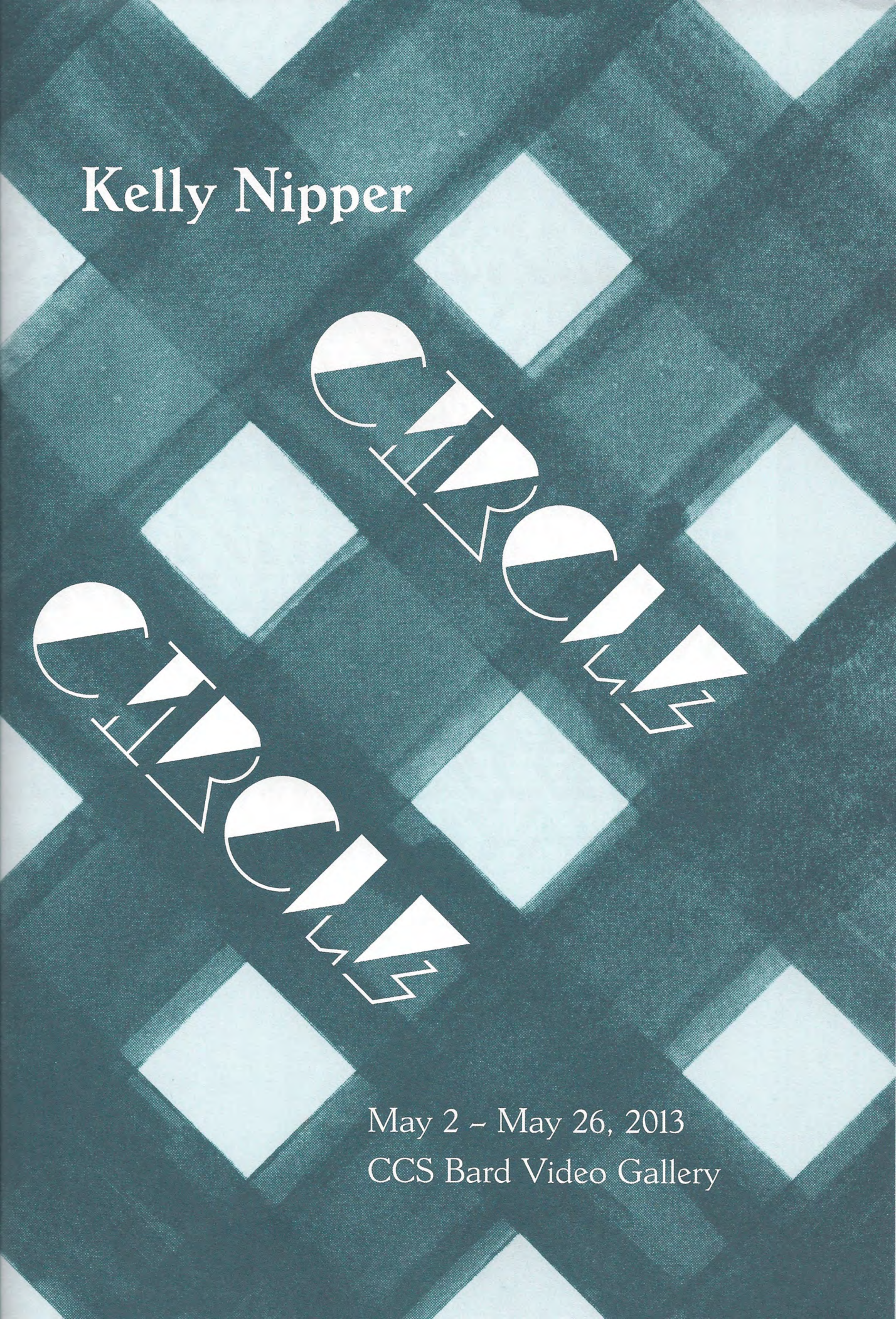
Kelly Nipper



May 2 – May 26, 2013
CCS Bard Video Gallery

Squaring the Circle

> *You can storm the house of a novel like Barthes, rearranging the furniture as you choose, or you can enter on your knees, like the pilgrim Nabakov thought you were, and try to figure out the cunning design of the place—the house will stand either way.*
>
> –Zadie Smith, "Rereading Barthes and Nabakov"

Several artistic legacies find their way into Kelly Nipper's art. Mostly the references are explicit, intentional, a return to figures and to practices with distinct and memorable vocabularies of their own. In these cases, the predecessors are usually followed closely and with fidelity. But at times, or in other ways, their aesthetic languages are redeployed to different ends. These varied ways of revisiting past practices produce a methodological tension in Nipper's work between a heavy investment in some authorial voices and the staging of productive encounters between others.

The figure who is most present in Nipper's work is an author in the truest sense: Rudolf von Laban, Hungarian artist, movement analyst, and creator of a modern form of dance writing, Labanotation. Nipper has taken the time to learn what Zadie Smith might consider to be Laban's "house rules," working closely with movement analysts and notation writers trained in his methodology. Nipper's videodances—movement pieces produced specifically for video—have worked through Laban's girdle scales, a graduated series for articulating particular ranges of movement. Another video includes a restaging of a dance by one of Laban's pupils—Mary Wigman—the chief body he worked on in initially developing his system of movement analysis.[1]

Labanotation is more alphabet than textual composition. As such, it awaits arrangement. Nipper works with this alphabet's capacities, and she applies its graphic symbols beyond the human body to the kinds of things that Laban at most only alluded to once he had dedicated himself to his analysis. Nipper goes even further too, allowing for scores written in Labanotation to be reread and reinterpreted through spoken word, typographic design, and object-making, as well as to be compared with other systems for recording and measuring flow.

The breakdown of movements into elemental forms while linked to the logic of the score is also a product of thinking through photography. The camera, in framing single, instant moments of time, works differently from the continuity of movement, but it doesn't necessarily obstruct flow. It points to that which exists before, and suggests what might follow. And in succession, as in memory, photographs abbreviate but they also construct a scaffolding for temporal flow. Photos then might be compared with other constitutive forms like graphemes, like musical notes, or even movement symbols, that when read one after the other, give rise to distinct phrasing and also to associated renderings of space and time. Photography has taken a back seat in Nipper's practice in recent years, although perhaps her videodances take up where the former left off. Within her larger metaproject of *Floyd on the Floor*, the videodances are at once finished pieces and small intervals within a larger choreographic study that emphasizes the flow of the weather, the body, and language, not to mention the organizing forces of technologies and emotion. Floyd is, after all, both hurricane and human.

For *Circle Circle*, Nipper returns to her eponymous videodance of 2007. Initially the work existed as one of three studies for *Floyd on the Floor*, which the artist began working on in 1999. The teleology of these projects is clearly hard to parse, and Nipper has returned before to *Circle Circle*—in 2012—adding an audio-track five years after *Floyd* was first performed. It may just be that *Floyd* is an ever-evolving form that continues to swell and perpetuate spin-offs like the recent *Black Forest*. The study of elemental forms that pertain to the larger project-structure may indeed be continually ripe for a second, or even a third look.

In itself, the lone body in *Circle Circle* is doubled, and projected larger than life on opposite walls of a darkened room, sandwiching the audience between the clockwise and anti-clockwise rotations of the dancer's hips. These movements correspond with the directionality of the cyclone and the hurricane, depending on your hemisphere. For the dancer, this movement is at her center of gravity; the arc that's traced out forms an equator of sorts, a midline at which everything rests in precarious equilibrium.

Notes

1./ "Every movement had to be done over and over again, until it was controlled, until it could be analyzed, transposed and transformed into an adequate symbol. I have always had a pronounced sense for rhythm and dynamics, and my belief in "living" a movement and not just doing it was strong. Therefore, my individual way of expression and reaction must have been as much torture to Laban as his indefatigable attempts to achieve objectivity were to me." Mary Wigman, "My Teacher Laban," in Copeland, Roger, and Marshall Cohen, eds. *What Is Dance: Readings in Theory and Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983

The circle is a primary form of Euclidean geometry. Its three-dimensional form is not however one of the five Platonic solids that were once associated with the classical elements of water, fire, earth, and air, and which have been prized throughout history for their exquisite symmetry. Laban formulated a theory of Space Harmony with the understanding that our everyday movements followed patterns found in these Platonic solids. Believing such forms are naturally more harmonious and thus more aesthetically pleasing than others, he devised a number of scales for practicing and refining movement based on the angles, surfaces, and edges of these harmonized solids. As complex forms constructed of regular polygons (equiangular and equilateral), these forms and the movements that articulated them did not include the circle nor the sphere, but rather were circumscribed by them, as the structural foundation of their possibility: all apexes of Platonic solids reach out to touch their containing sphere. The circle, for Laban, was the degree zero for choreography—"choreography, means literally the designing or writing of circles"—and its sister word, choreology "was a kind of grammar and syntax of the language of movement but also its mental and emotional content...based on the belief that motion and emotion, form and content, body and mind, are inseparably united."[2]

It's this kind of attention to the "cunning design" of another's work that grounds and animates Nipper's research-based practice. Labanotation is but one of a number of specialized languages the artist takes up—others include meteorology, geology, textile design—but it's arguably also the one that has the most bearing. It not only articulates the conditions of and the possibilities for all kinds of bodily movement, it's also a prime example of unstructured, incidental, and sometimes ritualistic activity (here, the base fact of moving) encountering a highly developed ordering structure. The hip rotations of Aubre Hill, the dancer in *Circle Circle*, may look simple, but the accompanying audio interpretation of her choreography gives some indication that principles and rules—the dance script, the Euclidean proof—underlie the forms she marks out in space and time.

Nipper's own aesthetics are often attuned to the minimal, but it would be a misreading to interpret this as a romance with formalist abstraction. Despite the iconicity of Laban's symbols, of typographic elements,

and direct quotation of pared-back modernist design, Nipper's works are well outside any claims to a universal aesthetic vocabulary that could be divorced from life. Gyrating hips. The spinning of the potter's wheel. The rotation of the earth. The eye of the storm. Nipper's references slide easily over each other as manifestations of primary form that are bodily, crafted, law-abiding, unharnessed. Her circle is more than a pure, singular, reductive form, it's a multivalent one that she finds over and again within a dense complex of systems and stories. Reiterated, retraced, the circle shifts speeds and directions, while pointing to a host of systems for observation, measurement, and production through which it presences.

We might say that these structural languages and conventions that Nipper engages with are closely aligned with instruction. To instruct is, quite literally, to inhabit a structure: to build. This is in actuality what happens when one works with dance notation. It's also the case with other forms of writing, like Allan Kaprow's proliferate scores for his highly scripted Happenings. Patterns give a schematic form of instruction too, and in Nipper's work, nods are made in the direction of Anni Albers and the Russian Constructivist Lyubov Popova, whose textiles in particular were born of instructional documents of design that can read like formalist abstractions themselves. Between the final paintings Popova executed before giving herself over to design—her spatial force constructions—and the lattice-like sketches she made for her fabric designs, is an ambivalence between the illustration and the actualization of formal elements coming to terms with space. Her fabric sketches can read as an arrangement of forms but they also can appear like illustrations of warp and weft: at once a visual pattern and a structuring ground with which to move through.

2./ Laban, Rudolf. *The Language of Movement: A Guidebook to Choreutics*. Lisa Ullman, ed. Boston: PLAYS, INC., 1974. vii–viii

Circle Circle, and the multiple languages that constitute it are only possible where there is practice. Although the body, the touch of the human, is readily apparent in Nipper's work, little is arbitrary or spontaneous. A practice is developed through repetition, through retracing prior movements and streams of logic and yet somewhere within there remains the possibility for the personalized gesture. Following instruction, revisiting, perseverance, these kinds of things pry open a possibility for deviation, redeployment, or intentional manipulation of

standard practices, and carve out space for the individual. Specialized languages can be occupied by intuitive and personal forces: Popova's lattice becomes sky to *Floyd*'s floor; movement notation is rearticulated as typographic score. It's not always easy to find the point of distinction between the systems we take for granted as objective and the less predictable energies they have contact with.

Out of Nipper's attention to movement, to elemental forms, and to flow come recognizable choreographic objects. The circle isn't simply performed in space and time, it actually becomes a thing in and of itself, "an alternative site for the understanding of potential instigation and organization of action to reside."[3] For Nipper, the choreographic object has additional resonance in her enduring material works, which defy the driving rhetoric of Fluxus and other similarly ephemeral art practices. Nipper gets to the heart of movement and structure through attending to specialized notations, and then she moves right back out again, condensing their systematic languages into forms that have texture, visuality, sound. Nipper embodies the complicated relationship the score and the pattern have to time—its status as before and after the fact—and she produces choreographic objects that point to the systems that determine us, but that also enable our creative agency.

3./ William Forsythe as quoted in Rosenthal, Stephanie, ed/cur. *Move: Choreographing You*. London: Hayward Gallery, 2011. 15

It is in this way that Nipper finds her own means to negotiate practices that have preceded her, ones which she finds ripe with meaning in the present moment. She refrains from the postmodernist privileging of the audience as the chief maker of meaning and its turn away from the fixed, or enduring object of facticity. Her work instead suggests that some attention be invested in getting to know not just the ways in and out of a structure, but its interior architecture too. To follow the literal lead of someone else in this way is to give one's self over to another's way of articulating the world. And yet this needn't be a trade off of one's own pursuits or one's own capacities for power. In Nipper's overall way of working, she tweaks the balance between taking the lead and harnessing formal congruencies to other ends. She plays to the strengths of one kind of writing, the contemporary score, as opposed to another, the modern novel. Nipper follows instruction, and accepts the invitation to rephrase.

Alicia Ritson, 2013

Circle Circle, 2007
Two-channel video projection (color, silent)
10:00 min. loop, dimensions variable
Movement Advisor: Tamra-henna
Dancer: Aubre Hill
Video Editor: Fil Ruting
Camera Operator: Joanne Sweiven
Hauser & Wirth Collection, Switzerland

Circle Circle, 2007/2012
Audio from printed score
10:00 min. loop
Original Notation: Hannah Kosstrin
Sound Editor: Sean C. Flaherty
Hauser & Wirth Collection, Switzerland

Circle Circle, 2013
Glazed ceramic
Two bowls, each: 9 x 14"
Courtesy of the Artist

Circle Circle, 2013
Eight page exhibition booklet and poster, Edition of 300
30 x 22" / 11 x 7.5"
Designer: Michael Worthington
Essay by Alicia Ritson

Kelly Nipper will give an Artist's Talk as part of the CCS Bard Speakers Series
Monday May 6, 2013 at 3pm
CCS Bard Seminar Room 1
Open to all students and faculty as well as to the general public

Published on occasion of the exhibition *Circle Circle* by Kelly Nipper, presented at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, May 2 – May 26, 2013.

This project is curated by Alicia Ritson, CCS Bard Curatorial Fellow 2012 – 2013.

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Kelly Nipper has been the subject of solo exhibitions and performances at Kunsthaus Zürich; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tramway, Glasgow; and Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. She has been included in numerous group exhibitions, including *Danser Sa Vie*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2011); 2010: Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2010); *While Bodies Get Mirrored. An Exhibition about Movement, Formalism and Space*, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zürich (2010); and *Dance with Camera*, Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (2009). The recipient of a Louis Comfort Foundation Tiffany Award and a Performa Commission, Nipper's work is in the public collections of the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and The Israel Museum in Jerusalem, among others. Nipper received her MFA from CalArts (1995) and BFA from Minneapolis College of Art and Design (1993).

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