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Double tap: the curation of self

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Abstract

Double Tap: The Curation of Self is a deep look into how visual and virtual presentation influences identity. Through the constant presence of social media, we have access to the most intimate self as both viewer and poster. This positionality can be celebrated and vilified through our scrolling habits. *Double Tap* allows me, as an interdisciplinary artist, to interrogate the hidden landmines, avoiding recrimination and winning validation. *GRWM (get ready with me)* is the performance companion to my research that illuminates the impossibilities of confronting the battle of our many outfacing identities, and being honest with the in-facing one. In response to being constantly met with my reflection and the virtual reflections of everyone else, peers and strangers alike, my performance work conceptualizes our choices to conceal or reveal parts of ourselves.

Engaging with the merry-go-round of GRWM methods through my artistic process, I unpack the superfluous and superficial platforms with audience participation. Together, we discover why they are relevant in dance, and how live performance and presentation are directly related to commerce, branding, and self-fashioning. TikTok and Instagram combine those modes. The self-made entrepreneur is making herself in public.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Double Tap: The Curation of Self

by

Kristen Lee

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

May 2024

College of the Arts

Department of Theatre and Dance

Thesis Committee:

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DOUBLE TAP: THE CURATION OF SELF

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Montclair, NJ

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Photo courtesy of Google Images.

Introduction

   Double Tap: The Curation of Self stems from a brimming curiosity about the adaptability of human beings to advancing technologies, and more specifically about how dance has altered, adapted, and remained a steady force in popular culture. The work I create uses improvisation, contemporary gesture, and total theater as a means to worldbuilding. I use space to enthusiastically create full mini-universes for my dances to live in.

   My desire to create work outside of traditional proscenium stages has been fostered by my passionate and career-long advocacy for bringing dance to new audiences in my community. In my fifteen years as a teaching artist, I have seen the lack of accessibility to live dance performances and the societal blind spot to dance as something to invest time and/or money in, at least in Long Island, New York, where I am from. After owning a dance studio for seven years and before embarking on my master's journey, my itch to understand better the inner workings of dance commerce and the subjective and projected measurability of an artist's worth is where this research began.

   Fifteen years have passed since I made a habit of finding stages for my work, whether that be at the (now closed) Greenwich Village music venue, Sullivan Hall, the Lower East Side's Arlene's Grocery, or in window displays on Long Island streets. But, I am back exploring these same proclivities. A substantial chunk of my time outside of creative work has been in classrooms or behind the scenes administratively. Connecting with people through movement is a joy, and, after several years of teaching, an opportunity arose to co-direct a new studio in my hometown. That was nine years ago. I spent many of those years selling: marketing dance as a valuable outlet for children, keeping clients interested in our varied offerings, and creating a digital presence to grow our values as a dance school. Covid hit at year five and with more time

for reflection I, like many in the world at that time, reevaluated my priorities. I realized that although I was proficient at being a studio owner, it would not continue to challenge me artistically, and though the steady paycheck was hard to turn away from I knew pursuing my master's degree would be the next step in focusing on the artist that I am and am becoming.

I was not aware of immersive dance-theater, as it is known today, when I was completing my bachelor's degree. It was there, however, that I started to develop a taste for this type of work. Two pivotal moments were seeing Keigwin + Company at the Skirball Center in New York when I was a sophomore in college and being introduced to Miami-based Rosie Herrera Dance Theatre soon after. After experiencing these moments of theater, everything felt a little more creatively possible then it did the day before. Keigwin's *Keigwin Kabaret* was a thrilling fusion of modern dance, burlesque and comedy. It was the first time I saw the possibilities and scope of modern dance in a live format. Herrera's *Various Stages Of Drowning* sparked my fascination with darkness and light and living color that continues to motivate the entertainment I consume and my own work. I crave humor and have delighted in seeing it conceptualized so originally on stage. It also led me to other artists, namely Pina Bausch, whose bold, conceptual, and entertaining work would inspire me for years to come.

Humor is an essential motivator in my creative process. I do not begin a creative project with grand subject matter as the impetus. My work starts smaller: inspired from dreams, conversations, and, for this thesis, a TikTok video. Dance has been a mode of expression and catharsis since I can remember, but not without humor, whether that be in creating class and rehearsal room environments or as an essential ingredient in a finished performance piece. Dance brings me freedom, but laughter brings me a deeper connection to the people around me.

I can consume content like a snake: dance, television series, movies, theater, magazines, books and eventually social media each fuel my creativity in unique ways. Pop culture and the intricacies of social-emotional interactions have long been backdrops for my work. For my senior thesis for my undergraduate degree, I ambitiously choreographed and created sets for my piece "Rabbit Hole," which explored the differences between someones' shiny exterior and their inner voice. After much pleading and letter writing, I was allowed to take over two floors of one of the dance buildings on campus, where I would transform the upper floor classrooms into mini-sets for each individual dancer. I had the dancers answer written questions early in the creative process, and we exaggerated parts of each of the dancers' writing for their particular set. The audiences made their way through the path of rooms before descending downstairs as a seated live performance was underway. My attraction to visual design and artists like Zoe Scofield and Juniper Shuey[1] and Raja Feather Kelly[2] began here.

I arrived at the MFA program at MSU with a business background, and I wanted to dive further into the numbers side of dance. For my independent studies in the fall of 2023, I studied the dance economy: what it has come to be and where it is headed. It was the first seed of *GRWM (get ready with me)*. I was looking at statistics, surveys and algorithm analysis that were admittedly very dry and at times discouraging, but I also found myself wondering about the worth of an artist. How do we measure that? Can we? What controls do we as artists have over our artistic worth? All of these swirling questions would lead me to TikTok: the ultimate platform for commerce and identity.

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[1] Seattle-based company, zoe | juniper are masters of cross-disciplinary research and blend the traditionalism of technique and proscenium performance with daring visual design, concept and installation.
[2] Artistic Director of the feath3r theory.

Research

TikTok

After spending a semester researching the architecture of funding systems in the United

States, I distilled the information down to one word: *worth*. This concept carried me into the next

phase of my research and development in the studio. In the spring semester of 2023 I installed

the TikTok app for the first time; the video shorts were fast-paced, and the algorithm was eerily

spot-on in the stream of videos it offered me. Unlike Facebook or Instagram, I didn't have any

friends or followers on the app; I was just a curious interloper. I started noticing patterns in

speech, gestures, and facial expressions early on that immediately made me curious about the

socio-cultural time capsule aspect of social media platforms.

As I explored the "GRWM" (get ready with me) hashtag on TikTok, I immediately

noticed the performative nature of these videos. The exaggerated speech, facial expressions, and

intimate tone were all designed to attract attention. The makeup routines that form the backbone

of these videos create a dramatic arc that captivates viewers. I was fascinated by the way social

media has changed how we market entertainment. Now, anyone with the app can offer their own

version of intimacy and become an influencer or sell products through app interaction. This

immediacy can sometimes be humorous or outlandish, but it creates an intimate connection with

the audience.

Social media has dramatically altered the relationship between seller and consumer.

Anyone with a smartphone can gain popularity, monetize their efforts, and influence people's

choices. The redundancy of each video has affected everyday language, gestures, and habits.

However, TikTok's signature fast-paced, looped video style has significant stakes. The videos are

seemingly genuine, but they are consciously edited and lit to create a specific impression. They

are not exactly false advertising, but they are both over examined and vapid. The hashtags "#relatability" and "#authenticity" are popular on the app, but they can lose their meaning quickly. Eventually, TikTok may end up becoming another pop culture graveyard, like AOL or MySpace.

My initial interest began with TikTok influencer Meredith Duxbury's[3] GRWM makeup routines and chats. She went viral in 2020 for what she calls her "foundation technique" which is applying a whopping ten pumps of foundation, substantially more than you would use even for stage makeup. (I use less peanut butter on a sandwich, to put it in perspective.) It's cringe-inducing and baffling. I thought for sure this was spectacle, or a gimmick that she would eventually cop to. Three years later her TikTok account has ballooned to 16 million followers and she is partnering with major beauty brands and companies on product placements, reviews and partnerships, and she's still shellacking her face. Her technique has been copied by millions of people on the app, all replicating her routine, signature headband, and catchphrases.

What fascinates me is Duxbury's commitment to character (herself, she claims, but I am still skeptical) and its performance. She films in extreme close-ups, zooming in occasionally to show the product in more detail, and rarely turns her head; she's in your face and relentlessly sunny. She caters to the fact that most of her viewers use their phones. Her videos, in their extreme theatricality, inspired this project. The sheer amount of video content on her account, along with the excess of texture, personality, and color in her tightly framed videos, inspired my own set and oversized makeup products for this project. Indeed, her videos encapsulate the overall experience of TikTok. Her commitment to this pore-clogging frivolity is utterly fascinating. It is the mystery of weirdness: is she delightfully daft or a satirical genius? Will she one day give an interview about her carefully crafted alter-ego, flipping the tables on her

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[3] @meredithduxbury. Duxbury's TikTok account as of early 2024 has 18.8 million followers.

audience and question us: why are we drawn, in the millions, to the repetitive silliness of what she's doing? I love it all.

Looking at TikTok, I am looking not only at idiosyncrasies but also at the ways in which the shared gestures, dynamics and aesthetics can lend themselves to worldbuilding through dance. GRWM videos have a sequence of steps that build upon one another: a starting point (cleansed and hydrated skin), foundation (to establish a base), concealer (to erase and brighten), contour (to sculpt, define), blush and highlighter (color and glow), brows (to gel, fill in), and finally, eyes (to pigment, accentuate, animate). Each step has tools, gestures and common language across the app. Some more obvious gestures are those required to apply the makeup. Seamless editing swiftly takes us through the arc of the makeup application. The casual storytelling by the subject enhances the relatable factor as is shown in the comments section of the videos. The gestures during the process were points of interest for my movement creation. A standout gesture is the "finishing pose," a visual/gestural period to the story as the subject daintily frames their face with their fingertips, wrists angled, head tilted to display the final "look." The gesture itself is a demure relative of the more seductive pursed-lipped "duckface'; both very "Toddlers and Tiaras,"[4] a symbol of an agreed upon stamp of approval for likability. TikTok is packed with these cutesy-child-like expressions. Considering the app is youth-driven, more so than any of its competitors (Facebook might as well be an AARP ad), its users consume and replicate the quirks. Before youtube and social media, this kind of schtick-like content could only have existed for an audience, onstage, or in a movie or television. With video calls as an accessible form of communication, this advancement in technology has brought new attention to our virtual self image. When videos are then made for the masses, the instinct to perform turns on.

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[4] American reality television show that aired on the TLC network from 2009-2013.

The body is filtered and lit through digital filters, the movements and facial expressions carefully studied back in replays and editing; I would argue one's micro-efforts in sharing themselves on TikTok mirror a similar trajectory in dance making. The constant measuring of time through movement and scheduling, to make the idea of time more controllable, directly feeds into my interest in current social media video trends and the ways in which we can use media to brand ourselves and take control of the presentation of one's body through timed, intentional offerings. Dance training has required us to spend inordinate amounts of time in front of mirrors surveying ourselves. We have self-corrected, celebrated, and learned before our reflection. Outside of the studio, cameras are our mirrors. The camera, however, can capture and alter our bodies, and file it away to be seen and experienced again and again.

The body on screen is a mere shadow of a body in real life. Camera angles, lighting, music and other technologies that drive emotional manipulation are now being used by everyday people to market themselves and grow their "following." Followers, collected and tallied, equal dollars: the rise in the number of followers drives increased income opportunity.

In "Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," French philosopher Michel Foucault says that Galileo's truest contribution was the discovery of infinite space (Foucault 1). Likewise, a heterotopia is that space that indefinitely accumulates time, such as a museum or library (Foucault 7). The internet is an archive of time and space, a utopia (a "no place," literally). It exists both in real time and confined to spaces that once captured our likeness. If a mirror is, as Foucault might call it, "a placeless place," then the reflection of our images through screens provides a sense of place and consequent meaning. The screen offers a contradiction in belonging.

Worth

The history of artists' relationships to wealth and commerce, and the cultural and economic norms that have prevailed over the past several decades, has been ubiquitous in my research. Looking at dance through the lens of social media, you can not separate the artist from the capitalist undercurrent of algorithms that constitutes each app. Dance artists have a history of underselling themselves in order to make themselves accessible or visible. They are simultaneously selling and underselling themselves. There is an inherent tension in this polarity. The artist is at the center of constantly facing questions of their value as it relates to their artistic contributions.

Are You For Sale? is a 6-episode podcast created in 2021 by the choreographer Miguel Gutierrez. The podcast delves into dance-making, philanthropy and ethics in the United States, or, as the podcast puts it, "the ethical entanglements between art and money" (Gutierrez). His research goes as far back as our government's first arts programs, the numerous fluctuations in the fortunes of the National Endowment for the Arts, the finances of making work in Europe versus the United States, the cost of an average dance piece, how choreographers are supporting their work and the contemporary concept of philanthropy and foundations (Gutierrrez).

What Gutierrez unearths is how our national and local funding systems are affecting the (artists') relationship with money. He admits that working for exposure, the side-gig culture, not being upfront about payment to collaborators, and so forth, has led to questioning feelings of moral integrity (Gutierrez). Gutierrez is holding a mirror up to himself and asks the podcast's listeners to do the same.

His interviews with other artists as well as anecdotes from callers add different viewpoints to the conversations. Many had experienced some successes in funding, but spoke of

still experiencing dry spells or "back to square one" plans (Gutierrez). Some guests talk about the kind of work that gets funded and that which they believe doesn't (Gutierrez). "Weird" and "experimental" were words used to describe the work that was hard to get funding for (Gutierrez). They stressed the frustrations of fitting oneself or one's art into a box as defined by the grant (Gutierrez). At one point, Gutierrez rifts on an inquiry he has about the grant process, wondering why there isn't more of a common application for grants similar to applying for college. He argues that the funders should be fighting over us, and not the other way around (Gutierrez).

Worth and feminism intersect in this research. Because of the nature and history of feminine beauty standards, advertising and marketing have deliberately tapped into the notion of a woman's perceived worth. GRWM is certainly not the first nor the last attempt at manufacturing a sense of casual intimacy and parasocial relationships to bolster a brand, a person as brand, sales of a product, or, "personal brand deals" as they are known today among influencers. L'Oréal Paris' website states: "Since its inception, 'Because You're Worth It' has been translated into 40 languages and has become the militant tagline uniting women worldwide, encouraging them to fearlessly embrace their ambitions and believe in their self-worth every day." Cut to 2024 and Selena Gomez's Rare Beauty brand description that reads: "Rare Beauty is breaking down unrealistic standards of perfection. This is makeup made to feel good without hiding what makes you unique—because Rare Beauty is not about being someone else, but being who you are." It's not enough for makeup to be utilitarian; to remain competitive, companies morally align themselves with the buzziest words of female empowerment.

What the sentiment in both of these examples lays out is not the feel-good mantra so much as the impossibilities of womanhood. I personally own products from both of these brands;

I like makeup, wear it daily, and enjoy the ritual and playfulness of it. I reject the notion that

makeup wearers are inherently more vain or superficial. I, however, also reject the idea that any

makeup brand or influencer should boast claims of using makeup as a measure of authenticity.

As Gutierrez points out, self-promotion as an artist is inherently contradictory; selling is

antithetical to the very idea of the avant-garde. Artists have long been unconcerned with exciting

consumer zeal, but gone are the days (at least in New York City) of choreographers who can

afford to create with blissful resistance. Harsh economic realities bring about innovation and

desperation.

Worth and identity consistently overlap, often in direct result of the other. Choreographer

Camille A. Brown's trilogy, *Mr. TOL E. RAncE* (2012)*, BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play* (2015),

and *ink* (2017) deals with identity in terms of race culture. *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play,* is a

powerful representation of black girlhood, a virtually unexplored territory on stage. Brown's use

of gesture is key to the life of the piece; the gestures hold nostalgia, a sense of belonging and

community and a specificity that illuminates the overall subject matter. In a 2015 interview,

Brown said of the work: "How can you honor what is culturally specific, go against the tide of a

stereotype, elevate and claim our gestures as art— empowering and not diminishing?" (Towers).

This idea of claiming gestures without minimizing the people enacting them was important to my

dissecting the gestures on Tik Tok. Brown's work expertly integrated a sense of play that

highlighted the nuances of the girls and women she was celebrating.

Modes of Exposure

There are young choreographers who are subverting the traditional modes for dance

making. The TikTok account @cost_n_mayor of husband and wife dancers Austin and Marideth

Telenko, began presenting short dances on the app during the covid 19 pandemic. Their videos started getting thousands and eventually millions of views. Meredith shared: "We saw a gap in the space and started making original work that really was focused on music. We took sounds that are recognizable to your ear and made something that looked like the sound. I think that scratched a satisfying itch for people and made it stand out from other choreography" (McTier). For example, the couple has choreographed to the electronic tune of their Samsung dryer, video game jingles, ringtones, and the NFL's theme music. With their hyper-synchronous movement as a signature part of each dance, along with their joyful commitment, the couple's work has brought fresh eyes and interest in the choreographic process. They frequently post blooper videos at the request of commenters. Marideth Talenko commented on the changes in dance presentation: "We're going to see a lot more crossover and a personal brand like ours facilitating a career in the mainstream industry. More than ever, it will be important to have an established platform and personal brand on social media. That package will become much more valuable to the traditional industry moving forward" (McTier).

Artists have been challenging the idea of where dance lives and what qualifies as performance for decades; Trisha Brown's iconic 1970 *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building*[5] obliterated all rules of traditional dance performance. A dancer in a harness, propels at ninety degrees down a tall building. Stripped of any theatricality and with only one action to perform, as opposed to the dozens that take place during traditional choreography, the precision of each step and weight shift was significant. Brown, praised for her innovation of performance space and sheer invention of concept, "reminds us of how art can reveal the world to us in magical ways." (Sulcas). What is interesting about Brown's work is that the audience knew how the piece would

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[5] *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* was first performed in 1970 at 80 Wooster Street, New York New York, by dancer Joseph Schlichter and was restaged at new locations in both 2007 and 2010.

end, but within that arc, from start to finish, the audience's eye, because of this knowledge, could

view the movement afresh; micro-movements, small shifts of weight and quick changes in

dynamic, create suspense and intrigue.

Applying skin care and cleansing the face is ordinary, commonplace, but add a camera

and it becomes something new. The same way your body tightens and adjusts for a photo being

taken, tending to your face on camera creates a hyper-awareness of every muscle in the face:

each eyebrow raise or furrow, placement of your lips, angles of your cheekbones, and dip of your

chin is a clocked movement that can be refined and animated. The attention to micro-movements

is also evident in Telenko's TikTok videos. Dance films and dances made for consumption on

phones utilize a narrowed focus to reveal subtleties that would otherwise be impossible to see in

a proscenium setting.

Interdisciplinary Artist Inspiration

Rosie Herrera

I saw Rosie Herrera Dance Theater's *Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret* when it

premiered at the American Dance Festival in 2009. There as a student, it was the first time I had

seen dance, theater and comedy in an evening length performance. The hilarity and poignancy

latched onto me. *Various Stages of Drowning* was colorful, sexy and strange: the dance felt like

Miami. Exceptionally executed silliness is my soft spot, and this moment of theater was the

perfect blend of camp and commitment.

Herrera uses space as a conceptual hub for her experiences as a woman in Miami. She

smartly uses the climate, nightlife and the idiosyncrasies of Floridians as part of the composition

of her work. Considering the Miami contemporary dance scene is considerably smaller than New York's, Herrera's geographic specificity works in her favor. In *Various Stages of Drowning*, she utilizes sets and costumes in a kaleidoscopic way reminiscent of Pina Bausch's work and vignette-style cabaret performances. The fusion of influences (Bausch and drag cabarets) parallel the friction of Miami as a city.

Her 2024 work, *Florida Woman*, co-created with Leah Verier-Dunn, pays direct homage to Florida, and a seemingly omnipresent internet meme. In describing the work, Herrera and Verier-Dunn highlight the absurdity: "That juxtaposition of people coming here for a sense of freedom and the people who are here becoming less free is the friction that the work ('Florida Woman') is interested in" (Gagnier). They go on to punctuate the work's unique geographical themes: "the piece is an aesthetic homage to the unique glamour, the unique wildness, the unique beauty of Florida" (Gagnier). Herrera's work has long-woven in her Miami-Cuban background, but this newwest work, which utilizes costumes heavily to enhance the works themes, is her most specific in its evocation of a place and an era.

Herrera's work, in all of its vibrancy, evokes interest because of its hyper-specificity. I am taking similar risks with *GRWM*, and entrusting the audiences will resonate with the humanity within the work.

Sydney Skybetter

Sydney Skybetter, an artist who has long explored the relationship between technology and dance, is quoted saying, "There's a way here for choreographers and dance artists to lead, to not just respond to the zeitgeist but shape how these technologies are developed" (Friscia). He mentions Kate Lademheim, an early adopter of augmented reality, as an example of an artist who

is using technology to work for them, not against (Friscia). Skybetter says, "These artists aren't just trying to take a proscenium dance and put it on the internet, but are trying to radically redefine how dance functions" (Friscia).

Skybetter began a podcast in 2023 titled "Dances With Robots," that is about dances, robots, bodies, and technology. The podcast is an introduction into the many facets and opportunities of emerging technologies for dance. In episode six, he interviews Dr. Catie Cuan, a pioneer in the field of choreorobotics). She discusses at one point the parallel crafts between performance art and STEM and elaborates on how each craft is lacking something that the other has (Cuan). She says that dance, often deficient in resources and financing, is rich in community, whereas in STEM it can be the opposite: "There's so much equipment, there's more money, there's more recognition, ostensibly more time, more space, more humans working on it. And yet, the community piece, the sort of self identification is a little bit murkier, whereas in many of the arts communities I've been in, you have essentially no resourcing, but you have this ability to, to come together and create a quilt of human expertise" (Cuan).

This perspective leaves space for each craft to fit into one another, lifting up the areas that need lifting up, as opposed to operating on separate tracks. As dance continues to evolve with technology, the urgency for dance scholars and makers to push forward into new spaces and opportunities will be vital. The more we innovate and stretch the parameters of dance presentation and careers, I hope that dance can find itself as a vital contributor to and beneficiary from emerging technologies. As anyone who works with dancers knows, our training creates individuals who are expert creative multitaskers, and malleable, collaborative workers. As we continue to hypothesize the effects of both the isolation and immersion that new technologies bring to our lives, dancers will need to continue to evolve with the changing world around them,

and perhaps the flexibility of the ephemerality of dance can be met with less fear and more imagination for the possibilities of the body.

Company SBB

Company SBB, led by Batten Bland, often nestles itself in fourth wall breaking moments of community. In her 2012 piece, *A Place of Sun*, the structure of the piece rested on the collective and emphatic actions of its audience by requiring them to pass large props to the dancers and essentially take part in the actual building of the piece. In this experience, the audience sees the dancers not as untouchable, but as human beings struggling with something that they can participate in helping them with. It is a simple, but incredibly moving display of active participation. When we first shared parts of this work to small audiences, they too wanted to be helpful and agreeable. I found that because the participation was phone-centered, it created a barrier between them and the performer which was natural, but still a bit uncomfortable. Even when stunned by unfamiliarity, we found that when Caitlin would stop and ask them if she was doing well, searching for approval, audience members would consent easily—what a stark contrast to a virtual environment and when not met with a person physically in front of them. The contradictions of intention, space, and perception is at the root of this work.

Raja Feather Kelly

Raja Feather Kelly's work with his New York-based company, the feath3r theory, and his freelance work for other theater productions, have all cemented him as an experimental modern dance creator who dives head first into all things pop culture and media. The company's *UGLY* trilogy, comprised of *UGLY (Black Queer Zoo), HYSTERIA (UGLY Part 2), and UGLY Part 3:*

BLUE, all employ the use of color and saturation that plays an integral role in the atmosphere of each piece. The boldness of the lighting choices, elaborate sets and distinct costuming and makeup also gives each piece its own memorable identity. In an article for *American Theatre*, Kelly is quoted saying "You know, dance for a dancer is a physical art form, but dance for an audience is a visual art form" (Wingenroth).

I see eye to eye with his streamlined idea of creating not only an expressive design of bodies, but a fully realized space for the life of the piece to live in and be witnessed. In *UGLY Part 3: BLUE*, he leaves no corner of the performance space untouched so that the literal blueness of the sets, costumes, video, props and lighting envelops the audience, clearly defining itself from the outside world.

Other Artistic Inspirations

Beyond the interdisciplinary dance artists mentioned above who inspire this work, I also found inspiration from artists such as photographer David LaChapelle's *make Believe* exhibit at Fotografiska in New York and the large-scale public works and installations by visual artist, Anne Hamilton, specifically her portrait series *O N E E V E R Y O N E*. Both exhibits utilize scale and exaggeration and are inspired by the zeitgeist.

LaChapelle's saturated, often surreal photographs capture both the sense of the performer he's photographed as well as the universe and narrative that surrounds them. Larger pop cultural themes materialize because of the public's tendency to worship celebrities. With the bombardment of images smartphone users are scrolling through daily, LaCapelle's portraits are succinct and bold contrasts. Hamilton's work for *O N E E V E R Y O N E* conveys the friction of seeing someone depicted with only certain parts of themselves revealed clearly. The results vary

between eerie and ethereal, frozen through image, and containing expressions that range from vacant to deeply internal.

When making my piece and crafting the arc of a person battling external and internal landscapes, LaChapelle and Hamilton's images acted as grounding pillars of opposition. Their work led me to question the times when we choose to reveal more than just parts of ourselves, and if that can ever be truly measured by someone else.

Methodology

Movement Inspiration and Generation for GRWM

I experience creativity as a mode of thinking, problem solving and curiosity that develops through nurture and experience. The purest form in my body is through improvisation. Improvisation feels like a physicalized daydream, but it is the body's purest expression of the present moment. With the body in a state of sustained listening, my attention can recalibrate. Daydreaming, improvisation, the space before sleep and long drives or walks are my mind's most meditative states that create a sense of openness and receiving. They all require the body to be in a specific continuous state of movement or stillness. The constancy and surrendering of time restraints allows for the creativity and curiosity that exists to fire up. Each avenue to creativity also has set boundaries. I can be bound by the physical space, utilizing unique mobility and stamina, and the individual strengths and limitations of the bodies or physical space around me becoming part of the dance. The limitations of improvisation, whether set by facilitator or by environment, provide a constant well of information that informs the present moment and the lived experience.

I was fortunate enough in my undergraduate years to be introduced to long form improvisation by Ishmael Houston-Jones.[6] My first master class with him was four hours; it was profound and transformative. We utilized space, time, text, energy, each other, and his prompts to initiate movement. We took breaks to reflect and write, sometimes in leisurely fashion and sometimes in a fluid, continuous stream, not allowing our pens to lift. The idea was to keep going, push past initial ideas or notions and find what lives past our surface or readily available ideas and thoughts. As someone who harbored a quiet love for creative writing, it was a lightbulb moment in my creative practice to connect writing, text and language to my process. Houston-Jones also encouraged and gleefully noted the awkwardness of improvisation. This lack of pretension was motivating for the work I was starting to create. The cue to lean into the mistakes and the off-center moments would resonate deeply and permeate into my creative thesis work.

When working with Claire Porter the past two summers during my master's studies, Porter had a similar and immensely helpful approach to improvisation. While we were involved in group improvisations, she often cued the class to "stay with it," encouraging us to linger into what was trying to reveal itself. It can be tempting with various stimuli happening around you to want to continue to branch off into newly morphing ideas. But, the idea of letting the idea unfold, sitting with it long enough to allow it to crescendo or put it to bed, allows the group performance unfolding to have structure. The audience eye can be drawn to a potential tension or relationship that wasn't there a moment ago, but is generating before our eyes. The duality of live creating and generating whilst keeping an eye on the larger picture and dynamics allows for improvisational performance that is richly intelligent, and thrillingly spontaneous.

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[6] Award winning choreographer, performer, educator, curator and author.

Claire Porter's work as a solo artist has been heavily influential when it comes to weaving in text and speech into performance. Porter, a master at crafting characters, leads with humor and makes work that is out-of-the-box and true to the bone to her own artistic interests. Her absolute dedication to writing, speech, timing, delivery, choreography and performance creates delight. It is tough not to join in with someone so invested and enjoying themselves. There is a lot of joy in the work she makes, and intelligence. Porter has carved out a singular path in this industry that is a rich example of the kind of artist I also aim to be: one who follows her creativity with ardent curiosity.

While making a solo for Porter's class, I worked backwards, coming up with titles from journal writings we had done in the class. I began working with a potential title I created, a title that was a humorous nod to the not-so-humorous medical condition I had during my first pregnancy. I focused on the words of the title, continuously coming back to that language as a guidepost, not wanting to slip too directly into the vastness of my feelings. When I first performed for Porter, she was very invested in the choice of focus and gesture, but the next time she saw it she gave me an immensely valuable note. She said, "Don't comment," meaning for me, the performer, not to visually comment on the gesture that I was making. The repetitive nature of rehearsing had unintentionally steered me away from the initial curiosity of the gesture and I was, though subtly but clearly to her razor-sharp comedic eye, layering my own silent commentary onto my choreography. This single note was a gift. I understood immediately the importance of crafting character, but allowing space for the audience to ingest it independently.

Excavating gesture has been integral to my thesis work. The process was twofold: I would sift through videos of images of people getting ready while self-documenting and creating my own "get ready with me" videos. I was able to take note of which gestures appeared

idiosyncratic and which were utilitarian. For example, I had to always lean closer when applying

my mascara, tipping up my chin and lifting my eyebrows higher to create space for the object

coming toward my eye. I looked just like my own mother when applying mascara. With no

internet growing up, my mother was my first beauty-influencer. She was quick and efficient;

organized, but unprecious. The results were put together and bright, but not overly labored.

Viewing GRWM videos of faces so up close and in personal spaces, we are reminded of

our own connection and relationship to our reflections. Watching someone else move through

this vulnerability, however rehearsed or staged it may be, resonates at some level because we

understand the myriad feelings that come up in a reflection: aging, confidence, shame,

exhaustion, disconnection, happiness. Curated intimacy and the power of parasocial relationships

are used as a means to connect with audiences into participating in the desired markets. A

difference today from the magazines and commercials of the last century is that people now use

their own image and likeness to both sell themselves as something commodifiable or sell

products to increase their overall visibility and economic power. It is both commerce and

performance, done from the convenience of a bedroom.

Conventional advertising is integrated into TikTok and Instagram, which leads to GRWM

and its meaning. Curated intimacy relates to my creative process and takes shape through live

and filmed spaces. The crafting of an image or brand isn't so far from the crafting of a dance:

space, sound, personalities, experience, and atmospheric tailoring must all be considered. When

choreographing, I utilized the affable personality of my dancer, Caitlin Sheppard, and her

experience working in hospitality, on top of her versatile resume in dance and theater.

We had conversations about the many meanings of presentation. There is aesthetic

presentation (makeup, hair choices, accessories, and wardrobe); physical presentation (posture,

energy, body language and gesture); verbal presentation (tone, cadence, speed, accents, word choice, and volume); rehearsed presentation (pre-planned, learned, accumulated, and including both spontaneous and deliberate choices with a goal or result in mind. Visual presentation, like everything, goes through cultural shifts. Utilizing social platforms for self-promotion is par for the course now, and creators are adapting to the micro-shifts of internet culture that occur almost daily.
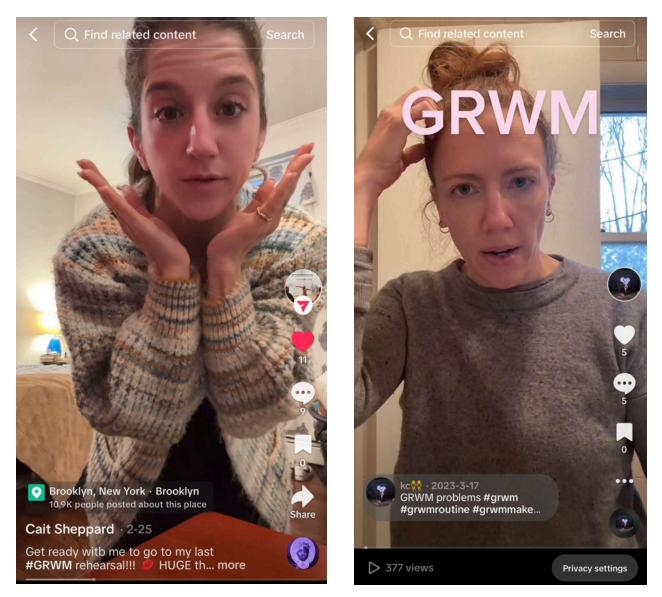
Outside of my in-person improvisatory research, an early inspiration for cultivating movement gestures was the 1964 piece *Carnation* created by Lucinda Childs. Childs, part of the seminal Judson Dance Theater in New York during the early 1960s, uses dramatic theatricality, absurd props and task-based movement, resulting in a stark portrayal of femininity and routine. Childs said of the piece: "They're objects that don't have anything to do with each other. The sponges and the colander and the sheet and so forth. The point was to find a relationship with these objects that generated movement ideas" ("Lucinda Childs. Carnation").

Childs keenly uses timing to place the monotony of the gestures into a dramatic light. Her posture, much more erect than mine, could be a generational choice. Child's upper body was regal and elegantly deliberate, a lens through which girls often see the women they admire, or fear. Her lower body, legs grounded and spread wide, portrayed her seriousness in the task she was involved in. Today's slang would label it as "manspreading," taking up space with unconscious arrogance.

In *New York Times* critic Jennifer Dunning's 1989 review of "Carnation" she states: "One can see in "Carnation" a commentary on housewives or women in general. Those hints of Judson history are interesting. But the greatest pleasure of "Carnation" is Ms. Childs herself. She is absorbing in the way she adorns herself, meticulously, with comic vanity, then a little

maniacally." This sums up how I was to work with the gesture and performance. The movement generation I was creating, born out of everyday gesture and routine, was to hold both universality and personal intimacy. Holding these two intentions simultaneously led to improvisationational tasks that would allow space for the unintentional gesture or movement, and ultimately interruption and disruption, concepts that when focused on a media trend in 2024, was paramount.

Breaking the fourth wall, an essential ingredient to making a work that was examining virtual behaviors, was a consistent practice between me and the dancer. We each took on the tasks of creating our own TikTok accounts, filming and even posting our own versions of the videos were an essential part of the process for each of us.

Figs 1 and 2: Images via TikTok.

We each had to tap into different sides of our personalities to get through it: Caitlin, her innate friendliness and for me, humor. It felt impossible to post the videos without a "wink" from me as the creator. For myself, it felt at once all too baring and at the same time painfully superfluous. Caitlin, experienced them with a more performer-centered perspective and leaned into the creative and fun side of it. She used the videos as a personal documentation of her rehearsal

process with me, and I used them as fuel for our work together in the studio, noticing her tone

changes and gestural patterns. Earlier on in the creative process I would audio record Caitlin as

she told me different stories of when she felt her self-worth felt most vulnerable. I noticed where

in the stories she put emphasis and what she would go through quickly. We discovered that in her

wanting to conceal and protect parts of herself, she overcompensates for others around her, even

at her detriment at times. We then dug deeper into how this pattern branches out and how in

general as women, we are taught early on to make everyone around us comfortable. Being this

was for all intents and purposes, a one-woman-show, we leaned into the hostess role to guide our

movement directions for the first half of the piece where she was often in conversation with the

audience.

Stefanie Batten Bland, my sponsor for this thesis, and an extraordinary artistic leader in

the field of immersive theater, offered dramaturgical support and guidance that helped shape my

decision making in how to clearly direct the dancer through moments of set improvisation, that

though rehearsed, present differently with each new audience. The varying degrees of the

participatory element of the audience is handled with a multi pronged approach so that the

dancer has interactions that are spontaneous, but rehearsed using different variables. With the

two-dimensionality of social media's video content, and framing this work in the setting of live

performance, I was keen on illuminating the very contradiction and meta quality of it all. We

participate behind screens through likes and comments as viewers on social media, but as live

audience members, there is more trepidation in participating. When encouraged at the start of the

performance by Caitlin to take out their phones and record, most only acquiesced politely. It was

only the teenage members of the audience that eagerly got involved. I was surprised, but maybe

shouldn't have been, that they kept their phones out for the remainder of the performance, recording different sections, becoming silent participants.

Collaboration: People and Spaces

Keri Collins is a New York City based experiential designer who acted as visual and graphic designer for this project. Keri and I have a shorthand, and similar sensibilities and taste when it comes to art and dance; we are sisters and have grown up together as each other's creative touchstones. We share a fervent love of live theater, music, fashion and pop culture. It was on her couch where the premise for this thesis idea came to be. We share the same feelings of urgency in wanting the art we put out into the world to reach new audiences and not cater to any preconceived notions. The desire for our work to be multigenerational and situated within a platform and modality of a younger generation was intentional and a driving force for the work. Our individual processes are complementary to one another. I tend to move quickly and have ideas that shoot out in succession during brainstorms, spitting out a lot at once. Keri is a slow-processor; she likes to digest and sleep on ideas until she patiently crafts her layout and execution. Her imaginative path is more cerebral and planned out, while mine is grown from improvisational practices.

The spaces in GRWM videos are partial; we see slivers of an occupied space, seeing only what the person in the video has edited and deemed shareable. Gaston-Bachelard wrote: "Is that house a 'group of organic habits' or is it something deeper, the shelter of the imagination itself" (7). We too, are greatly affected by spaces and their potential, and grow easily tired of the white and unimaginative, and revel at detailed craftsmanship and ingenuity. Our home growing up was warm and worn, and we had a dreamy backyard that our father packed with trees, flowers, swings and a wooden playhouse. The intricacy, color and attention to detail in our yard,

where we spent so much time imagining and creating, fostered both of our desires for spaces that evoke inspiration.

Our collaboration began in 2023, with a short dance film that would serve as promotional material for the live performance and the video that would play as audience members entered the space for the live performance in 2024. For the film, we experimented with scale, creating large-scale props. Beauty juggernauts Yves Saint Laurent, Rare Beauty and Glossier were all simultaneously creating events and product launches using megasized prototypes of the products they were selling, partly as sets to their events, and for the free publicity of enthusiastic pedestrians wanting to capture and share photos.

These companies were banking on the experiential side of marketing to sell their products and the grassroots buzz created from their bold designs. Keri and I agree that dance often lacks in the area of promotion. Events are very often barebones in post modern and contemporary performances with opportunities to show your work in "working" conditions or low tech venues. Even financially higher tiered artists and companies do not show much consideration for the audiences beyond their presence and attention for the duration of the work. With steadily dwindling audiences for dance, I firmly believe that artists need to pull themselves out of the precious bubble of process and creation and make the engagement of audiences part of the creation process. This doesn't have to mean pandering to potential patrons or sacrificing one's artistic goals of the work, but not taking into consideration the experience of an audience member will do little to pull the artform into a more profitable and marketable light for future generations.

In the 2010 article, "Vanishing: Dance Audiences In The Postmodern Age," author Jan Van Dyke dissects the idea of showing support for artists by attending their shows. The very idea

of showing up to people's work to show their support is problematic when they do so as a moral

obligation and not out of genuine interest in the work itself. Our investment into this thesis work

was born not out of not only personal delight and interest in the subject matter, but also very

much because of our desire to create experiences that would attract audiences through both the

specific conceptualization of GRWM videos (niche for older audiences) and the universality of

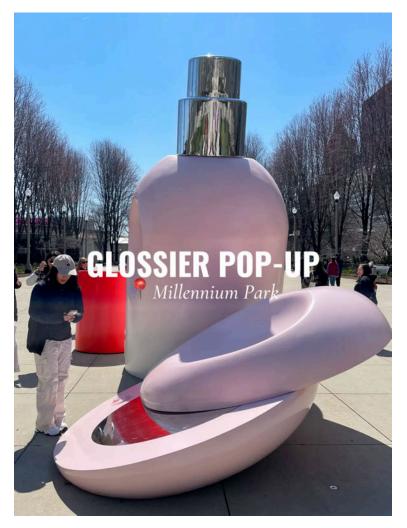the rollercoaster soundtrack of our own minds and the pitfalls of self absorption.
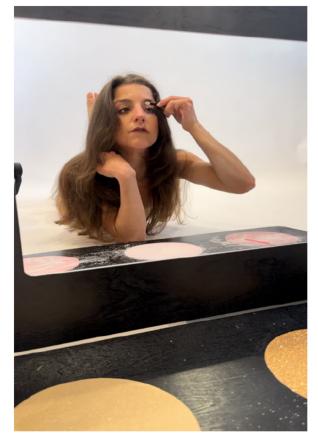

Fig. 3: Google Images.

Fig. 4,5,6: Props constructed in 2023.

Space and Materials

The space chosen for this performance is a photography studio nestled onto a street in Huntington, New York, a vibrant and bustling town on Long Island. The space, Coastal Creative Studio, faces Huntington Harbor and is adjacent to one of Long Island's premiere restaurants and event spaces. I loved the clean slate and coziness of the space and the views of the water and of glittery nightlife. When meeting with the space's owner, Janelle Brooke, I was instantly met with enthusiasm and generosity. She described her vision of the space as it transitions from solely a photo studio to a multipurpose creative space for artists and entrepreneurs. The studio had never hosted a choreographer before or any live performances, and Janelle was thrilled by this new possibility. The support she lent me and the flexibility, freedom and trust she gave me directly affected the work and the success of the performance.

The center of the space is defined by a large arch, gently separating the front area by the window and the back area of the studio. For the work, the arch acted as a frame for the dancer; it hugged her movement, acted as threshold between her space and the audiences and with the help of lighting, was the aesthetic division between part one and two of the performance. The multipurpose aspect of the space was perfect for GRWM; the videos range from being set in personal bathrooms and bedrooms to perfectly lit glam rooms and professional beauty sets. My inspiration for the visual design ranged from buzzy pop-up shops to a surrealist bedroom.

The ceiling installation and pink lighting in our downstage space were done to create separation and saturation. Each set piece was handmade using plastic tablecloths and metal rings fastened to the ceiling. Adding pink light bulbs, the circular shelving vignette and additional florals and programs created a playful, dreamy pink space. We chose pink because of its lasting reign across the beauty and fashion industry. Pantone chose a muted pink in 2016 as its annual

color, and the internet soon dubbed the tone "millennial pink." The color was splashed on walls, sofas, makeup packaging, and various fashionable forms. With a recent Y2k resurgence in fashion, bubblegum pink remained. Unbeknownst to me at the start of this project, the *Barbie* movie would be released in the fall of 2023, and "pinkcore" would be the next iteration of this color. Pink seemed inescapable at the height of this process, but even without the color's latest popularity, we were unwavering in our choice; it is the ultimate makeup color and holds an exciting weight in pop culture as a symbol of femininity.

With the pink coated foreground, the color difference in the back space was intentional for the arc of the piece. The large makeup compact, constructed using foam board and epoxy, brought focus to a more bare, but still dream-like space. The compact and the adjacent "tinsel tree" created a shifted mood that would be necessary in taking the piece from its more frenetic start to its more quiet resolve. The only lighting would be the large ring light behind the

Fig. 7: GRWM performance at Coastal Creative Studio, Huntington, New York.

compact. A light meant for one person, it casts its light brightly; Caitlin used it and her reflection

as a directional pull: singular and powerful.

Fig. 8-10: GRWM performance at Coastal Creative Studio, Huntington, New York.

Music/Sound Design

Sound was an integral piece to creating the world and atmosphere for my work to live in. I knew I wanted to play with a rising arc of sounds that would crescendo into a precise level of over-stimulation for part one of the piece. With part one representing themes of oversaturation, repetition, disruption and validation, the scaffolding of sounds would aid in bringing the audience into this world that for some may be foreign and for others all too familiar. I began exploring sounds for this project in the spring of 2023 when I was creating a dance film for my special topics course. I would screen record scrolling through TikTok, refresh the app or go into a new hashtag and repeat. The resulting recorded sound was just as you would expect with the particular scroll-specific timing that occurs when you hear someone scroll the app on full volume. It was choppy, chaotic, disjointed and bounced from speaking and abrupt sounds to

popular song snippets. I knew that layering these sounds in their raw, untouched state, over pulsating music would be the perfect blend of overstimulation.

I chose to include current music because the app frequently recycles "trending sounds" from not just the most current musical artists, but from old movies, speeches, reality show quotes and other more obscure sources. Bookending the work with music by George Gershwin is a nod to the nostalgic, breezy theatricality of the past. I included a few seconds from the Judy Garland-starring "Meet Me in St. Louis" for the same reason and to add a subtle nod to the fact that the themes the piece is exploring are new in our current technology, but not in emotion and experience.

Building in an extended silence for part two of the piece was essential to punctuate the chaos of part one's finish. The silence came as quickly as your app closes, a car door shuts or a bedroom door clicks. That kind of stimulation to silence is built into the fabric of our days. Some of us revel in the silences, while others like to fill our cup amongst the noise of a park or street market. We do not often witness this happening to someone else we are not closely involved with; watching someone in the intimacy of turning "off" is not common content to share.

Outro: My Contribution to the Industry

Post-performance, one of the most meaningful pieces of feedback was from female audience members ranging from sixteen to twenty-one. Two of the college-age young women said that the piece made them feel "seen." I couldn't have asked for a better response. People had different reactions seemingly based on their own personal relationships with social media. There were young people who have grown up with social media and older generations who either dabbled or some that engaged very infrequently. What worked was that the piece had enough

universality that it didn't box out people who weren't familiar with the current vernacular. Many audience members mentioned how they felt empathy for the dancer, that they wanted her to be okay. I was glad this was pointed out, and I think they felt this, I certainly did, because of the vulnerability of the dancer. Her versatility and willingness to share so much of herself drew the audience into her world, to understand her, to stay with her.

My goal with this written thesis and tandem creative work is to play an active role in the interrogation of aspects of our dance culture and ecosystem that require fresh attention. The multi-generational aspect of my work, purposeful in my desire to expand audiences for dance, is not only a motivator, but creating work with women makers, with subject matter for women, is a continuous force for my creative work. Creating space for female identifying people to collaborate and share in artistic and, in the fullness of time, financial prosperity, is the root of my artistic purpose.

The economics of dance and the realities of the funding structures in the United States have all been too dire for too long to not look for other avenues of exposure and monetary support. By integrating my work into current popular platforms, I am not turning my back on brick-and-mortar spaces to house performance, as is evidenced by this thesis performance. I believe the way forward in this field is to firmly and unequivocally advocate and insist upon the value of a choreographer as a leader and collaborator. As a former business owner, I see the value of TikTok creators using the platform to build audiences and create opportunities for themselves that otherwise would not exist. With this thesis as a jumping-off point, I will continue creating spaces for community-centered dance performances alive with interest, bringing focus to the whole audience experience.

I plan to expand *GRWM* and seek out unconventional ways in which to present it. Along with local and state grants, I will be spending time on researching the mental health side of identity as it relates to social media and beauty. This thread presented itself during our creative process and I flagged it as a path to explore in my second phase of this project. I am interested in learning more about the current research that surrounds the present day crisis of identity females face as they live more of their lives online. I feel I could do this twofold: by using this performance project as a way to expose the mental health challenges created by social media and with an interactive workshop that follows the performance that can be geared to specific age groups. I plan to test this out with smaller audiences locally to gather more information and would eventually love to tour the work at colleges and universities. If the work I create can make women feel seen, heard, and valued, I would be most content. Coming from an all-girls high school education, spending my life in dance with mostly female dancers and educators, and being a mother to a young daughter, the work I continue to make will be for them.

My work shines a light on things outside of the dance community that are often met with confounded innocence. We can not blithely ignore the realities of advancing technology and the impact social media is having on dance. The dance world is small, and the burgeoning efforts of people creating work online can only aid in shifting dance's position on a larger societal scale. Instead of dancing in a hall of mirrors, there is an opportunity to share one's unique creative interests with ease, and the possibility of reaching outside of your immediate audience circle. The future of dance relies upon dance artists contributing their viewpoints and talents into as many new spaces as possible.

Lastly, I would like to contribute to the dance community more opportunities for laughter. Nothing quite pierces the soul like a laugh, and in dance, an art form that is a beloved, but

arduous career, laughter shouldn't be reserved for rehearsal and dressing rooms. I intend to bring it center; into my classrooms, rehearsals and performances. With laughter, there is often an underbelly of something darker percolating. The concern the audience felt for Caitlin, a result I hoped for as much as laughter, was validating to hear. We knew that there was depth to the subject matter that if unlocked could affect people. Looking at our own self-image in mirror or screen reflections is an inevitability of our daily lives that can feel overwhelmingly artificial and monotonous. Tragedy and comedy exist not as polarities, but on our common social media feeds, closer to our fingertips than ever before. I will continue with this thesis work to challenge the emotional desensitization of social media, while also celebrating the possibilities advanced technology can bring to the dance community. Critical introspection will be a necessary component to maintaining a healthy relationship with ourselves and the world as technology develops. I am hopeful of dance's vital role in our necessary adaptations.

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