

***a code
of clouds***

by Cori Olinghouse

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A dark cloud, walks into a room.

This is Melinda Ring's working title from an earlier iteration of *cloud*. At a studio visit on July 30, 2016, she is wearing a white T-shirt from the Bureau for the Future of Choreography, with black lettering inside a Venn diagram: "life," "death," and "dance." The T-shirt shares an odd resemblance to the work I'm about to see. Piles of paper blankets are nestled in the corner.

It is late afternoon, everyone has returned from lunch. There is slowness to the thick passing of minutes.

Figure-ground. Phenomenology.

These words float through my consciousness as I take in the basement-like studio at Gibney. I watch Melinda and her collaborators—Talya Epstein, Maggie Jones, and Molly Lieber in secret conversations as they prepare for the showing. On the wall, slightly beyond view are scraps of paper collaged with tiny scribbles, words I can't make out from where I'm sitting. Melinda is citing the names of sections. I hear "cloud" repeated in different combinations. It is a kind of giving names to things unseen—an animating of the invisible.

First memory:

I remember the wide plane of the ground—the blackness of the floor. I remember dancers lurking beyond view. I remember entering the room without an orientation, and navigating the unknown space. Molly enters and sits. In a lingering slide, she melts down the surface of the chair. Her bones are liquid. The space appears dipped in ink. The lines of the chair emerge like a drawing against the fleshier outline of her body. I remember the internal movement of Molly's breathing sharply contrasting the stillness around her. Object and body are dialogic: Molly pulsing, blood filled—the chair inert.

Second memory:

Molly and Talya shape through a curling, pressurized duet. Seated, they burrow into each other, ripping lines of energy through the floor. The ground feels alive.

A metaphoric cloud passes overhead and their bodies slope downward, peering. The performers' gaze is shrouded—not quite glazed over. It is as if they are seeing from inside.

At points, flurries of rhythmically but oddly timed patterns emerge from the stomping of feet. This is a reoccurring gesture I've seen in Melinda's work—a hint at wildness. The performers in her dances are understated and simultaneously out of control. Moving towards composure and destruction.



I've been watching Melinda's work since the late 1990s. Her dances hold a calculated, yet pre-verbal unruliness. She is an architect, a phenomenologist, a sculptor, and a choreographer. There are pleasurable moments of wreckage, women thrashing, deliciously slowed momentums, hypnotic still life sculptures, visual rhythms layered upon one another, and powerful unseen energies. The forces of a storm rip through Melinda's dances in unpredictable lapses of time leaving a feeling of uncertainty. In this world spaces of disorientation and mystery are deliberate and constructed. Dancing is not the end result. Melinda's dances are stuffed with secrets.

Over the past three years, Melinda and I have been in close proximity through the archiving and curating of her solo improvisation, *Impossible Dance* (1999). During this time, she has been involved in the building of two new works: *c l o u d*, developed with performers Talya Epstein, Maggie Jones, Molly Lieber, Kayvon Pourazar, and Rainey White and *Shiny Angles in Angular Time*, which was created with Renée Archibald. I have witnessed multiple iterations of *c l o u d*, including a preview as part of the Movement Research Festival at Danspace Project (December 2015), a studio showing at Gibney (July 2016), and a preview as part of American Realness (January 2017). In talking with Melinda about her process, she describes the following compositional strategies used to defamiliarize the viewer. *c l o u d* takes place in an imagined room that appears to expand and contract as the dancers continuously shift their facings. Sometimes they collide through unison choreography, mirroring each other as a way to expand the imagination of the room. Melinda decenters the performers in the space, emphasizing what she calls *nowhere places* with movements that occur on *watery diagonals*.



Raw	Subtle & obvious	Feels rough - looks delicate
Artifice	Percussive	
Non-spiritual magical	Drippy	Rough & tumble floaters, angels
Urgent	Melty	This, that and that thing
Ornamental	Human	Ominous
Apologetic	Awkward	Guttural
Baroque	Multidimensional	
Circular	Omni-dimensional	
Dark Watercolor	Yawning	

"Then one day I brainstormed with the dancers for some words that describe the movement." — Melinda Ring

At The Chocolate Factory on April 7, 2018, a long wooden floor floats slightly askew. A rolling corridor of cotton batting hangs above, letting in streams of light. The colors of the room and costumes are subtle, as if from a landscape blurred—a camera catching streaks of sky, park, golden flower, and gray horizon. The space, an equal character, occupies a liminal dimension that appears to shimmer and change form. In the first moments, I catch the aesthetic politics of the space—white walls, minimal decor, and slowly moving bodies. As I sit longer, an interior filled with unruliness and emotion exudes from the stillness of Talya, Maggie, Rainey, and Melinda. While dancing, the performers use the metaphor of a cloud, which gives their gestures unpredictable presence and force.

I continually find myself asking if the work is minimalist in the way Melinda uses precise, bone plain movements, which are cast inside a white cube environment. While she hints at these aesthetic tropes, there seems to be something else at play. Towards the beginning of the dance, the audience is seated around the periphery, and she appears in the doorframe—hair strewn in front of her, impenetrably still. She reminds me of the woman crawling out of the television in Hideo Nakata's 1998 film, *Ringu*. She camouflages herself within the doorway, and disappears into the space beyond. Now tracing the perimeter of the floor, she moves into the center of the room. Her walk, Noh-like with its internal rhythms of slow, moderate, and fast loop into a stillness with imploding weight. She slides her arms into her pants, and morphs into a strange, wild character. She never danced in the prior iterations.



Melinda's choreography rests among a vast terrain of disciplines—performance, installation, sculpture, and site work. Originally from Los Angeles, she has worked with contemporary visual artists such as Paul McCarthy and Martin Kersels, along with Butoh artist Min Tanaka at his Body Weather Farm outside of Tokyo. In the early development of *c lo u d*, Melinda described her interest in Robert Rauschenberg's painting, *Untitled 1951*, a newspaper stuffed multi-paneled work that invites a cloaked performativity as Rauschenberg's actions are concealed from view. This painting, like *c lo u d*, offers a textured relationship to hidden interior spaces.

c lo u d was constructed from blindfolded improvisations.

In first gesture of the piece, Talya places her hand to the floor as if listening to the space below. I am reminded of Helen Keller whose touch gives a kind of seeing. In Keller's essays, "The World I Live In," she describes her world as being built from touch-sensations. In *c lo u d*, this touching is extended in the moments of mirroring, in which two dancers opposite from one another trace each other's gestures. In one moment, Talya and Maggie stand with hands connected into an outstretched peak. They embody a haptic experience, seeing each other through touch. Witnessing the dance, I could feel my sensation shift from seeing to feeling, as if watching *c lo u d* haptically.¹

I now understand what Melinda is referencing to when she says *still life*. The stillnesses in the dance are held with meaning. The performers appear shaped and contained like sculptures. Looking closer, dark tremors spark from within their bodies, and from within the shape of the dance itself. The interiority of Melinda's work reminds me of poet and cultural critic Wayne Koestenbaum's essay, *Outside In*. In the essay he writes,

¹ Haptic visuality is a concept developed by Laura U. Marks in the books *The Skin of Film and Touch*, which refers to embodied spectatorship. As a viewer, the eyes graze over the surface of the object being witnessed, functioning like organs of touch.

² Koestenbaum, Wayne. *Outside In*. Triple Canopy, 18 May 2008, www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/outside_in. Accessed 13 April 2018. A version of "Outside In" was read at New York's Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery in 2006, as part of the show "Street Poets & Visionaries: Selections from the UbuWeb Collection."

Interior-ity, as Emily Dickinson put it, is *where the meanings are*, but she put a comma between the words *meanings* and *are*, because she wanted to mark, as with a scar or a rip, the moment before meanings enters the "inside" of comprehensibility; she wanted to play around with the pause, the necessary, dumbfounded hesitation, the scrap of an instant in which the *are*—Being—hasn't yet happened, is still on hold, waiting.²

Watching *c lo u d*, I have the experience of time dilating. Details are uncovered that I might not have seen—Rainey's leg liquefied into the chair, or the way Melinda's hair spills as she slides down the wall. The breathing also amplifies the micro-movements inside the dancers. Time slows and an interior space is opened.

Within these openings, I am reminded of the *scars* and *rips* left from previous iterations. During the building of *c lo u d*, Melinda worked with a collection of paper blankets, fabricated from brown paper bags. As a record and deposit for movement, they contained the marks of dancing, handling, storage, transport. Also, air. *c lo u d* now stripped of physical objects, bears the imprint of their absent form.

The code of the dance becomes a code of clouds. The terrain, the slippery navigation within this terrain, and the ways of seeing are constructed. Disorientation is the orientation.

During the performance, Melinda places an electric keyboard in the space for the duration of the piece and plays only a few notes.

Maggie disappears into the wall.





Written as a response to Melinda Ring's performance of *c l o u d*, commissioned and presented at The Chocolate Factory Theater, April 6-14, 2018. Cori Olinghouse is the founder and director of The Portal Project, a living archives initiative dedicated to the transmission of performance through archival and curatorial frameworks. Special thanks to Kai Kleinbard. Design by Thais Chu. Photograph pages 12-13: Melinda Ring.

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