



SPRING 2021

indance

DISCOURSE + DIALOGUE TO UNIFY, STRENGTHEN + AMPLIFY



P.06 Fresh Meat Productions



P.32 Sharing with Strength



P.44 Ad Infinitum Identities

MEMBERSHIP

Dancers' Group – publisher of *In Dance* – provides resources to artists, the dance community, and audiences through programs and services that are as collaborative and innovative as the creative process.

Dancers' Group has extended all memberships through June 2021. If you're interested in becoming a new member, consider joining at our free Community level.

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Dancers' Group promotes performance listings in our online performance calendar, and emailed to over 1,700 members.

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DANCERS' GROUP

Artist Administrator
[Wayne Hazzard](#)

Artist Resource Manager
[Andréa Spearman](#)

Administrative Assistant
[Shellie Jew](#)

Bookkeeper
Michele Simon

Design
Sharon Anderson

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WELCOME



I'VE BEEN READING, READING, READING.

It's a lovely part of my job. I get to read grant proposals, budgets (numbers tell a story, too), research studies, emails and numerous articles featured in *In Dance*—finding comfort and inspiration as I read in my spare time.

My post-work reading is eclectic and is made up of consuming features in various online publications. Also I love fiction books—like Bryan Washington's beautiful novel called *Memorial*. And I've been reading lots of *NY Times* features on artists. Through these pieces I'm being introduced to live-treasures.

They've become my weekly, sometimes daily, inspire-pleasure.

Here's a highlight of those I've been learning about. I've fallen for the artist [Lorraine O'Grady](#) whose [newspaper poems](#) from 1977 are stunning visual dances. The artist [Roni Horn](#) has led me to appreciate the word "acclimatize"—I want to figure out how to use it in a sentence. And Horn states: "Since I know what I want, but not what it looks like, it takes time to focus it and arrive at some form of clarity." I needed to hear that "it takes time to focus." And then there's the brilliant [Kyohei Sakaguchi](#). "I do what I do in order to keep living." The matter of factness of Sakaguchi's statement slays. That they do what they do to live, resonates so deeply during a pandemic. I feel such a kinship within their words. Connecting with artists—even abstractly through interviews—comforts and is simply wondrous.

Wondrous words from dance artists is a way to ensure their voices and ideas are documented and visible. Highlighting how they maneuver complex relationships with their community, with their collaborators and especially how they connect with artists that motivate their own work and thinking.

Are you ready? Within these pages are the most amazing writings Dancers' Group has put out. I think this each time we publish, it really is true now and it will be true next time too—wink, wink. The featured writers in the Spring issue address how we acclimatize over time. They boldly speak to long known injustices like colonialism, white supremacy, racism and patriarchy.

They speak to adapting and prompt us towards new combinations of insights, through intuition, by taking time to be. We present writing by [Yayoi Kambara](#), [Gerald Casel](#), [Marvin K. White](#), [Bhumi Patel](#), [Usha Srivivisan and Priya Das](#), [Aura Fischbeck and Christy Funsch](#), [Hien Huynh](#), [Rowena Richie](#), [Farah Yasmeen Shaikh](#), [Sima Belmar](#) and [Justin Ebrahemi](#). The themes are deep and personal.

As you savor each word I hope you share these Spring articles and join me in asking questions like: How am I feeling? How can I evolve?

Be well,

—Wayne Hazzard, Artist Administrator

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Dancers' Group gratefully acknowledges the support of Bernard Osher Foundation, California Arts Council, Fleishhacker Foundation, Grants for the Arts, JB Berland Foundation, Kenneth Rainin Foundation, Koret Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, Phyllis C. Wattis Foundation, San Francisco Arts Commission, Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, Walter & Elise Haas Fund, William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, Zellerbach Family Foundation and generous individuals.



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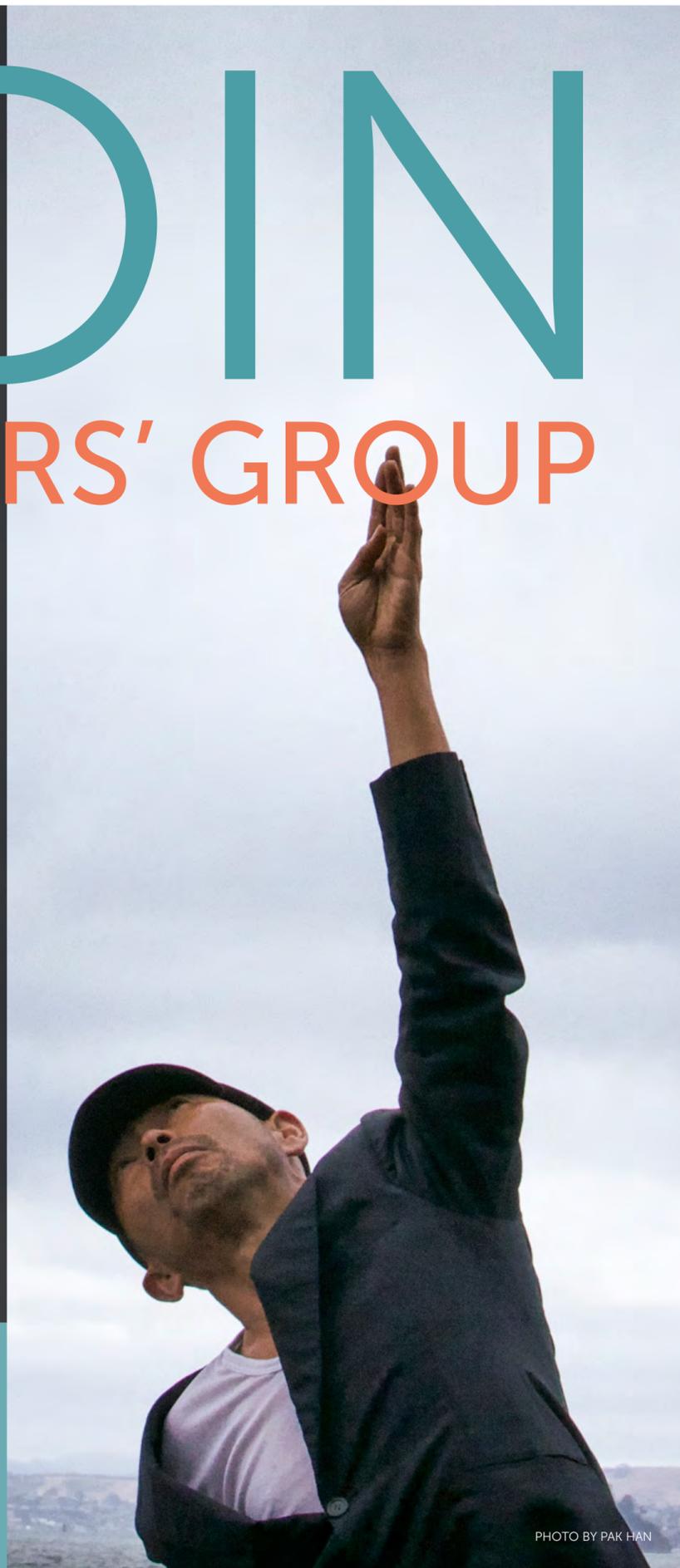


PHOTO BY PAK HAN



COMING SOON

YBG Festival is getting ready for new programs and activations for 2021.

Follow @ybgfestival on social media or through our monthly eNewsletter at www.ybgfestival.org.

Keep on dancing! We hope to see you very soon.

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INPRACTICE

SEAN DORSEY, FRESH MEAT PRODUCTIONS, AND TRANS JOY

by SIMA BELMAR



KnowShade Vogue

As he looks back on 20 years of making and producing performance by trans, gender-nonconforming (GNC), two-spirit, and queer artists in the Bay Area and across the country, Sean Dorsey, Artistic Director of Sean Dorsey Dance (SDD) and founder of [Fresh Meat Productions](#) (FMP), is positively glowing.

Founded in 2001, Fresh Meat Productions is a trans-led-and-serving, history-making organization committed to shining a light on and reflecting the light of artists who, despite

increased visibility in popular culture, continue to struggle to find their voices amplified, uplifted, and represented in theatrical contexts.

To mark the milestone, FMP has launched [The Lost Art of Dreaming Project](#), a constellation of online events spread out over the course of 2021, a Spring 2022 premiere, and a 10+-city tour through 2024. This year, The Lost Art of Dreaming will feature SDD's [AT-HOME Season \(April 16-18\)](#) that includes a series of gorgeous site-specific dance films and messages from Dorsey; a second

season of [“Stay Fresh At Home,”](#) a free online series of videos dedicated to creative wellness; the [20th Anniversary Fresh Meat Festival](#) (June 17-19, online), showcasing an incredible lineup including the work of commissioned artists, Antoine Hunter/Purple Fire Crow, J Mase III, Jahaira & Angelica, Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi, Mark Travis Rivera, and Randy Ford, supported by FMP's FRESH WORKS! program; and a monthly release of free activities, including [Postcards from the Future](#), which highlights the work

of four commissioned visual artists, and [The Dictionary of Joy and Pleasure](#), a free, interactive online A-to-Z with contributions by ten commissioned artists. There's even a “Futurist Pledge” that folks can download, print, and sign.

The Lost Art of Dreaming is a project with a singular yet expansive mission: “to explore and create expansive futures” for trans, GNC, two-spirit, and queer communities. Dorsey and I had two lengthy conversations about what it looks like to center joy and pleasure in artistic and social practice.

Belmar: Have you always been a dancer?

Sean Dorsey: Yes! But I always say that I did not grow up at the ballet barre. I loved dance with every cell in my body. I spent all my time in my leotard, dancing around to records. I was always making up dances. I did have a lot of early training and performing in theater and music, mostly piano, choral stuff, youth theater. But most of my dancing was in my living room. I took a “ballet” class series when I was 5 and remember having an awesome tambourine with long

ribbons attached to it, so I'm pretty sure it wasn't classical ballet.

SB: I too remember having a tambourine with ribbons attached to it among other things with ribbons attached to them. I remember being around four and dancing with these wire things with flowers attached to them to the song “Thank Heaven for Little Girls.”

SD: I had no other formal dance training until right after I graduated from high school when I did a summer session largely based on the choreography of Janet Jackson—it was amazing. And then I started taking classes, mostly modern dance, some jazz, in college [University of British Columbia], but community level, drop-in stuff. I remember loving it so, so much, but my career and my heart's trajectory was on the community organizing, social justice path. I felt clear that my calling was to be of service and do justice-seeking work.

SB: So that's why you're able to make work and organize so many events and programs! What was your major?

SD: I did a double major in Political Science and Women's Studies. After that, I started a graduate program in community economic development, and also started taking classes in the dance department. When I was 25, I started thinking about getting more training. I couldn't dance often enough! I was taking ballet with this one teacher who one day asked me to stay after class. When she asked me if I'd ever thought about being a professional dancer, my mind exploded. It was a landscape-altering moment.

Up until that moment I had literally never imagined I could become a professional dancer: how could I, when I had never seen another person like me in dance? So I took a year off of grad school, entered a two-year studio-based Dance program, and never looked back.

The very first piece of choreography I made at dance school was a duet and it was definitely queer. At that point I hadn't seen a lot of dance-theater or "talking dance," but from the beginning I've always felt called to bring in elements of story

and text. The local dance community came out to these student recitals, and was very supportive of young students and their burgeoning craft. I don't remember feeling nervous at all about my work being queer. People were awesome: I was blown away by the incredibly positive response and feedback from professional dancers to my baby-choreography. They were "interested in my voice" and "were excited to see what I did next." The day after the show, in morning technique class, the school director pulled me out, sat me down in her office,

and told me sternly that my piece "made people feel very uncomfortable"—which was not even a little bit true. I had experienced the exact opposite. I don't know how I had the wherewithal to feel sure of that truth at the time, but I did. She actually withheld my graduation certificate at the end of my program. In that moment, the years of all the awful experiences in gendered bathrooms, gendered costumes, everything came crashing down on me. But at the same time, I realized that this was how I could forge change in the world, this was my calling, and this was how I could be of service. Her words made me realize the power of dance-theater work that's based in the body, in story, and in language.

SB: What do you love about dancing?

SD: Feeling into my love of dancing, there is both the love of velocity and the momentum of movement, the embodiment of energy and emotion, but also a real love of the relationship and response to music. But I have also always loved storytelling. Those were not separate things. You know a lot about me if you know that my favorite childhood movies were *Fame* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. *Rocky Horror* was so huge for me. Here's this amazing, sexy, gender-expansive, fierce, totally embodied character in Frankenfurter.

SB: *Fame* came out in 1980, when I was 9 and you were 7. It was not a thing to watch at that age!

SD: When I go back and watch it now, I'm like, This is the most depressing movie about trauma and abuse ever! But at the time all that mattered was Leroy, roller skates, and the romantic notion of bottle caps on the bottom of your shoes. That was my dream high school, but I never imagined my own adult life being about dance and performance. I never saw anybody like me in those fields doing those things. So it wasn't



Toby MacNutt



Javier Stell-Fresquez and Ivy Monteiro

like, gosh, I wish someday I could do this. There was literally no brain pathway for that dream because I literally didn't exist in the world.

Trans people of my generation and older—and maybe just a little bit younger—we had to work so hard to find any proof of our existence other than our own selves in the world. For example, my partner, [Shawna Virago](#), a trans woman musician, filmmaker, and director of the [San Francisco Transgender Film Festival](#), talks about going to the public library just to find anything, and there being like one weird medical book on transsexuality. There was no internet, no blogs, no Gay Straight Alliances in high school, there was nothing, unless you saw maybe a transsexual on the Donahue show. If I had been lucky enough to know or been connected to ballroom culture and voguing, I would have been like here's this amazing trans/GNC leadership, lineage, and ancestry. Here's this long lineage of Black and Latinx trans women, queers and GNC folks with this amazing dance and performance form and huge chosen-family/community network.

Flash forward to today, and so much has changed while so much has still not changed: in pop culture we still have cisgender people being cast as trans. Totally unacceptable when there are so many talented trans and nonbinary actors. But in dance also, we've seen many institutions investing in

works for the stage that portray trans characters as pathological, disturbed characters; and even more institutions and companies bringing exactly zero trans bodies, dancers or leadership to the stage. And not having dance educators who are trans, nonbinary, or GNC. The Bay Area, like the rest of the country, still has to do a lot better.

SB: How did you make your way to the Bay Area?

YOU KNOW A LOT ABOUT ME IF YOU KNOW THAT MY FAVORITE CHILDHOOD MOVIES WERE *FAME* AND *THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW*.

SD: I had been dancing in some small companies in British Columbia, and on a visit to San Francisco in 2000, I took classes at ODC with Lizz Roman and Ellie Klopp. With Lizz's class, I was like, "What is this magic?!" It was my real introduction to upside down, release technique. There was very little of that in Vancouver. It was this room full of all these glorious people, and Lizz was singing and Daniel Berkman was accompanying; it was this magical, mystical experience. And then Lizz asked me to join her company! I danced with her for six amazing years, hanging from rafters, climbing up walls, and dancing on furniture.

SB: So, if I have my math right, you're dating your 20th anniversary from 2001, right? What happened then?

SD: In June 2001, I performed my first work in the Bay Area for the final Lesbian and Gay Dance Festival at Dance Mission. I had seen Dance Brigade perform in Vancouver a few years before. It was one of the first times I'd seen dance theater that was fiery and political, imbued with text and story; they were just gloriously ripping into colonialism and misog-

yny. I kept presenting work under my name, and then I date my company, Sean Dorsey Dance, from when we had our first full-evening home season, which was 2005.

SB: How did you come up with the name Fresh Meat Productions?

SD: In 2002, I brought together a group of artists and activists to put on what we thought would be a one-time festival of trans and queer performance. We wanted to center trans artists, center BIPOC queer/trans artistry, and do it gorgeously. At an early planning meeting at a Mission café, we were like, "What do we call this thing?" [Jesse Bie](#) said, "Let's call it



KnowShade Vogue

PHOTOS BY KEGAN MARLING



fresh meat,” and there was this collective gasp of excitement. So saucy at the time!

SB: Jesse is the sauciest!

SD: Absolutely! He had already long been bringing BIPOC queer dance-theater to theaters and to the streets across the Bay with his com-

BIPOC, trans, queer, and GNC artists including disabled artists. It was about reclaiming ourselves, our bodies, and our creative expression as powerful, sexy, and worthy of taking up the space that had hitherto been denied to our communities.

Elizabeth Gorelik did our first photo shoot at ODC: there were lots of

proud that from the beginning, all our artists and crew were paid well. We’re so proud of really changing that landscape, of breaking down so many barriers for trans and GNC performing artists. I have so much love, gratitude, and awe for our tiny but mighty core staff, Shawna Virago, Eric Garcia, and StormMiguel Florez, the “Fresh Meat Family”—and it really is a family.

SB: Reflecting on the last twenty years, what has changed about the Bay Area performance landscape in terms of both trans representation and influence?

SD: It’s painful to witness the continued refusal of most Bay Area dance leadership and spaces to take any actual action around trans equity. There are a lot of trans supportive “values” but almost no action or policies and procedures put in place. It’s absolutely unacceptable that most of our dance spaces don’t have any trans/non-binary faculty, trans programming, all-gender changing rooms

PHOTOS BY KEGAN MARLING

or all-gender bathrooms. I call upon Bay Area dance venues and spaces to use the shutdown period of the pandemic to fix this—AND PUT NEW SIGNS ON YOUR BATHROOMS, DARNIT! I will mail you the sharpies if you don’t have any.

SB: And not everybody sees themselves in the new equity, “everybody is welcome” statements.

SD: Right. When white cisgender non-disabled people say something generic like “everybody is welcome,” it often means “you’re welcome in theory but our facility, staff, and practices might still be harmful or excluding.” Welcoming needs to be a *verb*, not a passive value. We white people in leadership don’t get to claim to be “anti-racist” or say we care about white supremacy unless we can back it up with daily, concrete, meaningful and accountable action.

At FMP, when we have any kind of public event we always list a bunch of information right on our website, ticketing page, and social media that we hope is helpful for people to feel that they are thought of ahead of time and welcomed into that space. For example, we will share that the entrance, bathrooms, and seating are wheelchair accessible, the front row seats are all armless for fat or super-fat folks, we only ever use venues with all gender bathrooms, we provide a monitored scent-free seating area, we never require “legal ID” to purchase or pick up tickets. This is to say, I’m specifically thinking of *you*, I want you to feel like you are welcome, and here are the loving accommodations we’re providing. I’d like to see those statements on a venue’s ticketing page.

Z Space is our artistic home for a reason—they’ve always been awesome. Part of their leadership staff team includes a trans person. After years of temporarily allowing us to make their bathrooms all-gender during our events, they permanently and lovingly made *all* their bathrooms all gender.





Tinky Younger

It's also awesome that CounterPulse intentionally planned for and built their new facility with only all-gender bathrooms, and regularly presents/supports trans/Two-Spirit/NB artists, unlike most other Bay Area dance venues. Shawl Anderson as a home for dance has been supportive of trans/NB artists, including trans faculty, producing their Queering Dance Festival—that's so huge and amazing.

This is something that I'm also proud of: because Sean Dorsey Dance's Tech Rider *requires* theaters to convert all lobby and backstage bathrooms to be all-gender during our tours, I have left

behind a swath of permanently-altered all-gender restrooms in theaters across the country, from The Joyce in NYC to The Young Auditorium in highly conservative Whitewater WI.

SB: I love all of your [trans love t-shirts](#), and your current project emphasizes trans joy, pushing back on the sort of spectacle of suffering cis folks may expect from trans artists.

SD: The reason I create work and founded FMP is because of the exquisite joy, wisdom, ebullience, radiance, depth of spirit, innovation of craft, and positively extraordinary

resiliency of trans and gender-non-conforming people and artists. I love trans people and I love trans artists. When I'm in our workshop spaces, our audiences, our community forums, I'm so blissed out. There's so much creativity and depth and shimmer, sparkly creativity. That's what drives us—our beauty and our gifts.

So many people in so many communities live amidst harm, daily oppression, violence, but what gets forged out of that is joy, resilience, awesomeness, sass, beauty. Part of the agonizing frustration, anger, and sadness I feel is so much because all of these cisgender dance leaders and funders are totally missing out on all of this community's incredible work, innovation, and beauty.

SB: I called you a trans ambassador, a moniker you accepted and that also frustrated you to some extent because of the way it erased your identity and work as an artist.

SD: I'm so proud to be trans and love being an ambassador, but there is a profound level of exhaustion I've worked myself into. So much traveling and speaking and advocacy, and teaching and touring, prior to the pandemic, I'd totally worked myself into the ground. I will keep advocating and fighting for intersectional trans equity, but I also have to stop and find a balance for Sean the artist.

When I think back to 20 years ago and how I brought some folks together to put on this "one-time" Fresh Meat Festival, it was about the fact that at that time almost nobody was putting trans artists on stages with high production values, and nobody was paying us for our art. Probably for the next 8-10 years, if I had press interviews as Sean Dorsey and Sean Dorsey Dance, writers would hyper-focus on my trans identity and ask me Trans 101 questions. Nobody was like, "Tell me about your craft." It was years before I got to talk about that in interviews.

SO MANY PEOPLE IN SO MANY COMMUNITIES LIVE AMIDST HARM, DAILY OPPRESSION, VIOLENCE, BUT WHAT GETS FORGED OUT OF THAT IS JOY, RESILIENCE, AWESOMENESS, SASS, BEAUTY.

So what feels very important at the 20th anniversary mark, is to remember how 20 years ago almost no one was doing this, and now, every week, I have young nonbinary or trans aspiring dancers reaching out to me from all across the country. I came of age having no peers in the dance world and it's so exciting to witness so many gender expansive folks. It's also frustrating that so little has changed, how few trans dance educators we see, we don't see trans artists being presented, trans folks given residencies, on staff, on boards of directors, in leadership and decision-making power at foundations or funding agencies. The values and friendliness are there, but the action is not. Like all the white folks in leadership claiming to have anti-white-supremacist values, with little to no action.

SB: Let's talk about your craft. Your theater, music, and writing background clarifies for me how dance appears in your work, as one communicative piece of a puzzle. In the AT-HOME season videos, which are beautifully made, I noticed a repetition of gesture that had a lot to do with two fingers pulling away from and towards the body. Tell me about those choices.

SD: I'm calling this new series of dance films "video postcards." In them, we're exploring movement research for our new project [The Lost Art Of Dreaming](#). The idea is that we can be doing movement investigation or play and create tendrils that may end up in the staged work down the road.

The Lost Art Of Dreaming is rooted in imagining and creating expansive Futures, so the idea of starting here [Sean moves his hands towards and away from his forehead and chest], and getting to here [Sean gestures

toward the sky], connecting what's out there, the Future, and what's in the body. Some of that movement you saw was about that swirling cosmos, that Future energy, and how we might connect it to our body. Me and my dancers (Nol Simonse, Will Woodward, Raul Torres-Bonilla) have been doing this "cosmic connective tissue" movement research in our Zoom rehearsals 3 days a week since the beginning of the pandemic.

SB: When you demonstrate and talk about these core-distal relationships, I can start to think about why one might choreograph exaggerated finger extensions and reaches toward the furthest point away from the body. Dance is a tremendously powerful and successful communicator of force and energy and emotion, but it's a shitty communicator of ideas. Because I don't think that's what it was born to do. And it's a very Western idea that viewers of dance should know what it means, should understand it, "get it," and if they don't know, they're going to get anxious and pissed and dismiss it. I think it's important for me to hear from an artist about the movement choices they make. Now I can revisit the films and think about the relationship between my material reality and my interiority and how far I can reach as I continue to be stuck in these pandemic bubbles.

SD: In most of the video postcards, there's no relationship to language or text. This project is really different for me so far because I generally work with text and writing. *The Missing Generation* (2018) started with a lot of research, a year and a half and 75 hours of oral history interviews I recorded with survivors of the early

AIDS epidemic, and then 500 hours editing it down to a sound score, all before the movement creation. My current process—I don't know where it will end up. I look forward to getting back into the studio because grand-scale costumes had also been driving our movement creation. Now they're in storage at Dance Mission, these huge gowns with 6-foot trains.

SB: Thinking about Tim Curry's delicious embodiment in *Rocky Horror*, how do we get people to understand the material sensations and pleasures of embodiment as processes and practices that exist on a nonthreatening continuum of embodiments? Are we getting closer to that? How can dance artists help audiences develop an awareness that their embodiments are these rich amazing things that are being limited by social norms?

SD: As an artist and activist I've learned that the crucible, the transformation happens through personal, shared, felt experience. It's a butts in seats thing, getting people in the theater, or into the conversation, or into the workshop, or into the online experience. Whether we're watching a dance film online, or watching dancers on stage, that experience, that witnessing gives us an embodied visceral experience. It involves our breath, our heart, our muscles contracting in empathic reaction. There's something magical about when the lights go down and your guard is dropped, your heart and mind are open in a different way. The magic and change happen there.

Visit freshmeatproductions.org/programs for information about the 20th anniversary offerings and about FMP's collaborators on *The Lost Art of Dreaming*.

SIMA BELMAR, Ph.D., is a Lecturer in the Department of Theater, Dance, & Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She is ODC Writer in Residence and host of the new podcast *Dance Cast*. To keep up with Sima's writing please subscribe to tinylatter.com/simabelmar.

PHOTOS BY ERIKA MARLING



YOU CAN STILL SEE THE BURN SCARS that dot the hills near the campus where I live, which is on the unceded territory of the Awas-speaking Uypi tribe and the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band. Last year's CZU Lightning Complex fires burned over 86,000 acres in Santa Cruz County and brought ash from counties far away. When the rains came in February, several areas were evacuated from potential debris flow as a result of the fires' devastation. We've lost power, too, here and there, because the electrical grid has been damaged. Remarkably, you can see much more wildlife than usual – either because they have been displaced due to their natural habitats having been destroyed or because of rewilding, a process where animals return to spaces where they hadn't been allowed to roam freely before. As a result of humans stepping back, ecological restoration is underway, and although the air is cleaner now, the weather remains unpredictable.

BURN SCARS

by GERALD CASEL

RACIALIZED CLIMATES CAN BE SEEN AND FELT BY ARTISTS OF COLOR BUT THANKS TO THE PRIVILEGES AFFORDED TO THEM BY WHITENESS, WHITE PEOPLE DO NOT HAVE TO ACKNOWLEDGE HOW THEY BENEFIT FROM SUCH SYSTEMIC FORCES; IT IS SIMPLY THE NORM.

We're coming up on one year since COVID-19 restrictions have been in place. Since I haven't been able to dance regularly, my feet have lost their calluses. Those layers of skin made tough and thick through wear and tear have protected me from floor burns and splits while allowing me to turn, glide, and brush the floor without pain. Losing calluses also means a loss of felt sense, being out of shape, and general tightness. We haven't had our rigorous movement practices and communal exchanges in shared spaces and that lack of human contact has also produced sustained emotional distress.

Callousness can also be used as a metaphor for emotional hardening—protection from constant oppression or harm. As a dance artist of color, I know how to deploy this emotional armor when I need it to survive microaggressions/invalidations/assaults—like that time in ballet class when a white woman physically forced me to move because I was blocking her view of herself in the mirror. Violence like this often comes quick, leaving me frozen and burning with anger, but the scars last for a long time. This incident reminded me how "white body supremacy," a term used by somatic abolitionist [Resmaa Menakem](#), allows white people to take up space and claim ownership over shared or public spaces. I take care not to be too hardened by these jabs and seek balance when navigating the unpredictable weather of white supremacy. In her book, *In the Wake, On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe describes the possible metaphors and materiality of "the weather" that creates a climate where anti-Blackness and white supremacy are pervasive. Sharpe writes, "The weather necessitates changeability

and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies." We can apply this metaphor to challenge the structures of whiteness that create conditions of exclusion by restoring a felt sense of safety through an embodied preparedness that can weather white supremacist culture. By doing so, we can alter the atmosphere and generate new ecosystems that minimize harm while acknowledging the harm when it arises.

Last summer, instigated by Jill Homan Randall and as part of a series of writing that featured the Dancing Around Race cohort, I wrote a piece called "[Regranting as a Performance of Benevolent Colonialism](#)." I have been thinking about how this needs to be revisited, especially now at the year-long mark of COVID-19 and after the many pronouncements of diversity, equity, and inclusion that white-led organizations have presented on websites, social media, and in many online interactions where I have witnessed emotional performances of solidarity.

In addition to having annual seasons, many white dance artists with companies or organizations have benefited from receiving large grants only to disperse funds through a festival or through a shared evening of dance that promotes emerging artists of color. This is possible, in part, because these white choreographers have lived and worked in the Bay Area for some time but also because they have solid support from funders who also (through general operating support grants) cover the costs of administrative staff, marketing, and development and grant writing support. What if white artists who are able to receive these

funds refrain from doing so, so that artists of color can receive the funds directly? What if we got rid of the 'middle man,' or the part that feels the most in need of intervention – this sense that People of Color know all-too-well as imperial benevolence? In other words, changing the narrative that says white people will fix your community, save you from being irrelevant, and prescribe educational and enrichment programs so that they look charitable and have no hidden ulterior motives.

Unfortunately, even after the overdue racial reckoning that inspired so many people to protest in the streets with powerful calls to action following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, things have not changed much in terms of racial politics and power dynamics in the Bay Area dance ecology. White-led dance organizations resume operations as if nothing has changed – not acknowledging how they benefit from their social position through the institutional structures of whiteness. Informed by scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, who remind us that decolonization is not a metaphor, this "evasion" or failure by white people to enact sustained and systemic change gives rise to platitudes that are nothing more than performative gestures.

Because of historical, legal, and institutional barriers such as redlining, racial quotas, restrictive voting and immigration laws, and other settler-colonial logics that are baked into systems that regulate who owns what, generational wealth gaps between white people and their

BIPOC counterparts endure. This atmosphere of inequity is true here in San Francisco, where most of the major dance companies, performance spaces, and organizations are owned and run by white people. The system is set up such that BIPOC artists must rely on "renting" from established white artists, which perpetuates white saviorism, white ownership, and Black and brown tenancy.

Racialized climates can be seen and felt by artists of color but thanks to the privileges afforded to them by whiteness, white people do not have to acknowledge how they benefit from such systemic forces; it is simply the norm. As an example, many white-led organizations continue to produce well-meaning programs that support (emerging) artists of color as well as mentorship platforms that imply a boost to those artists' careers. Such white savior mentality is complicated by the notion of white ownership, and together, they drive market forces that contribute to racial capitalism by promoting a logic of possession. This creates specific turbulence for those of us whose families have never owned any property or who have had to move frequently because of our tenancy status. It is a struggle to feel a sense of belonging even when these gestures of support from white-led organizations seem benevolent.

What would happen if foundations gave resources directly to artists of color rather than brokering them through systematic white gatekeeping? Would BIPOC artists feel more of a sense of ownership rather than being owned by these organizations who parade their institutional ethos of racial equity and inclusion? On the other hand, what if BIPOC artists refuse these offers and instead collectively generate their own systems of support that foster communal care and mutual aid?

As we navigate through the unpredictable climate of racial inequity and as we imagine a future that values the cultural wealth of BIPOC communities, we must weather storms of white supremacy and plant seeds that will grow and transform burn scars into new growth. Refusing colonial structures that reinforce separation, competition, and exploitation, we will find ways to rewild the spaces that have not been available to us. Tending to our bodies and each other, we can learn to heal from generational trauma, and like calluses, we can regenerate tougher skin that will protect us from the elements.

My writing and thinking have been influenced by conversations with the Dancing Around Race collective (David Herrera, Yayoi Kambara, Kimani Fowlin, Bhumi B. Patel, and Raissa Simpson). I have also been inspired by the writings of Maile Arvin, Resmaa Menakem, Claudia Rankine, Christina Sharpe, and Edgar Villanueva.

GERALD CASEL (he/they) is the artistic director of GERALDCASELDANCE. His choreographic research complicates and provokes questions surrounding colonialism, collective cultural amnesia, whiteness and privilege, and the tensions between the invisible/perceived/obvious structures of power. Casel is an Associate Professor of Dance in the Department of Theater Arts and is the Provost of Porter College at UC Santa Cruz. A graduate of The Juilliard School, with an MFA from UW Milwaukee, Casel received a Bessie award for sustained achievement for dancing in the companies of Stephen Petronio, Lar Lubovitch, Stanley Love, among others. His newest work, *Not About Race Dance*, has been awarded a National Dance Project grant and will be in residence at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography and will premiere at CounterPulse with a forthcoming national tour. Dancing Around Race, a community-engaged participatory practice he founded that examines racial inequity in the Bay Area and beyond, continues to grow. geraldcasel.com



Joyce Calvert



Joyce Calvert



Rowena Richie



IT'S HARD TO SAY

DANCING AROUND THE FEAR OF ART, LONELINESS AND DEMENTIA

By Rowena Richie with Joyce Calvert

THIS IS THE STORY OF A DANCING BANANA. Try saying it out loud: “Dancing banana.” On the first syllable of “dancing” and the second syllable of “banana” your mouth turns up into a smile.

This is the story of two dancing bananas.

I have a new friend. Her name is Jane. She is a remarkable visual artist, a retired high school art teacher, a mama of two kitties—Grace and Frankie, a wearer of many hats (literally and figuratively), and a lover of the moon, hummingbirds and butterflies. Jane is also a person living with Alzheimer’s Disease.

Jane and I were dancing over Zoom recently when she asked her wife, “Do we have any bananas?” Her wife, Joyce, nodded at the fruit basket. Jane sauntered over and retrieved one. I grabbed a banana, too. Jane tucked hers into the front

of her shirt. I copied her, leaving the stem poking out. It looked like the beak of a yellow bird. I started whistling. Jane copied me. We gently danced our banana birds. We whistled and balanced our bananas on our heads, hands and feet. We listened to them like telephones. We smoked them like cigars.

Then Jane asked Joyce if they had any more bananas. I only had the one so I grabbed a gourd. Jane retrieved a second banana. She placed her bananas in her imaginary holster. Mine went into my waistband. Joyce said, “Ready...Set...” (Jane wiggled her fingers), “Fire!” Jane’s draw was so fast I got caught with my hands in my pants. We erupted in peals of laughter.

THIS IS THE STORY of a pool. An ephemeral pool. A pool that Joyce swims / floats / occasionally splashes around in with others / occasionally submerges in alone.

Joyce is a mother, grandmother, retired court reporter and creative writer. I have asked her to help me write a handbook on how to support dementia caregivers. She comes from a family of strong women, but when it comes to caregiving she chafes when people say, “Oh, you’re so strong, you’re so brave. It must be SO hard.”

“What is SO hard, tell me?” she writes in the handbook. “And what would you expect? ‘You’re so brave, you’re so strong’ – would you expect a caregiver to be anything else?”

Many of us have been treading water since the pandemic started. Joyce has been caregiving 24/7 with very little respite. I imagine a constant caregiver hiss, a drone drowning out everything else. “The pool” metaphor surfaced during the wintertime. “It’s hard to come out of caregiving, out of the pool,” Joyce writes. “Come see

me inside the pool, swim with me and keep the loneliness at bay.”

Dementia caregivers are especially susceptible to Caregiver Burden, a medical term used to describe a state of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion.

“It’s like existing in another substance,” Joyce writes. “Grief touches every place, every cell, like water; it changes you. Joy can emerge from grief. Rowena comes and jumps in the pool with us.”

I MET JOYCE AND JANE in February 2020 when I was looking for participants for a creative research project I’m piloting. Over the past five years my For You performance collective collaborators, Erika Chong Shuch and Ryan Tacata, and I have developed a person-centered performance practice. Our goals are to bring strangers together and to make performances as gifts. We wanted to see if this practice



you. And we love you!” Erika’s cousins—Ted and Merrill, Willa and Corey—kicked things off by caroling, “Joyce to the world / this is a song / for Joyce / rejoice / and sing! / Let every heart / prepare her room / the wonder of her love / the wonder of her love / the wonder, wonder of her love...”

THIS IS A STORY that repeats itself. The other day Jane asked, “Do you know me?” I told her I did. “How long have you known me?” I told her I met her about a year ago. “How do you know me?” she asked. “As a

fellow artist,” I said. “I think we can learn from each other about how art can support dementia,” I told her, “because I think it really, really helps.”

“Can I ask you a question?” Jane said. “How long have you known me?” I told her about a year. “How do you know me?” she asked. I told her that I was a fellow artist learning how to help people with dementia. “Oh, dimm..dimm...that word,” she said, struggling to say “dementia.”

“Can I ask *you* a question?” I said. “What is something nice we can do for Joyce?” She thought about it for a moment and then replied, “It’s hard to say.” I responded by hugging myself and then extending my arms out to her. She opened her arms, raised and lowered them, like wings. (Birds and birdwatching are some of Jane’s favorite things). The barrier of language was removed; there was no sense of right or wrong answers; we were just moving together. Art Therapist and Experiential Researcher Dr. Erin Partridge has said working with people with dementia in this way—in a creative, non-judgmental, non-goal-oriented way—communicates, “You are worthy of having community. I see you.”

of personalized creative engagement could make a difference in the lives of dementia caregivers and their care recipients, people who are often isolated and stigmatized.

“Welcome to ‘Joyce to the World—A Winter Solstice Variety Show,’” I announced to a handful of guests on Zoom. It was Monday December 21st during the Saturn-Jupiter Great Conjunction of 2020. The pandemic was surging so we abandoned our flash mob performance fantasy and instead presented a scrappy Zoom-based potpourri of performative gifts for Joyce: “butterflies” (Erika) dancing out from under bedsheets, an art lecture from Ryan’s bathtub, an animal spirit card reading from a shamanistic cat (my friend Temple).

I opened the show with a dedication: “As a devoted partner, mother, grandmother and friend; as a cosmic being full of grace; as a human companion to Grace and Frankie; and as a full time dementia caregiver full of love without condition...” A sob lodged in my throat. All of the unexpressed tears that had accumulated over months of witnessing Joyce were swimming to the surface. “...This is a gift to say: We see you. We hear

I AM AN ATLANTIC FELLOW for Equity in Brain Health at the Global Brain Health Institute (GBHI), a program at UCSF and Trinity College, Dublin, dedicated to improving brain health and reducing the scale and impact of dementia worldwide. Through the fellowship I was awarded a grant by GBHI, the Alzheimer’s Association and the Alzheimer’s Society (UK) to pilot For You’s personalized creative engagement practice. One of the aims of the pilot is “To validate care partners and their loved ones living with dementia. Oftentimes we think of performance as an opportunity to see. What happens if it’s an opportunity for audiences—our participating care partners and their loved ones—to be seen?”

Is there a tool that measures how it feels to be seen?

One of my favorite GBHI faculty members, Dr. Virginia Sturm, Associate Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at UCSF, developed a study called “Awe Walks.” In the study, older adults who took weekly 15-minute “awe walks”—focusing their energy and attention outward instead of inward—reported increased positive emotions and less distress in their daily lives. This shift was reflected in “selfies” participants took on their walks, in which an increasing focus on their surroundings rather than themselves was paralleled by measurably broader smiles by the end of the study. They could see the measurable change in the number of pixels the smiles occupied.

Science requires proof. I’m having difficulty proving our claim that personalized creative engagement validates the experience and worth of care partners and their loved ones. For one thing, I’m struggling to come up with an assessment tool that is both sensitive enough to measure the amount of “validation” that Jane experiences, and flexible enough to work with her capacity for assessments. A tool that wouldn’t require her to come up with answers that are “Hard to say.”

BUT THERE’S ANOTHER OBSTACLE making it hard to prove. A societal hurdle that is making me question whether this is a viable model: People’s resistance to art. Resistance not only from the scientific community which can be dismissive of even the most rigorous arts-based research but from folks we’d like to recruit. In general people don’t line up when you say, “I have an art project, would you like to participate?” They back away.

Anne Basting is one of the most seasoned practitioners in the creative care arena. She is a MacArthur “genius” Fellow, an author, professor, and the founder of TimeSlips, a storytelling-based participatory program designed for the dementia population. The TimeSlips motto is: “Forget memory, try imagination!” Anne has dedicated her career to bringing opportunities for “meaning making” to people all the way to the end of life.

Last month I attended a webinar Anne gave where she addressed both the Arts vs. Science tension and the problem with saying the word “art.”

“Our systems have a residue from the institutionalization of medicine and the institutionalization of arts as separate entities from the 1800s. We are slowly getting to a place where I think we can now start refusing that separation. For people who work in the health system, you should constantly be asking yourself, ‘Are there opportunities for meaning making here?’ And in cultural settings, ‘Are we attentive to accessibility for people from all different ranges of health and abilities?’”

Anne envisions art as water to pour meaning-making opportunities into the cultural and health systems. But she, too, has been deserted when she invites people to participate in art projects. In one instance, she invited older people living alone to participate in an art project that involved responding to creative prompts. The response: crickets. “What we decided

to do was not reference art at all,” Anne explained, “because the baggage and resistance to creativity and art-making was so tremendous that we decided to just say our invitation to participate was, ‘I have a question of the day, would you like to hear it?’” Then she got an overwhelming response.

There’s a part of me that subscribes to this code-switching tactic—calling our pilot an “intervention” when we’re talking to researchers, an “art project” when we’re talking to artists, “deep hanging out” when we’re trying to recruit participants. But part of me worries: how are we ever going to substantiate art if we can’t say it?

HOW DO WE UNPACK THE BAGGAGE THAT HAS LED PEOPLE TO DOUBT THEIR CREATIVE CAPACITY FOR SO LONG?

Won’t it always be hard to say? How do we unpack the baggage that has led people to doubt their creative capacity for so long?

SOMETIMES WHEN THE PARTS of the brain that block inhibition shut down, the impetus for unfiltered creativity and novelty comes online—the baggage is discarded. Every time I meet with Jane I find beauty and wonder, whether she’s constructing sculptures out of avocado sandwiches, party hats out of cat toys, or banana dances. Her creative self-expression is incredibly articulate. And I end up expressing myself, too, in ways I never have before.

My role in the pilot is to offer what Anne describes as “radical affirmation and demonstration of that affirmation of choices.” Anne calls this “proof of listening.” I call it

“validating.” It goes both ways: Jane and Joyce affirm and reflect—validate—me. It is a healing experience for all of us. One that motivates me to keep chipping away to create the world I want to grow old in, a world where I can play fully at the limits of what I can possibly do. A world where, if I have dementia or my loved one has dementia, people don’t disappear because they don’t know what to say or how to see us. Instead, they flock to us because what we’re doing in response to dementia is flourishing.

“The greatest joy of caregiving comes when someone else embraces my loved one.” Joyce writes. *“It is such a pleasure and liberation to witness that.”*

A couple days ago I received a text from Joyce. She and Jane have both had their vaccinations and they went out to breakfast with friends for the first time in a year. Joyce wrote: “We all witnessed Jane soak in all the social contact and come quite alive and present. Everyone made sure to enjoy

being with her, letting her hold their hands and wave at birds. It was fuckin cool!”

Through the text message I could hear Joyce’s voice rise above the caregiver drone. Like a diver suddenly emerging from the depths of a pool.

ROWENA RICHIE has been a dance theater-maker and performer in San Francisco for 25 years. She’s a member of For You, a performance collective, along with Erika Chong Shuch and Ryan Tacata. She’s also an Atlantic Fellow for Equity in Brain Health and an Encore.org Gen2Gen Innovation Fellow. Learn more about For You at foryouproductions.org. Learn more about GBHI at gbhi.org.

JANE and **JOYCE** have been together for 20 years. They were married in 2015 after returning to their San Francisco home from 10 years living in a small village north of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Jane is retired from teaching art at San Mateo High School. Joyce retired early from freelance court reporting and is Jane’s primary care partner.

MAKING AND NOT MAKING IN THE TIME OF COVID

In mid-December 2020, my friend and colleague Christy Funsch and I began a conversation about how to find a way to work together in creative practice through the geographical distance which are our current circumstances—she sheltering in place in Butler, Pennsylvania and me in San Francisco, California, the traditional land of the Lenni Lenape and Ramaytush Ohlone people, respectively (and respectfully. We support the work of [Sogorea Te Land Trust – Shuumi Land Tax](#) and encourage you to check them out).

Christy and I have had a working relationship since 2010 when I was a performer in her dance *White Girls for Black Power*. Since that time, our relationship has grown and included many hours of improvisational practice in the studio and in performance, inside and outside, as well as rich conversations and sharing of perspectives about creative practice.

BY AURA FISCHBECK AND CHRISTY FUNSCH

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PHOTO BY AURA FISCHBECK



FOR TWO ARTISTS WHO ARE SELF-PRODUCING EVENTS FOR THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITIES, THE NOTION OF HAVING A PRACTICE THAT NEGATED ANY KIND OF PRODUCT APPEALED—AT ONCE SUSTAINABLE AND RESTORATIVE.

We were set to be working together again throughout 2020, on Christy's new work *EPOCH*, which was scheduled to premiere at ODC Theater in San Francisco, in fall of 2020. Needless to say, this was rescheduled along with the multitude. As our adaptability was tested, our ability to function and approach process in the usual ways has been faced with increasing ambiguity. The need to reframe artistic practices has become paramount.

We wanted to find a way to work together but without the historically valued parameter of creating any type of product or production—no dance film, no choreography to hold onto and no performative component (maybe subconsciously invoking Yvonne Rainer's infamous *No Manifesto*). For two artists who are self-producing events for their local communities, the notion of having a practice that negated any kind of product appealed—at once sustainable and restorative. It spoke to embracing a formalism that is of this moment in time—at once rejecting productivity in a definitive way, but also forging a rigorous practice which asks for a specific level of commitment and durational scope. One that values “task over longing” and carving out time for research that acknowledges the changed world we inhabit.

We landed on the score for week 1 on 12/31/20 and began on 1/1/2021. Since that time we have been collaboratively creating scores and practicing a minimum of 5 days a week with a commitment to 3 months of practice. We are documenting through images, writings, drawings, sound recordings and video recordings. Our process has been to agree on the parameters at the start of each week, and share documentation on the last day through a shared “google folder.” Sometimes we are returning to things. Sometimes we choose slightly different areas of focus or interest, but they are always linked so that we can have the experience of being in this shared practice.

Some of our parameters for working with score have been:

- Unanchoring: a deliberateness that resists accumulating or culminating
- Coaches. Coaching: expanding through influence
- Chance procedures to determine focus and duration
- Observation as a state of receptivity: move while noticing. Receiving is an active state

- Practice sensing with the whole body at once/ multiple directions
- Connecting to rhythm in visual and aural fields
- Quantifiable data of latitudes, longitudes; distance travelled; direction; time of day and weather; Beaufort scale (this is a wind tracking system); cardinal directions; Perimeter/Horizon/Locus—all as a means of locating our individual worlds
- Track/name what emerges by making verbal lists, voice recordings, and/or maps
- Repeat and/or return (to place or directives) and find something new in the midst of ongoingness
- Let yourself be seen
- Shake up/shed/radicalize
- Forgiveness/failure

In the spirit of our non-productive approach, we are framing this article as a series of questions, which serves as a branching out of our continued conversation. We are using article writing to reveal more about our research and also to create more potential directions for future dialogue.

HOW and WHY

Aura Fischbeck: Why is a regular improvisational practice important (to you)?

Christy Funsch: It's the earliest way I made sense of the world, and is still the most meaningful way I have found to be in the world. It's not that it helps formulate thought, it's that it IS thought (thank you Susan Rethorst!). It's a crucial way of functioning. It's foundational.

AF: How has this practice affected/changed your SIP experience?

CF: Well, task is good for me. I was raised in a very task-based worker bee household, and I know how to function in that way. It's grounding for me—especially task that doesn't lead to product. The doing of it is its own reward. It's also a way for me to give a different kind of attention to the natural world here. The woods have been my safe spot, a place where I feel completely accepted. And that kind of acceptance makes possible a specific kind of action and risk-taking. The practice has not been as bright for me when I'm inside at home. Which is a bummer, because it is now on average about 25 degrees Fahrenheit outside!

AF: How do you find yourself relating to me in your/our practice through the distance?

CF: It's a boost for sure, and some of that boost is the not-so-simple realization that you're doing it. You're held to the same task. It's like we're co-workers. And in the sharing of data and documentation there's a language that's ours—we are co-authoring it as we practice. I find a lot of richness and mystery in the way minds work, and our minds work differently. I admire how you articulate your perceptions. I try on the words you use, I take them with me, almost like a puzzle of sorts, and if I start there in that thought process of deciphering, then I am led somewhere. It isn't as causal as “Oh! Now I know what she is talking about, I'll do that, too.” It's more like your thought ends and mine begins, or I'm distracted and that itself is a kind of continuance.

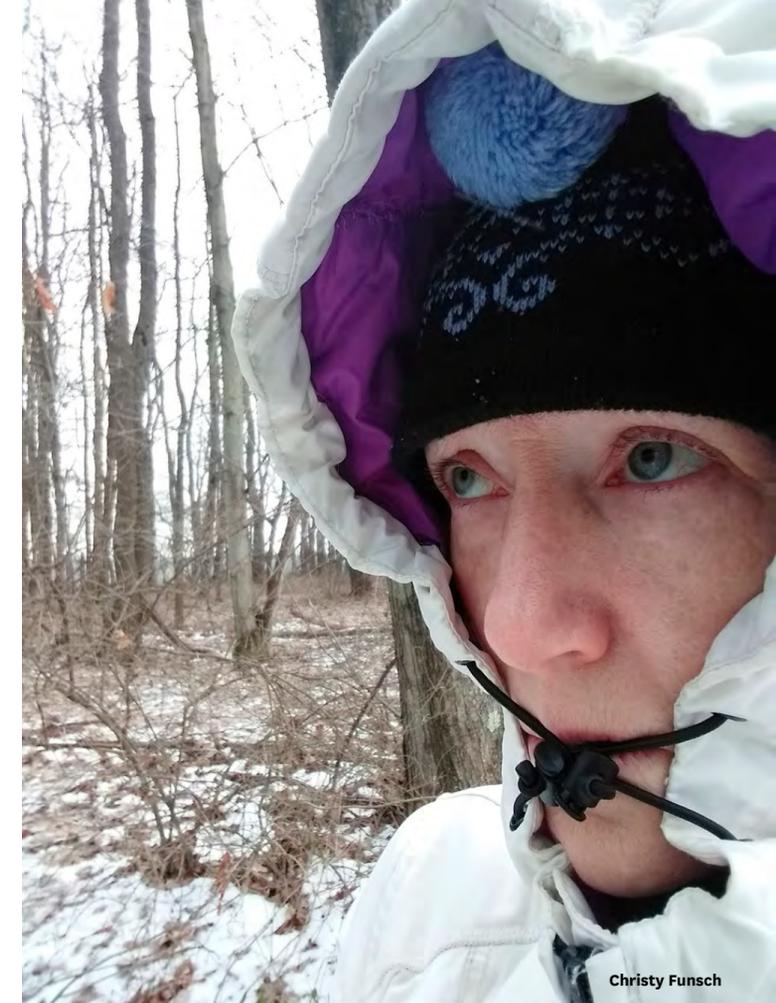
AF: I echo this appreciation for the way our minds work differently. I fascinate on how we might interpret the same set of parameters so differently. We've talked about “task” being enough. You coined this wonderful phrase “task over longing.” What does this mean?

CF: “Task over longing” reaches back to the brilliant Rowena Richie. A few years ago I was part of her piece *Dearly Gathered* which interrogated how capitalism engenders longing. Since then it's been on my mind and deeply informs my upcoming work *EPOCH*. As embodied in our score, I'm keenly aware of my longing when I am in the act of going to (my spot in) the woods. Then, as soon as, or even before I arrive, I feel free of desire. I go to the woods because it's part of my day. I think the frequency keeps me in task mode.

AF: Yes, definitely the frequency is a powerful element. And also how it can be something that you do even when you don't feel like doing it. It's both a comfort and a type of labor. I love the word “practice.” What does it mean to have a practice? And what are we practicing? As an improviser I have continually come to find my experience of improvisation as a practice of presence, or becoming present, or maybe it's “presence-ing.” I feel that so clearly in our current way of working. As though I sense the practice as a constant companion, like a steady hum or vibration, or some kind of benevolent spirit guide.

CF: “Practice as a constant companion” - Wow, yes! This reminds me of that song “Love Letters” (“I'm not alone in the night, when I can have all the love you write...”). How poignant this idea is during SIP. Who doesn't feel alone?

Part of what we are up to with this practice involves documentation. When I see your documentation I am struck by how substantial your practice seems. It's



Christy Funsch

that the documentation refers me to a larger, deep world of being in something. When and how do you choose to document?

AF: I think the documentation is usually something I want you to see or hear or something I want to be able to offer both of us to be able to know about or reference in our collection of data. Sometimes it's also just naming like “today I'm in/with the garbage” when I noticed that there was garbage strewn around the area where I was dancing. And so as a phrase it becomes recontextualized. So it's both about observing what's happening but it's also a practice of harvesting. I start with whatever parameters we have set for the particular week, and this tunes my attention in a particular way, tunes me to what I'm in relationship to. This could be visual, aural, spatial, conceptual, somatic, directional, etc. I think that's how the documentation “asks” to be included. It's a kind of “thinginess.” For example, with the sound recordings it started because I became very aware of the sound of my boots on the gravel I was dancing on and wanted you to be able to hear my dance, versus see it.

CF: “How the documentation asks to be included”—yes to that! That, to me, is a continuation of not valuing the product but instead continuing to notice what is there.



PHOTO BY CHRISTY FUNSCH

SPACE and SITE

CF: Regarding context and space, once you mentioned the experience of taking the “private life” of the studio setting into the public, and that this was a reverse (converse?) of the pandemic making your private space at home public via remote teaching. Can you say more about this flip of space? And can you say more about “letting yourself be seen” as a prompt for you?

AF: I have over this SIP time become increasingly aware of how, by teaching remotely from my living room, the space that I live in has now been opened up as a public space. People can see my stuff, my partner wandering into the kitchen to get a snack, etc. The formality of going to the neutral space of a studio has been replaced by a sort of virtual entering of people into my private space and I into theirs. It’s fascinating. At the beginning of SIP I started, like many people, with trying to dance in my living room, but the sense of confinement was starting to feel crushing. Then you and I had a conversation and you said you had started to dance outside and I decided I needed to be brave like you and find some way to be moving in open space. I found the soccer field in the Golden Gate park as a first place to

feel comfortable enough to just dance by myself and be seen. I have had many experiences of improvising outside with other people, but the leap to dancing outside alone was something else. So part of my work now is going to various locations and letting my experience be in part about the challenge of letting myself be seen in what feels like an exposed state, and yes, I am also seeing. I work on allowing the difficulty of this to be included. Sometimes I can barely do it, and sometimes I feel totally unconcerned with whether anyone is paying attention to me.

CF: Do you approach the sites differently?

AF: It’s very pragmatic. I have a few spots close to my house that feel safe. Two of them are on the USF campus and the other is a parking ramp across the street that isn’t very busy. I think more so than approaching the locations differently, it’s that each day is different - how many people are around, what is the weather like, what is my energy level. I try to stay in a state of observing and doing, and lately it has felt like something between being and performing. Duration is also a thing— sometimes I set a timer, and sometimes I tell myself to work as long as it takes to feel a change or shift of energy.

CF: Say more about working until you feel a shift in energy.

AF: Yes, this is a big and actual experience. Because of all the screen time I have a profound experience of shifting away from it and I’m usually doing our practice at the end of that screen time day. So it’s such a needed change. And it comes on slowly, like at first I don’t feel like doing anything, but I know I have to do it (like brushing my teeth) and so I go and I find a spot and begin . . . and I think I know I feel a change when I feel I become part of the environment almost, that’s when I feel the biggest shift. I don’t always get there, but when I do it’s very restorative. It feels both cellular and chemical.

AF: You’re in a place with real winter weather. Dancing outside in snow, and frigid temperatures. How is your sense of perception affected?

CF: I grew up in upstate New York so I have roots in the bodily discomfort and psychological dread of winter. The reduction in access. And I am overwhelmed with nostalgia for and memories of winter and seasonal drama. I appreciate having to adapt. We don’t have to do much of that in Northern California. I recognize, acutely, the privileges of access I have. I have a functioning body, a job, an apartment, and a car. So I can be in my apartment moving, I can walk out the door and be in my (safe) neighborhood, and I can get in my car and go to the woods. The actual physical difficulties in working outside are welcome challenges. It’s a matter of How more than What and this for me is a comfort zone because of my allergic reaction away from content. I have to prepare and watch weather and tread carefully and push through the weight of snow to get to my spot in the woods. The quietude is addicting. You can practically bite into it. The sculpturing of tree branches by snow and ice is breath-taking. Again, I have nothing to add to the environment, and everything to receive from it by observing. Because of the cold, I can’t sit or be in stillness for too long and so the prompt of doing while observing has been rich. I can see the ruin I bring to my spot by the marks I leave in the snow and the earth. I forgive myself for this.

SCORES and POTENTIALS

AF: What’s your approach to score making?

CF: I realize I am cautious that scores do not become content. I like the word “prompt” instead as it’s like an initial push. I sometimes think of a score as something I have to follow, complete, or fulfill. I use improvisation as a way to change my perception, heighten my perception, and attend to perception. Often I find a prompt or score is a starting place to frame or anchor the shift in perception I am seeking. And I appreciate how words frame action. I have been enjoying our lists and collection of words. I am having fun choosing words at random, using

them to frame the practice, then re-imagining them as I document or write about the session.

AF: I often think of a score as a sort of web or a map, a way to hone my attention and perception but also a way to track particulars. And I both like and push against having something to follow, complete or fulfill. Again I think it comes back to task, and the rigor of ongoingness that we are inviting. If the “mind is a muscle” (Thanks again Yvonne Rainer) then dancing is certainly a state of mind. I’m loving the journey of it! Grateful for it.

CF: Are there ways this score, this practice, could involve others? How do you see that happening beyond SIP?

AF: I would love to continue to evolve this research into a cycle of score-based performance work. I love the way working with a score to develop performance work gives individual agency inside the creative process, while still placing the collaborators in a shared world or context. I can imagine the language and prompts we have developed through this practice being repurposed in a variety of capacities. I have visions of being in spaces and performers/ audience/community being there and roaming about and everyone somehow being co-creators. I have no idea how it’s going to go post-quarantine but I do have some instincts. How about you? Has this been generative for you??

CF: I would say it has been generative in terms of the unique thoughts and perceptual shifts that emerge from the moving moment. And so, yes, in the doing of this practice I find my decision-making lays itself bare. Clarity may be fleeting but potentials arise. I trust the inevitability of this completely and bring this trust into the working room.

In conclusion, we are not concluding anything really. As we write this, our practice is still continuing, and it brings to mind the many dances and creative acts that are going on all over the world. Something about having to find ways to connect with one another through the distance conjures a longing and there is a sweetness to that.

CHRISTY FUNSCH formed Funsch Dance in 2002 and has since been presented nationally and internationally. She holds an MFA and a Laban Movement Analysis Certification. In 2015 she taught her improvisational practice 100 Days Score at ImpulSTANZ, and she became the first woman to be granted permission to perform Daniel Nagrin’s 1965 solo, *Path*. In 2019 she was a Fulbright Scholar at Lisbon’s *Escola Superior de Dança* in 2019. funchdance.org

AURA FISCHBECK is a San Francisco based dance artist, movement educator and writer. In 2008 she formed Aura Fischbeck Dance. Her work seeks to create performance events which investigate and communicate the body’s intelligence and reflect the complexity of the contemporary human experience. She is currently working on her first self published book of scores for creative process and practice, entitled “Shapeshifter.” She holds a B.A. in dance and poetry from the Naropa University and is slated to begin pursuit of an MFA this summer, through University of the Arts in Philadelphia. aurafischbeckdance.org

A MOVEMENT FOR MOVING COMMUNITIES

by PRIYA DAS AND USHA SRINIVASAN



Dances of Devotion, Dancers: (left) Charya Burt, (right) Lavanya Ananth

Folklorico dancers of Ensemble Folclórico Colibri and Indian dancers of Xpressions



Conference of the Birds, Dancers: Kathak Dancers from Antara Asthaji Dance, Hula dancers from halau napuokamokihanaoha

Mosaic America, Folklorico dancers of Ensemble Folclórico Colibri and Indian dancers of Xpressions

Typically seen as a form of individual expression, dance can be a form of worship, a powerful tool for passing on ritual and tradition through generations. Dance traditions, movements and songs that get passed down through generations are typically those that originate as expressions of everyday life. Nomadic tribes used dance and song to make a home wherever they were. Dance in America began with the Indigenous peoples, as a spiritual offering to the celestials, and played a vital role in rituals and ceremonies. It also served as a medium of learning about nature and ancestors. The first waves of

immigrants to the United States were from European nations, fleeing war and economic hardship. While their music and dance were distinct from each other, they originated in an era when a clear distinction existed between the dances and music of “common folk” and those of “high society” such as ballroom dance and symphonies. These were a sign of upward mobility, governed by strict etiquette and formality. Due to their sponsorship by royalty and aristocracy, these dance forms reflected the ideas and propaganda of their sponsors. The porous nature of borders helped these art forms to proliferate and became prevalent throughout Europe before being

imported into the United States. This inevitably led to some artistic “cultured,” mainstreamed homogeneity. Then as now, imitation was considered the sincerest form of flattery, and the hope of upward mobility went hand in hand with the discernment and appreciation for the arts. At some point in this evolutionary pattern, dance came to mean a skill, a talent, a study used to excel in movement; an art, rather than the practice of a culture or community. The waves of immigration that followed World-War II, especially after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1965 attracted a more diverse group of immigrants, those who had their own dance forms that dated back millennia and differed greatly in their music, costume, and expression

from those dance forms that came from Europe. But these non-European immigrants like us have found limited “mainstream” interest in their arts. As first generation immigrants from India who learned Bharatanatyam as a hobby, we live among a diaspora rich with a multitude of classical music and dance traditions. Though all Indian classical dances take inspiration from the same text, their practitioners in Silicon Valley create and perform to limited audiences. It was to address this fragmentation that [Sangam Arts](#) was founded in 2013. Our initial focus was on consolidating and expanding audiences for Classical Indian dance in Silicon Valley. Given the common threads that bind

PHOTOS BY: (ABOVE AND OPPOSITE PAGE TOP RIGHT) SWAGATO BASUMALLICK PHOTOS BY: (TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM) PRABHAKAR LIBRAHANAN

these forms including a rich repertoire rooted in Hindu spirituality and mythology, curating presentations featuring multiple Indian classical dance forms was straightforward. In 2014, Sangam Arts presented a ground-breaking showcase of all eight classical Indian dance forms at the [San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival](#).

OUR EVOLUTION FROM SANGAM TO MOSAIC

The Ethnic Dance Festival showcase experience brought two important realizations –

- 1) The richness and beauty of dance wasn't unique to the Terpsichorean talents of the Indian diaspora. The Bay Area was home to many culturally distinct communities with vibrant dance forms being practiced at the highest levels – albeit within their cultural silos.

- 2) Festivals are a wonderful platform for acknowledgement and representation of cultures. However, creating collaborative works that tell meaningful stories for audiences with varying degrees of familiarity with the art forms and fostering a lasting connection between the communities they represent requires greater investment of time, money and purposeful curation.

This awareness led us to our foray into intercultural presentation *Dances of Devotion* featuring traditional Cambodian classical-dance master artist [Charya Burt](#) and renowned Indian-Bharatanatyam exponent [Lavanya Ananth](#). Then came *Conference of the Birds* in 2016, in partnership with [Enacte Arts](#), which brought together over 60 dancers and actors from 12 traditions ranging from Folklorico and Kathak to Hula and Aztec dance in a multicultural, multidisciplinary rendition of the Sufi allegory scripted by the legendary [Jean-Claude Carrière](#).

The lead-up to the 2016 elections laid bare the tatters in the social

fabric of our nation. Hateful, racist rhetoric, aimed at exploiting xenophobia for political gain, highlighted the ugly reality that the all-American identity was bestowed on Whites by default while all others were hyphenated-Americans, forced to reckon with the question “Where are you really from?”

We felt a sense of urgency to use the power of the arts to foster cultural cohesion.

So we wondered, what if we expanded the scope of Sangam's work to include all cultures that have made their home in Silicon Valley and all the art forms on which each culture thrived? Suddenly, the potential for wider appeal, for oneness, and for meaningful interaction between cultures, seemed more attainable. We trusted in the power of the arts to stem the tide of divisiveness and began a new grassroots initiative under Sangam Arts called Mosaic.

A mosaic is a pattern made of stone, tile or glass produced by arranging together small pieces of material called tesserae. The absence of even a single tessera, either by error or omission leaves a mosaic unmanifested. We believe that in the gloriously diverse and culture-rich Bay Area, significant cohesion is possible through deliberately commissioned intercultural works of art: works that do not aim to erase nor exclude distinctions, but instead, allow them to softly grow and gain familiarity together, to fill an otherwise yawning gap, and forming a mosaic that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Mosaic programming uses the arts to help create a sense of belonging for all who live, work, play, and pray in our community. While all of us appreciate the diversity in Silicon Valley, there remain huge pockets of segregated lives. Not everybody is included in the same way. Economic opportunity has made us disregard histories and has even contributed to the displacement of several communities. For example, residents who have

come here from all over the world may have little to no knowledge of the indigenous populations who still live among us, and struggle to preserve and promote their cultural traditions. We believe that culturally rooted art forms can be used to tell these hidden stories and to connect the many people and cultures in our community.

Merely living in a community and sharing roads, schools and municipal services does not create a sense of belonging. It takes meaningful and repeated interactions in community settings and an accurate, shared understanding of history of the community and its peoples to cultivate belonging and foster a common vision for the future. Mosaic's approach is to draw on the rich artistic and cultural assets of communities to create collaborative, intercultural performances that prioritize authenticity and co-creation.

It is encouraging to see that we are not alone in this approach. [The Long Time Project](#) believes in building our capacity to think and plan for long term futures (beyond a lifetime) and sees arts and culture as uniquely positioned to inspire transformative shifts in people's attitudes and behaviors. The five long-term paths identified by the Long Time Project align with our work and include deep time, multi-generational emotions, legacy stance, mortality consciousness, and interconnected worldviews. These pathways speak to our goals of connecting audiences with place and history, moving beyond diversity to inclusion and belonging, and developing shared visions for the future.

MAKING THE MOSAIC

So what does this look like in practice? One of our first productions under the Mosaic Silicon Valley umbrella was *RaasLorico*, a collaborative work between Indian folk-dance (Raas) artist [Srividya Eashwar](#), (Artistic Director of Xpressions) and Mexican Folklorico artist [Arturo Magana](#)

([Artistic Director of Ensemble Folclórico Colibrí](#)). This was a commissioned piece with the goal to connect these traditions authentically. Mosaic sought to build a bridge between the audiences, to connect the communities, and to reflect the connection onstage. *RaasLorico* would showcase both Raas and Folklorico separately, then bring the two together with all dancers on stage. There was some trepidation at first about safely intertwining two traditions, one that required bare feet and the other, hard-soled boots. Once the dancers got together, however, the fear subsided with the common rhythms of Raas and Folklorico emerging together as a heartbeat for their collaboration. Once the commonality was found, trust in each other grew, and safety was felt in a number of ways—not just for dancers' feet, but safety to share cultural traditions as well. Audience members would feel the same sense of cohesion and the performance brought neighbors together in a way they had never connected before. After the success of *RaasLorico*, Srividya and Arturo have continued working together, offering workshops in cross-cultural dance, and producing more performances for a new shared audience.

Notably, since the authenticity of the traditions was maintained, everybody felt empowered to claim their whole identity. This was not a work of fusion, where each participant was forced to compromise or contort their practice in a hurried attempt to meet perceived audience preferences. Rather, this was a true coming together of distinct parts which retained their identities while creating a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts and quintessentially American.

Though it is easy to assume that successes like this will continue to grow, it is not without potential for conflict. Arturo's Ensemble Folklorico Colibrí sits at the intersection of LatinX and LGBTQ+ identities and promotes the pride of both through Mexican folklorico dance. Knowing that anti-LGBTQ+

sentiment exists for many in the diaspora, there was great potential for tension in *RaasLorico* and subsequent collaborations. We exist within that sort of risk all the time, and believe it is important to confront it. In a sense, it is this tension that drives us to create in the way that we do. We want to break down barriers to find a shared humanity with an underlying deep understanding and respect for all cultures and their histories while working toward a future where we all support each other.

Mosaic continues to meet crises of identity in whatever forms they appear. We are now working with Cambodian dancer Charya Burt to create *Beautiful Dark*, a collaborative dance piece with live original music that explores the social and psychological impact of colorism including the social phenomenon of skin lightening and the physical, emotional, and cultural implications it has for persons of color.

This work is informed by Charya's personal experiences growing up in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, when she was derisively labeled srey k'mau (black girl) and how that colored her own perceptions of beauty and self-worth. Her collaborative partners, Vietnamese composer and musician [Van Anh Vo](#), poet [Shikha Malaviya](#), and Odissi dancer [Niharika Mohanty](#) all provide accounts of colorism within their communities as explorations within the piece. These women's unique voices and experiences will come together onstage in the intentionally racially stereotyped beauty salon to directly illustrate how colorism, influenced by institutional practices, colonialism, popular culture, and relentless advertisements of skin treatments, impacts personal and cultural ideals of beauty and the formation of identity.

We are now living through one of the largest racial justice uprisings in recorded history, reckoning with prejudices and oppressions that are rooted in anti-blackness. Colorism is just one of many expressions of anti-blackness

that affect people from all cultures. As this piece is specific to perspectives of women from South and Southeast Asia, we hope *Beautiful Dark* will have broader implications for addressing anti-blackness within non-Black communities of color. We want those who have experienced the pain of colorism to see themselves in this work, and we want to contribute to healing that pain.

While the Bay Area is at the cutting edge of the demographic shifts that have resulted simultaneously in rapid diversification and segregation, other parts of America are sure to experience the trend. We believe our work in Silicon Valley can offer a template for other communities facing similar trends. We have chosen to meet this moment by relaunching Sangam Arts as Mosaic America. It has been an incredible journey from being a dance-based organization focused on expanding audiences for artists, to a movement for moving communities across America from diversity to belonging. We welcome you to join our movement at [mosaicamerica.org](#)

USHA SRINIVASAN Usha Srinivasan is the co-founder and president of Mosaic America. Usha has served on the Santa Clara City Cultural Commission and on the Board of World Arts West, the producer of the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival. An alumna of Multicultural Arts Leadership Institute, she was selected by Knight Foundation as a Creative Community Fellow in 2016.

Prior to founding Sangam Arts, Usha worked in the hi-tech industry for nearly fifteen years. She holds a Master's degree in Electrical Engineering from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY and an MBA from Stanford University's Graduate School of Business.

PRIYA DAS is co-founder and Vice President of Programming Strategy for Mosaic America. She sets the creative direction for Mosaic programming and is responsible for artist relations, and community outreach.

A trained Bharatanatyam dancer, Priya is also an arts critic and columnist. She is an alumna of Multicultural Arts Leadership Institute (MALI) and SVCreates' MindShare program. Priya works as a Consultant at an international eCommerce company in Silicon Valley and holds degrees in Business and Computer Science.

The authors would like to thank Mosaic volunteers Kris Bifulco and Karpagam Rajagopal for their contributions.



PHOTO BY WILLE WILKINER

SOFT POWER

OPEN AND SHARING
WITH STRENGTH

U NCOMFORTABLE SWEAT DRIPS under my arms, my cheeks burning as I speak up on the panel. I challenge an application because it's unclear how the applicant belonged to a marginalized BIPOC community and why they share stories of this community as a cis-white person. Why do I, as a person who regularly advocates for equity, have so much discomfort confronting equity issues in our dance field?

I often wonder if this unsettling is something I'm supposed to get a grip on? As a parent, I frequently hear educators speaking about students learning to regulate their bodies. As a dancer, I feel I should have better control, yet these uninvited physiological reactions startle me. Even though I am a member of [Dancing Around Race](#), [Women of Color in the Arts \(WOCA\)](#), my small group Power Cirque from APAP LFP, and I've gotten to work through residencies like *Aesthetic Shift*, the physical disruption continues to have the same intensity.

During college, I had to evaluate whether I would want to be the token Asian dancer in a predominantly white or Black company or dance with a predominantly Asian company. The reality of this was reflected in my career when I began dancing with [STEAMROLLER Dance Company](#). STEAMROLLER is a queer loud dance company of mostly Asian Americans where rehearsals brimmed with crying laughter, mockery, and sweaty cheeks. Jesselito Bie was our choreographer or who we called ‘fearless leader’ but there was no traditional hierarchy. The collective collaboration was never defined through by-laws but I felt safe. In fact, during STEAMROLLER rehearsals, and the outings following, we would mercilessly tease one another as only siblings can do. I would blush from the impact as the zinging could sting, but I couldn’t deny the truth embedded in those words or the love where it came from.

During those weekend rehearsals on sidewalks, and meals shared with gravel and glass on our clothes and in our hair, we also shared the challenges of being dancers in the Bay Area which boasted a diverse dancer community but with much less diversity in institutional and choreographic leadership, a fact still true today.

Confrontations are challenging and yet I demand further equity in our field. Thankfully, affinity groups help us to better understand how to harmoniously work with personal and communal reactivity. Can I feel valid when making an observation? Can we, as a community, ask one another to do better without fear of repercussion, being labeled as difficult, or dismissed? Instead, can we call each other up to be better allies and community members?

I’ve also been thinking more about why was STEAMROLLER rehearsing on sidewalks when my rehearsals with white choreographers were in studios? STEAMROLLER’s lack of funds to pay for studio space is the practical answer. And yet, as I’ve participated on grant panels it’s made me ask questions like: Is it hard to fund culturally specific work? Is Asian American dance mostly supported through cultural equity efforts and cultural preservation interests? Are other cultural groups having this issue? I wonder if the aesthetics of soft power and collaborative leadership are fundable for white folks, but not for us?

I’ve become aware of artists calling themselves the Asian Babe Gang (ABG)*, and it made me nostalgic for my STEAMROLLER days. Maybe it’s their shared pleasure in art-making, collaborative spirit, and the fact they meet in their homes. Or is it because they kind of look like me in my twenties? Or maybe it’s because the ABG collaboration *tube top manifesto*, a video to express



the revolutionary potential of tube tops as the site of the revolution, was made specifically for me? If I am their audience, they are making work for someone like me, shouldn’t they be fundable?

I caught up with Asian Babe Gang (Malia Byrne, Kim Ip, Rose Huey, Nina Wu, Aiano Nakagawa, and Melissa Lewis) to learn more about their shared work.

How would you describe Asian Babe Gang?

MALIA: Asian Babe Gang (ABG) is six friends within the Asian diaspora who found each other through various dance projects and started unpacking our shared and individual experiences. We just kept hanging out and gravitating towards each other, even after the projects we were working on ended. I think engaging with race and identity can feel really isolating, and I personally was seeking witnesses and empathy in that process. We also know that Asian people have been strategically used by the forces of white supremacy to reinforce anti-Blackness and we strive to coalition build with our Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other friends towards mutual liberation. The name ABG wrecks the “Asian baby girl” trope, which is rooted in the appropriation of Blackness and also depends on the monolithic stereotype of Asian women being a certain way.

KIM: ABG is a group of dance artists, multi-media artists, healers (Aiano+Melissa), a mathematician (Nina), writers, poets, stand up comedian (Malia), vertical dancer/

DURING COLLEGE, I HAD TO EVALUATE WHETHER I WOULD WANT TO BE THE TOKEN ASIAN DANCER IN A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE OR BLACK COMPANY OR DANCE WITH A PREDOMINANTLY ASIAN COMPANY

flyer extraordinaire (Rose) and I could PROBABLY GO ON. Each of us has been in someone else’s rehearsal process or sharing our cultural experiences at a Dialogue (on Diaspora) at Nina’s Home (pre-pandemic). What I noticed in dance rehearsals with other Asian folks was how comforted I felt having discussions about our bodies, our herstories in ways that resonated with each other rather than just acknowledgement.

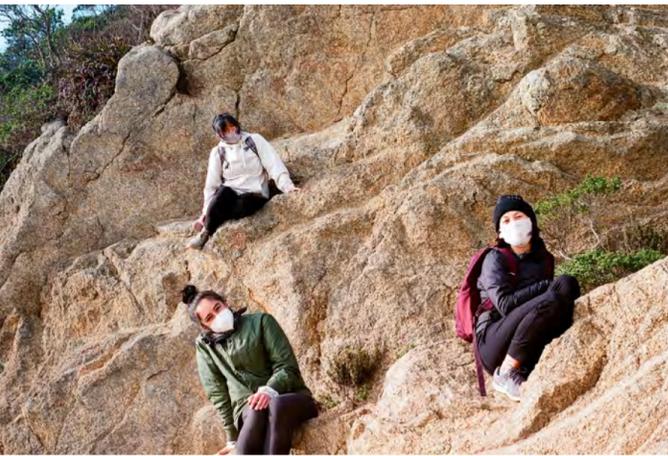
AIANO: Echoing everything already said, and adding that, for me, ABG is also about learning how to build solidarity within the Asian diaspora. Within the United States, we are categorized into a monolith of “Asian American,” but there is a complex history of colonization, imperialism, and war between many of our ancestral homes (Japan, China, Philippines, Korea, etc.). For me, ABG is an attempt to begin to explore the question, “How do we build solidarity against white-supremacy, while also facing the complex reality that as a Japanese person, my ancestors were responsible for colonization, genocide, and imperial violence against the ancestors and ancestral lands of my current comrades?” White-supremacy runs deep and we must address its manifestations at every level.

What do you think of when you think of Asian American dance work? Can you name a major Asian American dance company?

MELISSA: In my experience, I didn’t encounter ‘Asian American dance’ until my twenties - when I’d moved to San Francisco. I distinctly remember Googling “Asian American Dance SF” ... Lenora Lee Dance and Lily Cai Dance Company came up in my search. Yay, it existed here! But I really had to seek it out myself. Another big moment for me was when Shen Wei came from New York to show *Undivided Divided* at YBCA. There are so many predecessors to ABG that we wish to name, acknowledge, connect with, learn from, recruit into ABG; but the followup observation is: there are not that many ‘mainstream’ examples. That’s where the white supremacy of the dance world shows up—keeping us in competition or isolation from each other instead of in relationship with.

KIM: As a youngin’ growing up between New Zealand and the United States, Asian American Dance Work was traditional Chinese Ribbon Dancing and anything that was on a variety show that my mum would watch on the television. I remember Asian American Dance Work seeming

PHOTOS BY MALIA BYRNE



grand and something out of my reach. Then in my teens, I recall watching “The Jabbawockeez” perform and win the first season of America’s Best Dance Crew on MTV which greatly changed my perception of Asian American Dance work—realising that the dance work Asians performed wasn’t limited to traditional Asian dance forms.

It wasn’t until college that I could tell you the names of major Asian American Dance Companies: Lenora Lee Dance here in San Francisco and Shen Wei Dance Company in New York.

MALIA: wowwww kim, I so appreciate this reference. It makes me realize that I grew up idolizing Melody Lacayanga-- the season 1 runner up of So You Think You Can Dance. That must have been the first time I saw an Asian, let alone Filipinx, person occupying any explicitly “American” dance space, or probably any dance space at all. I also have a memory of going to see a Shen Wei performance when i was in high school. It’s funny because someone i looked up to as a young dancer from the local dance community had joined the company at that point (a white person) and looking back, i was excited by this aesthetic that was distinctively not western, yet there were mostly/only white (and tall, lithe) people onstage. So i was like, “where do i fit into this...?”

AIANO: I also grew up with very little Asian-American representation in dance and the representation I did have was usually within the context of an Asian dancer fitting into the white, eurocentric aesthetic of a tall, thin, cis-het, dainty feminine dancer. Moving to the bay was also my first time seeing Asian-American dancers who were addressing issues directly related to their experience as dancers, not ignoring it. However, I was always craving to see more of myself, as a queer, big bodied, non-binary person, represented. I am still craving that, which is why I’m so grateful ABG is making space for that.

Where did you grow up and were you involved in a cultural/arts/athletics/program?

KIM: I grew up in Wellington, New Zealand and eventually moved to Cupertino, California where I wanted to play AYSO Soccer with all the other kids, but my mum was restrictive about the activities I participated in. She wanted me to participate in more “feminine forms” of activity warning me that soccer would make my legs too muscular. So with lots of negotiating, I was finally able to take a dance class once a week and join the cross country team in Middle School. Jokes on my mum because my legs still got muscular! By high school, I moved to Honolulu, Hawai’i, and naturally as an angsty teenager, participated in theatre in High School and in Chinatown (the arts district) doing long form improv theatre and Hawai’i Shakespeare Festival. Hawai’i is unique in that Asians are the majority, so I saw representation all around me in the arts.

MELISSA: I grew up in Massachusetts performing with a traditional Chinese Dance group, but that space didn’t ever acknowledge the wholeness of our individual experi-

ences. Instead of being a space to support each other and process our identities, I feel it actually reinforced some hierarchical, ableist values of beauty while trying to ‘preserve’ Chinese culture (which isn’t inherently a bad thing). I made some of my closest friendships there and learned a lot of Chinese technique, but I don’t think I got any closer to understanding myself in that space. Younger me longed to be accepted, but I was always struggling with my sense of belonging (as a biracial white and Chinese person often read as white).

NINA: Somehow, my Chinese parents ended up in southwest Florida, where I was often the only Asian person anywhere I went. That led to a lot of internalized racism, resentment and shame towards my heritage, and a very strong desire to be white. (I distinctly remember wanting to look like Shirley Temple and role play the Pink Power Ranger, refusing to play the Yellow Ranger.) I remember my friends growing up “complimenting” me saying that they sometimes forgot that I was Asian (because I was so good at “playing

“I’M CURIOUS IN EXPLORING HOW THIS BODY-FIRST CONNECTION IMPACTS HOW WE BUILD STRATEGY TOWARDS COLLECTIVE LIBERATION AND DISMANTLING WHITE SUPREMACY.”—Rose

whiteness”). Being enrolled in dance studios starting at the age of 8 and onward, I took on more white goals in my dancing (ballet, pointe, lyrical, jazz, and a season of clogging LOL) where the messages of whiteness, gender performance/roles, and body politics were only reinforced. So all the dance that I’ve pursued as an adult has come with an underlying imposter syndrome of wondering if this dance is really *for me*, and if I belong in that space. This is all to say that it’s been my work in adulthood to undo all that internalized white- supremacy and learn how to honor, build connection, and fall in love with being Chinese, while also challenging and undoing the oppressive parts of that identity (anti-Blackness, body-shaming, misogyny, homophobia, etc.).

AIANO: I grew up in Portland, OR and attended Japanese Immersion school from 3rd – 8th grade. I had access to learning Japanese language and *parts* of Japanese history. However, while I was part of this program, I always viewed Japanese culture as “other” because the rest of my life was in white, American culture. I saw my “Asianness” as a point of shame and difference until I was in my third year of college and began to learn about systemic racism.

I’ve noticed that Asian Babe Gang harnesses their soft power in the videos and IG posts. What are you interested in exploring? Do you also define this as soft power? Or is it something entirely different?

MALIA: I love that. I definitely identify with soft power, personally. I’m not sure that’s what I call it in my brain though, because I find softness inherently powerful even though it might seem like an oxymoron. there’s definitely a tenderness with which we approach this work and each other.

ROSE: Agreed! There is a tenderness in the way we approach each other and any work we do. At the heart of ABG, we are all dancers with personal creative practices. For most of us, the entry point into being in relationship with each other was through movement - a rehearsal or dance class. We met each other as bodies before anything else. I’m curious in exploring how this body-first connection impacts how we build strategy towards collective liberation and dismantling white supremacy. It feels like a powerful entry point and place to build foundation from.

MELISSA: Yes, tenderness as an approach. And it goes so far beyond the ‘femme’ association of softness, I think. We also collectively have a mixture of martial arts training, carpentry, outdoor wilderness skills, etc... and are curious about what it means to embody strength, directness and power in addition to softness. Maybe it’s an ability to be flexible, fluid, and adaptable to a multitude of modes and ‘powers.’

NINA: I appreciate the naming and attribution of soft power to ABG because as Malia and Rose mentioned, it is how we tend to each other as friends and collaborators. I also second Melissa’s idea that we’re also trying to explore, practice, re-mix, and re-define power. I think it’s especially important work as Asian femmes where we’ve historically been seen as and expected to be soft. And while we’ve been able to claim power through softness (which is a potent and radical way to be), are we also allowed to access power through more “hard” means? (or whatever soft power is opposite to; and without furthering any harmful oppression) More broadly, I like grappling with how we can continue to bring nuance and complexity to ideas of power.

KIM: Yayoi you and I spoke about this soft power over our video call a few weeks back—I really loved hearing that so much. I felt very comforted in knowing that you could see it in ABG and the ways in which we try to guide each other in a horizontally integrated collective. I agree with what has been said above about how we are trying to evolve what “soft power” can look like. There is strength in being adaptive and flexible but there is absolute power in recognising when it no longer serves you and the group; we try to treat and hear each other with softness, and recognise that this soft power is to hold an understanding for each other in our respective lives and capacities as part of ABG.

Can I join Asian Babe Gang? Is it exclusive?

MALIA: We’re still figuring out this question I think but fundamentally ABG is not exclusive. There’s a clear need from the community to have spaces to be seen and heard in our Asianness and all the intersections therein and so that’s the space we aim to create and offer to who-

“THERE IS NO PERFECT MOMENT TO SHARE. IF YOUR HEART IS BEATING FAST, TAKE IT AS A SIGN: YOU HAVE SOMETHING IMPORTANT TO SAY THAT SOMEONE NEEDS TO HEAR.” —Melissa

ever needs it (while specifically centering the experiences of queer people, femmes, women, nonbinary and trans folks, and dancers/artists). When we were deciding on our name, it was exciting to include ‘babe’ in it because then we claim babe-ness along with Asianness. So I kind of feel like if you are Asian and self identify as a babe then you’re in ABG. And that being said, it’s also important to have this container between the six of us where we’re actively deepening our relationships to our lineages and each other, because what we learn through that commitment is ultimately what we have to offer the community at large.

ROSE: So far, we work from a place of attending to what is needed among the six of us and then turning focus towards our larger community. Currently, we are building our collective foundation, deepening our trust and clarifying our visions and dreams. We are also still in the middle of the pandemic, which has caused us to slow down and reevaluate how we can show up and how we want to be showing up for each other.

Why is an AADA (Asian American Dance Affinity) group important to you?

KIM: This group is important to me because it identifies a group of Asian Artists at various points in their careers who want to nurture/support artists like me. Conversely there is a lot to learn from each other as the challenges that younger generations of artists face are similar and some of the challenges are very different—one being that the economy around art-making in the 90s is very different than the last 5 years in the Bay Area. AADA is an organisation that can affirm Asian American artists and support them in their pursuit of creation or supporting longevity in our careers. In the past, the momentum in my work is driven by a residency or my putting aside finances to produce work. I would like to see how our Asian Artist community can grow through affirmative spaces/support systems.

MELISSA: I distinctly remember this small moment a few of us shared in a rehearsal process for Clarissa Ko’s ‘five feet dance’ — we all had a collective realization that NONE of us had never been in a creative process with 100% Asian Diaspora collaborators. I return to this simple moment (that turned into hours of followup discus-

sion) often because it reminds me how important it is to build support and capacity from an internal, affinity place (i.e. with other Asian Americans)—in order to step up in coalition with others, as Malia is saying.

NINA: I think you know the answer to this question the moment you’re in any affinity group/space (whether it’s by race, sexuality, gender identity, parenting status, whatever it is. In this case, it is queer Asian femme dance artists). Echoing Melissa’s memory of being brought together and sharing space and process for the first time in five feet dance, the absence of feeling othered in a contemporary dance space was very striking. By removing just that one layer of whiteness, there’s a sense of release and permission to let go (of performing, accommodating, proving that I belong, assimilating). And then, once you see what that’s like, you can’t unsee it and you realize how important it is to nourish your self, identity, lineage, and connection to ancestors. And then building and feeding into a larger AADA community feels like a natural extension, so we may see/be seen, heal, process, interrogate, challenge, build, share resources/history, and surface our connective tissue that exists within this specific slice of identity.

What is your best group agreement?

ROSE: “I am responsible for myself, my reactions, my own needs” “show up however you need, however feels best.” “crying is okay!”

MELISSA: “There is no perfect moment to share. If your heart is beating fast, take it as a sign: you have something important to say that someone else needs to hear.”

KIM: Our group agreement: come as you are with the parts of yourself that you are ready and/or want to share with the group. This is a space where you can ask questions, make mistakes, and not worry about failing or being wrong. There is a space here for you to be held. Our group agreement is a living agreement.

How do you want to show up for each other?

ROSE: With ferocious tenderness. with love. listening to our own and each others’ capacities. Asking for what we need, want, and dream of. Deep, active listening and patience. Maintaining check-ins and communication through ups, downs and inbetweens. encouraging and supporting each others’ imaginations. holding each other after a hard day or a sweaty dance class. Listening to our ancestors and those who have come before.

MELISSA: I see this image of us all wrapping and eating dumplings together. Nourishing each other, using our hands, in motion together, with enough abundance to spare and share with others. As a chosen family, with constant invitations to each bring our unique gifts into our work together. With joy, lightness, and deep trust.

MALIA: With the capacity to really see each other in each new moment and with trust that it’s reciprocal. With lots of laughter! With the knowledge that Kim and I are probably going to start singing a 2000’s pop song. Definitely with dumplings and luxurious love, and our ancestors’ support.

NINA: I love what Rose said earlier about how most of us met in a body-first way. I think that dynamic has set the tone/foundation for ABG. We listen to more than words or deliberately shared information. I really believe that we can *feel* each other - energetically, spiritually, and through our ancestors.

KIM: I would like to show up with space for others to take if they need, an offering—joke, story, laughter, and

unending sensitivity for one another. I show up for the womxn in my family who came before me—my grandmother who worked in the fields researching Malaria, my mother who taught me her kind of strength, and to show up for myself and understand that familial sacrifices made for me don’t direct the story of my life.

AIANO: I want to show up in fullness, which to me means everyone being able to show up where they’re at. I’ve been struggling with depression and appreciate that I’m able to show up in whatever my fullness is that day. The other day, that was in bed with the blankets up to my nose. But space was still held for me and I was able to participate in that state. I want this space to be one not of perfection or professionalism, but one of authenticity and fullness at whatever state we’re in.

Hearing ABG articulate their process and project makes my heart full and I am inspired to keep thinking about the legacy and future of Asian American dancers and choreographers from the Bay. Next, I’ll be interviewing Claudine Naganuma about Asian American Dance Performances and how we can disrupt funding structures so we see more culturally specific groups get funding, and why re-granting doesn’t work. I’ll also be speaking with Melecio Estrella on developing an Asian American Dancers’ Affinity Group with ABG.

As a third culture kid, assimilation was crucial to Yayoi Kambara’s survival. The instinct to fit in kept her quiet for many years - perhaps she started dancing to talk less.

During college, a conversation made Kambara evaluate whether she would want to be the token Asian dancer or dance with a predominantly Asian company. The reality of this was reflected in her career, where she first worked Pearl Ubungen Dancers and Musicians and STEAMROLLER Dance Company later moving to ODC/Dance. Kambara began choreographing in 2015 centering a Japanese American/POC audience creating dance experiences that cultivate a sense of belonging.

Last year, she led a Community Engagement Residency for the Bridge Project, *Aesthetic Shift*, an exchange between dance educators, social justice activists, and choreographers to interrogate the overlap between equity values, creative practices, and organization. Kambara was in the 4th Cohort of APAP (Association of Performing Arts Professionals) Leadership Fellows Program and is a member of the collective Dancing Around Race with Gerald Casel, David Herrera, Bhumi Patel, and Raissa Simpson.

Her current project *IKKAI means once: a transplanted pilgrimage* is commissioned by the Japanese American Citizens League of San Jose and awarded a Hewlett50 award from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. She is currently exploring ideas for *IKKAI XR* - an interactive Virtual Reality performance.

A note of caution, if you Google Asian Babe Gang please spell it correctly. Search results may vary from this topic.

by BHUMI PATEL

slow, sticky, sustainable

Built with integrity, openness, abundance, and commitment to the continuous ongoing, neverending work of traveling toward that beautiful horizon of liberation.



I AM READY FOR A DIFFERENT WORLD. I am ready for a world where care leads practices of policy-making. I am ready for a world where we abolish not only systems of physical incarceration, but punitive and carceral thinking and culture as well. I am ready for a world where we can all operate from a place of abundance, instead of scarcity. I am so ready that I feel a physical ache for it. I often talk about the speed of my train toward liberation not stopping for others to catch up. But I worry that when I talk about the speed of my train, what is left unsaid about what I value and believe is that the train has to be built sustainably. Built with integrity, openness, abundance, and commitment to the continuous, ongoing, neverending work of traveling toward that beautiful horizon of liberation. I fear that if we move too quickly the trajectory toward ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized liberation will burn out. That the enthusiasm to read and learn will dissipate. That burst of excitement about change will fizzle because the work is exhausting and difficult and long-term. But onward we must go.

Systems of oppression want us, as QTBIPOC, to believe that we don't have the authority or expertise to make decisions about our own professional development and careers, but we do. It is not imposter syndrome that we are feeling when we doubt ourselves. It is white supremacy. So when we are told that what you're willing to give up is a minuscule fraction of your annual budget to mentor us, or a small artist fee to participate in a festival for which your organization gets recognition, or a micro-grant that requires hours spent on an application, I see your well-intentioned canoodling with systems of oppression. I see your inability to give up power.

I've been feeling a deep depletion, a sense of overwhelm, an immense sadness about the constant invisible labor that many QTBIPOC artists do every day. From code-switching to swallowing micro (and macro) aggressions; from serving on panels to being asked for my opinion on equity statements. Each with undertones of tokenism, this labor of just being goes unacknowledged in its heaviness. Expected because though it is labor, it is propagated as "for the common good." I get the sense that there is a desire to create belonging for those who exist at the margins, but just being included is a terrible standard for belonging. Assuming that QTBIPOC artists want training, mentorship, guidance, or to be your tick box of diversity and inclusion is even worse.

Invisible labor is just the surface. Invisible labor is the twin of extraction and the cousin of scarcity. There is an invisibilizing that happens when you exist at the intersections of marginalized identities that plays into bigger underlying issues about taking, reciprocity, and scarcity. When I reflect on being asked to do labor for equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility efforts, I frequently

am left with a feeling of being mined for knowledge or approval. I witness the taking and taking and taking, because we all want more, even under the guise of "giving back" or "learning." We want more accolades for equity work. We want more money and resources. We are ravenous out of a sense of not enough. But when you have never experienced "having not," you end up with a skewed sense of what it means to "have." And while we, in the arts, have experienced immense losses in this last year, the gap between those who have and those who have not continues to grow. In order to create equitable and sustainable practices, move away from extraction, and start to witness invisible labors, we must interrogate the beliefs we hold about scarcity to flip the narrative toward one of abundance.

Scarcity is built into the very fabric of some areas of our field. I know that there are movement- and body-based communities who have and will continue to practice from a place of abundance, but for the vast majority, scarcity is in the metaphorical water that we drink. We have enough love to go around, but we've been conditioned to believe that there aren't enough financial resources, dancers to hire, fellowship opportunities, or critics to review our work. We've been taught that if we don't get recognized in our youth by lists that name those under 25 or under 30 "to watch," we have missed out. We underpay ourselves and overwork in the name of the Art, only to end up in some kind of unspoken, unhealthy competition, in which no one actually wins anything.

I've heard so many metaphors about creating a seat at the table to solve issues in inequity, in part because we've been told as much, but I implore us to collectively dream bigger than a seat, or even a new table. Let us dismantle the table, take the walls of the room down, and future a new world.

Ask yourself: What would it look like for everyone to have enough?

A few years ago, I noticed that artists around me were making performances about grief—embodying it, processing it, living with it—and I was too. I was re-entering dance after a major injury and all I could think about was the grief I was holding like a tightly wound coil in my body. I could see so clearly the struggle to have enough in these works. It makes sense that patterns like this one emerge. We are living in the same world, witnessing the same crises of migration, climate change, poverty, racial inequity, and now, a global pandemic that was grossly mismanaged and led to the deaths of over half a million people in the US alone. So many of us understand our experiences of the world around us

When I reflect on being asked to do labor for equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility efforts, I frequently am left with a feeling of being mined for knowledge or approval.

through movement and making.

Like the number of performances tackling grief, I've been noticing words like decolonization and anti-racism being used to describe work being done artistically and administratively in the dance ecosystem. Without tangible action to substantiate these claims. Recently, I've noticed that many artists are shifting their attention away from the process of making art and more toward what I've heard referred to as "resource sharing" and "mentorship." Recently, I've seen calls for QTBIPOC Board Members and public equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility statements on websites and social media accounts. Recently, I've seen a waning in enthusiasm, a metaphorical throwing up of hands demanding "haven't we done enough already?." I know that the intention is good, but the impact is

that I feel siphoned into a box. One in which I am the recipient of the well-intentioned oppressive structures that demand I be grateful.

But I am not grateful. I am disappointed. Being part of an established company's festival to fill the new mission to support QTBIPOC artists does not require those with power to give up any of it. Offering mentorship to young QTBIPOC artists often does little good and more unintentional harm in teaching to strive for whiteness. Having QTBIPOC artists "guest teach" at an institution does not leverage more space for us in education and academia. Liberation is not the empowerment of QTBIPOC artists by mentorship from white artists. It is not a program to learn how to have a dance company without long term cultural shifts. It is not guest teaching. It

of QTBIPOC practices, the lipservice of resource sharing, the pushback of niceness as adequate, more opaqueness than ever. Nevertheless, this mission is necessary. And just to be clear, I do not want a cookie. I want lasting, sustainable, cultural change where the needs of the most marginalized are centered.

I will leave you with this. I am burnt out because of the emotional, financial, and cultural labor and pressure I've been under to create, support, and demand equity in our field and how that is undervalued and invisibilized. But I'm not going to change; I am always going to give this much because I believe in our capacity for a better world.

I can't help but think that if we want a real revolution then it is important to give up more than we

is not all QTBIPOC festivals under a white-led organization's name. Liberation is handing over resources. It is giving up power. It is sitting out grant cycles. It is using clout and influence to change the system.

What's difficult is that equity work, or even just being committed to being a good person, goes unseen, nobody gives you a cookie to keep going when you have steadily and sustainably been in it for a long time. The cookies are given to the most emotionally performative (frequently unsustainable) displays of solidarity in hiring, programming, demographics. And I'm sure that getting that cookie feels good, but the cookie will not feed and nourish the work to keep going long term. The pursuit of integrity and transparency toward cultural change is a thankless mission. Instead of offering thanks to those who have been in the work for decades, I see the co-opting

ever have before. Isn't real abundance believing that there is plenty for all of us? Angela Davis reminds us that "you have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time." So I ask you, dear reader, what are you most afraid of giving up when it comes to the changing world, and how will you work through that fear for a future where we practice liberation as a horizon toward which we collectively aspire but do not expect to arrive? We are ready. Let's get messy.

BHUMI B PATEL is a queer, desi artist/activist. Her work involves dancing, choreographing, curating, educating, and writing as a pursuit for liberation, with the time and space to decolonize the body. She is a member of Dancing Around Race and Women of Color in the Arts. She's been published in the San Francisco Chronicle, Life as a Modern Dancer, Contact Quarterly, and In Dance. pateldanceworks.org

AD INFINITUM IDENTITIES

THE WORK OF PSEUDA AND KIM IP

BY JUSTIN EBRAHEMI

✓ **PSEUDA CAN BE SEEN FROM A STAGE**, holding two metal chain ropes attached to the limbs of another body. A doll, a dancer, Kim Ip. It's Halloween, 2015, at B4bel4b Gallery, and the audience doesn't yet know that Kim and Pseuda are chained together until they begin to stretch away, the chains syncing a nexus between bodies.

Kim is the marionette. She adorns a black, strappy makeshift harness fashioned of seatbelt material that cages her torso like external ribs. Attached to the back of her are the metal chains controlled by Pseuda. Kim struggles to escape the chained confines

that contort and pivot her movements. Her improvised dance vocabulary avers free will against the puppeteering dominance of Pseuda, who expertly jostles Kim. Her master. Then the dominance inverts and the Doll can be seen controlling Pseuda. She throws them violently to the floor. "I'm Your Doll" by FKA Twigs accentuates the sparring as the movement fractures notions of control. The performer's identities are exported and stretched in situ, surmising agency to that which was assumed to be a chained doll. But what traps the doll's identity is the same mechanism that may set her free.



➤ **NICK NAVARRO'S DRAG IDENTITY**—Pseuda—was born out of San Francisco's SOMA nightlife milieu. While he never considered himself a performer, he frequented The Stud and rejoiced in queer mediations of identity. Pre-pandemic, the city's queer nightlife aesthetics were a haven of experimental drag looks comprising the fabulous, the surreal, the abstract, the morbid – myriad identity transformations partying in unison. As Nick tells me, "Drag is an art form where you can literally do anything you want. The SOMA drag scene showed me there are no rules, and that was a big part of me discovering and making my queer identity."



Pseuda

➤ **IN 2014 NICK BEGAN EXPERIMENTING** with creepy horror drag concepts. Blacked out teeth and white-out contacts. Dystopian characters and science fiction aesthetics. Blood and glitter. From there his alias, Pseuda, spawned and began performing throughout the city's queer nightlife – often, alongside Jader and urheinous, as the offbeat drag trio Toxic Waste Face. One performance installation from the trio embodied them as zoned-out adult babies confined to wooden cribs glued to personal television monitors, complete with streams of incoherent media footage bleeding into one another.

"We were embodying the crippling infantilization that technology can often wield over the human psyche through themes of technological isolation, control, the sort of phantom limb attachment to our devices," Nick explains.

✓ **AS AN ARTIST**, Pseuda uses avatars to mediate their own identity to investigate the nefarious effects of technology on the human psyche, and our curation of the self. With Drag, Nick could embody anyone or anything he curated. Pseuda emerged as a self-evident slave to the ever-growing techno-voyeurism of



Jader, Pseuda, and urheinous



Pseuda at Gray Area Theater

PHOTO BY: THIS PAGE: (TOP): TAKEOVER TOKYO, (BOTTOM): COURTESY OF ARTIST, (OPPOSITE PAGE: (TOP) DAVID DURIE, (BOTTOM) SKIN

✓ **KIM AND NICK** were quick to discover their overlapping motifs. One of their first major collaborations was through Kim's residency at SAFEhouse for the Arts in 2016. "I think we always knew we had similar aesthetic tastes in art. I was like, 'oh this person can visualize what I'm saying. So working together feels very comfortable.'" As her bio reads, Kim Ip (aka Krimm) uses her choreography to undermine the stereotypes and expectations of the performing womxn's body as it relates to American Pop Culture." Kim's work "critiques the mediated gaze of womxn's bodies in the media by creating alternate experiences on stage."

One night in 2016, Kim and Nick revealed new identity experiments in nightlife. Kim's face and chest is covered in blood; Nick, layered in clownish white paint and dripping black makeup as one of the early horror-inspired Pseuda numbers. What ensued that night was a fabulously gruesome photo shoot atop a bed that memorialized their altered identities.



⬆️ **"AS NICK,** I was getting too in my head about how I was expressing myself online and whether it was too premeditated or actually represented my real identity. At a certain point, Nick left and Pseuda stayed." With Nick's emergent identities materializing across screens and stages throughout the country, he retired his personal Instagram account and curated a newfound persona. One where his relationship to digital media was a shadow of a hidden identity.

Simultaneously in San Francisco, Kim Ip was emerging as a practicing dance artist in the city's interdisciplinary performance scene. Having recently received her BA in Dance from Mills College, she found her artistic home in SF through residencies at Shawl-Anderson, SAFEHouse for the Arts, and CounterPulse. Her work investigates the mediated image and the concept of the video vixen, who is at once celebrated and held at a moral high ground in public scrutiny. (Namely, Britney Spears. In the recently streamed work, "It's Like Groundhog Day Everyday," Kim responds to the #FREEBRITNEY movement with a Lynchian love letter to the celebrity.)



Kim Ip



⬅️ **A YEAR LATER,** Kim & Nick collaborated on *Steep in Here*, as part of B4bel4b's VITAL HYBRIDS performance showcase at Gray Area. In this work a large white cube enclosed dancers who moved within the confines of their contoured identities, while silhouettes of other bodies were projected onto the white box. Shadows were emulating reality and attempting to learn from the dancers, as bewildered voyeurs in the audience tried to distinguish mediated outlines from their organic origin.

"IT WAS ABOUT THE VIDEO VIXEN," Kim explains. "We placed a mover inside the box to show the entrapment of an identity that people project onto. The video vixen is widely seen in the media, dancing in Hip Hop music videos or video games. The public idea has a projected idea about who that person is, how they live their life, what decisions they make. So they're trapped. But my goal in making the piece is showing that there's so much complexity to that body, their pleasures, and their athleticism that can move in dynamic ways."

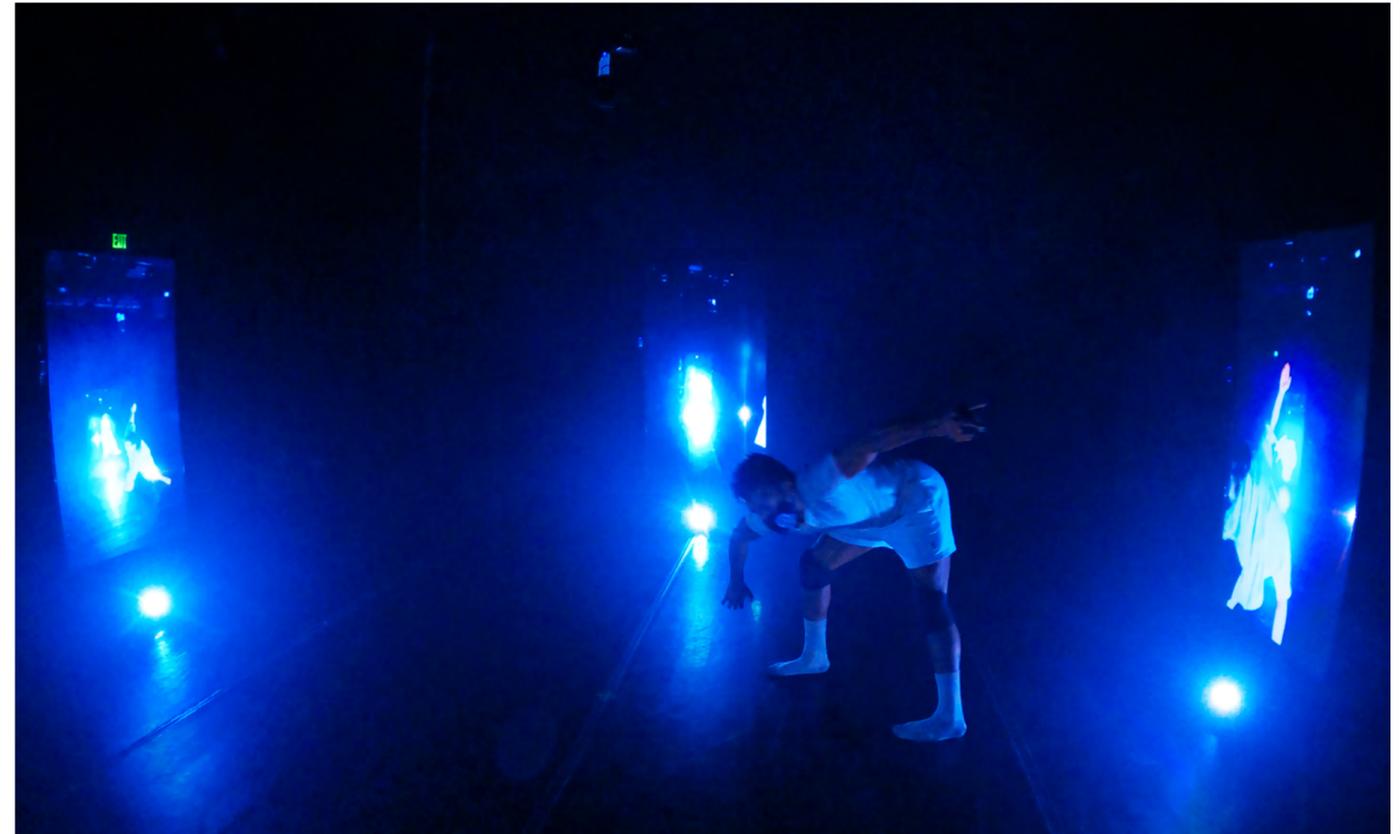
Kim's work at B4bel4b foreshadowed future collaborations with Nick/Pseuda that examined the video vixens in our selfie camera.

Now, in March 2021 — a year into the pandemic — digital media's voyeuristic capacity has expanded in deeper facets of everyday life. The new norm for many of us is to be devoid of live social interaction, and so we find deeper comfort in social media for the affirmation of our identities and our work. "There's a value judgment that happens in my head," Nick reflects, "Then I begin to analyze my work based on likes...it's just strange. The struggle is to be liked and feel seen."

"You have to also consider the tools that are being provided by the platform too," Kim adds. "The tools on Instagram nurture an environment where we seek a semi-celebrity status."

As the pandemic progresses, so does use of social media. While some artists affirm the vitality of rest and stress the need to not strain our days for constant production; others constantly produce, share, and engage. Collaborations rehearse in virtual space, adapt, livestream their art with refreshed technological tools. And this output, as always, is saturated in the mass manufacturing of curated identities, (un)willingly mediated, manipulated, and stretched beyond that original post.

"We're all watching our curated lives that we're sharing with each other. We're predicting the way we're all watching each other, and unconsciously this alters how we engage with the world." Nick observes. His vision of an augmenting techno-voyeurism evokes Neo in *The Matrix*, who wakes up in a pod of installed screens neighboring additional pods that span ad infinitum. "It's what I call the microcosm. It's a dystopian machinescape where we're all individually isolated." Identities in these pods are curated, distorted, and feedback endlessly to ourselves.



⬆️ **THIS ECHO CHAMBER** became the basis for Nick and Kim's work, *are:era*, as part of CounterPulse's 2021 Combustible Residency culminating on-site and virtually this April. The work coalesces towering video monitors into a circular perimeter surrounding the dancers. Devised by co-collaborator and creative technologist Taurin Barrera, the panopticon surveils and absorbs the choreographed identity, as large monitors track and regurgitate live movements. "In this space, 'organic movement is but an echo of the past, remembered through the flicker of screens,'" as the work description reads.

PHOTO BY: THIS PAGE: (TOP LEFT): ROBIE SWEENEY, (TOP RIGHT) COURTESY OF ARTISTS, (BOTTOM) THE STUDIO CO, OPPOSITE PAGE: (TOP) PSEUDA, (BOTTOM) COURTESY OF ARTISTS



AS THE CHOREOGRAPHER for *are:era*, Kim’s dance phrases mimic the dizzying replication of identity. “The challenge I felt was creating movements that were somehow dynamic enough but also fixed in space to not define the next dancers. It was like playing telephone with myself. When I’m doing the dance phrase, I need to subtly iterate my movement but not so much that it’s unrecognizable. It’s like your Facebook memory from years ago, like it’s me but also different. The dance sequence parallels your identity as it interfaces with social medias, maybe you lost track of your identity, you feel disoriented, or maybe you need to have someone remind you of who you are.”

The dancers — Kim Ip, Gabriel Christian, Erin Yen, and sibling hart — interface with phantoms of their mediated identities. Watching the work-in-progress, we view bodies move within a flicker of screens and try to trace an evolving identity. Embodying perhaps a single protagonist, the dancers mirror themselves, recoiling and leaping between screens. We hear the pulsating electronica score from urheinous. We see bodies bend in time and space, projected back to us, as dancers cypher through their morphing identity in cascading rhythm. Often they break free with a deviated movement, only to be captured by the technology and outputted into the echo chamber, infinitely. Performers are enveloped in a single crescendoing identity of light, music, and technology. Viewing the panopticon as an audience, the performance ascends into gorgeous chaos.

“THE DANCERS ARE CONFINED by these screens,” Nick describes. “And they’re literally trapped in this little installation where they watch each other. The lights black out, and when they come back you see a different dancer in the space, almost as if you, the audience member, have been transported to a different pod.” The time sequences of movement and projection are delayed, bodies disappear and reappear in space, identities merge and duplicate in multiplicity.

The choreographic elements in *are:era* emerged through Zoom rehearsals, a self-aware gridlock of dancers tracking each others’ movements. Dance scores were puzzle pieced into a collective work. “It was fascinating,” Kim recalls. “The rehearsals were a struggle of looking through ‘telephone footage’ and realizing that I’m seeing identities in front of me manipulated by each other. I’m seeing some kind of phenomena happening and I have no idea how to track any of this. It’s similar to sifting through massive online content and not knowing where you are.”

The screened collaborations evolved throughout the pandemic into socially distanced rehearsals at CounterPulse and Zoom call work-in-progresses. The Combustible Residency’s time frame doubled in length — a full year — to make space for generative expansion, from site to screen and back to site again. With *are:era*’s adaptation to an installation, it will exist beyond a screen as an evolving identity in and of itself.

WHILE DIGITAL SATURATION only grows more pervasive — as does the obsession with meta celebrity status — to ascribe a techno-voyeurism analysis to just the most recent technological tools is falsehood. Writings of technology’s role in constructing identities are as old as the advent of television, “*Think of Leave it to Beaver*,” Nick explains. “Like, this is what you should model your life after, white, cis, hetero, nuclear family with christian morals. Then everyone gets a TV set and models themselves after this suburban life. Art imitates life...So there’s this looping of people modeling people who are modeling television. And with the internet, the looping increases at a rapid speed. It’s dizzying. *are:era* explores this phenomena.”

Nick and Kim don’t inherently prescribe pessimism to our techno-voyeurism stasis. “I don’t have a strong moral position but err on the side of skepticism,” Nick elaborates. “There are many good things like human connection, sharing resources, and the representation of different people. But all of these things are fed into the algorithms and tracked by the technology, and by us too.”

Three months into the New Year, artists and audiences continue to rely on social media to experience art, collaborate and connect, and observe one another. Arts institutions, too, ideate on novel digital engagement strategies, tracking cultural shifts; their branded identities, adapting. As many are increasingly reliant on digital tools, mental health and social media experts warn of the dangers of too much screen time. Numerous articles populate offering neurological explorations of Zoom fatigue and tips to alleviate the strain. Many feel oversaturated and delete their social media accounts for weeks.

Yet, as the protagonist of curated identities, social media users also find catharsis and a sense of belonging through digital participation. The same tools that entrap and mediate identities also spread vital resources and awareness, calls to action, and representation of marginalized individuals that can literally save lives.

Viewing Pseuda’s [Instagram](#) account, only one photo can be seen of Nick Navarro not in drag. The rest of the grid is an invigorating display of ghoulish looks, metal harnesses, algae wires, A.I., and electricity. In one video, Pseuda wears a helmet fashioned from barbed wire that wraps their head like a venus flytrap. Their torso is covered in a leather harness, and a beam of light is projection mapped to their chest — cracking open with changing shades of scarlet as they lip sync “Doomed” by Moses.

I feel you
But nobody else
Though you’re someone I can’t see
Yet you say nothing
Of the stoic suffering
That stirs lukewarm in me
If lovelessness is godlessness
Will you cast me to the wayside?



NOT ALL OF US CAN BE science fiction drag artists or embody the mediated video vixen. Though Nick Navarro and Kim Ip’s work may compel us to rejoice in the nuanced identities of ourselves and others within the feedback loops we’re embedded in. With so much beyond our control in the emerging metaverse, how can we assert our known truths, or use the same tools that confine us to compose new optics of ourselves?

When the last dancer concludes their delay sequence, when the screens flicker the last ghost of an identity, when audiences leave the video installation, when *are:era*’s coda fades, we’ll be left to our own devices of introspection. Perhaps technology is merely a form of thought, and these same digital tools can recalibrate and choreograph new identities altogether.

are:era is part of a split bill with *StratoFyzika* for Combustible Residency 2021, running Wed-Sun, Apr 14-18, 12pm-8pm PST at CounterPulse. Live installation tours are available by appointment only, available at counterpulse.org/combustible2021.

A livestream and Q&A will air on Friday, April 16, 5pm PST

JUSTIN EBRAHEMI is the Director of Communications & Advancement at CounterPulse

[Counterpulse.org/combustible2021](https://counterpulse.org/combustible2021)

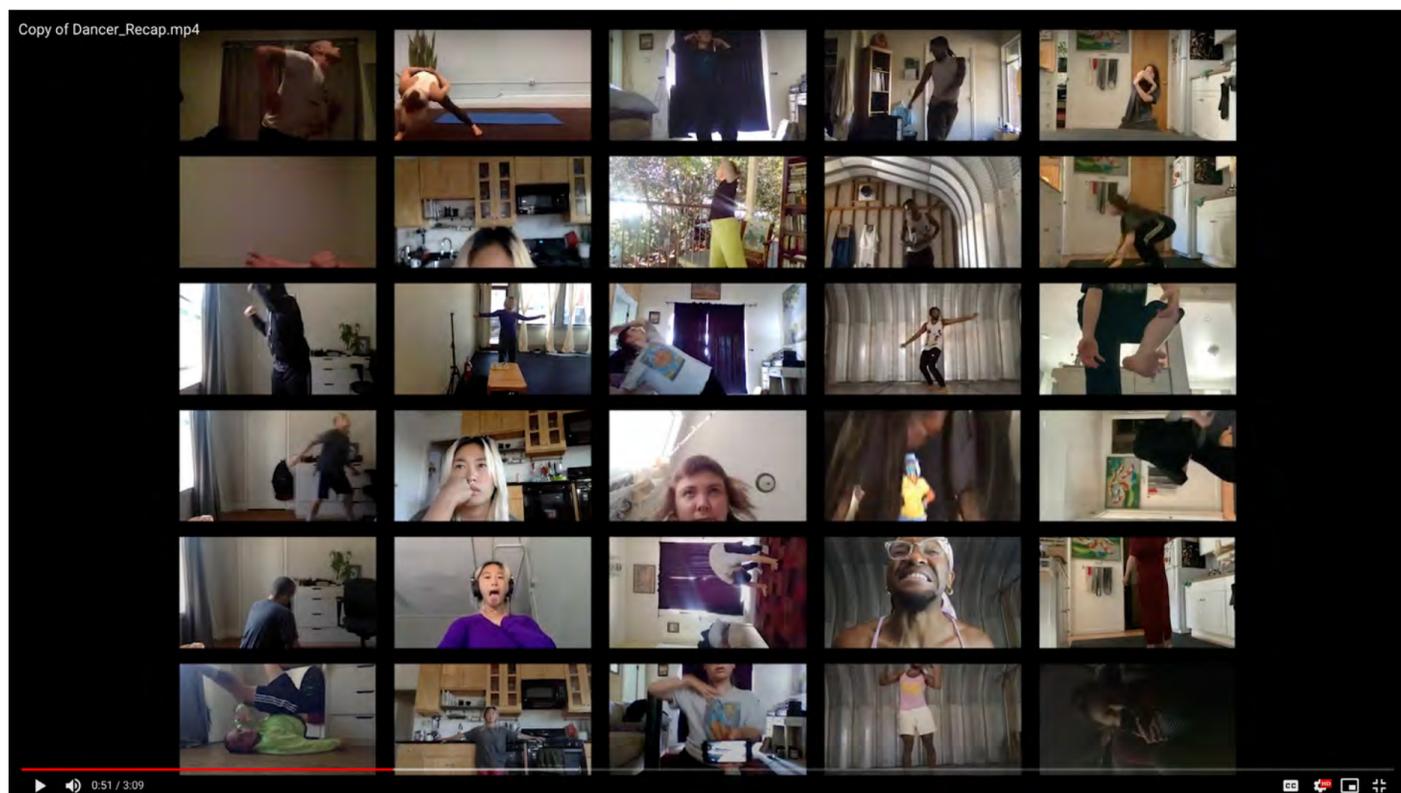


PHOTO BY: THIS PAGE: (TOP) PSEUDA, (BOTTOM) COURTESY OF ARTISTS; OPPOSITE PAGE: CAJURE A BONJOUR

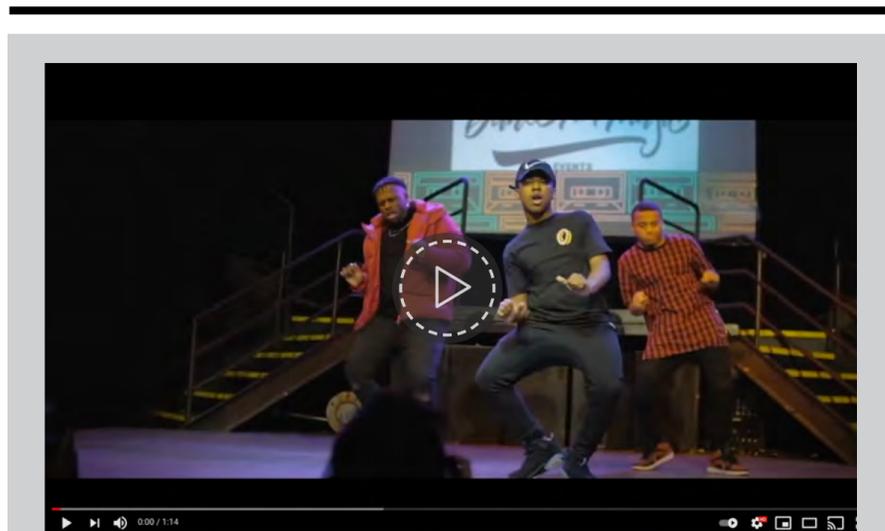
C IN COMMUNITY



PHOTO BY ANUBHAWA

ALLIANCE FOR CALIFORNIA TRADITIONAL ARTS

[The Alliance for California Traditional Arts](#) promotes and supports ways for cultural traditions to thrive now and into the future by providing advocacy, resources, and connections for folk and traditional artists and their communities.



D.A.M. EVENTS

Since 2010, [DAM Events](#) has provided developing artists the opportunities they need to strengthen and showcase their talent. The #DAMdigital series presents dance demos, live performances, makeup tutorials, cooking segments, and more.



PHOTO BY SHELL JIANG

RHYTHM & MOTION

At [Rhythm & Motion](#), they believe that anyone can dance and offer fun, high energy dance workout classes for everyone! Activities include livestream and free recorded classes with outdoor classes coming soon. Sign up for their newsletter to receive updates.



PHOTO BY BETHANIE HINES

NAKA DANCE THEATRE

[NAKA Dance Theater](#) and [EastSide Arts Alliance](#) continue their *Live Arts in Resistance* series, in collaboration with [Amara Tabor-Smith](#), as she instigates conversations that flirt with magic, failure, rage, and freedom—all while surrendering to the unexpected creative spirit of the moment. Tuesdays, Apr 6 & 20.

[Acto de Memoria / Act of Memory](#) (June 2021) is a series of virtual talks, performances, and an art installation about NAKA Dance Theater's *BUSCARTE* project, a multi-year inquiry into the struggle to remain visible: to counteract the power structures of forced erasure.

BE EXCEPTIONAL

Lynda Green began leading recreational classes for individuals with exceptional needs out of her family's dance studio in Antioch, California 15 years ago. The "buddy" system Lynda has established at [Be Exceptional](#) provides volunteers and participants the opportunity to grow together.

DANCING POETRY FESTIVAL

The [Dancing Poetry Festival](#) provides uplifting, thought-provoking, artistic entertainment for an audience of all ages with performances that feature a wide range of poetry and dance genres.

SHANICE WHITTAKER

[Soul Movement](#) encourages and uplifts the community through dance and holistic arts. Founder Shanice Whittaker offers instruction in praise dance, creative movement and fitness classes. This season she directs the annual spiritually-uplifting D.O.P. Experience during Easter weekend, [Sat, April 3](#).



PHOTO BY JANE HU

MUSEUM OF DANCE

Museum of Dance celebrates the universal art of dance through innovative exhibitions and diverse educational programs. Immerse yourself into their recently launched podcast, [MODPOD](#), that explores the voices, stories, and history of dance as they interview artists, choreographers, and educators in the field.



PHOTO BY ROBBIE SMITH

Kiandanda Dance Theater

Based in San Francisco, [Kiandanda Dance Theater](#) presents works between the USA, France and Congo. Artistically directed by Byb Bibene, the company produces creative performance projects, Mbongui Square Festival, and Tracing Africa Circle-African Dance Histories and Philosophies.



UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO DANCE PROGRAM

The [University of San Francisco](#) offers a rigorous course of study within the Performing Arts and Social Justice major where students learn how to combine their passion for dance with their desire to make a positive impact on their communities. Join the [PASJ 20th Anniversary Festival - Breathing Room -](#), Wed, Apr 21 - Sat, May 1.



LEELA ACADEMY

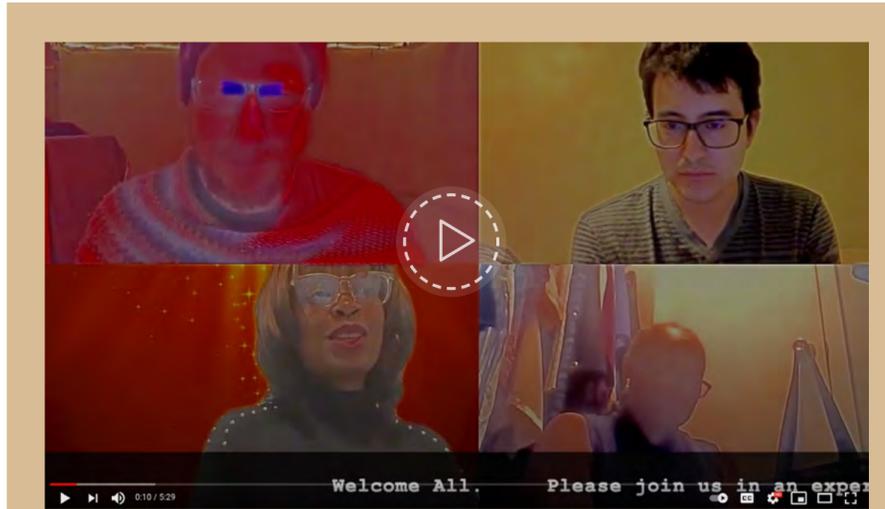
Leela Academy presents the [Interview Series: The Making of the California Gharana](#) that brings to life the stories of how Pandit Chitresh Das' influential and unique lineage of kathak developed over the course of four decades. Learn more about Das' senior disciples as well as musical artists who emerged from this treasured era of North Indian classical art in the SF Bay Area.

Leela Academy presents [Kathak Dance Immersive, April 5-8 and Online Summer Camp: Stories of Indian Mythology, June 14-18](#)



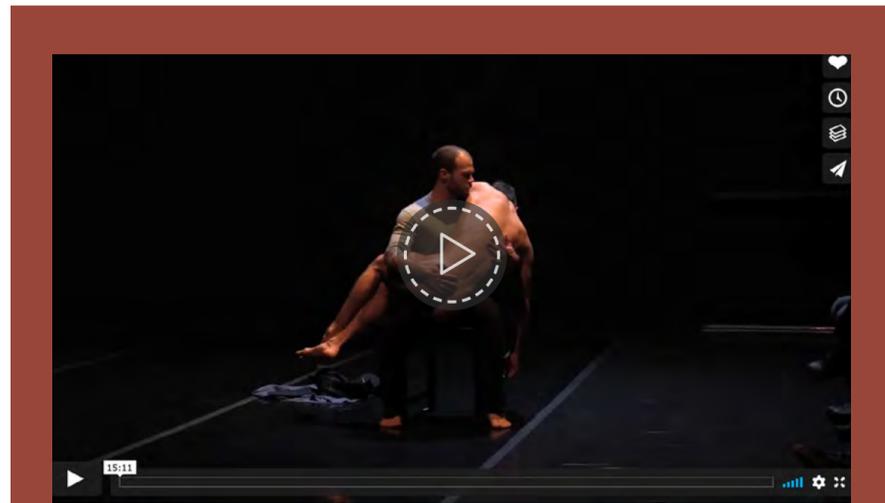
Alive & Well Productions

Led by Annie Kahane, [Alive & Well Productions](#) is a shape-shifting group of artists who collaborate to create performances made of movement, language and song. Kahane recently released a poetry chapbook "[No Time Like the Present to Be](#)"; all profits are donated to [Youth Speaks](#).



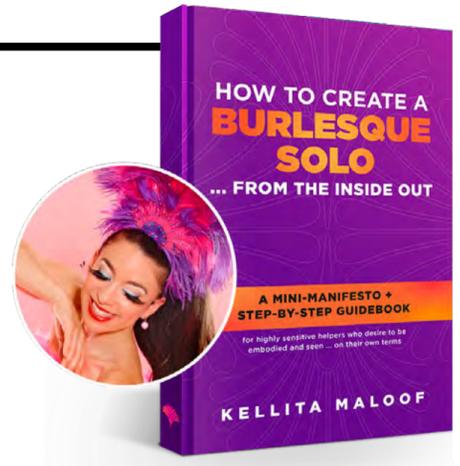
Dandelion Dancetheater

[Dandelion Dancetheater](#) collaborates with CSU East Bay for the first Inclusive Performance Festival, a grass-roots, DIY, radically inclusive, process-oriented gathering. Apr 6-May 8.



James Graham Dance Theatre

[James Graham Dance Theatre](#), started in 2010 to present original dance theatre work that deals with universal experiences. They are currently engaging with a remote residency at Kenyon College in Ohio with Graham creating a new work for the graduating seniors. James also teaches Gaga movement classes weekly.



KELLITA MALOOF/ SHOWGIRL AWAKENING

Congratulations to Showgirl Awakening's founder Kellita Maloof on her debut book, [How To Create A Burlesque Solo ... From the Inside Out](#), a guidebook for creating a conscious burlesque solo, written with highly sensitive souls in mind.

SF DANCE GEAR

SF Dance Gear has moved! Check out their new location at 551 Hayes Street or shop online. Book your shopping window or shoe fitting appointment through their [website](#).



WHEN EYES SPEAK

[When Eyes Speak](#) is the first Indian Choreography Festival in SF connecting audiences to combinations of theater, mythology, and movement through outreach programs, curated performances, panel discussions, and more. [Join the next lecture demonstration collaboration with UCR Dance Program on April 16.](#)

Santa Rosa Dance Theater

[Santa Rosa Dance Theater](#) welcomes all ages, from tiny dancers and advanced students to adult students, inspiring each one to envision a future in dance.



PHOTO BY AMANDA LANE



COURTESY OF THE BEAT

The Beat

[The Beat-BPA](#) offers a comprehensive experience focused on diverse dance art forms and cultural experiences—Jazz, Latin dance, samba, ballet, line dance, swing, AfroCuban and rhythm tap. Our mission is to provide the highest quality of diverse educational dance and cultural experience for our students.



detour dance

[detour dance's](#) Tiny Dance Film Festival returns with a virtual slate of short dance films from around the world, April 19-26. The festival prioritizes works made by and for marginalized communities including a special screening of detour dance's *The Nelken Line*—an ambitious project to replicate Pina Bausch's historic choreography with a gorgeous cast of local Bay Area drag artists and queer performers.



Stephanie Bastos



Janpi Star



Alicia Langlais aka Dance Dragon Slayer

DANCE FOR ALL BODIES

Established in 2019, [Dance for All Bodies](#) is a non-profit providing welcoming and accessible, pay-what-you-can virtual dance classes for people of all abilities in an effort to dismantle ableism in dance. The *Instructor Interview Series* delves into the background of the instructors that are part of the online programming.

Ăn gì chua?

By HIEN HUYNH

“did you eat yet?”
ma would ask
“did you eat yet?”
ma would ask
“Ăn gì chua?”

sunset, at a busy intersection, swollen ankles, working infinite,
ma freezes time, and asks,
passing by her, separate paths, ma bends gravity, and asks
even sitting, already eating at the dinner table, she'd ask

as if she did not need to know if it rained
if it poured
if the world was ending
she would say
“did you eat yet?”

and i eating, eating at her words
eating at her sustained, uninterrupted, unrelenting, perpetual,
persistent, ceaselessness effort
taking for granted the ten thousand times she had asked
pouring her every ounce of love, into soft beds of turmeric
noodles, ‘Mì Quảng’ cuddled with shy crescent intimate
shrimp, ‘Bún bò Huế’ hot spas of lemongrass beef but preferred
chicken soup, angry roasted bell pepper jalapeno dated salmon
shouting over saucy-sauteed-selflessness grains of bountiful
brown rice ‘Com tấm’

and she asks and asks and asks
and i eat and eat and eat

until full to my throat, too full,
pushing words and courage to my throat
i ask
“would you
dance
with me?”

cooling peanut sauce, spring rolls
the dishes lined up,
the stove went to sleep,
the oven djayed

HIEN HUYNH was born in Da Nang, Vietnam. Through the sacrifices, hardship, and journey of his parents, Hien dedicates his artistic and living practices to share their story to the oceanic constellation of narratives. As a teaching artist and performer, he is committed to support the generation of now and beyond to contribute to human compassion, love, and interconnectedness. He is honored to have performed in the works of Lenora Lee Dance, Kim Epifano, Robert Moses' Kin, Kinetech Arts, PUSH, DSDT, and punkiCO. Reflecting with immense gratitude for the sharing and generosity of the bay area and beyond, he wishes you all a year full of well beingness, joy, and kindling of flame. hien-huynh.com

Audio recorded and edited by Andréa Spearman, Dancers' Group Artist Resource Manager



LISTEN TO THIS ARTICLE

and so we began,
crushing pepper below our feet,
with savory swaying hands
‘bò lúc lắc’ - shaking beef
sizzling and slicing through the space
between butter, bread, and bodies
a different sense of taste
we began, peeling
peeling onions into the past

she began, sharing, “there was a time”
when
rainwater, visited through the roof
leaking a routine of empty bellies
bombs from the sky, sprinkling over the horizon
screams and cries, nourished by sweet sweet lullabies
cold rice, metal on skin, guns and chopsticks and daydreaming
stomachs
she waited and weighted
waiting, and weighing
the pounds of loss lives
fleeing, floating, following
hiding, hoping, swimming, rowing, running, flying, farther and
farther and father and father
and daughter and daughter
and water and water
and she, she, with a little water in her eyes
crystallizes tears, and shelves away memories,
transforming into recipes
she arrives, turning watery eyes into mouth watery flavors

she arrives, and arrives,
finally, back to here,
here, holding i
and i,
hearing,
dancing with ma
looking to my eyes
she asks,
“did you eat yet?”
“Ăn gì chua?”

SEAN DORSEY DANCE'S AT-HOME SEASON online April 16-18, 2021 FREE (donations welcome)



SAVE THE DATE
JUNE 17-19
online
FREE + 

20th ANNIVERSARY
FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL
OF TRANSGENDER & QUEER PERFORMANCE

FROM CONTAINMENT TO EXPANSION A TENDERLOIN MEDITATION

WITH FROM CONTAINMENT TO EXPANSION ABDProductions /Skywatchers Ensemble marks a decade of radical community-centered art making in the Tenderloin. This work heralds a future in which we celebrate, illuminate, and amplify what is powerful and unique in our most disinvested neighborhood. In honor of this work, we invited poet and GLIDE's Minister of Celebration Marvin K. White to reflect and prospect with ABD/Skywatchers on the work of Skywatchers and this upcoming multidisciplinary performance piece.



—By Minister Marvin K. White

The seed does not contain the flower. The sun does not contain the fire. The eye does not contain the vision. The body does not contain the dance. The mouth does not contain the song. The knee does not contain the prayer. The pencil does not contain the testimony. The spark does not contain the fire. The eye does not contain the tear. The ore does not contain the iron. The iron does not contain the chain. The tree does not contain the lynch. The blackness does not contain the danger. The wing does not contain the flight. The moon does not contain the howl. The desert does not contain the sand. The water does not contain the ocean. The ocean does not contain the water. The machete does not contain the cut. The cane does not contain the sugar.

The tongue does not contain the lie. The gun does not contain the murder. The circle does not contain the infinity. The path does not contain the way. The silence does not contain the nothingness. The stone does not contain the monument. The end does not contain the totality. The library does contain the gods. The universe does contain the galaxies. The neutrality does not contain the peace. The future does not contain the past. The past does not contain the future. The bone does not contain break. The suffering does not contain the blessing. The survival does not contain blessing. The recovery does not contain the blessing. The pitch does not contain the tar. The hit does not contain the run. The neck does not contain the choke. The poet does not contain the poem. The sky does not contain the watcher.

Containment Zone: A complex conjunction of high crime and civic neglect common to low-income urban areas around the world. Borders of urban containment zones are enforced by a combination over-policing at the periphery and under-policing within, with hostile design of public space enforcing these borders.



PHOTO BY DEBORAH VISSER

The Tenderloin is often referred to as a Containment Zone by neighborhood activists calling out decades-long institutionalized civic neglect. Skywatchers, a Tenderloin-based performing arts ensemble, upends the concept of containment, exploring instead what is rich, profound, and transformative that the neighborhood and its residents also contain: radical acceptance, resilience, creativity, and fierce compassion. With this work we call for the celebration and expansion of these superpowers which hold the seeds of our collective and shared liberation.

ABD/Skywatchers' upcoming work, *From Containment to Expansion*, moves with the community artists of the Tenderloin from relegation to determination. The stories push back against popular notions the Tenderloin is where you end up. But for the resident/artists, the Tenderloin is not where you are put on punishment. The Tenderloin is not Karma. The Tenderloin is not paper towels on a spill. The stories that *Containment to Expansion* dares to utter are about volition.

Poor folks, black folk, women folk, queer folk, drunk folk, drug folk, most folk have to choose to be here. The actors and performers and musicians, through word and rhythm making, say that they are not fighting to hold on, that they are fighting to break free; Free from the invitation to become crises actors in the exploitation film. They are fighting against type and willfully choosing not to be cast as "Crab in The Barrel No 1, Turf Warlord, Rose in Concrete, Broken Bottle No. 3, Abandoned Baby Stroller, Building Piss, or Stop and Frisk."

The Tenderloin does not mean what you think it means. Does not mean invisible. Does not mean small. Does not mean nothing. The Tenderloin is not "marked" as in "target" but "marked" as in "glyphed." The truth shared in *From Containment to Expansion*, is the Tenderloin Codex and everything gon' make sense when they decipher the Tenderloin. Everything gon' be clear when they know its coal that's singing, not the canary. They gon' know, the bird don't speak for us, if the bird sing a song about us being dangerous. It's deep, but it's not complex.

From Containment to Expansion will draw on histories of resistance, from the liberatory movements of the Gullah people of South Carolina's lowlands to Martin Luther King Jr's Poor People's campaign of 1968, up to and including the BLM and current iteration of the Poor People's Campaign. The performance, though based deeply in movement, will employ spoken word, drumming, stick pounding, and song, including a commissioned sound score by internationally recognized singer, choral director, and vocal activist Melanie DeMore, whose artistic and musical history is deeply embedded in the liberatory power of collective song. Working in close collaboration with Skywatchers' 20 member ensemble, DeMore blends African roots and rhythms, stick pounding, and African American spirituals to create improvisational and participatory choral arrangements.

We talk to God in the Tenderloin. I know God talking about me cuz my ears burning. I know I'm somebody's prayer. Different from being prayed for. Godliness is a choice I make every time I enter a door or a dream. A conversation not an order. God don't got no more than ten commandments anyway. Ain't no glass ceiling between us and God. Ain't no heaven between



here and God. Ain't nobody standing in the way of my promotion. I walk to work every day. You'd know that if you decided that living was your job. Your breath smell like Goddrunk. God the designated driver. God get you home safe. God make you laugh like they do in the movies. That's what that feeling of silliness, of lucidity, of divinity is. That's what this story is. Difference is, this morning don't need to spill Mary's blood. Your radio set to wake you up to the miracle station. This show, inventory your space. Rent God a room. Let God reside in you. Offer this, your body as the one to view this human condition through. We are an expansion of God's territory. God don't end in the Tenderloin. Forever don't skip over the Tenderloin. If you hear me singing, "Increase My Territory," I ain't asking for more, I'm asking less. That's the less. I'm in the thought of God. Thought of God. Make sense? So unselfish. So much honor. I'm in service. I'm stronger in this wake then when I laid down sleep. I'm go do what is expected of me. You heard right. I'm expected. And anything expected cannot be contained.

FROM CONTAINMENT TO EXPANSION

Outdoor Performances Friday through Sunday, May 14-16, 2021

5:30pm performances in the Tenderloin May 14 & 15

2:00pm matinee in the Mission District on May 16

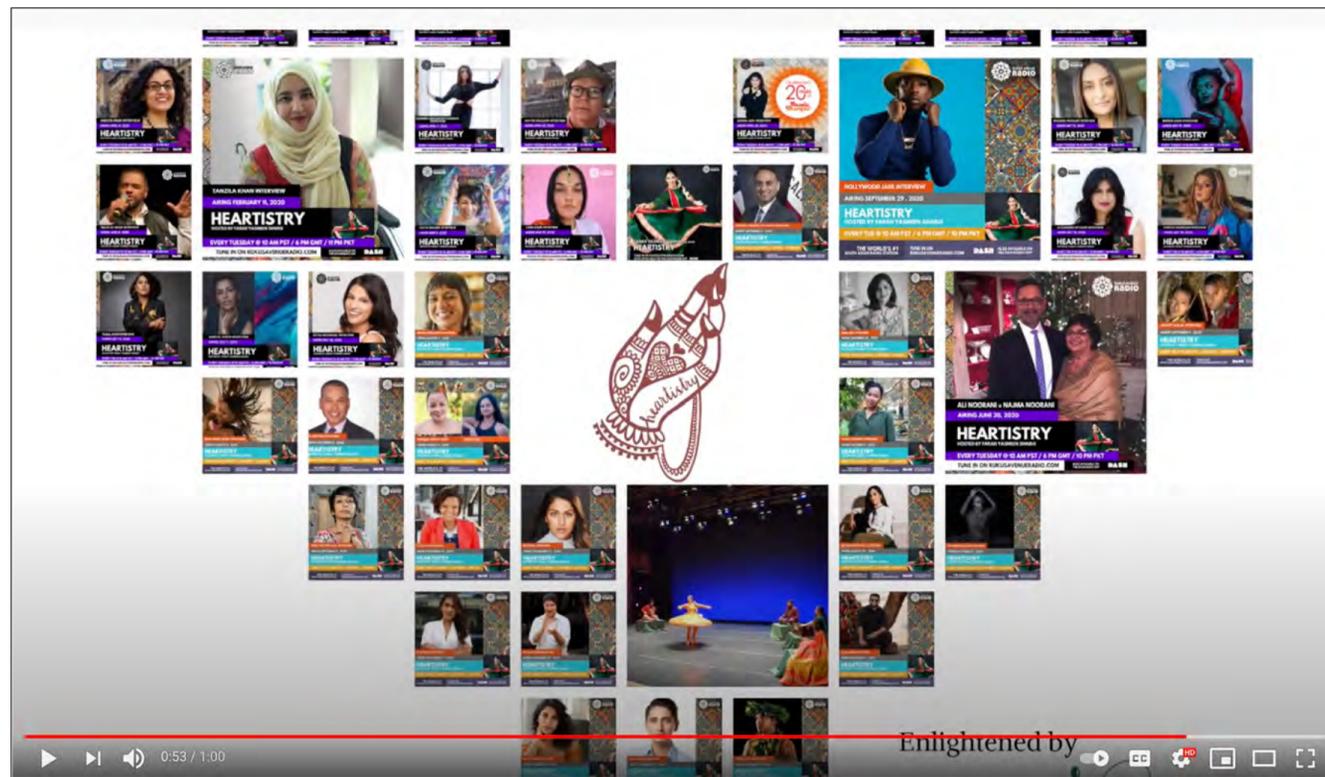
For information about location and times: abdproductions.org

MARVIN K. WHITE, MDIV, is currently serving as the Full-time Minister of Celebration at GLIDE Church in San Francisco. He is a graduate of The Pacific School of Religion, where he earned a MDiv. He is the author of four collections of poetry: *Our Name Be Witness*; *Status*; and the two Lammy-nominated collections *last rights and nothin' ugly fly*. He was named one of YBCA's "100" in 2019. He is articulating a vision of social, prophetic and creative justice through his work as a poet, artist, teacher, collaborator, preacher, cake baker, and Facebook Statistician.

PHOTO BY DENIERE VISSER

FINDING A FLOW THROUGH HEARTISTRY

By FARAH YASMEEN SHAIKH



Oh my, not another podcast.

With an infinite number of podcasts to listen to, why would I add another one to the list? Would anyone even listen to it, who would I speak with, what would we discuss?

Pondering what would interest and motivate me had to be balanced with what would draw in guests and listeners alike. Before I get into this heart-filled gift that in so many ways created itself, I'll first share the behind the scenes of how it all came to be.

Ironically, much like the projects and productions that start out as a glimmer of an idea, this too was that. Before the podcast could truly materialize, I had to consider all of those questions above, and I had to be clear with myself about my bandwidth and my intentions.

WHAT & WHY?

In the mix of the artist life hustle, I find myself going nonstop. I rarely take the time to engage with others to get a sense of what is working for them, hear of their challenges and successes, share my own, and go through what could be a collaborative reflective process. Like many artists, I go from project to project, production to production, teaching one class to the next, grant to grant, practicing, choreographing... you get it. I might attend an information session, or even a networking event, but hardly ever take the time to just talk to someone without it being tied to a particular outcome.

Lightbulb moment. The idea was born.

Initially, I thought I would create a podcast based on the “business of being an artist.” This would be a great way to engage, with the hope that they would listen to each other’s episodes, and we could collectively learn from

and support one another in hearing each person’s experiences. But wait...

As much as it excited me to create a platform for engaging artists from across the globe, the divide between artists and non-artists was also weighing on me. Perhaps this podcast could contribute to bridging the gap between non-artists and artists and the assumptions that we lead totally different lives. It could be a space where we can acknowledge that the pursuit of one’s passions can be equally inspiring and informative, regardless of what “industry” you are a part of. I also wanted to shine a light (in that blue light kind of way to expose the things that we often don’t want to see) on the fact that artists work tirelessly with often minimal financial remuneration, and are highly undervalued, especially in comparison to those in areas such as tech, medicine, law, and, dare I say it, “more traditional” careers.

These various thoughts and ideas began to coalesce, and in February of 2020, the [Heartistry Talk Show](#) was born.

Heartistry is a podcast based on the idea that we are all artists—creating a choreography or masterpiece through our respective life paths— and the belief that when life is approached with heart, there is a form of artistry, or as we call it “*heartistry*.”

Through my journey of performing,

teaching and collaborating, I have had the opportunity to meet many incredible visionaries that inspire me. I had a deep desire to get to know them better, and I also wanted to find a way for others to be equally inspired by what they had to share.

Now 50 episodes in, I have had the immense pleasure of welcoming guests from around the globe - each bringing a passion, compassion and commitment to what they are doing, income generating or not. Conversations take place with dancers and artists of various genres, educators, entrepreneurs, activists, government officials, lawyers, and more - uncovering the layers of how we each find an artistic flow with our heart leading the way.

The podcast initially airs on Rukus Avenue Radio—an online radio station as part of the DASH Radio platform, with Rukus Avenue Radio being their “South Asian Radio Station.” Though not exclusively, many of the guests on *Heartistry* are from South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan); however, this too has been an unexpected outcome: to communicate the diversity of South Asians who are often stereotyped as having particular career paths and lifestyles.

Heartistry is a podcast based on the idea that we are all artists—creating a choreography or masterpiece through our respective life paths—and the belief that when life is approached with heart, there is a form of artistry, or as we call it "heartistry."

Following the air date, each episode can be found on Spotify and Apple Podcasts.

Season 1 welcomed phenomenal individuals including many who make up the rich tapestry of Bay Area artists—[Kai Davis](#), [Rena Marie Guidry](#), [Raissa Simpson](#), [David Herrera](#), [Deepti Warriar](#), [Jim Santi Owen](#), [Kawika Alfiche](#), [Sheherazaad & Chanpreet Singh](#), [Amit Patel](#) and [Wayne Hazzard](#) along with many others—each sharing their amazing story of finding and following their heart led passion. Listen to any and all of the [episodes](#).

As 2020 went on, probably needless to say, all of our guests joined me via Zoom rather than in person. Considering all that has been going on in the world, my time in conversation with each guest continued to yield stories of their respective journeys, as well as the conveyance of a deeply reflective state of how they were being impacted personally, professionally, physically and emotionally. I believe that each conversation has a timeless quality to it by hearing both the guest's "origin story" and their own presently evolving path.

I've been loving each and every conversation when they take place, during the editing process, when it airs on Rukus Avenue Radio, and sometimes even listening to it again on a podcast platform. I realized that I was being

given the gift of not just hearing the words of each guest, but being able to interact with them by asking questions, having dialogue, reflecting, and even sharing my own experiences as I spoke with them. All of it continues to move me deeply, and has made me want to explore this medium even more - not just through the podcast, but to find other ways to share and amplify voices, experiences, themes, and topics.

ENHANCING THE VISUAL

Our organization, [Noorani Dance](#), decided to expand on this idea and take these conversations to more of a visual platform, while simultaneously maintaining the podcast. Thus, the *Heartistry Talk Show* welcomed her sister, the [Heartistry Video Series](#). Through a virtual, visual platform, we return to recordings of past performances of Noorani Dance and its collaborators, and at times, create anew, seeking to reimagine our work as artists during this new normal as a catalyst for collaboration, creativity, and conversation.

[Episode 1: Creativity, Collaboration & Community](#) aired in November 2020. I and some of my brilliant musical artist collaborators expressed our sentiments about being an artist during the pandemic, and the unique methods we are utilizing to execute

innovative projects. We engaged in conversations on creative collaboration during the pandemic and watched the premiere of a dance/music video project —[Aaj Rang Hai \(Today There is Color/Light/Hope\)](#). We also had a real-time Q & A session giving our virtual audience an opportunity to interact with the artists through the chat feature.

We had over 100 people join us for the episode in real time, with more that viewed after the air date. We were intentional in selling tickets for the event, and even now, though we want to make the episode accessible, we are unapologetic about requesting a donation to the organization in an effort to always encourage financial support for the arts and artists. #PAYARTISTS

With anything new, there are always unforeseen tasks that come up, but there are also wonderfully unpredictable outcomes which reinforce the importance of the work that artists do. It has become increasingly apparent to many in the arts community just how critical our work is. It is for our own survival, and the sanity and survival of those that we serve through our classes, our performances, and our various offerings. For those that are consciously taking on the responsibility of preserving cultural heritage and history, there is an increased responsibility of passing down their artistic practices and traditions as well. Operating on the belief that the practice of art making is a form of activism, we acknowledge that many artists proactively utilize their art as a catalyst for social impact.

This led us to the theme for our upcoming episodes of the *Heartistry Video Series*.

#heARTivism

In April and June we will share Episodes 2 & 3 of the *Heartistry Video Series*. We are calling these episodes *Social Change through HeARTivism*.

Art and Artists have long been at the forefront of making social



PHOTO BY MAGIC LANTERN / MAUD DAUJEN

change, using their artistic mediums to promote the message or cause they are calling attention to. We see it in music, in film, and our favorite—dance.

In these episodes of the *Heartistry Video Series*, we are bringing together a powerful group of women-of-color artists from across the US. We honor and celebrate the work that they do to advocate for equality and justice, addressing issues through their artistic voice and movement. Taking a deeper look at how they engage in conversations, dance making and activism through performances, teaching and choreographing - often spotlighting various systems of oppression such as racism, casteism, colorism, gender inequality, classism, religious divide and so much more - we will speak with each artist to understand and learn from their approach, their process and the outcomes.

Our collaborating artists include: [Brinda Guha](#), [Athena Nair](#), [Alicia Nascimento](#), [Annette Phillip](#), [Nadhi Thekkekk](#) and [Aysha Upchurch](#).

In the second of these two episodes, we will premiere a new collaborative work, including Farah, where the artists will come together to create a new dance work and will also welcome special guest [Valarie Kaur](#), a seasoned civil rights activist, award-winning filmmaker, lawyer, faith leader, and author of [See No Stranger—A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love](#).

Each of these women is mind-blowing and heart-healing, and I can't wait to share the conversations and the new work that comes out of this timely and powerful coming-together of creativity, collaboration and community.

As we continue on this quest to find our flow (including the ebbs), I invite you to learn more about *Heartistry*, to

not hesitate to contact me if you, or someone you know, would be interested in being a guest on the podcast or perhaps a future episode of the *Heartistry Video Series*.

Follow & Contact Us on Instagram:

[@farahyasmeenshaikh](#)
[@heartistrytalkshow](#)
[@nooranidance](#)

FARAH YASMEEN SHAIKH is an internationally acclaimed performer, choreographer and instructor, and Founder & Artistic Director of Noorani Dance. As a performer, Farah is known for her evocative storytelling, technical precision, delicacy and grace, with two decades of training from the late Pandit Chitresh Das. Farah has developed a unique artistic voice, often addressing topics of historical and social relevance, while also maintaining the classical elements of kathak. Farah performs her own traditional and innovative works, most notably, *The Forgotten Empress*, *The Partition Project* — based on the 1947 India-Pakistan Partition and *Nazaakat aur Taaqat—A Delicate Power*.

* * * * *

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