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Slaying the Dragon:
Dances Created During the Time of The Pandemic

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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links: full 4/6/22 <https://vimeo.com/702693291> close up 4/7/22 <https://vimeo.com/705037880>
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PART I: INTRODUCTION

Historical moment

In March 2020, Covid-19 hit New York City and the city went on pause. I interviewed for the MFA in Dance at Hunter College in April and a month later, I started my studies. Everything had turned to Zoom, a video conferencing platform that soon became a verb: “Should we do a phone call or zoom?” Nothing could have been more out of the norm for me than this unprecedented situation. The image of slaying the dragon was what emerged as a metaphor for overcoming things we fear, while I moved through those difficult days. I found myself forced into an unexpected do-it-yourself mode, learning to film and edit my own dances on my smartphone, completely by myself, and my inquiry emerged: “How can digital media enhance live performance onstage? What can be gained and what is lost? What does the creator/choreographer gain by integrating the live body with a film, or the live body with animation during live performance? In our hyper-reality, saturated with various and constant information of the 21st Century, do the viewers’ perceptions become overwhelmed by multidisciplinary information or is it heightened toward a new reality? Can a TV monitor presenting a multiplicity of images simultaneously with a dance on a stage heighten the viewer’s experience or does it distract their focus?”

My thesis project, *Slaying the Dragon*, reveals what I went through and discovered in order to create dances and share them with others during this uncertain historical time. Contrasting concepts such as expansion and contraction, objectivity and subjectivity, mediated or live, choreographed or “in the moment” are what I focus on throughout this paper.

During the lock-down, artists were stripped of their studio spaces, opportunities, income and the dance classes that sustained their communities' functionalities. Quickly, online

technologies such as Zoom, WhatsUp, Slack, Vimeo, YouTube, became available means for survival in the midst of isolation for most people. As I continued my research, however, I realized that the questions go even deeper than those above: How can we, as choreographers, move the dance form forward? What is at stake here? What can we possibly gain from the addition of technology?

Creating during the pandemic

In her essay “This is Where We Dance Now” for *The International Journal of ScreenDance 12* (2021), dancer and writer Harmony Bench explains “we [the dancers] found ourselves in awe of a collective refusal to stop dancing, and indeed, what seemed to be the emergence of a whole new era of dance onscreen” (Bench 1). Indeed we continued to dance, and I used film and screen technology specifically to keep creating. The new work that I created was presented to live audiences on April 6th and 7th, 2022, on the 6th floor of Thomas Hunter Hall as part of my thesis project, all of which was created inside the container of the pandemic.

When the lock-down started in March 2020 and everyone became confined to their own homes and apartments, the internet was flooded with various kinds of video/dance artifacts. Many screen dances started to sprout online such as Dixon Place TV, school performances such as the Juilliard School, Hunter College’s Spring Dance Concert, Bard Fisher Center, Guggenheim Works in Progress, and the Joyce Theater, which presented live streams of solo dances. Watching these works was inspiring. Organizations rose up to the moment with new solutions and opened their vaults of recordings for public viewing. Companies such as Martha Graham, Bill T. Jones, and others showed old dances for free or a small donation online. Dance became urgent in many ways.

Bench and Harlin describe in their essay how a new trend of pasting together various videos of different locations emerged, creating a new type of screendance. One of the first videos I saw was of the Juilliard School students dancing to Ravel's *Bolero*, in a film directed and choreographed by Larry Keigwin with associate Nicole Wolcott (Keigwin, 00:23- 08:34). In *Bolero Juilliard*, careful combinations of the choreographed movement sequences continue through changing environments (portrayed in squares). Through zoom and by themselves, dancers, actors, and musicians filmed themselves at home, sometimes portraying simple gestures such as pointing, or dancing, running or doing a grand jeté outside, or a musician playing his instrument. The new trend of showing everyday home-based actions such as making coffee, putting on make-up or playing with one's pet, were inserted in dance making online such as in *Bolero Juilliard* and other commissioned films by the Guggenheim Works in Process.

What we have gained. To start answering the questions I raised in the introduction and taking into account how our technological capabilities in 2020 were an important turning point that dancers have benefited immensely from, both creatively and emotionally, as we exit the most stringent limitations of the pandemic time, I created a list of what we have gained.

Dance became more intimate. Larry Keigwin's editing arranged the squares in *Bolero Juilliard* with close-ups of the camera on people's faces making it very intimate in contrast to the proscenium stage which often creates a distance between the performers and the audience. Film opened an exposed intimacy that allowed us to see and kinesthetically participate, which was definitely a positive change created at this time. In the same essay, Harmony Bench mentions "the multiplicity of the screen itself was narrowed during Covid to primarily computer and mobile screens and online content, since theaters were largely closed and gatherings prohibited" (Bench 2). Unlike just sitting in a theater, even with proximity to dancers as it is in smaller

venues, we started to witness the behind the scenes of dancers' lives or to see body parts up close as it is often presented in screendance.

Dance became more accessible. In the confines of my apartment, late at night, I watched Pam Tanowitz's *Four Quartets* through an online viewing program presented by Bard Fisher Center. According to Susan Yung of "The Brooklyn Rail" edition of June 2020, Pam was one "the busiest choreographers working when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020" and, like many artists in the field, had to postpone her live engagements, although she could still present her dances online. Dixon Place TV showed experimental works where artists performed in their bedrooms and living rooms. You could watch those dances at any time or even rewind and watch it a second time.

Dance became more real. Dance became more real by showing us the behind the scenes of something that is usually packaged carefully for the stage. This crossing over to common moments of these "super beings" (as dancers are sometimes perceived by other people), showed our everyday mundane moments and common humanity. Waking up in one's bedroom, doing laundry and folding clothes, walking the dogs, showing dancers' apartments or homes were images rarely seen before isolation times. One of the first dances that I watched online, on Facebook, was of an Italian male dancer dancing outside on the streets while he tried to deliver food. It was shot on a phone from a balcony by someone in quarantine.

Dance Archives became available. Another positive aspect during this time of isolation was that dancers and dance companies released their works online. "The COVID-19 pandemic and the requirements of social distancing have led dance artists and companies to embrace the digital: offering remote classes or rehearsals, streaming archival or new performances" (Chametzky). Big institutionalized dance companies/organizations such as Martha Graham

Dance Company, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation and Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company among others opened their video archives for asynchronous and synchronous online viewing, or showed new works that became seeds for future dances. For example, I watched *The Breathing Show* (1999) an avant-garde multimedia solo by Bill T. Jones, and another work of his *Dora* that tells a story of a second World War holocaust survivor: *Analogy/Dora: Tramontane* | The Kennedy Center (Jones 00:00- 02:36). It was inspiring to watch these works from the past or works I had missed due to a busy NYC life. It was life affirming in 2020 when everything paused and we were living in so much uncertainty.

Dance Live Streams became available. Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker presented a live stream of her 1998 dance *Drumming* through Facebook, in the fall of 2020, during a time when elections in the United States were going to take place. At the end, one dancer held a sign that said VOTE. The intimacy, accessibility, and new presentation forms led to a stronger civic engagement from the dance community in their work. Dance quickly became activism: here beauty and activism met on the other side of the world sending us a message, and due to current technology capability, which is not dependent on mainstream television, the message was communicated. This production had various close ups through high-tech video work transmission that was able to switch quickly from various camera angles placed above the performers and at different sides of the stage that made the audience feel as if we were watching the dance live, or as if we were onstage with the dancers. Dance had indeed raised its accessibility to a new global level.

New commissions and venues emerged. Guggenheim embarked on supporting online learning, and virtual performances. Guggenheim's Works & Process Virtual Commissions commissioned over 280 artists. According to an essay of April 10, 2020, on their website,

director Richard Armstrong expressed that “the Guggenheim remains dedicated to showcasing art and different voices from a multitude of regions and cultures, and in this moment hopes to provide both solace and inspiration through our diverse programming.” These new commissions were revealing of how choreographers and dancers were dealing with this restricted moment of the pandemic and we watched their experiences during the isolation days. Three short films are examples of these developments in the field.

In Jamar Robert’s *Cooped*, he expresses feelings about being confined: “This display of the dancing black body not only peers into the psyche of marginalized people in a very specific crisis, but it is also a testament to their strength, beauty and resilience” (Roberts 00:00-05:05). In the editing of *Cooped* the images are reoriented vertically and sideways giving the viewer an uncomfortable feeling of claustrophobia. It looks like he is gesturing while kneeling backwards, however, the position of the image together with the lighting makes the confinement more intense. We see his sweat dripping down his body and later he shakes while the music helps amplify the power. The work starts with a sharp sound and as the camera shows blue/black colors on screen and a blurred figure, which we soon find out, as it comes into focus, that it is a black man hanging upside down from his torso. It is shocking. The space is constricted and his dangling body makes you fear for him.

Ballerina Sara Mearns, dancing in her apartment in a black and white film *STORM*, portrays sadness and then hope (Mearns 00:22-04:04). Through the film, the audience was able to empathize with dancers who often feel expansive in their bodies. However, at that moment, they feel completely restricted, a shared experience felt by many people then. The film starts by focusing on the dancer sitting alone on a chair at her home as we hear melancholic piano sounds combined with song. The camera focuses on Sara’s face which looks a bit lost and disappointed

and follows her as she gets off her chair and starts moving. The black and white tones in the film in this case intensify our perception of melancholy. The music by Zoe Sarnak mentions “look out for hope and you’ll find some” and as the pace of the dance progresses, the apathy seems to give place to hope.

BalletX’s “The Under Way” by Rena Butler (Butler 00:30-03:20) is my third example. With the sound of breaths in the music we watch two African American male dancers dancing as if they are trying to breathe, and later they dance supporting each other in a duet at different locations outside in front of a statue, during the heated times of social protest. The images change from outside to inside an apartment. This change in dimensionality of where the dance happens and the quick timing and cuts is something that through film brings the viewer to a richer visual experience than if it was just onstage.

Dance classes moved online. Being stuck at home also made me and other dancers and choreographers take new measures to stay in dance shape and get the “juices” rolling: I took classes online with Israeli choreographer and inventor of the gaga movement language and technique, Ohad Naharin and his disciples, the gaga people. Gaga technique is an improvisational approach where dancers investigate movement that can flow in multiple directions at the same time, expanding the dancer’s range of movement. During the class, various dynamics are explored through imagery, guided by the teacher.

Creating a community of dancers online was really important, so we could connect through dance, class and lift our spirits through movement. Even though pre-pandemic there were plenty of instructional dance videos on YouTube, maintaining a full artistic life online might have been unthinkable before the pandemic. Perhaps surprisingly, this new mode of taking a dance class is going to stay as a positive aspect of the field, in that a dancer can now connect

with workshops, training, discussions, and classes all over the world without having to get on a plane. As I write this paper, I continue to take gaga classes online and watch discussions and interviews.

What we have lost. What we have lost, perhaps, is the tradition of sitting through a long dance in the dark, and watching its development which spans a certain temporal length. In my own experience, I believe our attention span has become compromised and more impatient, ready for the instant gratification that shorter screendances can provide, or our focus wanders as we have the ability to rewind. After a year and a half, the fatigue of viewing dance online became real. Friends relayed to me that they found themselves in an “overload” of screen watching. The tremendous financial loss in the field was strongly felt. Many dance spaces closed for good, Broadway lost a huge amount of money, dancers lost performances, touring engagements, dance teaching artist assignments and some artists decided to stop their careers and move out of New York. Some companies folded.

We lost many lives.

My creative process during the pandemic

During the pandemic days, my creative process combined site-specific dance, eclecticism, the use of the Alexander Technique in my movement, as well as inquiry into issues dealing with women in society (such as in my screendance *Marie Claire*). I also explored choreographing through a process of “not knowing” and happenstance in the context of the imposed restrictions, which created opportunities to explore and present dance in new ways. I connected all these parts as the sole dancer, choreographer, director, cinematographer, editor, costume designer and technician, becoming my own collaborator. My body was the common thread to all these moments for an evening of dance that became a holistic journey. *Slaying the*

Dragon presented short dance pieces created during these last two years in a gallery-type walk-through. My evening of work explored the self in diverse contexts. By navigating through different sites and placing the body of the solo dancer in various spaces, live and in film, it investigated presenting screendance in collaboration with the live performance, and the encouragement of an active and mobile audience. In the films, actions and events were captured in a single-take style of filming to preserve an improvisational, “in the moment” feeling.

Improvisational approach. My improvisational approach deepened during the last two years. Since then, I have pursued creating dance through an accidental moment or happenstance manner; this is a practice aiming to create something that is true to the moment and to let go of the need to control. This kind of improvisational juxtaposition is how I have been approaching my choreography. In her book “I Want To be Ready,” Danielle Goldman mentioned how the choreographer David Dorfman encourages freedom in his students' work by letting them make changes, as opposed to having something tightly set. She continues describing that “Such celebratory pairings of improvisation and freedom are common in the field of dance—not only in colleges but also among critics, scholars, and practicing artists across a range of genres” (Goldman 1).

In my choreography, I connect to “in the moment” creation in many of my recent works. For example, working in an improvisational way, or using “happenstance” is how my *takeitback* dance film was created. I used spontaneous moments and improvisation to create the movement seen in the film (Nejman 00:00-11:54). There was no previous planning, no drawing board, no itinerary of what to do first. The movement was generated in the present moment, and I wanted the camera to have more movement than my previous works. When I was editing the film meticulously, looking at the footage in a trial and error manner, I created a flow of the images

which quickly formed a rhythm that helped me to make sense of the material. This material was then juxtaposed with the live movement created in the studio to accompany the film.

PART II: EMBODIED INQUIRY

Inquiry into movement

My embodied inquiry and practice has been ongoing for the last thirty years as a choreographer. I often create movement phrases and transform them with formalistic spatial and rhythmic variation techniques. In addition, I connect with current intellectual ideas that spark my curiosity at the moment, like for example in my first evening length work “*Maria Vai Com As Outras*” (translated word by word as Maria Who Follows the Others) which is an idiomatic expression in Portuguese language describing someone who is a follower, or doesn’t have a very strong sense of self. The concepts that I bring into my work relate to myself as a woman, and in being in the world. For example, my dance of 2016, *Beautiful Figure*, was developed as a response to the ugliness I saw in the world with ongoing war, which made me think that humanity needs a new Renaissance Period, with a random comment that “dancers have beautiful figures.” I translated the context into a dance that dealt with images of the late Renaissance paintings portraying the beauty of the female body in contrast to passages taken from real online conversations that referred to sexual harassment and how men view and speak to women on and off dating sites and the objectification of woman in society. I often mix various ideas to create a nonlinear dance by not following a chronological sequence. Concepts are related through a stream of consciousness that gives surge to the dance together with questions I had in a certain moment. One other work, *The Velocity of Things*, 2005, dealt with time and space, comparing the unhurried time I felt in Rio de Janeiro to the fast paced time I felt in New York City.

Lineage. Since 1993, when I started to create my own choreography and to make evening length works for the proscenium stage, museums and street sites both locally and internationally, I used choreographic methods that I had learned during my years dancing with Donald Byrd from 1988 to 1992. Donald was one of the first choreographers in the downtown New York City dance scene in the 1990's to combine various styles of dances from street dance to hip hop to modern and ballet, using speedy movement. In his own words: "I want audiences to start to understand that dance has the ability to deal with things that perhaps they didn't think it could—the work that people expect really wonderful literary artworks to do" (*Seattle Magazine*).

The phenomenology of dance. To understand the phenomenology of dance and to have a clear way into perception, first one has to stay present in the moment. Dance scholar Sondra Horton Fraleigh states in "Witnessing The Frog Pond", that "the aim of a phenomena is to allow the essence of things to appear (to consciousness) and to identify habits of thought and action" (Fraleigh 210). She mentions that the same goes for watching and creating a work of art or a dance. I often work to get to that state of mind in the studio and I often encounter a "nebulosa" (Portuguese for nebula) full of choices within which I enjoy the freedom to make intuitive choices in the "making" process. Fraleigh talks about being in the moment, letting go of preconceived ideas and expectations, as well as inquiring into the makers' own aesthetics. She writes about intention in movement and asks if it is necessary for the audience to know the intentions of the maker. This makes me think that the genres of classical ballet and post-modern dance are worlds apart that require different subjective understandings. However, in both, the unselfconsciousness of a dancer, or performer, is where expression resides. Without fake flowery or trying to be cool, the dancer must be one with the dance. Fraleigh also mentions qualities and values, inquiring into who delineates these values. Many times, values were supported by the

philosophies of the time and became outdated through scientific innovation. In creating a work of art, one should always investigate the values of the time and question them. This principle applies to the creation of new and current work. For example, working on *takeitback* in the fall of 2021, I worked on the dance altogether with a film, creating and following impulses of my own aesthetic values at this time. Something guided the movement and I questioned my intentions with the juxtapositions. I had to trust my choices, there were always many. I had to pick one. This process and action was informed by the subconscious mind.

The Alexander Technique. Part of my process in creating, choreographing and performing is also using the self-awareness of the *Alexander Technique*. Encountering it in the early 1990's was a major turning point for me as a mover and person: it changed the way I danced by encouraging me to become more direct in my movement, and using my energy more efficiently and with more *ease*. The technique was created by Fredrick Mathias Alexander (1869-1955) an Australian actor, who studied his "use of the self," and his own habits of speaking because he used to lose his voice every time he performed as an actor. He discovered that a certain awareness of the relationship of the neck, head and torso offered a way to change harmful patterns.

By paying attention to this relationship a person is able to eliminate habits of movement by avoiding excess tension, and to become more open in the connection between the body and mind. "The brain becomes used to thinking in a certain way, it works in a groove, and when set in action, slides along the familiar, well-worn path; but when once it is lifted out of the groove, it is astonishing how easily it may be directed" (Alexander 83). By learning this somatic practice and inhabiting a new way of being, one becomes more open and so, more expressive.

I have learned to bring my attention to myself and I am able to *notice* and to practice this awareness in different situations, especially when learning and performing choreography. During performance, I bring my attention to *ease* as I notice my head-neck relationship. I bring my attention to my head-neck and body as I start to walk towards the small studio to perform *Red Meadow*, and as I carry and place the plants. I continue throughout the performance, by bringing the attention back to myself, during all the pieces. For example, when I step onto the sofa and I switch my positions quickly, or when I jump changing fronts. As I walk towards *BUBBLE* and as I move during it, as when I extend my arms forward before a short “pause.” *Noticing* is an awareness that you bring your attention to constantly becoming part of what you do. This skill is subtle, and it takes special *Alexander* training to perfect. Another example is when I dance wearing high heels. So, especially in performance, I am bringing my attention to *noticing* all the time.

“In the moment”

My practice of using an “in the moment” style while choreographing and creating my films, can find support in Michaly Csikszentmihalyi’s *Flow*. He mentions that “flow” is achieved in the doing of a task that you put yourself wholeheartedly into, as well as in the after effect of it. This after effect stays with you and feeds you in your life, offering you a connection with everything, an expansion of your being at that moment. For artists, the creative process is available in how we encounter everyday life, and it can support everything we do.

Csikszentmihalyi discusses an ecstatic state as an alternative reality. He talks about the “optimum experience of a flow state” which is a state of happiness. He explains that you enter a different reality by engaging in the process of creating something new, expanding your consciousness as your identity disappears. You don't think of food, your problems, your identity

is suspended. “The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (Csikszentmihalyi 3). However, he also mentions that it takes at least ten years to be able to get there; in other words, you need to know your craft so well that you can create beyond it, or transform it. Every time I am in a creative mode, choreographing, hours fly by without me noticing it, and I am completely immersed in the process. I am aware of these moments, as I navigate my work and motivations, I don’t really know why I chose a specific movement or way of moving. By submerging myself in a state of “flow”, I follow through to see “what happens if...” as intuition is guiding me and I let it happen. So, in this way, my creativity follows “in the moment” impulses and improvisations without a choreographic formula for the final outcome.

Interpreting dance. Joann McNamara writes in “Dance In The Hermeneutic Circle” that according to Susan Foster and Cynthia J. Novack, hermeneutics is “concerned with the meaning of dance and how that meaning is constructed” (McNamara 163). The meaning comes from the interpretation itself. The person’s pre-understanding of the text (in our situation, the dance is the text), the text, and its cultural context contribute to the interpretation. Instead of creating a “true” interpretation, phenomenological hermeneutics values understanding the essence of the subject within various settings by linking theory with phenomenology and everyday lived experiences. In other words, in hermeneutics ideologies, philosophy, linguistics, and phenomenology come together in order to create the meaning or interpretation of a dance.

We live and interpret life around us with symbols such as dances, works of art, language, nonverbal communication, texts, objects and social interactions and by interacting with these symbols our understanding is clarified. “To exist is to interpret” (McNamara 164). We live in culture, and as part of one, the various spaces and energy levels spent and experienced during the

day, can be related to a dancer's effort and energy throughout a dance. "Heidegger suggests that Being, an embodiment of pre-understanding, is always already existing, or there" (165). "Being" is the center from where this interpretation is gathered. However, we also have the pre-understanding of aesthetics and expectations if something is supposed to be modern or classical and hope these expectations are met through experience. "Just as art is more than art, so also is the experience of art more than pure aesthetic experience; it is a mode of self-understanding" (166). The interpreter brings with them preconceived ideas in consciousness, so observing becomes a way into understanding the self. Where the unfamiliar and familiar meet is known as the *horizon*, a concept developed by Anthonie Cornelis Van Pueresen, and mentioned by McNamara (168). Noticed by the observer's conscious and subconscious, it embraces everything and it is subjective, creating a mysterious space. Language together with culture creates the connection and interpretation of hermeneutics: "Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells" (168). Although dance is fleeting, we cannot interpret without the language of the body, space, time, and relations.

In my dance *takeitback* the meaning and interpretation is entirety in the minds and kinesthetic experience of the audience. "Film is unique in that it creates an illusion of movement through the rapid presentation of still images, so audiences imagine that what they are viewing is happening now, a real experience being lived, and not the tightly scripted and edited work that it is" (Johnson 2). My desire is to invite the viewer into a world that is not just film or just live dance but both, creating a 3D feel effect once you consider the shadow.

In *takeitback* I dance in front of a large film projection of myself dancing outside, and the juxtaposition created a conversation with my double as well as my shadow, creating a trio. By placing myself as the maker who is also the performer, both filmed and live at the same time, I

become both object/subject and observer/observed, in addition to being observed as a maker/performer in relation to the audience. On the “horizon” of this dance/film work, I am proposing the possibility of integrating the object and subject or the observer and observed in the piece, as the juxtaposition of live dance and film takes place. “We have also long danced with, via, and through the screen, but the screen, too, may be a different place, now that being on both sides of the screen is a familiar and embodied experience” (Bench 2). I worked tirelessly in the studio to find the best position of my body against the background of the film, interacting with my double, and creating three dimensionality for the viewer. In the live dance, I tried to enter into the scrim as I run and then move slowly towards it. At other moments I danced in cannon with my double, and used proximity to and distance from the scrim to create different projections of my shadow.

Film versus live. An issue of using film onstage together with live performance has been that film was considered too overpowering for the live body and therefore film should be used carefully or not at all. I remember a conversation I had with a colleague a while ago about the balance of power between live dance and film. Film can be seductive. However, in 2020, when the world suddenly changed, we became even more mediated through our technological response to the pandemic, and our mediated selves, which are now here to stay, are often situated in both a comfortable and complimentary way with our live selves: “the live now derives its authority from its reference to the mediatized” (Auslander 39). Film became a way to express ourselves in the last two years, and in my work *takeitback*, I juxtaposed a large film projection carefully with the live movement.

Media and live dance

In order to address the media and live dance performance of today, I must acknowledge the pioneering work of John Cage (1912-1992) and Merce Cunningham (1919-2009), who laid

out and transformed American concert dance's pathway into the future with their innovative use of media, technology, and chance methods. Their influence has been felt for decades. As Selma Jean Cohen mentions in her book, *Dance As A Theater Art*, the revolution started with Cage, who directly influenced his partner, Cunningham, who then created pieces without a plot or characters and "looked for objective ways of combining and ordering movements, trying devices of chance or arbitrary systems" (Cohen 194). These concepts quickly included evolving technologies of the day.

In 1999, Cunningham created *Biped* which brought dancers together with motion capture technology that resulted in performers dancing in front of computer animated projections. Movements were derived from his own choreography, which was then projected on a frontal scrim on stage, with the dancers performing behind it. Cunningham collaborated with The Open Ended Group comprised of Marc Downie and Paul Kaiser, and in their website they mention that "their pioneering approach to digital art frequently combines three signature elements: non-photorealistic 3D rendering; the incorporation of body movement by motion-capture and other means; and the autonomy of artworks directed or assisted by artificial intelligence" (Open Ended Group).

Researcher Eric Mullins, in his article, "*Dance Interactive Technology, and the Device Paradigm*" for the *Dance Research Journal* writes "A sense of interactivity may arise when the live dancers move with the projected images on stage, but this sense is ultimately illusory since the images cannot respond to the live dancer's movement in real time" (Mullins 112). Mullins continues by mentioning another more interactive work, *Glow* by Dutch choreographer Anouk Van Dijk with the group *Chunky Move*, where the dancer interacts with a computer platform that creates in the moment shapes and projections, through a motion capture device which creates a

bidirectionality of the movement (Chunky Move 00:00-23:42). Also in Akram Khan's *Desh*, an alternative world is created interacting with larger than life animations (Khan 00:00-03:29).

BUBBLE connects to the above works on a much smaller scale. Timing in *BUBBLE* is crucial as it intersects live movement with animation projections on the dancer and the white scrim creating another type of interaction by giving the illusion of commanding energy between the live dancer and the animated figures. This relationship creates an uncanny view of dance with drawn animations to astound the perception of the viewer.

PART III: THE DANCES

For my thesis project, I connected six works I created in the last two years into one evening of works linked by the solo dancer in conversation with her own images and animation on screen. I also tried to break down the theatrical specificity, taking away some of the illusion of theater, creating a democratic shared space; in other words, pulling the curtain on the presentation set up. I have been interested in presenting my dance in spaces other than just in the proscenium stage. "Another aspect of Judson's legacy for post-modern dance, again one with a peculiarly American neo-romantic tone, was the exploration of space" (Banes 106). The idea was to connect all these parts of this container as the dancer, choreographer and director, as the common thread to all these moments into an evening of dance through a holistic journey. Except for *BUBBLE*, all the films were filmed and edited on my smartphone. *Slaying the Dragon* presented short dance pieces created during these last two years in a gallery-type walk-through as a site that required a mobile audience within the space combining technology with a live body.

Red Meadow With *Red Meadow*, I wanted to abstract the body. I wanted to have close-ups that confused the viewer's imagination at certain points. So when you watch the beginning

of the *Red Meadow* film, you see just the red and you don't know why, and then you see the blue, the green—there is something with the colors, which reminds me of paintings like Mark Rothko's *Blue Over Red* (1953), one color on top of the other—but then you notice the hands and fingers come into the frame, and the form of the body is revealed in space. I believe that if you put a body in any type of space, the space becomes alive because of the live body, as in Joan Miro's Painting *Landscape*, 1968 of a blue dot in the middle of a blank canvas. The body in movement, in contrast to the background, calls attention.

In the park, in the meadow, I started to move and something started to happen in contrast to the green background. The meadow was empty and inviting. I placed the camera on top of my bicycle which I laid on the grass, in the middle of the meadow, and I started to improvise. I shot various clips, playing with proximity to and distance from the camera, walking outside of the frame and back in. Framing, and “in the moment” were experiments and concepts that I was searching for.

I went back a second day to get more material, as I wanted a contrasting space to the open space of the meadow. I found another site more enclosed where I encountered other people walking through, conversations, dogs, and I filmed more moments. On the second day, I also brought different red colored costumes. One was a flowing dress that I used to go up and down a slope in the park to create a third “dreamy” scene for the film contrasting to the other two. Finally, I came home and I watched and edited the material on my smartphone trying different modifications of speed, or retrograding the film and finding unusual available framing and switching background color.

Thinking as a choreographer, while editing the film, kinesthetically you perceive the length as if you were sitting in a theater, with a beginning, middle, and end of a dance. Although

these films are screen dances, I did not go for the usual three minutes duration only. I wanted to find some kind of development, where I could put this abstraction and this confusion out for the audience's perception, and happenstance moments, such as when the camera falls, I wanted to keep those moments. These moments added to the surprise and unpredictable realness of my experiences in the park. Since the pandemic, our perspectives have changed, broadening the possibilities and modes of presenting dance. For my final performance, *Red Meadow* became a pre-show juxtaposing live solo performance with the film which looped on a TV screen placed in the small studio. Dressed with the same red blouse, I meditatively walked and placed 25 jars of plants around the room, as I improvised a dance while the audience entered the space.

Sofa Dance *Sofa Dance* was a dance/film that happened “in the moment” in my apartment while I waited sitting on the sofa— what else can you do on a Saturday afternoon during the pandemic? I filmed myself improvising on the sofa motivated by the joints and angles as I explored the surface of the sofa. As I edited, I found the squares motif on my smartphone that divided the film into smaller pieces which caught my attention. I played with the colors and created a 3 minute film of mostly continuous movement. The imagery I connected to was of how during the pandemic people were living on their sofas for days, not even changing their clothes! In the performance, the film played simultaneously alongside my live improvisation on a couch in the theater hallway. My intention was to portray in the live dance feelings of waiting and frustration through stark movement.

BUBBLE I met animator Theodore J. Newby by chance, in the summer of 2019, and we talked about collaboration: how could we put the live body and projected animation together in the same time/space and create a dance piece? What happens if we put these mediums together? We created a concept having to do with a feeling of disconnection and isolation for the piece. It

was a summer that I felt as if I was floating, and a bit disconnected. I was searching for new stimulating ideas to research with my dance. In September we started working and I was not sure exactly how the dance was going to happen until we got to our first rehearsal in November of that year. Soon after, I learned about projection onto the body and connecting my movement with the projections. It was shaped little by little, creating the movement, and from my movement he created the animation. We immersed them together and the piece started to develop.

We were trying to figure out the logistics of how to reflect the images back to me as I danced on stage with the animation, and then, the pandemic happened. We continued to develop *BUBBLE* emailing video files to one another. In January of 2021, I was able to continue creating and developing *BUBBLE* in the studio, trying the projections and using the feelings that were emerging through the pandemic such as being isolated, or feeling paranoid and hallucinating, into the work. I conducted zoom meetings with both the composer and animator where we talked about the arc of the character. We continued connecting movement and animation by emailing files and rehearsing with the projections in the studio, finding the correct timing.

I premiered *BUBBLE* as a film in the spring of 2021. *BUBBLE* is a dream-like contemporary experimental dance in which live dance is interacted with projections of animated designs and figures and cinematic sound exploring the capacity for imagination, connection, and moving through an increasingly chaotic world. In the performance of *BUBBLE* in *Slaying the Dragon*, I decided to close the curtains when I entered the Peggy Theater, to replicate the feeling of being enclosed during the pandemic, contrasting with those of expansion in my body when I was outdoors. This action added to the dance as I entered into a magical type space where the animation is revealed. The juxtaposition of animation and the live body was complementary and

symbiotic in the work and it created an illusion of the dancer commanding energy at times and being overwhelmed by it at other instances.

Marie Claire *Marie Claire: A Woman of the 1960s*, was a project that evolved from an assignment to create a narrative dance film while we were still in isolation. I created the character, which was situated in a domestic apartment. I used this female character stuck at home in the time of women's liberation, "the pill", the political movement of the 1960s, and utilized improvisation both during the film and in the live performance as well. In the film, I portrayed a woman cleaning her home, while she is "a bit off" and listening to a narrator talking about Olympic gymnast Nadia Comăneci on TV. The parallel of a woman of the 1960s stuck at home and the reality and uncertainties of Covid-19 created an internal feeling that I was able to draw from.

During rehearsals the character grew, walking around the stage, pushing the TV, and becoming very talkative. Life frustrations collided with fantasy ones, as I talked about creativity and "My Dance" and I spoke in Portuguese as I danced improvised movements combining ballet with modern dance while wearing high heels. In the film, the character proceeds to go into an upside-down tumbling world, wanting to be a gymnast and at the same time thinking "Ha! She (Nadia) is not so good, look at what I can do!", and she goes on doing cartwheels, handstands and climbing the wall, while she is a bit "off." This parody became another piece to perform in my thesis, as a character study contrasting to the other works. However, in the live performance, I interacted with the audience and I was not trying to replicate what happens in the video, but I created a parallel world of the character, by bringing the live body on stage and creating a double juxtaposition.

As scholar Steve Dixon details in “Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation, “The idea of the body and its double pervades digital performance, and relates to the shadow figure of the doppelgänger” (Dixon 244). In *Marie Claire*, the live performance and film exist in different times. The live *Marie Claire* is oblivious to the one playing on the TV. Both are developing “in the moment.” For example, I did not know that dishes were in the sink and I found it at the moment of going through the wall. *Marie Claire* is inspired by watching Pina Bausch, and the dance theater style that her pieces are rooted in.

takeitback My last live performance piece, *takeitback*, included another film that I juxtaposed with live performance creating a multimedia piece where I investigated more connections to dancing directly with my double. “In recent performance practice, the double as a digital image replicating its human referent has been used to produce a range of different forms of imitation and representation which reflect upon the changing nature and understanding of the body and self, spirit, technology, and theater” (Dixon 244). Placing myself on both sides, dancing with my double and creating a poetic intensity in live performance, the piece brought attention to movement and being alive in a simultaneously past and present self.

Embarking on this work, I wanted to experiment with having more camera movement because I wanted to have sweeping, topsy-turvy moments that disorient the audience. So, as I went through the movement improvisation in the wide-open space, I felt that this was taking back my space, our public spaces, taking it back from our fear and out of Covid-19. Creating the live work in the studio started as a puzzle, followed by a careful look into the juxtaposition of the live body with the images. In my last rehearsal, sounds started to come out of my mouth, and when I looked back, I thought “this is the dragon coming out, or I am encountering the dragon; these sounds! It made the whole connection of the evening come through: I am encountering and

slaying the dragon! Let's move forward with this pandemic situation!" For the final performances, I kept some gestures and hissing sounds at the end. The piece expressed the urgency of this historical moment.

takeitback shares similarities with work by performance and video artist Joan Jonas, which I saw earlier this year at Danspace Project Platform 2021 collaborating with Japanese dancer choreographer Eiko Otake (Jonas). It was a film that interacted with the live performers and, at times, it blurred film images of live bodies with the film. Eiko also interacted with the set, creating yet another layer to the visual experience. The difference though, is that I saw the piece online and not in a live performance, which was probably due to the pandemic restrictions. In an interview for the *Venice Biennale 2015*, Jonas mentions, in regards to her film work, that she does not expect anything from the viewer, "you have to sit and look at the videos" in order to understand the piece (Jonas).

In a similar way but on a much larger scale, Bill T Jones's *Deep Blue Sea*, presented by The Park Avenue Armory on October 9th, 2021 interacted with live bodies juxtaposed with film that was used as a lighting/floor design element, together with lights and other projections. The movement of the projections combined with the live dancers who moved expansively around the space, combined with the configuration of the huge space with the audience in an arena-style seating, created a feeling of "vastness". For example, when film projections of the sea reflected through a mirror-like curtain under the risers projected onto the floor of the space for a long period of time, it created a new dimension, as well as other moments and groupings that otherwise, without these technological collaborations, would have been impossible.

Other artists such as Myrna Parker/Art Bridgman and Kathy Rose create an interactivity of movement and images as well as creating new dimensions and expanding viewer's

perceptions. However, Rose's work seems to follow more into a performance art vein. "Performance art" can be described as an art form that combines visual art with dramatic performance, often using the body as a medium creating an immersive experience for viewers. Art Bridgman and Myrna Parker create a multiplicity of images that confuse the audience's perception by overlaying live performance and film, and sometimes "in the moment" projections. For example, in their piece *VOYEUR*, they placed a set piece onstage and juxtapose films that were already juxtaposing different images projected onto the set and themselves as they perform onstage. This creates an impression of live cinematography, and it also portrays changing modes of the day. Their work often tells a story even in abstract ways, as seen in *VOYEUR*, Excerpts (Bridgman 00:00-01:15).

For me, the film background in *takeitback* created a connection to a real moment, and instead of having sets, or lighting, or paintings by Rauschsberg, I am bringing film as my background to portray that visual space and create a sense of container for the piece. The images created a distinct environment and a connection with another time/space. Each piece in my evening had its own container within this navigation of an evening through the dancer in different modes, and different parts of the self.

In the Sky *In the Sky*, a stand alone film, shown as people exited the theater space, inquired into what happens if I use Brazilian Music in the background of the film contrasting with the light projections of two lanterns that I hold and manipulate? This abstraction of the two lights projected on a wall "dancing" as it appears in the film, evoked many different meanings: from energy to souls, stars or cars at night. In creating this mediated film, I abstracted the body through proximity of the camera which I placed on the floor; in the editing on my phone, together with the timing of the music included images of feet dancing samba combined with

other improvised steps. The last moments in the film reflected on what happens if I go upside down and all you see is my feet and the projection of the light on the ceiling while the music is talking about flying saucers in the sky? In the news last year, people questioned what were those lights they saw in the sky. So, I connected these ideas in my brain and this was what emerged in my work by chance again, as I found the music, and created an abstract mediated work. It was ironic that during the pandemic we were stuck at home while in the news they were worried about flying saucers (*60 Minutes 05:13-05:25*).

CONCLUSION

My thesis project turned out how I had imagined it. Ever since my rehearsals began in January 2022, I was focused and I immersed myself in my rehearsals solving the puzzle of the gallery walk through, the technical challenges of the layout, and logistics of costume changes as well as the flow of the evening. Not until performance time did the energy of the evening take form. For example, I realized that after *Red Meadow*, which was meditative, I needed to perform *Sofa Dance* with more energy with a stark feeling. So I did, and the performance became stronger. Also, in *Red Meadow*, I started to dance more and that movement I discovered is where I will pick up in my next studio practice. My character *Marie Claire* grew at each rehearsal as I became more talkative and the movements more connected to the timing and a bit more intense and humorous. *takeitback* also became stronger with the juxtaposition of film and the live dance.

I too became very comfortable as a solo performer. Many audience members expressed to me at the end of the evening how they could see and relate to the moments of fear and restrictions due to the pandemic days, as well as feeling relieved and feeling the expansive moments outside. The performance opened up the opportunity for the audience to begin to slay their own personal pandemic dragon. Finally, the juxtapositions of film on TV or scrim,

animation, and live performance proved to be something that enhanced the live performance experience.

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