same Planet Performance Project, and Vershawn Sanders Ward for Red Clay Dance).

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Colorado native Zachary Whittenburg spent ten years as a professional dancer with companies including Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, BJM Danse Montréal, Pacific Northwest Ballet, and North Carolina Dance Theatre, now Charlotte Ballet. His subsequent freelance career in Chicago included performance and choreographic work with, among others, Lucky Plush Productions, Same Planet Performance Project, and Molly Shanahan / Mad Shak, plus instruction and coaching for the artists of DanceWorks Chicago, Luna Negra Dance Theater, Mordine & Co. Dance Theater, River North Dance Chicago, and Thodos Dance Chicago.

Dance Editor at Time Out Chicago magazine from 2009–12, Whittenburg has written for numerous print and online publications, contributes regularly to Dance Magazine, is a panelist and guest speaker, and tweets @trailerpilot about contemporary culture, politics, and the performing arts. He has guest-lectured and led workshops in dance and other subjects at California State University–Long Beach, Columbia College Chicago, Northwestern University, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and the University of Southern Mississippi, in addition to hosting Fireside Chats at the Auditorium Theatre of Roosevelt University, and special events for the Chicago Dancing Festival, the Chicago Humanities Festival, and the Harris Theater for Music and Dance.

As Associate Director of Marketing and Communication at Hubbard Street, he represented the company on the Chicago Dancemakers Forum consortium, and he is currently Communications and Engagement Director at Arts Alliance Illinois, promoting the value of the arts and giving voice to a creative state through arts access, arts advocacy, arts education, cultural equity, and statewide civic engagement programs.

In 2017, Whittenburg collaborated with artist Ginger Krebs on a catalogue and public events offered in conjunction with “Minor Local Slumpage,” a solo exhibition of sculptures by Krebs at Chicago Artists Coalition's BOLT Gallery. He performed with Arcade Fire during the band's 2014 Reflektor tour, and documented a cultural exchange in Tel Aviv the following year, between Same Planet Performance Project and Niv Sheinfeld & Oren Laor, supported by The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s International Connections Fund. Newcity’s Best of Chicago 2015 issue recognized Whittenburg for his dance advocacy efforts. He remains engaged with dance as a founding member of the executive committee for the Chicago Dance History Project, and serves on the artistic advisory council for High Concept Labs.

Photo by Quinn B Wharton.