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# On Vanishing: Museums, Choreography, and Mythology

Jonah Bokaer\*

## I. EURIPIDES TO THE AUDIENCE (APPROXIMATELY 428 B.C.)

“Truth is often, in some degree, economic. . . Who likes to look straight at real passion? As if truths were skins of one another and the ability to move, hunt, negotiate among them was a way of finessing the terms of the world in which we find ourselves. Skin game, so to speak.”<sup>1</sup>

## II. DANCE WRITING

In 2002, when I was twenty-two years old, beginning studies in animation and earning a degree in Visual & Media Studies, I discovered that the ancient Greeks referred to choreography as “dance writing,” from the words *χορεία* (circular dance) and *γραφή* (writing). This fascinated me because I had always viewed choreography a visual act that vanishes: its remnants are commonly witnessed in the bodies of performers reproducing movements and activities. The act of choreography is private, as opposed to dance, which is communally shared — or publicly viewed. Choreography occurs, it is transmitted, and it disappears, to become dance. Paradoxically, I believe this ephemerality heightens, substantially, if dance occurs in a museum.

The Greek etymology of choreography led to a substantial discovery for me, as it suggested an ancient relationship between dancing, writing, drawing, and the graphic arts. It made the word choreography seem more

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\*Recently named a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellow in Choreography this May, 2015, Jonah Bokaer was born to Tunisian and American parents in Ithaca, NY, and has been active as a choreographer and exhibiting artist since 2002. The creator of 56 works in a wide variety of media, Bokaer’s work has been produced throughout venues in Belgium, Canada, Cuba, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hungary, India, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, Tunisia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Creating choreography for museum spaces since 2002, Bokaer has performed at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, P.S.1 MoMA, The New Museum, the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City. He has worked closely with performing arts curators for programs at The Asia Society (2011, 2014), Le Carré d’Art à Nîmes, IVAM Valencia, Kunsthalle St. Gallen, MUDAM Luxembourg, and La Triennale di Milano. During “The Legal Medium” symposium at Yale, Bokaer performed a short choreography called “Study For Occupant” in the courtroom of the Yale School of Law.

1. Anne Carson, *Why I Wrote Two Plays About Phaidra*, in *GRIEF LESSONS: FOUR PLAYS BY EURIPIDES 309-10* (Anne Carson trans, N.Y. Rev. Books Classics 2008) (c. 416-38 B.C.E).

permanent, and propelled a five-year cycle of my digital animations, which are synthetic in nature, often combining movement, technological art, graphics, and drawing – frequently exhibited in museum contexts.

More than ten years later, in 2013, I located a sketchbook from that time, in which I wrote a series of related goals:

“Goals:

My project is to develop five proposals on the continuum of choreography:

1) To inhibit the act of vanishing in choreography. To capture choreography so that it does not have to vanish;

2) To intensify the relationship between choreography, visual art, and design;

3) To utilize new forms of reproduction, capture, animation, and image-based media: moving images or moving bodies;

4) To reconfigure spaces. To situate choreography in new relationships to exhibition spaces;

5) To have dedicated spaces for choreography. Choreography has always been a tenant to theater spaces, to opera houses, and to makeshift places that serve as temporary hosts. Choreography needs to own property: real estate.”<sup>2</sup>

As more and more venues for dance writing vanish in 2015, I suggest a new exploration of the etymology of choreography—itsself the definition of dance writing. And I propose a rigorous analysis of the new advancements, challenges, precedents, and ruptures afforded by presenting the choreographic arts in a museum context.

### III. RETROSPECTION

Looking back, I would slightly revise the statements in my journal from art school. The art of choreography taking up real estate in a museum or a gallery is not the question. In actuality, choreographers are primarily concerned with the same questions as other exhibiting artists—space, visibility, temporality, and value: including issues of aesthetics, economics, presentation, and possible distortions of reproduction, which can occur when choreography is curated within a visual arts context.

By participating in *The Legal Medium*, a symposium held at Yale Law School, I encountered an Attic Greek phrase, *χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ*, meaning “beautiful things are difficult,” in a March 9th letter from law student Kristen Bushnell. Subsequent email dialogue in March 2015 provoked further thinking on the supposed venue of dance, which in my practice is

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2. Jonah Bokaer, *Notes for Underscore* (2002) (on file with author).

museums. Moderators of *The Legal Medium* observed that the ideal venue to display my choreography appears to be a difficult endeavor, and they are correct.

More often than not, the physical locations in which my works are performed lend a creative force to the choreography itself, producing, what I have termed since 2011, a “new mythology” for dance. I have coined this term not in reference to literal, existing myths – but to the creation of new critical foundations upon which to analyze the impact of museum spaces on the ephemerality of choreography. Dance in museums is both subject, and myth, in my research: often producing certain rupture, between appearance and disappearance of the artform. Still further, this is what leads to such a rich potential dialogue between this artform, and the law.

Following conversation with other participants in the symposium, I realize that an analogy can be drawn: between dance and venue, parallel to the lawyer and the courtroom. In the words of Bushnell, “the lawyer, both prosecutor and defense, choreographs the trial toward a particular end, conviction or exoneration, respectively.”<sup>3</sup>

During this symposium, organized by Amar Bakshi and colleagues, I staged new choreography inside a small auditorium normally intended for academic colloquia, originally designed for legal proceedings: complete with architectural perspective, courtroom furnishings, jury seating, and audiovisual supports whose orientation and design stem from the medium of law, whose venue is the justice system.

Parallel to the correlation between *The Legal Medium* symposium and the medium of dance, perhaps the courtroom can serve as a new space for choreography’s physical manifestation. Partly out of respect for the organizers and my fellow participants, I challenged this unlikely combination of disciplines, through extension: by supposing that the medium of live dance writing (*χορεία γραφή*) could contribute to the discussion of legal processes in art. My moderators, by turns equally adventurous and cooperative, posited that perhaps the medium of dance could offer a unique contribution to scholarship—a legal analogue to my thesis as a young man, many years ago. From student journals in 2002; to a body of museum choreography art spanning 2002-2015; to participation in *The Legal Medium* this February 2015; to writing for this current journal in June 2015; the analogue comes full circle by acknowledging that indeed, beautiful things are difficult, especially when one medium begins to occupy the space of another.

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3. Correspondence with Kristen Bushnell, Notes Editor, *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* (Mar. 9, 2015) (on file with author).

#### IV. SHIFTING SPACE: SHIFTING LANGUAGE

Shifting away from the courtroom, the transposition of ephemeral choreographic arts into museums and other visual art institutions is not a new phenomenon. But there ruptures can occur between current choreographic literacy, and curatorial practice in the visual arts. This is increasingly evident when choreographies become curated or produced in museums, galleries, and public collections. As a choreographer, I analyze the structural supports available to my medium, when presented in museums. A given venue is used as a point of departure, to suppose new possibilities for choreography, often producing highly ephemeral viewing experiences that will not be limited to the traditional creation or distribution of dance concerts touring to multiple, relatively interchangeable, neutral theatres.

But staging the choreographic act, after its placement in a museum, is not only a formal crisis: it is also a linguistic one, capable of its own mythology. I introduce the word crisis, again for its etymological potential. “Crisis” stems from the Greek word *krisis* (κρίσις), a feminine noun referring to the turning point in a physical disease (used as such by Hippocrates and Galen).<sup>4</sup> Yet by tracing the word to a physical act (for example, the body producing fever, to overheat, and thereby cleanse a germ from the bloodstream), one can imagine the body’s generation of physical heat, to purge illness.

An interesting parallel arrives when we consider obtaining criticism from the word crisis: whereas the Greek word *krisis* applies internal heat to heal the body, the French word *critique* (derived from the Greek *kritikos*) also applies heat to a subject or work of art, perhaps to strengthen its structure. Etymology also indicates that crisis can quite literally mean “judgment, result of a trial, or selection,” placing the word more centrally in relation to law.<sup>5</sup>

If the medium of choreography literally shifts spaces, from proscenium theatre to museum architecture, critical language will also require shifts in perspective: deeper understanding of the visual arts and museum culture will be required of writers, in order to form critical judgment of dance in new visual spaces.

#### V. THE MYTH OF CHANCE

In order to enlarge the possibilities of choreographic composition and

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4. See *Crisis*, ONLINE ETYMOLOGY DICTIONARY, [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=krisis&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=krisis&searchmode=none) (last accessed June 20, 2015).

5. Correspondence with Madison Mainwaring, American writer (June 1, 2015) (on file with author).

leap beyond imagination, habit, and the repetition of personal style, Merce Cunningham famously employed the use of chance procedures in his choreography to compose, sequence, structure, and present his dances—often in museum spaces. Cunningham has stated frequently, including on film:

“John Cage and I became interested in the use of chance in the 50’s. I think one of the very primary things that happened then was the publication of the *I Ching*, the Chinese book of changes, from which you can cast your fortune: the hexagrams.

Cage took it to work in his way of making compositions then; and he used the idea of 64—the number of the hexagrams—to say that you had 64, for example, sounds; then you could cast, by chance, to find which sound first appeared, cast again, to say which sound came second, cast again, so that it’s done by, in that sense, chance operations. Instead of finding out what you think should follow—say a particular sound—what did the *I Ching* suggest? Well, I took this also for dance.”<sup>6</sup>

The use of chance operations was (and remains) widely read to be an abrogation of artistic decision-making, perhaps placing the Cage/Cunningham compositional methods beyond the reach of critical judgment. But what interested me about this process, artistically, was its challenge to the laws of dance composition. My experience was that Cunningham transplanted the origin of choreography away from his own imagination, and into the hands of chance operations such as the *I Ching*, dice, flipping coins, and also computer-generated software.

Rupturing the laws of dance sequencing, such as beginning, middle, and end, Cunningham scrambled compositional hierarchy in dance, and changed what the public was asked to see in time. Active as a choreographer between 1938-2009, Cunningham devised methods that acquired legendary status: over a career spanning nearly seventy years, Cunningham’s use of chance gained appreciation, through continued application, in a reinforcing cycle.

My experience as a dancer in that mythic company, between 2000-2007, significantly informed my physical body as a performer—but did not significantly impact my vocabulary as a choreographer. Quite the opposite, I turned away from these compositional methods, and have only created conscious, intentional structures in dance. My own choreography has not employed chance operations of any kind.

Museum performances were an occasional part of the Cunningham vocabulary, often in the form of *Events*, composed of interchangeable

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6. AMERICAN MASTERS: MERCE CUNNINGHAM—A LIFETIME OF DANCE (Eagle Rock Entertainment 1999).

fragments of past, existing repertory. But when presented in museum spaces, I observed early on that the myth of chance began to erode in Cunningham's vocabulary: museum spaces, often due to their architectural, programmatic, or logistic constraints, disarmed the ability to work by chance. This observation does not belittle the aesthetic accomplishments of such a great artist, and company, but rather, it serves as a lens to look critically at how museums and dance impact each other: formally, and, as cultural partners.

When performing in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in 2003, the Cunningham Company worked with an existing installation by Olafur Eliasson, known as *The Weather Project*, commissioned by the *Unilever Series*, and rightly heralded as a major work of public installation art. It should be understood that Cunningham and Eliasson did not directly collaborate, as would be common in Cunningham's work for stage: the installation was realized prior to the choreography. The performance duration was twenty minutes long, repeated on three separated stages along the Turbine Hall, with multiple performances each evening. As a dancer, the production experience and logistics were so monumental as to decay the possibility of working by chance at all: installation, duration, interval, space, and visual elements all worked together to sculpt what could (or could not) happen as part of that program.

A very similar phenomenon took place four years later, at Dia:Beacon in the Hudson Valley, in which the Cunningham company performed amidst the *Andy Warhol: Shadows (1978-1979)* exhibition of masterworks, neatly surrounding the four walls on the perimeter of the gallery. The imagery depicted a single image of shadowed light, painted by Warhol, repeated in varying shades of black, overtop of a single primary color: iterating in contiguous, adjacent canvases, to form a single and monumental encasement to the entire gallery space at Dia:Beacon.

The phenomenal depth of Cunningham's oeuvre, aesthetic accomplishments, and artistic courage are not here in question: what I mean to suggest instead, is that this museum once again inhibited the ability to work by chance with museum choreography. As an interpreter of that performance, it was Cunningham's assistant, Robert Swinston, who structured the material, without incorporating chance procedures. Instead, Swinston (brilliantly) navigated the rules and regulations imposed by the museum to allow a performance to occur within the walls of a museum exhibition with valuable masterpieces by Warhol, a close Cunningham collaborator from the 1960s, who had realized iconic collaborations with Cunningham during his lifetime. At Dia:Beacon, space, distance from the paintings, audience proximity, and stage size all formed a complex matrix of constraints, which resulted in a nonetheless beautiful performance in situ.

Nevertheless, while undertaking museum invitations, chance

procedures began vanishing from Cunningham's compositional process.

## VI. OTHER LAWS

Vanishing is not limited to the medium of choreography, to the mythology of chance procedures in 20th century composition, or to the newfound legal quagmires of dance in museums. Disappearance can of course occupy the personal sphere as well.

In January 2013, prior to a premiere of mine at the 33rd Festival Les Hivernales d'Avignon, based on a thematic commission addressing Mediterranean migration, I embarked on a personal and professional journey in Tunisia, to retrace my father's birth, history, and traces in Tunisia and the Mediterranean between 1941 and 1967. Born in Tunis in 1941, German-occupied Tunisia was still a French protectorate, and had not yet achieved national independence.

Until my journey in 2013, fragmentary physical memories transmitted to me during childhood dominated my understanding of Tunisia: stories of my father's experience of intermittent bombings, of migration, of national transition and upheaval, and of ethnic tensions escalating to the point of diaspora, all populated my childhood understanding of the nation. The popular uprising known as the Jasmine Revolution, which led to the ousting of Dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, began in December 2010 and escalated in January 2011. These events also conflated and reprovoked my understanding of the country. Becoming versed in Tunisian law was key to my travel preparations.

Visiting Tunisia in January 2013 occurred against the backdrop of a large array of anti-terrorist warnings issued from the United States Department of Homeland Security, travel advisory warnings, and general discouragement from colleagues, collaborators, and administrators. Upon my decision to proceed with the voyage, a very close dramaturge and collaborator of North African descent told me: "Don't disclose anything at the border. Tunisia is a *lawless society*. You'll be detained at the border, by attractive young men, who will say, 'Come with me,' and will confine you for questioning. You are choosing to enter a third-world society, in transition, in the aftermath of revolution."<sup>7</sup>

According to Wikipedia and other online sources, the Tunisian legal system is mainly influenced by French law, while the Law of Personal Status is based on ancient Islamic law. Contrary to popular belief, Sharia laws and courts were abolished in Tunisia as early as 1956, and a Code of Personal Status was adopted shortly after independence. During this same year, women were allotted full legal status, allowing them access to

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7. Telephone conversation with Moroccan Dramaturge Youness Anzane, Associate Dramaturge of the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence (Jan. 25, 2013).



complete entrepreneurial, financial, and marital independence. The Code of Personal Status also stands as one of the most progressive civil codes in North Africa and the Muslim world.<sup>8</sup>

LGBTQ rights in Tunisia remain under-developed; there has been no coherent LGBTQ civil rights movement in the nation. Article 230 of the Penal Code of 1913 prescribes imprisonment for up to three years for homosexual conduct among consenting adults, but this was substantially modified in 1964.<sup>9</sup> (This relates, peripherally, to some discussions initiated during the “Laws of the Human Body” panel organized by *The Legal Medium*, on February 28, 2015, in which I participated as a presenter and panelist, with Barbara Hoffman and David Joselit.)

Unusually, my father belonged to a Jewish minority in Tunisia, nearly 2,500 years old. Like many such enclaves in North Africa and the Middle East, this minority represented about 2% of the national population in 1941, and totaled less than 900 in 2013 (with another 1,000 on the Hebraic Tunisian island of Djerba).<sup>10</sup> My research indicated that Tunisian citizens would be tolerant of religious freedom, not only legally, but socially, and would not inquire about a person’s beliefs of any kind. This points toward another kind of law—an unspoken law—of etiquette, neighborly coexistence, and at times explicit or complicit segregation among differing religious customs—that I view as a form of “unruptured” tolerance, deeply embedded in the culture.

Personal necessity to understand my father’s past life in Tunisia combined with the major international commission addressing Mediterranean migration in 2013. This enhanced my continuing curiosity about a society whose fundamental human rights were in transition. Each of these circumstances reinforced personal, professional, and social motivations to travel to Tunisia. Understanding the law, in advance, was one aspect of my preparations.

I did finally embark on the journey, and it completely changed my life.

## VI. TABLEAU

To inhibit the act of vanishing in choreography; to capture choreography so that it does not have to vanish; to intensify the relationship between choreography, visual art, and design; these motivations continued during my trip to Tunisia, and were blended with a fear of traveling alone. I reached out to three trusted colleagues to inquire

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8. See *Tunisia Law*, WIKIPEDIA, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tunisia#Law> (last accessed June 20, 2015).

9. See *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Arabs*, ARABS4TOLERANCE, <http://www.arabs4tolerance.org/the-law.php> (last accessed June 21, 2015).

10. ABDELWAHAB MEDDEB & BENJAMIN STORA, *HISTOIRE DES RELATIONS ENTRE JUIFS ET MUSULMANS DES ORIGINS À NOS JOURS* (2013).

if they would be willing to accompany me on my journey: a manager, a close friend, and a partner. Quickly, my partner, visual artist Steven Ladd, was the first and only person to agree to the trip. He accepted the invitation without hesitation.

Arranging flights, I first began to research an itinerary that would be functional for each of us, traveling from different departure cities. He began researching civil liberties, human rights, and laws pertaining to LGBT travelers and citizens, in Tunisia in 2013. He was thorough, fast, and very street-savvy in this research.

On the first day in the city of Tunis, we decided to visit the Bardo National Museum, one of Tunisia's and greater Africa's most renowned museums. Spending the majority of the day in the museum, its collections, its galleries, and its gifts shops and amenities, I noticed that the collection was endowed with rare mosaics, renowned tile works, and ephemera dating back several millennia, including multi-national, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious artifacts. The museum had succeeded in preserving these cultural masterpieces with uncommon success. The artifacts were protected and preserved, in time. "Inhibited" from vanishing, I thought.

Standing there in the museum, about three kilometers from my father's birthplace, I began (as I often do) to visualize a choreographed performance, in the museum's lower galleries, and main entry hall: beyond my own choreographic practice, what are the precedents for museum performances in this part of the world? Do such precedents exist? Who has embarked on this: which artists, which institutions? What are the parameters for undertaking such an idea? What are the legal considerations to take into account?

In the Cartel Judaica room, amidst a series of vitrines, preserving ancient hand-written, hand-drawn manuscripts of many religions, I began to consider the link between choreography and calligraphy, imagining how the Greek definition of "circle writing" would extend to civilizations whose writing is based on other, non-Euclidean forms of geometry. Other patterns, other shapes seemed to govern the hand-drawn manuscripts in that museum.

Steven stood there, underneath a sky-lit gallery, looking outside an interior gallery window, viewing the main public atrium below, leaning forward with his torso, to look out of the large bay at the public spaces below. He was wearing a blue jacket, to stay warm in the January winter – and in the overbearing air-conditioning.

Photography is forbidden in the Bardo National Museum. But he formed such a tableau in that moment that I decided to turn on my mobile phone, aim, and take a photo of him, by the vitrines and hand-drawn manuscripts, standing at the window, in contrapposto, under the skylight.

## VII. RUPTURE

In preparation for a recent performance at the MAC VAL museum in Vitry-sur-Seine, France, I am reading a new dramatic work by Wajdi Mouawad, a renowned playwright of Lebanese origin, called *Ciels* [*Skies*]. Isolated in a secret space, the play dramatizes the international team of “Operation Socrates:” the protagonists scan the sky, trying to decipher hidden messages that unknown terrorists send via coded text.

One of the members of this closely-knit group of counter-terrorist workers commits suicide, for unknown reasons, at the beginning of the play (perhaps employing the structure of early tragedians such as Euripides). The sky of all voices and all nations darkens further: in Mouawad’s play, young terrorists use a work of visual art, *The Annunciation* by Tintoretto, as the foil for their synchronized attack on the Museum of Modern Art, The Centre Georges Pompidou, The Tate Modern, the Deutsche Guggenheim, and other museums in Montreal, Padua, Tokyo, and St. Petersburg. The playwright devises that the attackers are disillusioned youth under the age of thirty-five, and the play’s structure uses visual imagery and mythology to purposely debunk stereotypes depicting the Muslim world as adhering to radical Islam.

Uncannily, while reading of *Ciels*, and also preparing for a museum choreography of my own at the MAC VAL, Steven texts a link from *The New York Times*, which I open on a mobile phone. I read of a terrorist attack in Tunisia on March 19, executed at the National Bardo Museum, three kilometers from my father’s birthplace, in the same galleries of my photograph in January 2013. It is paralyzing to learn that these events took place in the same public space, in the same museum, claiming the lives of many foreign and western tourists.

Just as the medium of choreography can immediately be rendered helpless when faced with such events, I wonder, at times, if the medium of the law is not just as fragile, when faced with atrocities of this scale. Events like this far exceed breaking the law: they constitute crimes against humanity and rapidly erase the distinctions between different countries’ laws, such as I had been previously researching.

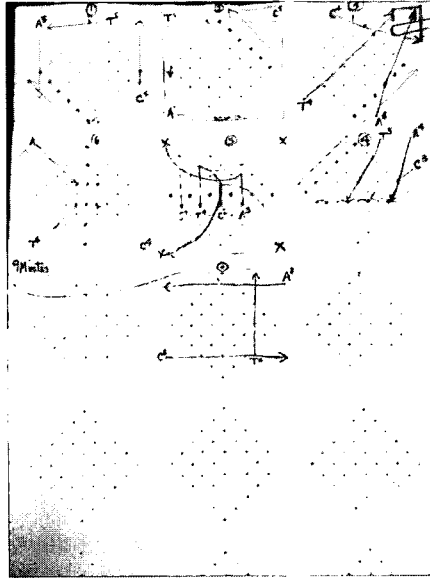
“Terrorism” stems from the Latin verb *terreō*, meaning “I frighten,” and the *Terror Cimbricus*, a state of emergency and panic in Rome due to invasion, dating back to 105 B.C. This echoes with my state of body, after clicking on the news link: I am physically and emotionally frightened. In that moment, New York, Vitry, Tunis: all cities at once seemed to collide into one wounded body.

I set down the play, a work of theatrical fiction, destined for the stage, depicting terror in a museum. And I contemplate this actual terror in an actual museum, one of Africa’s finest, which I have visited all too recently. Somehow, it’s impossible to contemplate the museum

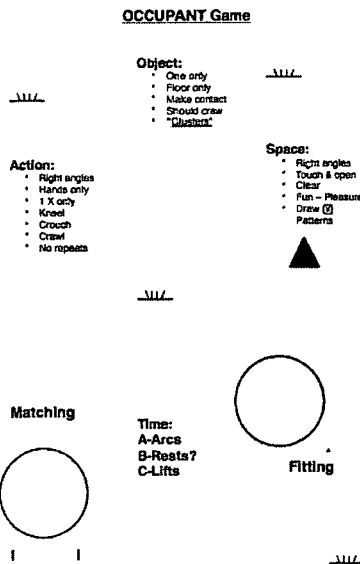
performance to be given: it feels too raw, too topical and inconsequential, too numb.

Such a rupture in public space as occurred at the Bardo National Museum renders aesthetics, law, and choreography – all – much closer to another medium: tragedy. Only ten days in the aftermath of these events, one cannot presume answers, or meaning, for museum professionals nor for civil society. But it's certain that our experience of museums, of our bodies, and of the law have already started to experience dramatic change, which can only resolve over time.

VIII. CAPTIONS



**Figure 1. ECLIPSE First Drawing (2012)**  
 9-Minute Timed Drawing, pre-figuring 4 dancers' movements into a 4-sided venue. Choreography & Drawing © Jonah Bokaer.



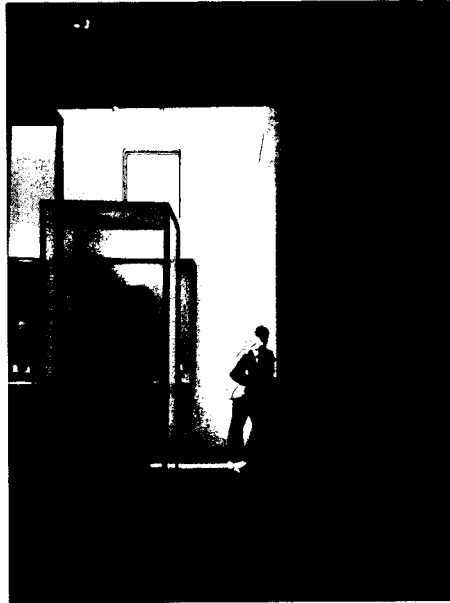
**Figure 2. OCCUPANT Game Score (2013)**  
 Choreographic Score, animating dancers, objects, and actions. Choreography & Drawing © Jonah Bokaer.



**Figure 3.** *OCCUPANT Performance & Drawing 1 (2013)*  
Dancers, objects, and actions generating a floor drawing.  
Choreography & Drawing © Jonah Bokaer  
Dancer: CC Chang; Scenography: Daniel Arsham  
Photo: © Tess Deselle



**Figure 4.** *OCCUPANT Performance & Drawing 2 (2013)*  
Dancers, objects, and actions generating a floor drawing.  
Choreography & Drawing © Jonah Bokaer  
Dancer: Tal Adler-Arieli; Scenography: Daniel Arsham  
Photo: © Tess Deselle



**Figure 5.** *TABLEAU* (2013)

Photograph of Steven Ladd in the Bardo National Museum, Tunisia.  
(January 2013) © Jonah Bokaer.