

“I don’t believe that site-specific work anywhere can exist in a vacuum. It is a political act, it is a social act, whether you want it to be or not.”

—STEPHEN KOPLOWITZ

I first began talking with Mary Armentrout about creating a new work for EMPAC when I arrived in Troy a little over two years ago. I was familiar with Armentrout’s practice from my time working in Oakland, California. The post-industrial landscape of the Capital Region immediately invoked familiar sights and sounds of Armentrout’s own performance space The Milk Bar, which at the time was located in the abandoned Sunshine Biscuit Factory in an industrial Oakland neighborhood wedged between Fruitvale and San Leandro. I was interested in how her approach to sites and the borders of those sites might probe EMPAC’s architectural bearing on the precipice of both the small and bustling town of Troy, NY, and the nation’s first technical university, Rensselaer. But I wasn’t sure what it would look like to take Armentrout’s practice, which had been so deeply rooted in Bay Area sites for over two decades, and move it elsewhere.

#### **SITED WORK ACROSS DIFFERENT PLACES AND TIMES**

There is a marked difference between northern California and north eastern dance communities. Bay Area dance communities take up space. They yell and scream, they wear brightly colored costumes, they act out as performers and activists in the streets, they run through the hills and beaches, and they take up space in a way that north eastern urban-based choreographers in particular seem never to fathom. Bay Area dance is most widely known for Anna Haprin’s 1950’s San Francisco Dancer’s Workshop and her subsequent work with great postmodern dance choreographers including Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer. Brown and Rainer worked with Halprin in the Bay Area, but ultimately made their careers in New York City like contemporary transplants including Trajal Harrell, Catherine Galasso, and Kate Weare.

But what of those choreographers who make their life’s work in the Bay Area? Like Joe Goode, Keith Hennessey, and Jess Curtis, three male choreographers who have made careers based in the Bay Area and who have successful careers touring nationally and internationally. Or those whose work stays closer to home, like Kealy Garfield, Nina Otis Haft, Randee Pauve, Erika Chong Shuch, and Amara Tabor-Smith? Like this latter group of her colleagues, Armentrout has made her life’s work almost exclusively in the Bay Area. She has delved deeply into various Bay Area performance sites from her own lived experience, somatic explorations thereof, and performance dedication to a certain community. She has taken her work on the road to places like New York City and Brighton in England, but typically with a less extended engagement. I wanted to work with Mary Armentrout to explore what makes her work tick, and how it might interface with another community from the outside in.

It is fitting that Mary Armentrout Dance Theater’s *Listening Creates an Opening* inaugurates the ten-year anniversary season of EMPAC’s building, which will be formally commemorated with the 10YEARS Celebration October 11-13, 2018. *Listening Creates an Opening* hearkens the days prior to EMPAC’s building, when curators and artists utilized local sites and venues for new programming that addressed technology, media, and science. For four years prior to the building’s opening, projects such as rehearsals for Flyaway Productions took place at the Hudson River and All Raise this Barn (East) by MTAA took place in the midst of Rensselaer’s campus. When the building opened in October 2008, the facility itself was a large experimental instrument for artists to explore. In the years since, artists have stretched the building’s four venues to their limits, changing their orientation, utilizing different facets of their technical adaptabilities, and drawing on various architectural elements for aesthetic inspiration. *Listening Creates an Opening* links these two eras of EMPAC programming with a performance that intrinsically explores the relationships between Troy, Rensselaer, and EMPAC.

To facilitate the depth of physical connection to her sites that I think makes Armentrout’s practice special, *Listening Creates an Opening* has been developed over the course of two and a half years, six different EMPAC residencies, and various personal trips that Armentrout made to Troy. Community members may have seen Armentrout spending time exploring town as her character, “the woman in the black dress.” Throughout the development of *Listening Creates an Opening*,

Armentrout has engaged almost every single department of the EMPAC staff, ranging from IT and Front of House, to video, stage technologies, and audio. She even asked members of EMPAC’s environmental health and safety team to appear in the work. She taught seven workshops for different Rensselaer classes, hosted a public workshop with her collaborators, taught students in the Sanctuary for Independent Media’s 2017 Uptown Summer program, and provided a free performance at Superior Merchandise Company as a part of the most recent August 2018 Troy Night Out. Former Rensselaer faculty Nina Young’s Exploring Music @ Rensselaer students are featured as vocalists in the original compositions for *Listening Creates an Opening*. Armentrout also worked closely with local artists like Jack Magai and community members including Atsushi Akera and Jonah Moberg, who, among others, even carried out choreographic engagements for the development of *Listening Creates an Opening* when Armentrout herself could not be in town.

A focus on spaces both inside and outside of the EMPAC building as architectural place brings into focus the structure’s relationship to surrounding people and places. In its final product, *Listening Creates an Opening* reflects inward on the EMPAC building with a performance on the roof and in EMPAC’s theater. It simultaneously expands outward into the Rensselaer and Troy communities with performances in the new Rensselaer Off Campus Commons building, a downtown parking lot, Karma Hair Salon overlooking Troy’s iconic Monument Square, and finally Troy Riverfront Park at dusk. In the process, Mary Armentrout and her close collaborators media artist Ian Winters and composer Evelyn Ficarra “listen” to their various

surroundings to create a multi-sited live performance work that acquaints an intimate audience with a world of deliberate experiences.

#### **TECHNOLOGICAL INTERFACES**

*Listening Creates an Opening* takes inspiration from technical and physical interfaces that track the architectural borders of the EMPAC building. Across their artistic expertise, Armentrout, Ficarra, and Winters have collaborated together for almost two decades to explore, both explicitly and implicitly, how technology impacts our physical experience of moving through the world. Armentrout's own practice is rooted in her work with the Feldenkrais Method of Somatic Education. It consists of a series of gentle movement exercises that bring individual attention to the bodily experience, thus cultivating embodied awareness. This is the base from which the artists turn their attention to technology.

*Listening Creates an Opening* features footage from a year-long video time lapse that captured the northern and western glass borders of the EMPAC building. Over the course of the year, Armentrout invited local participants and artistic collaborators to occupy space and perform in the time lapse both outside of the hill adjacent to the building and inside on the staircase that borders the edge of the building. Some of these engagements were deliberate scenes for *Listening Creates an Opening*, where costumed performers appear as apparitions amidst daily happenings. Others were workshops with Rensselaer classes, and others still involved passersby. Complete footage from the time-lapse is installed in EMPAC's lobby, while an artistic edit of the footage for *Listening Creates an Opening* is featured in the performance as an installation in Troy's Riverside Park.

Another major technical endeavor that compliments the live components of *Listening Creates an Opening* is an LED-light sculpture installed in EMPAC's theater. Media artist Ian Winters installed eight LED-light sensors around the crown of EMPAC's Concert Hall, which lets light stream into the building. Winters then collected a year's worth of sensor data that he captured from the changes of day light, sun and clouds around the crown of EMPAC's concert hall. Winters' light sculpture is driven by these collected changes of daylight and brings outside atmospheric elements into the otherwise insular theatrical space. While the video time-lapse highlights one of the more iconic parts of the EMPAC building, the light sensors were placed in one of the most inconspicuous and least traveled nooks of the building.

The original score for *Listening Creates an Opening* follows a similar focus as the visual media elements of the work. Composer Evelyn Ficarra spent a good deal of time listening to local soundscapes in processes inspired by the late-Pauline Oliveros' sound walks. These recordings of technological and natural sound scores play with the live performances of Ficarra's original score.

#### **MAKING DANCES IN TROY, NY**

In all, the simple idea of bringing Armentrout's Bay Area methods to Troy are a success in that Mary Armentrout Dance Theater has been able to make one of their signature works in Troy. Yet over the years this simple task has shifted and changed accordingly to various large goals and sited practicalities. For one, the barge on Starbuck Island where Armentrout planned to host a portion of her performance was sold to the new island development.

On a more granular level, I have learned in helping to facilitate Armentrout's engagement with Troy that the stickiest parts of her practice are paramount to the success of her work. For example, Mary Armentrout has a deep commitment to community engagement, activism, and conversation with others. The centrality of her own somatic experience to her choreography, however, highlights the difficulties in factoring personal world experience into engagements with other surroundings and perspectives. At the most basic level, this plays out in the power dynamics of being a funded artist at EMPAC with a wealth of staff and building resources. In trying to connect with Troy as a community, Armentrout had to navigate how to participate in ways that could help her in making a new work without also taking from the limited artistic resources of our local landscape. On another level one emerging theme in Armentrout's practice in both California and New York is how a white artist working from an extremely personal place can listen to, support, and work to create more space for the landscape of racial and class difference around her.

*Listening Creates an Opening* is a beautiful work, but in it Mary Armentrout highlights the awkward, the quirky, and the uncomfortable in both her choreography and in the tone of her voice. I would venture to say that this aesthetic exemplifies the stickiness of exploring the intersectionality of places and spaces like Troy, the difficulties of being an outsider in someone else's community, and of different institutions serving different purposes for different people. I hope that if nothing else this performance gives the relatively small part of our community that it touches something to grapple with, think about, and experience together. It does not seek to provide answers or solutions or successes, but instead sits in spaces and begs a listening to problems, gaps, failures and personal and collective experiences.

—ASHLEY FERRO-MURRAY, CURATOR, THEATER/DANCE