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BALANCING ACTS

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Papers should not exceed 4500 words (including notes and references). Practice-based papers should normally include images in JPEG format (300ppi). Reviews should be around 1000 words. Photo essays should not exceed 2000 words and 10 pictures. All contributions should be formatted according to the MLA style guidelines (see Gibaldi's MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers) and should include a 200-word abstract of the article submitted as well as the article itself. Authors should also send a 50-word bio with their submission. Submissions should be sent electronically as email attachments to platform-submissions@rhul.ac.uk.

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Images courtesy of Christina Tente (illustration), Dylan Sherman (courtesy of Brendan Fernandes and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago), Maryam Bagheri Nesami (scanned photograph of self), and Angela Woodhouse and Caroline Broadhead (from *Thermal Duets*, 2019). Front image: Quint Buchholz, *Giacomond* (1984)—licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

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Often we refer to feeling somatically in and out of balance, or speak of a balanced economy, which is ingrained in imperialistic class structures. The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (2010), reminding us of John Stuart Mill's commentary on balance in a talk given at The Mutual Improvement Society in 1834, notes that for Mill the word balance is 'singularity captivating', and stresses that what is referred to as balance 'must, for that reason, be necessarily good'. The urge to have 'a balanced economy', 'a balance of power', and to make 'balanced judgements' illustrates, Phillips points out, how unbalanced socio-economic infrastructures are (xi). This *Platform* issue, 'Balancing Acts', is the first devoted to dance and is published at a time when dance departments are being increasingly subsumed into other fields of the art. It investigates corpo-political approaches to balance through dance's artistic form. Dance is a bodily, agential performance practice that sometimes produces faulted or releasing moments, which make us unable to hold or move on to our understandings of balance: it can capitulate us into a state of being 'off-balance'. 'Balancing Acts' puts the foundationalism at stake of what is considered as morally being 'off balance' by foregrounding its ethical discrepancies. How can we shift physical ways of thinking to embrace the unknown, which might entail falling out of what we conceive of as balance? How can such moves pose challenges to modes of discrimination within society?

Putting moving bodies and their performed morals into the centre of a critical debate automatically implies that their identities have to be considered as part of artistic and materialistic issues. This *Platform* issue conceives of 'balance' as both a physical, political, and metaphorical concept to address the entanglement of 'situated', bodily experience (Haraway 1988) with economic and social mechanisms. This issue understands balance as a double-folded state: on one hand, the concept of balance historically and artificially re-produces an idea that there is something of an equilibrium, an ideal state of power, and

on the other hand, it conceives of balance as a corporeal surviving mechanism to sustain living organisms.

'Balancing Acts' brings dance and performance together to offer a site for a critical discourse about culturally ingrained, artistic body-based performance practices, as well as quotidien performances happening outside of theatres and art institutions. It is inspired by dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright's reorienting approach towards dance. She suggests 'instead of being nervous about keeping our balance in a world in which so many aspects of our lives are in danger of falling apart, we need to accept our falls with grace and learn how to land with intention' (10). Her recent book, *How to Land: Finding Ground in an Unstable World* (2019), vitally foregrounds that bodily perception and social engagements are profoundly interconnected and are decisive for how we move through and think about the world. As a way to provoke somatic ways of thinking through dance and to question our individual relationship to gravity, Cooper Albright asks how we can realign ourselves 'at the edge of our balance' (22) in order to negotiate the social, political and economic unpredictability of the world. Daring to move off balance, Sara Ahmed suggests that disorientation can help us to understand the many cultural assumptions that lie beneath the surface of our lives ('Queer Fragility') by using a language of movement to describe how life choices are also conditioned by culturally produced somatic patterns (performative acts and gestures) which make us decide how to orientate ourselves.

This issue debates the entanglement of somatics, embodied perceptions of balance and politics, and how they are acted out attitudes. Its formation started in the early summer of 2020 when physical touch was restricted and dance performances mainly happened online, if at all. 'Balancing Acts' was also conceptualized around the time when dance and visual art organisations in the UK increasingly started to programme the work of people of colour as an urgent response to the BLM protests which sparked a move across art institutions to decolonise staff and curriculums, aligning with the decolonising turn, in the UK and US. While this was a welcome step forward for Global North

institutions and universities, it also exposed their sluggish response to the not-so-new question of decolonisation. Emerging from these specific historic moments lies the issue's core question of how bodies can come to perform—both as artistic and political subjects—inside and outside of arts organisations as a way to rethink ideas of social and economic balance.

This question is, of course, not a new one. How humans perceive balance is intertwined with the ways capitalism employs them productively, in a technological way, to increase the financial profits and wealth of a small number of people. Dancers can perform both, opting to stay in balance, (participate) with capitalist operations, or resist them by embracing the conditions of being out of balance. If these movement practitioners, like all precarious and mainly temporary employees, are merely regarded as labourers of capital, generating ephemeral cultural surplus values through their bodily capital, then dance is often generated without care, under exploitative working conditions, putting the performers off-balance. As Mårten Spångberg stresses, dance struggles precisely with keeping 'its autonomy and its possible impact, its independence and simultaneously its opportunity to care and install safe-spaces', and knows that 'neoliberal capitalism can and will instrumentalize everything, transform anything into a financial asset' (21).

Underneath bodies' apparent 'balance'—their mental and physical positionality—lurks another question: how to practice and understand dance if the way we hold our bodies is at odds with how we relate to one another? Emerging before the academic field of dance studies, Marble Elsworth Todd's 'Ideokinesis'—a form of somatic education—provided us with key terminologies to develop a verbal language to describe physiological experiences and practices. In her 1937 groundbreaking book of human kinesiology, *The Thinking Body*, she explores notions such as balancing forces, posture, consciousness, old animal mechanisms, and mobilisation for movement. Her approach to the body in motion—an aesthetic experience—addresses questions of how subjectivity is performed, such as how habit and action interact and

are performed, embodied, and physiological objectives. The mobilising forces Todd addresses can produce their own support structures and networks, but also generate and feed into infrastructurally installed political tensions and universally accepted values and morals. How we conceptually approach dance depends therefore on how and where it is practiced.

In her philosophy of science, Isabelle Stengers describes the dialectics between disequilibrium and balance in relation to the laws of motion. Arguing for an 'ecology of practices' and 'poetic attentiveness to nature' (4-5), she reminds us that 'while capitalism has destroyed many practices [that] it feeds on', it also has the ability 'to redefine them' (9). She stresses that 'if the balance is no longer at equilibrium, motion occurs' (101). When the parameters and players of a system are falling out of their established equilibrium, then balance starts to shift. Being 'off-balance', in this sense, suggests being in-motion, and has the potential to bring about change. As this issue suggests, the potential of dance and dance studies lies in situations that critically explore balance by encountering moments of being 'off-balance'. In a similar vein, Randy Martin takes stake in the precarity of artistic work in relation to finance. He speaks of a decentered social kinesthetic of certain movement forms, such as skate-boarding or hip hop to address their physical and metaphorical shifts from vertical to horizontal levels. He considers dance to be able to move through states of disequilibrium and to dive 'ways through spaces made for infinite possibility' (63). Following Stengers' and Martin's critical and yet productive approach to corporeal movement practices, 'Balancing Acts' foregrounds dance's potential for moving away from stabilised ideas of balance and draws attention to its potentially shape-shifting role.

Despite dance's economic embeddedness and its reliance on institutional infrastructures, this *Platform* issue aims to prompt questions about how the poetics of performances can produce ways of dancing which are more attuned with oneself and others 'off-balance'. The replacement of culturally established understandings of balance

with a critical concept of balance rooted in somatics, as an agential 'balancing act', might help us to address imperially produced power relations, historically reproduced and ideological forms of agency, rooted in sexual and racial stereotypes.

This kinaesthetic awareness together with the idea of being connected with other bodies is discussed throughout the issue's contributions, which we have divided into four sections. The contributors each come to terms with what modes of disorientation can be generated by thinking beyond stereotypical concepts of balance. They use a range of tools and analyse artistic dance forms that allow bodies to speak to state institutionalisation, as well as to their and dance's identity-shaping mechanisms.

Historical Mobilisation: Disorientating White Performance

Living through a moment in history in which there is a dominating 'neoliberal impulse to include' performers of colour as part of a 'progressive racial politic' (DeFrantz 724), Tom Hastings's and Dylan Sherman's contributions put the inclusion of black bodies in art institutions and other public spaces under scrutiny. The urgency of disorientating white spaces becomes more acute in the light of light of BLM protests following the murder of George Floyd. Hasting's essay, 'Taking a Knee', focuses on recent happenings in the UK and conceptualises the 'coalitional politics' of kneeling, a gesture enacted by the south London rapper, Still Shadey, from a Black performance angle. Taking the liberal politics of the movement into account, he argues that the kinaesthetic pose of kneeling, 'a balancing act itself', can intervene into the state choreography and thereby initiate social mobility. While Hastings examines a recent cultural performance phenomenon, Dylan Sherman positions Brendan Fernandes' sculptural installation, *The Master and Form* (2018/19) and accompanying ballet performance seen at the Whitney Museum in New York City in relation to broader discourse around dance. He argues that Fernandes engages critically

with his ballet training and thereby puts his queer body of colour off-balance as he works with, against and beyond ballet's whiteness and heteronormativity. Sherman's detailed writing about the interaction between choreography, sculpture, and dance not only destabilises ballet's whiteness but also reveals how Fernandes' physicalisation placed in relation to the 'abstract sculpture' creates a non-normative space within the museum where an intersectional queer lack of balance can be represented.

Performing Beyond Balance: Bodily Liquids and Modernist Text-Play Relations

In this section the contributors reflect on the performance of bodies and text, and introduce ways of thinking beyond normative conceptions of balance. Christina Tente's essay, 'Spasms over balance', reflects on a particular style of vogueing from a posthuman perspective. She focuses on 'possibilities for posthuman becomings' to draw attention to that moving beyond conventional understandings of balance. Tente illustrates how the performance of Vogue Femme disrupts normative understandings of balance through sweat, spasm and the creation of sticky atmpospheres. Drawing on her observer-participation of Vogue Femme sessions in Berlin and Malmö, case studies framed through somatic practice and queer aesthetics demonstrate how the form's excessive performativity allows participants to move byond the human as well as disturb heteronormative stereotypes and conventions of patriarchal and capitalist systems. She captures the materiality of the performative event in an affective language of movement description, arguing that vogue's aesthetics of excess, with its erratic spins, drops, floor performance (spasms) and the sticky space of the vogue spectacle (as sweat oozes off walls and passes from body to body) ruptures understandings of the straight, contained balanced body.

Rebekka Jolley's essay focuses on Gertrude Stein's first theatre play, *What Happened A Play in Five Acts*, from 1913. Branded as unperformable because of its text, her early play has only been

performed five times since the 1960s, and this, notably, not by Stein herself. Jolley offers an original reading of *What Happened* by undertaking a comparative, linguistic analysis of its recent staging by Radio Free Stein in 2019 in relation to Stein's original play-text. Jolley 'rebalances' Stein's ingrained reputation from that of a modernist writer towards a playwright, and argues that *What Happened*'s collage text style operates as a 'hybrid genre of literary cubist theatre'.[1]

Performing as Political Turmoil: Notes from the Field

This section brings together voices of a dance scholar and performance art scholar as they respond to racial, gender, and political silencing that political economy's equilibrium brings. At stake here is the visibility of performance artists in Singapore and an exiled Iranian dance artist. Maryam Bagheri Nesami's performative writing is an oblique orientation around dance and dance writing as she reflects on her 'counter-gaze' positionality in her solo work *Effortless Power on the Edge* (2019). Performing and writing as a displaced subject of dance - a migrant dancer, forbidden to dance in her own country - her solo work negotiates alternative modes of appearance. Her intertextual approach to performance seeks to embrace failure and falling out of a system as she releases dance from codes of western artistic representation, and her wrestling with forces of gravity in pursuit of grounding. Bagheri Nesami's political, somatic, and poetic writing enables her to communicate the felt conditions of being in-between the global and the local, the invisible and visible, as she experiments with alternative somatic and aesthetic strategies.

Adrian Tan's insightful discussion of performance art's growing presence in the globalised city of Singapore, situates performance artists in a delicate 'balancing act' with cultural authorities and audiences. Tan's report takes the establishment of the Cultural

1 The author does not, due to the scope of this article which focuses on Gertrude Stein's early literary theatre technique in *What Happened A Five Act Play*, include a reflection upon her political stance towards non-white people.

Development Committee in 1980 and a public policy statement from 1989 as its starting point to negotiate the possibilities and relevance of performance art amidst Singapore's transformation into a global city. He examines the work of five performance artists, such as Tang Da Wu, Amanda Heng, and Urich Lau, and argues that performance art's revolutionary potential operates as a 'balancing art' within Singapore's cultural industry framework.

Balancing Subjectivities: Creative Contributions

The following contributions by practitioners question the physical sensation of experiencing the world through multiple states of being in and off physical balance. Debbie Green's and Clare Park's photographic image, 'July Supporting', constitutes part of a visual journal (*Series Blue,* 2017) recording a year of their lives. The image featured responds to the unpredictability of life during the pandemic and imagines multiple definitions of balance. The artwork depicts two women pulling away from each other, evoking a precarious state of counter-balance. Words playfully scribbled over the image are drawn from the language of contact improvisation, grappling with the complexity that a balancing act implies.

Choreographer Angela Woodhouse and film-maker Caroline Broadhead's visual essay reflects on the making of their collaborative video installation *Thermal Duets* (2019) where they describe the tension, balance, and release between technology (thermal imaging), and the sensorial (of both dancer and spectator). They extend the sensorial beyond the screen by recording the trace of touch on the bodies of the dancers. Their work catches the viewer in a state of holding and release as it negotiates the tension between what is being seen and what is being felt. Describing the installation both from the dancers' perspective and the experience of the spectator, Woodhouse argues that the technology of thermal imaging creates a form of rebalancing of our relationship with our surroundings as we renegotiate the porous boundaries of our bodies.

Hand balancer Natalie Reckert tells us from her experience of performing extreme balancing acts, being in-balance 'is just one out of many possible states. It is the most unlikely state, the million other off-balances will eventually win' (138). How, then, can we think more playfully, and engage creatively with balance's multiple meanings and opposites?

Completing the original contributions' section, Carolien Hermans, a photographer and dance practitioner, envisions the state of being between one position and another as 'the body in-between', one which hovers in the liminal space between balance and off-balance: a state of suspension. Hermans' photos of her children and a student taking a dance improvisation workshop emphasise bodies moving in between vertical and horizontal planes. She writes:

> The in-between that enables us to engage with potentialities, where the self (as a fixed identity) is suspended, in favor of a floating, unstable state of being. The in-between reveals the groundlessness of ourselves. (147)

Her interest echoes Adam Phillips's words, 'what we do when we are off balance tends to be more morally interesting than what we do when we are unbalanced' (xv). As we fall, Hermans points out, we give up our vertical, upright position and with the pull of gravity we have to engage with the horizontal plane. This is perhaps not such a bad place to land, and implies that we need to expand narrow understandings of balance and our desperation to cling on to just one definition.

Performance Responses and Book Reviews

Balance is further scrutinised through the performance and book reviews that embrace not only the techniques of physical, body-based artistic practices that push movement beyond balance and the human, but also other identities that shake up conservative and capitalist notions of being in balance. The four book reviews cover academic and

practical approaches to balance. Katherine Grace Holden revisits the edited book *Caught Falling: The Confluence of Contact Improvisation* (2008) that collects key ideas of Nancy Stark Smith's dance practice and understanding of contact improvisation in relation to physical balance. Their review historically contextualises the book and takes us back to initial ideas of contact improvisation, months after Stark passed away. Rachael Davies reviews Harmony Bench's book, *Perpetual Motion: Dance, Digital Cultures and the Common*, which explores dance's relationship with digital media from 1996 to 2006, putting into question what bodily experience comprises. *Disabled Theatre*, (2015) edited by Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz, and reviewed by 'Tunde Awosanmi, stems from Jerome Bel's performance *Disabled Theatre* (2012/13). The essay collection gathers responses from leading dance scholars about performances that intersect with disability studies. It interrogates closely how disabled people are publicly perceived and staged and makes a collective call for a critical engagement with both disability studies and performance. Christina Regorosa reviews John Lutterbie's *An Introduction to Theatre, Performance and the Cognitive Sciences* (2020). Focusing on overlaps between arts and science, the book opens up interdisciplinary discourse and fosters further exchanges.

Two of our performance responses dwell on the existential implications of the act of falling, where a conceptual and live artist—making work decades apart—perform falling as a way of finding meaning and even momentary euphoria in spite of the fear and damage that it can bring. Lilly Markaki revisits a series of short films by Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader in which he falls repeatedly in different locations. Markaki questions whether the falling speaks of Ader's resignation and despair, or rather as an attempt to find some sort of eternal truth in his art. For Amy Sharrocks, a voluntary act of falling into the waters of the Thames in her live artwork *Landscape with Fall of Artist* (2020) felt like an attempt to liberate herself both physically and emotionally from universally oppressive conditions, further exacerbated by the pandemic. Reflecting on the motivations for her performative act, a whole bodied

response to a fractured world, she considers the multiple implications of falling. In their discussion of Sarah Kane's play *Crave* (1998), live streamed in November 2020, Alex Watson and Kit Narey consider the notion of 'balancing acts' in relation to the play's traumatic subject matter of isolation and its affect on the audience. The actors performing on treadmills through much of the play physically negotiate balance as they act out personal narratives of violence, abuse, and suffering between victim and perpetrator, while the audience's empathetic and emotional relationship with the actors is tipped further off balance as they watch online from the seclusion of their homes.

Similarly affected by the pandemic, the production process of this issue was accompanied by the workshop, 'Unravelling the Everyday', funded by Royal Holloway and led by Prof. Alexandra Kolb (Roehampton University, London) last May. Despite being held on Zoom, the session enabled us to connect with and discuss ideas of 'balancing acts' in the everyday and in the performing acts with some of the issue's international contributors. During the workshop Prof. Kolb invited us to find a position in our homes overlooking the street and document everything we saw. Through this kinaesthetically activating exercise we had to pay close attention to think about the entanglement of somatic rhythms and how people move through the urban landscape. The issues addressed in this workshop transverse between understandings of being 'in balance' and being 'off balance', and are echoed in the issue's collective exploration of performances operating inside and outside of enclosed arts institutions. Sometimes, as 'Balancing Acts' fleshes out, being in balance is physically more risky than losing it. If we are ready to let go and give in, we lose our understanding and sense of balance, and this is precisely where thinking and moving differently becomes possible.

If dance performances do not only represent subjective, as well as collective, body politics through movements and gestures, but are also taken seriously as poetic, kinesthetic practices, there seems to be no way around investigating how we physically and intellectually

perceive of balance, not as a fixed idea or form of practice, but as spatial and body-shifting 'balancing acts'.

With this issue the functions of the current editorial board, comprising of Meg Cunningham, Josephine Leask, Lisa Moravec, and Clio Unger, which was formed over summer 2018, ends. At this stage, the journal is already in the hands of Alex Watson and Lianna Mark—who are working towards the next special issue 'Within Limits' with Gwyneth Donlon as Notes from the Field editor, and the three new incoming editors Chris Green (editing Performance Reviews), Grace Joseph (editing Book Reviews), and Milo Harries (as editorial assistant).

On a final note, we are grateful to the Department of Drama, Theatre, and Dance at Royal Holloway, University of London, for the continuous financial and academic support, and thank the contributors, peer-reviewers, copy editors, and the whole Platform team for working through this issue and socially isolating time together. Platform, as this issue reflects, publishes work by researchers from different academic levels as it conceives of itself as a collective learning platform. Without the people involved in this process, and the implied conversations, this issue would not be what it is, a collaboratively realised balancing act.

- Josephine Leask and Lisa Moravec, issue co-editors

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Notes on Contributors

Dr. 'Tunde Awosanmi holds a Ph.D in Theatre Arts from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, where he also teaches. He is a collaborative research fellow of the Centre of African Studies and a fellow of Wolfson College, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom. A scholar of philosophy and aesthetics of theatre and culture, he is also a peace researcher.

Prof. Caroline Broadhead comes from the discipline of jewellery. For more than forty years Caroline has developed her own practice exploring objects that come into contact with and interact with the body. Her work is housed in many international collections. She is Professor Emerita at Central Saint Martins, and won the Lifetime Achievement Award from The Goldsmiths Craft and Design Council in 2017.

Meg Cunningham has submitted her PhD at the University of Surrey and is waiting for her viva voce! Her practice-based PhD explores the intersections between architectural environments, story, and immersive scenography. Holding a Bachelors of Architecture and an MFA in Scenic Design, she has worked in Los Angeles as a designer and art director for the themed entertainment industry (theme parks and attractions). Meg has also designed in a variety of theatres in London, Pittsburgh and LA. Meg is a lecturer of scenography at Middlesex University and, with Clio Unger, co-edited the previous *Platform* issue, 'Theatres of Labour'.

Rachael Davies is a curator, researcher and writer living in London. She is currently a M4C PhD candidate at the Centre for Dance Research (C-Dare) at Coventry University in collaboration with Chisenhale Dance Space, London. Her research is concerned with British experimental dance and performance art of the 1970-80s with a focus on feminist discourses; with interests in alternative organisational models, feminist historiography, and practices of archival study. Previously Rachael worked as public programme curator and gallery manager at Cell Project Space, London, where she curated 'X6 Dance Space (1976-80): Liberation Notes' (2020), the first exhibition to document the work of the X6 Collective (1976-80). Rachael is a visiting lecturer at Roehampton University and co-editor of the journal *Choreographic Practices*.

Gwyneth Donlon is the current editor of *Platform*'s Performance Responses and a PhD researcher at Royal Holloway, University of London, working at the intersections of performance, visual and material cultures. Her department-funded project explores the function of objects in contemporary feminist performance and aims to extend thinking on practices and theories of representation by interrogating the contribution of material culture discourse. Gwyneth holds an MA in Theatre and Performance from Queen Mary, London, and an MA in Arts Management from RMIT University, Melbourne.

Chris Green is an artist currently undertaking a fully collaborative, co-authored practice research PhD at the University of Plymouth. This research is centred on experiences of millennial precarity, drawing on philosophies of hauntology and lost futures (published in *Performance Research* and *Studies in Theatre & Performance*). Chris has recently joined the *Platform* editorial board, and is a part-time lecturer at Leeds Beckett University after teaching at Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Plymouth. He holds a BA from the University of Chester and MA from Wimbledon College of Art.

Debbie Green worked as Senior Lecturer on BA (Hons) Acting at Royal Central School of Speech & Drama for over two decades, her subject being Actor Movement. She has worked since the 1980s with photographer Clare Park as subject, co-conceiver and choreographer, producing photographic work for exhibition and publication.

Milo Harries is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, writing on logics of encounter in the climate crisis. He co-convenes the Cambridge Graduate Seminar for Drama and Performance, is co-editor of *Arcadiana* for EASLCE, has recently joined the *Platform* editorial board, and works as an opera singer (see www.miloharries.com).

Dr. Tom Hastings is Lecturer in Dance at The Place, London. Tom completed his AHRC-funded PhD on the choreographer Yvonne Rainer at the University of Leeds in 2018. He has published in *Artforum, Frieze*, *Burlington Contemporary, Studio International, Ma Bibliothèque*, *Texte zur Kunst*, and *Sculpture Journal* (forthcoming) Tom is a former co-editor of *Parallax* and is co-editing *Feminist Genealogies of the Body*.

Carolien Hermans is a senior lecturer at both the Conservatory of Amsterdam and the University of the Arts, Utrecht. She is affiliated to the University of Leiden, Academy of Creative Performing Arts, where she is researching an artistic PhD entitled 'Dance and play: A comparison between children's physical play events and dance improvisational practice'. She holds an MA in dance and choreography, and graduated cum laude at Nijmegen's Radboud University in Orthopedagogy.

Kate Holden is a PhD candidate at University College Cork in Drama and Theatre Studies who specialises in devising feminist adaptations of canonical works, using extended performance modalities. Her work has appeared in academic and fringe festival contexts, and she holds a MFA from Naropa University in Theatre: Contemporary Performance.

Rebekka Jolley is an interdisciplinary practice as research PhD candidate, studying English Literature and Drama at Liverpool Hope University and specialising in Gertrude Stein's early theatre. Rebekka is a Lecturer and the Programme Leader for the FdA and BA Theatre and Performance degrees at University Centre St. Helens.

Grace Joseph is a theatre director and researcher, currently undertaking a practice-based PhD at Goldsmiths University. Her project, shaped by her ongoing collaboration with disabled-led theatre companies, looks at the aesthetics of access in both rehearsal and performance. As a theatre director, she has trained at the Young Vic, worked at Shakespeare's Globe, and developed new writing with Camden People's Theatre and Battersea Arts Centre. She has also taught at Central School of Speech and Drama and is currently leading a research project with Extant Theatre Company on access to scripts for visually impaired artists. She has recently joined the *Platform* editorial board, and holds a BA from the University of Cambridge and is studying for her Level 3 in BSL.

Josephine Leask is the issue co-editor of 'Balancing Acts', along with Lisa Moravec. She is a dance critic, editor, lecturer and part-time PhD researcher at Central School of Speech and Drama. Her PhD research explores the contribution of New Dance Magazine (1977-1988) to the creation of feminist intersectional dance writing practices and embodied modes of criticism. She has written about dance for a range

of mainstream press and dance publications but currently writes for *DanceTabs*. She lectures on the BA dance programme at London Studio Centre and the MA programme at Rambert and is editor of *Resolution Review* at The Place, which profiles and mentors emerging critics.

Dr. Lianna Mark is a Teaching Fellow in the Department of English Studies at Durham University. She holds a LAHP-funded PhD in English and Theatre Studies from King's College London, which she recently completed on a DAAD visiting fellowship at the Freie Universität in Berlin. Her thesis explores the stories and storytelling—thematic, formal, and institutional—of recent British new writing. She completed her postgraduate studies in Comparative and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Bologna and Paris-Sorbonne, and holds a BA in European Literature from the University of Bologna and the University of Upper Alsace. She collaborated as associate researcher on the Fabulamundi Workbook project and her work has been published in *Comparative Drama* and the *JCDE*. Lianna is book reviews editor for this issue of Platform and, with Alex Watson, is co-editing the next issue, 'Within Limits'.

Lilly Markaki is a PhD Candidate at Royal Holloway, University of London. Blending theory and prose, their work investigates materiality, time, desire, possibility, and practices of world-building. Their projects and affiliations include membership of the research coven Activismes Ésoteriques and DEMO, a curatorial platform dedicated to the aesthetic and political potentialities of the moving image.

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Mark Morreau is an established film-maker and photographer, following 15 years as a professional trapeze artist. Recent digital artwork includes the Barbican instillation 'Unclaimed', and 'Departure Lounge' both for The Liminal Space; 'Depths of my Mind' for Scarabeus (2016-18); Gravity and Levity's 'An Ordinary Grief' (2017-18); 'Take Me to Bed' with Luke Pell and Jo Verrent (2014); and his solo-piece 'United States' (2016), which explores interactive software and responsive interaction between digital media and the performer (see www.morreaux.co.uk).

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Articles

Taking a Knee

By Tom Hastings

Abstract

Kneeling was ubiquitous during the recent Black Lives Matter protests that were organised in response to the police murder of George Floyd. This transnational gesture was also deployed by mainstream media as a sign of multiracial, coalitional politics, its uniformity supplying state actors with movement material for expressions of unity. Having first situated the protests in relation to anti-Black violence and the national lockdown in the UK, this essay interrogates kneeling's relation to coalitional politics. Drawing on the Black Radical Tradition, I ask whether this gesture's stamp of unity neutralised the radical demands of Black Lives Matter. By analysing this gesture's deployment during a speech by the South London rapper, Still Shadey, I seek to describe a wider gestural economy, figuring this gesture as Black performance in relation to what Rizvana Bradley calls 'a history of interdicted and coerced movement'. Finally, I argue that the balancing act itself—the difficulty of sustaining a knee—disrupts this gesture's absorption into state choreography by transmitting a kinaesthetic experience of social mobility. Kneeling's 'vibratory potential', I argue, renews the possibility of a coalitional politics in the face of liberal calls for unity.

Introduction

How long have we been screaming change?
A change must come.
Man just walked all the way from west to south you know,
Mans been walking all my life.
This aint nothing new.
This is the life,
This is repeat.
This is the life,
This is repeat.

(Still Shadey)

Fig. 1: Protesters kneel on the neck of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, June 2020 (Twitter).

A livestreamed video records the surroundings. Amid a welter of banners, protesters, and grey glinting light someone in Still Shadey's entourage hands him a megaphone. The South London rapper ascends a low brick wall by Vauxhall Bridge during a Black Lives Matter protest in London, June 2020.[1] Shadey's crew holds a space while he implores those gathered, his face lapsing into a grimace of exhausted consternation as he flows, free hand thrown up to the sky as if animating the refrain then circulating across social media, 'Enough is Enough'. Stretched and amplified by the tinny speaker, demarcated by italics throughout this essay, his speech culminates with the performative statement: *I'm taking a knee today. This is a change. We're mobilising.* The crowd respond in kind, lowering to the tarmac in an act of sombre and defiant contagion;

1 I found a video of Shadey's speech on YouTube while researching for this essay and after attending the protests. His channel features music videos mixing genre codes of grime and drill, alongside social commentary. I here take his protest speech as exemplary in its emotional communication of key issues around anti-Black racism.

an alliance forms of those who had diverged from the official route leading to the American Embassy in Battersea.[2] In the environment of Shadey's speech, kneeling crystallised a moment of effervescent solidarity otherwise difficult to achieve under the lockdown's law of distancing, yet its efficacy remains contested.

In order to sustain this gesture (during vigils for Floyd, the knee was held for eight minutes forty-six seconds) it is necessary to shift one's weight around the point of contact with the ground by manipulating hips, torso, shoulders, arms, and hands. As such, the doing of it makes clear that the image of unity that kneeling projects is actually comprised of hundreds of embodied negotiations, none of which effectively resolve the position's tension; yet these negotiations do, when released, serve to renew concentration on the difficult work of taking a coalitional stand. The form of unity kneeling promises remains uncertain: a balancing act.

Drawing on the Black Radical Tradition and contemporary sources, this essay examines kneeling's tensile relation to politics. How did this transnational gesture, migrating from the US to protests globally, enable alliances to form in the street? Did the viral images of alliance that ensued promote or curtail the demands of Black Lives Matter? Are this social movement's radical demands neutralised by kneeling's stamp of unity? The uneasy coexistence of liberalism's dispossession of Black people and the presence of white protestors is precisely at issue here. A focus on kneeling, this essay argues, makes contact with the strategic difficulty of organising a coalitional movement around specifically anti-Black violence, a difficulty that is augmented in the 2020 mobilisation of Black Lives Matter because of this gesture's indexical link to the police murder of George Floyd. Taking a knee allowed for a collective witness of violence, yet kneeling was, at the same time, deployed in the protests to express theological values of devotion, respect, and resilience that define a politics of racial

2 Contagion has provided a metaphor for describing the crowd from Gustav Le Bon (1895) onwards. In this essay contagion is linked to the gesture of Black social dance.

uplift, as popularised by the NFL player Colin Kaepernick in 2016. Yes, kneeling indexes the fact of social death, but it also promises and possibly creates a multiracial, coalitional politics linked to Black pride that is not wholly extinguished by the assimilationist agenda of public institutions.

The performance of kneeling, however iconic or mainstream, remains contextually specific and tied to material circumstances. As such, this essay analyses the situation of Shadey's speech, figuring his performance in relation to the toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol and coeval vigils for Floyd.[3] Reading for energies of (social) movement amid national lockdown, I turn to resources of gesture theory whose articulation of meaning's embodied, sometimes contradictory flow is invaluable. Further, I draw on Afropessimist literature to figure kneeling's agonistic relation to life and death. Indeed, as Christina Sharpe poses in her 2016 book *In the Wake*, 'How do we memorialise an event that is still ongoing?' (20). Or, as Shadey puts it succinctly above, *This aint nothing new.*

In writing this essay, I hope to situate my own experience as a white Jew of marching, chanting, and silently kneeling while surrounded by banners uncannily stating, 'White Silence is White Violence'. Empathy is the form of possessive individualism that continues to dispossess Black people in a liberal democracy, yet this does not entirely foreclose radical possibilities from emerging. How might a focus on the gestural economy of kneeling allow for a different understanding of the relationship between coalitional activism and anti-Black violence to emerge? I argue that the kinaesthetic difficulty of balancing while 'taking a knee' itself mediates the different meanings produced by this gesture's appearance in the present conjuncture.

3 Edward Colston (1636-1721) was a notorious British slave trader. In his official role in the Royal African Society, he was responsible for the enslavement and forced transportation of thousands of Africans during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. His statue was toppled and then dumped in the harbour by Black Lives Matter protesters.

Racism is a Pandemic Too

Why are man beeping their horns and thinking it just started today?
It's not just when we saw George Floyd,
It's when we saw the Mark Duggan,
It's when we saw the Sandra Bland,
It's when we saw our brothers, and our sisters, in the Law, the Law's hand.

George Floyd, an unarmed African-American man, was murdered by a white police officer on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis in what was reported to be a 'modern day lynching'. The violence of Floyd's murder circulated globally, retraumatising the African diaspora, appalling liberal whites, and galvanising the biggest transnational mobilisation of Black Lives Matter since the movement's founding in 2013. Against attempts by some media channels to relativise Floyd's murder, protests in the UK insistently spotlighted the British state's endemic racism. Protestors shouted the names of Black men and women murdered by the state and the disproportionate, state-sanctioned vulnerability of Black people to Covid-19 was reflected in the slogan 'Racism is a Pandemic Too' – organisers handed out masks and insisted that those assembled maintain social distancing. In the United States, protests were organised in rural white areas while in regional cities the socially dispossessed rioted and looted, resisting the police defence of private property. The Minnesota Freedom Fund and other grassroots legal support organisations provided ballast to calls to 'Defund the Police' and Instagram surged into a battleground of bootlegged resources, black squares, accusations of posturing, and videos compacting anger, exhaustion, and self-care.

Coming into effect in the UK on 16 March 2020, the first national lockdown reconfigured the social space of the street, rendering proximity to others not only forbidden but undesirable. Yet the virus's real threat also provided subterfuge for the re-sanctioning of existing forms of racist discrimination; the lockdown's spacing of social relations

extending the compartmentalisation of the street along racial and ableist lines. Furthermore, this zoning was abetted by a new lexicon centred on a grammar of 'underlying conditions', and an increase in domestic violence against women was a direct result of the lockdown's sanctioning logic. As such, the resignification of 'pandemic' in the slogan 'Racism is a Pandemic Too' served to demystify an expansion of structural racism, demonstrating how the lockdown's hypervisible regulatory control, rejected as repressive by anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers across the political spectrum, was already in place for Black people as the dominant form of liberal democracy. One year on, the government's 2021 Race Disparities Report has been widely condemned for its refusal to acknowledge structural racism.

As Saidiya Hartman has written in relation to the Vagrancy Statutes in Harlem, New York, at the turn of the 20th Century:

> What mattered was not what you had done, but the prophetic power of the police to predict the future, and anticipate the mug shot… Vagrancy was an expansive and virtually all-encompassing category; like the manner of walking in Ferguson, it was a ubiquitous charge that made it easy for the police to arrest and prosecute young women with no evidence of crime or act of lawbreaking. (*Wayward Lives* 241)

Hartman's allusion to Ferguson raises the memory of riotous mobilisations after the police murder of Michael Brown. Appearing suddenly in the author's 'critical fabulation' (*Venus in Two Acts* 11) of the modern legal apparatus in Harlem, this contemporary allusion posits anti-blackness as a transhistorical imperative that is constitutive of the law under liberal democracy, and riot as a necessary response to it.[4] As narrated by Hartman, the anticipatory form of the Vagrancy Statutes gave carte blanche to police to harass and arrest Black people without

4 As João Costa Vargas and Joy A. James ask, 'What happens when, instead of becoming enraged and shocked every time a black person is killed in the United States, we recognise black death as a predictable and constitutive aspect of this democracy?' (193).

cause, a mechanism that is reflected today in the proliferation of stop and search measures—in London, young Black men are nineteen times more likely to be stopped than white people (Akhabau). In the above excerpt Still Shadey's use of the definite article—*the* Mark Duggan and *the* Sandra Bland—posits their murders, by police in the UK and the US respectively, as categorical and ongoing. Indeed, Shadey's speech is exemplary in its figuration of violence as a daily, archaic fact of Black life: he repeatedly shifts from particular to universal, demonstrating the violence of abstraction, *It's not just when we saw George Floyd / It's when we saw our brothers, our sisters, in the Law.* In word and vocal intensity, his exhaustion is obviously a response to Floyd's murder and the exceptionalism attributed to it, as if *this* were the incident that made Black suffering grievable; yet, for this reason, it is also symptomatic of the Black community's response to the overwhelming increase of white recognition for violence against Black people and, in a complicated sense, the presence of white protestors. I want to understand how Shadey's call for unity, and the performance of kneeling it enacts, responds to the form of liberal democracy described by Hartman.

Kneeling's 'Vibratory Potential'

We're going to do something special; we're going to take a knee,
Because for once we can build unity.
I'm taking a knee today. I'm taking a knee today.
Whether you're black, whether you're white.
Whether you're Asian, or whether you're anything, do not be shy.

Something happened on December the 4th. I kneeled down and I prayed.
And I said when I stood, I'm gonna stay for justice.
I'm gonna stand for the sake of God, and so can you!
My first real conversation with God.

Having recounted the murder of his friend on 4 December 2019 amid the loss of many brothers and sisters, Shadey invites those assembled

to take a knee. As he lowers himself on the brick wall, megaphone in hand, the camera pans over a wave of kneeling protestors, fists raised in silent response to his call. The uniformity of this gesture, triggered by the quasi-ministerial command *we're going to*, evokes a vocabulary of prayer that is compounded by the performance's break: *I kneeled down and I prayed. And I said when I stood, I'm gonna stay for justice.* Ascending on the word 'stood', Shadey's enactment of kneeling is organised by a politics of racial uplift transmitted from the early, theologically informed Civil Rights movement.[5]

In an essay concerning Black mobility, Jason King observes that uprightness and verticality have served Black pride as a counter to Black people's 'burden of ambivalent direction' under white supremacy (King 28). Troubling the fixity of uprightness, he advances a genealogy leading from this empowered stance to 'the cool walk', which he describes as a state of falling that appears 'intentionally unintended'—crucially, in this genealogy, hip-hop culture would redirect 'the shame associated with downward mobility into an ethics of pride' (36–37). King thereby submits uprightness, which I relate to kneeling via their mediation of Black theology, to a dialectics; kneeling, like uprightness, exceeds its iconicity and affirms other, more quotidian or even accidental movements that surround it. As King writes, 'In Black performance, disorientation […] is the highest form of orientation, uncanny balance and rhythm' (41). There is, then, a need to read for the *effects* of kneeling in the surround, in gestures that appear to invert its connotations of devotion, respect, and resilience. Kneeling cannot be separated from moments in Shadey's speech 'where shriek turns speech turns song' (Moten 22), or the forbidden *proximity* of those assembled in conditions of lockdown; nor can it be disarticulated from the spectacle of 'angry' Black men congregating in public space. Kneeling's apparent uniformity is, in the context of Shadey's speech, embedded in a wider gestural economy that is legible through codes of Black performance.

5 For instance, see James H. Cone's *Black Theology & Black Power* (1969).

In a recent article, Rizvana Bradley reflects on how the state of emergency in which Black people live produces conditions for a different kind of performance to emerge. In particular, she draws a distinction between the choreographic and the gestural in relation to Black social dance, linking this cultural form to a history of activist politics. Bradley argues that where the choreographic disciplines and pattern movements are in line with social norms, the gestural describes the body relationally in terms of the 'heterogeneity and variation of its postures and habits' (19). She explains that, to the extent that Black people are excluded from the field of 'human subjectivity'—a field that, as Giorgio Agamben has posited **(ref)**, is redefined through Modernity by a *loss* of the gestural—the migratory gesture of Black social dance emerges as capable, via chains of contagion, of disrupting choreographic norms of citizenship (26). For Bradley, the transnational currents of Black social dance, especially as these erupt in the context of *protest*, have the potential of 'breaking and bending' the choreographic. She asserts:

> Black bodies in movement have consistently been viewed as threatening; black social dance tends to feature a multitude or swarm of black bodies in their vibratory potential. Black bodies cut movement's law, drawing us closer to riotous form. In light of such history, black movement might be conceived of as the performance of what Fred Moten calls the "sociopoetics of the riot" (Moten 2011), where black moving bodies are the reminder but also the remainder of a history of interdicted and coerced movement. (23)

Shadey's performance of kneeling, however still and silent it was in form, generates a 'vibratory potential' that is energised by 'a history of interdicted and coerced movement'. Bradley's reference to a 'vibratory potential' is significant. In a kinaesthetic (rather than a metaphorical) sense, this term registers those tiny shifts in bodily movement that

Fig. 2: Sir Keir Starmer and Labour Deputy, Angela Rayner, taking a knee in a meeting room in the UK Parliament, June 2020 (Sky News).

occur in immobilised, stationary states such as standing or kneeling. 'Vibratory' describes the disorientating and intended shifts that King assigns to Black performance. Needless to say, kneeling affords visibility to the able-bodied protester; 'vibratory' can be extended to describe various stationary modes of assembly in public space. Reflecting on my own experience, it registers the difficulty of balancing while taking a knee. Over the several protests I attended, this migratory gesture 'swarmed' through the march several times, immobilising everyone in different orientations and for various durations. If anything, the *doing of it* compromises the image of unity that is its central effect.

A Call for Unity*

Consider the spectacle of Labour leader, Sir Keir Starmer, genuflecting in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, and note that in his former role of Director of Public Prosecutions, Starmer arranged overnight courts to maximise prosecutions in the aftermath of the London Riots of 2011

(@libcom.org). In transcribed form Shadey's speech would seem to share the affirmative language of statements released by public institutions at this time, his performance of kneeling dovetailing with this kind of state appropriation. On the contrary, Shadey's call definitely swerves away from this order of spectacle as Black performance. Reading with Christina Sharpe, I argue that Shadey performs *otherwise*, with a difference. As she proposes: 'The asterisk after a word functions as the wildcard, and I am thinking of the trans* […] as a means to mark the ways the slave and the Black occupy what Saidiya Hartman calls "the position of the unthought"' (Sharpe 30).

Sharpe is here in conversation with a community of Black feminist scholars through a shared citational practice. Her use of the asterisk responds to Hortense Spillers's call for an 'insurgent ground' in the wake of the fact that, as Spillers has written, 'every feature of social and human differentiation disappears in public discourses regarding the African-American person' (78). Sharpe's expression of forms of occupying what Hartman calls 'the position of the unthought' points to improvised styles and effects of *movement* in speech, the prefix trans* serving to 'enable', as Sylvia Wynter has written, 'the rhetorical energy of black nationalist discourse so powerfully "to mobilise the sign of blackness"' (111). Just as the uniformity of kneeling is surrogated in Shadey's performance, per King's genealogy, so is his speech; uttered in this context, the word 'unity' follows a different logic. As Denise Ferreira Da Silva, in dialogue with Wynter, observes, 'traversability […] assumes linear causality, the existence of different points in time, but does not obey its limitation, which is efficient causality' (94). While Shadey's performance and speech is patterned after liberal discourse, to read the Eurocentric universalism of 'unity' into his call for unity* would be to ignore his Black performance, defined by capacities of 'rhetorical energy' and 'traversability'.

More precisely, we can say that where kneeling has been choreographed into a stale neutrality by state actors like Starmer, it is in this context a migratory gesture with a specific genealogy tied to

blackness, as that which *traverses* Shadey's call for unity*, mobilising those assembled via a contagious act of 'vibratory potential'. This gesture may have been absorbed by the choreography of the state, its immobilisation of the subject rendering them docile, yet Shadey is a Black man, representing the 'constitutive outside' of the liberal message of unity that kneeling serves. Of course, Black people constitute docile citizens in contemporary social life too. However, a confrontation of anti-Black violence allows us to grapple with the antagonisms made visible by the call for unity* amid lockdown. His performance dislocates this gesture from its state-sanctioned codification, linking it to a wider gestural economy that indexes Bradley's 'sociopoetics of the riot' (23).

At issue is the ubiquitous slogan 'White Silence is White Violence' and its mediagenic uptake by the state: a slogan that demands white empathy. It entails a mode of identification that, as Saidiya Hartman has proposed, 'is as much due to […] good intentions and heartfelt opposition to slavery as to the fungibility of the captive body' (*Scenes of Subjection* 19). Whether felt by the 19th-Century abolitionist or the contemporary white liberal, Hartman argues that empathy with the plight of the dispossessed conceals a pleasurable means of taking possession of the other; in her view, the sincere projection of feeling establishes a kind of 'disembodied universality' that is ultimately consonant with mastery of the enslaved in 'the aftermath of slavery' (21). In structure, this slogan is a demand by white people that puts the spotlight on white people to end the liberal toleration of violence against Black people. Yet, in its fantasised address to the inwardness of the citizen, this slogan's psychic investment arguably draws on the same kind of moral censure that has, under other circumstances, led white liberals to fixate on the violence of young Black men.[6]

Simply put, 'violence' is a constitutive agent of racialisation that is not overcome by the mobilisation of white leftists; the murder of George Floyd establishes a hermeneutic circle, its spectacularised

6 See Stuart Hall and others' important analysis of mugging and moral panic.

violence reinscribing white liberalism as structurally dominant.[7] This slogan's abstract invocation of violence is inseparable from the fact that, as Sharpe after Frank Wilderson III has written, 'it is gratuitous violence that occurs at the level of a structure that constitutes the Black as the constitutive outside' (Sharpe 28)—Afropessimism, in short, argues that 'gratuitous violence' is necessary in modern society to 'secure the division between the Human and the Black' (Wilderson). As Wilderson goes on to report, this analysis grew out of a frustration with 'multiracial coalitions' and the recognition that the historical specificity of anti-Black violence was often sidelined by activists.[8] In this sense, the slogan 'White Silence is White Violence' vitiates the production of a coalitional politics. However, precisely because of its reliance on embodiment, this logic of dispossession may be subverted by moments of contagion.

I want to close by suggesting that Shadey's call for unity* is effective in swerving away from liberal discourse. His invitation to kneel, which passed through the crowd, redirected the energies of this 'linear causality', producing a different kind of collective, *Whether you're black, whether you're white. Whether you're Asian, or whether you're anything, do not be shy.* Shadey's call opens the door to another kind of interaction, one that seeks to move beyond the fixity of white liberal guilt. Like an invitation to dance, *do not be shy* encourages self-exposure.[9] A friend recently asked if I had been in touch with Shadey.[10] Realising there was a gap in communication, I sent him a message on Instagram. What had seemed obvious to my friend, coupled with the

7 As Cedric J. Robinson writes, '[t]he creation of the Negro was obviously at the cost of immense expenditures of psychic and intellectual energies in the West. The exercise was obligatory. It was an effort commensurate with the importance Black labor power possessed for the world economy' (4).

8 While acknowledging the contested position of Afropessimism within Blackness Studies, I introduce this critical framework here as Black Lives Matter is a coalitional movement centred on anti-Black violence.

9 I am indebted to Akshi Singh for this thought.

10 Thank you to Gabriella Okon for making this point.

lack of a reply from Shadey, made me reflect on my own positionality and actual distance from coalitional work. Shadey's call figures the protest as a site of struggle and unlearning. The difficulty of sustaining a painful contact with the tarmac, 'where performance meets ontology', submitted the crowd *as a whole* to the experience of downward mobility and social dispossession (Marriott 40), a gravitational pull that brought mystified bonds of white empathy and privilege to the surface. As such, I argue that the doing of 'taking a knee' is *other than* its circulation as a sign of unity; 'vibratory potential' itself mobilising a coalition in action. A history of 'interdicted movement' was transmitted through the balancing act of taking a knee, untethering this gesture from its representation by the state, so that when the protestors stood up, social movement was produced. Following Bradley, we can say that kneeling's choreographed fixity was disrupted by its transmission as Black performance, producing unity through contagion. Further, Shadey's call intervened into the government lockdown, reconfiguring the social organisation of the street. In this sense, kneeling joins other scenes in the protests that produced similar contagious moments of solidarity.

At the end of one protest in June, someone shouted 'let's march to Grenfell!'. The unplanned march from Battersea to Kensington was obstructed by police at several points but the protest did reach Grenfell Tower. On 14 June 2017, a fire broke out in Grenfell Tower, a council estate in West London, killing 72 residents. This tragedy brought the Tory Government's racist austerity politics into sharp relief, as the fire was a direct result of legislative decisions not to carry out necessary social work. Led by a grassroots campaign, a silent walk was held each month after the fire.

In the late afternoon sun, everyone sat in small circles on Latimer Road while twenty metres away, a caravan of riot vans were parked, the police observing. This assemblage of circles of tired protesters, as well as the historic spectacle of a protestor kneeling on the bronze, shit-covered slave-trader's neck in Bristol, join Shadey's performance to produce a newly radical set of demands that are inseparable from the experience of euphoria and grief.

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Staging a Queer Relationality: Destabilising Ballet in Brendan Fernandes' *The Master and Form*

By Dylan Sherman

Abstract

In this article, I examine Kenyan-born Canadian multidisciplinary artist Brendan Fernandes' 2018/19 *The Master and Form*, a sculptural installation and performance that addresses mastery, constraint, and freedom within ballet through the artist's experience as a young queer ballet dancer of colour. Pairing Sara Ahmed's phenomenological readings of queerness and whiteness with scholarship on the politics of race, sexuality, and dance, I explore how Fernandes processes the historical forms of ballet that excluded his queer, non-white body and creates a space where a lack of balance can become the norm. Even as his cast of dancers are limited by the installation's rigid structures, I argue that they are given freedom within the largely improvisational performance to generate iconoclastic forms and sustained disorientations as they work with, against, and beyond the sculptures. Fernandes' engagement with ballet in *The Master and Form* displays the discipline's stringency but also its potential for malleability, demonstrating how the 'gray zone' of museum performances can be effectively used to critically explore minority identities. Though the work's austerity and affectlessness could contest its radicality or potential for invoking progress, its visible adjustments to ballet ultimately speak to the power of gestures to craft alternatives to dominant systems.

In a gallery in the Whitney Museum of American Art, two black, squarely cut wooden rods extend upwards to form a V with the support of a triangular base and a third protruding rod. The two tips of the V are wrapped with black leather and the sculpture stands on a circular black carpet. This sculpture, entitled *In First, in Fifth* (2018), is an art object in its own right, with a dark, enigmatic aura reminiscent of minimalist sculpture. But as the title suggests, it is specifically designed to support a ballet dancer in first or fifth position. And indeed, the sculpture can be activated by performance (see fig. 1). But here, the dancer rejects the satisfaction of filling in its negative space with the sculpture's namesake position. Instead, he surpasses its boundaries, barely even touching the edge of its carpet in his extended lunge position.

Fig. 1: Brendan Fernandes, *In First, in Fifth*, 2018. Stained ash wood, leather, and carpet. From *The Master and Form*, 2018/19. Performer: Hector Cerna. Photo by Matthew Carasella Photography. Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

This alignment (or lack thereof) is unexpected; the 'proper' position appears obvious based on the sculpture's title and construction. But it is just one of many such misaligned moments that emerge from the fusion of body and object during the one-hour performances that accompany *The Master and Form*, a 2018/19 sculptural installation by Brendan Fernandes, a Kenyan-born Canadian multidisciplinary artist of Goan descent. Over the course of my repeated viewings of *The Master and Form*—I saw the performance once a week for ten weeks as it was presented in the 2019 Whitney Biennial—I never grew tired of it. I would always notice a new spatial configuration achieved by a dancer engaging with—or not engaging with—a sculpture. By combining the constraint of a segmented performance score and a series of largely unpliable objects with the freedom of improvisation, Fernandes allows his dancers to explore balance and disorientation, critiquing the language of ballet by surpassing its restrictions.

The performances are divided into six segments in which the cast of five dancers rotate between three series of objects. They begin on five sculptures (including *In First, in Fifth*) that are arranged around the perimeter of the gallery. Each sculpture reifies a certain ballet position and is individually engaged by a dancer. Working on, against,

and beyond these devices (as the cast and Whitney production staff colloquially referred to them), the dancers fluidly occupy and contest the negative space of each device's respective position. For the second segment, the dancers leave their devices and come together in the large scaffolding-like structure in the center of the gallery, freely weaving their limbs through its forest of rounded metal rods (this structure was colloquially referred to as 'the cage' by the dancers and production team, see fig. 2). For the third segment, the dancers stand around the perimeter of the cage and hold onto vertical rods with one hand to execute archetypal ballet barre combinations in unison: *pliés, tendus, dégagés, rondes de jambes*, and finally *grandes battements*. After returning to the devices and the central cage for the fourth and fifth segment, the dancers conclude the performance by taking to the ten ropes hung along the rear wall of the gallery, with each dancer using two ropes to counterbalance and elevate their bodies (fig. 3). Even as the dancers always follow the fixed device-cage-barre-device-cage-ropes score for the one-hour performances, the only expressly set choreography is the barre exercises.

By staging *The Master and Form* in the museum, Fernandes removes ballet from the spectacle of the proscenium stage and scrutinises it in the intimate proximity of the gallery. Here, he joins a niche yet rich group of artists who work within and with the museum to decontextualise and remix ballet. To present just two brief examples, William Forsythe's popular interactive exhibition *Choreographic Objects*, presented at the ICA Boston and MFA Houston in 2018 and 2019, offered visitors the chance to engage and animate their own bodies with reified choreographic 'technologies' that Forsythe might use when devising one of his proscenium pieces. Meanwhile, for Yve Laris Cohen's 2012 installation and performance *Coda* at New York's SculptureCenter, the artist built a 75-foot-long vertical expanse of sprung marley floor as an installation and then, in a series of six performances, meticulously cleaned it using his own T-shirt, invoking an expanded view of labour in dance.

Fig. 2: Brendan Fernandes, *The Master and Form*, 2018/19. Performers: Tiffany Mangulabnan, Hector Cerna, Charles Gowin, Violetta Komyshan, Josep Maria Monreal Vidal. Photo by Matthew Carasella Photography. Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

Fig. 3: Brendan Fernandes, *The Master and Form*, June 7, 2019. Photo by Paula Court. Performers: Tiffany Mangulabnan, Mauricio Vera, Josep Maria Monreal Vidal. Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

This range of possibilities for re-working of ballet performance in museal spaces aligns with Claire Bishop's positioning of dance exhibitions in a ripe 'gray zone' between the black box theatre and the white cube gallery (24). Such a space also offers queer artists and artists of colour the opportunity to emphatically assert their live presence in an institution that, as Diana Taylor observes, has 'long taken the cultural Other out of context and isolated it, reducing the live to a dead object behind glass' (66). And even as performers act within and on the museum, rejecting the fixedness of a static object or brief wall label, their presence also extends beyond it. As Erin Silver writes about Fernandes' performance work, 'the deliberate situatedness of the dancer's body… delineat[es] the chasm between bodies and the physical space of the gallery and its invisible structures of organization both within and outside' (96). An essay on *The Master and Form* could disregard this complex 'situatedness' and read the work on a purely formal level as an interrogation of the place of discipline within ballet's ontology. But Fernandes speaks at length to the importance of his non-white and queer identities to his work, and I feel that turning a blind eye to this would neglect the depth of this work.

In my subsequent investigation of race and queerness in *The Master and Form*, I draw inspiration from Jose Muñoz's concept of disidentification and seek to identify moments in which Fernandes slants ballet's line of inheritance, a subject-object relationship I call a queer relationality. This skewed orientation that can be seen in the work of many queer dance and performance artists of colour who configure themselves in relation to canonical works or forms from the white Western cultural canon. I see a queer relationality in Ishmael Houston-Jones' ongoing project *Looking for Laure*, in which he casts various duos, such as one Black and one white male dance artist, in postures that inhabit and rework the racial and gender politics of the nude white prostitute and the subservient Black maid from Édouard Manet's iconic 1863 painting *Olympia* (Houston-Jones). I see a queer relationality in *Séance*, a 2007 performance by Cree Indigenous artist Paul Monkman at the Royal Ontario Museum in which his drag alter-

ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle resurrects and confronts nineteenth-century 'history' painters such as Paul Kane who painted fabricated inventions of Indigenous people, establishing misrepresentation as fact for generations to come (Monkman). And, in spite of its initial impression of cleanness or austerity, I see a queer relationality in Fernandes' *The Master and Form* by reading it through the artist's more explicitly personal work.

In this article, I center Fernandes' lived experience and locate the origin of *The Master and Form* in the artist's history as a young ballet student and outspoken discussions of how his identity as a queer person of colour influences his work. Pairing Sara Ahmed's phenomenological readings of queerness and whiteness with contemporary scholars working between race, sexuality, and dance, I explore how Fernandes physicalises and expands his dissonant relationship to ballet's whiteness and ultimately creates a space where a queer lack of balance can become the norm. The performance's improvisatory structure and the dancers' unconventional gestures made by Fernandes' diverse cast work to dismantle 'the white swan' as the ideal figure of ballet in the Western imagination, pointing us towards a future where ballet can be a welcoming space for dancers of all backgrounds and identities.

Origin Stories, Re-Worked

I begin my study of *The Master and Form* by pulling away from its present site in the 2019 Whitney Biennial and going back in time to Fernandes' youth. Here, I am motivated by Kareem Khubchandani's resonant declaration that 'origin stories matter [...] to us as queer people' (199): 'As queers, as dancers, as queer dancers, we are success stories, errant futures predicted in origin stories that could not be curtailed by propriety and respectability' (200). Fernandes' resilient origin story encapsulates his journey with ballet. He started dancing in his youth and continued through his senior year of college when a hamstring injury forced him to stop his dance training (Morais). Reflecting on his experience with ballet, he asserts how 'dancing as a young boy and the

feeling of being on stage [gave] me an immense feeling of freedom' that he did not always experience in everyday life as a young queer person of colour (qtd. in Kennedy). But at the same time, Fernandes recalls how 'my feet did not have [the high arches that are considered to be] required conditions of beauty [in ballet] and so I worked on them by wearing the foot stretcher… I pushed my body to reflect the contours of the device' (qtd. in Metcalfe and Mowry). Even though ballet gave him freedom, its entrenched idea of the perfect body also cast him out.

Fernandes confronts the physical and mental legacy of his ballet training in his 2014 performance *Standing Leg* (fig. 4). Dressed minimally in a black tank top and shorts, the artist uses a foot stretcher to re-shape his feet just as he did in his youth; his impossible goal is to stand up while keeping his right foot trapped in the elastic strap of the stretcher. His intense concentration is visible as he rolls on his back and scoots around in circles, but he never defeats the constraint of the foot stretcher and fully stands. This performance brings its audience intimately and brutally close to Fernandes' futile efforts as he reembodies his fraught history with freedom and constraint in ballet. He connects this personal struggle with the broader history of ballet in interviews, pointing to how ballet began within Western hegemony as 'a way to bow to Louis XIV' in seventeenth-century France (qtd. in Welsh). Considered with attention to its own origin story, ballet becomes a non-neutral form of movement that upholds the power of Western patriarchy. Fernandes further names how whiteness becomes valued as a pure mark of untainted, lithe fragility under this framework: 'bodies of colour have been deemed "too strong" or their musculature accused of not allowing the dancer to perform in [certain] ways, distracting [them] from being effortless and free' (qtd. in Kennedy).

Fernandes' critique of ballet's exclusionary conditions aligns with the work of dance studies scholars who scrutinise the medium's troubled relationship to race, gender, and sexuality (Gottschild; Foster; Stoneley). Particularly relevant to the scope of this section is the artist's critique of ballet prizing white bodies more than bodies of colour, a valuation that extends across Euro-American society's maintenance

of whiteness as an invisible yet ever-present standard. Because these racialised frameworks have been absorbed into the dance studio, white bodies are established as the dominant standard unmarked by racialisation while bodies of colour are inescapably racialised and incapable of performing as completely 'ordinary' or 'normal'. From the individual dancing body marked (by race) or unmarked (by whiteness), a broader framework for the studio and stage develops. As Rebecca Chaleff articulates in her article critiquing the whiteness of postmodern dance, '[t]he ordinary body activates an ordinary space oriented around whiteness; inversely, the unseen whiteness of this space determines which bodies appear ordinary within it' (77). The unmarked status of white bodies in dance spaces is an everyday reality for Fernandes and other dancers and choreographers of colour. When Fernandes was on a panel with taisha paggett, a queer Black American dancer and choreographer, they both spoke to how they have struggled to stand in the established (white) lineage of dance history (Silver 86). This uneasy relationship with tradition underscores how bodies of colour cannot neutrally occupy the same lineage as white bodies and further exposes the limitations of labeling the white body as 'ordinary' or 'universal'.

Existing under the invisible standard of whiteness as a person of colour places stress on the body, a phenomenon drawn out by Sara Ahmed in 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness' (2007). She posits the successful body as white and unrestrained by its race, an advantage that is not by any means a measure of inherent competence but rather a gradually constructed 'bodily form of privilege' that comes across as the 'ability to move through the world without losing one's way' (161). The mobility of bodies of colour, in turn, is restricted: 'when someone's whiteness is in dispute then they come under "stress," which in turn threatens bodily motility, or what the body "can do"' (160). This corporeal sensation of difference is readily aligned with the embodied practice of dance, especially vis-à-vis André Lepecki's work on 'choreopolitics'. Following Michel Foucault, he articulates how choreography can be considered 'a site for investigating agency, compliance, the force of imperatives, and the capacity to collectively

Fig. 4: Brendan Fernandes, *Standing Leg*, 2014. Photo by Felix Chan. Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

surrender oneself, as dancer, to an outside force' (16). The exclusivity and bodily conditioning of this 'outside force' brings forth pressure. In the case of ballet, a dancer's success is dependent upon how obediently they can align with or 'surrender' to ballet's regime of codified positions, including its invisible yet dominant infrastructure of whiteness—a stressful task, to say the least.

Fernandes' excavation of his own body's history of stress in relation to ballet's invisible whiteness can be seen in the tense exchanges between dancer and sculpture in *The Master and Form*. Standing on

the carpet adjacent to the *In First, in Fifth*, a dancer traces his arms in a broad arc around his body as he moves them to the downward circle of a low fifth position, dutifully following the motion of his limbs with his eyes. At the conclusion of this gesture, his lowered arms curve around the middle of *In First, in Fifth*'s V-shaped extension. There is a pleasing synergy in this final form—the sculpture molds with the dancer's position such that he can directly touch its wooden rods without changing the shape of his arm position. His classically trained body is well-equipped to occupy this position, and he does so with striking grace. But even as *In First, in Fifth* amplifies the elegant precision of his position, it also discourages the dancer from reaching into the gestural space *beyond* his arm's curve in the ordained low fifth position; attempting a different position while remaining adjacent to the sculpture would break the pleasing object-body symmetry. Such a limited alignment—the sculpture can only be properly 'completed' when the dancer wraps his arm around in very precise positions—resonates with the formalised exactitude of ballet's positions that can, under the historical Euro-American logic of ballet, only be achieved in their most ideal state by white bodies.

Standing in Fifth, Queerly

This reification of ballet's exclusionary whiteness is harsh and could even be read as the artist unduly inflicting restraint on his dancers. But returning to Fernandes' voice offers a path forward in investigating what is opened up in such a display. In an interview, the artist states:

> It's all about lived experiences. I'm a Kenyan, Indian, who grew up in Toronto, who lives in the U.S. now, and I've lived in other places, like the Caribbean. Moving into new spaces affect[s] me, whether it's just the daily life experience of being challenged because I'm queer, understanding traditions and relations with my family, or just being in a foreign place and trying to figure out

> if this place is a home for me… It's a hybridization of different experiences that make me who I am. (qtd. in Hochberger)

Here, Fernandes speaks directly to the intersection of identities and experiences that have influenced his life, considering them together as a hybrid group of influences rather than as isolated or unrelated categories. Given how fluidly Fernandes names these points of identity formation, I realise that I cannot read *The Master and Form* as originating in the artist's biography without also considering how his queer identity influences *The Master and Form*.

But rather than distinguish this from my previous discussion of the artist's experience as a dancer of colour, I take up queerness as an intersectional marker of overlapping minority identities, following Clare Croft's acknowledgment that 'queer' has too often been a 'moniker for whiteness, disaggregating LGBTQ subjectivity from race' (5). I am further indebted to Muñoz, whose imaginative meditations on queerness vividly illustrate how the concept can be expansively considered: 'Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world' (*Cruising Utopia* 1). In a world still embedded with overlapping schemas of oppression, minoritarian subjects can gain more life by approaching the world queerly and imagining a different one where their persistent vision is no longer a point of stress.

An intersectional look into *The Master and Form* can be initiated through Muñoz's theory of disidentification, which formulates how queer artists of colour work within and against the systems of power that designate them as 'less than'. One key part of this theory is 'the me and the not me': the aspects of the system the artist still identifies with or connects to in spite of it all, and the aspects of the system they seek to subvert (*Disidentifications* 3). In *The Master and Form*, we can see Fernandes' 'me' as his identification with the freedom of achieving elevated positions that ballet enables, whereas the 'not me' is his *dis*identification with the systemic constraints that unduly

restrict his body from fully inhabiting ballet's positions. Following his inability to fully inhabit his own multifaceted identity in the dance studio, Fernandes holds onto ballet's points of constraint but pushes its form to encompass a wider spectrum of identities, forging a queer relationality between its exclusive path and his hope for its future.

But how exactly does he do this? Turning again to Ahmed's critical re-working of phenomenology allows me to appreciate the queer potential inherent in *The Master and Form*'s structure. In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), she defines straightness as the act of being in alignment: 'Things seems "straight" (on the vertical axis), when they are "in line," which means when they are aligned with other lines [...]. The vertical is hence normative; it is shaped by the repetition of bodily and social actions over time' (66). If straightness can be a normative sexual orientation and a three-dimensional orientation, how can we understand queerness in spatial terms, especially with regards to dance? Thomas DeFrantz's 'Queer Dance in Three Acts' offers a rich template: 'queer being reflects *an orientation to another*: a near and far, rather than an address; **queer doing** assumes an interaction of self and other. **doing queer**, then, becomes something always shared, always interpreted and recognized between/among' (170, my italics, bold in original). Rather than suppressing difficult aspects of self-identity in pursuit of respectable legibility or a didactic 'address' towards others, queer doing and dancing embraces its skewed starting point and follows its slant to a shared commonality and generative embrace of difference.

Thinking about (sexual) orientation in ballet quickly brings up the form's obsession with moments of balance that are achieved in spite of a dancers' limbs' orientation away from the body's vertical axis. In *The Sleeping Beauty*'s iconic Rose Adagio, Princess Aurora (whose heterosexuality is on display as she courts four male dukes) strives to balance and align her body with a vertical axis, even though she is not standing straight up and down—she stands *en pointe* on her right light with her left leg turned out and bent behind her in *attitude*, her right arm holding a series of four suitors' hand for balance, and her left arm curved above her head in high fifth. In these notoriously

difficult sequences, Princess Aurora must prove the persistence of her straightness by ensuring that her body remains stabilised and vertically oriented despite the asymmetry of her attitude position. Straightness is visible in many other places in ballet: recall the dancers whose 180-degree extensions are praised as being 'as straight as a ruler' or the firm ubiquity of the male-female duet in ballets from all eras.

So what happens when queer orientations remain queer and are not re-straightened in a world conditioned by straightness? What happens when—as Ahmed asks—the queer orientation 'does not overcome what is "off line," and hence *acts out of line with others*[?]' (*Queer Phenomenology* 107, emphasis in original). How can queer and non-white dance produce '*counter*moves and *counter*discourses' that resist the default condition of straightness? (Lepecki 18, my italics). In *The Master and Form*, Fernandes embraces the dissonance and opportunity of queer orientations, allowing ballet to fall—and stay—out of alignment as his cast resists the vertical 'pull of straight life' (DeFrantz 175) through disorientated positions.

This queer orientation of the work can be illustrated by once again observing a singular gesture. In the central cage structure, a dancer sits on a rod three feet off the floor that runs parallel to the ground with his back to museum viewers and his legs stretched out in front of him. Hooking his feet onto an adjacent rod to anchor his body, he dramatically bends backwards and drapes himself over the rod so that he looks at the audience upside-down, all while his left arm sweeps over his head and just barely caresses the gallery floor (fig. 5). And instead of just passing through this upside-down position to and from his more stable, vertically-oriented seated position, he mines his new orientation, windmilling his arms and scanning the contours of the gallery from his new vantage point. This dancer could only turn fifth position on its head—in effect, 'queering' it—because of Fernandes' broad allowance for improvisation and freedom within performances. This aligns well with DeFrantz's recipe for making queer dances: 'we create stabilized collections of gestures that are at once precarious and fussy' (174). In the absence of delineated choreography, the dancers naturally use the

Fig. 5: Brendan Fernandes, *The Master and Form*, August 9, 2019. Photo by Dylan Sherman. Performers pictured, left to right: Hector Cerna, Tiffany Mangulabnan, Amy Saunder, Violetta Komyshan, Mauricio Vera. Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

stable structure of the installation as a jumping-off point for generating destabilised and re-worked ballet movements, creating a porous and open rather than restrictive and hyper-specific framework for ballet performance.

The Conundrum of Visibility

The Master and Form's deep engagement with personal sources and embrace of oscillating states of balance reach towards a broader community of marginalised dancers and people in its invocation of a world wherein ballet and other ideologically constraining forces do not restrict belonging based on identity. Those who experience *The Master and Form* as an installation and performance, in Muñoz's words, 'see the past and potentiality imbued within [the] object, the ways in which it might represent a mode of being that was then not quite there but nonetheless an opening' (*Cruising Utopia* 9). Through Fernandes inhabiting and reconciling his own fraught background with ballet and the ways in which he was not included, the personal is opened outwards.

But in staging and reproducing the exclusionary conditions of ballet, especially in the already-exclusive space of the museum, one could justifiably argue that Fernandes is not truly degrading barriers and reaching towards an inclusive future. Moreover, *The Master and Form* is in some ways too willing to fuse the exclusivity of ballet with contemporary art's own fraught culture of impassivity and austerity that, as Jennifer Doyle astutely observes, aligns 'one form of difficulty (in which a work's meaning is not readily available to the viewer) with a regulation of affect (in which opacity, the difficulty of meaning, is packaged as cool, distanced, and anti-emotional)' (8). Perhaps this cool impenetrability is only fair, as it faithfully represents and scrutinises ballet training's emphasis on suppressing pain and 'making it look effortless'. But instead of replicating these stressful conditions of ballet, what if Fernandes had instead *grand battement*-ed them off their pedestal and thrown them into a space that welcomes affect, where dancers can crack their balletic composure and let out screams of frustration in moments when they feel ballet's pain? What if he had embraced DeFrantz's definition of 'queer doing' that calls for an 'extravagance of some sort, an excess so that the queerness will not be mistaken for some brand of errant straightness' (171)?

In response, I invoke the fickle conundrum of visibility. As Joshua Chambers-Letson teaches us in his work on the queerness of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' conceptual art, queer artists of colour often must first perform 'the recognizable role of institutionally sanctioned artist' (135) in order to gain access to art's white, heteronormative spaces and then get to work eroding their exclusivity. Just like Gonzalez-Torres, Fernandes must replicate some of contemporary art's dominant conditions—in this case, its affectless austerity—in order to gain entry to the Whitney and form a queer relationality with ballet. *The Master and Form* does not topple ballet's elitism, and perhaps it does retain too much of its restraining discipline, but at least it does the work of breaking inside ballet in order to mine and adjust its foundational codes. Gonzalez-Torres once said that he wanted to 'work within the contradictions of the system and try to create a better place' (qtd. in

Chambers-Letson 137). The same could be said of Fernandes, who creates a work that can be identified and read within the schema of ballet but ultimately exceeds it through the validation of resonant, off-balance gestures. Working within the contradictions of ballet, he reaches towards a 'better place'.

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Spasms over balance: Posthuman perspectives, antinormative *becomings*, and the *sticky* runway of vogue femme

By Christina Tente

Abstract

This article explores vogue femme as a performative way of creating ruptures with normative understandings of balance. As normative balance, I define a set of binary and heteronormative stereotypes and conventions that are enforced on a sociopolitical level, contributing to the survival of the capitalist patriarchal system. The focus lies on two specific elements of vogue femme: the spins and dips, and the floor performance. Both elements open up, I suggest, possibilities for 'posthuman becomings', as they are improvisational, coincidental and ephemeral, based on the here and now of the dancing bodies. The article is based on fieldwork conducted between January and March 2020. I employed participatory observation and ethnographic interviews with voguers in vogue femme sessions and ballrooms in Berlin and Malmö in order to explore and analyse potential posthuman aspects and the aesthetics of the dance, the possibilities it offers for deconstructing normative identities and becoming-other through erratic spins, dips, and drops. In this process, spasm and sweat are considered to be central generators of affect. The characteristics of the voguing space, as well as the atmosphere that is constructed every time the bodies meet and collide with each other are also explored.

Introduction

> '*The category is... vogue femme. Anybody walking?*'
>
> The commentator announces the category, the DJ starts the beat, and *Jaja* presents herself on the improvised runway somewhere in Charlottenburg. She catwalks with confidence in an exaggerated fashion, while working a very elaborate hand performance that frames her face and emphasises her chest and hips. Suddenly, the beat gives a crash, which motivates her to do a wild spin and drop abruptly on the floor, as if the ground is calling to her like a magnet. As she drops, the audience

> goes crazy, clapping, snapping, and cheering. I know that this is the first time *Jaja* walks in drag and I share the audience's excitement. *Jaja* twerks on the floor, splits, arches her spine and lifts her legs; she makes it seem effortless, though beads of sweat concentrate on her forehead and drip on the floor. Her arched chest spasms with every breath, as she gasps for air, as she gets back up on her legs, spins again, and drops in ecstatic and erratic loops. The following day we will meet for an interview and *Jaja* will tell me 'my heart was beating so fast, my body was shaking, my head was up in the air, it was so exciting! I think I'm finally who I always wanted to be, I dance the way I want to dance. Now I don't care anymore, I'm just so happy!' (Notes from fieldwork, January 2020).

The above excerpt from my fieldnotes paints a picture of the atmosphere on a kiki ball night. For a few hours, the place that hosts the ball becomes a feast, a space to explore and experiment with oneself, an intimate community, a heterotopia hidden in the middle of the dystopian metropolis. In this space, voguing presents a way to dismantle norms, to become-other while dancing in community with others.

This article seeks to explore voguing as a performative way of creating ruptures with the normative balance, which I define as the neoliberal heteropatriarchal binary norms that we are called to perform in (and impose on) our everyday lives. I specifically explore 'vogue femme', which is based on the construction and performance of plethoric hyperfeminine dancing personas. Vogue femme consists of five elements: hand performance, catwalk, duckwalk, spins and dips, and floor performance. The article focuses on the latter two, tracing potential posthuman perspectives, possibilities for deconstructing normative identities, and *becoming-other* processes through erratic spins, dips, and drops. The concept of *becoming*, borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is approached as a political and aesthetic/

performative tool that clashes with pre-inscribed normative identities. I propose that vogue femme seeks to dismantle the heteronormative and capitalist balance by creating a space for imbalanced bodies to perform themselves in unconventional, ironic, and exaggerated manners.

Between January and March 2020, I conducted participatory observation at balls, voguing sessions, and vogue femme workshops, as well as interviews with voguers in Malmö and Berlin. I also explored my personal embodied relationship to vogue femme by dancing in(to) the field together with my sources, attempting to replicate their movements, learning how to walk and pose, and reflecting on my body as a research tool and as a performative force. The article includes excerpts from the fieldwork and quotes from my (anonymised) sources as empirical material which is analysed through the lens of posthuman theory, affect theory, and poststructuralism.

The existing research and literature on ballroom culture and voguing is multifaceted. It includes historical, postcolonial, and gender studies' perspectives, as voguing and ballroom culture have been intertwined with the histories of Black and Latinx queer movements. Even though my contribution to the field stems from a posthumanist and visual cultural approach, I am particularly inspired by the work of scholar and performer Marlon M Bailey (2011 et al). Bailey navigates voguing and ballroom culture with an emphasis on gender performativity and with various methodological references to (auto)ethnography. As for its history, in its early days, the ballroom was a community-based social event, a place of belonging for Black and Latinx queers that were excluded from the white gay spaces, and a space for competition amongst the different Houses (families). Voguing in particular was born in Riker Islands' prison in the 1970s and was brought as a competition category into the ballrooms of Harlem by Paris Dupree (Lawrence 5). Initially, voguing was based on the creative replication of models' poses in Vogue magazine—hence its name—and gradually evolved into a complicated dance and an integral part of the ballroom as 'a mix of competitive instinct, athletic ability and, above all, a desire to be seen (rather than a desire to become part of the crowd,

which motivated most club and party dancers)' (Lawrence 6). In today's ballrooms, there are three voguing categories: the old way, the new way, and vogue femme.

A voguing performance is not choreography-based, but rather improvisational, building on some existing elements (moves). It requires precision, accuracy, and creativity in terms of performatively interpreting the existing elements. Spontaneity is also important, as the performer responds to the competitor's moves, the music, the general energy of the room. The goal is to be memorable, so the voguing performance is aesthetically over-the-top. In vogue femme, this exaggeration is translated into an over-the-top celebration of femininity, soft moves, dramatic poses, a mixture of hypersexual energy and naivety, irony, whimsy, and often grotesque aesthetics. As my sources have frequently expressed, there is a radical empowerment rooted in this exaggeration. Vogue femme is thus often seen as a 'chance to own my sexuality; I put it in your face rather than sugarcoating it' (*Flora*, January 2020), or a way to 'explore my feminine and masculine sides, and I'm now comfortable with both' (*Bruce*, February 2020), or even to 'dance like a beautiful cyborg' (*Moa*, February 2020). This empowering exaggeration transgresses moderation and normativity, opening up a space for movements beyond balance.

Moving beyond balance. Heterotopic spaces and *sticky* atmospheres

Balance is here defined as the movement of the heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalist system towards sustaining itself, and not as a movement of constant change. Balance is approached as a fixed position, as a rather conservative state and not a progressive process. In that sense, I refer to balance as it is represented in heteronormative and neoliberal rhetorics: it is neither neutral nor entropic; it is based on hegemony and majoritarian power structures. With 'majoritarian', I do not imply that the balance expresses the group that is bigger in numbers. Rather, it supports and is supported by the group that 'assumes a state of power and domination', as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari state

(*A Thousand Plateaus* 105), by making this domination seem natural and inevitable. Deleuze and Guattari approach the dominant subject, the white cis male, as majority/majoritarian, and all others—women, animals, insects, minerals, machines, etc.—are minority/minoritarian. The majoritarian subject is the subject that decides what and who constitutes the normative balance. Respectively, minoritarian subjects seek to move/dance beyond balance by *becoming-other*. The very act of *becoming* can be approached as a decolonisation and a queering; *becoming* is counter-hegemonic, anti-authoritarian, anti-speciesist, and non-binary.

The balance is intertwined with the neoliberal oppressive system and can be traced in various places, forms, and shapes. The normative balance is close to what Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos defines as the Lawscape, i.e. 'the epistemological and ontological tautology of law and the city' ('Atmospheres of law' 36). For Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, the lawscape is omnipresent as long as humans, non-humans, buildings, animals, machines meet (*ibid*). It is inescapable, which means that 'wherever one is in the city […] one swims with and against the various normative flows that constitute the materiality of the lawscape' ('Atmospheres of law' 37). The normative balance may be inescapable, but not indestructible. The voguing bodies inside the ballroom swim—or rather, dance—with and against the normative flows, attempting to bend or break them, creating their own antinormative here and now.

This is expressed on a performative level, as vogue femme includes beyond-balance moves like slipping, sliding, or dropping. Especially during the floor performance, the voguing body trembles, shivers, spasms, twerks. Vogue femme celebrates the literal loss of balance and incorporates it in the performance as a staged move to make the performance even more dramatic. My source, *Ena*, explains it better: 'when you feel you're about to fall, make it look like you meant to fall. Own it, give it character, make them go like *damn girl how you drop*' (March 2020).

The architecture of the ballroom also plays a significant role, creating a space and an atmosphere that facilitates *becomings*, antinormative movements. I define space as the tactile side of the ballroom, the three-dimensional locality where the performance takes place. This can be anywhere, as the space is also the ephemeral spatiality that is created when the participating bodies move towards each other on the runway. It is moveable, it can exist in various places, but it is not easily extendable, it has specific limits or borders, which are further underlined by the participants' immersion, the intimacy and sense of safety that is produced. The space is explored haptically. It is experienced through skin-on-skin contact, by touching the walls, sliding on the runway, dropping and feeling the cold dirty floor against one's backbones.

This space is a heterotopia, defined by Michel Foucault as 'counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (Foucault 3). The ballroom space is literal and symbolic, existing with its own rules while subverting the norms of society with irony. This can be observed in the hyperfeminine, sexual, and, at times, grotesque vogue femme aesthetics. For my sources, vogue femme embraces and celebrates characteristics which are stereotypically considered 'shameful' for a non-cis-male body, like sensuality, softness, audacity. These are subverted and approached with self-reflexivity and irony within the physical ballroom space.

On the other hand, the atmosphere is a phenomenological concept. I define it as a co-produced affect, as methexis experienced by the participating bodies. For Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, the atmosphere is 'an enclosure of affects that spread through affective imitation between bodies' (*Spatial Justice* 5). This atmosphere is fluid, temporary and incidental; it will withdraw as soon as the contact between these bodies stops. I locate the atmosphere in the sensual level; it is the stuffy, yet intoxicating air that circulates amongst the participating bodies, the beads of sweat that drip on the floor and

evaporate, the sense of presence and togetherness that is produced by the feeling that the participating bodies sweat, spasm, and breathe in and out together. The ballroom atmosphere is intimate and sticky.

The intimacy of the ballroom atmosphere was a recurring pattern during the interviews that I conducted. Sources have described it as a *bubble* (*Moa*, February 2020), a *safe space* (*Dre*, February 2020), a *common vibe* (*Liam*, January 2020). The ballroom space strives to facilitate methexis, a collective here and now, where the bodies that are present are moved by a sense of shared desire. I am not implying that each body inside this space will immerse in the voguing performance and experience the ballroom atmosphere in the same way. However, the space and the performance give the participants the possibility to become part of the atmosphere, to circulate methexis amongst them, if they want to. The space and the atmosphere are thus characterised by *stickiness*.

Stickiness is defined by Sara Ahmed as a generator of affect ('Happy Objects' 29), while affect is 'what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects' (*ibid*). As the dancing bodies move with, around, and against each other, they constantly leave sticky impressions, staining, transforming, and emotionally affecting each other with their energies and fluids. Ahmed argues that 'emotions are about movement, but also about attachments' and, respectively, attachments take place 'through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others' (*cultural politics* 11). There is a mutual movement at play. The bodies that occupy the ballroom transform and support each other with various somatic and verbal actions and reactions. In these processes of mutual movement, sweat is a crucial factor. The *sticky*, sweaty impressions that the voguers leave on each other every time their bodies meet, collide, brush against each other, are markers of intimacy, methexis, and presence. Sweat is a fluidity with various connotations. On a visual level, it offers proof of intense somatic labour and transformative processes of immersion. Additionally, it is a fluidity that speaks against proper bodies and rejects the domination of the clean and the spotless, the normatively proper.

Sweat as a *sticky* factor also marks the boundaries of the heterotopia and indicates that it can only be occupied by specific (*sticky, becoming-other*) bodies. Thus, these heterotopic bubbles belong to these bodies and can be decoded by them. As Michel Serres points out, 'to make something its own, the body knows how to leave some personal stain […] appropriation takes place through dirt' (3). Similarly, the becoming bodies appropriate the space through sweat. Intimacy and stickiness are often generated as a body comes across something that has been stained by someone else's bodily fluids. Sweat thus may facilitate what Ahmed defines as 'the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near' ('Happy Objects' 30).

This movement is motivated by rhythm, spasm, and desire. Voguing is based on improvisations and experimentations on pre-existing elements, so there is no choreography to follow in a linear chronological order. The body moves as it wishes to move, responding to the *stickiness* of the ballroom. The sweat here is not the result of a heavily labouring oppressed body, but the result of a desiring body, that is let loose to dance freely. The voguer is free to 'let the spine do the work and just set that body on fire' (*Cleo*, March 2020). Consequently, the sweaty voguing body is presented as the radical Other of the majoritarian balanced body. The balanced body must be clean, spotless, pure. Even extreme somatic labour often appears to have a minimum impact on the (mainstream) visual representations of the majoritarian balanced body. Two examples that I like to think of here are classical ballet and Olympic gymnastics, both of which are based on balance and praise the normative body. In both cases, the body is put under extreme pressure and goes through very intense somatic labour. The visual representations of these two examples, however, are—to a large extent—those of graceful, clean, and perfectly balanced bodies that perform without clashing with other bodies and seemingly without producing any bodily fluids.

On the contrary, the minoritarian imbalanced body oozes fluids. Thinking about the film *Paris is Burning* (1990) as an example of visual representations of voguing, what comes to mind is the thick beads of sweat trickling down Pepper LaBeija's face, Willi Ninja tossing his sweaty hair back during a duck walk, the fading make-up, the damp clothes as the voguers lock and pop against each other on the runway. The facade of systematic balance indicates a sterile environment, where the proper bodies glide avoiding any skin-on-skin contact. On the contrary, the ballroom heterotopia is crowded, narrow, *sticky,* full of colours, noises and smells. Despite the literal lack of space, the bodies still move and clash around the ballroom. As I observed in my fieldwork and as I discussed with my sources, the bodies on the runway yearn for somatic contact, desire to leave repeated impressions on each other's skin, to be seen, to be heard, to *become*. This desire is expressed in the movement itself and is underlined by the body's resort to spasm.

Spasms as ruptures in balance

The spasm as a movement and as a somatic condition has interesting political and philosophical connotations. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi connects it to the hectic speed of semiocapitalism (*Precarious Rhapsody* 149), the inexorable exhaustion that it causes, and the depression that it leads to. Berardi defines the spasm as 'a sudden, abnormal, involuntary muscular contraction, or a series of alternating muscular contractions and relaxations. A spasm is also a sudden, brief spell of energy and an abnormal, painful intensification of the bodily nervous vibration' (*Heroes* 113). For Berardi, the spasm is a 'panic response of the accelerated vibration of the organism' as well as the 'hyper-mobilisation of desire submitted to the forces of economy' (*Heroes* 115). It is the result of a collision between the body's desire to be and capitalism's desire to exploit, to profit from its labouring movements.

Drawing parallels between capitalism and heteronormativity, I see the spasm as the result of a collision between the body's desire to dance beyond balance and the normative balance's desire to limit

the body's expressive and transformative movements. In a similar context, Melissa Blanco Borelli explores the spasm both theoretically and performatively, looking at majoritarian spasming bodies, white cis men who 'benefit from an ideological system that grants them privilege' (59). I find her work fascinating, as it facilitates a dialogue with other types of non-majoritarian spasmogenic dance performances and can be contextualised within vogue femme. In this case, the spasm is a political and performative tool for empowerment, a somatic responses to the angst that is caused by the heteronormative balance. In a capitalist urban centre, the precarious labouring body spasms due to its inability 'to live and breathe in harmony with other bodies' (58). In that sense, I understand Berardi's spasm as a somatic response of a body in an extremely precarious state, pushed to the limit, forced to perform in certain speeds and normative ways. It is simultaneously an involuntary contraction and a conscious act of defiance, which affects the participating/labouring bodies.

Dance allows alternative aesthetic and affective responses, as well as different experiences of space and rhythm. Here, the somatic labour is not exploitative, but expressive, and the body moves around not carrying pre-inscribed identities, but deconstructing them. In voguing, the spasming body is able to create its own radical space and rhythm, where the harmonious coexistence is interrupted by creative, chaotic collisions and withdrawals. The spasm is thus a series of rapid movements that attempt ruptures with the balance. It is crucial to remember that this balance is not an equilibrium, since it is based on exploitation and oppression. Rather, it is a conservative response that the system creates to perpetuate its existence. The bodies that spasm inside the ballroom atmosphere are bodies in state of *becoming*, which choose to spin and dip against, to subvert the normative balance through their performance.

With the spin and dip, the voguer performs a freestyle pirouette and then either gradually slides to the ground or drops abruptly on the backside. As a final pose, the voguer arches the body, keeping one leg bent right next to the backside and the other leg lifted, with the coup-

de-pieu pointing towards the ceiling (see fig. 1). As a visual experience, it is spectacular and captivating; *Rae* even claims that 'if voguing is the sentence, the dip is the exclamation point' (March 2020). As a somatic experience, it is intoxicating, yet rather painful, twisting the body in unusual angles. It requires practice, repetition, and failure upon failure, and it seems hard to stop until it is perfected. 'With practice, the pain won't go away, but you'll start caring less about ruining your knees. It's kind of addictive', comments *Jaja* (February 2020).

The spin and dip gives the voguer a chance to haptically converse with the runway-space and the other bodies that occupy it. This element includes actual contact, intense skin-on-skin brushes. The body spins around its axis and drops or slides to the floor, spreading and exploring it with its senses. After the dip comes the floor performance, a dramatic improvisational vogue femme element. The voguer is free to dance any way they wish, performatively renegotiating and reinventing aesthetic conventions. The body experiments, becomes ethereal, elemental, changes shapes. On the floor, as one source beautifully states, 'I am free, I'm unreal, I'm a show, baby, I'm not from this world!' (Dre, February 2020). Another source has shared a rather poetic experience: 'I spread like ocean, I consume the floor with my body, then I become small, disappear for a second, before I resurface' (*Cleo*, April 2020). The transformative *becomings* are limitless and there is no deciding factor that would indicate which direction they would take, other than the spasmogenic ephemeral here and now of the dancing body.

The floor performance movement is not linear and progressive, but circular and constantly disrupted. The voguer follows the body, and the body responds to the characteristics of the surrounding space. The voguer spasms, fuelled by the collective methexis that is produced by all participating bodies; these are the other voguers, the audience, the judges, the commentator, the DJ, everyone that contributes to the construction of intimate stickiness within the ballroom. Every spasm is a movement against and beyond balance and a performative motivation towards becomings.

In the works of Deleuze and Guattari, the concept of *becoming* is not an imaginary identification, an imitation, a resemblance, but rather an active, never-ending process of embodiment, an 'extreme contiguity within a coupling of two sensations without resemblance' (*What is Philosophy* 173). *Becoming* is a transformative, embodied, climactic process that is never completely fulfilled; it is a movement towards a state or an action, without a teleological cause. For Rosi Braidotti, '*becoming* is the actualisation of the immanent encounter between subjects, entities, and forces, which are apt mutually to affect and exchange parts of each other in a creative and non-individual way' (58). Becoming is 'minoritarian' (*A Thousand Plateaus* 106) and spasmogenic, stemming from an excess of energy from within. The voguing becomings are anti-majoritarian performative acts of queering.

Consequently, the spins and dips and the floor performance, marked by sweat and embellished with spasms, become highly aestheticised political tools of a deviant body that seeks to create radical counter-narratives and counter-sites of expression. The spasms transform the body, the space it occupies, and the other bodies that collectively *become* with it. This liberating process entails a little paradox that is common with dance in general. This is a chaotic state of deconstructing and reconstructing oneself, while being in control and remaining aware of the body. This sense of losing oneself without ever losing control is an act of going beyond balance. Balance is about control in a very specific and narrow context, whereas becoming is about testing and dismantling the existing limits, without entirely erasing the body. The body cannot be erased as it is not only a dancing element, but also a political tool. The identities are deconstructed and renegotiated, but the materiality is still there, never abandoned.

Again, sweat is a very central fluidity, functioning as a proof and as a reminder of presence. Immersing into dance and *becoming-other*, the dancer might lose the conscious connections to the body and momentarily forget about its physical dimension. As *Moa* describes it, 'it's almost like a spiritual experience, because your body exists and you exist, but you're not really there' (February 2020). In these moments

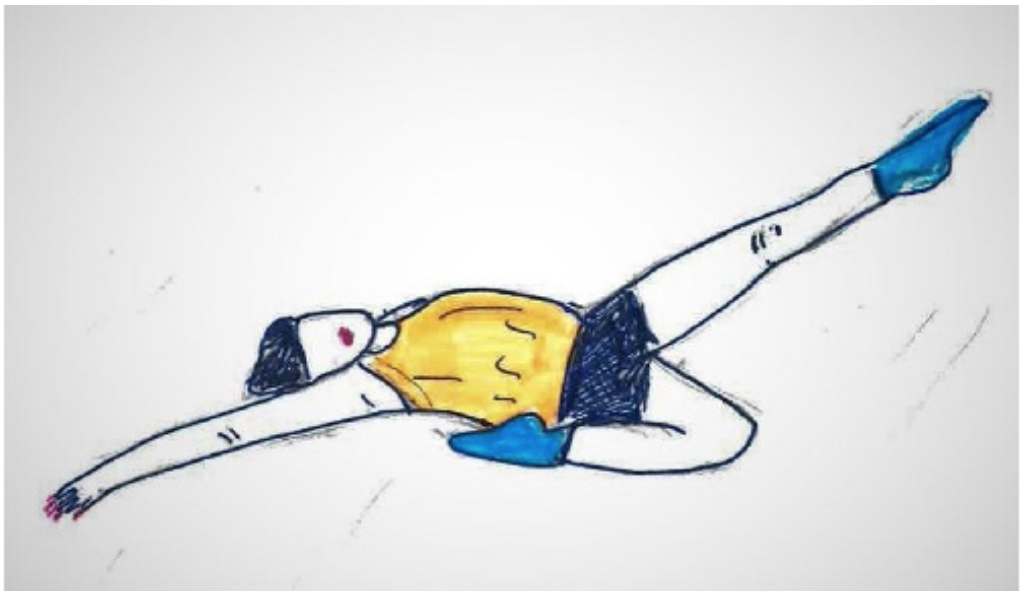

Fig. 1: A rough example of a spin and dip's final pose. Sketch created by the author, May 2020.

when we forget that we are really there and we get lost in the loops, touching and feeling our own sweaty skin works as a reminder that, despite our best attempts to dissolve into thin air, we are still present. Every spasm may be an act of withdrawing from the normative balance, but every contact with our sweaty skin, with the sweaty bodies around us is a reminder of the togetherness, the intimacy, the radical physicality of the ballroom. Returning to our sweaty bodies, we become aware of our conscious, political decision to move beyond what we know, beyond balance.

Concluding reflections

> When I vogue, I tell a story, my story. My hands will draw attention to my body. This is important to me, this is me, I've been forced to hide me, to avoid the looks, the tears, the pain. And the touch. But now I want you to look. When I spin, I am free. I drop on the floor, my body is mine, my story is *my* story. The floor, the duckwalk; I love every part of it, even the pain. This is a pain that I choose, it's a happy pain. (*pause*)

> But I guess it's a happy pain because *you* guys are there. I have my audience, they hear my story, they see, they dance, they *know*. This is what makes it so special. (*Cleo*, April 2020 – the emphasis in italics is *Cleo*'s).

The spasmogenic beyond balance *becoming* in vogue femme is not a lonely process. The voguing body needs the interaction with the other bodies to unfold its uniqueness while being fuelled, challenged or supported. As a political act, the becoming is based on togetherness and solidarity. In this sense, the floor performance underlines the sociopolitical dimension of voguing, because it indicates that the body needs the other bodies to walk, to dance, to battle, to merely exist, to transform, to *become*, and to subvert. Above all, voguing requires an assemblage, a multiplicity of bodies, and stems from a collective need for visibility, for protest, and for celebration.

Voguing is a lot more than a dance. It is a social movement in its most literal sense; a collective move-ment against the normative balance, towards a heterotopic counter-hegemonic state that is yet to be explored. As I have argued throughout this article, voguing is inextricably intertwined with the sociality and togetherness of the ballroom, the feeling of skin against skin, the sweat, the spasms that come from within. In a world ravaged by a global pandemic, it is hard to not yearn for this type of encounter, the tactile and affective relationship that develops on the floor, the accidental contacts and collisions. This affectivity is indeed a spasm against balance, based on the ethereal materiality and presence of bodies, willing to immerse, to sweat and to *become*, to bump against each other, to construct sticky, intimate atmospheres. And in this context, the voguing body—political, social, performative, aesthetic—is a *body-in-becoming*, never ceasing to experiment. As a political, social, and performative tool, the voguing body is multidimensional, multisensorial, creative; constantly exploring ways to hold on to the materiality and carry on moving, transforming, subverting, spasming and sweating, beyond norms, beyond gender, beyond species: beyond balance.

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What happened in *What Happened A Five Act Play*: Gertrude Stein's Collaged Narrative

By Rebekka Jolley

Abstract

Existing scholarship has neglected Gertrude Stein's early theatrical works by overlooking the generation of what I call her hybrid genre of 'literary cubist theatre'. This essay analyses Gertrude Stein's first play *What Happened A Five Act Play* (1913) through the concept of 'literary cubism' (Steiner 103). It first draws on examples from Radio Free Stein's 2019 radio production of *What Happened*, and then compares it to close-readings of the original play-text. The examples show how Stein uses the technique of multiple character perspectives to create a non-linear, fractured plot. The plot is a collaged narrative, created by Stein as an alternative to the conventional linear dramatic structure. In turn, she creates a multi-dimensional space allowing the audience/readers to generate multiple interpretations, which subsequently 'rebalances' Stein's identity as an innovator within modernist playwriting. The article re-establishes her neglected experimental early plays with this new reading of *What Happened*, and argues for its innovation as part of a new hybrid genre of text-based theatre.

Gertrude Stein is an important modernist playwright. Although her theatrical works are given the blanket classification of 'closet dramas' (Puchner 101), I propose, in an attempt to rebalance the reputation of Stein's early theatre such as *What Happened A Five Act Play* (1913), that they are successful and performable pieces of 'literary cubist theatre'. Jane Palatini-Bowers refers to practitioners that stage Stein's play-texts as 'sympathetic directors' (109). Palatini-Bowers' comment refers to some of the most prolific contemporary and avant-garde practitioners that have staged Stein's work during their early careers, which has thus influenced their own practices. The performances and adaptations of her works include the Judson Poets' theatre company, which performed four of Stein's plays during the 1960s, as well as her other early work *In Circles* (1967); the Living Theatre produced Stein's *Ladies' Voices* (1916) in 1952; and Robert Wilson, who has 'acknowledged affinities with Gertrude Stein' (Innes 201), produced her later opera *Doctor Faustus*

Lights the Lights (1938) in 1992—which was also included in the the Wooster Group's *House / Lights* (1998). A variety of Stein's works were also adapted with compositions by John Cage in the 1930s and 1940s, before composing his renowned work *4'33* (1952); Anne Boggart adapted Stein's plays, texts and letters into the piece *Gertrude and Alice* (1999); and Katie Mitchell directed a showcase of Stein's play-texts in her production of *Say it with Flowers* (2013). Although some directors have only staged Stein's later works, they had to adapt and create their own innovative ways to stage performances of these experimental texts—'re-balancing' Stein's identity from a writer of 'closet dramas' (Puchner 101) to an innovator of a new genre of literary cubist theatre. Though her early play-texts have been deemed 'unperformable' (Palatini-Bowers 109) contemporary productions, such as the 2019 Radio Free Stein, prove otherwise.

The play-texts are indeed experimental and can be difficult to interpret—yet there have been five major stagings of Stein's first play, *What Happened A Five Act Play*. Its debut performance was in 1950 nearly forty years after it was written, being staged by Lindley Williams Hubbell.*[1] The other four productions were by Judson Poets' theater company* in 1963, Dance Opera for Montréal's Le Groupe de la Place Royale in 1978*, by Scott Osborne* in 2001, and most recently by Radio Free Stein in 2019. The latter was a radio play (recorded in Paris, where Stein spent most of her life), whereas the others—excepting Dance Opera's production—were staged in the USA. I analyse here the Radio Free Stein production in the following sections as it is the most contemporary production. As mentioned, Radio Free Stein adapted *What Happened* into a radio play which, arguably, follows Stein's own dramaturgy—as explained further below. The text itself is (as the title suggests) five acts, but is very short at four and a quarter pages in length.

1 Where the asterisk appears, the performances are documented by Sarah Bay-Cheng in her monograph *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant-garde Theater* (2005). This information is taken from Appendix B: 'A Chronological List of Professional Productions' (147-165). The list contains production information up to the year of the book's publication in 2004 (and therefore does not include the Radio Free Stein production).

The non-linear, 'non-narrative' plot is told through various characters talking and recounting events that make it unclear and ambiguous 'what happens'. Conventional signals that aid in interpretation are removed: there are no stage directions, no character lists, no character names. It is unclear who is speaking and what their dialogue is within the text and this interpretation is left to the reader and director to decide, while the characters or voices are reduced to numbers. Martin Puchner notes that Stein 'does not "tell" what happened (diegesis) but instead aspires to represent' (106). The sporadic dialogue from the nameless and genderless characters represents what happened but also offers little context as to what the 'plot' is in the text. Therefore, it is unclear what happens in *What Happened*. However, as Alex Goody notes, *What Happened* was written by Stein in response to a dinner party that she attended and was hosted by the painter Harry Gibb in 1913. The focus of the play is the characters' language and dialogue as the main conveyor of meaning, and the audience/reader must attempt to piece together what has occurred at the dinner party.

Multiple Perspectives: Vocalisations and Multidimensional Space

Although the story in *What Happened* remains unclear due to the lack of textual conventions it would seem, as Goody states, that the play recounts what happened at the dinner party that Stein attended. Radio Free Stein's 2019 production of *What Happened* utilises the ambiguous meaning of the play and uses musical compositions and the actors' use of voice to help guide audiences through the plot to glean some intepreted meaning. Radio Free Stein is an interdisciplinary project established and directed by the academic Adam Frank. It aims 'to understand the relevance of music and sound to [Stein's] poetics, and to expand ways of integrating words with other sonic elements' (Radio Free Stein, 'What Happened').[2] The dialogue in the early play-texts, as noted above, is ambiguous and can be difficult to interpret for readers,

2 Snippets from the 2019 production of *What Happened* are available on *YouTube*.

directors, actors, and audiences. The performance focuses on the vocality and musicality of the language within the play-text. It has an accompanying composition that is played during some of the spoken dialogue. The musical compositions help contextualise the dialogue's plot as they suggest certain emotions to the listeners. The difference between physically staging the piece in a theatre space and producing an audio performance is the elimination of one of the audiences' senses and system of signs. Sight is removed and cannot be used to help navigate and interpret the obscure text. Keir Elam posits that usually there are three semiotic codes that are all simultaneously read and interpreted by an audience in a performance: 'kinesic, scenic [and] linguistic' (50). Kinesic refers to the signified meaning elicited by the proximity, use of space, and movement of the actor's body as the signifiers. Linguistic signs are the verbal cues signified by the actors' use of voice. The scenic code refers to any signifiers that are not the actors' body, use of space and proximity or voice—including lighting, set, sound effects or compositions and costume. In the Radio Free Stein production, there is no *mise-en-scène* for the audience and the kinesic code is completely removed. No actors' physicality, costume, set, props, or lighting can be interpreted by the audience. The most prominent theatrical code used here is the linguistic code. The scenic code is almost completely removed and its partial remains are the use of musical accompaniments in the production. The kinesic code and the majority of the scenic code aids the audience in their interpretation of the play, helping to physically locate it in a certain space and time period. In removing these codes, space and time become ambiguous in Radio Free Stein's production of *What Happened*. It is up to the audience—arguably more so than the four other adaptations listed above—to interpret where and when this play takes place.

Without supplying much in the way of the kinesic or scenic codes, the production primarily relies on the linguistic. Elaine Aston and George Savona describe the actor as a sign that the audience can interpret: 'as a public person, as the conveyor of the text, and as the site

of interconnecting sign-systems' (102). There are two linguistic signs present during performances. Firstly, the lexis of the word, which the playwright has written, can release a signified meaning. For example, the word 'depressing' (*What Happened* 208) expresses the signified meaning of someone experiencing a debilitating low mood. However, the signified meaning generated from the lexis is not created by singular words, but by the singular word's relationship with other words. Using the previous example, the complete line of dialogue is: 'Not any nuisance is depressing' (*ibid.*). The signified meaning of depressing has now changed, because of the other words that are placed and organised within the sentence. This shows that the characters are not experiencing anything that makes them busy, and they are expressing their dislike towards this experience.

The second linguistic sign is the vocalisation of the line; of course, how an actor chooses to speak the line affects the signified meaning. For instance, if the actor were to read: 'Not any nuisance is depressing' (*ibid.*) using a slow pace and low volume, it might signify that the character is experiencing sadness. If the actor chooses to vocalise the line in a different way—using high elation, fast pace, and loud volume—then the vocalisation would signify excitement or enthusiasm. The linguistic code then has a dualist nature because the written language is a set of signifiers, and the way that the written language is vocalised by an actor also *signifies*. The two signs, lexical and vocal, work in simultaneous harmony to convey a combined signified meaning to the audience. By choosing to focus on the linguistic code in their production, Radio Free Stein relies on the language, the actors' vocalisations, and the musical accompaniments to convey meaning and the ambiguous plot of the play to the audience. The focus on the linguistic sign in the Radio Free Stein production follows Stein's own dramaturgy by focusing on dialogue over plot in the early plays. Alexis Soloski argues that Stein:

> found it difficult to see and hear at the same time, both to observe the action and listen to the speech, so she

> invented plays in which the language doesn't distract from the action. ('Who's Afraid of Gertrude Stein?')

Choosing the format of the radio-play and using the linguistic code as the main conveyor of meaning follows Stein's notion of not distracting the audience from the action/plot which creates, as Adam Frank calls it, an 'emotional syncopation' ('The Expansion of Setting'). The Radio Free Stein production plays with the sonic element of the scenic code, experimenting with the musicality and verse present in the language as Frank adapts the play script into an almost-libretto with composer Samuel Vriezen, music director Didier Aschour, and sound engineer Benjamin Maumus. The music compositions, the vocalisations of the actors, and the language of the text are the main codes that the audience can use to interpret what happens in this production of *What Happened*.

In focusing on the linguistic code as the main representation of meaning, the production features multiple perspectives in the performance. The radio-play production includes the use of multiple character perspectives that are collaged together through the actors' vocalisations. The vocalisations play with the sonic features that are present in *What Happened*'s language. The title of the play is vocalised by multiple people, sometimes simultaneously, and others at staggered intervals. The title for instance is pronounced in various tones and at differing volumes, each actor uses a different emotion when verbalising the title. Some of the actors turn the title into a question with their inflection and use of their emotive tone. There are seven members of the ensemble that are present in the video recording of the production. There are seven cast members stood in an upright position. It appears that these individuals are the seven voices that state the play's title at the start of the performance. The use of multiple voices and the differentiation between their vocalisations presents to the audience multiple perspectives at once. The audience are at first assaulted with an almost choral cacophony of multiple, individual readings of 'what happened', which later evolves to simultaneous vocalisations, and

finally the staggered enunciations. The Radio Free Stein production uses multiple vocalisations to allude to the various meanings that can be elicited from the play's title alone.

What Happened creates a multi-dimensional space in which the audience/readers have no choice but to interpret the dialogue in any way they can to piece together the fractured plot. Roland Barthes argues that 'a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning […] but a multi-dimensional space' (1324). The language in the play-text does not restrict the audience to a flat singular restrictive section in which only a few possible meanings can be found; Stein creates a large multi-dimensional area that the audience and reader can explore while navigating various planes of meaning. In the early play-texts, such as *What Happened*, the readers and the audience experience—as outlined by Laura Schultz (2)—various possible outcomes. The audience and readers have interpretive freedom as the play-texts create a 'multi-dimensional' space, to use Barthes' term, that can be explored without authorial control. Stein's experimental early literary cubist pieces of theatre and the modern re-stagings by companies such as Radio Free Stein create an imaginative space that produces a multiplicity of interpretations and meanings. The audience attempt to fathom the 'essence', as Stein refers to it, of the play and in the case of *What Happened* what it was that actually happened (*Lectures in America* 119).

The Generation of Literary Cubist Theatre

Literary cubist theatre is a term that I use to classify Stein's early plays written from 1913-19, including her first play *What Happened.* Scholars coined the term 'literary cubism' to describe Stein's poetry, literary portraits and novels, but it has not been applied to her early theatre. Existing research has claimed that Stein's other literary works such as her early novels and poetry, written at the same time as her theatre pieces, are pieces of 'literary cubism'. Many scholars have argued that Stein's early works are influenced by cubism. For example, Charles

Altieri claims that only Stein's poetry has 'cubist elements' (241). Andrzej Wirth likens her later theatrical writing to cubist qualities or techniques, such as her landscape plays *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927) and *Listen to Me* (1936), using the comparative analogy describing the later plays as a 'sub-genre of the cubist period, the collage' (201). Steinian academics such as Marianne DeKoven (94), Stephen Scobie (105), William H. Gass (145), and Wendy Steiner (103) refer to her poetry, literary portraits, and novels as being pieces of literary cubism. Previous research has not considered the early play-texts to be pieces of literary cubism—despite the fact they were written at the same time as Stein's other literary cubist works.

The term 'literary cubism' acknowledges the difference of the artistic formats and outlines the difference directly within its neologism—and Stein's position as an innovator of this genre should be understood. Stein's works cannot be constituted as direct repetitions of cubism as her works have a different concept than that of, for example, Juan Gris and Pablo Picasso. Furthermore, as mentioned above, research to date has tended to focus on and apply the term to Stein's poetry, literary portraits, and novels. There is little research published that focuses on her 1913-9 play-texts in this regard. Some research on Stein's theatre from Leslie Atkins Durham (69), Betsy Alayne Ryan (86), and Sarah Bay-Cheng (22) mention the early play-texts but do not focus their analyses on them. Palatini-Bowers is the only critic with a dedicated monograph chapter for the early play-texts (111). I analyse *What Happened* through the concept of 'literary cubism' which has, until now, not been analysed using this lens.

Playing with Techniques: Literary Cubism, Multiple Perspectives and Collage Narrative

DeKoven acknowledges that Stein uses multiple-viewpoints within her literature, arguing that Stein fragments sentences and perception producing multiple perspectives (81). She contends alternative perceptions are created in Stein's works, with the generation of

multifocality in Stein's poem *Tender Buttons* (1914), for example. The technique of multiple perspectives can be identified in the theatrical works that were written during the same period. Carolyn Barros also acknowledges this within the later work of the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933),[3] observing that as 'Stein creates a multifaceted and multidimensional effect by drawing a collage of verbal portraits that cut into and across her modernist life-narrative' (187). Stein's early works feature multifaceted narratives then, as identified by DeKoven and Barros. Stein uses multiple character perspectives that become collaged together in *What Happened* as a non-linear narrative device. As a result, this ambiguity means that what happens in *What Happened* is generally unclear for an audience/reader.

Stein refuses to adhere to narrative cohesiveness in her early play-texts like *What Happened*. Instead, as Frank argues, she chooses to 'subordinate narrative' ('Loose Coordinations' 461). *What Happened* uses non-linear means to build the representation of what happened at the 'pleasant dinner party' that she attended before writing the play (Stein, *Plays* 118), using non-linear dialogue. The dialogue is constructed by multiple character perspectives and told only through fragmented framing. It is shown and told through multiple viewpoints, which become fluid and temporary, rather than singular and fixed. Stein presents characters and dialogue as being multiple and shared (examples of this are explored below). In her lecture 'Portraits and Repetition' (1935) she gives the anecdote of her aunts in Baltimore who are all repeating themselves by retelling the same story to her (although she does not tell us what the story was) as an example to explain her technique:

> When all these eleven little aunts were listening as they were talking gradually some one of them was no longer listening. When this happened it might be that the time had come that anyone or one of them was beginning

3 Alice B. Toklas was an American avant-garde writer who was Stein's life-long lover and partner—who also atteneded the dinner party dramatised in *What Happened*.

> repeating, this was ceasing to be insisting or else perhaps
> it might be that the attention of one of someone of them
> had been worn out by adding something. (*Lectures* 170)

Stein's aunts are no longer listening to each other and in turn repeat the same story; 'adding something' different to the same story becomes a repetition with a small difference. Stein, influenced by these aunts' multiple viewpoints of the same story with slight variations, is featured in her early theatre. A useful example of multiple perspectives is the dual stage directions and characters; in each of the acts in *What Happened* the number of speakers alters: for instance, '(Two.) (Three.)' in one section (206), and in the following passage there are '(The same three)' (206). As Stein states in her play's lecture, two speakers, then three, recount 'what happened' (*Lectures in America* 96). If '(Two.) (Three.)' could be interpreted as character names, they could also be interpreted as choral voices. Stein linguistically places multiple perspectives over another as the various characters or voices recount the same event, each providing their different account, and collages these all together to create the 'plot' of the play.

The audience does not hear a full account of what happened in *What Happened* at the dinner party that Stein attended. Instead, Stein presents multiple character perspectives in a fragmented manner—the fragmented narrative is then collaged together in acts and scenes to form the overall stage picture and the possibility of what did happen. An example of the intersection of planes to elicit multiple perspectives with *What Happened*'s dialogue is the play's opening:

> (One.)
> Loud and no cataract. Not any nuisance is depressing.
> (Five.)
> A single sum four and five together and one, not any
> sun a clear signal and an exchange. (205)

Speaker one elicits two signified images of the senses, hearing and seeing with the reference to eyes as a cataract, carrying the meaning of

a medical condition that affects the eyes. As cataract has two signified meanings, the second is the noise of a loud waterfall. Either of these images can be created for an audience member depending upon their stream of associated, signified meanings. The calm image of having no noise is presented, however, as a nuisance: the social experience of silence is worse than the hearing of loud noise. This image of the senses and experience of noise, or lack of, is then interrupted with the dialogue of 'five'. Five builds the image of a sum, possibly counting the amount of people in the room and notes that there are no current signals for social exchanges. The telling of what happened is then in constant flux; with the interruptions from the multiple speakers that recount their experiences. Each of Stein's multiple perspectives builds the overall dialogic 'plot' for the play, as each of the characters' sections and statements in the acts builds to the overall representation of *What Happened*. The acts then relate to one another and are of equal importance in the play's progression. Multiple perspectives allow for the movement away from 'telling another story' (Stein, *Plays* 118). These separated perspectives form together to create a fractured image of what has happened. Although the different witnesses recount various parts of what happened, and their accounts differ subjectively, they still contribute to build a non-linear and fractured image of the plot, which is an abstract representation of what happened at the dinner party that Stein and Toklas attended.

Multiple Interpretations of the Play-text

The relationship between words within her literary cubist theatrical works creates multiple viewpoints for the reader/audience. Cyrena Pondrom describes the ways in which Stein's wordplay functions in Stein's other early writing where 'vivid nouns dominate and the axis of combination is undermined with non-sequitur and logical fallacy' (xv). As Pondrom notes, Stein combines words, which then create playful meanings for the reader (xv). She experiments with the signified meaning that is elicited, with her rejection of grammatical ruling. An

obvious example of this within *What Happened* would be the exchange between '(Two.)' and '(Four.)' in ACT THREE:

> (Two.)
> A cut, a cut is not a slice, what is the occasion for representing a cut and a slice. What is the occasion for all that.
> A cut is a slice, a cut is the same slice. The reason that a cut is a slice is that if there is no hurry any time is just as useful.
> (Four.)
> A cut and a slice is there any question when a cut and a slice are just the same.
> A cut and a slice has no particular exchange it has such a strange exception to all that which is different. (207)

The language used has a meta-linguistic quality as Stein's wordplay creates language that is self-reflexively commenting upon its own usage. She uses cut and slice as both verbs and nouns throughout the passage above, demonstrating the various signified meanings that are elicited, depending upon the other combined words in the sentence and their arbitrary relationship. The grammatical play and meta-linguistic questioning also reveal signs to the audience member/reader, as they query the words' functions as actions at an occasion, such as a party. Stein includes the discussion of cake as it was written partly autobiographically, based on a dinner party she attended. She uses the language in this dialogue exchange to question how she can describe the action of the cutting or slicing of the cake, while also alluding to the image of the cuts and slices of cake that were present at the party as objects. The multiple meanings and images that are elicited are present due to the non-linear dialogue being presented through the multiple character perspectives of '(Two.)' and '(Four.)'.

Within the incorporation of multiple character perspectives that are collaged together as a narrative device and linguistic

experimentation Stein 'inverts the traditional descriptive relationship of word to object' (Dubnick 33). Stein actively plays with how language creates meaning with the signifier and signified. In doing so, as noted by Sara Ford in their study of the poem *Tender Buttons,* the same linguistic experimentation is present and 'creates new levels of possible interpretation over which [Stein] cannot maintain complete control' (51). By eliciting multiple meanings—rather than one that is clearly identifiable for the audience/reader—Stein relinquishes her authorial control. Additionally, Schultz notes that Stein writes 'plays that are open-ended and suggestive of as many possible realizations as there are readers' (2). Her claim supports the hypothesis that Stein creates multiple perspectives and 'open ended' interpretations for the audience/reader, due to the many signified meanings that can be elicited.

The multi-dimensional space that Stein creates in her early play-texts, such as *What Happened*, create endless staging and performing possibilities. Although the play is difficult to interpret due to the ambiguous plot and non-linear collaged narrative, it creates a strength as the text has no fixed meaning. The strength of the piece is also its crux and why it has previously been deemed by Martin Puchner as closet drama (101) and Palatini-Bowers as unperformable (109). However, the boundless stagings that are available to practitioners who approach the text allow them freedom to experiment with and use various formats. This extends to the Radio Free Stein production: adapting the play into a radio-play with musical accompaniments that help guide the audience through the plot of the piece, as based on the director Adam Frank's understanding and interpretation of the original text.

So, what happened in *What Happened a Five Act Play*? By removing what *did* happen, Stein makes the plot ambiguous and somewhat inconsequential. However, the play's strength is in how what happens unfolds through the literary cubist technique of multiple character perspectives. It is never clear what did happen due to the multiplicity of re-tellings—which allows for multitudinous adaptive possibilities, such as that of Radio Free Stein. Stein uses techniques

such as multiple character perspectives and successfully incorporates these into her early play-texts to create non-linear fractured plots. In *What Happened*, the plot is a collaged narrative and as a result Stein creates what I call a new hybrid genre of 'literary cubist theatre'. As Stein converts the cubist technique into her own technique, she creates her own method of theatre. Rather than simply being influenced by or 'copying' her cubist friends and contemporaries, she innovates a new genre of theatre. Furthermore, the production by Radio Free Stein's attempt to successfully stage Stein's early play-texts as performances 'rebalances' her theatrical code to focus on the linguistic code. This aligns, I suggest, with Stein's own dramaturgy, removing the need to watch the action and listen at the same time. The multiple vocalisations from the actors further produce and enhance various interpretations for the audience. The play's literary cubist technique of multiple perspectives creates several meanings and no fixed, singular one is produced—the audience must interpret their own meaning from the play. As Radio Free Stein's radio play demonstrates, the multifaceted interpretations of *What Happened* emerge from the play's ambiguous plot, allowing for various modern interpretations of the play by practitioners and directors.

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Notes from the Field

Effortless Power on the Edge: A choreopolitical proposal to negotiate the gravity

By Maryam Bagheri Nesami

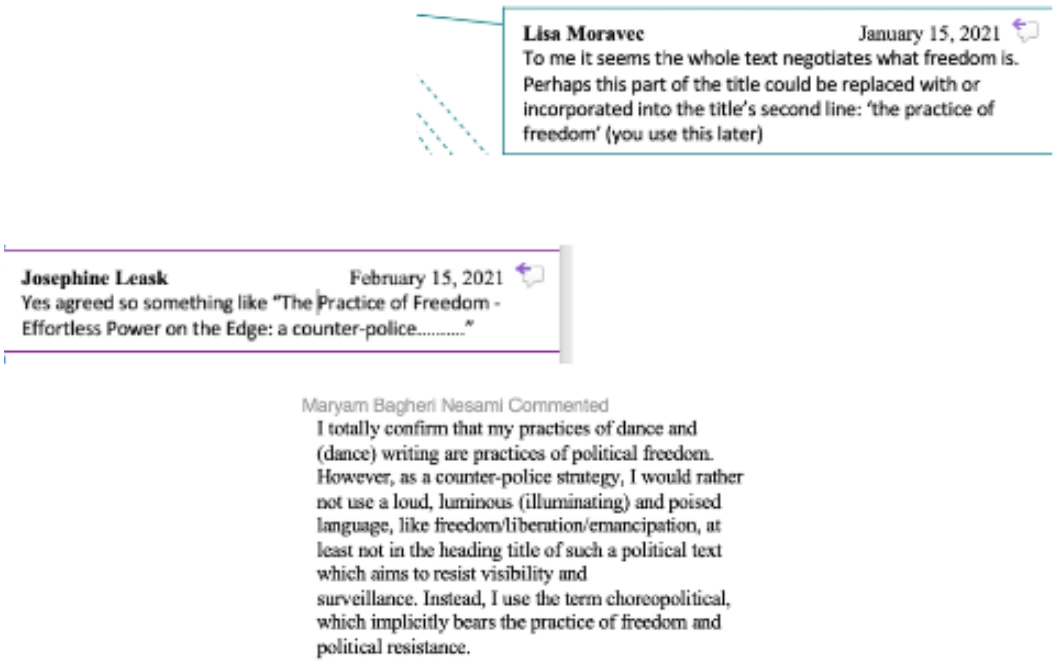


Fig. 1: Screenshot of editorial comments between the author and the issue co-editors, February 2021.

Prologue

I am a migrant woman from Iran, based in New Zealand, practicing dance between local and global geopolitics. In Iran, dance is illegal, and the dancer is a criminal. In such a choreophobic (Shay) context, visibility and unambiguity of any dance-related activity, especially for a woman, counts as a problematic risk. Dealing with the risk of visibility, the feminine embodiment in Iran summons alternative modes of appearance as a subject of womanliness and dance; she writes (localises) her dance in alternative locations, such as underground.

Within the hegemonic economy of artistic and academic productions, there is always a desire for transparency, a 'desire to see'; this is a desire that either fetishises or excludes practices that are not visible enough. Such an 'ideology of the visible' (Phelan 7) and the economy of gaze problematise migrant/marginal/minor practices with the risk of racialisation and sexualisation. Being a migrant to the international/universal language of text and dance, I see the language of my dance practice as subject to the risk of failure due to untranslatability and incompatibility.

The *Effortless Power on the Edge* is a counter-gaze proposal for a solo practice. I presented this proposal in December 2019 at the HERA House (Heavy Engineering Research Association), in Auckland (NZ), as one of the creative components of my practice-led Ph.D. The choreographic practice of the Effortless Power on the Edge is a liminal spatialisation that allows mobility without being seen. Experimenting the material (and immaterial) affordabilities of failure/falling, I exhaust the possibilities to fall without being seen (policed). I aimed to propose alter-aesthetics and alter-kinesthetics, to negotiate with the gravity and find a *safe* and *sustainable* way to fall … somatically and politically.

Stepping on the edge of visibility and invisibility, taking the risk of failure, negotiating in between possibilities and impossibilities of dancing without being seen, my practice of (dance) writing is a political project bearing the practice of freedom at its core.

Political freedom

Negotiation is a respectful approach, not an aggressive or radical one. And this is what I mean by political freedom: the ability to negotiate between can dos and cannot dos. Freedom, in this sense, is the matter of *what one can do?* and *to what extent?*, questions that Hannah Arendt poses. In a context where the ideological system of gaze exclusively segregates the spaces into binaries and accordingly causes risks (of assimilation, reduction, and elimination), my practice of choreography, as a 'choreopolitical' (Franko; Lepecki) proposal, offers an alternative

language of dance and (dance) writing inclusive to both visible and invisible, migrant and citizen, minor and major practices, and capable of negotiation with paradoxes, trans-subjectively, and trans-geographically. Practice of freedom in my dance context is conditioned to relationality.

Failing the location of dance

Dance is a local practice as it requires a location to take place. The locality is the matter of belonging, feeling at home, and grounded-ness.

- Coming from a choreophobic context and dealing with the risk of visibility as a dancing woman of Iran,
- residing outside Iran (as a migrant),
- writing (dance) in English (as a non-English speaker),
- dancing as an undisciplined dancer on the hegemonic stages of disciplinarity in arts and academia,
- transitioning between the trans-geographical borders,

I wonder *where my dance location is?*

Therefore gravity in this (dance) writing is discussed in between the local and global politics of location.

An unhomely, queer and groundless subject of dance disorientates herself from any already known or taken for granted locations of presence (in time and space). Disorientation might cause discontinuity and disruption to the audience of dance and reader of text. However, disconnections leave gaps to potentially escape the 'choreopoliced' (Lepecki 15) pathways and conventional choreo-choices. Failing the coherence, consistency, and fluency of the intellectual language of academia and professional language of arts, I stumble off the gaze line and lose appropriating any land/ground on the stage as well as the page.

Fig. 2: Author's collage, 2019.

[14 December 2019, Auckland, Heavy Engineering Research Association, foyer:] Where I am standing probably is the stage. A heterogeneous, inconsistent, and disrupted space including a couple of meeting and conference rooms, two kitchens, one long and large foyer, and numbers of other rooms which belonged to some ~~certain~~ company offices from the steel industry. On the ground, a bit to the left side of the audience's view (my right side), there are rolled LED string lights entailing a pair of black shoes and a knee protector inside. I patiently remain still until everyone is seated.

Fig. 3. *Effortless Power on the Edge*, Heavy Engineering Research Association (Hera House), Auckland, December 2019, photo by Reza Negarestani.

I take a selfie with the audience; from now on, both me and the audience are subjects and objects of this solo practice. From now on, the Self is Othered, and the Other is Selfied, and it would be hard to differentiate between the 'I,' 'SHE,' 'she', and the 'eye.'

Fig. 4. The selfie I took with the audience, *Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019.

SHE (maybe I), as the liminal corporeality, embodying simultaneity of the Self and her Othered version, puts the cell phone back into her bum bag and, this time, takes out a rolled piece of grey fabric (potentially known as the veil). SHE squeezes the fabric in-between four fingers of her right hand (apart from the index finger). SHE, as a not-yet veiled subject of dance, emerges as a monster. This monster who is resulted by the unequal reciprocity of the Self and Other looks like: and articulates:

Fig. 5. Scanned photo of the artist, December 2019.

رب اشرح لی صدری، ویسرلی امری، واحلل عقده من لسانی یفقهو قولی.

Translation: 'O my nourisher! Open my chest, ease my task for me, and remove the impediment from my speech, so they may understand what I say'. (Quran 20: 25-28)

… word by word, slowly, hoping that everyone understands, no matter whether the language is Persian, Arabic, or any o/Other language of the geo-temporal otherness.

Moving without being seen, and being seen without moving

If visibility is a risk, accordingly, I should have asked: *How can I move without being seen?* However, this one-way question might not be practically inclusive to other modes of political resistance to the ideological system of visibility; a system that, for example, privileges:

active over passive,

visible over invisible,

successful over failed.

Therefore, the political freedom of mobility can be practiced not only through moving without being seen but through being seen without moving as well, like a Mobius strip.

[Back to 14 December 2019, HERA House, the performance event:]

SHE/I unroll rolled fabric, takes a deep breath, and dives into a long tunnel/funnel. From now on, SHE/I am veiled.

Fig. 6: *Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019, photo by Reza Negarestani.

The veil as a corporeal extension not only bridges as a 'connective tissue' (Kozel 28) but also differentiates and segregates the spheres. It allows for simultaneous distancing and proximity, exoticising and intimating. And in this way, at Möbius's pivoting point, the freedom (of mobility) can be practiced in constant transitioning.

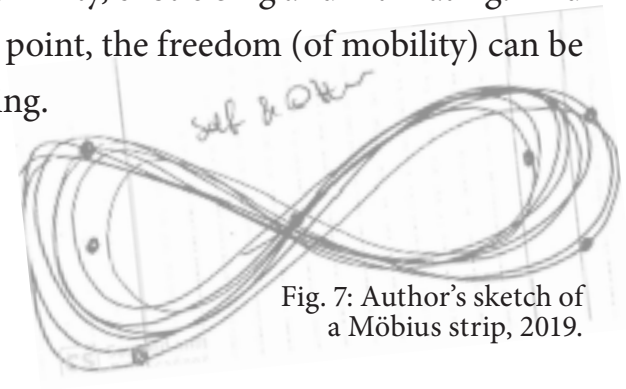


Fig. 7: Author's sketch of a Möbius strip, 2019.

Negotiating the force of dance and veil

[In the event:] The popular music of *baba Karam* starts.
This Iranian urban music and its heavily weighted 6/8 beats of drum evoke identifiable rhythmic patterns: sudden stops, slow bounces, coquettish facial, frowned face, neck tilts, prolonged hip rotations (left to right, right to left, and a full circle), heavy, rigid and masculine carried arms and shoulder lifts.

I put on my high heel shoes, get ready, move to the dancing spot, and stand still.

I could see the awaiting gaze of a couple of Iranian friends amongst the audience who desired to see the distinct *baba karam*-related moves. I could also see the confused looks of the non-Iranian audience waiting to see the dance-related emancipatory motility of a Muslim (veiled) Middle Eastern woman.

As the music progresses, the hard-to-see shifts of weight occur, which probably confuses the viewer: *Has SHE moved yet? Or would SHE finally move at all?*

Hope and patience can cause exhaustion. The political potential of exhaustion, as Gilles Deleuze discusses, is in the indeterminacy of the material (and immaterial) possibilities, because one can never realize the whole of the possible" (Essays critical and clinical, 152). This

indeterminacy between the possible and beyond the possible is a full potentiality. And the potential is political. Exhaustion doesn't have to do with the impossible but regards the unrealised and undetermined possibilities. Realising these possibilities can never fully occur, and we never know what a body can do (Deleuze, Cinema II, 195).

[Back to the event:] The 'micro-dance' in search for balance exhausts the possibilities of the still and slow movements. This exhaustion finally results in the visible shifts in dialogue with the constant force of gravity. The challenge of balancing takes over now: *Should I let myself fall? Should I let it (the dance) go, and motility take over?*

The political gravity and the problem of the pelvis

[October 2019, Reflection from a dance colleague, in the studio:]

> 'I wished you could push it further to the edge... people should know what will happen if you fall...'

My non-representational struggle with gravity was not clear and justifiable for my colleague.

When talking about risks, often an active transgression of the boundaries seems spectacular and appraised. For a dancing woman of the Third World, who lives and dances in the First World, the expected intellectual and artistic engagement with the practice of freedom requires loud, luminous, and liberatory movements. However, movement is not always a luxury, and not everyone can move (visibly and loudly).

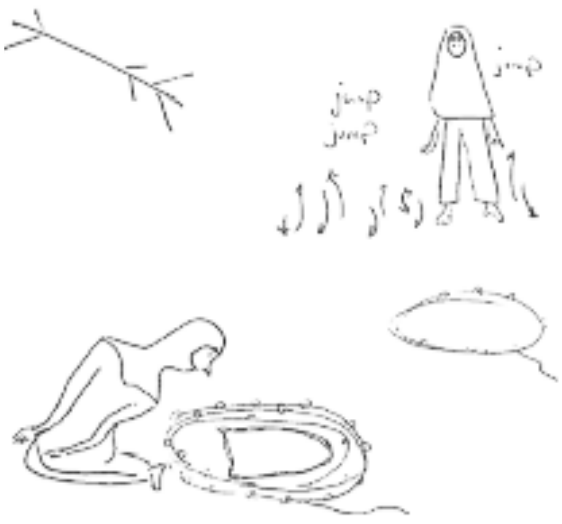


Fig. 8: Author's sketch, 2019.

[In the event:]I am tensioned in between the risk of representation (that kinaesthetically urges a dramatic/heroic fall) and the risk of fall due to insufficient material possibilities (discipline and technique) to deal successfully with the gravity. The tension makes me look as an unestablished, undisciplined, and a not-yet dancer. Although such a failure marginalises me to the periphery of the artistic and intellectual poise and proficiency, it can keep me politically safe from the hegemony of the choreopolice.

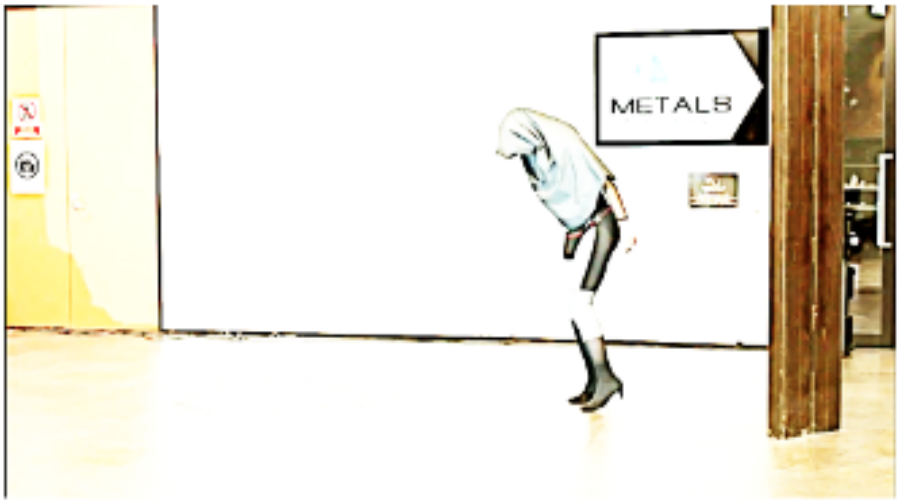


Fig. 9: Still from the video. *The Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019.

Exhausting the material possibilities for falling, SHE leaves the dance at this point and walks away, further and further, to turn the lights off.

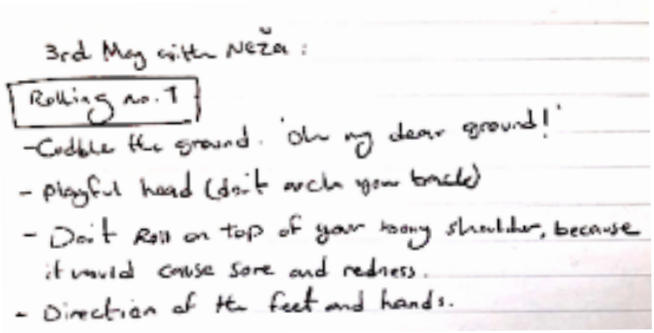
Fig. 10: Still from the video. *The Effortless Power on the Edge,* HERA House, Auckland, December 2019.

In the dark, I unveil myself and inscribe the veil on the ground. I re-veil in a black hood now.

Fig. 11: Still from the video. *The Effortless Power on the Edge,* HERA House, Auckland, December 2019.

I turn the lights on again and lie down on the ground, neighbouring the veil.

I think about the Mobius strip and my material possibilities again, question what can I do?. I remember a couple of rolls that I learned from my Slovenian movement artist friend, Neža:


3rd May with Neža :

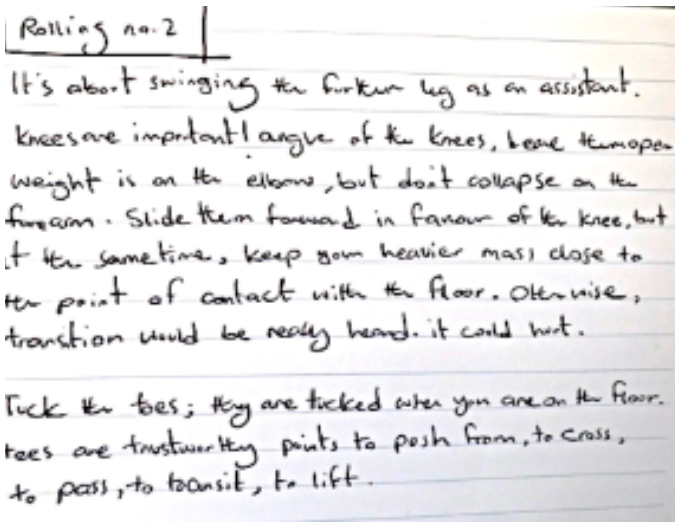
Rolling no. 1

-Cuddle the ground. 'Oh my dear ground!'

- playful head (don't arch your back)

- Don't Roll on top of your bony shoulder, because it would cause sore and redness.

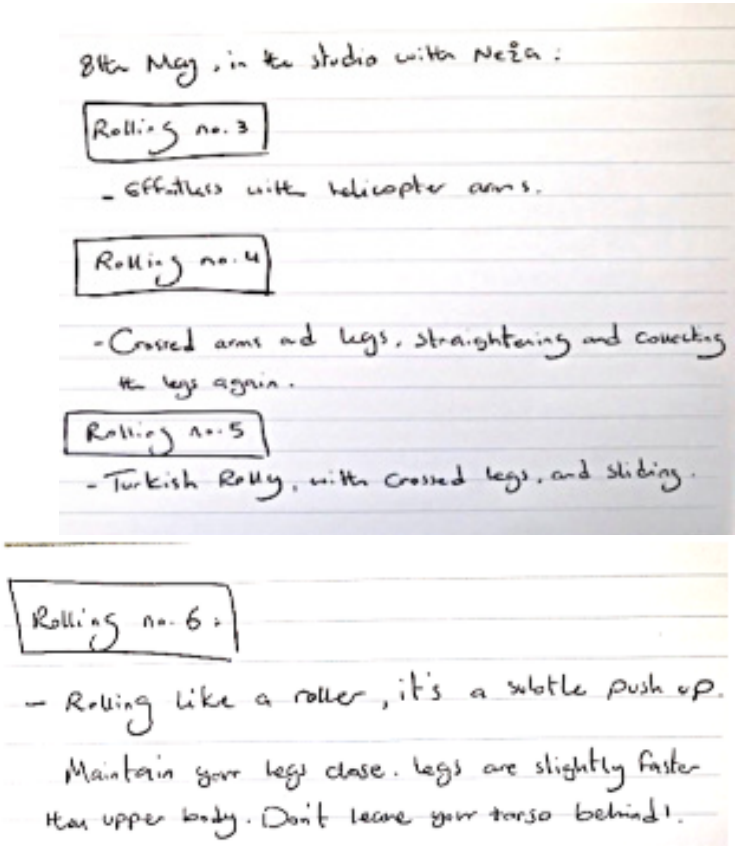
- Direction of the feet and hands.


Rolling no. 2

It's about swinging the further leg as an assistant. knees are important! angle of the knees, bear the proper weight is on the elbows, but don't collapse on the forearm. Slide them forward in favour of the knee, but at the same time, keep your heavier mass close to the point of contact with the floor. Otherwise, transition would be really heard. it could hurt.

Tuck the toes; they are tucked when you are on the floor. toes are trustworthy points to push from, to cross, to pass, to transit, to lift.

Figs. 12-3: Author's photographs of notes written by Neža, 2019.



Figs. 14-5: Author's photographs of notes written by Neža, 2019.

Exhausting the low, horizontal, face-off, and gravity-friendly prone position, I start the Bartenief's roll (rolling no.1), as I constantly roll and unroll, pack and unpack, hide and reveal the body. In between this Mobius strip-like rolling experimentation, I wonder about the potentials of the pivoting point as a relational space for negotiating the politics: the pivot is my pelvis.

I recall all the struggles other movement artists, and I had in Iran during rehearsals, with every single roll, bow, bend, and fall, to avoid exposing the pelvic area explicitly visible to the audience. The direction and position of the pelvis did matter to the degree that affected the lines of choreography and stage design. We shifted politically and poetically all the rolls and lying downs (whether prone or supine) to the oblique angle where the pelvis would not appear to the audience straightforward.

Fig. 16: Still from the video. *The Effortless Power on the Edge,* HERA House, Auckland, December 2019.

Promises of pelvis and democracy

Since Martha Graham's school of modern dance, known as the House of the Pelvic Truth (Bannerman), to somatic spinal alignment, neutrality, and release techniques, the pelvis has always been central to the discourse of democracy and emancipatory embodied acts.

I wonder about the universal Pelvic Truth, posing questions:

- *How truthful might the ~~be~~ pelvis be?*
- *Whose house is this, the pelvis?*
- *What historical alignment is it?*
- *What geographical alignment is it part of?*
- *Whose truth is being held through the pelvis?*

Fig. 17: Author's screenshot of co-editor's comments, February 2021.

I start rolling like a ball, back and forth, effortlessly and iteratively.

Figs. 18-9: Rehearsing the Effortless Power on the Edge, dance studio G01, Bld 113, University of Auckland, October 2019.

Doubtful and diagonal, oblique and critical, I land down on the ground on my high heel shoes, making a bridge. Then vertebrae by vertebrae roll down, as I wonder *whether the house of the pelvis could ever become a neutral and empty space from which one could get aligned with the universal gravity and release from the spatio-temporal necessities of the geopolitics? Would democracy fully occur at all?*

Fig. 20: Still from the video *Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019.

Here I return to the temporal and constant becoming/unbecoming of the Möbius strip. Only through such a temporariness and provisionality, freedom of mobility can happen. This is where technique and practice differentiate from each other. For Ben Spatz, technique is a repeatable knowledge while every moment of practice is unique and refers to 'moments of doing, historical instances of materialized activity' (41). Through contingency and simultaneity (as strategic modes of emergence) in my practice, I might potentially practice 'moments' of democracy as well as somatic release and neutral spine. I wonder now *how these moments might relate to the universal temporality of the democratic and somatic embodied practices? How can I compensate such a time (and place) difference?*

Dim dance, dim veil, dim text

As I am lying supine, with knees bent, hip-width apart, gaze to gaze with the audience, I start rocking the pelvis up and down constantly hoping to reach moments of somatic release. However, these pelvic moves are potentially read as an erotic release, an orgasm, a climax that a conventional romance desires; the romance of freedom (Abu-Lughod).

I turn the lights off again and continue rocking in the dark. Darkness counts as a counter-police strategy, especially in our time of romanticised luminosity and transparency. However, arguing the binary language of either this or that, I keep the scene liminal and dim, between darkness and light (enlightenment). I lie at the neighbourly position of LED lights and continue my practice of pelvic mobilisation in the shadow.

Fig. 21: Rehearsing *Effortless Power on the Edge*, dance studio G01, Bld 113, University of Auckland, October 2019.

Is SHE Liberated Yet?

The politics of gravity forces a fall (either vertically or horizontally); however, the counter-police resistance urges an oblique alignment, as Sara Ahmed recommends. Becoming dim, diagonal, and oblique requires getting out of line, the line of balance, or, failing the appraised (or recognised) alignment (alongside-ness, same-ness).

Holding an oblique orientation around dance and dance writing causes 'uncanny effects' (Ahmed 162) that allows for extension and permeating into the exclusive and segregated walls and enables being seen without necessarily claiming any linear (explicit) directionality. However, being dim and diagonal is also risky, as it might pronounce the uncanny-ness and a complete loss of face (failure).

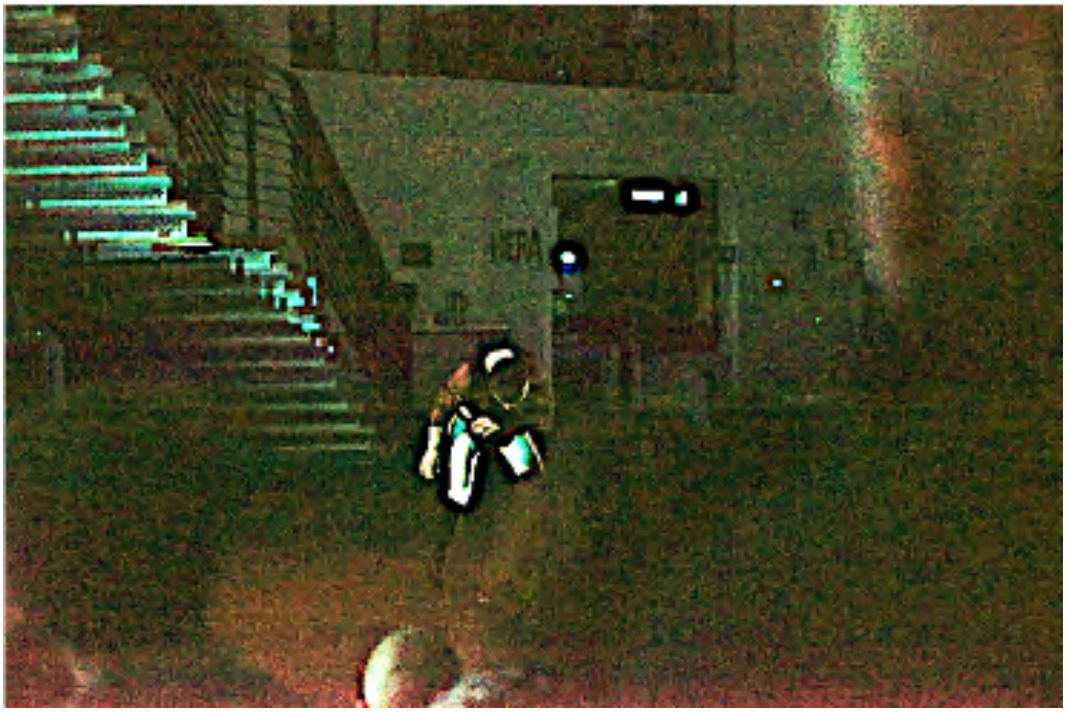


Fig. 22: *Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019, photo by Reza Negarestani.

Epilogue

I spatialise my solo on the pivoting point of the Möbius strip to benefit the simultaneity of being a political minority to the hegemonic language of text and dance, and at the same time benefiting the proximity and accessibility of the major language of the universal platforms of visibility. I am aware that our realisation only happens through the otherness, the differences, and distances. We need to experience such differences and distances; otherwise, we are destined to sameness/alignment, and due to this alignment, destined to eternal disappearance. Freedom means being able to get aligned and disorientate contingently.

I am concerned about the risk of universalism that encourages like-minded-ness upon the established artistic poise, vigor, success, emancipatory and erected activism; and sadly misses other practices that don't converge with the major shared emotions, understandings, and values (artistic, aesthetic, intellectual); like dim, shadowy, implicit and conceptual (immaterial), non-established, non-citizens, non-liberatory, non-binary, non-linear and non-romantic embodied practices.

I am not just concerned about those who are excluded/ exoticised outside the circle of common sense, but also those who are trapped inside the hegemonic circle of like-mindedness (universalism, racism, sexism). I am worried as both minor/local, and major/global residents of this segregated wall (Self |Other) are condemned to remain located (inscribed) in their permanent positionalities. And this is risky for both, as assimilation ends in elimination.

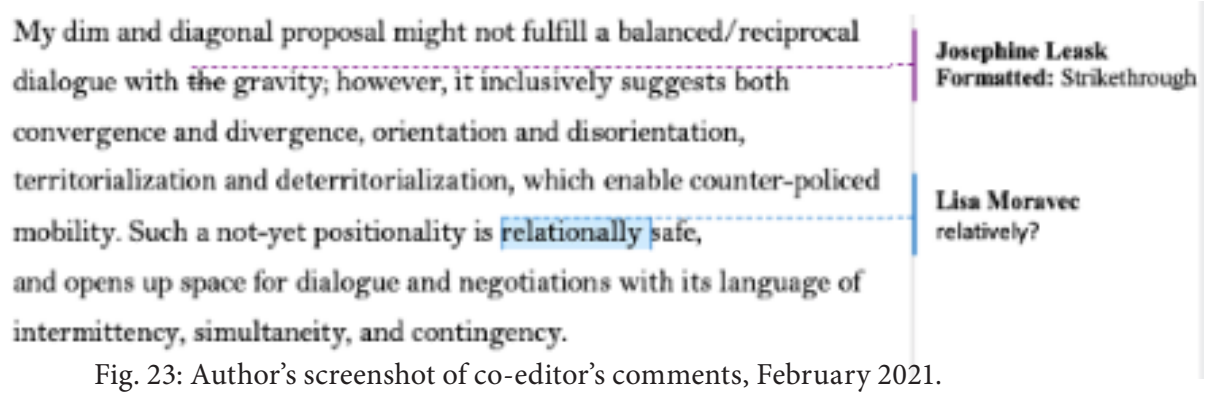


Fig. 23: Author's screenshot of co-editor's comments, February 2021.

Fig. 24: Effortless Power on the Edge, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019, photo by Reza Negarestani.

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Performance Art: Journeying Through Public Spaces in the City of Singapore

By Adrian Tan

From the creation of a creative industries framework decades ago to more recent celebration of new art spaces, global art events, and a new art biennale, Singapore's rapid urban transformation necessitated a re-direction in cultural policies in its quest to become a global city. In this report from the field, performances in public spaces are cited as examples for artists' abilities to negotiate what they can and cannot do in an evolving city. It is the directness and journeying through various parts of the city that has etched performance art's presence in Singapore, where artists have had to learn and unlearn how to balance between promotion, acceptance, and reaction to their performances.

This report from the field explores how, since the 1990s, the city of Singapore offered a fertile ground for performance art to transpire in public spaces and illustrates the critical roles artistic performances play in delicate balance with the state's cultural development narrative. While culture was being repackaged in the city's landscape and mindscape during the early days of the 1990s, art events were hosted and cultural institutions opened, forms of performance art started to traverse a rapidly urbanising city and navigate through public spaces. In the artworks cited, performance art maintains a unique position in blurring the line between audience and participant by encroaching into places deemed public and reserved for public activities or activism. Due to its ability to negotiate what an artist can and cannot do, the directness of this form of artistic practice has etched performance art's presence into the city of Singapore. This report illustrates how performance art has been balanced, rejuvenated, and expanded on differently as it journeyed through the public spaces of the rapidly urbanising city.

Culture and the Arts as Performed in the City of Singapore

In the promotion of the arts and culture in Singapore, the establishment of a Cultural Development Committee (CDC) in 1980 was timed just as the publication of an election manifesto to make Singapore a 'City of Excellence' was drafted. This marked a shift for the city-state as the rapidly developed economic society saw a need to develop into a society that was culturally excellent. The 1989 Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) report was thorough and explicit in its manifold goals of 'improving local quality of life and contributing to the nation's tourism and entertainment economies' (ACCA 12). Singapore is often perceived as a highly controlling city-state but has—since the enactment of the ACCA report—re-strategised and shifted emphasis to growing artistic practice and the arts through the emergence of a new creative industries framework and various cultural policies. During the early days of this transformation and re-direction, performance art was finding its footing in Singapore. The Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) and the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a joint statement in response to some performances that took place asserting that it was 'concerned that new art forms such as "performance art" and "forum theatre" which have no script and encourage spontaneous audience participation pose dangers to public order, security and decency', and much greater difficulty to the licensing authority (21 January 1994).

This was a critical moment in foregrounding the disorientation that performance artists faced in Singapore—such as prosecutions, curtailments, and funding restrictions—as there was an invisible fear that performance art could potentially disorientate its audience and seek to imbalance public order. A general understanding or representation of Singapore today is that it is a 'global stage' for contemporary art events; what has been lesser discussed however is the art originating from artists residing and practicing in this city-state. The larger aim of this text is to posit a consistent presence of performance art in the reading

of the development of the arts in the city-state, where the enactment of performance art in public spaces has a historical trajectory in Singapore.

Performance Art in and Around the Public Spaces of the City

Tang Da Wu is an important Singaporean artist closely associated with performance art and state-funded art events and festivals. His artistic oeuvre has taken him into the streets of Singapore more often than not through state-sanctioned festivals of the arts. Through his performative gestures, his pieces question and confront the deeply and delicately held social and cultural beliefs in the multicultural city of Singapore. Through his performance interventions in public spaces like *They Poached the Rhino, Chop Off His Horn and Make This Drink* (1989–1991) and *Tiger's Whip* (1991), Tang reflexively opened up his practice to a live audience and emphasised the importance of the public space as a site for dialogue and even contestation, before performance art was recognised locally. This impetus for performing in and amongst people for Tang 'in a public space outside' is because 'it's most real, very real' (Low). Tang's collaborative street performance, *Four Men in One Suit in the Streets of Singapore* (1991), took place as part of 'A Sculpture Seminar' at the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG). This performance involved artists collaboratively navigating various parts of the city, encountering bus stops and train stations through this journeying into the public spaces of the city. Tang conceived the piece as a dialogical art work at a moment in Singapore's cultural history where performance art in public spaces was unheard of and scarcely noticed or written about, much less critically discussed.

What remains of the collaborative piece is photographic documentation of four artists stumbling around and traversing newly opened train stations and bus stops where 'the work activated these public spaces to depict a very specific predicament facing the everyday Singaporean, challenging authorities to rethink their modes of urban planning or lack thereof' (Tan 645). The performance and

Fig. 1: Tang Da Wu. *Four Men in One Suit in the Streets of Singapore* (1991). Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How.

its documentation were created where the self-deprecating public artists want[ed] the viewer to move away from the familiar boundary of their everyday, out of their common language and existing forms of representations to reconsider their current predicament or social situation. These walks through public spaces have in my view become important open-ended artistic commentaries of a city gradually finding its footing as Singapore's urbanisation progressed.

The sculpture seminar conceived by Tang had been an event organised by the newly opened NMAG to introduce the public to alternative modes of artistic production. This approach, attempted by the artist of embedding performance art into exhibitions and seminars, enabled the medium to become a prominent form of artistic intervention and started to gain much public attention. Despite the spontaneous nature of performative gestures, the participatory nature and directness of such an artform found bandwidth and leeway for its existence in Singapore.

Singapore developed rapidly in the 1990s to the 2000s and gradually became a dense city: dense in spatial terms and in the

weight and importance it confers on culture and the arts. The impetus to increase cultural activity in the city-state arose in the context of a slowing economy which stimulated the need to find alternatives to the industrial structure prescribed in the existing state narrative. Change became apparent in the state narrative with the emergence of a new creative industries framework and led to an increased interest in the arts as an industry, coupling it in particular with tourism and resulting in a vague collective drive towards harnessing cultural activity in the city-state's narrative. The state investigated what economic restructuring was needed to enable Singapore to be competitive and survive the economic downturn. Findings from the Ministry of Information Technology and the Arts (MITA) suggested the need to develop the creative industries as a 'pillar and strategic enabler for the Singapore economy' (MITA). Strategies were put in place to nurture Singapore's non-economic wants, culturalisation became official and strongly embedded in planning agendas to develop a culturally adept, and economically sustainable Singapore. This re-direction is key to understanding how contemporary art has been nurtured, fetishised and institutionalised in the island-state ever since. In balancing the need to promote the arts and retain economic stability, artists like Tang started to produce performance art works that did not merely break free from the dominant media of painting and sculpture, or the constraints of museums and art galleries, but they in my view began to break down barriers between the live presence of the artist and the Singaporean public.

Amanda Heng's *Let's Chat* (1996) is an example of a participatory artwork that blends performative gestures with participant interaction conducted in public or semi-public spaces. Situated around a round table and the ubiquitous activity of tailing bean sprouts (an activity commonly practiced in Southeast Asia as part of food preparation), it presented a place for conversations between strangers (participants) to ensue. As the artist partakes in communicating with her audience, the participants find themselves adopting various vernacular languages in communicating ideas about the everyday while sipping tea.

Questioning the relationship between one's selfhood as an artist in an as-yet established collateralised city and one's frantically modernising environment, the predicament facing the city was what Amanda Heng explored in her work. Everyday conversations about the state gently surfaced, were probed, and scrutinised in her form of conversational performance art. In *Let's Chat*, she invariably alluded to Singapore's 1979 'Speak Mandarin' Campaign, a government policy that promoted Mandarin's usage in a largely vernacular-dialect-speaking community at that time. This campaign came under scrutiny for its hindering of intergenerational communication and possible systemic erasure of culture. The public opposed it, but unlike the harsh response to performance art, the campaign continued for years, resulting in the usage of vernacular dialect becoming gradually forgotten and erased from most public spaces. Additionally, much of her work deals with the politics of being a woman, a criticality towards gender stereotypes that was largely not encountered in other visual art practices locally in the 1990s. Learning how to balance state support and maintaining their mode for provocation, artists in my view became important voices as they continued to expand their artistic repertoire and yet retained the criticality and spontaneity that performance art offers.

In another of Heng's seminal works, *Let's Walk* (1999), she walks the streets of Singapore and invites her participants to follow suit. In journeying around the city, Heng has broken away from the museum or the gallery site as a locale for artistic production and appreciation. Using the live presence of the artist navigating real spaces, her walks in public spaces enabled her practice to enter the larger discourse of international culture and contemporary art. At times, her use of props like tea, beansprouts, and domestic objects has become a feature of her durational performance pieces that is focused not on a traditional plot or narrative but a series of intimate gestures based on improvisation and the active participation of others discussing all things local. Through *Let's Chat* and *Let's Walk*, simple gestures involving everyday activities provided opportunities for participants to partake, exchange, interact,

and question the status quo within Singapore through her artistic intervention, led by an artist who was ethnically Chinese, female and exposed to western artistic sensibilities.

Heng's keen awareness of her everyday vernacular roots played a large part in her actions as an artist where her itinerant performative gestures literally took her to the streets and were unconditionally public. In the *Yellow Man* performances by Lee Wen, another key Singaporean performance artist whose body took center-stage, cultural concerns are surfaced and observed in the artist's actions set within all-inclusive sites in a modernising city. In these journeying performances, Lee emphasised his physicality through his bodily movement and heightened his ethnicity through his partially nude body that was painted an altered intense coloration of yellowness. His nuanced movements have come to balance a work that could border on the point of absurdity. The simple gesture of walking around the streets of a city builds a dialogical relationship between viewer and artist, where one's cultural and ethnic identity were questioned through gestures, interaction, and planned and unplanned sequences (Kester 10). Lee and Heng both shared a spirit of exploration, criticality to social changes and adopted an inventive use of the body set within the public spaces of Singapore and other cities. The *Yellow Man* Series was developed from Lee's keen observation of the region around him and his life experiences. He developed a nuanced performative impulse that exaggerated the yellow Asian skin tone to a bright yellow hue as a layering of values, cultures and biases are enmeshed in his performances—where the eponymous character is seen roving with props and interacting with spaces and people.

As a result of their artistic practices, Tang, Lee and Heng became the embodiment of an artistic critique of hegemony and social biases through their performance art pieces. Varying in duration and documented in varying degrees, they pushed the medium in their far-reaching practice and were also instrumental in organising performance art events in all-inclusive public spaces in Singapore. Artists like Tang, Heng, and Lee represent a generation of Singaporean performance

artists who networked or became enmeshed or interconnected with fellow practitioners engaging in exchange and mutual participation in events, festivals, and installations. This networking is what enabled participatory, relational, collaborative, or action art to have a presence in this region manifested in large- and small-scale performance art festivals. Performance art events have done more than help performance art to grow in Singapore. They have also enabled the voices of artists to be heard outside of the country and region, inevitably balancing the state's perception of its propensity to bring about imbalance to social order. This mode of self-organisation and collectivity in and of itself has come to create meaning and significance for performance artists in the face of state-driven commodification of art, where performance art has been ever-present. The value of working in groups and travelling from country to country also enabled the criticality present in these performative works to be discussed and read by an outside audience, thereby increasing the global awareness of Singapore as a city for contemporary performance art.

Performance Art in and about Singapore

Performance Art became recognised and framed as a form of practice that was engendered by the state. Since performance works became accepted in art institutions and galleries, it started to widely inhabit a space between performative interventions and participatory formats and installatory forms. In a country that might be considered to be small, Singapore has become a global tech hub, as well as a creative global city in the decades of 2000s to 2010. The island-state's highly technologised society is characterised by a labyrinthine framework of digital connectivity. Beyond the institutionalisation and commodification of performance art during the 2000s, Several Singaporean artists were exploring technology and its embodied nature in relation to state ideologies. Urich Lau's *Life Circuit* series (2010, 2012) adopts the performative format. It takes the artist's bodily presence and replaces it with a technocratic embodiment,

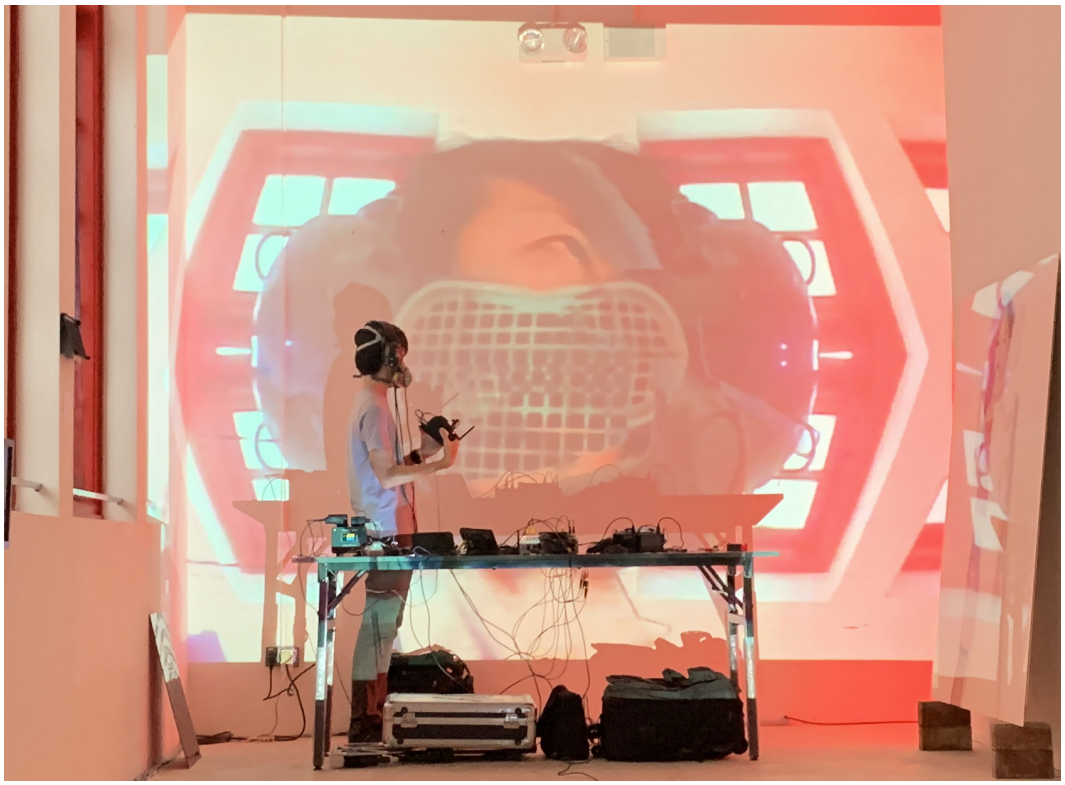

Fig. 1: Urich Lau. *Life Circuit 2.0* (2019). Image courtesy of Jaymi McManus.

that of the video camera, projection devices, and other gadgets. Akin to Nam June Paik's controversial performance pieces that used technology, such as *Opera Sextronique* (1967) and *TV For Living Bra* (1969), Lau devised a ground-breaking electronic media performance action that commented on the development of Singapore from an island city to a highly technologised contemporary city. In various iterations of Lau's video performances, he dons wearable gadgets reconstructed from industrial safety equipment like gas masks and welding goggles, staging a 'hybrid-being' in disguise. In addition to referencing examples from new media art histories, Lau's video performances can also be seen as inverting the capabilities of these technologies and critiquing Singapore's adoption of innovations and steadfast cultural policies through his state-sanctioned pieces. His performances, of varying durations, call upon the gadgets to become the extensions of the artist, re-terrorising his bodily movement, and his overall being and self-hood. In my view, it is

in this series of performative works that Lau deftly inverted technology's usefulness by producing situations of inconvenience and impediment in order to question society's embrace of technology.

Life Circuit embodies Lau's entanglement with the state and modes of artistic expression. His performance works are actions that form a sophisticated trope of social critique, where he presents 'statements as noise' in programming computer voices to read out the National Art Council's mission statement. His bodily actions push the viewer to reflect on the mandated aims, set out like a manifesto for the arts and cultural development in Singapore. Through his usage of mechanically read out mission statements from Singapore's *Renaissance City Report* (MITA), the artist has adopted duration, the artist's body, the audience's physical presence, and the dull lull of electronic gadgets to respond to the geopolitical conditions of the nation-state. The Renaissance City Report (2000) provided a vision and plan for the promotion of arts and culture in Singapore. The report reviewed the progress made in the local arts and cultural scene since the last comprehensive study undertaken in 1989 by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA). Lau's critique is smartly veiled under state-funded festivals and events, where he produced performance actions that are critical art pieces developed from political conditions that he finds himself practicing in, a finely balanced approach to artistic production.

Up until now, the works of Tang, Heng, Lee, and Lau discussed in this text represent unique moments of collaborative gestures with the public, the state, and other governmental bodies involved in sanctioning artistic interventions. The creation of networks among artists, their performance art, and art spaces in Singapore have been part of a schema towards the conditions artists find themselves making art in and for. More recently, *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror* (2017) by Seelan Palay exists as a form of walk that explored performative tropes in a tangential way. Seelan performed *32 Years* during the year of his 32nd birthday to Dr. Chia Thye Poh, the world's longest-serving

political detainee, who was forced to spend 32 years in jail and house arrest, without trial, by the state for alleged pro-communist activity. The performer has made his own definition in the very process and manner of execution, where the journeying has been provocative and stands as key to this investigation about how performance art has been a balancing act in Singapore. The artistic performance was shaped from the visual realities of an artist residing and making art in the duality of Singapore's consumerist, capitalist, and globalised ecosystem. A contemporary of the earlier generation of Singaporean artists, Palay is, in my view, an artist who is deeply attached to community through his other forms of artistic endeavors. He sees the core fundamentals of performance art as a connection not just to his reality but the reality of those residing in this city, much like the previous works cited in my text. In this piece, the artist carries the portrait of political detainee, Chia Thye Poh, and journeys from the Speakers' Corner to the National Gallery and finally to the Parliament House. In the actions taken by the artist, 'at every single point, the state was an active participant in this performance' ('Performing Without Acting'). The artist, proceeding with his intended procession, carried with him the probability of being stopped by the police at any juncture, where the journeyed locations held significance for his performative gesture. Heightened by this likelihood, in his itinerant and contemplative performance, Palay made a speech, unrolled a banner, and held up a mirror to the National Gallery. The banner read 'Passion Made Probable', a response to the Singapore Tourism Board's slogan 'Passion Made Possible' which was a catchphrase to market Singapore as the global creative city. He navigated these public spaces prior to his final action when he was in front of the Parliament House. There he was arrested and subsequently charged for violating the Public Order Act, and ordered to either serve a two-week jail term or pay a fine of $2,500 Singapore dollars. Palay chose to serve the jail term and contended that the whole process was part of his performance.

32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror is a performance art work operating firmly outside of the art gallery, the mechanics of the state-endorsed art institution, and stands as a reflection of the critical boundaries of performance art amidst the state's rational view of cultural development. One can almost say that this work tips the balance of what is performance art and what is civil activism. This itinerant performance offers a stark contrast to the text's earlier examples and presents an opposing instance of disequilibrium in the state's tolerance for performance art. The walk has taken several forms in this report, and this latter example is a critical vehicle in expressing a contested mode of expression and aesthetics contrary to the state's rational order.

From the 1980s to now, there have been many moments of state intervention in cultural development that can be traced to geopolitical events, government policy implementation periods, and large and widespread changes to our social and spatial configurations. This movement from the rural to the urban was topped off in the late 1990s where cultural policies were mooted to engineer or foster a development of the arts. It is through this backdrop of systemic changes that we map artists who respond to and produce performance artworks that react, critique, and raise questions in and through the expressive language of action and modes of collaboration. The creation of performance artworks in the public spaces in Singapore should be read more critically in relation to the city that they exist in. The examples explored and examined here are, in my view, important schemas in the reading of the conditions artists find themselves making art in and for. It is a complex situation that artists find themselves in when making performance art in the present-day, globalised society in the city of Singapore. So how and where can performance art be located in Singapore? What can or cannot be performed? From the emergence of a creative industries framework decades ago to the more recent celebration of new art spaces, global art events, and a new art biennale, performance art sits at the periphery as a form of artistic expression that is often curtailed by the perceived

dangers it poses to the state, even as the state transitions to a smart nation. In this report from the field, a reading of performance art by five Singaporean artists, an understanding of how performative works have been conceived, nurtured, and even institutionalised in Singapore in my view reveals a delicate 'balancing act' in how the art form continues to maintain its revolutionary potential in the face of social, cultural, and technological changes.

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Creative Contributions

July, Supporting

By Debbie Green and Clare Park

Debbie Green worked as Senior Lecturer on BA (Hons) Acting at Royal Central School of Speech & Drama for over two decades, her subject being Actor Movement. Outside of this, she has worked since the 1980s with photographer Clare Park as subject, co-conceiver and choreographer—producing photographic work for exhibition and publication. The below image, *July, Supporting*. is from 'Series Blue' (2017) in *Breaking Form: Re-Formed* (2020; 99; photograph by Clare Park; movement direction by Toby Sedgwick; digital artwork by Matthew Tugwell).

The 'Series Blue' images layer and weave together Clare and Debbie's personal photographs month-by-month, compressing time and space to produce a visual journal of a year in their lives. Debbie's landscapes—from her 'walks with no dog' photographic series—flow across Clare's portraiture. Each picture has one element from their previous 'Breaking Form: Buz[1] and Parkinson's' project, here Buz's Skeleton Ship and Scribblings, whilst also casting back to previous themes such as the presence of worn and unworn masks and the bond of friendship.

> The text is a response to our image – I took on the role of observer of this co-created image and of myself as one of the subjects. My words follow the pattern of the sky water scribblings but are unrelated. The words in columns are also in three layers or strata of thoughts evoked by the image, 'balance', 'a balancing act' as the unpredictable nature of life experience and its impact from which this picture emerged, and selected words from my studio actor movement vocabulary including Contact Improvisation. (Debbie Green, July 2020).

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1 Buz Williams, 1949-2014, PWP (Person with Parkinson's), Debbie's husband.

Photograph: July, Supporting, from Series Blue 2017, photograph by Clare Park ©

Latent
Stasis
Place in a steady position
Suspension
Stalemate
Counterweight
Central pivot
the Balance
Weighing up

Equality
In balance
Equal
Even out
Predominating amount
Equivalent
Strike a balance
On balance
Meet match

In the balance
Counter-act
Healthy balance
Reciprocal
Horizontal
Fulcrum
Libra
(Two scales pans)

Finding where the balance is
Balancing out
Credits and debits equal
Harmony of design and proportion
An amount left over
Still upright, still vertical
Equilibrium

Counterbalance
One side, the other side
Holding balance
In time
Spirit level
Friendship

Offset
Teetering on the brink
Precarious
Off balance
Precipitous
Flip flop
Tipping point

Go, come
Hither, thither
Pull away, pull towards
Counterpull
Mental and emotional
(st)[l]ability

Pull back
Heave ho
To and fro
Back to front, front to back, forwards, backwards
Push Me Pull You
Adverse direction

Could go either way
Contradictory
Mutuality
Negotiation
Counterpull
Shift, adjust

Out of balance
Imbalance
Up and down
Rocking the boat
Tip the scales
Keep balanced

Give and take
Sink your weight, pay attention, listen
Wait
Act, react
Offer and receive

Pull, push
Initiate, receptivity
Stable, labile
Release and support

Even distribution of weight
Stillness
Full emptiness

Perpendicular
Connecting

Bound progression
Seesaw
Place of potential

Platform, Vol. 15, No. 1, Balancing Acts, Autumn 2021

Seeing Beyond the Visible: The Choreography of Breath and Touch A reflection on the making of *Thermal Duets*

By Angela Woodhouse and Caroline Broadhead

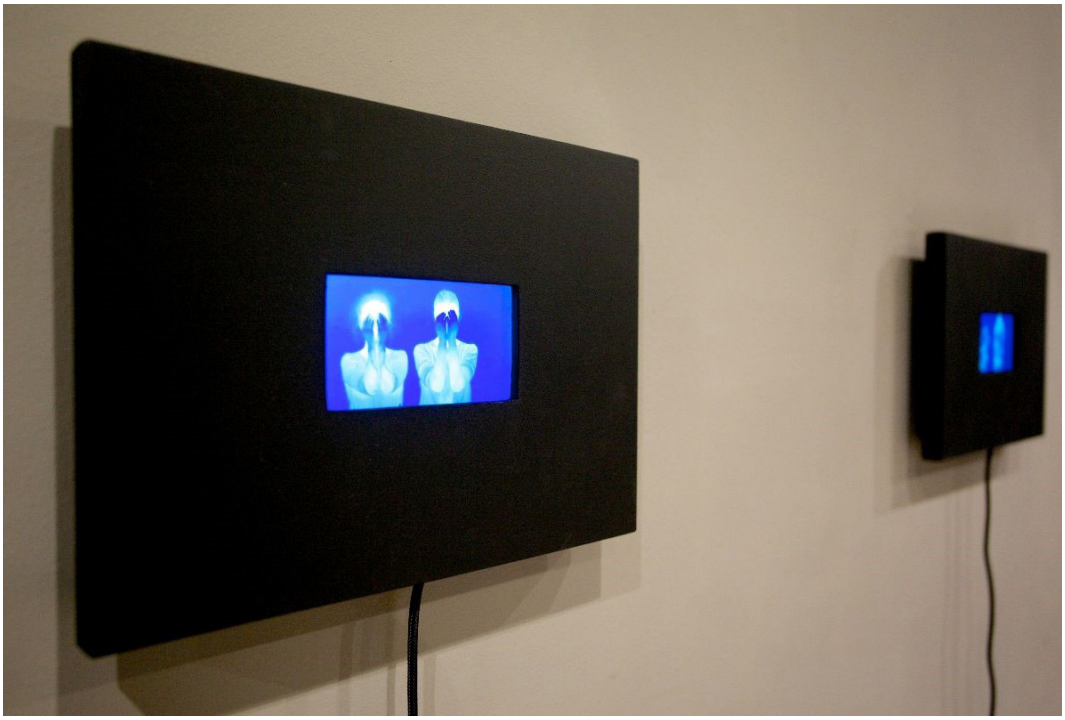


Fig. 1: *Thermal Duets*, Marsden Woo Gallery, July 2019. Photo by Philip Sayer.

This visual essay seeks to explore the themes and process of making *Thermal Duets* (2019), a collaborative work between ourselves and performed by Martina Conti and Alice Labant. It comprises a series of five short video pieces using thermal imaging technology. Each video is separately titled (*Shed, Shroud, Exchange, Spread, Stroke*) and offers a different notion of trace, either of breath or touch to amplify the residue and effect of body heat. Intrinsic is the tension and release as it exists here between the technology and the sensorial, between our understanding of our embodied selves and of that which the technology makes visible. Through careful design the work straddles scientific demonstration with an emotional resonance of one individual to another. This tension then

between what is seen (separated from us) and what is felt (enmeshed within us) underlines the sense of tension and release for the viewer.

The prompt of 'Balancing Acts' draws our attention in T*hermal Duets* to the highly luminous images intensified on the miniaturised screen set against the fragility of the body in its heated liveness impacting others and the environment. This fragility is looped into the wider context of damage, a dichotomy between the tender touch and the inflicted mark that speaks to our impact in the post-Covid understanding of ourselves, the power of touch as associated with both care and contamination. Reflecting on work made prior to the pandemic requires a re-adjustment, a pause in consideration of the work, its intent and impact. This re-balancing of how we perceive much around us gives weight to this work in respect of the delineation between one body and another.

Context and Process

As collaborating artists, we have been exploring anticipated touch, intimacy, and detail through a number of dance installation works such as *Sighted* (2009) and *Between* (2011-13) to create highly charged performance events. Audiences were invited into constructed spaces in which the scores enacted by the dancers heightened awareness of one's own body, both performers and viewers. Integral to the experience of the works were the viewers' potential actions (whether of stillness or motion), and the impact these actions may have on the environment or other audience members. As two audience members remarked:

> The piece made me want to move—the dancers made us feel all the things we want to do, all the anticipation reminding us of movement.
> (Audience response, *Between* [2011])

> The performers' touch left my body feeling heavier.
> (Audience response, *Between* [2012])

The aim of *Thermal Duets* was to expand on the intimate and sensorial but in the virtual sphere. As before, we drew on observing the body extended through time, of detail emerging and fading, of quiet attention, but within the context of thermal technology, specifically using the Helion Camera (able to pick out more detail on hair and clothing and which produces a deep blue/low heat). The palpable sense of warmth in a previous live work, *Between*—manifested at one point in the slow and deliberate removal of an undergarment by a dancer and handed, still warm from her body, to an audience member—would in *Thermal Duets* be translated into an image intended to evoke the potential for felt responses. As one viewer reflected:

> There is a sensual feeling as the figures merge —'I wanna feel the heat from somebody' sang Whitney Houston in 1987. The desire for human interaction is pretty universal. They breathe more heavily. I feel a certain sadness that what made the figures burn more brightly is ended so soon. (Audience response, *Thermal Duets*)

And here another remarked on the 'slowly breathing, placing and displacing, a sense of stillness, bodily arrival, grounding' (audience response 2019). The emergent change of colour indicating a recording of heat slowly bleeds out from the gestures onto the other, to clothing and the environment in painterly form. The colour range of dark blue, light yellow to red indicating changes in body temperature were manipulated in the choreographic process to become painterly marks of wounding, subsuming or blanketing the other. The challenge here was to extend the sensorial quality beyond the screen; to record the *trace* of touch was in effect to *touch* the viewer. Erin Manning's writing resonates here as she reminds us that touching another is never singular:

> Touching you, I propose to you to receive, to touch… To touch is to violently or gently encounter a surface, a contour. To touch is to feel the perceived limits of my contours, my surfaces, and my body in relation to yours. To touch is to expand these contours, creating new perimeters. (12)

She goes on to elaborate how the impact of touch modulates between violent and tender acts. Equally, the extent of breath made visible in *Thermal Duets (Spread)* indicates how the boundary of the body is not easily or tangibly defined, the edges overlapping and tipping into another's body expand and filter into the air.

In attending to work in the field by other artists, Italian video artist Stefano Cagol comes to mind, in particular his environmental project *Body of Energy* (2014) for which he recorded the natural exertion of bodies and heat trace from volunteer participants in different outdoor locations, leaving their mark on trees or urban infrastructure. We were equally interested in this bleed onto the environment but wanted to articulate the quiet detail of action through gesture, pace and sculptural form of the body. This incorporated its furthest reaches, for example the detail of hair or the heat tone of the underarm, and equally through garments in their texture and layering. Our purpose was to exploit and attune the materiality of recorded body heat towards the poetics of movement and image, balancing the association of scientific forensics with art making.

On Miniaturisation

The videos are presented on iPods. This miniaturised scale feeds into the common experience of looking via our smartphones into a small illuminated space. French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, in his essay on the miniature notes the small scale as the essence of imagination since 'values become condensed and enriched in miniature' (150). He also notes the idea of small scale having the ability to appear larger,

'[t]hus the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The details of a thing can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness' (155).

We, as artists, take advantage of the burgeoning understanding of the small screen space to draw the viewer closer, to see into the luminous colours, to call upon a more intimate relationship with the screen and thereby a sense of, and empathy with, the continual motion that allows the viewer to slow down and follow the action moment by moment. Susan Stewart in her book *On Longing* (1993) suggests '[t]he miniature has the capacity to make its content remarkable; its fantastic qualities are related to what lies outside it in such a way as to transform the total context' (46). We choose to exploit these concepts, extending an artistic enquiry through the body that alerts viewers through minute action rather than expansive outward and recognisable virtuosic dancing. Miniaturisation acts in tension with the experience that ironically *becomes* expansive in highlighting the slow materialisation of heat trace. This is also supported in the use of the fixed frame single shot to evoke a sense of time extended and shared, of real time, of the now.

The real and the imagined

The dimension of the screen, and the sense of stillness and scale are important factors as they invite a certain intimacy and closeness when viewing. The effect is to encourage the viewer to walk up to and, one might say, *into* the exotic body, imprinted on the screen, not in its form but through its heat. This is very apparent in the saturation of colours, vibrant blues, soft greens, yellow and red, referred by one viewer as 'a jewel-like quality that is enticing' (Audience response, *Thermal Duets*). Another viewer reflects:

> With these pieces I am constantly aware what I see is invisible to me… The protagonists search for the obliteration of identity in each other, expecting perhaps it will only last for a fleeting moment. (*ibid*)

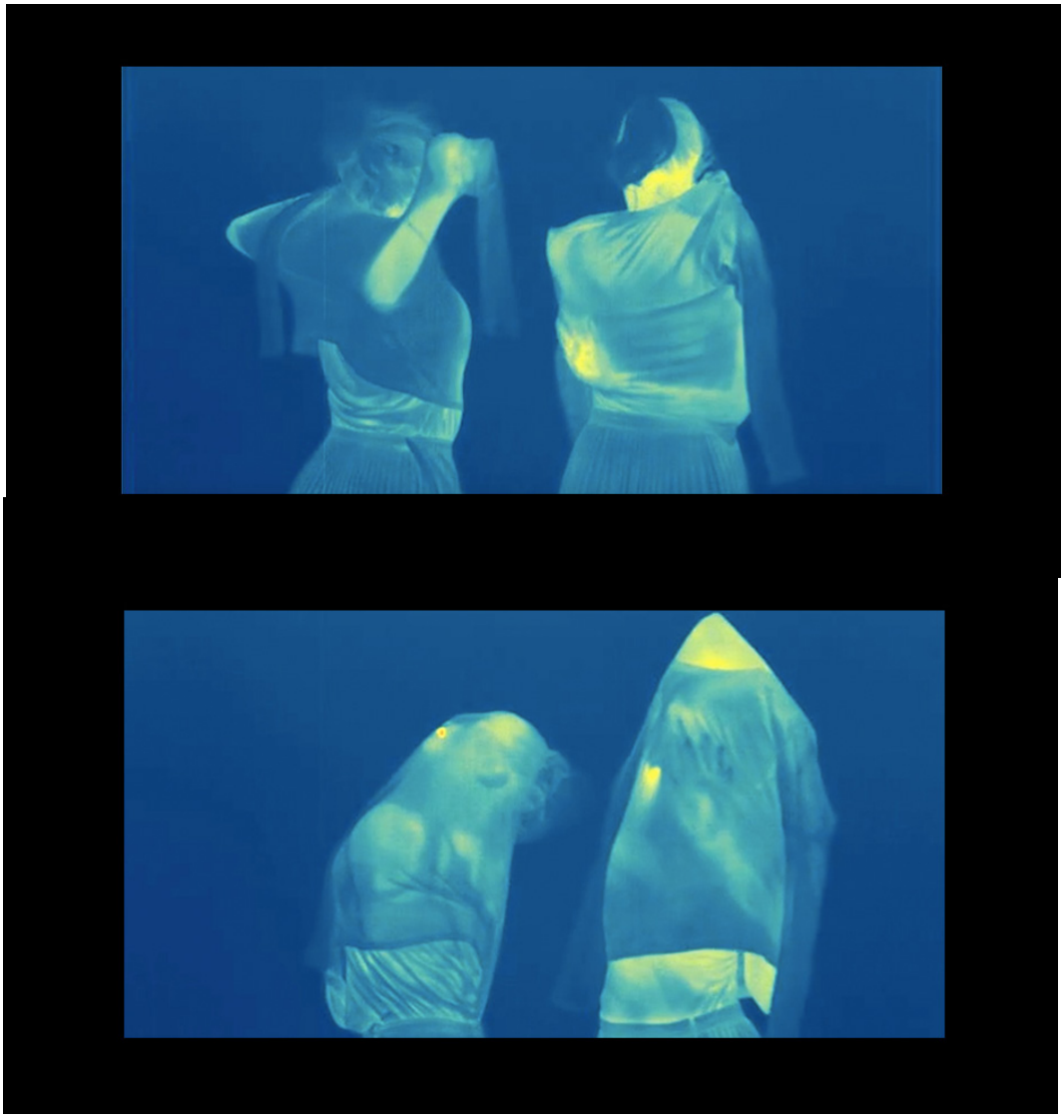
Recognition of the other becomes an acknowledgement of oneself as an expanded body beyond the frame and through the exertion of energy. In some ways this extraordinary capture of the body via technology exaggerates the liveness, though only visible in this virtual space.

In rehearsal the question of understanding how the tasks played out on the camera in respect of heat trace challenged the dancers' somatic response. While there may have been a strong sensorial quality in the exhalation of breath, for example, the redness of trace on the other body may not have been visible to the camera; it was this balance between the felt and the resulting record of heat that became a key aspect, tuning visceral nature to effect. This difference between the felt and the visual effect created an intangible gap that caused an interesting tension in the necessity to close it. Equally the heat reading of the different bodies such as the strong blue veins apparent on Labant and less so on Conti (*Shroud*) became a guide to the construction of the image.

Designing movement and imagining the consequence of the effect called for a double layer of seeing, the real and the hoped for. Guided by what could be seen through the camera required many takes of the same moment to get the right effect. This practicality of to and from, discussions, re-imagining, tuned us into an imaginative space. Noticing and exploring more detail was central to defining the aesthetic of the films driven by a desire to create a hypersensitivity in and of the moment.

In the following section we explore each of the videos as to their specific details highlighting the unique and shared aspects.

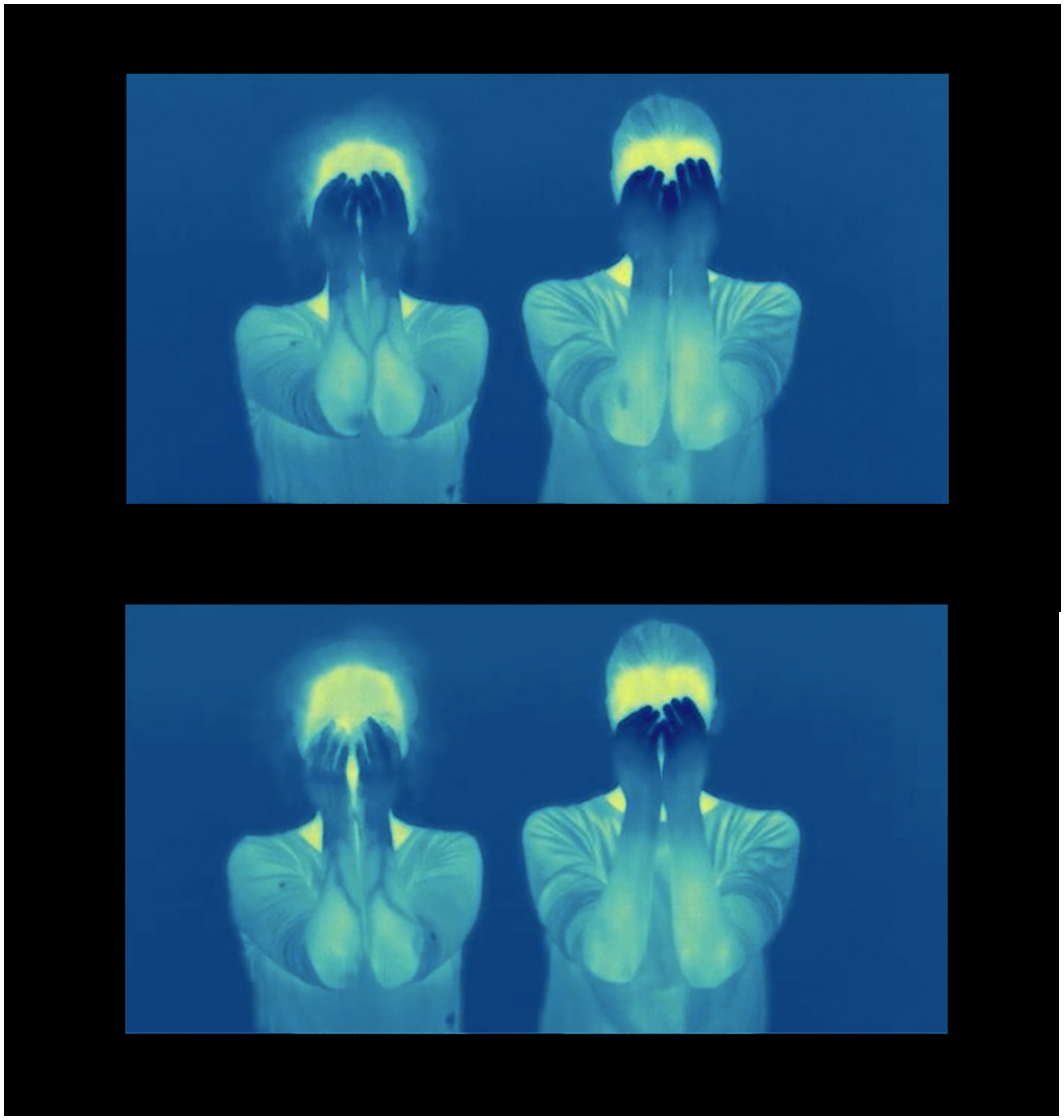
Shed



Figs. 2 and 3: *Thermal Duets (Shed)*, screenshots by Caroline Broadhead.

Shed plays with the shift of garments around the body as the dancers slowly peel them off. Through a series of sculptural pauses in which the body heat penetrates the fabric the texture or pattern becomes more apparent. Views of the face, the red breath, the elbows, and hands emerge from and disappear into the abstract shapes that the encased and wrapped body has become. There is a form of double life, balancing the natural action of taking off a garment with the 'unnatural' bleed of parts of the body, cooling and fading to dark blue, as the body shifts to another point.

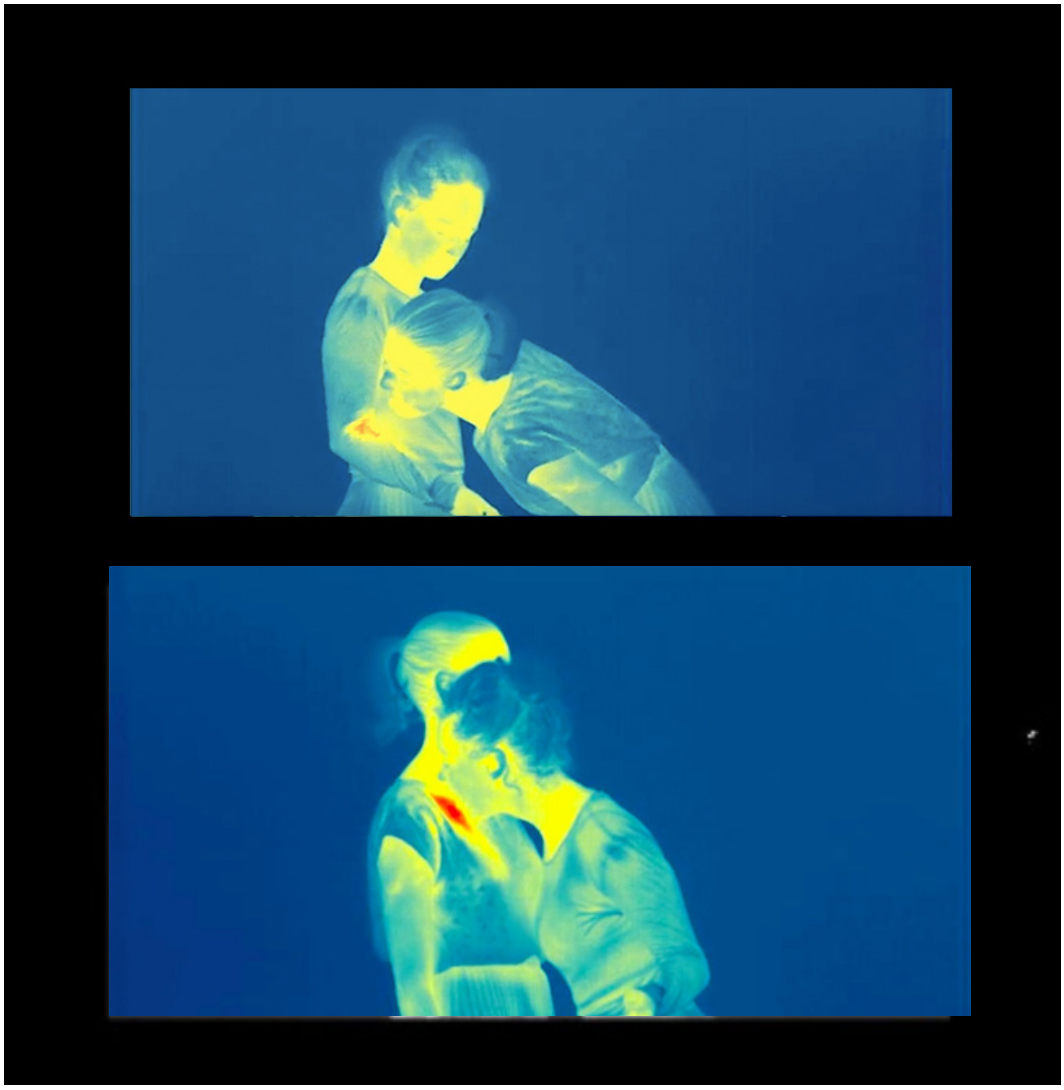
Shroud



Figs. 4 and 5: *Thermal Duets (Shroud)*, screenshots by Caroline Broadhead.

In *Shroud*, we retain the anonymity of the dancers while allowing the gradual progression of temperature change to reveal the individuality of the bodies. As the video progresses the heat from the face and its breath slowly makes small changes to the edges of the hands and the face, becoming a source of illumination. Obliterating the dancers' identity enhances the difference between them as we observe the biology of heat slowly changing the veins in the arms, becoming bluer for one more than the other.

Exchange



Figs. 6 and 7: *Thermal Duets (Exchange)*, screenshots by Caroline Broadhead.

In *Exchange*, the directed action of one body breathing on another made visible as heat trace becomes a process of marking, the camera detecting the heat displaced on skin or clothing. The ambiguity of intent as either a tender or a violent action is manifested in the power and energy that creates either a hot red mark or a softer yellow. The directed breath on specific points on the body, such as the forehead or the inner elbow reverberates in consequent motion. There is a conversational tone but also an implicit sensuality, a form of kissing. The viewer is invited into this private and silent act.

Stroke

Figs. 8 and 9: *Thermal Duets (Stroke)*, screenshots by Caroline Broadhead.

The simple everyday gesture (a single stroke) is complicated by the painterly stroke of yellow resulting from heat being pressed into the other. The sensation of warming bodies through the tender slow action emphasises a kinship. However, the consequence is also to effectively wipe away the detail of the clothing, seeming to bleed or submerge the garment into the skin, as if the detail of her is also compromised in some way; the impact of the heat of one hand 'wipes out' the details of another's body. There is a balance between how we understand the autonomy of an individual and how the recording of temperature merges both dancers into one.

Spread

Fig. 10: *Thermal Duets (Spread)*, screenshot by Caroline Broadhead.

In *Spread* the positioning of the dancers on the edge of the frame slices the body, slivers the presence, and in so doing gives weight to the breath. Their exhalation is read as heat vapour by the camera, a soft haze filtering from the mouth and evaporating across the empty blue space between them. In viewing you are invited to tune into the regularity breathing and to notice the differences of rhythm between each of the dancers' exhalation, falling in and out of sync. Bodily stillness draws attention to the delicate and changing balance between the visible edge of bodies and their extended boundary exemplified by the visible traces of breath.

The concluding reflection on *Thermal Duets* goes to the dancers. Here Alice notes:

> Colours bring a fiction [...] yet the fact that warmth and coolness become visible and overtake the way the bodies are seen brought to me as performer a heightened sense of my volumes, multiple depths and organic aspects of the moving body. (Labant)

This fresh conception of being expands beyond our visible contours. The inviolability of the borders of the body is challenged, demanding a re-balancing in understanding of our relation with our surroundings that in turn foregrounds the dialogue between our exterior and interior selves.

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Natalie Inside Out

By Natalie Reckert and Mark Morreau

We are acrobat and theatre maker Natalie Reckert, and digital artist and videographer Mark Morreau. Our work explores the body in the actual and the digital realm through extreme close up as well as the wide lens perspective, through video projection, spoken word and acrobatic movement. We use the camera's eye to play with the process of seeing and the biographical narratives that arise from looking at details as well as considering the larger perspective. We are particularly interested in the mechanics and the psychology of the body, it's digital alter-egos and the meaning they have for the construction of identities.

This visual essay is based on the stage performance *Natalie Inside Out*, which premiered in 2018 at the Lowry in Salford as part of the Lowry's "Developed with..." program and was supported by National Centre for Circus Arts Lab:time² bursary, Jacksons Lane theatre in North London, Arts council England and the Roundhouse's circus fest.

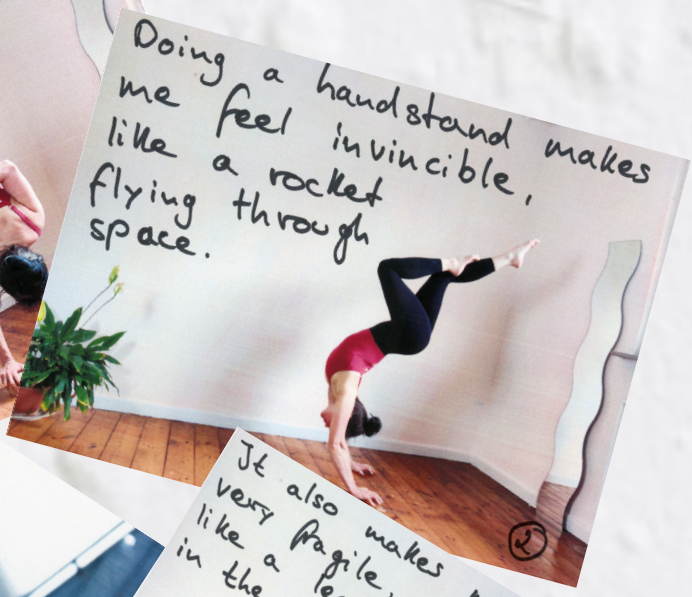
Concept and texts by Natalie Reckert and Mark Morreau.
Pictures by Natalie Reckert/Mark Morreau.
Computer interface screenshot: Isadora 3 by Troikatronix.
Natalie Inside Out *(2018) was created by Natalie Reckert and Mark Morreau as part of the Lowry's "Developed with..." program, supported by Jacksons Lane theatre, Greentop community circus and Arts Council England.*

www.natalieinsideout.com
www.nataliereckert.com
www.morreaux.co.uk

I am Natalie and I am a handbalancer.
It is a rather strange thing to choose
as a career: The art of balancing the body
in contorted, unusual and spectacular shapes.

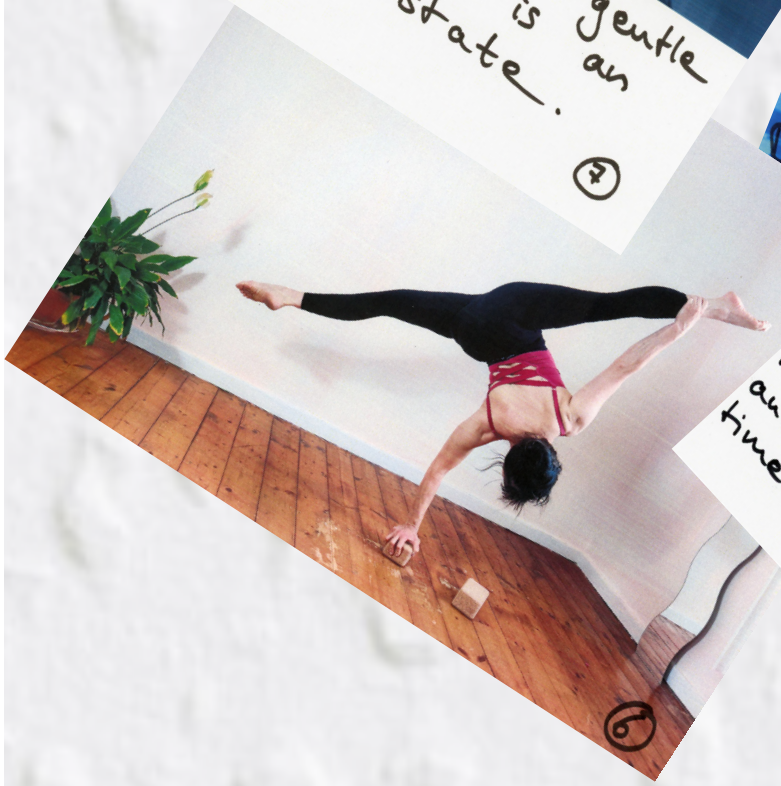
My fascination is simple
and complex at the
same time:

Doing a handstand makes
me feel invincible,
like a rocket
flying through
space.

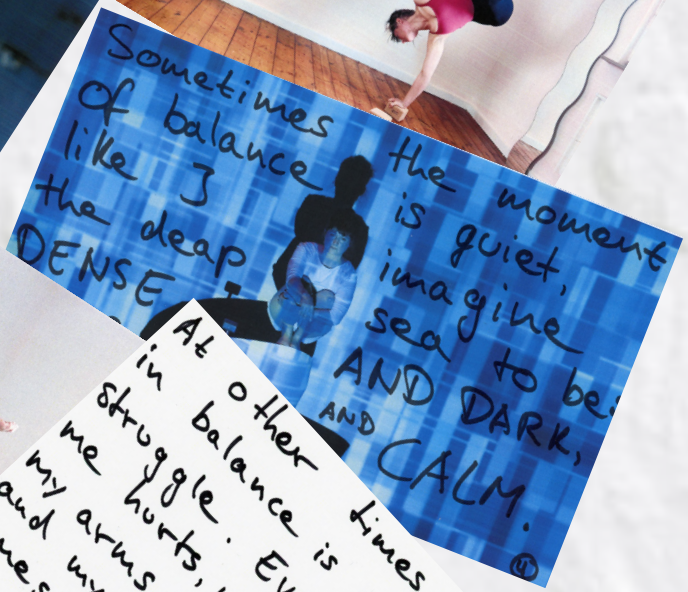


It also makes me feel
very fragile,
like a leaf
in the wind.

Balance sounds gentle
but balance is an
artificial state.



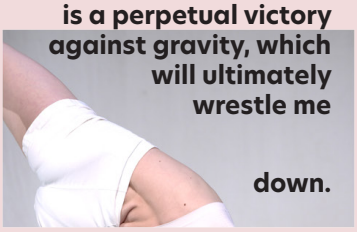
Sometimes the moment
of balance is quiet,
like I imagine
the deep sea to be:
DENSE AND DARK,
AND CALM.



At other times staying
in balance is a raging bit of
struggle. Every bit of
me hurts, my back is aching,
my arms are getting pumped
and my head feels three
times its size.

For the upkeep of balance a constant struggle is necessary, cancelling out all other options because in-balance is just one out of many possible states. It is the most unlikely state, the million other off-balances will eventually win.

Balance in a handstand is a perpetual victory against gravity, which will ultimately wrestle me down.



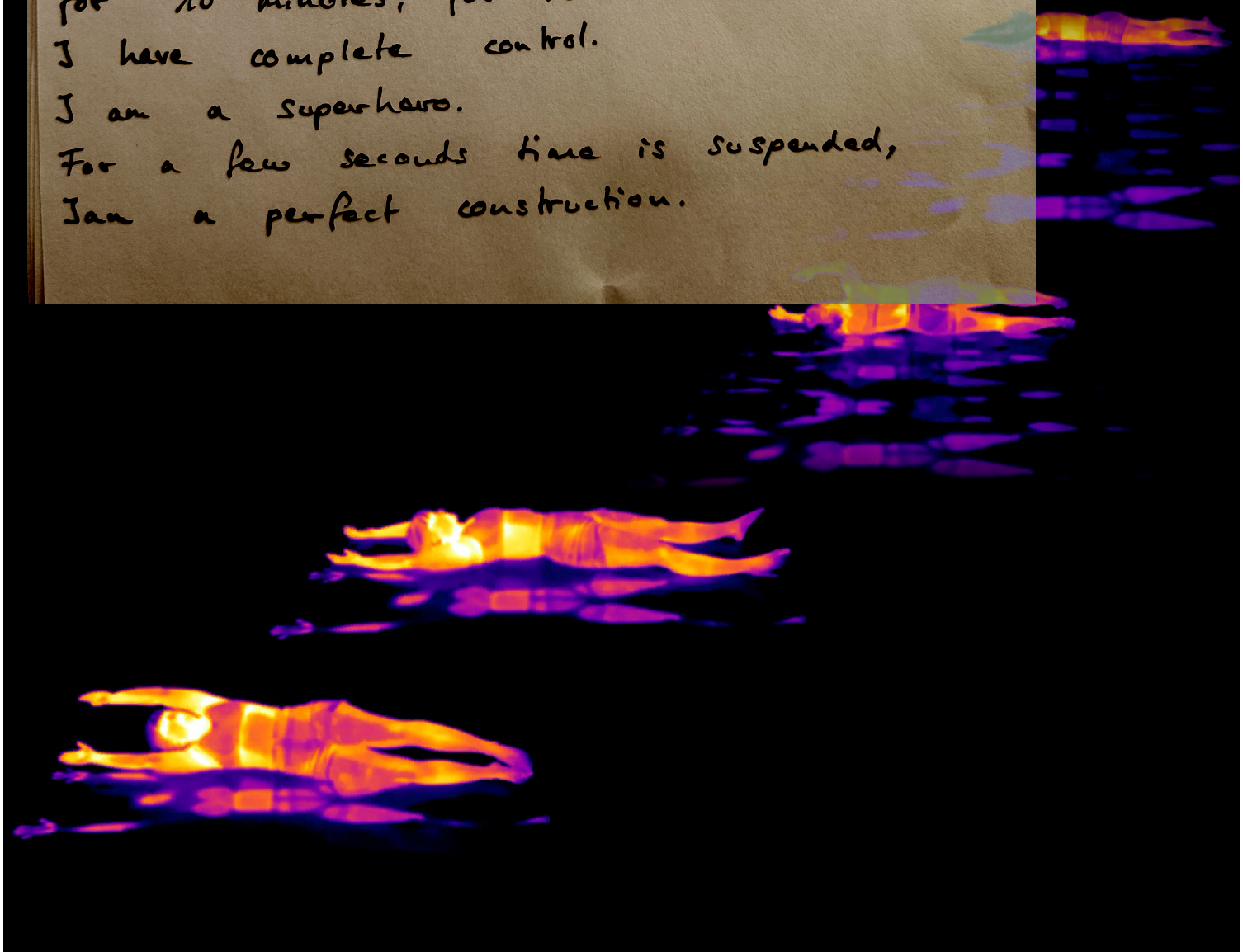
In the few moments in a handstand, when I have complete control, when I am in balance, I feel immortal. For a few seconds time is suspended and I feel invincible.

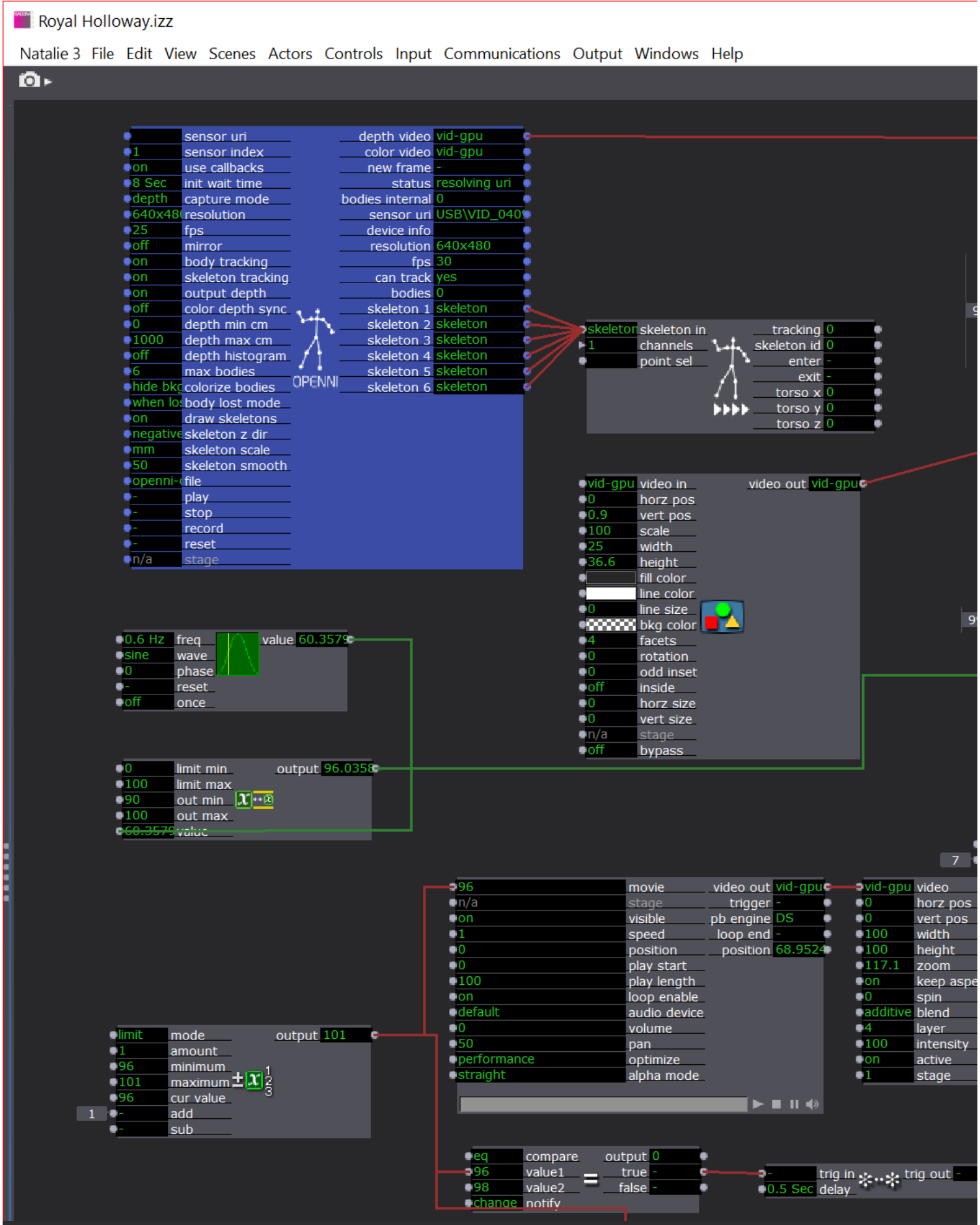
Mark is also here. Mark is a photographer and filmmaker. Mark loves to watch things through his favorite camera. Mark is fascinated by details. Especially by details the audience never notice when they see an acrobat on stage. Mark films my handstands. With a super close up camera. With an infrared camera. With a Go-Pro and with a remote controlled camera which I call the independent camera.

Mark and I talk a lot about what we see through the lens. We often disagree in ways that make us see each other's world better. Mark's super close up lens has made me understand that I am a superhero and a mortal being at the same time.

photos: The Lowry

In my dreams I am an avatar.
My muscles can hold an unlimited amount of weight.
My hips rotate sideways for more than 180°.
I have a head-body-pressure-compensation valve which ensures perfectly balanced blood pressure.
My torso stability re-calibrates every 5 minutes.
My aerodynamic carbon fibre legs make me lighter than air.
My arms and my skin are enriched with titanium oxide.
An enhanced nervous system makes me resistant to irritations.
My muscles carry my weight for 5 minutes, for 10 minutes, for 15 minutes.
I have complete control.
I am a superhero.
For a few seconds time is suspended,
I am a perfect construction.





Natalie 3

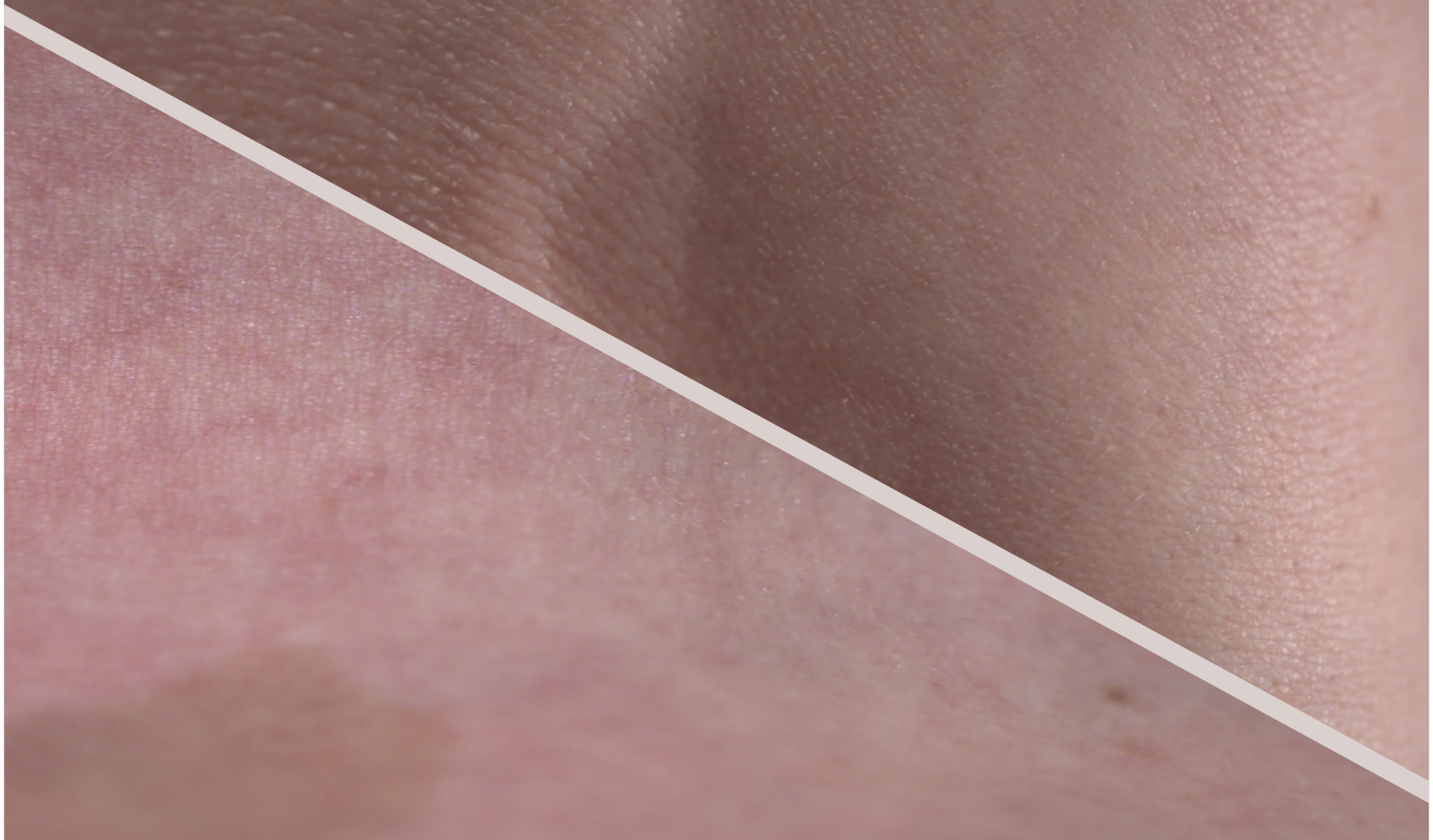
Requires: Windows 10 or macOS 10.11.x
Intel or AMD Processor with 64-bit support
Up to 8 channels of HD Natalie Playback
Unlimited avatar layers
MIDI Timeless Support
Integrated Body Mapping
Fast, GPU-Based movement effects
Custom body styles via OpenGL Shading Language
Syphon, Spout, and NDI Integration

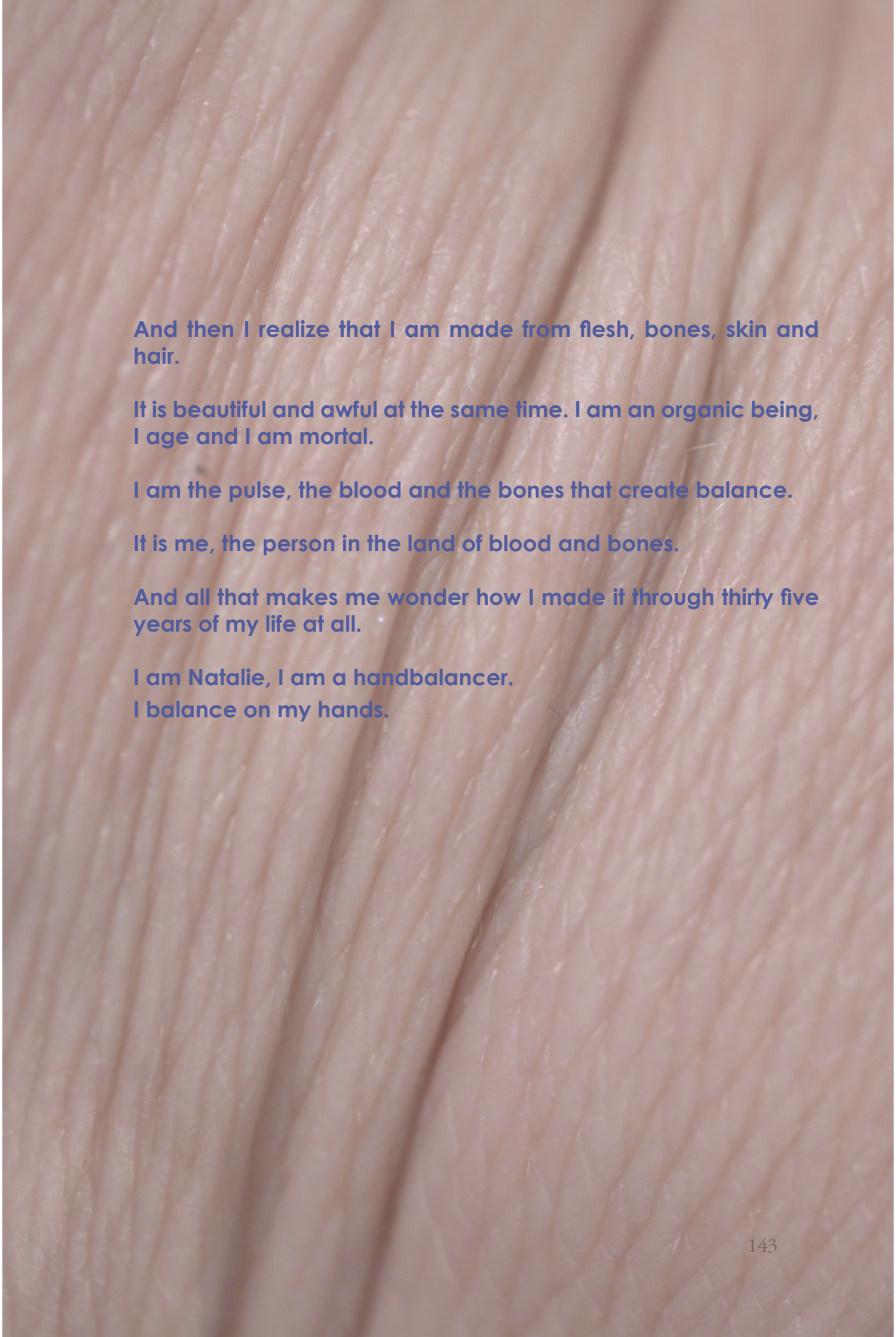
Real-Time consciousness rendering
Intuitive Interface with emotion control
Drag-and-Drop Media for rapid character prototyping
Node-based programming offers deep learning
Powerful scene-based vision devices
Low-latency response to real-time overload
Arduino I/O via built-in serial reset feature
Remote performance tools and workflow
Made by Troikatronix

But then I see Mark's close up footage of my body and my SKIN.
The SKIN looks like SNAKE SKIN, like scales.

It makes me think of how SNAKES can shed their SKIN and leave the old one behind. They can renew their identity by leaving the outer shell behind. I cannot leave my SKIN behind.
My SKIN bears the imprint of the memories of my life.

My SKIN is laid out like a landscape, valleys and hills of past and present, secret pathways of unknown land. New territory to discover, to cover, to uncover.





And then I realize that I am made from flesh, bones, skin and hair.

It is beautiful and awful at the same time. I am an organic being, I age and I am mortal.

I am the pulse, the blood and the bones that create balance.

It is me, the person in the land of blood and bones.

And all that makes me wonder how I made it through thirty five years of my life at all.

I am Natalie, I am a handbalancer.
I balance on my hands.

Platform, Vol. 15, No. 1, Balancing Acts, Autumn 2021

A Sense of Balance: Moving In-between the Vertical and Horizontal Plane

By Carolien Hermans

When we say 'we are in balance' or 'we are off balance', we often do not refer to our physical state but to our emotional and mental wellbeing. Balance is frequently associated with terms such as risk and power. We use it as a metaphor for politics, the financial world and social stratification. Despite the wider cultural use of the term balance, it is grounded in our bodies, based on embodied experiences of balance (Fuchs 1). According to Johnson, our embodied experience of balance serves as the grounding of any abstract understanding of what it means 'to be in balance' (Núñez et al. 50). Balancing is an activity that we learn from very early on. It is a prerequisite of a whole range of movements

such as rolling, crawling, sitting, standing, walking, running, cycling etc. In fact, all our daily movements are based on our sense of balance, although balance is strictly speaking not one sense but a cross-modal system that includes proprioception, the vestibular system, as well as our tactile, visual and hearing system. It is multisensory, as it requires the collaboration of different bodily systems. The sensation of balance is one that resides deep in our body. Balance is thus first and foremost an embodied experience. However, it is also used as a cultural expression to describe our mental condition and even the state of our world.

In my own artistic work, I explore the dynamics of balance through a range of basic movements such as jumping, falling, rolling, turning, running. According to Sheets-Johnstone such basic movements can be regarded as motivating forces that produce 'a high, an elevated sense of aliveness, a delight in the kinetic dynamics that is underway'

Figs. 1-7: Author's photographs of their children (24 April 2017, Lisseuil)..

(416). Movement itself is compelling, as it not only motivates us but also directs our attention. Even more, through physical play we learn 'the vulnerabilities of being a body—our own vulnerabilities and the vulnerabilities of others in our movement interactions' (Sheets-Johnstone 412). Through basic bodily movements, we come to know ourselves in a kinetic and kinesthetic way.

With the camera I capture the basic movement repertoire of playing, as well as the more complex movements of professional dancers. I am interested in how affects, forces, and intensities can travel through different bodies and I use the camera to capture these transformational moments. I specifically choose photography and not video, since I am not interested in capturing the whole sequence of movements, but just fragments of it while still being able to follow the whole trajectory of movement.

In the first set of images, we see two children (my children), jumping as high as possible, and landing on a mattress that is placed in the backyard of an old mill somewhere in France. As the mattress provides safety, the children are allowed to take more risk. The mattress in fact is an integral part of the act of jumping. This is also the reason why I decided not to remove the mattress in the post-editing process. I am more interested in the expressiveness of a pose rather than drawing attention to its spectacular nature.

The first set of images can best be described as a collage, since images from different sequences are selected and re-arranged in a loose order. I purposely break up the linear and temporal construction, in order to isolate the different phases of jumping and falling: approach, takeoff, flight, landing, and recovery. It is only because the chain of movements is interrupted, that the narrative of the action is suspended.

The second set of images is taken during a dance improvisation workshop to thirteen first-year dance students of the Amsterdam University of the Arts. As you can see below, I have kept the original order of the sequence. The physical action (the jumping) is re-constructed through a temporal (re-)ordering of the photographs. Meaning arises

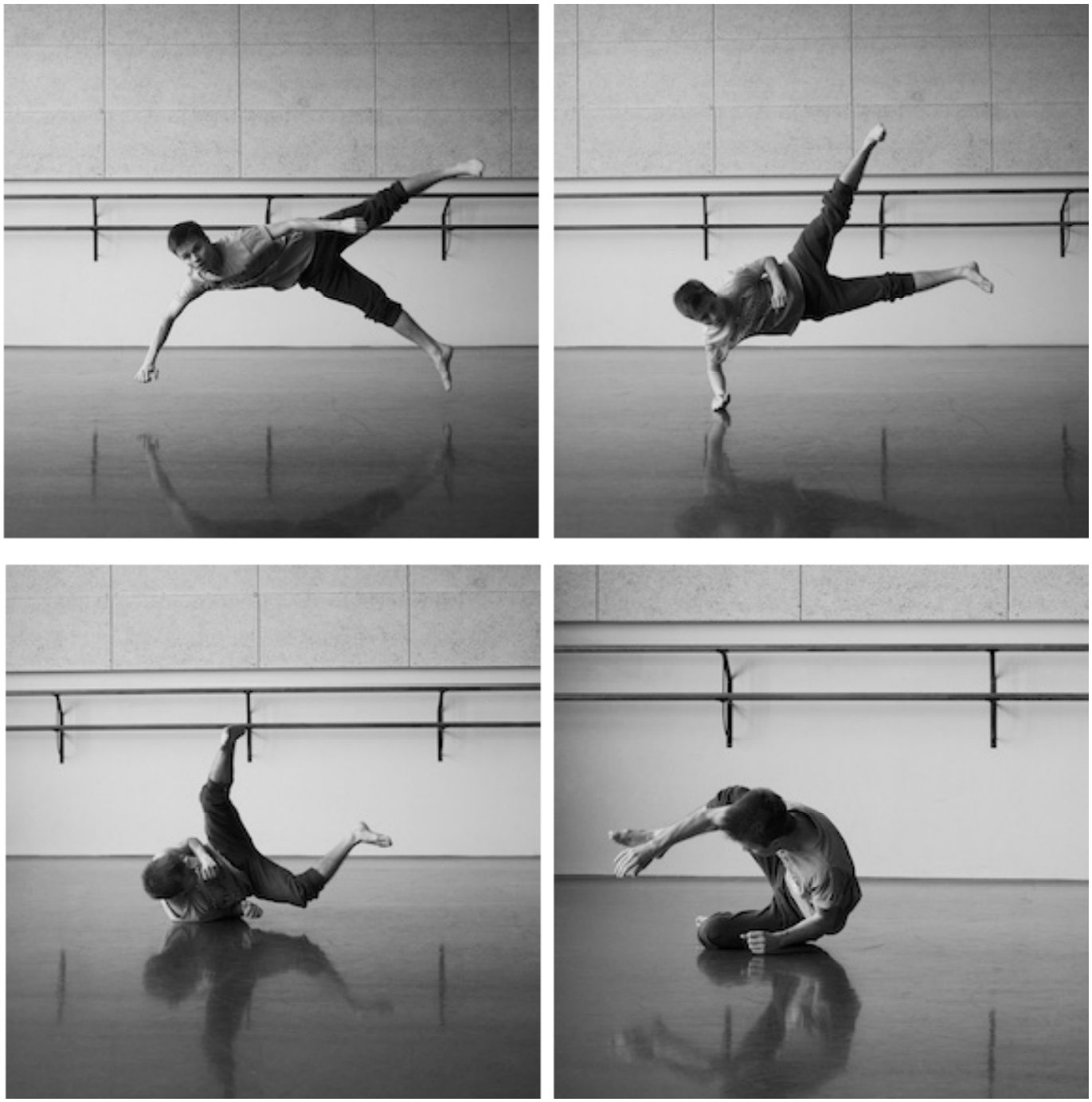
in-between the photographs. In other words, the missing photographs are just as important as the existing ones. Absence constitutes presence. The photographic sequence is constituted around perceptual breaks in linear time. The original action has been frayed and dissected until only isolated fragments (images) remain, frozen in time. Then the bits and pieces (the fragments) are put back together—in such a way that a new intrinsic logic and order starts to emerge. As a result, the photographic sequence is not complete, it is fragmentary and remains unfinished. The holes and gaps in the sequential order are very much part of the reconstruction of the action.

With these images I try to capture the body in-between: 'the body of the almost, when the movement is on the verge, actual but almost virtual, hanging, pulsing, spiralling' (Manning, in Cooper Albright, *Falling* 40). The in-between that enables us to engage with potentialities, where the self (as a fixed identity) is suspended, in favour of a floating, unstable state of being. The in-between reveals the groundlessness of ourselves. The in-between is a transitional state, a crossing, a no-man's-land, a fluid zone, an unstable borderland of differences. The in-between is 'an open space, filled with an atmosphere of suspension and uncertainty, neither this nor that…' (Fremantle par. 1). The in-between creates passages from the actual to the virtual, thereby opening up a continuum of multiplicities. It enables us to engage with potentialities. In a more literal sense, the in-between is movement that is still on its way. It has not found its definite form yet.

According to Fuchs (2), balance is the 'ability to control one's own centre of gravity in relation to the support area in order to maintain an upright posture'. Its function is to control the body's upright position in space. The organ of balance (the vestibular system) is vital for our sense of balance: it is located in the inner ear, and it is (almost metaphorically) referred to as the labyrinth, with hoses, liquids, pebbles and sensory hairs. Balance is a 'musical sense', its signals are transferred in the same area as auditive signals. Distance, direction, space, orientation, height and depth, and rhythm all play a role in balancing. Even more,

balancing is a movement, even if we stand still for a minute on one leg. It is only through movement that we experience a sense of balancing. Balancing is therefore a dynamic act, as we continuously make context-dependent adjustments in order to maintain balance. Walking, for example, is a dynamic act of balancing. From a biomechanical point of view, walking can be divided into four basic tasks: (1) 'to support the body against gravity, (2) to redirect the body's center mass in order to maintain forward motion, (3) to swing the leg forward, and (4) to maintain stability through balance control' (Ijmker 11). Walking is, in a way, controlled falling: you fall forward and you catch yourself in your own fall. Balancing is intrinsically related to falling. To balance is to find the right momentum between falling and catching.

Two systems are at work in order to maintain balance: postural control and equilibrium control (the latter one is often conceived as part of postural control). Postural control is 'the ability to maintain equilibrium by keeping or returning the centre of gravity over its base of support' (Wallmann 436). Postural control is a flexible system that operates on an automatic and pre-reflective level. The postural control system has two functions: 1) to ensure that balance is maintained and 2)



Figs. 8-13: Author's photographs of Alberto Quirico (15 March 2018, Amsterdam University of the Arts).

to provide a stable reference frame for perception, an action (Massion 877). Equilibrium control consists of all the micro-adjustments that are made to compensate for internal and external perturbations in order to keep balance (Ivanenko and Gurfinkel 1).

To fall is to lose balance, to slip over, to be knocked off your feet. Falling confuses our sense of the world's order (*How To Land* 18-19). Falling is disorienting. Falling unsettles our world (Sharrocks

55). We fall from grace, we fall in love, we fall asleep. It happens to me quite a lot. The falling into sleep I mean, or actually, the falling out of sleep. It is called hypnic jerk: the feeling of falling triggered by a sudden involuntary contraction of the muscle twitch. Hypnic jerks typically occur moments before the first stage of sleep. In fact, the hypnic jerk is a sign that the motor system can still exert some control over the body.

Dropping. Surrendering. Releasing. Letting go of the upright position, engaging in the horizontal. The fall: 'any movement of the body as a whole and its segments in the direction of the gravitational force' (Reguli et al. 64). We fall because of imbalance, caused by endogenous or exogenous factors. Falling almost always implies the giving up of our upright position (and indeed this is our dominant Western position), when gravity pulls us downwards, we engage in the horizontal plane. We fall towards the ground. Only in our dreams, we can fall without landing on the ground (since in our dreams we fall and land into our subconscious).

> Falling is relational—if there is nothing to fall toward, you may not even be aware that you're falling […]. As you are falling, your sense of orientation may start to play additional tricks on you. The horizon quivers in a maze of collapsing lines and you may lose any sense of above and below, of before and after, of yourself and your boundaries. Pilots have even reported that free fall can trigger a feeling of confusion between the self and the aircraft. While falling, people may sense themselves as being things, while things may sense that they are people. Traditional modes of seeing and feeling are shattered. Any sense of balance is disrupted. Perspectives are twisted and multiplied. (Steyerl par. 4)

Not only falling, but also balancing is a relational act. Balancing is to find equilibrium between self and environment. Our movements are connected to the movements of the earth, to the movements of

our environment. The earth pulls on all the mass of your body, while your body exerts the same gravitational force on the Earth. We are in constant dialogue with the forces around us. Balancing can thus be seen as a process where we try to maintain our upright position in an ever-changing world. Balance: orientation, control, stability, safety, power, authority, dominance, verticality, the upright position. Off balance: disorientation, confusion, loss, failure, instability, vertigo, dis-ease, unsettling, loss of control, dizziness.

Despite the fact that dizziness and disorientation are unsettling states, there is something luring about dizziness and vertigo. Youngsters especially make all kinds of efforts (spinning around, roller coasters, using drugs) to bring themselves into a state of dizziness, deliberately seeking the moment that the ground slips from under their feet.

Ann Cooper Allbright perceives the fall and being out of balance as the opening up of other possibilities, a state of becoming, a state where you become more-than, and where openings arise in the personal envelopes of singular bodies, where self, space and time are re-organized (*Falling* 40). For Cooper Allbright being off balance is a transitional state. It is a place of uncertainty. It is the suspension between two known points that 'opens up multiple possibilities and different orientations' (39). It is here, at this transitional point, where new meanings may emerge.

In the act of falling and regaining balance, we learn about the fragility of our own bodies. Each act of balance is an act of uncertainty, vulnerability and fragility. Indeed, we live in uncertain times with overpopulation, climate crisis, social stratification, political instability and epidemic outbreaks. We, human beings, are losing balance more and more frequently: '[l]ife and the world of human experiences are messy, complex, and rarely well balanced' (Fuchs 8).

Life itself is a process of finding balance, losing balance and finding balance again. We jump, we fly, we fall, we land, and maybe we crash. It is in-between the jumping, the flying, the falling and landing that new potentialities arise, and where endings become beginnings.

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Platform, Vol. 15, No. 1, Balancing Acts, Autumn 2021

Performance Responses

edited by Gwyneth Donlon

Grace, Not Gravity

Fall pieces. Created by Bas Jan Ader. 1970-1.

By Lilly Markaki

Isolation has me looking for art where I do not like to go looking for it: the internet. Luckily, one medium lends itself particularly well to this environment: the moving image. Among the works I have returned to online is a group of short films by the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader, perhaps most known for becoming lost at sea after embarking on a journey *In Search of The Miraculous* in 1975.[1]

Produced over a two-year period, these films by Ader are linked by the performance of a balancing act that gives way to a fall—sometimes reluctant, other times decided. Between 1970 and 1971, Ader is captured on film falling and falling again: from a rooftop (*Fall I,* 1970); from a tree (*Broken Fall [Organic]*, 1971); against a sawhorse (*Broken Fall [Geometric]*, 1971); while on a bicycle and into a canal (*Fall II*, 1970). The final, edited versions of these films often begin mid-act and last only a few seconds, although as Alexander Dumbadze has noted, the tension or ambivalence of the body's movement has a peculiar way of stretching time for the viewer (33). Unlike Ader's photographic works, which allude to a fall by showing his body horizontal on the ground, the films sometimes end ambiguously, with Ader's body out of sight.[2] What does it all mean?

1 In 1975 Ader set off on the second part of his three-piece work, *In Search of the Miraculous*: a transatlantic voyage from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to Falthmouth, England, in a 12½ foot sailboat named Ocean Wave. But Ader never completed the journey; all radio contact was lost three weeks into the trip, and his boat was discovered partially submerged off the coast of Ireland eight months later. Ader's body was never recovered.

2 I am referring here to *Pitfall on the way to a new Neo Plasticism* (1971), and *Untitled (Swedish Fall)* (1971).

While committed, no doubt, to the exploration of aesthetic possibilities, Ader's falls exceed this fairly narrow project. If his films and photographic works are 'works of art', what they record are actions that begin with the body experiencing itself for itself, for what it is: moving, feeling, thinking—a *life*. In this performance response, I look at how he concentrates his and our attention on the body's movement; how he, if only for a moment, maintains control; how he exchanges control for weight and the body's fate in the fall. Watching Ader, I remember that I too have a body and that body, *my body*, begins to crave movement. The child-like, non-purposive nature of his falls reawakens in me possibilities for movement diminished by adulthood—a frame of mind more than a stage of life. It makes me think of all the movement I would not dare today out of fear not only of hurting myself, but above all, because I am too afraid to look foolish. I suspect that Ader knows and experiences his falls to be troubling in this very profound sense.

The existential dimension to Ader's work is no secret—both his academic record and those who knew him testify to his deep interest in a kind of first philosophy.[3] For conceptual artist and Ader's good friend William Leavitt, the entirety of Ader's short oeuvre can be understood as an attempt to get free of all artifice, to an art of fundamental truths. Leavitt recalls him saying 'I want to do a piece where I go to the Alps and talk to a mountain. The mountain will talk of things which are necessary and always true, and I shall talk of things which are sometimes, accidentally true' (Leavitt).

Ader's 'desire for concrete truth' makes itself felt in the way he speaks of his falls in one of his few public statements: 'I do not make body sculptures, body art, or body works […] when I fell off the roof of my house, or into a canal, it was because gravity made itself master over me' (Leavitt; Sharp 2). For as long as we live in a body, gravity will run through it—a universal fact or a *necessity* as Simone Weil has it (*Gravity and Grace*). Gravity, or rather *the fall*, is our primary state; the world's

3 Jan Verwoert, for example, describes Ader's practice in terms of 'existential conceptual art' (Verwoert 1).

'original configuration' (Serres 147). Standing upright, balancing, we resist the telos which, of course, will one day arrive anyway. In the act of balancing, of resisting, we discover singularity—*the who of the I*. By falling, on the other hand, we give way to the general. If resistance makes up the details of life—choice, chance, creativity—then gravity is the background stage to all that and entropy our common destiny. Surrendering to gravity one knows not so much who, but *what* one is. Made of matter and void, always failing and falling, the body will one day return to dust. As Martijn van Calmthout has put it, 'to fall is to understand the universe' (2006). Why then, do we resist? Why do we strive to balance? In order to live. Does Ader, in falling, therefore refuse life? I don't think so.

Looking at *Nightfall* (1971), it is clear that, for Ader, gravity is linked to an existential drama thoroughly marked by futility and failure. Twice he picks up a concrete block and attempts to balance himself while lifting, but each time the block falls, crashing onto a source of light on the ground until the entire scene is swallowed by darkness. I do not deny that there is a sense of melancholy at the heart of Ader's *Fall* series. In many ways, his work in general appears to me to labour towards making space for failure, for sadness. But it does so in a way that says that all this, too, is life. Returning to the idea of gravity, if its pull presupposes a body, doesn't the experience of the pull demand a body that is, precisely, alive? In as much as it may be a sign of the individual and cosmic oblivion that awaits us all, I interpret the absence of closure in a number of Ader's falling films as an invitation to pay attention to balancing and falling as processes that precede, and proceed *against*, the inevitable. Yes, life is fragile—as the global pandemic has made all the more clear. But to affirm one's vulnerability, *one's being-toward-death*, means also to understand that this flux of disappearance requires the flickering, fugitive presence of life; for only the living can die.

It is almost always possible to discern in Ader's falls critical moments when a decision is made to hold on or to let go. *He exchanges*

Fig. 1: *Broken fall (organic)*, Amsterdamse Bos, Holland, 1971. 16mm black and white film, 1'36". Courtesy of Meliksetian | Briggs, Los Angeles and Simon Lee Gallery, London.

control for the fall, I wrote earlier. There is volition here, but there's also voluntas—the artist persisting even as he decides to let go. By gravity or death, the human will is inevitably brought to an end but what Ader evidences for me is that one can still choose the inevitable; 'The Lord speaks: "I made him just and right, sufficient to have stood, though free to fall"' he writes after John Milton (Dumbadze 16). Ader, it must be remembered, was born in 1942 and his father was executed by the Nazis for harbouring Jewish refugees just two years later. *Untitled (Swedish Fall)* from 1971 shows Ader return to the site of his father's execution to lie on the same land upon which his body would have fallen. Does this work speak of resignation or despair? Again, I don't think so. I think it says that sometimes falling is the opposite of surrendering—a thought to keep close in a time like ours.

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Landscape with Fall of Artist

Created by Amy Sharrocks for the *Come Hell or High Water* festival. London. 5 July 2020.

By Amy Sharrocks

There were gale force winds whipping around us on Sunday 5 July 2020 and the full Thunder Moon pulled the Thames tide lower than it had been all year. Conceived as a 'pocket of resistance on the banks of the River Thames by Canary Wharf, a place that exists between water and land, private and public space, wealth and poverty, past and present, and an unknowable future' (Anne Bean), *Come Hell or High Water* was a series of curated art events staged across the full moons of 2020, first activated by Hayley Newman, George Pringle, Sarah Andrew and Anne Bean. The eighth edition took place after the UK's first national lockdown of the coronavirus pandemic—a rare moment when it was possible to gather again, outdoors, before the next lockdown began. People congregated on the strand of beach revealed at low tide with a sense of collective reeling, not only from the horrors of the global pandemic but also the systemic racism raised to view by the Black Lives Matter protests organised in the wake of George Floyd's murder. In the midst of this unmooring, I took the invitation to make an artwork for *Come Hell or High Water*, to fall further out of every fixing, cross the strand of beach and fall offshore. *Landscape with Fall of Artist* (2020) was a live artwork where I fell in the river Thames. In falling, I became a dot and a splash against the backdrop of London.

I fell between the full Thunder Moon and the Dark Moon, the greatest magnitude of the evening's penumbral lunar eclipse. The eclipse, a rare moment of imperfect alignment between the earth, moon, and sun, called for action and wild transformation. Everything felt like it was deconstructing. At times the river was so rough it looked like it was boiling; the outgoing tide full of London dirt. Mary Lemley's huge cloths from her 1992 work *These Fragments We Have Shored Against Our Ruin* were re-hung from the harbour walls—28 years after

their first appearance. They undulated to different times and cycles, billowing stains accrued from rivers across London like menstrual cloths from river pourings, swirling a confluence of waters around us that helped sustain me in my work. The atmosphere was tense and I was scared to go in. I had a real fear I could be swept away. As I stood in the late evening sun looking out across the water I tried to hold the moment while people at my back both held on to me and urged me in. I felt for the threshold and the separation, pulled towards the sticking point and gathered all my urgencies, all my reasons, aches, worries, and all my fellow fallers: *to fall full.*

Falling is a way of responding with my whole body to these overwhelming times, to this world; to prostrate myself. The etymology of *overwhelm* finds close connections with experiences of being in water. Old and Middle English variations contain original meanings of submergence and capsizing, they refer to the act of 'covering over', making an 'arch cover' and being engulfed—the shape of a wave is intrinsic to this word. Together these meanings pull us to the sense of a body, human or water, hovering at a breaking point it can no longer maintain before collapsing into its source. So in many ways, falling into water feels like coming home: returning to our watery beginning. There is a further strange doubling in the meaning of overwhelm. On its own, to 'whelm' means to tip over or overturn, to turn upside down, so to overwhelm literally means to 'over-overwhelm'. It's a word that both linguistically and physically falls over itself: it's a total rinsing.

Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, attributed to Peter Breughel the Elder, was painted in approximately 1558 (see fig. 1). My mum, the painter Anne Norman, made her watercolour response to it in the 1990s (fig. 2). Re-making artworks you love is a useful practice, a way of licking knowledge from the inside of an artwork. It is not a reproduction so much as an attempt to get closer, a way of accosting the original making and reasoning, to transpose perhaps, or make a translation of sorts. *Landscape with Fall of Artist* was made in response to my mum, whose painting was in response to Breughel's, who painted in response to the Greek myth. It is a set of waves; a tidal action over centuries.

Fig. 1: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1558), attributed to Breughel the Elder.

Fig. 1: *After Breughel, Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Anne Norman, courtesy of her estate (photograph by Amy Sharrocks).

The story and the paintings have always called to me. When I was younger I identified with Icarus' longing for flight and his intemperance. I felt painfully his ruin, the parent's anguish, and the world's indifference. It is a painting for our times, perhaps, as the world careers from disaster to catastrophe. My fall is a paltry shadow of Icarus' flight but lining up these works it is as if the splash that we can see around his legs makes a ripple that can still be felt today, is still visible around my legs and those of others subsumed by a fall. If we can bear to look, every fall pulls focus not only onto the falling but the attendant loss, grief and indifference. The man sowing the field in Breughel's painting could be any one of us looking the other way, unaware or intentionally avoiding a faller just out of sight and out of reach of care. In the face of apathy, global inequality, and injustice, I am trying to reach out to the fallers, a helpless desperate act to cherish and respond with my own vulnerable body to this ongoing time of disaster: this free fall.

I have fallen in water before. The unexpected thrill as teenage boys rushed to join us in the group fall *DAYTRIP* (2014) on the hottest day of the year in Swansea, by the following year had morphed into a sombre event in Hastings, off the south coast into the English Channel, as the refugee crisis deepened. Before we fell together, we spoke of people who might at that moment be facing the Mediterranean Sea, starting a treacherous journey in the hope of a safe harbour, of the people who had already attempted it, and of those whose bodies were now in the water. We were falling towards them. Every water work demands that we consider who is in the water.

I am aware that when I fall I do so voluntarily—that I am able to get up. At its edge this work performs not only the fall but the recovery, the return to safety and the privilege of living. Often falling artworks, like those by Bas Jan Ader, cut the fall at the moment of impact, or freeze it in mid-air so that there is no epilogue, while each time these falls became a swim and a walk back to dry land. My time in the water made me vulnerable but didn't kill me, not like Ader, who disappeared at sea in the second part of his artwork *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975), or

like the countless and unaccounted for people lost in our oceans. It is an appalling truth that water can be both murderous and restorative. The photograph of *Landscape with Fall of Artist* does not convey how warm the water was, how it softened the fall, held, and restored me. But falling is always unsettling and partly self-destructive: a shaking, a wrench, and violent pull away from what was before. Falling unhinges us. I feel this and I know it to be a dangerous yet necessary practice. This world is over-overwhelming and we need to unhinge ourselves from it, to let go and re-orientate ourselves. Those who have privilege and security need to leave safer ground in search of change.

The paintings by Breughel and Norman are of a vast land and seascape. In all the works, the water is the centre of the image and the fall to one side, as with Dominic Johnson's photograph of my fall in the Thames. The Movement for Black Lives and the global pandemic have pulled focus onto those who have fallen and those most at risk of falling. By attempting to fall out of time, place and economy, events like this pocket of resistance on the beach on the south side of the Thames that day post-lockdown attempt a reorientation; a tentative, floundering, and staggering assembly gesturing towards a new geography. We were cautious with each other on the beach that day, amazed to be out and together, delighted to be social beings again, but not trusting the world as we knew it to be safe.

My mum suffered early onset dementia when she was about 55 years old but continued drawing and painting until the very end of her life. Her change of style documented the gradual erasure of objects and people from her mind as her focus pulled towards the widening chasm she was facing. She died aged 70 after a long, slow deterioration; a gossamer thin loss extending over years. The individual and communal losses of 2020 have been devastating, linking us all, unequally, in vast repeating waves of shared loss, grief and mourning.

The July edition of *Come Hell or High Water* concluded with Anne Bean and Richard Wilson's *Four Gongs for Wuhan*, a wild action that was part protest, part sounding, and part shout of support for the city that had endured the first coronavirus outbreak. Making their way

Fig. 1: *Landscape with Fall of Artist* by Amy Sharrocks, photograph Dominic Johnson (2020).

down the beach towards the water, the artists crashed huge gongs and cymbals, handmade in Wuhan, along the harbour walls, sand, and rocks, ricocheting the crashings through our bodies and across water that might eventually find its way through wavelengths to Wuhan.

I wonder what the passersby made of our rabble on the beach? Did they move closer, long to join us, and jump down onto the sand to shake the world with us? Did they stay well back, head down, eyes askance, and keep walking on? I doubt any of them noticed my fall: I was just one, a tiny one, a barely imperceptible one of many bigger, wholesale, global, over-over-over-overwhelming, crashing falls of these and other times.

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Crave

By Sarah Kane. Directed by Tinuke Craig. Chichester Festival Theatre. 29 October - November 2020. Watched via stream on 7 November.

A dialogue between Kit Narey and Alex Watson

Kit Narey (KN) is a postgraduate student in Gender, Violence and Conflict studies. Alex Watson (AW) is a postgraduate researcher specialising in 2010s British theatre and theories of violence.

AW: Sarah Kane's *Crave*, which debuted in 1998, is a play about isolation, about never being able to fully understand the experiences and emotional depths of another person. The Chichester Festival Theatre production was to be performed to a socially distanced audience when the 'circuit-breaker' lockdown of November occurred. The artistic director, Daniel Evans, responded by organising several ticketed live-streams which could be watched at home. We watched one of these together—but apart. I thought an interdisciplinary dialogue in response to the performance was warranted, not least because of your background in gender and violence studies, which are prominent considerations for Kane's work overall. To start this off, I wanted to ask how your experience of the circumstances around the production impacted how you viewed it (or vice versa)?

KN: As you mention, isolation is the key word. In November we were back to pacing the house in lockdown, so the production felt especially timely. Aside from the economic and health challenges experienced by so many of us this past year, there's been so much space for dark inner monologues because we have all, at times and to differing extents, been lonely. It felt very relevant to those experiences, with suffering endured by all of us in the global pandemic in a shared but individually distinct way. Despair was (and still is) not exactly in short supply—in the news and in conversations with friends. To see it so clearly manifested on stage was impactful.

Fig. 1: (Left to right) Alfred Enoch (B), Erin Doherty (C), Wendy Kweh (M), and Jonathan Slinger (A; also on screen) in Tinuke Craig's production of Sarah Kane's *Crave*. Set designed by Alex Lowde. Photo by Alex Watson (2020).

AW: Agreed. At the same time it was also great to experience 'live' theatre. Although the performance was streamed, it had a different energy to the pre-recorded shows that we've seen through National Theatre at Home, for example. But your image of 'pacing the house' brings to mind the director Tinuke Craig's distinct scenography in this production—namely, the four treadmills (see fig. 1). The movement director, Jenny Ogilvie, seems to push the performers/characters to continually balance, to be 'on their toes' and struggle against their momentum. Craig's inclusion of the treadmills seems to be an open symbol that can be interpreted through some of the issues you've mentioned: economic precarity, the struggle of isolation, and the perpetual cycle of dealing with depression—on a treadmill you are in competition with yourself. Do any of your own studies reflect on the concerns that the treadmills might allude to?

KN: The first thing that comes to mind is the idea of cycles of violence, abuse and suffering, which can come in many forms. C's repeated

victimisation (played here by Erin Doherty) at the hands of people they should be able to trust shows how instances of violence are not isolated events: they echo through lives, leaving marks. Survivors of abuse are often targeted because of their vulnerability, and these experiences can then open them up to further vulnerabilities, meaning that some people experience violence on a chronic basis (as noted by Dick Sobsey and Tanis Doe). We keep moving, but trauma moves with us. Though more contested, it's also thought that if the right (or rather, wrong) set of circumstances occur, we might also see ourselves transform from victim to perpetrator as the rotating motor of suffering pushes us onwards.

AW: Of course, we could certainly question the considerations behind presenting the complexities of victim/perpetrator dynamics in a time and context where reports of domestic abuse, for example, have increased in frequency…

KN: Absolutely, and the first thing to say is that abuse is never justifiable—and I don't think this production endorses or exonerates it. The second is that if we see the rate of any form of violence increase, this is due at least in part to a shift in external circumstances, creating the conditions of possibility for that violence to occur. This changes over time and arises and relocates on a continuum of violence comprising space, time, and form within a society that enables or permits certain behaviours and dynamics (as seen in the research of Liz Kelly and Caroline Moser). Perpetrators rarely see themselves as perpetrators, creating a false, manufactured ambiguity of reality. I'm thinking of A (played by Jonathan Slinger) casually referencing vile acts of child abuse before calmly moving onto other topics. Their presumed victim, C, does not gloss over it so lightly, because for them it was of course a traumatic, world-altering experience. Critically and directly witnessing this is complicated and uncomfortable, as it requires you to consider how someone can do something so incomprehensibly awful and keep

'walking along their treadmill.' The characters' fractured narratives capture this complexity in an unsettling way—but it's an unsettling concept, so it feels appropriate.

AW: Yes, Kane's work seems to have this 'unsettling' motif of troubling the audience's empathetic relationship (or lack of one) with perpetrators, which has been posed as enabling a critical distance (as written on by Hillary Chute). In *Blasted* (1995), we are confronted with a coercive rapist only for him to be 'humanised' through being placed in vulnerable situations; in *Cleansed* (1998), the masochistic torturer Tinker appears to be in desperate need of love. Katie Mitchell's 2016 National Theatre production of the latter (which we also both saw) considerably downplayed this aspect of the character to adhere to the dramaturgy, which was informed by Rebecca Solnit's posing of violence as gendered (*Men Explain Things to Me*)—or, as Mitchell articulates it, 'that it's men who do violence' (interview with Matt Trueman 18.47). On the other hand, Craig's *Crave* seems to foreground the text's troubled dynamic between distance and empathy: the projection behind the performers reveals close-ups of their faces, and the treadmills physicalise the characters' personal struggles. So the 'humanisation' of their faces and labouring bodies are met with the distance of the individual treadmills and the screens (including the screens we are watching through at home). I'd like to get your opinion on this—but I think Craig's production arguably presents Solnit's understanding of there being a continuum of gender violence (which you mention above) in a more effective way than Mitchell, precisely because of this difficult tension between distance and empathy, between victim and perpetrator. For example, rather than explicitly making 'men do violence', Crave (as well as not actually showing any explicit violence) intertwines these two positions across its four characters—to differing extents—which is truer to theorisations of how this continuum is perpetuated.

KN: I think you're right; Craig's *Crave* did an impressive job of showing the nuanced, evolving nature of that continuum. As you say, it's not just the spectacular displays, it starts with the subtlest abuses of power, extending 'from minor social misery to violent silencing and violent death' (Solnit 16). I also find it interesting that although none of the characters are marked by any particular gender, it creeps back in in recognisable ways (the casting director Charlotte Sutton obviously assigns certain performers accordingly here). There is a shifting pattern of complicity and exploitation that we are all part of, though we are taught to see ourselves as free agents—both separating us from any understanding of our role in the continuum, and also allowing society to ignore the ways that it permits these dynamics to arise. We are put on these separate treadmills, hooked up to a system we have no real control over. If things go bad, or something is done to us and we stumble and fall, we are told that it is us 'doing individuality wrong.' But violence is not just enabled and ignored in our society, it's also woven into structures, so doing violence of some kind is almost inevitable. We are all victims and perpetrators—a tension that could itself be described as a social 'balancing act'—and this can change across lifetimes, across relationships, even from minute to minute. I thought Craig's production captured this well.

Something we've not mentioned yet, which I think is important to *Crave* and *Cleansed*, is that violence is certainly not the only concern. I find it so easy to focus on because of my areas of interest, but both plays are also about love, and the power and the pain of love. It stands in stark contrast to the violence, but in some places is inextricably interwoven. Watching it hurts, because love can be a narrative refuge where we can hide and heal from pain, but in both plays it drags the pain along with it or cruelly births it. In Mitchell's *Cleansed* I felt like love was present and hideous; in Craig's *Crave* it felt absent yet, unsurprisingly, desperately desired. Which brings us back to how timely it felt when so many of us were separated from our loved ones, and how watching it was actually a little bit cathartic.

AW: Yes—my own studies on violence mark this topic out for me too. Perhaps the depiction of love in Kane's work is meant to, as you say, complicate our understanding of love and its relation to violence: an arguable inspiration for *Cleansed* is Roland Barthes' provocative and problematic contemplation that love could be comparable to being an inmate of a concentration camp (49). But there is certainly something cathartic about seeing these complex feelings physicalised onstage. Craig stated in interview that, rather than looking to do 'feelgood escapism', she understood the necessity of people needing 'a place to gather together and grieve' (interview with Holly Williams). Though this could not be actualised in physical space—resulting in the only time I've watched performers bow to complete silence, no applause in the empty auditorium whatsoever (a very weird experience)—Craig's production certainly understands the power of how Kane symbolises and actualises the aching and torturous depths of love, loneliness, despair, isolation, and violence. And despite that morbidity, I'm glad to share that experience with another person—the uncanny relation of watching this together, but apart, is 'very Sarah Kane,' I think!

KN: Definitely. I actually felt emotional at the lack of applause—it was easy to imagine everyone in their respective homes clapping at their impassive screens, with no way of transmitting that approval—we've all done so much clapping into the void this past year! Despite being a stark reminder of the unprecedented situation at hand, it was dramatic to create a shared experience of remembering in that moment. In grief or not, I feel that theatre has definitely proven itself to be a powerful tool to bring people together over the past year—not just in terms of entertainment to be consumed and dissected, but also as elusive and valuable shared experiences. In witnessing representations of isolation together, we (for a while) overcome it.

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Book Reviews

edited by Lianna Mark

Caught Falling: The Confluence of Contact Improvisation, Nancy Stark Smith, and Other Moving Ideas by David Koteen and Nancy Stark Smith

Holyoke, MA: Marcus Printing, 2008, 111 pp. (paperback)

By Kate Holden

I am deeply honored to revisit Nancy Stark Smith's work a year after her passing. Many are grieving and celebrating Nancy as an ancestor and a blessed memory. Comprising pages of photography and letters, *Caught Falling: The Confluence of Contact Improvisation, Nancy Stark Smith, and Other Moving Ideas* by David Koteen and Nancy Stark Smith creates a sense of motion in its layout, through the sophisticated montage of a scrapbook-like archive, offering personal closeups, dynamic photographs, letters, and snapshots of Nancy's life.

Contact Improvisation (henceforth CI) is a dance form with multiple definitions. For Stark Smith, it is 'a duet movement form, originated in 1972 by choreographer Steve Paxton, based on the communication between two moving bodies and their combined relationship to the physical laws governing their motion-gravity, momentum, friction, inertia, centrifugal force, etc.' (xiii). The book acknowledges this, while stating that it is 'written from the experience of CI rather than about it', in order 'to further disseminate information about CI, with Nancy as the Medium' (vii). The book is non-linear in structure and divided into sections so that it can 'be dipped into at any point where it catches your interest' (1). These include prologues by both Koteen and Stark Smith, 'Nancy's Intro', 'What is CI?' (a series of definitions that demonstrates how the form has evolved), 'Views Through the Windshield' (a dialogue between Koteen and Stark Smith that constitutes the most substantial section of the book), 'Backwards'

(a reflective piece by Steve Paxton, in lieu of a conventional foreword), 'Underscore' (a dance improvisation score which is a compositional improvisational dance research tool), 'David's Epi-chrono-logue' (an avant-garde epilogue), 'Biographical notes' (on both authors), and a 'Birthday Poem' by Christina Svane.

In line with the stated intentions, the book employs Stark Smith as a medium. In 'Through the Windshield', she serves as an intermediary in conversation with Koteen to map the development of CI alongside her personal life. The dialogue is interspersed with 'talk bubbles', comprising commentary, memories, and well wishes from friends and esteemed dance colleagues such as Barbara Dilley and Ruth Zaporah. The paired photographs and interviews depict Stark Smith's turbulent childhood, her close relationship with her sister, and her iconic single braid serving as a metaphor for how she wove together threads of her life. In the interviews, she describes her adventurous summers at sleepaway camp, her love for gymnastics and athletics, and the death of her mother, who was a columnist at *Life* magazine.

The book also contains tender revelations. Stark Smith shares her understanding of personal love as 'backwards', implying its non-linear discovery in later life. She reflects on how she processed experiences somatically, thinking of how heartbreak and quitting smoking alike affected her body, thus demonstrating how intertwined her own body was with her body of work. The tonality of vulnerability and tenderness the book expresses aligns with the self-awareness required to practice CI, which relies on physical 'dialogue' with another person.

Nancy Stark Smith met Steve Paxton at Oberlin College, where she immediately championed the principles of CI communication: i.e., intimacy, self-awareness and the ability to challenge limits, to Paxton's surprise. He confesses: 'It had not occurred to me that such a rough and tumble dance would be of interest to a woman' (86). Through the subversion of expectations, she fostered collaboration, and expanded the form and her spirit of inclusivity with those who partake in it, as well as its dissemination.

Stark Smith successfully disseminated CI as a dance form, as well as a body of written discourse related to it. The 'Biographical Notes', which include a section titled 'Continents not reached: Antarctica', demonstrate how CI has gained traction globally. Moreover, *Caught Falling* discusses Stark Smith's academic career, including her time at Oberlin, her studies in meditation with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and her work at the prestigious avant-garde Naropa University, including her transcription of Diane Di Prima's poems, which catalysed her writing career. The book also evokes her career at Contact Quarterly, a journal she co-founded that describes itself as 'a vehicle for moving ideas' (87) and 'a dance and improvisation journal' (xii). It too contains a repository of information on the development of CI, as well other forms Stark Smith studied, such as Body-Mind Centering™.

The theoretical discourse she fostered is legible in the book through the contributions of letters and memories by other famed performance practitioners, dancers and Naropa teachers, such as Dilley and Zaporah, testifying to a creative lineage of women artists. Indeed, Stark Smith's work is part of an active discourse and has overt influence on contemporary experimental dance scholarship. Dilley's *This Very Moment: Teaching, Thinking, Dancing*, that chronicles the development of contemplative dance practice, as well as scores and exercises, is an example.

Examining *Caught Falling* at a time when, due to a pandemic, touch is so limited and community so constrained highlights the value of the liveness and dialogue CI has to offer. Mirroring the practice of CI, the book is an open invitation to the reader to engage in a dynamic dialogue with the work. CI has a transdisciplinary appeal, allowing *Caught Falling* to speak to a wide readership across dance, performance, embodiment practices, meditation, and somatic studies. The striking dance and personal photography and the unconventional design allow the book to transcend genre.

In a time of restrictions and limits, Nancy Stark Smith's wisdom and principles of contact improvisation—i.e., 'cooperation, spontaneity, responsibility, intelligence, innovation, invention, sensing self and

other, finding freedom inside limits, communication of support and change' (82)—serve as an invitation to 'dance with abandon safely' (5), to have grace, to pursue 'the coordination of the body with all forces of nature' (7), and to apply the principles of CI to the dance of living in wild times.

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Disabled Theatre edited by Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz

Zurich and Berlin: Diaphanes, 2015, 245 pp. (eText review copy)

By ‘Tunde Awosanmi

Disabled Theatre (2015), which draws substantially on Jerome Bel’s *Disabled Theatre*—a 2012/13 performance rupturing theatrical norms—celebrates the infrequent practice of granting liberty to disabled actors’ creative intellect over an able director’s creative power. Staging inclusive affirmation, Bel’s *Disabled Theatre* brought together eleven cognitively disabled actor-dancers at the Theatre HORA, Zurich. The controversy and critical interventions ignited by this fruitful production, which *Disabled Theatre*’s collected essays grapple with, testify to the theatre’s interdisciplinary interface with disability studies from artistic, aesthetic, critical and spectatorial perspectives. Exploring the politics of ability versus disability, *Disabled Theatre* queries the theatre’s status as a socio-cultural institution and disability’s conceptual in/exclusivity. It toasts Bel’s iconoclasm by documenting the actual performance and its reception.

Disabled Theatre comprises ten chapter-contributions by multi-disciplinary scholars and interviews with Jerome Bel and the eleven cognitively disabled actor-dancers, whose ‘virtuoso dilettantism’ in Bel's *Disabled Theatre* pragmatically accentuates Yoshi Oida’s (1997) reflection on what acting should (not) be: ‘displaying my technique. Rather [...] revealing [...] something that the audience doesn’t encounter in daily life’ (xvii). Structuring their ‘Prologue’ around the idea of ‘Disabling the Theatre’, the editors, Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz, seek to do so by 'preventing theatre from working' and seizing 'power away from theatre until that point where it resists' (8).

Gerald Siegmund’s contribution maps Bel’s oeuvre through a series of comparisons, and presents his productions as strategically signifying the death of all theatre’s tyrannical authorial forms, thus

echoing Barthes (1977) and Foucault (1979). This 'author de-authoring' paradigm antagonises the apparatchik produced by the theatre's hierarchical power relations; constructs an aesthetics of dancers' bodies as cultural inscriptions; and locates the force of imagination in a performance's transformative power and in the performers' cultural intellect. The political currency of Bel's *Disabled Theatre* thus lies in its aesthetics which is projected through the correspondence between a set of three major paradoxical concepts: ability versus disability; difference versus indifference; and individual power versus communal power.

Leveraging the actor-dancers' self-introductory 'emancipatory speech act, "… and I am an actor"', Wihstutz probes four levels of the analysed production's emancipatory pungency: emancipation as an act of freedom and agency; emancipation as an act of self-distancing, that is gaining a fresh understanding of social reality by taking 'advantage of the aesthetic difference provided by the stage' (42); emancipation from conservative theatrical norms; and emancipation of aesthetic judgement—i.e., freedom from the conventional criteria of assessing stage skills, performer's achievement and actor's proficiency. Bel's *Disabled Theatre* conventionalises actor-disobedience through its insistence on self-determination and in-difference in revolt against the director's authority.

Bel's *Disabled Theatre* portrays the actors, through their unselfconsciousness, as both embodiments of a condition and paradigms of human vulnerabilities and imperfections. The performance's radical aesthetic approach has, consequently, informed Yvonne Rainer's perception that its style evokes a paradoxical feeling of 'discomfort', on the one hand, and 'longing', on the other hand, in the spectator (80). Influenced by Peter Sloterdijk's (2013) self-optimisation philosophy, Sandra Umathum concludes that Bel's *Disabled Theatre* is a self-transformational performance act. This is an endorsement of the actors' ingenuity 'in spite of their Down's syndrome or learning disabilities' (106). Kai van Enkels's piece is concerned about the challenges involved in featuring disabled persons in theatrical productions and the extent to which this could result in the spectator's incapacitation,

thus rendering the theatrical pact built on performance's aesthetic collectivism 'inoperative'. This surely calls for 'strategies of disabling' both the 'performers and the spectators' (123).

While non-neuronormative persons largely lack juridical and political representation, *Disabled Theatre* showcases actors as 'representing a community'. Responding to the tension generated by these 'two antithetical yet co-constitutive representational conditions' (142), André Lepecki problematises two antipodal terms — *minoritarianism*, following Gilles Deleuze, and *majoritarianism*. This conceptual mediation relies on Bel's three compositional codes: scenic *dispositif* (minimalist staging); score *dispositif* (strategic documentation of disabled actors' routine actions); and translation *dispositif* (formal translation from the actors' Swiss German to the audience's language). This liberates performances from 'ableist perceptive regimes' by privileging 'normative-abled-majoritarian subject' positions (159).

Kati Kros's contribution asserts that *Disabled Theatre* and Christoph Schlingensief's film, *Freakstars 3000*, are powerfully subversive and emancipatorily valuable artworks which, like *Beauty and the Beast* and *Regie*, have intensified the debate on the 'hierarchical dichotomy' between 'non-disabled' and 'disabled' (196). Lars Nowak interrogates polarised reception in Diane Arbus's 1950-70s 'freak photographs' alongside *Disabled Theatre*. The collaboration between abled photographer and disabled models in 'freak photography' is useful in framing discourses around ableism, disableism and monstrified bodies. Yvonne Schmidt metaphorically theorises the theatre's ideological 'free republic' status—as a rehearsal space for power relations, freedom and creative autonomy—drawing on Jerome Bel's production, *Freie Republik HORA*. Jana-Maria Stahl's interviews with the actors touch upon issues overlapping with the substance of the editors' interview with Jerome Bel. Highlighting his radical theatre praxis, the interviews navigate subjects like audience response and Bel's unique fourth wall deconstructive 'theatrical *dispositif*' approach (173).

Interspersing the chapters, translated from Swiss German into English by Christoph Nothlings, are photographs of the actors with

quotes. Far from mere illustrations, identity integration and authenticity reinforcement are indexed as ideological concepts underscoring both the performance and the book. However, this visual aspect of the book could have been accompanied by access to a recording of the performance for readers who have not seen the show. The omission makes this visual material feel incomplete.

Theatre's quintessence, enthuses Peter Brook (1995), resides 'within a mystery called the present moment' (97). Both Bel's *Disabled Theatre* and *Disabled Theatre* epitomise disability's present moment as an indispensable artistic genre and the counter-reality of ability. *Disabled Theatre* celebrates the humaneness of the disabled, the performance shared with the audience and the actors' families and advocates a canonisation of Bel's disabled theatrical aesthetics within the discipline alongside Stanislavski, Grotowski, Brook and others.

Benjamin Fraser expresses anxiety in *Cognitive Disability Aesthetics* (2018) that 'we risk condemning cognitive disability to a condition of both social and academic (in)visibility, and … ceding the discursive control over experiences of cognitive disability from the humanities to the health and medical sciences' (6). *Disabled Theatre* freshly illuminates fundamental disability performance aesthetic and sociological issues; constructs a novel performative template for disability studies, advocacy and identity politics; and deflates the disciplinary arrogance of the social and medical models. As a work of scholarship, it affirms theatre's collaborative and inter-disciplinary openness. Preempting Fraser already in 2015, *Disabled Theatre* was working to wrest 'discursive control' of 'the social constructedness of disability over the experience of disability from ableist power structures' (5).

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Perpetual Motion: Dance, Digital Cultures, and the Common by Harmony Bench

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 256 pp. (paperback)

By Rachael Davies

Harmony Bench sets the tone for what is to be explored in the pages to follow by opening the introduction of *Perpetual Motion: Dance, Digital Cultures and the Common* with an account of *Passe-Partout* (2014) produced by 2wice Arts Foundation. Comprehensive descriptions of digital dance works like this one structure the book and are central to its narrative and analysis. These accounts act as an intimate device allowing the reader to experience the works through Bench's personal encounter with them. More broadly, *Perpetual Motion* provides a rich historical account of the development of dance and its relationship to digital media from 1996 to 2006. It approaches the subject of dance in the digital sphere from a personal and communal perspective, relating individual concerns to wider political issues. For Bench, digital technologies have 'thoroughly saturated the practices, creation, distribution, and viewers' experiences of dance' (3), and it is from this point that the book begins its narrative. Published prior to the coronavirus pandemic, this proposition is now all the timelier.

Chapter One is set in a pre-social media era, focusing on artists' exploration of the early web and the format of CD-ROMs. More specifically, Bench provides an analysis of what she terms hyperdances—'choreographies created for computational devices… that support user interaction but do not incorporate user-generated content' (20)—with a focus on *Somnambules* (2003) by Nicolas Clauss, Jean-Jacques Birgé, and Didier Silhol. The theme of this analysis is repetition, and it is grounded in a theoretical framework primarily comprising Gilles Deleuze's analysis of difference and repetition, and Friedrich Nietzche's philosophy of eternal return. From this first chapter, Bench assesses the role and responsibility of the internet and digital technologies, not just

with regard to dance practices but to society more broadly. Drawing on Roland Barthes, Bench explores the notion that in interacting with digital texts users can be 'emancipated from their previous roles as mere consumers and passive spectators' (25), whilst reminding us at the same time that, in the context of hyperdances, it is important to make the distinction between interactions with digital works that can make a difference to their reading and those that cannot. The question of freedom and liberty in the commons is an invigorating debate that runs through the book.

Chapter Two encapsulates some of the most urgent questions about our individual and collective being in common space. It highlights a series of case studies: solo and group performances taking place from 2008 to 2013, with a primary focus on *Girl Walk// All Day* (2011-12), directed by Jacob Krupnick, with lead performer Anne Marsen. Bench's selection of works take place in a post-9/11 world. Central to their analysis is thus the freedoms of movement, gathering, and being in public space when threats of 'domestic and international terrorism are cited as reasons to control and limit where, when and how people move through open spaces and transit sites' (55). Bench proposes that dance in public holds the potential to facilitate 'the renewal of social bonds' (68), particularly in light of oppressive governmental strategies, threats of terrorism, social injustice, and inequality. It is a bold statement but perhaps, now, never truer. We have become more aware of our bodies in relation to space, place, and others—online and offline—than ever before.

Whereas Chapter Two focuses on works made in the locale, the attention of Chapter Three turns to work made for a much wider audience—'a global or planetary common' (106). This includes dance works produced, composed, as well as circulated globally on the internet. YouTube is an exemplary platform for this, and it is on the YouTube series *Where the Hell is Matt?* by Matt Harding that Bench focuses her analysis, making the case that, through works such as this, artists are 'attempting to make-world from the space of globalization' (101). The works considered here rely on crowdsourcing; Bench weighs

up historical critique of participatory, relational, and socially engaged practices through the work of Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) and Claire Bishop (2004), and in doing so touches on some of the ethical concerns surrounding it. Whilst she argues that the works discussed in the chapter involve participants to create 'a world from the crowd' (104) rather than exploit them (Bishop 2004; Harvie 2013), the pandemic has been a stark reminder of the limitations of the 'worlds' that can be created online, who they serve, and who they exclude. One thus has to interrogate the 'global or planetary common' that these artists are striving for—whether such a thing exists, or whether it inevitably ends up, in Bishop's words, 'duplicating the structures of neo-liberal capitalism, requiring affective investments and uncompensated labour as part of a larger "experience economy"' (qtd. in Bench 103).

Issues of authorship and accreditation are significant considerations in the world of participatory and digital art and Bench continues to explore this in Chapter Four with *24 Hours of Happy* (2013) by Pharrell Williams. The final chapter succinctly brings together technological developments in digital dance practice and Bench's theoretical analysis in a way that unifies the central concerns of the book through historical analysis. In doing so, it brings to the surface some of the most urgent questions posed by dance today. This book is not only an important contribution to dance history and discourse, but an eloquently curated study, bringing together an eclectic selection of digital works that demonstrate dance's relationship to, and development alongside, the digital, and how we as interactors have contributed to it.

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An Introduction to Theatre, Performance and the Cognitive Sciences by John Lutterbie

London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2020, 198 pp. (paperback)

By Christina Regorosa

An Introduction to Theatre, Performance and the Cognitive Sciences is part of the 'Performance and Science: Interdisciplinary Dialogues' series, exploring current practices in the performing arts in light of research carried out in cognitive science. The endeavour is timely, and the interest mutual, as cognitive scientists too have been turning to the arts to investigate the human mind—in the field of neuroaesthetics, for example, or in creativity research. It is no easy task to synthesise insights derived from fundamentally different epistemic cultures, and the authors and scientists who endeavour nonetheless to bridge these gaps—not only between theory and practice, but also between arts and science—deserve genuine recognition for their efforts.

Lutterbie conceptualises this introduction as an exploration of how arts and science can productively communicate with each other (3). Chapter by chapter, the author walks the reader through a selection of concepts from different disciplines: from cognitive science (Chapter One); via culture, as defined by cultural studies (Chapter Two); and the relevant aspects of theatre: namely, space, time, and text (Chapters Three-Five); to aesthetics (Chapter Six). He draws throughout on the work of scholars in cognitive science, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy alike. In Chapters Three-Six, he generously shares his experience of various genres and works of theatre—be it as spectator, actor, or director—to illustrate the point at hand. In addition to these concepts and portrayals of his personal experiences, there are reflection tasks in each chapter to help the reader engage directly with theoretical concepts. These tasks are one of the book's strongest features, in their offering an experiential approach to the outlined theories.

For example, in Chapter One Lutterbie frames theatre and performance as a dynamic system (21), which is a mathematical concept used in cognitive science. To illustrate why, he shares his own experience of directing a piece in which a planned fog-effect did not always work out due to the temperature changes in the theatre (20). In task 3, he asks the reader to think of other kinds of dynamic systems in which they are involved, to then define boundary conditions, control parameters, and perturbations (23).

However, perhaps due to the impressively broad range of elements included in this exploration, it remains somewhat unclear what exactly the concrete merits of a productive communication between arts and science are. Lutterbie claims that there 'is a brave new world at the intersection of art and science that can help us understand the creative act, making us better artists and audiences' (181), but at the same time admits that his take is merely 'a sketch, a pencil drawing' (180). Nonetheless, projects like this are indispensable, particularly as evolving branches of cognitive science—like the enactive approach and neurophenomenology—turn to lived human experience. Since theatre offers case studies of condensed human experience, it is an interesting field for the study of human cognition.

From a cognitive science perspective, there are a few points that merit further reflection. One thing the book does *not* offer is a concise differentiation of the various paradigms within cognitive science. While the author does state that this field is interdisciplinary (15), no mention is made of the earlier cognitivist approach, which is—broadly speaking—in opposition to embodied, enactive, extended, and embedded approaches that Lutterbie often refers to. The omission of the differing stances within the field gives the false impression that it is homogeneous in its premises and suppositions. This becomes problematic when, for example, he claims that the notion of embodied cognition is one of the foundational concepts of his book (26), but then uses terminology that is inherently cognitivist, and therefore at odds with his claim. For example, to use the terms 'data' or 'message' to indicate the electrochemical signals in neurons (40, 55) implies that

cognition is being conceptualised through the mind-as-computer metaphor, which characterise a cognitivist stance. This inconsistent use of terminology stemming from differing paradigms gives an impression of eclecticism to readers familiar with cognitive science.

Another weakness is that sometimes the conclusions the author draws are reductionist (again, in opposition with his stated embodiment foundation). For example, in explaining how predominant techniques in America made space for different acting styles, he concludes: 'Through the change in neural synapses and communicating these changing beliefs […], the culture is changing' (60). Statements like these overlook a central question in cognitive science, the so-called explanatory gap: how can electrochemical signals account for all the various experiences we are able to make as human beings? In what way is the level of action potentials related to meaning in the social domain? Equating 'change in neural synapses' with 'changing beliefs' simply ignores this gap, when it is precisely this issue that would benefit from inputs from the humanities and arts.

This much-needed collaboration becomes particularly obvious in the field of neuroaesthetics. In Chapter Six, Lutterbie takes a critical stance against the neuroscientific investigations of the biological bases of aesthetic experience. He conveys vividly and convincingly what an aesthetic experience of theatre and performance entails. In describing his own through a phenomenological lens, he demonstrates how arts can illuminate cognitive neuroscience (conversely to the book's stated intent). Neuroaesthetics had been overly focused on beauty in its inception phase, which is only a part of aesthetic experience. By offering an account of aesthetics that is temporal, and consisting of stages such as expectation, defamiliarisation, and (dis)fluency (171), he hints at the complexity of the aesthetic experience that neuroscientists should consider. He thus implicitly points to an intersection in which a productive communication between science and arts is key.

Despite these weaknesses, the author does justice to the declared aim of the book. It introduces theories and concepts from the humanities as well as from the cognitive sciences in an approachable

and personal manner. For cognitive scientists, this book will shed light on the ways in which their discipline is being received in the arts and humanities, and where crucial misunderstandings linger. For practitioners and scholars of theatre, it is a wayfare (13) through the landscape of theatre, with an outlook on an array of different views from cognitive science. It is an exploration that expands the horizon of the mindscape in merging arts, humanities, and cognitive science.

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