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Proposal: Research, Scholarship, and Creativity Grant 2014

I received funding from a previous RSC grant in 2011. The funding was utilized to help with costs and fees related to my self-produced dance concert in Minneapolis at the Intermedia Arts in June of 2011. The concert titled, “Fe/Male” was co-directed with Jeffrey Peterson who was a Visiting Assistant Professor at Gustavus during that time period. The concert was well attended and received a favorable review. My final report was sent into the provost in 2013.

Project Description:
Purpose:
During my sabbatical I will travel to the United Kingdom to collaborate choreographically on a site-specific performance piece. Site work focuses on the non-traditional performance, recognizing “place” as an integral element in the inspiration, backdrop and environment of a created piece. My collaboration with a local artist, will explore the controversial site of an ancient oak tree that is currently being threatened by local area development, yet is simultaneously being protected by a woman defying that development through tree dwelling.

I will be working with long time colleague, political activist and site-work artist extraordinaire, Clare Whistler. Whistler lives in East Sussex and has a 30-year history as a dancer, choreographer and director, including 15 years working in opera, education and community projects. Most recently she has been the Artist in Residence on the Beech Estate near Battle at the Bunces Barn, a 17th century structure which has no power or running water and is surrounded by conservation meadows. During her 3 year residency Whistler states that her practice has involved, “consistent, considered, and spontaneous placing of her body in the landscape by walking, observing and openly encountering the subtle shifting terrain within and without-moving, writing, photographing, filming, in all seasons and weather.” The estate area is the harvest site for the Millennium Seed Bank Wildflowers. Her work has focused on the “wildflower” as an embodied image for use in interdisciplinary research and performance exploring the wildflower as a metaphor and symbol of adaptation with respect to a changing climate.

Whistler and I will be working on a performance piece that specifically seeks to expand the focus from the wildflower meadow to the surrounding environment inclusive of other organisms being threatened by environmental degradation and heightened development in the area. While Artist in Residence on the Beech Estate, Whistler created a number of performances during which she interfaced and collaborated with musicians, visual artists, photographers, beekeepers, eco-poets, dancers and political activists. One such person is the woman who has taken up residence in the ancient oak tree near the estate that is being threatened by development. Our intent is to make a piece that brings attention to both the plight
of the woman and the tree, their inextricable coexisting histories and future survival.

I will be in residence in East Sussex for 8 weeks exploring the landscape through embodied practice consisting of walking, observing, encountering, moving/choreographing, writing, and interviewing the tree dwelling woman and other persons in the area. The weeks previous to my residency, I will confer with Whistler, who will conduct research during the forthcoming months, about the tree’s history in context, the proposed development and its potential impact on the environment.

**Feasibility:**
It will be fascinating and illuminating to work with Clare Whistler on this type of project. As a local citizen, she is connected to a large network of people who will help us navigate village protocols and logistics in terms of permits and infrastructure arrangements. Moreover, she will be able to alert the community to the project details, enlisting volunteers to participate in the creation and performance of the piece. As an environmental political activist she is experienced in bringing awareness to the potential destructive practices that development often leaves in its wake, using her art as a forum for expression and action.

While I have performed in and made some site work, collaborating with someone who is as experienced and prominent in the genre as Clare Whistler would present an invaluable opportunity for me to reconsider how to envision and make site-specific work, leading me into a new paradigm of creativity and social action. Site work is not framed by the constructed parameters of a stage space and performed in isolation. Rather, the choreography exists in relationship to a place that has a living history and is subject to elemental changes beyond the control and confines of one’s imagination. The challenge for all site work is to let “place” and context affect one’s sensibilities informing aesthetic and creative decisions. In the process, choreography brings attention to the idiosyncrasies and wonders of said place. The environment becomes a partner in the creative process leading the artist into new dimensions of thought and practice. The project will have significant ties to the Theatre and Dance Department’s mission, which explores the ways, that performance can be a tool for personal transformation and social justice.

There will certainly be unexpected obstacles that we will need to creatively navigate and surmount. Indeed, they are one of the challenges of making site work come to life. Weather is always an unknown factor. However, I have no doubt that Clare’s experience in the field will enable us to successfully research, create and produce a performance within the parameters of time that we have established. Moreover, my own history as a successful choreographer and artistic director will also help to inform our scheduled outline for creation and performance.

Overall project cost will also present an additional difficulty. Hopefully the grant will provide the means for me to travel to the UK. Yet, even with the help of a
stipend, I will have to confront many out of pocket expenses. However this is not an unusual scenario when self-producing. It is something that most choreographers factor into presenting work. My commitment to the work will remain steadfast, regardless of personal expense.

**Project Design:**
Research prior to my arrival will be ongoing. Whistler and I have already been in consultation with each other about the project, sharing research regarding civil disobedience related to the protection of forests and other environmental causes. Clare has been in conversation with the woman who lives in the tree and she will be sharing her documented conversations with me. I will travel to the UK in mid-August and stay through mid-October. We have scheduled 8 weeks of preparation time for me to be on site conducting interviews, and participating in the embodied practice discussed above. The performances will take place at the middle of October at the site of the tree, which is just outside of the Beech Estate in East Sussex, UK.

**Proposed Schedule:**
Weeks 1-2: acclimatizing through Whistler’s introductions to local sites, ecology, persons, and experiential practice. We will need to finalize local constituencies to both support and participate in the work. Making sure that necessary permits and local protocols have been secured will be required during this time.

Weeks 3-4: collaborating with Whistler, creating/organizing a structure and form for the proposed performance event involving area performers and the stated site. A press release will be disseminated and poster design/postcards will need to be finalized. Using social network sites possible.

Week 5: rehearsing on site creating a movement vocabulary that arises out of our collaborative embodied practice based on interviews, site experiences and historical information.

Weeks 6-7: rehearsing with local participants including, musicians, poets, photographer and videographer.

Weeks 8: finalizing preparations through rehearsals leading to performances.

**Budget Rationale:**
As the first part of my sabbatical has me living and studying Gaga in Israel, I will be traveling to the UK either on route to or from Israel in order to reduce the costs of plane transportation. At this point in time, round trip travel expenses to Tel Aviv are listed at approximately $2,000.00. Multi city travel from Minneapolis- Tel Aviv- London- Minneapolis is listed at approximately $2,300.00. Individual round trip travel from Minneapolis- London is listed at $1,600.00.
I will not have to pay lodging while in East Sussex, as I will be staying with Whistler. However I do expect food expenses to be about $75.00 a week for 8 weeks. Other expenses as stated earlier will come out of pocket.

**Budget:**
Travel to London from Minneapolis = $1,600.00

Food costs ($75.00 a week x 8) = $ 600.00

Total travel and food expense = $2,200.00