

## CONCLUSION:

### MOVING TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE *LUNA* DANCE EVENT AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL PHENOMENON

With her seminal essay (1969/70) on the ethnicity of ballet, I believe that Kealiinohomoku launched a new paradigm for the field of cultural dance studies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the wake of her manifesto, this ethnographic study of *Luna* has examined the form and function of one large-scale contemporary dance event, turning researchers' attention towards the socio-cultural effects of these kinds of contemporary artistic dance practices. In an era of increasing globalization and commodification of the arts and of debates about the survival of the distinct category of art in the Occident, the *Luna* event is situated as an occasion for useful, meaningful, and extra-ordinary activities of a small subculture of Montréalers. This ethnographic study also points to the interest in examining the beliefs and attitudes of those for whom contemporary dance is still unknown, of little significance or even the subject of disapproval, a project beyond the capacity of this study.

In an unexpected turn away from certain presumptions I held about an endangered dance world and desire to advocate for its survival, the *Luna* project revealed a dance practice and artistic company that was highly valued and viable for its practitioners. The *métier* of professional dancer remains an economically and physically precarious one, and it is still true that few contemporary dance companies have attained the status and stability of *O Vertigo* within society-at-large. But it is clear that contemporary dance in

Montréal is no longer exclusively the marginalized art form of its origins. Although still the province of a small subculture in most societies in which it appears, as in Montréal, its presentation is now a common occurrence in large-scale theaters and festivals in the Occident and beyond. A few companies like *O Vertigo*, are now coveted by a group of arts presenters who cooperate together in increasingly powerful international networks, which Arbour has characterized metaphorically as horizontal movements within contemporary art systems (1999).

Contemporary dance events like *Luna* also mark a shift in thought and action for dance artists and theorists from the notion of unity to that of eclecticism, in the sense of intermixing disparate phenomena and realities. For instance, among the *Luna* dancers, rather than the uniform idealized bodies and movement qualities of classical ballet there was a range of body types and training backgrounds. Discussed more thoroughly in the next section, the *Luna* dance event was marked at every level of its undertaking by mixing among diverse (and previously opposing) socio-cultural phenomenon, from the composition of the dance company and audience to the aesthetics of choreographic composition.

In terms of methodology, the *Luna* dance event framework elaborated through this study provides, I believe, a novel approach for the study of contemporary dance practices. It also ascertains the place of these practices within the field of dance anthropology. As far as I have been able to determine, it is in this study that the traditional dance event framework has for the first time served as a template for examining a contemporary dance event. And the unique standpoint of the dance presenter provides ground for understanding this kind of dance practice by telling its story from the points of views of its various kinds of participants.

This chapter exposes some of the implications of this genre of large-scale, internationalist yet locally identified, and eclectic dance events in two sections: (1) its form, its defining characteristics; (2) its functions, the range

of meanings the event held for its eclectic “aesthetic community.” A third section explores how the dance event perspective has changed my practice of dance presentation, while an epilogue brings to the surface further insights from the premiere performance of the choreographic work following *Luna*.

### 9.1 Form: the contours of the *Luna* event

The *Luna* dance event crystallized a cluster of values, beliefs and practices that characterize an elite group of contemporary dance companies who, like *O Vertigo*, have attained favored status in the dance world and, based on my knowledge, I would even venture at this point to say in society-at-large. Some of the characteristics described below are common to all these companies, while others are indigenous to the unique situation of the *O Vertigo* dance company and the vision of artistic director Laurin. In this section I will discuss these features from (a) historic, (b) socio-cultural, (c) political, (d) economic and (e) aesthetic perspectives. These are, of course, not isolated categories of characteristics but an integrally interconnected matrix of phenomena.

In historical context, this portrait of *Luna* depicts a contemporary dance form that is in a mature phase of development and steadily becoming a global movement. In the case of Montréal, what was once a small band of dance experimentalists who were Laurin’s close colleagues and peers – Chouinard, Fortier, Léveillé, Lock and Perreault – constitute the first generation of choreographers in Québec to become economically viable and internationally acclaimed. In fact, the local contemporary dance history of most countries in which this kind of dance appears includes indigenous Modern Dance “founders” and one or more generations of contesting postmodern choreographers. Although a massive undertaking, the collection and cross-cultural analysis of these indigenous dance histories has never been done and

might prove worthwhile to dance historians. While remaining committed to the original modernist ethos of innovation and authenticity, the choreographic aesthetic of postmodern dancers is generally more complex and cosmopolitan than in the previous modernist period. And though outside of the parameters of this research project to determine, and the subject of further study, I believe that their popular success in terms of their relatively large “audience base” as measured by presenting venues is due to their favoring of certain pleasurable and spectacular aspects. I am thinking here of characteristics such as athletic virtuosity, astonishing stage effects and beauty -- that have rendered dances like *Luna* appealing to the massive audiences of large theaters. In another historical vein, Tembeck (1994a) posited that Laurin’s choreography in general didn’t “refer to a collective memory” as she believed did the Modern Dance, and return briefly to her contention that it was an aesthetic in which “images, choreographic and otherwise, are piled up, [...] whose guiding principle is ‘impurity’ (p. 120).” To my mind, this notion of impurity is associated with the characteristic eclecticism and mixing of *Luna*, discussed earlier. I also believe that postmodernist aesthetics like those of Laurin reflect living in a post-colonialist moment when notions like purity bring to mind distressing images of eugenics and ethnic cleansing.

As for the socio-cultural aspects, there was a traditional duality that was bridged within the *Luna* dance event: local vs. global artistic identity. By moving into the arena of extensive touring to large cultural centers in cities around the world, *O Vertigo* participated in creating – and bears the marks of – an internationalist choreographic aesthetic. At the same time, the *Luna* choreography was an authentic product of Laurin’s unique background, environment and artistic ethos. Arbour (1999) explained the nature of this reconfiguration of local and internationalist orientations with an art historian’s eye, in her account of the evolution of Québec visual arts in the last 50 years:

With the coming of new technological means in communication and information, what was local has become virtually international. While the modern was international and enemy of the local, the contemporary is international, integrating the local, by a direct or sinuous route.<sup>i</sup> (p. 107)

Furthermore, this is an era when most large cities of the world (especially in the Occident) are increasingly culturally diverse, the result of an influx of repeated waves of immigrants, migrants and refugees. As an embodiment of these social situations and predicaments, contemporary choreographers' discourse (albeit mainly in democratic societies) has generally turned away from universalist narratives and towards concepts like interculturalism and cultural identity. There are many examples of how these notions are embedded in multiple levels of the *Luna* dance event. For instance, Laurin spoke about how her Catholic and Québécoise girlhood, and her belief in the Automatist outlook of her *Refus Global* forebearers, contributed to a cultural specificity and local identity to her aesthetic. Also, interculturalism, in the sense of co-mingling references from different cultures, is one of those internationalist characteristics that were visible and audible in *Luna's* texts, images, and music and dancers. An intercultural dialogue was also inherent in the intersubjective dynamics, between *O Vertigo* members and local participants, of presenting the event in 40 diverse cities on different continents. *Luna's* audiences in Québec bore witness to diverse cultural origins, if data from even a small sample of 22 spectators in Montréal and Chicoutimi is any evidence. But the way in which a single choreographic event's form, function and meaning shifts somewhat as it travels to various theatres and cities around the world, merits further research in order to fully understand the phenomenon of internationalist aesthetics and the impact of globalization on contemporary dance aesthetics and events.

The politics operating for these large-scale contemporary dance companies no longer adhere to those of the imperial hierarchies of the ballet world, and seldom even to the benevolent monarchies and patriarchies of Modern Dance companies with their charismatic but authoritative artistic directors. Although there was no question that Laurin made the final decisions, the creed of empowerment influenced the way things were done at *O Vertigo* from the dancers' autonomy over their own training programs to the audience's freedom of interpretation. Another important example of this lay within the structure and choreographic processes of *Luna*, in particular the dynamics of power established between choreographer and dancers. The company was an "ensemble" group in many senses of the word. There was no division into classes of principal and secondary dancers (although Barry was "featured" in an emblematic solo and image). As well, a three-tier pay scale honoring seniority and dance experience was negotiated among the dancers themselves at the request of directors. Laurin's creative process allowed for autonomous choices from her dancers and she took care to enhance their individuality within the confines of the choreographic composition. This empowerment of the dancers was, however, measured and incomplete, as seen in two dancer's perception of the company as a large machine, despite a general sense of their co-workers as a kind of family.

The economic characteristics of the *Luna* event proved to be complex, multi-faceted. The dance company itself was a non-profit corporation, obliged continuously to generate public, private and "self-generated" (e.g. the summer workshop fees) funding to support its activities. While the performance attracted well-educated middle class participants for the most part, people from diverse social backgrounds and income levels participated in one way or another. Performances in the kind of upscale arts centers where *Luna* was presented tended to assign ticket prices that were often too costly to attract lower income spectators. But efforts at "audience development" among the dance presenters to "democratize" the arts, like the

student-priced tickets at the Chicoutimi performance for example, had led to various measures to keep the price as low as possible. Only a few wealthy participants were found in the course of this study among the artists, spectators and specialists. But some of the business members of *O Vertigo's* Board of Directors, who in the end were not among those finally interviewed, were as I discovered high-income arts patrons. Research about these wealthy arts donors and directors needs yet to be done if we are to fully understand the economic dynamics of dance events. As for the artists and artistic collaborators interviewed, their biographies show a gamut of origins from impoverished to middle class. But it is also true that all *O Vertigo* company members earned relatively high-end wages in the context of the Québec dance milieu, and so enjoyed at least middle class status in terms of income.

The aesthetics of *Luna* were emblematic of an eclecticism that has been fostered by the tenets of postmodern art. A striking example of this is how Laurin's approach to dance-making integrated elements of previously opposing artistic movements: idea-based Conceptualism, emotionally saturated Expressionism and a belief in the subconscious that belonged to Automatism. Once again drawing on the local knowledge of dance historian Tembeck (1994a), she observed that in choreographies of this kind "composite images [...] stream before us" and "works are overcoded, with multiple layers of meanings – thickets of choreographic discourse [...] (p. 120)." *Luna's* numerous, tightly packed and quickly changing movements indeed suggested to me, as it did to some of the participants, a multitude of references such as: everyday gesture, hand sign language, magical occurrences, playful encounters, gymnastics, poetic metaphors and more. As articulated in the project proposal by the choreographer and visual designer, during interviews with participants, and in the press previews and reviews, the thematic content intermeshed at least three threads: (a) an exploration of the science and the poetry of the moon and stars; (b) looking closely at the dancers' bodies with cameras and large lenses, at usually hidden aspects; and

(c) how new technologies can be used to create dream-like effects. As well, the way in which participants found meaning in the choreography took many forms, bearing witness to the policy of freedom of interpretation embedded in the postmodernist tradition.

## 9.2 Function: finding meaning within an eclectic aesthetic community

In the *Luna* dance event meaning is neither inherited nor prescribed. How the *Luna* dance event functioned to make meaning for its proponents was at once an individual and group enterprise. In one of the on-going aesthetic debates of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, aesthetic philosophers (Cohen and Copeland, 1983; Lavender, 1997; Sparshott, 1995) have asked whether the meaning of an art work lies in the mind of the perceiver, deeply embedded within the properties of the work itself, or a matter of the conscious (and perhaps unconscious) intentions of the artistic creator. The *Luna* study suggests the possibility of a reconciliation of all these positions: that meaning might be considered as a composite of all of these at once, and others as well that were not previously considered in the debates, such as the dancers' interpretations and programmers' context-based assessments.

*Luna* dance event participants might be thought of as part of a wider aesthetic community of interest and belief. In other words, *Luna's* eclectic band of participants were bound together principally by a common interest in contemporary dance performance and a belief in its significance and value. Months of hard work in creating and mounting a choreographic project came to fruition when all gathered to experience the moment of public presentation. In this kind of community -- with its occasional and vocational members, dancing and non-dancing participants -- implicit codes of dance event behavior appeared for the most part to be understood and respected. Most everyone knew their role and what was expected of them. But as

became increasingly evident as the study progressed, the data didn't yield a common purpose. What I was able to determine were distinct but disparate modes of consensus about how the event made sense in the lives of participants. A multiplicity of modes also emerged in terms of the kinds of meanings – perceptions, interpretations and evaluations – ascribed to the *Luna* choreography by its participants.

To place these meanings into historical perspective, dance theorists and aesthetic philosophers during the early modernist period set out like human science researchers to discover “the” immutable elements of movement, laws of motion and compositional systems for dance. Was the new Modern Dance to be fundamentally rooted in psychology, spirituality, rational thought or principles of nature? Where was the body's center to be located: in the solar plexus, the pelvic floor, the center of gravity of its mass or somewhere else? What could be the body's “neutral stance,” its “basic body positions and movements,” fundamental principles? Rival theories led to the establishment of competing schools of thought and training about the form and function of dance. These disparate artistic views were never resolved into a single aesthetic ethos that would predominate in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> they persist as either rival positions or, as with *Luna*, have been combined to form new mixtures of style and substance in which the boundaries between formerly oppositional concepts seem to be dissolving. For dance historians and aestheticians, *Luna* might be seen as emblematic of a period that is one outcome of both the Modernist turn towards abstraction and postmodernism's resolute subjectivity and hybridization. As witness to this tendency, this is a period in which the prefix “inter-“ abounds: interarts, interdisciplinarity, interactivity, intersubjectivity, intertextuality.

In the case of Laurin and others like her, traditional boundaries between experimental and popular art are seen to be dissolving as elements once belonging to one are intermixed with those of the other. For instance with *Luna*, Laurin hasn't sacrificed the emotional resonance that appears to

give her work wide popularity, in favor of complex, conceptualist content preferred by the artistic intelligentsia. In *Luna* it seems that the appealing pleasures of beauty and lyrical poetry temper the more disturbing and turbulent moments of discomfort that are found in the choreography. Spectacular stage effects (although she preferred to use them sparsely in *Luna*) and virtuosic physicality (especially the acrobatic duets) that are trademarks of her style have lent her work mass appeal. But she also demonstrated the attitude of a serious-minded *nouvelle danse* “researcher” who was fully committed to breaking new territory for the art form of dance. And so it is with *O Vertigo*, and other elite dance companies of its kind, that commercial viability and mass popularity don’t necessarily preclude artistic depth and authenticity. But it bears mentioning that in the international marketplace of contemporary dance, *Luna* was not always perfectly suited to everyone's aesthetic priorities. For example, some of the Swiss and German critics cited the lack of a dramaturg's direction in sustaining the theatrical interest of the choreographic composition; one of the presenters found the work too conceptual to attain the emotional resonance he had anticipated; and several new-to-dance audience members expressed disappointment because of their difficulty in understanding the narrative.

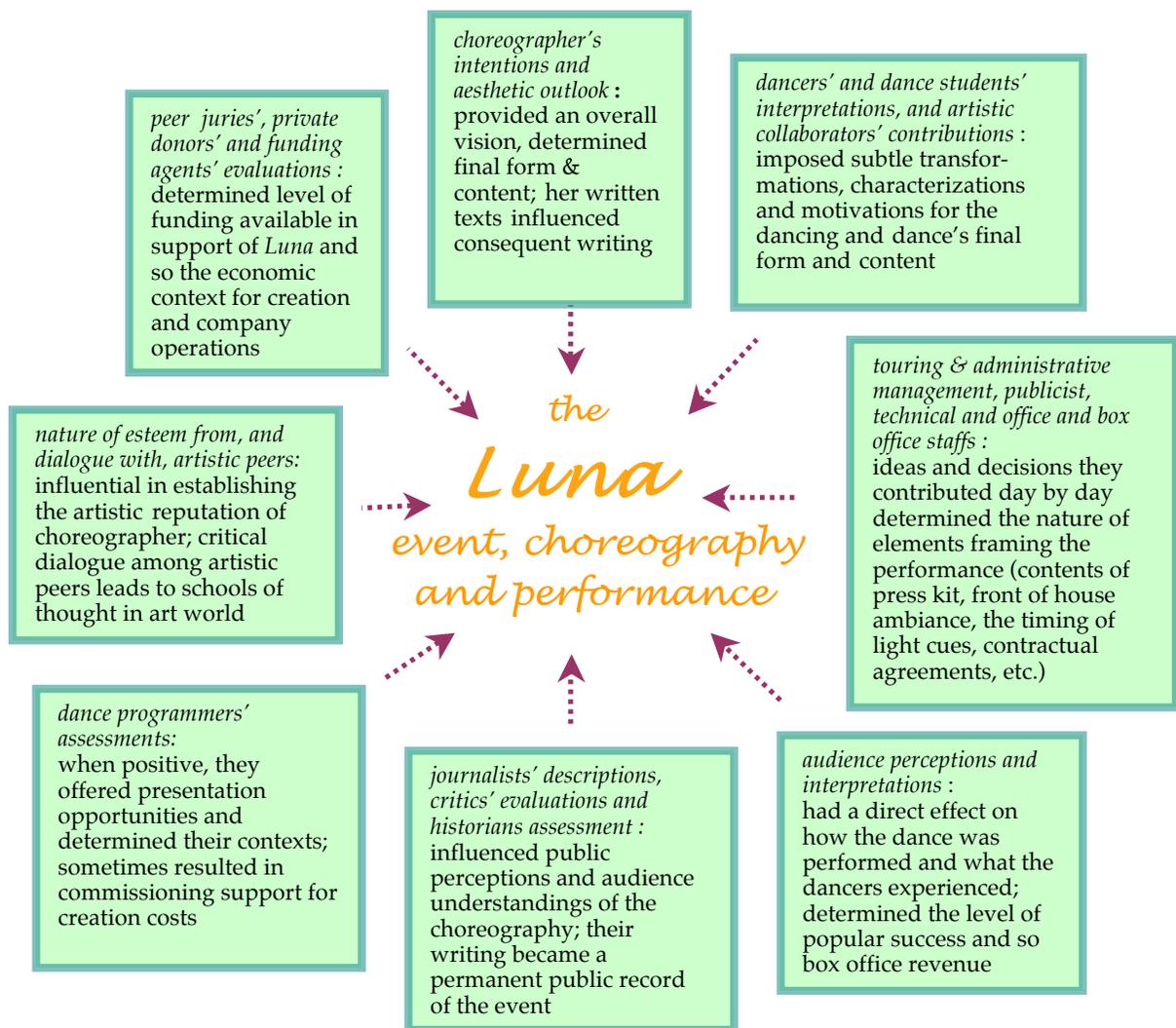
*Luna's* artistic and specialist participants have answered in various manners the question of why be an artist that has animated recent critical debates challenging the high art/mass culture dichotomy (Arbour, 1999; Marcus and Meyers, 1995). In the dance world of *Luna*, being a dancer was very rarely a question of birthright, as evidenced by how few had artist parents. Many, but not all, did have parents who valued the arts and so nurtured the artistic inclinations of their offspring. But in some cases, like that of Laurin herself, the artistic professionals explained that there was little or no family encouragement. *O Vertigo* dancers considered it as either a fateful or accidental set of circumstances that led to their choice of working in dance. As they told it, the dance world offered them a way of being and

living that seemed to “fit” their desires and aspirations, providing a sense of purpose and a significant means of self-expression. And in their biographical stories, the dancers recounted how it was that they displayed an irrepressible physicality since early youth. At the same time their bodies betrayed the signs of the physical rigors, chronic and debilitating injuries that challenged their longevity in the field. But one of the most fascinating mysteries about aesthetic meaning, for which this study provided clues, was how the dancers created strategies for making sense and motivating the abstract movements they were called on to perform by Laurin. In this story of *Luna*, each one recounted how they first set out to master the physical skills required by newly invented movement sequences, but eventually were compelled to create a way in which they could give private meanings and motivations to the movements. Although the company shared a common metaphor they called “the inner garden,” each dancer also created a conscious and personal approach to interpreting the sense, to giving character, to the abstract posturings and gesturings required of them as they danced *Luna*.

As for the audience, the 22 focus group members proved to be a diverse group who came to the performance of *Luna* with disparate points of view and expectations. The data in this study and others (e.g. Cloutier and Pronovost, 1996) revealed various modes of apprehension by which audience members organize their dance-watching. On the other hand, I also witnessed first hand how *Luna* spectators were also drawn into collective behaviors as they watched, and particularly at the moment of applause. It has also been seen how with little instructive guidance in dance literacy, learning to be a contemporary dance spectator remains for spectators largely a “kinesthetic” tradition acquired by repeated exposure and discussions with dance-going comrades.

Throughout this ethnography, discussion and examination of meaning has hovered around the proposal that the *Luna* event was meaningful to its participants, and has delineated the modes and genres of meaning making.

But this study also demonstrates that meaning and interpretation are reciprocal, and that as participants went about fulfilling their roles in the dance event they also literally contributed to its very sense and substance, as charted below:



**Figure 9.1** The genre of contribution made by each participant group to the sense and substance of *Luna*.

This schematic representation not only synthesizes the impact of each group and the part they played in the unfolding of *Luna*, but it provides an exemplary illustration of Becker's vision (1982), underlying the entirety of this research project, of art work as a human activity that "involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people" and most significantly that "[t]hrough their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation" (p. 1). For instance, *Luna's* choreographic vision may have been under the masterful control of Laurin, but it was ultimately her dancers who determined the essence and quality of the dance's interpretation, as did the stage crew for the accompanying technical effects. It was funders and administrative personnel who were largely responsible for the economic and logistic parameters of the creation and performance. And the various expressive specialists framed the choreographic presentation as they went about exercising their expertise in supporting the creation, presenting the public performance, and interpreting and evaluating its sense and viability to the art world. This study demonstrates how the sense and substance of the *Luna* choreography, performance and event was in part the effects of these contributions from and among its participants.

### 9.3 Practice: transforming contemporary dance presentation

What might be the potential effects of this way of envisioning a dance performance on dance presentation? In a practice replete with quantitative audience development strategies aimed at improving box office revenue and driven by economic models from the so-called cultural industries (for-profit art-making enterprises), this ethnographic study would move dance presenters in a resolutely subjective and intersubjective direction. Discussions among a small group of American presenters are already

pointing a small minority towards methodologies for evaluating dance performances as qualitative human experiences and community gatherings. As *Luna's* "research specialist" I can already confirm that the way in which I go about my work as a dance presenter has been fundamentally changed in the course of forging this way of thinking about dance performances.

This realization crystallized one evening during a dance performance on March 17, 2005 of the Random Dance Company in Roubaix, France. The occasion was the gala opening performance of a young choreographer's festival presented by *Danse à Lille*. I began to notice that the way my mind now navigated a dance occasion had radically shifted. No longer was I preoccupied with the usual presenting issues: e.g. how would Tangente's audiences respond, was the aesthetic appropriate to our programming mandate, and so on. But the first thought that actually came to mind as I walked into the lobby was the question "who are all these people and what were they doing here?" This wider frame of reference now included social, cultural and historic contexts. The dynamics of interaction among the participants were now at the center of my concern and the possible range of answers to "why dance?" now appeared to be as richly varied as the cultural identities and ideologies of those who engaged in the dance event. In actual practice this has meant that my artistic direction is shifting towards the notion of creating "community events," rather than simply of programming a dance creation. In this new way of thinking for me, I now consider an evening of dance in terms of intensifying the interaction between audience members, audience and performers, artistic creators and even technicians. Could a dance performance be more than a passive contemplation of a dance work? And it has brought me to once more re-examine the old boundaries I had set up around traditional, urban, social and artistic forms of dance, and ask myself "what kinds of contemporary dance forms might be pertinent to this contemporary art world?"

I also venture to propose that this study offers contemporary dance researchers and presenters the possibility of re-aligning our ethos with those who study presentational dance events in village squares. Are our artistic dances really so different from other kinds of dances in the world? As Kealiinohomoku has been arguing all along (1969/1970, 1976), all dances are ethnic because in fact social and cultural in nature. Throughout her writings she reminds us that both art and folk dance have dancers with special trainings who perform for spectators, patrons, a socio-cultural context that determines the dance's "ethnic identity," a local dance history, and a period of preparation and gathering of resources for the dance. Participants come together with a sense of the appropriate decorum for the occasion. And I would add that every dance event has its expressive specialists, administrators, evaluators and technicians. Would the distinction of contemporary dance survive this alliance with traditional dancers? I believe it would. Like all other dances that are performed for spectators, those that are contemporary and artistic also have unique characteristics that distinguish them from other kinds of dance. In the case of *Luna* there are features, as Small (1998) has pointed out, such as an artistic creator who envisions a new work, an extensive creative process, specially designed theatrical buildings and stages for the dance performances, and so on. And this ethnography of *Luna* provides examples of how contemporary dance events are bounded by distinct ways of doing, thinking and believing that are grounded in their own histories and ethos. But what might indeed be lost in this association of art and folk dance is the persistent hierarchy of values in which the art-identified presentational dancing, especially in occidental cultures, has long claimed the highest position.

#### 9.4 Epilogue in the Aftermath: Passing on to *Pass a r e*

Bright white points of light on a black screen were the last image of Laurin's new work *Pass a r e*. They were an appropriate metaphor for the insights that came bursting out everywhere, as I returned once again to observe *O Vertigo* for the first time since leaving the field of *Luna*. I sat at *Place des Arts* in Montréal waiting for the premiere performance to begin on February 25, 2005, and wondered what it was going to be like to watch a dance company that now held so many stories for me. It was certainly a shock to attend the performance three years later. Where were Ken, Anna, Donald and Chi? Mélanie and Patrick were now the senior dancers. And how strange it was indeed when I visited their new offices and studios deep in the recesses of *Place des Arts*, to collect a few last pieces of information! There were no windows and it seemed like more of a fortress than an artists' workplace.

As I exited the theatre I wondered, could my experience possibly have been more dense and intense? I had found my mind hungry to look at one and the same time beyond and more deeply into the dancing. The dancers' lives, creative processes, intellectual and poetic ideas, imagined backstage goings-on, multiples frames of interpretation among spectators, the sonic filament connecting spectators at the moment of applause, all this and more was rushing through my consciousness at the speed of thought.

At the post-performance reception in the elegant lobby of the opera house, I chatted with dancer Demers<sup>1</sup> who provided me with a final, fresh insight with which to close this study. *Luna*, she concluded, had after all been a beautiful aesthetic object. She mused that in retrospect, it now seemed as if "silent and complete in itself." She added by way of evidence that the dancers didn't talk together much while creating and dancing *Luna*. But she

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<sup>1</sup> From a personal conversation with Demers on February 25, 2005.

explained that with *Pass a r e* the dancers' stage personas were "so incarnate" that it was as if they were real people talking together on and off stage. Conversations had been frequent during the creative process this time among the dancers and choreographer about the ideas spoken out loud and explored in the piece. With *Pass a r e*, meaning and motivation had been so much clearer and easier for her to identify.

Demers' perspective was a vivid reminder that in this contemporary dance world it is imperative that each choreographic project be created anew, and that these dance events are occasions for participants to encounter unique, newly imagined visions of the world through the dance.

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Original French texts

<sup>i</sup> "Avec l'avènement des nouveaux moyens technologiques de communication et d'information, le local est devenu virtuellement international. Le moderne avait été international et ennemi du local, le contemporain est international, intégrant le local, par voie directe ou détournée." Arbour