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Reconfiguring a "Safe" Art Space:
Dallas Avant-Garde Companies Create Innovative Answers

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Today, the umbrella term "safety" in theatre practice implies two conflicting notions. The trendier definition suggests the establishment of an emotional "safe space," typically in the pedagogical context of an acting class or rehearsal. However, "safe" in this essay primarily refers to the bureaucratic, including documents created by governing authorities that determine what is necessary for a compliant and official performance venue. While safety is a laudable goal, the bureaucratic homogenization of space standardizes the kinds of performance venues a city may legally support. In this way, experimental performances are kept from gaining access to critical space.

As updated city building codes require more elaborate technology and "safety" features, the prospect of turning a found space into a performance venue that retains aspects of the raw location diminishes. Nationally, theatre companies that wish to produce temporary "pop up" performances inside found structures have faced scrutiny from law enforcement. This is certainly the case in Dallas, Texas, on which this essay focuses. Municipalities without temporary performance codes or certificates of occupancy force some theatre organizations to operate under the radar for fear of closure. In terms of enforcement, the local fire marshal determines how building codes are enforced. For Dallas, governing authorities have taken a particular interest in cracking down on unconventional art spaces. This essay examines two case studies of how experimental performance groups reacted to the hyper-vigilance of the city's fire marshal: Therefore's *The World's Safest Art Show* (2016) and Dead White Zombies' *Holy Bone* (2017).

In 2016, Dallas arts organizations (experimental performance collectives, art galleries, and theatre companies) received approximately twenty shutdowns due to certificate of occupancy (CO) violations. A CO determines the classification of a structure, the number of people allowed on site, the levels of hazard, and safety requirements.[1] The art organizations repurposed structures designated as a "Warehouse" or "Showroom," designations which do not allow for groups of thirteen or more. Without the proper CO, the fire marshal ordered these companies to cease operations within these structures, at times appearing on opening night—as was the case with performance collective Therefore.[2] While the fire marshal advised these groups to utilize spaces that already had a CO for an "Assembly," conventional theatre spaces impede the experimental work created by smaller theatre companies, particularly in regard to spatial configuration, phenomenological experience, and financial resources.

The ecosystem of Dallas's performing arts scene varies from the Tony Award-winning Dallas Theater Center to established local theatres serving distinct neighborhoods to small companies initiated by local college graduates like Prism Movement Theater or Shakespeare in the Bar. Artists choose to reside in Dallas because of the opportunities to work in both traditional and experimental organizations. While the number of performance groups has increased, funding and performance venues have not necessarily followed suit. This year, The Arts Community Alliance (TACA) cut nearly half of their grant funding (from $1.3 million to $700,000), and there are few opportunities available for small experimental companies to receive grant support.[3]

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[1] City of Dallas, "Dallas Existing Building Code Introduction," Dallas City Hall, June 2004, http://dallascityhall.com/departments/sustainabledevelopment/buildinginspection/DCH%20documents/pdf/DEBCIntrod.pdf, 4-5.

[2] Jeremy Hallock, "Dallas Pays for a Music and Arts Event, Then Shuts It Down," *Dallas Observer,* May 10, 2016, http://www.dallasobserver.com/music/dallas-pays-for-a-music-and-arts-event-then-shuts-it-down-8286421.

The dearth of flexible performing arts venues and the financial limitations of small collectives that produce original work have encouraged companies to utilize unconventional venues. Only two theatre companies in Dallas own a permanent building (Theatre Three and Dallas Children's Theater); the rest of the theatre companies and collectives in the area are forced to rent spaces in a highly competitive real estate market. Some theatres have been forced to relocate operations due to real estate deals. For example, The McKinney Avenue Contemporary (The MAC), which housed Kitchen Dog Theater, was demolished to build luxury apartments in 2015. Some theatres were shut down entirely after rent increases, as happened to PFamily Arts in 2014.

For decades, small groups of artists have worked to create bootstrap theatre companies in Dallas, but the city's experimental scene has only emerged recently. Thomas Riccio, who co-founded Dead White Zombies (DWZ), pioneered the use of vacant spaces in areas like Trinity Groves and the Design District since 2012. These kinds of found venues have been available in abundance due to changing economics in Oak Cliff. This southern sector of Dallas has been a primary target of gentrification over the past decade as developers purchase structures and hold them in limbo for several years until they begin construction on retail shops, luxury apartments, or parking garages. Experimental artists have produced numerous works under the radar of law enforcement—that is, until early 2016 when the legitimacy of occupying these spaces suddenly came under scrutiny.

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[3] Michael Granberry, "Bad news for Dallas arts groups as major funder TACA cuts grants nearly in half," *Dallas Morning News,* January 19, 2018, https://www.dallasnews.com/business/philanthropy/2018/01/19/bad-news-dallas-arts-groups-major-funder-taca-cuts-grants-nearly-half.

The most common violation concerned a proper CO for an Assembly, a gathering of fourteen or more people. This designation requires a number of expensive amenities as it is considered a high-risk occupancy. Requirements include parking spaces related to the ratio of square footage of the building,[4] standby personnel, an automatic sprinkler system, smoke control systems and emergency communication systems.[5] Changing the CO or building designation is a lengthy and expensive process as it alters the permanent use of the structure. As a result, an abandoned light factory established in the 1920s as a "Warehouse" retains that designation even if it has been unoccupied for thirty years. The process of converting a found space into a performance venue requires resources that small performance collectives simply do not have. Dallas' building code has only one "temporary" certificate of occupancy, for "non-safety related work such as landscaping is near completion," not for other uses like performances or gallery openings.[6] Therefore, short-term productions—as utilized by experimental performance groups—are not legally acceptable in these unconventional spaces. Even if an organization plans to rent an empty, 6,000-square-foot warehouse for a performance over three weekends with an audience of forty and minimal scenic elements, the company must legally re-designate and renovate the building to the most current code in order to avoid a shutdown. While this is the legal way to proceed, it is not feasible for emerging collectives.

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[4] City of Dallas, "Certificate of Occupancy Checklist," Sustainable Development and Construction Department, February 26, 2013. Parking requirements relate to the square footage of the structure as a ratio. For an Assembly space, each 100 square feet of the structure equals one parking space. Experimental groups like DWZ utilize warehouse spaces up to 10,000 square feet, demanding a significant amount of parking spaces that will not be utilized for productions that attract audiences of forty to sixty patrons.

[5] City of Dallas, "Dallas Existing Building Code," Dallas City Hall, December 29, 2016, http://dallascityhall.com/departments/sustainabledevelopment/buildinginspection/DCH%20documents/pdf/BI_2015_IBC_Amendments_01-25-2017.pdf, 50 (standby personnel), 70-71 (smoke control systems and emergency voice alarms), and 83-85 (sprinkler systems).

[6] City of Dallas, "How to Get a Certificate of Occupancy," Sustainable Development and Construction Department, August 16, 2011,

Found spaces offer more than simple affordability to companies of limited means. Perhaps more importantly, they can contribute to the sign systems and phenomenological aspects of the performance itself. The industrial atmosphere separates the viewer from considering theatre as an escapist activity by placing the audience in a context of a space with a visible history unrelated to performance activities. These found spaces awaken the spectator to reimagine their relationship to the performed actions through tactile engagement or immersion in the repurposed space. Utilizing found space encourages de-compartmentalization of where "art" can be located within a city; collectives in Dallas faced consequences as the city enforced CO restrictions.

A similar story started to spread, quietly at first. The first documented shutdown occurred in spring 2015 when the fire marshal shut down an "illegal rooftop gathering in the Design District."[7] This event tipped off the fire marshal to keep an eye on organizations in the area, including art galleries and theatre groups. In 2016, the number of shutdowns increased; fire marshals appeared at the opening of an art gallery or theatre production at twenty venues,

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http://dallascityhall.com/departments/sustainabledevelopment/buildinginspection/DCH%20documents/pdf/How-to_certificate-occupancy.pdf.

[7] Peter Simek, "The Fire Marshal Wants to Shut Down Our Party," *D Magazine,* December 2016, https://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/2016/december/the-fire-marshal-wants-to-shut-down-our-party/.

demanding that the activity inside cease and all attendees exit the building. While the fire marshals admitted searching online for Facebook events occurring in the city, no authorities contacted the arts groups prior to the event or gave any kind of warning.[8] Instead, they made an appearance at the planned event itself, almost as if to make a spectacle of the citation. Press coverage was scarce, and several arts leaders denied that anything out of the ordinary occurred.

But, as organizations began trading stories, a public meeting between artists, the Dallas Office of Cultural Affairs, and the fire marshal became necessary. At this public gathering at the Dallas Public Library on August 9, 2016, the Lieutenant Fire Marshal Dwight Freeman displayed pictures from tragedies at overcrowded night clubs and discussed the severity of what could happen: "Who's gonna be on the news? It's gonna be us. Where's the 'art' then? It burned up."[9] The unsettling part of his statement was not the words, but his action of gesturing quotation marks as he said the word "art." After that statement, a local gallery owner posed the question: "Do you even know what happens at an art gallery opening?" The fire marshals may not realize they are doing more than enforcing codes with that statement; they and the city government are limiting the scope of what locally produced "art" can be by determining where "art" may occur. Experimental groups may not desire to use traditional Assembly structures for their work since the context of the space which houses the art alters the meaning—as with site-specific theatre, for example. For any kind of site-specific or found-space production to occur in Dallas, the building selected must change permanently from one certificate of occupancy to another, requiring significant renovation, resources, and hoop-jumping of municipal bureaucracy.

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[8] Francesca Paris, "Video Update: Local Artists and Fire Marshals Discuss Shutdowns," *Art&Seek*, August 9, 2016, http://artandseek.org/2016/08/09/watch-todays-meeting-between-dallas-artists-and-fire-marshal/.

[9] Paris, "Video Update."

While Dallas may have expected artists to simply start complying with code expectations, the opposite occurred. This essay offers two case studies on experimental performing arts collectives that have maneuvered around the Dallas code restrictions through the creation of new projects that directly respond to the shutdowns. Dean Terry's Therefore, an interdisciplinary, multimedia performance collective, created a tongue-in-cheek experimental performance titled *The World's Safest Art Show* (*TWSAS*). This participatory, multimedia performance offered a deconstruction of an arts building filled with regulations obeyed without question. In contrast, Thomas Riccio's site-specific immersion group Dead White Zombies created *Holy Bone,* which infiltrated non-performance spaces with unannounced happenings and culminated in a highly participatory promenade event through multiple abandoned structures. These two groups demonstrated a productive response to the shutdowns, using the code as a source of generative, artistic friction.

The World's Safest Art Show

The series of shutdowns inspired experimental practitioners to critique the nature of "safety" in an arts space through reactionary performances. In 2017, emerging media artist Dean Terry received a Special Support Grant of $5,000 from the City of Dallas Office of Cultural Affairs to create a new work with his performance collective Therefore. Terry proposed *Acoustic Nerves,* an interdisciplinary performance event paying special attention to the intersection of humans and digital technologies. On the application to the city, Terry listed The

Ice House as the performance venue. This structure previously housed an ice block factory in the early twentieth century. It was purchased by Trinity Groves, LLC, and left vacant until DWZ began producing works in the multi-room space in 2014. The city approved funding for this event at that location.[10]

The Ice House had been used as a rehearsal and performance venue with no interruptions until *Acoustic Nerves.* For this event, Terry installed Wi-Fi systems, projection systems, and lighting instruments in the hollowed-out warehouse. Even with city support and months of preparation, the fire marshal shut down *Acoustic Nerves* due to a CO violation. The event received the majority of its financial support from the city only to be shut down by that same governing system, which instilled confusion in the experimental arts community concerning the communication within municipal government. This leads to a more significant question about the potential cultural ecosystem of Dallas: Does the city government desire to have a thriving experimental arts community if venue resources and legal parameters to produce such work are scarce?

As Terry believed the building code requirements were excessive, he created a protest performance: *The World's Safest Art Show*. Of course, Terry remained concerned that the fire marshal would find out about this protest event in a non-Assembly venue, so he made the performance as secret as possible. The private Facebook event page withheld the address of the performance until twenty-four hours prior to the event. The invited guests heeded Therefore's request for secrecy; over 150 people showed up, anxiously waiting outside Beefhaus, a small gallery space near historic Fair Park. Prior to the performance, Beefhaus received an official “Showroom” designation, meaning that up to thirteen people may be inside the structure at any time. Terry abided by that principle, only allowing handful of people inside while an extended line looked through the exterior window into the gallery. To remain under the radar as a “private party,” Terry gave free admission to the performance. That designation allowed him to utilize a loophole in the code but also prohibited any guaranteed income from the production.[11] But does the switch in legal designation actually ensure safety if a “private party” does not require a financial stake from the patron? This designation appears to only release the city from liability rather than ensure a physically safe environment for a gathering of people.

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[10] Hallock, "Dallas Pays."

TWSAS provoked the audience to consider the absurdity of over-regulating spaces designated for “art” activities. Terry presented a hyperbolic version of a regulated and processed performance, ensuring the public’s physical and psychological “safety” from the moment they entered the space until they exited. The most “unsafe” situation does not relate to a sprinkler system or emergency exits but a space that provides room for individual choice beyond the codification of bureaucracy. The performers presented themselves as the fictional Dallas Art Safety Department (DASD), complete with hazmat suits, goggles, camera surveillance, and walkie-talkies. While the audience waited outside in the summer heat, three performers (Abel Flores, Jr.; Hannah Weir; and Hillary Holsonback) observed the crowd from within the gallery with beaming smiles and suspicious glares (see Figure 1). The performers then stepped outside onto the sidewalk and began reshaping the audience into lines with random curves and shapes, reinforcing the seemingly arbitrary nature of the city’s regulations. The audience adjusted to the rules eagerly, even when the performers reordered the line entirely, giving some people advantages while others waited for over an hour to step inside.

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[11] Charging admission as a public event would require an Assembly CO.

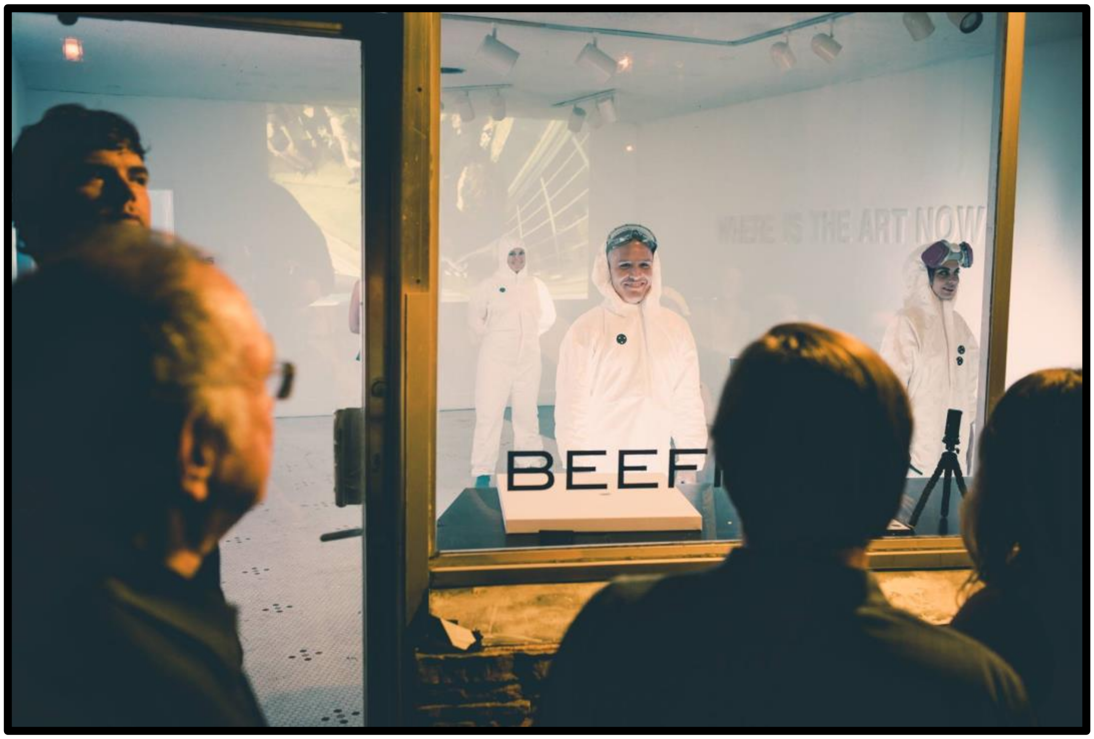
WHERE IS THE ART NOW
BEEF

Figure 1: Abel Flores, Jr. and Hannah Weir inside Beefhaus with audience members waiting on the sidewalk outside for *The World's Safest Art Show* (Photo: Alisa Eykilis)

The precautionary measures increased as each audience member stepped onto a taped-off square and put on a hazmat suit before entering the building, making a spectacle of the perceived dangers awaiting in the performance space. Each person entered the gallery while a performer physically clung to them and gave nonsensical commands: "Hop here. Two steps forward. One step back. Slide to your right." Even though there were no physical obstructions within the space, the performers demanded that the audience self-evaluate their safety: "Are You OK? Do you feel safe? Are you happy? Do you feel at ease?" There were so many questions that the interrogation and instructions instilled a sense of fear that danger from an unknown source may erupt momentarily. The room featured a live-stream video of the audience waiting outside and a decorative display of the exact words spoken by the fire marshal at the public meeting: “Where is the Art Now?” Each participant was asked to stare at this display and comment on how they felt while a performer held them tightly. If an audience member refused to comply with instructions or asked questions about the performance, they were removed from the space altogether. This antagonistic approach to the audience mirrored the regulatory measures at play with the building codes.

Beyond physical commands to restrict behavior, Terry also monitored the audience through multiple systems. Several cameras inside and outside the gallery captured the audience’s movement; but, instead of sending the footage to a hidden screen, the video was projected in full audience view. The Big Brother-like monitoring reflected the perceived vigilance of the fire marshal, checking for any questionable or noncompliant behavior. Capturing video through hidden cameras and openly presenting the surveillance established a relationship of distrust between creator and audience. In addition to video, the performers continuously commented on audience behavior through a walkie-talkie system. These instruments reflected institutionalized policing taken to the absurd as every person inside Beefhaus remained within eighteen feet of each other at all times. At random moments, Terry would issue “codes” through the walkies. For example, if a “Code Garland” was called, all persons inside the gallery had to stand next to a wall with their hands up while the DASD officers checked the space for any hazards (see Figure 2). The code system relayed the sense of emergency that the fire marshals communicated during their meeting. All actions ceased until the DASD deemed the building safe.

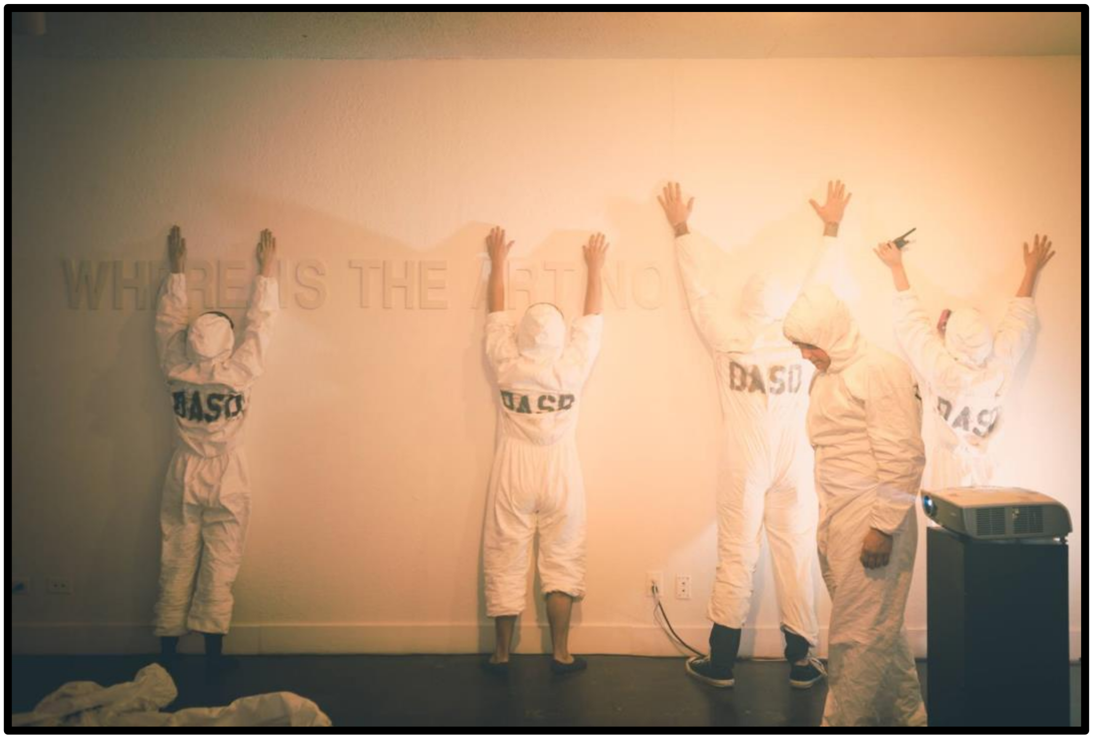

Figure 2: Audience members line up against the wall of "Where is the Art Now?" during a "Code Garland" (Photo: Alisa Eykilis)

The culmination of *TWSAS* echoed Dada and Absurdism; patrons assumed a remarkable, dangerous work of art awaited them in the interior room (not visible to the audience on the sidewalk). This assumption turned out to be false as the performers led each participant to a back door that opened on a vacant alley. Deposited back into the world with no cathartic event, the audience stood in the alley, asking each other, "Was that it?" The tension built through the restrictive behavior evaporated, and all the absurd demands appeared to be for naught. Through Absurdist means, *TWSAS* deconstructed the seemingly arbitrary nature of "safety" regulation in an arts space and critiqued the ways code designations and requirements limit artists' abilities to create freely. By connecting "safety" regulations with subversive behavior, Terry took the city's perception of art as a dangerous entity in its own right to task.

Finding a Home for *Holy Bone*

Later in 2016, Dead White Zombies struggled to navigate the logistical issues of site-specific work; for a number of years they had used found spaces without interruption. In fact, Artistic Director Thomas Riccio fostered relationships with local law enforcement to determine which safety features were essential for the structures he used. The expectation that DWZ would continue unobstructed was thrown into question as the shutdowns continued. The evolving situation encouraged Riccio to reconsider how he developed immersive performances—using a series of public experiments and blurring the performed and the real.

For most DWZ productions, Riccio developed a script with a specific location in mind, writing an immersive performance specifically for that venue. Fear of a shutdown gave the company pause in selecting a found space; transforming a vacant building into a usable performance venue requires the investment of time and money in addition to the creative work on the script. To respond, Riccio initiated a creative process that reflected the goddess Gaia, fluidly responding to any obstacle by going with the current rather than against it. Since a location could not be set, Riccio established *Holy Bone* as an evolutionary seven-month process that interrogated the assumed physical container for a performance (or a singular meeting place for actors and participants). The legal boundaries between a performance space and non-performance space is therefore a moot point, as all spaces DWZ occupied became ground for performance. *Holy Bone* connected Riccio's vast work with indigenous groups around the world, particularly the Bushmen in South Africa where he studied healing ceremonies.[12] For the

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[12] Thomas Riccio, "N!ngongiao People Come Out of Here: Making a new story with the !Xuu and Khwe Bushmen," *TheatreForum* 10 (1997): 51.

Bushmen, there is no separation between the self and the world—only an interconnectivity and evolving relationship. The surrounding world is not a collection of static objects but a responsive and active circuitry; there is a holistic relationship between all elements of the earth. *Holy Bone* asked participants to listen to the world in a different way, paying attention to elements ignored and invisible as a way to reconnect with the world.

The first phase of *Holy Bone* responded to the occupancy restrictions through randomized performances in public spaces where formalized "performance" was usually not found. Instead of following code restrictions that attempted to dictate where a performance could occur, Riccio subversively determined that *all* spaces in Dallas were at his disposal. He and a company of fifteen performers went out to various public spaces (retail stores, restaurants, etc.) performing "bones." These short performance pieces were scripted fragments; characters described a new awareness with the world, as if something was emerging as they interacted with objects and strangers. "Bones" were not announced to the public; the actors appeared in plain clothes and wandered through the spaces as they would in everyday life. Once fully immersed in the environment, they would perform "bones" at undetermined moments. Afterwards, they continued to walk through the venue as a patron until they felt inspired to perform another "bone." As no invisible barrier between the "real" and imagined performance existed in these spaces, the passersby were not aware that they were actually audience members of a theatrical experience (see Figure 3). Even in street performance, there is typically an invisible barrier between the performer's area and the audience, reinforcing containment or imagined "safety." *Holy Bone* eliminated that by refusing to state a performance was occurring and not setting up temporal boundaries of the beginning and end of the happening.

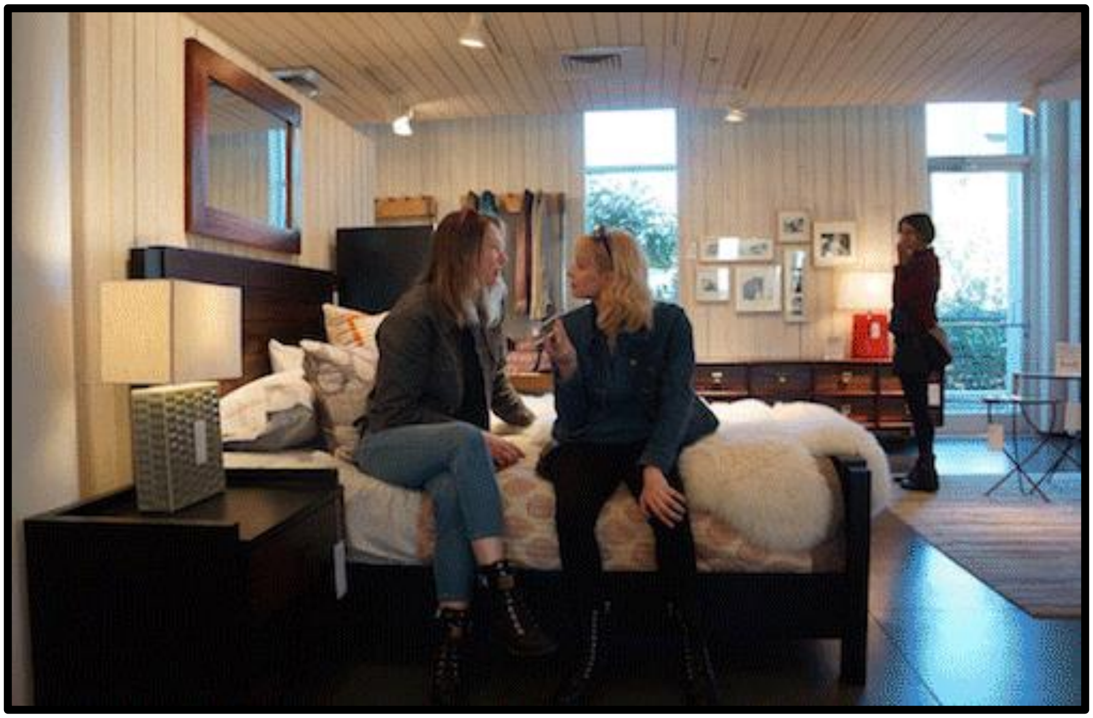

Figure 3: Alexandra Werle and Hillary Holsonback at a home décor store performing a "bone" (Photo: Thomas Riccio)

These public performances demonstrated that it is not necessarily the space that makes a performance "safe." Instead, it is the audience's consciousness which does so in determining their relationship to the occurring performance. Most bystanders who accidentally fell upon the *Holy Bone* appearances could not tell that a work of theatre was happening, but they did sense some kind of disruption surrounding them. Unusual activity instills anxiety in Dallas, particularly in the shadow of July 7, 2016, where five officers were killed by a sniper following a Black Lives Matter protest. Any kind of unusual behavior is scrutinized; a group of adults speaking about the opening of a new consciousness and using unfamiliar gestures certainly drew attention. This was particularly true for the actors who happened to be people of color, including Latinos, African Americans, and Pakistanis. Unwitting audiences were quick to report unusual activity to security officers, who usually approached the people of color first. While the "bones" presented no physical threat to any person, the appearance of abnormal activity sent the surrounding passersby into a state of unease. Specifically, it encouraged people to quickly determine its cause, even to the point of racial profiling. This emotional fear proved to be quite potent as some performers were escorted out of shops while other remained unseen. The experiment illuminated how far impromptu performance could go with an unsuspecting audience, or, better, how much they would tolerate before fear for "safety" took over.

In the spring of 2017, Riccio progressed toward a formalized interpretation of *Holy Bone*. However, doing so carried certain restrictions because the CO dilemma for abandoned locations was still in effect. Since it was impossible to find one location to contain up to seventy people for a performance, Riccio decided to use multiple sites around Trinity Groves as a kind of promenade, keeping no more than thirteen people inside each building at any given moment. I was brought onto this project as the co-director since the logistics of using multiple structures over a half-mile of territory exceeded the scope of any other previous DWZ show. I have been a member of DWZ since 2013, serving as assistant director, dramaturg, and performer in various immersive productions. DWZ has a history of utilizing environmental theatre practices, but *Holy Bone* took this a step further by removing "safe" interior spaces as the audience navigated sections of West Dallas through multiple unmarked properties. The participants continuously made choices to continue their pilgrimage through this neighborhood, unaware of the end point of their journey.

In order to not draw the authorities' attention to any of these structures, *Holy Bone* removed any traditional signage, requiring the audience to simply trust that they were at the correct location. When purchasing tickets online, the audience was directed to show up at Tacos Mariachi, a local taco joint in the Trinity Groves area. Like in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More,* audience members chose a specific entry time between 7:30 and 8:40 p.m. Our choice to keep occupancy low emerged from a need to follow "safety" procedures, but it also instigated unique dramaturgical consequences. Once the audience checked in, they were given a "pass-gesture" (a specific movement the performers would recognize) and the street address for the first venue. The buildings utilized were only marked with *Holy Bone* ideographs, or images associated with each character. Audience members had to consciously commit to progressing to the next venue and trust the street operators (plainclothes crew members) as they walked through a notoriously dangerous section of West Dallas. Each of the six structures housed one to three performers, and the audience progressed from one venue to the next. The half-mile journey dissolved the audience into individuals, pairs, or small groups.

One byproduct of having small groups of audience members was heightened intimacy between performer and spectator. Multiple kinds of participation blurred audience members' expectations of a theatrical event: answering personal questions, responding through movement, accepting drinks, and making decisions. For example, when the audience found the first location of the promenade, they were asked to select a contemplative question from a menu of options: "What am I not hearing?" "How can I find happiness?" "What should I pursue?" After the audience selected a question and initiated their introspective journey, a character performed a bone reading for each participant on an abstracted map of the promenade and offered enlightening advice regarding the performance journey and their lives afterward (see Figure 4).

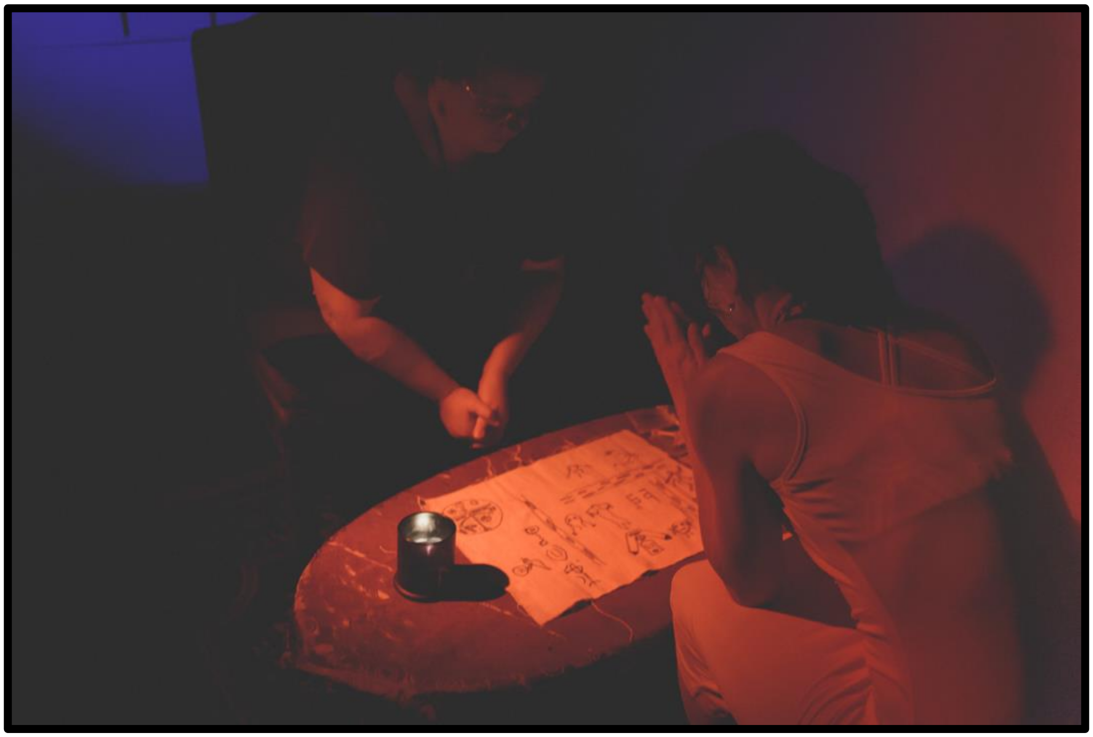

Figure 4: Jennifer Culver (left) instructs an audience member to whisper their question into the bones they hold. On the table, an abstracted map of the performance venues. (Photo: Alisa Eykilis)

These kinds of personal interactions eradicated the notion of a “safe distance.” Each participant had to make private and reflective choices without a contextualized, imaginative space separate from reality. Both audience and performer were forced to exhibit active empathy toward each other as the exchange between the two parties was far more immediate and unpredictable than a traditional theatrical experience. Another character situated himself in the center of an empty warehouse. With simply a desk, a light fixture, and two chairs, he called over each participant individually. Each audience member made a solitary walk into the dark warehouse while the lone figure waited, smoking a cigarette (see Figure 5). This vignette was known as “The Interview” since the man only spoke in questions, flowing freely with the responses given by each participant. No two participants experienced the same performance; it was an individualized interrogation. These interactions deviated from the standardization of performance venues where the audience would usually experience the same performance from different seats. Removing the presumed “safe distance” altered the audience’s relationship to the performance from viewing to participating. *Holy Bone* provoked an awareness of the self because there was nowhere to hide during one-on-one interactions.

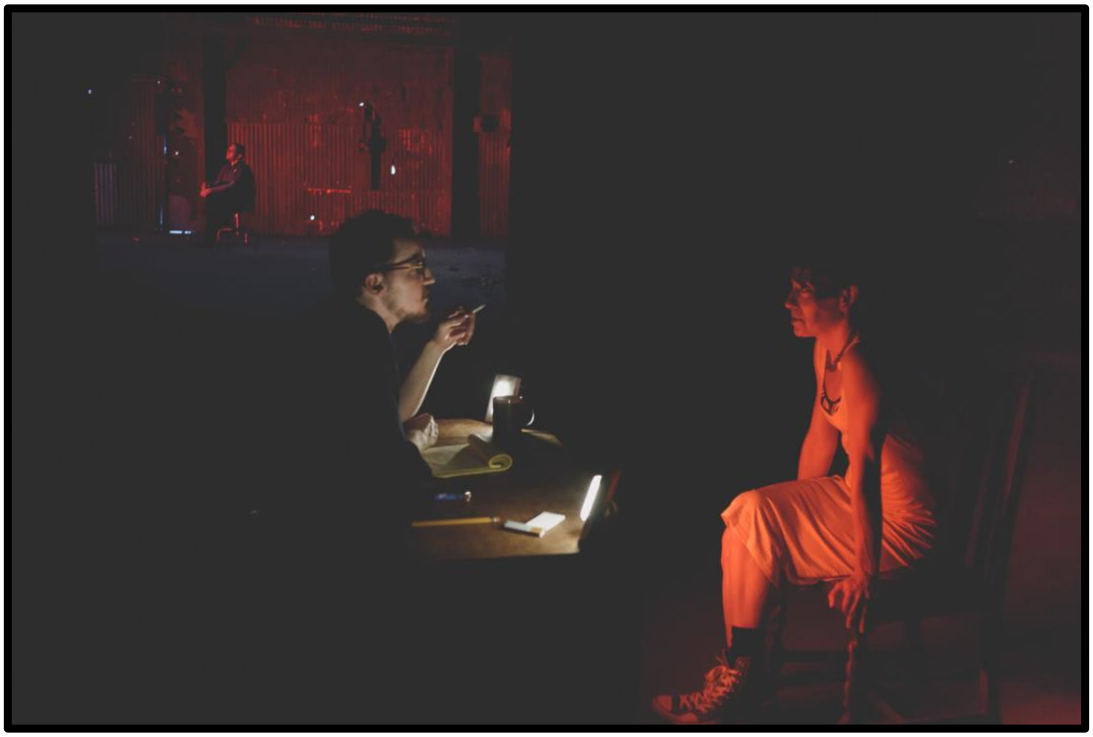

Figure 5: Stephen Gardner questions an audience member (Photo: Alisa Eykilis)

DWZ’s presence on the streets did not go without scrutiny by local authorities. During one of the first performances, an operator was sitting on a street corner reading William Esper’s book *The Actor’s Art and Craft* when two police cars surrounded him in a matter of seconds, flashing lights and calling “hands in the air.” A local resident had complained about the presence of pedestrians; the police suspected that the operator was a drug dealer. I intervened, explaining to the officer that this was a part of a theatre performance. He gave a dumbfounded stare and asked, “Do you have any idea where you are right now?” He proceeded to tell us that a special task force monitored this series of streets, mentioning the crime-ridden history of the neighborhood. After the officers left us with a warning, I wondered if any activity in the area was automatically believed to be criminal. How can an area evolve from a dangerous space to a safe one without some kind of change?

Dallas and “Safe” Spaces

It is noteworthy that both of these experiences led the audience through a series of choices and drew primary attention to phenomenological, individual encounters. “Safety” had very little to do with the buildings themselves but with art and unpredictable human behavior. Both *The World’s Safest Art Show* and *Holy Bone* demanded that audiences question their trust in the performers, fellow audience members, and themselves. While limiting the number of participants seemed at first a negative quality (or at least a compromise), the limitations provided a unique experience for each person. With personal boundaries removed, the audience could become emotionally vulnerable—which may be an “unsafe” space for some. The restrictions heeded to avoid a shutdown fostered the creation of a performance event that could not occur in conventional spaces approved by the city.

Concern for viable performance space continues to permeate Dallas. Some traditional companies argue that the solution should include construction of new black box theatres and easier access to city-owned venues like Moody Performance Hall and AT&T Performing Arts

Center, but experimental theatre companies do not necessarily desire either of those solutions. The black box—devoid of history or connection to the real world—does not interest companies like DWZ, and the financial burden of renting the venues available is not a real possibility for small collectives like Therefore. These companies reject the notion that performance can only occur in places where the codes are met. But the City of Dallas seems to want an arts scene that is contained, compartmentalizing “dangerous” or “safe” areas. This city has been a haven for emerging artists like my collaborators, and I have to hope that some middle ground can be reached to address legitimate safety concerns without significant financial or artistic hurdles.

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