

Search

Review Categories

About caa.reviews

Book Reviews

Exhibition Reviews

Essays

Recent Books in the Arts

Dissertations

Supporters

View CAA Journals

Visit the CAA Website

Subscribe to CAA Newsletter

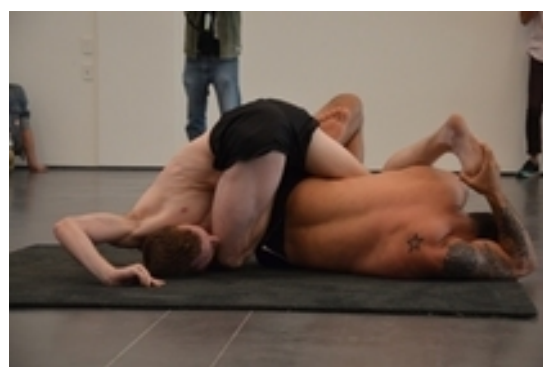
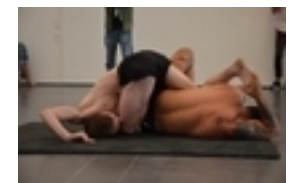
March 29, 2018

The Off-Staging of William Forsythe's Dance in the Museum

2016.

Ariel Osterweis

CrossRef DOI: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2018.97



Rauf "Rubberlegz" Yasit and Riley Watts in *Stellentstellen* (2016) by William Forsythe, LACMA, 2016 (photo by Yanting Li)

The Off-Staging of William Forsythe's Dance in the Museum

Stellentstellen (2016) and *Acquisition* (2016) by William Forsythe. *Stellentstellen*, performed by Rauf (Rubberlegz) Yasit and Riley Watts. *Acquisition*, presented by students of the University of Southern California Gloria Kaufman School of Dance. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, October 16, 2016.

Reviewed by Paola Escobar, Yanting Li, Julia Meyer, Marissa Osato, and Ariel Osterweis

Introduction

When approached by Juliet Bellow to write this review, I suspected that the multisited yet simultaneously performed *Stellentstellen* (2016) and *Acquisition* (2016) would be most appropriately considered by a multiplicity of voices, and I solicited graduate students from my CalArts course, Critical Dance Studies, to join me in reflecting on choreographer William Forsythe's offerings at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Because these particular artist-scholars are approaching the material from their practices and MFA/MA programs in dance, creative writing, and aesthetics and politics, their observations reflect particular sensibilities, from performance ethnography, to cultural studies, to choreographic practice, and poetics. What unfolds in the following contributions by Paola Escobar, Yanting Li, Julia Meyer, and Marissa Osato is a certain praxis, a theory-in-practice. We arrived at LACMA one by one, sat together, dispersed, spoke with Forsythe himself at varying intervals, joined CalArts BFA dance students as they explored choreographic tasks with students of the Gloria Kaufman School of Dance, took iPhone photos, walked by other works of art, met up, separated again, and came back together over the course of the semester to discuss our experiences. We found that five organizing threads came out of our discussions, and Escobar (MFA in choreography), Li (MFA in creative writing), Meyer (MA in aesthetics and politics), and Osato (MFA in choreography) share their thoughts herein. If, in *Stellentstellen's* uncompromising entangling, two bodies become one, in this particular review essay, one voice becomes many.

Overview and context

Forsythe's *Stellentstellen* and *Acquisition* appeared at LACMA on October 16, 2016. To different degrees, these dances, which were billed as "site-specific," engaged museumgoers in exercises of relationality, movement, and attention that avoided the dilution of placing dances made for the stage in a museum context. These pieces also attempted to close the supposed museological divide between the ways objects and people move and are perceived.

The question of removing choreographic and museological conventions is an intriguing one in relation to Forsythe's oeuvre since he is a choreographer ever committed to working in and with highly demanding technique and movement. In other words, in the context of Forsythe's evacuation of choreographic conventions and framings, the designation of "de-/re-skilling" does not do the labor of explaining the entirety of what is taking place. In any iteration of *Stellentstellen*, stage, film, video, choreography, and installation (no matter how absent from the live or screened moment) are simultaneously influencing the work. Due to this mixing of genres and media, a mingling of institutions also takes place.

The staging of Forsythe's work at LACMA raises questions about the staging of dance in the art museum, a topic much written about in the past several years. We have encountered musings on the topic from choreographers, academics, and journalists with backgrounds in dance, performance, and visual art, in journals such as *Dance Research Journal* (Mark Franko, André Lepecki, et al.), *Artforum*

(Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker), and the *Brooklyn Rail* (Claire Bishop). Scholars such as Shannon Jackson and Judith Butler (both University of California, Berkeley), Rebecca Schneider (Brown University), and Amelia Jones (University of Southern California) have devoted time to thinking through the stakes of deploying terms like “de-skilling,” “re-skilling,” “re-performance,” and “reenactment” to chart the effects of museological space and architecture on the live, often dancing, body.

Since the advent of 1960s Minimalism and performance art in the US, “duration” and, more recently, “slow time” have been used to refer to an experience of stretched temporality antithetical to the presentational imperatives of the proscenium stage. Partly in response, choreographers such as Ralph Lemon and Boris Charmatz have tried their hands at the curation of dance in the museum, *restaging* pieces in the absence of stages. In some cases, that translation has proved awkward or unsuccessful. Bishop has critiqued several museums’ ineffectual forays into dance presentation, likening MoMA’s excerpted performance of Jerome Bel’s decidedly postdramatic piece *The Show Must Go On* (one reliant on the Western proscenium conventions it critiques) to “a great-uncle trying to breakdance.”¹

As it pertains to dance originally made for the stage—as opposed to performance that is not context specific—competing modes of engagement in open atriums and galleries can scatter attention in too many directions. Meaning seeps away from such performances with each darting eye and bodily pivot. But what if we, as audience-participants or choreographer-restagers, shift our expectations and approaches? Can we then allow duration to become movement where there was once none; reperformance to become a novel event; distraction to become enrichment; and dance to become sensual rather than iconographic?

While, traditionally speaking, one expects an object in a museum to remain static, one expects a dancer to move. No matter the degree of relationality (between objects and people, or objects and objects), art objects and human bodies inherently perform differently; even a moving image lacks the corporeality and fleshly agency of a body. Thus, to encounter bodies performing in a museum is still, and will likely remain, to experience a kind of altered attention, to tune in proprioceptively to questions of containment wafting in and out of otherwise transitory space. In other words, if a typical mode of viewership in a museum is to walk up to a static painting, sculpture, specimen, or screen, to encounter bodies moving or dancing at all, even if slowly in comparison to most staged concert dance, is to encounter the passage of time through space, as directed by the performing bodies’ impossibility of absolute stillness. That impossibility—and subsequent invitation to perceive a tremor, a gait, or an unraveling—guides our gazes and otherwise sensory orientations.

Although it was presented as a stand-alone piece, dissociated from any previous versions, *Stellentstellen* actually refers back to Forsythe’s 2013 double-screen video installation of the same title. It is perhaps the intentionality of Forsythe’s insistence that this installation is a “choreographic object” (and not, say, a “full-length ballet”) that lends *Stellentstellen* and its related iterations a sense of compatibility with the museum space. *Stellentstellen*’s objecthood and its decidedly anti-structural and under-expansive aesthetic inadvertently assure viewers that they need not look for a narrative arc or formal resolution; in the installation (and to a large degree the live site-specific piece), “an event is offered that subtracts common elements typically associated with choreography: the structural development of time and space and the visual isolation of parts,” and “this slow motion physical and optical puzzle in real time...[is] an ‘entanglement’...[and] a hybrid of choreography, film, and sculpture.”² A film version of *Stellentstellen* called *Alignigung* (2016)³ is posted on the Paris Opera Ballet’s website, and exaggerates the postdramatic elements we found in the live LACMA performance: slow-motion techniques extend movement that could already be described as durational, inviting us to experience a kind of stretched temporality only available to the filmic imagination; the camera’s eye erases any walls and corners we might find in the “white cube” of the gallery, generating an ambiguous atmosphere devoid of institutional associations.

LACMA’s site-specific performance inherently refers back to the Paris Opera’s film, which, in turn, refers back to Museum für Moderne Kunst’s (MMK) installation. While *Stellentstellen*, as a choreographic object, is in the collection of the MMK, it took place more fleetingly at LACMA. *Acquisition* reveals more explicitly the institutional thrust behind the *Fall for Forsythe* festival that took place across Los Angeles in 2016. The festival was copresented by the Kaufman School, the Music Center, and LACMA. Thus, it was no accident that *Acquisition*, a task-based exercise in acquiring choreography, was led by Kaufman dance students. In this current moment, Los Angeles artists, institutions, and philanthropists seem to be looking for ways to bring different types of dance to various “publics.” While we may question the egalitarianism of traversing the relatively privileged range from concert hall to museum to university, at the very least, site-specific performances and experiences such as LACMA’s *Stellentstellen* and *Acquisition* allow us to reorient our sensorial experiences of choreography.

Ariel Osterweis: *As performance venues, museums differ from proscenium stages in terms of spatial configuration: museumgoers are often free to roam the perimeter of any given performance at their own pace and at uneven intervals. Audiences in a museum may not even understand themselves as such, stumbling onto the shared ground of a performance event as they wander from one gallery to the next. The question I pose to you is, how did you enter the space, and which space did you enter?*

Yanting Li: The footsteps of visitors to the gallery, like rumbling thunder, accumulate to circle the deep green carpet, which looks damp and succulent with the expectant gaze of the audience. Two bodies, naked but for two black shorts, scurry onto the carpet and dry the saturated moisture in the

air like bouts of wind.

Julia Meyer: Glass doors contain the bodies of men intertwined on a small black carpet. Audience members fall in a line parallel to the entryway, concealing the figures from exterior passersby. A large James Turrell installation sits to the right of the doors. The majority of the audience is seated along three walls surrounding the men, whose limbs spill off the carpet and onto the hardwood floor as they shift from one position to the next. It is difficult to decipher the number of men upon the mat, as their bodies are distorted through the fragmentation of their flesh. About twenty paces from the entryway, I sit down to face the performance. Other viewers join me, creating a fourth border to frame the contents of the performance. The modulation of form at the core gallery operates in extreme density, contrasting with the emptiness of the space. Though the performance takes place in a museum, the men are only surrounded by white walls, viewers, and air. There is no stationary artwork framing Forsythe's composition. The men are forlorn, assuming the weight of a space that is empty.

Marissa Osato: I came across a sign reading "Acquisition RYBG" and found myself in the middle of a cheerful group of USC School of Dance sophomores wearing pastel-colored street clothing and white sneakers. Two by two, they stopped museum passersby, including myself, and asked if we would like to "acquire the movement." While I anticipated having to copy some recognizable dance vocabulary, the "movement" turned out to be a non-dance, task-based activity challenging coordination, cognitive skills, and real-time manipulation of visual-spatial/mental imagery. We were instructed to assign a color—red, yellow, blue, or green—to each shoulder and each hip joint, forming an imaginary square across our torso. Our prompt was to speak the color and touch the corresponding body part, then rotate the colors clockwise and repeat the same action. It was deceptively difficult to execute accurately.

Paola Escobar: I approached the performance location and saw a group of people who were addressing others passing by. The situation looked more like a street sales campaign in which peddlers avidly look for clients, and some potential clients escape the vendors while others surrender and enjoy what sellers have to offer.

AO: *Objects hold meaning; some say they have agency. Anthropologists and the cultures they study have told us this for over a century. On the one hand, we can look to the ways people have imbued totems and sacred tools with meaning and power; on the other hand, we may recall Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, in which exchange value exceeds use value and we find ourselves paying \$500 for a pair of sneakers. If the idea is that human labor is concealed in the formulation of commodity fetishism, what does it mean to think of dances as "choreographic objects," Forsythe's term? When we experience dance, we witness human bodies laboring (at least to an extent), but that labor, although not concealed, leaves no commodity behind. Perhaps Forsythe is inviting us to think of a choreographic object as something bounded by a specific period of time; perhaps the object is the idea of a repeatable piece. During our discussions in my CalArts office, laden with "found objects" (a beach rock), DIY craft (a plate decorated with Prince's portrait), ephemera (a woman's journal from early 1900s Los Angeles), photographs, and books from various disciplines (anthropology, dance studies, performance studies), what emerged was a meditation on the ways in which we "consume" and share performance. Can dances circulate like gifts? Do they ever circulate like commodities? What was the status of consumption and the gift in the two Forsythe pieces?*

YL: *Acquisition, open to anyone. Follow the instructions of volunteers. An open space, come and go as you will. But once you are in, you are in seriously: (voice in head) do the math, visualize the geometric shapes, match the color, think faster, move with rhythm. Why can't you do it? Anyone can do it. Acquire it. Acquire it! It's a souvenir for your consumed time and energy: do you still keep the gifts you buy in museums? What do you do with them? What if you fail to acquire it? And you are trained in choreography?*

MO: A framed sign read "PERFORMANCE. Site-Specific Forsythe: *Acquisition*" and described how the Glorja Kaufman School of Dance students "offered" this work to be acquired by the public. The economic language of giving and receiving, offering and acquiring, suggests this art as a gift to be freely consumed. The positioning of *Acquisition* directly between the LACMA café and the museum gift shop illuminates the contrast between purchasing a product for consumption and partaking in a performance to consume a somatic and cerebral experience. Forsythe made *Acquisition* a choreographic device equally attainable by and frustrating to all, regardless of age, intellect, physicality, or artistic skill set. "It's not so predictable who is going to get it," he stated, claiming that some children quickly get it and some do not, that many musicians over fifty get it because they understand musical patterns and "grasp the motion in mathematics." Forsythe expressed his interest in implementing this choreographic tool—initially created to hone dancers' skills of understanding systems and building upon structures—into research surrounding brain-injured patients and methods to improve their quality of life. His art practice expands beyond the usual dance consumer to the general population, challenging the parameters of what a dance performance can be and do.

PE: I heard Meg Stuart say in her performance *Hunter* that art is an undesired gift that the receiver didn't ask for, but that the artist believes the receiver needs. That idea seems very pertinent in the context of the LACMA's shop entrance, surrounded by a group of fifteen or twenty dance students, part of Forsythe's piece *Acquisition*, willing to generously offer to the public a free movement souvenir. His gift for the audience was a system that organizes movement and targets and challenges an individual's brain activity for a diverse range of purposes. Observing the reactions of the people who were casually offered this movement gift made me think that, although no money was involved

in the transaction, the recipients of the gift were asked to offer the giver permission to access their thinking process, which was not always a pleasant experience. Publicly, the recipients were asked to deliver a movement phrase that although apparently simple, required a complex thinking process.

On the other hand, in *Stellentstellen*, the striking image that Forsythe created of two intricate bodies on the floor operated differently in terms of this idea of art as an unrequested gift. Just by entering the space, the image reached the audience's brain, without asking permission. Some tried to escape the vision of these two almost naked bodies, especially groups of families with children, worried parents who tried to pass quickly, ignore, or block their children's view of the exposed skin. Their efforts were probably useless.

AO: *While viewing Stellentstellen, it seemed as though it would never end. At the same time, the dancers endured what seemed to be a painfully protracted feat of intertwinement. We wondered how the durational performance would culminate, and eventually saw Forsythe approach the duo, leaning over them and signaling through voice and touch that the end had arrived. At that moment, the idea of one separating to become two again seemed like a relief and a violation at once. When the dancers came apart, they collapsed in exhaustion, splayed out on their sweaty backs on the carpet. How did you and others respond to the ending of Stellentstellen, the "collapsing moment?"*

YL: In a weightless silence, you would be able to hear the crushing intensities that stretch and flow and transform in the communing of the two bodies that slowly and tirelessly build into yet another human knot to dissolve and erase the former one. Erasing is the key, endless erasing. Motion and time are folded in this vacuum. There is no end in this realm. It ends with Forsythe's abrupt intervention, walking up to the two bodies and telling them to stop—it is an end to the performance, not an end to the folding in this sphere of reality.

MO: This evolving amoeba transported its viewers, seated and standing against the peripheral walls, into a tranquil, almost hypnotic state. Would the performers disrupt this moving sculpture, return to their bipedal human form, and end with a formal bow? There were no clocks in their sightline, so I wondered about their sense of time and how they would know when the multi-hour exhibit was over. Engaged in their entanglement, I did not notice Forsythe standing amid the crowd. He emerged at the two-hour mark and walked toward the men, breaking the invisible barrier of safe space the patrons had delineated around the performers. Forsythe leaned over, tapped one on the shoulder, and audibly declared, "Done." The two men immediately released each other into a relieved, wide-X splat on the floor, chests heaving in exhaustion. In that instant, the men transformed their amorphous energy into that of regular pedestrians, and my wandering imagination snapped back to reality. Some audience members giggled at this unceremonious ending, unaccustomed to seeing performers transition out of character so candidly. Watching Forsythe then proceed to give them notes privately, but in public, further decreased the performer-audience separation as we were given an intimate look into their process. The beautifully intense and tangled struggle we had witnessed appeared to be an investigative exercise, an ongoing open rehearsal, as much as it was deemed a public performance.

PE: The interaction of those two tangled bodies offered a vision that mesmerized viewers. An almost sacred space was created around their exposed skin. But when Forsythe entered the space, and casually interrupted the performers, the spell was abruptly broken. The otherworldliness generated by the dancers was cracked by the command of the choreographer. It was obviously the end of the performance, but it was also a drastic call to reality that made evident the power of the piece to make us see things beyond two simple bodies on the floor.

AO: *When dance practitioners and scholars hear "contact improvisation," they tend to think of Steve Paxton, the 1970s, and an improvisatory practice of partner work that takes place in communal "contact jams." While much can be said to undo the idea of its actual inclusivity, the impulse behind contact improvisation is a democratic one. Forsythe's work is heavily invested in improvisation, but his resulting aesthetic is decidedly more polished and invested in technical embodiment and acquisition. Improvisation in Forsythe's work is of a different sort than that of contact improvisation (despite some overlaps), but it is impossible to think of Stellentstellen without the concepts of "contact" and "improvisation." While Stellentstellen lies outside Paxton's combined term (contact improvisation), it artfully brings together these terms anew. How can we think of the words contact and improvisation together and separately in regards to Stellentstellen?*

YL: It starts with a sensation that radiates possibilities of previously unacknowledged sensations that keep evolving. "The line is the sensation of its own realization," said Forsythe once, quoting Cy Twombly.⁴ The bodies are never separated. When contact becomes a new reality of existence, there's no longer a triggered subject. The internalized bodily momentum dictates only one direction of movement. Is it improvisation? Or a destined causality?

PE: In *Stellentstellen*, the physical contact of the two performers was not mediated by clothing, implying a significant level of intimacy in the interaction that allowed for a wide range of interpretation. As a viewer, I saw lovers, unanimated bodies in a situation of extreme violence or a fight for power. Some people saw wrestlers; others just saw an undefined organism with four legs and arms.

The contact between the two bodies seemed to connote restriction instead of release. The specific way the piece used contact revealed qualities of effort and movement that lie in opposition to "contact" in a postmodern dance context. The long-lasting, massive hug between the performers implied that the point of contact, instead of being focused on a small area, included large areas of the bodies and their sensorial information. In contact improvisation, each individual makes decisions

about sharing their weight, but always temporarily. In *Stellentstellen*, the weight sharing seems to happen with no interruption or restraint. On the other hand, *Stellentstellen* seems to be organized according to tasks, implying the use of improvisation. The fact that the performers have to solve problems along the way may be read by the audience as an honest exploration of struggle and the search for resolution.

AO: During *Stellentstellen*, Yasit and Watts move skin to skin; surface that what was once outline becomes swaths of transference, and two move as one. Audiences at LACMA saw tattoos, complexion, and perspiration coating muscular flesh and reciprocal effort. Skin is never neutral: What is "written" on the body? What kind of dialogue ensues in the presence of touch? Acquisition, in contrast, presents us with cerebral tasks, and the question of skin or flesh is seemingly effaced. Is there an affective difference between seeing skin and merely imagining its motions? What can you say about skin in both pieces?

YL: There's no *they* in *Stellentstellen*. There's only *it*. It looks like an inhuman creature that has two heads, two torsos, two tones of skin, four arms and four legs. It looks like there's an inferno burning inside that reddens the skin and tenses up the limbs, that pops out the veins and twists the faces. Are those tattoos or sinister totems? "Multivalence in the linguistic sense, the power to recombine," said Forsythe.⁵ At the far end of the pavilion, an exhibition title is foreboding: *Gemini G.E.L. Coincidence?*

JM: Forsythe's *Acquisition* is egalitarian in the sense that it is really not made for any specific group of people. It is just as easy for the pedestrian body to learn as it is for a trained dancer, as it requires no "technical" dance background. It is as tricky as an everyday schoolyard challenge, such as patting your head and rubbing your stomach simultaneously; nondancers can easily implement the architecture of the piece onto their own bodies, perhaps adding elements of their own volition. The dancers explained that while the learning of the structure begins in color, once mastered, language, numbers, songs, etc., can be layered upon the original form. While visitors of LACMA perhaps felt sucked into the work as Kaufman students surrounded viewers most likely heading for the gift shop, Forsythe's *Acquisition* is particularly significant in its underlying approachability. Contemporary dance proves to be incredibly difficult to digest for audience members lacking a certain background. One could easily argue that this is the case with all forms of art, but many non-painters enjoy visiting museums and many nonmusicians find pleasure in listening to the form. Contemporary dance has one of the smallest viewerships and the least amount of money. Even people well-versed in the art world walk away from contemporary dance performances with lingering questions about what has transpired and why they had to endure it. The disjuncture often stems from the strangeness of viewing the body as an artistic medium. Especially as choreography becomes more complex, viewers are often alienated from the process. *Acquisition* allows them to not only see the underlying structural components of dance composition, but actively participate in the form.

Acquisition and *Stellentstellen* shown side-by-side appears to be a strange choice on the surface. But the disjuncture of their outer layers is exactly what makes the simultaneity of the works so compelling. *Stellentstellen* is incredibly difficult to digest. The body is highly fragmented, which is an uncomfortable sight to bear. Furthermore, the audience is situated on a single platform, unsure of where the stage begins or if there is a "stage" at all. It is troubling to be on the same surface, perhaps performing (as was the case for the participants in *Acquisition*) alongside two male dancers who are hardly clothed. Their bodies are in contact and they are improvising, but it is definitely not "contact improv" as we traditionally speak of the form. Forsythe has created a structure from which they slowly wind their bodies into a swirling knot. They are in a constant state of tangling and untangling. Their flexibility is both impressive and disturbing, for the work of contortion is usually reserved for women. The malleability of their flesh gives way to the feeling that their limbs are interchangeable. A foot could be any man's foot. A knee seems as though it does not have a body to call its home. The splintering of flesh that we experience in *Stellentstellen* is hardly easy to reconcile. While at times sensual, it is also highly charged and perhaps violent. While *Stellentstellen* is all about the flesh, *Acquisition* seems to skip flesh altogether, providing the visitor with imaginary surfaces of color to transgress. There is a visible component to the dance, as Kaufman students approach museum visitors and attempt to teach a perplexing task, but the movement itself is mostly mental, progressing through the cognitive capability of the performer. Providing museum visitors with a choreographic structure that they too can enter and play around in perhaps alludes to the structural components of *Stellentstellen*, allowing the experience of viewership to be less alienating for the nondancers present.

1. Claire Bishop, "The Perils and Possibilities of Dance in the Museum: TATE, MoMA, and Whitney," *Dance Research Journal* 46, no. 3 (December 2014): 65.

2. http://www.williamforsythe.com/filmspaces.html?&pid=45&count=1&no_cache=1&detail=1&uid=52.

3. "For years, Rauf 'RubberLegz' Yasit and myself have been independently focused on choreographic strategies involving threading the body into its own negative spaces, while Riley Watts and Rauf have been intensively performing these kind of threadings, Riley with The Forsythe Company, and Rauf in his own unique work. This film brings together these three work streams by intertwining two bodies to form what I like to call 'optical puzzles.' In these puzzles, it is obvious to the viewer that there are only two persons in the composition, but the complex threading of their two bodies creates optical conundrums that frequently defy the apparent logic of the situation. The title ALIGNIGUNG is also a threading of two languages. The English word align sounds like the German word allein, which means

alone. That English word has been inserted into the German word Einigung, which means agreement. So the 'threaded' result is a pun and a hybrid, which could mean aligning in agreement with oneself and another, on one's own." William Forsythe, <https://www.operadeparis.fr/en/3e-scene/alignigung>.

4. <https://frieze.com/article/talking-dance>.

5. Ibid.

Ariel Osterweis

Please send comments about this review to editor.caareviews@collegeart.org.



Copyright © 2018 College Art Association. Reviews and essays are licensed to the public under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

By accessing and/or using caa.reviews, you accept and agree to abide by the Terms & Conditions.