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Capacity for an Inadequacy: A discussion of the performative body in video space.

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This thesis explores how video documentation can reveal and transcend the distance in time and space between the event of a recording of a performance and the secondary audience, creating an awareness of the processes undertaken. It discusses the ontology of the camera camera operator in duality with site responsivity and the challenge generated by displacing a movement discipline.

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Introduction

The medium of video is now used commonly in society, primarily as a tool to document an event or action. Performance artists use it in this way with the belief that it is the closest thing to experiencing reality, but it has also been explored as a component of the work itself. Bill Viola says in the 1989 documentary *Processing the Signal* that he “began to think of making a video as doing a dance, with the human technology, and the artificial technology” (Viola, 1989). I am fascinated by the idea of this productive ‘dance’ and the ever present but often invisible body of the video maker. Gaston Bachelard’s notions concerning space are applied to the communication between two cameras, two subjects and an audience.

The employment of technology such as the video camera mediates the audience experience. In this paper I argue that though the presence of the performer and the audience member in the same physical space may have a specific precedence, technology can bring new information to the interpretation of the performance and even depend on its inclusion. Often using research concerning dance, I discuss how choreographers such as Merce Cunningham and William Forsythe, and thinkers such as Amelia Jones have discussed this issue.

The interpretation of success or failure is subjective, but crucial to the understanding of a physical discipline. During this study I attempt to document the tension between endurance and chronological improvement.

This paper is organised into three chapters; *Space*, *Performance*, and *Camera*, each which discusses a central theme within the work. There are also several topics which apply to two or all three sections, which are discussed throughout. These vertical threads include *Time*, *Presence*, *Being*, *Repetition*, *Audience*, and *Expectation*.

Description of *failure/repeat* components:

failure/repeat (compose)

In *failure/repeat (compose)* we stand between two projected video recordings of performances. Viewing one means turning away from the other. Within each projection are two adjacent moving images. Two simultaneous recordings of each performance were made by recording on a HD capable Digital SLR camera composed in a wide cinematic format on a static tripod, while moving around the performer with a Standard Definition handycam. This meant that the body of the artist was rendered visible in the HD recording. Sound is also recorded live. Performers were recruited for their skills in physical disciplines or codes of movement which do not require the use of an object or device beyond the body. They take place in close proximity to each other, in the same wooded area. The instructions to a casually dressed performer were to think of a phrase, routine, or element of movement which they are either currently struggling with or will struggle with at the unfamiliar site.

List of participating movement disciplines:

- Capoeira Angola
- Classical Ballet
- Contemporary dance
- Karate
- Boxing
- Trapeze



Figure 1: Melissa Irving, Still from *failure/repeat (compose)* (2013)

failure/repeat (collapse)

This component acts in duality with some of the ideas elaborated on in *failure/repeat (compose)*, and helps the audience understand the element of failure within the works. It also takes place in the same area of pine forest situated within the Wellington town belt. In this work we see a video recording of a sole performer (the artist) who is also the camera operator. The artist is shown to walk from behind the camera, assume a bridge position (bent backwards with hands and feet on the ground), and proceed to 'walk' backwards over a small mound, but each time she collapses. She fails to succeed in her endeavour to reach the other side in the same bodily position. There are several iterations of the same performance.



Figure 2: Melissa Irving, Still from *failure/repeat (collapse)* (2013)

Installation Views



Background to practice

My fascination with the performative body comes in part from my own background in gymnastics. Artistic gymnastics formed a dominant part of my childhood. I was training twice a week, competing until the age of 13, and coaching from age 14-18. Although not competing at a high level, I enjoyed it and it helped define how I spent my weeks and who I have become. Conditioning for strength, flexibility and fitness became the primary focus for me. After moving to Wellington to pursue academic interests I did not take up the sport with another gym, and lost those skills which I had spent so long building and maintaining.

During my third year of undergraduate photographic study I worked with a dancer to create commercial style images for their portfolio. This renewed my interest in the athletic body and brought with it a slight nostalgia for gymnastics. I then started working with and researching dance in my own practice. I gradually became frustrated with photography's limited ability to document movement, and started using video. However, my videos continue to have a very photographic quality to them; I have a tendency to use a static camera and consider composition and light of importance. This training also affects the way in which I select equipment. I am comfortable using DSLR cameras, and am aware of their competence in the field of HD video.

My practice is a reflective process; I make works, analyse them and make more work in response. These previous works and tests are explained in more detail in the appendices.

Chapter One: Space

Site

The performances are located in Wellington's town belt. The area of land focussed on is populated mostly with pine trees, with native undergrowth starting to regenerate. The terrain is steep but not treacherous. I came across the location while looking for a site/space which manipulated movement, and did several test works using my own body to familiarise myself with the area and generate an initial response (Appendix III).

This work is site-responsive, but not site-specific. Knowledge of the site is used to mould the way the body and recording equipment is worked with, however a similar series of performances could be enacted elsewhere without the purpose changing significantly. It is also possible for the subsequent recordings to be installed at another site.

In *failure/repeat* the space that the camera itself creates, the effect it has on the viewer's interpretation of a site, and the camera as a site for choreography is acknowledged. Douglas Rosenberg, an American video artist and writer, in his essay *Video Space: A Site for Choreography*, summarises Walter Benjamin's text *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, which takes the position that mechanical reproduction jeopardises the aura of a space. Rosenberg references the collaborative video dance works between Merce Cunningham and Elliot Caplan as "successfully challenging Benjamin's assertions and re-inscribing the choreographic aura within the site of video dance" (Rosenberg, *Video Space: A site for choreography*, 2000, p. 280).

Merce Cunningham's theories on dance and movement and his choreography have been a dominant influence on my work and will also be discussed in later chapters. With reference to camera space, these dances are choreographed for camera, and the camera's movements are also informed by the dancers' movements. The camera moves around the dancers in a space that usually only other performers inhabit, therefore gives a perspective not often seen by an audience. In Cunningham's video and film collaborations we are able to travel around corners, exploring the space with the dancers. Quick cuts in videodance '*Points in Space*' (Cunningham, 1986) take the viewer suddenly to a new virtual location within the set. The scale of a body also changes quite dramatically depending on the performer's proximity to the lens. However there is still a lot of activity going on off camera. In 'behind the scenes' footage, shot as an accompanying part of the same production, we see dancers sprinting through the set, dodging cables, camera equipment and crew to reach the point at which they are due to next appear in the camera's recording space (*Points in Space*, 1986).



Figure 3: Still from documentary part of Merce Cunningham, *Points in Space* (1986)

Douglas Rosenberg asserts that “Video dance is in practice a choreography that lives only within the site and architectural space of the camera” (Rosenberg, *Video Space: A site for choreography*, 2000), and explores this in his own collaborative video dance work *SITE* (Rosenberg & Kaija, 2005). One of the aims of my current practice is to challenge Benjamin’s ideas and highlight characteristics of the space which are unique to the moment in time and place in which the recording was enacted. I would like the audience to build an idea of the larger site, the technical set up and the encompassing duration of the original set of performances through visual and audio recordings.

There are many aspects of the location that inform the way that works performed here are responded to, and not all are visible on screen. The location is near to a sports ground, the dance and drama school, a circus training facility, a gymnasium, as well as residential properties and a busy road. The nature of the site is such that while I may omit any visual signs of the city from the frame, I cannot escape its sounds. An example of this is the sounds of soccer training, while working with a ballet dancer on a sunny Saturday. The audio is quite aggressive; it sounds like a fitness/army drill and is fast paced in contrast to the dancer’s slow ‘adage’. Another more natural sonic characteristic is the wind amplified in the trees; while recording the boxer’s training technique of sets of ‘shadow boxing’ there is a rustling of leaves as the wind ebbs and flows. The audio contradictions interfere with the constructed camera space. Another example of intrusion in *failure/repeat* is the occasional passerby which appears in the series of performances recorded with Gina, a dancer trained in the contemporary discipline. Moments like these hint at the presence of the city which envelops a small piece of nature, and remind the audience of the world beyond the camera.

Body in Nature

There is a sense of aloneness we associate with solo performers in a natural landscape as seen in my work *failure/repeat*. This feeling is encroached upon by the presence of both the artist’s body and the occasional passerby, but there is still that interpretation of a person needing to escape, actively seeking solitude. This could mean seeking a personal space needed to focus on perfecting a skill. Many people would consider the Wellington Town Belt to be a refuge in nature, an escape from the walls of the city. It is an open space which allows more physical freedom. The work takes place in this natural environment, and although I did not initially intend for my project to involve issues concerning the human’s relationship with nature, it has become part of how people read the work, and is something I would like to acknowledge.

Nature has long been thought to be beneficial for health, and there is a huge body of research now emerging that indicates that city dwellers are becoming nature poor. One study taken out at the University of Washington suggests that even a minimal, indirect connection with nature can improve health, like that through a window or even via technology (Kahn Jr., Severson, & Ruckert, 2009).

The town belt, where *failure/repeat* was performed, is a public space set aside in the town planning process of 1841 as a recreational green space. According to the Wellington Council website, the area was “reserved for the enjoyment of public and not to be built upon” but one third has been appropriated for other public uses, and its history is dotted with disputes, including a claim by the Waitangi Tribunal that the original purchase of the land by the New Zealand Company was invalid (Absolutely Positively Wellington). It is criss-crossed with a network of mountain biking and walking tracks which are frequently used, especially in the weekend, for running, walking dogs, and other

recreational activities. The area of land is designated as 'nature', and the maintenance of the space deems it almost as constructed as a stage.

Inside and Outside

By locating structured performances in a natural environment the movement style is displaced. In documenting performers who are comfortable in a controlled (usually indoor) environment and situating them in uncontrolled terrain, the constraints, and also the safety and comfort of the "built environment" have been removed. All performers are wearing clothes not associated with the indoor activity, but which may be considered right for the outdoor environment. They are asked to undertake movements which are a challenge in themselves and which are made more difficult in the unstable and unfamiliar setting. In a way the work situates the inside performance outside, and the outside performance of documenting inside the camera frame.

In *Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard points out that we often think of inside as 'being', and outside as 'non-being'. In *failure/repeat (compose)* we can divide space into inside and outside in multiple ways. Inside we have the internal space of the camera, the exhibition space, and the underlying loss of the room in which the performer would normally be located. Outside we have the natural environment, the objects of the cameras themselves, and the reality which the image represents. We could also consider one camera to be inside the other, as the handycam is depicted within the image recorded with the DSLR. Video documentation locates the viewer outside, without them being physically there.

The photographic/video image, while in a way proving our presence in space at one time, also creates a barrier where we think of that time in space as the other. While they were there then, they are not there now. And they are not here either. Gaston Bachelard talks of the French word *etre-la*, translated roughly as 'being-there'. He muses;

"Where is the main stress, for instance, in being-there: on being, or on there? In there – which it may be better to call here – shall I first look at my being? Or am I going to find, in my being, above all, certainty of my fixation on a there? In any case, one of these terms always weakens the other. Often the there is spoken so forcefully that the ontological aspects of the problems under consideration are sharply summarised in a geometrical fixation." (Bachelard, 1958)

If we deconstruct the geometry of *failure/repeat (compose)*, as seen in the diagram below, we have several visual planes. We are faced with two picture planes, one of each camera, which are later translated to screens. One of these is static, the other floats in space according to the direction of my body. We can also determine two points in space where the HD camera and SD handy-cam are positioned, again one is static (passive) and one which moves and responds to the things that are happening (active). Each body is also a point, moving freely within the space labelled "in front" of the static camera. We instinctively detect the barrier past which neither body passes, rendering it background. We assume that no significant event will affect this background space, and indeed it is more of a context in which the performance takes place. These divisions of space create boundaries, invisible obstacles around which cinematic guidelines are generated.

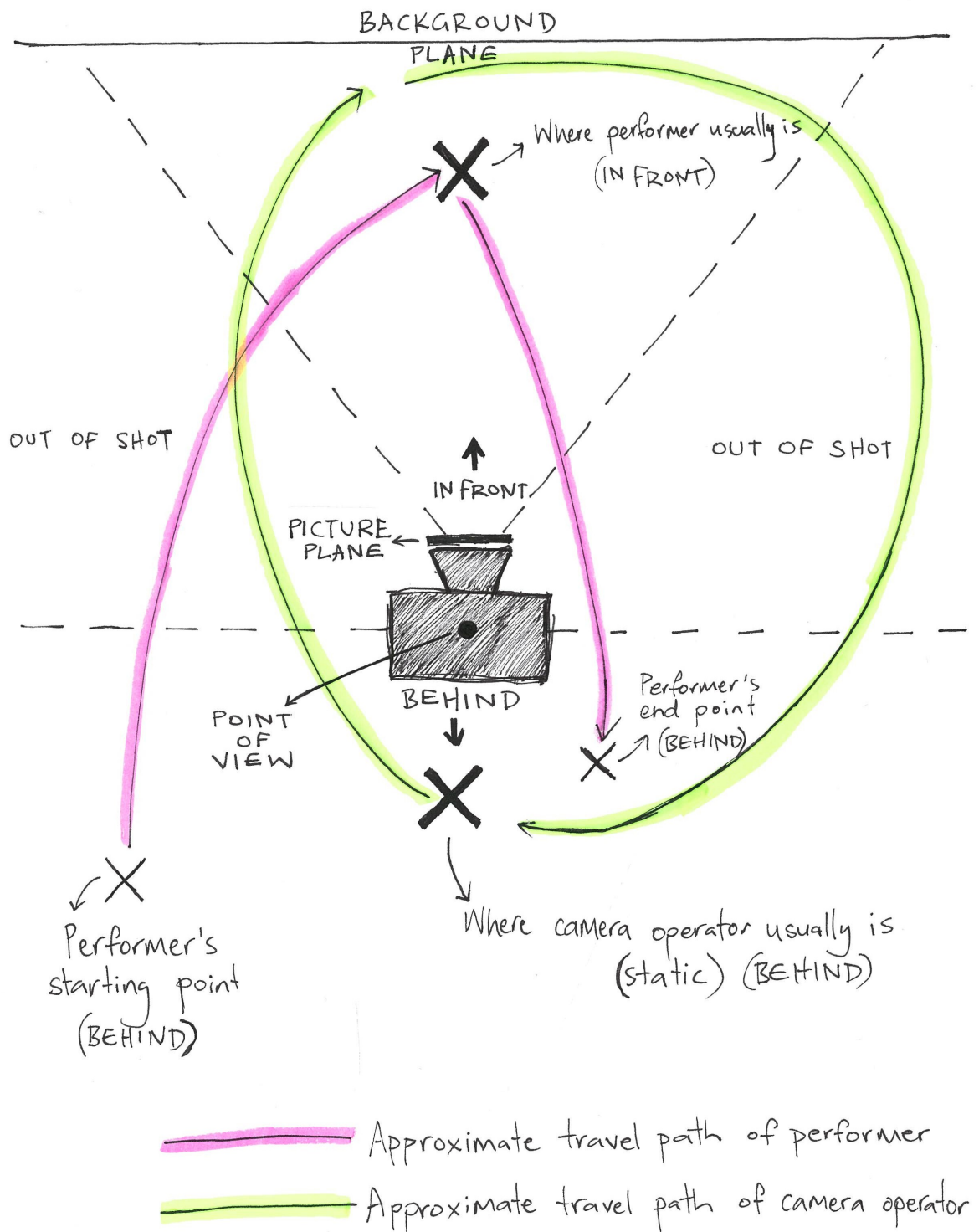


Figure 4: Diagram showing dissection of camera space in the work discussed.

The cinematic line or 180 degree rule is a device used in narrative filmmaking to keep the audience unaware of the camera and engrossed in the story. It creates and maintains continuity. Crossing it generates confusion and brings the focus of the audience back to reality. If we have two subjects in front of a camera, one wearing black and one wearing white, as seen in the diagram, and place a camera to one side of them, we will get the image shown. If the camera is placed on the other side, the image is effectively flipped. If we imagine a line or boundary stretching between the two people over which the camera mustn't cross, we avoid the problem of a reversal of locations of the characters in frame. An audience may become confused as to which way the characters are facing or who is talking. If the subjects were to be moving, they would be moving either towards or away from one another, rather than in the same direction, which is ideal for portraying a linear series of events. Since my subject(s) are moving, I took this into consideration in *failure/repeat (compose)*. Of course I am writing from the perspective of the static camera as dominant, but we mustn't forget that the addition of the moving camera is what breaks this rule and creates this conversation. By including a second camera and its operator moving inside the frame of the more cinematic style footage, the audience's perception of space is challenged. They are required to make sense of two different but related images. Another variation I wish to bring attention to here is that the 'rule' was conceived to keep narrative in place. By crossing this line I am deliberately disrupting the viewers' sense of narrative construction, giving them access to the mechanics of making the work.

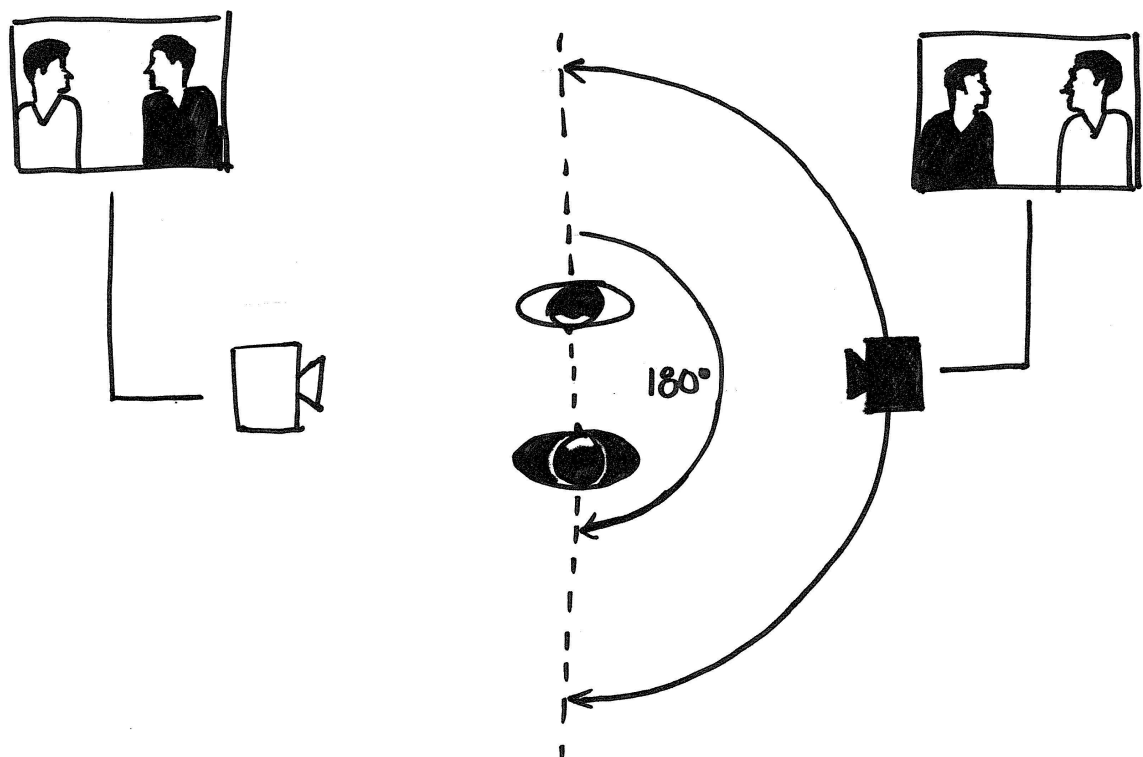


Figure 5: Diagram showing the 180° rule.

There is a similar rule in theatre called the fourth wall. The fourth wall is the imagined plane between the actors and the audience. Inside the stage area is considered a different world than that of reality. Breaking it consists of using the audience within the story, and or using the space in which they sit as part of the performance. It is often used humorously. By doing this the writers and performers are acknowledging the audience's presence in the space, which is usually a rule not broken in narrative theatre due to the story being momentarily lost. As an audience, we do not usually expect to be shown a situation from the performer's perspective. If we apply this rule to video, the artist breaches this plane in both components of *failure/repeat*.



Figure 6: Melissa Irving, Still from *failure/repeat (compose)* (2013)

Chapter Two: Performance

The Artist's Body

Most people are aware that for a still or moving image to be made, somebody is required to set the equipment up, and trigger the recording device. It is the nature of the operator to exclude themselves from the viewer's vision when video recording is employed to express narrative. Here the aim is for detachment from the 'real'. In the works presented the on-screen presence of the artist's body is explored.

The artist is both the camera operator and a performer here. The identity of the artist is not proven, however an assumption is often made due to the context. The conventions of art performance for video are that most artists choose to operate their own equipment (that they are physically 'making' the work), and there are many examples of artists performing to a fixed camera, which stands in for the physical audience. Once it is known that it is the artist performing, the viewer realises information that may or may not have been speculated about.

In their collaborative essay *The Body and Technology* (2001), Amelia Jones and her associates justify the notion that it is the nature of a photographic image that while viewing, we assume "an imagined exchange of touches between subject, photograph, and viewer" (Jones, et al., 2001). It is this imagined exchange that I am hoping to achieve in both components of *failure/repeat*, but which is particularly important for a sense of audience in *failure/repeat (compose)*.

Now visible, the body and perceived experience of the camera operator influences the experience of the audience. In *failure/repeat (compose)*, the dominant presence is that of the performer(s); they are recorded on two screens, and I make my presence as recorder known by being visible on one screen. This gives evidence of not only my position in space, but of the fact that I am controlling at least one of the two devices. It reminds the viewer of the conventional power relationship between recorder/recorded and audience in that by controlling the device, I am controlling the way the viewer experiences the performance. The significant decision of making my body and the object of the second camera visible gives an unexpected "behind the scenes" perspective to the viewer.

Though the image of my body is present on screen, it is not a self portrait. Just as a conventional performance is not about the character of the recorder or of the audience, this work is not about my character. Having made the decision to include my physical presence, however, opens the work up to a focussed discussion on gender and the gaze. One point which Laura Mulvey discusses in her seminal text '*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*' (Mulvey, 1975) is the 'male gaze'. At the time Mulvey's essay was published, filmmakers were only just beginning to combat the prevalence of the sexualised object of the woman, and the controlling nature of the male's projected look. She felt that in 1975 she was required to take a strong standpoint, to 'attack' (Mulvey in Sassatelli, 2011). In contemporary narrative cinema, however, the definition of the male gaze has been 'explosively fragmented', and "the female spectator is now able to manipulate and control the image, she can reverse the power relationship" (Mulvey in Sassatelli, 2011). In both components of *failure/repeat*, I engage with 'the gaze' by being both subject to it and operator of the device which focusses it (the camera).

Dance

Strictly speaking, we are never still, even in death, therefore are we always dancing? It is hard to draw the line. Our common association with dance may be as 'performed', for an audience, for camera, or alone. However performance suggests an element of artifice and I believe it can also be found in the everyday. Dance becomes at times primal, not enacted for any reason but the release of energy. It is also primarily associated with the body, but is used as a metaphor for describing movement of objects, water and light.

In an interview in 1978 American postmodern dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham describes dance as "movement in space and time", but then goes on to say that space and time is inherent in movement, therefore it may just be movement. He also acknowledges the importance of stillness, however. He says that to appreciate movement, we have to experience stillness, and vice versa (Cunningham, Cage, Paik, & Kostelanetz, 1978). His last film collaboration was with Tacita Dean in her work *Merce Cunningham performs STILLNESS (in three movements) to John Cage's composition 4'33" with Trevor Carlson, New York City, 28 April 2007 (six performances; six films)* (2008). The 3 channel video documents Cunningham sitting on a chair, unmoving and in silence. Though the camera is framed around Cunningham, we see Trevor Carlson (Cunningham's friend and employee, who after Cunningham's death in 2009 became executive director of the company) in the mirror reflection, holding a timer and indicating to Cunningham when to change position. This gives the audience a glimpse of an essential component of the piece, which perhaps grounds them in reality. Cunningham often choreographed using movements appropriated from the mundane or the everyday and made decisions using chance devices such as coin flips. He also collaborated with several artists when creating screendances. *STILLNESS* (2008) and aforementioned *Points in Space* (Cunningham, 1986) are performances which would not exist if it were not for the camera; they are formed by their depiction in images. Likewise, without the compiling and showing of video clips from different stages in time, *failure/repeat* would be a series of unseen performances.

My research is heavily based in dance and its relationship to art. And yet I have now chosen to step outside of the world of dance when working with performers. I had a desire to explore different codes or disciplines of movement following a previous site-specific screendance *Being-here* (Appendix II). When asked to improvise movement, the dancer resorted to what she knew -she is trained in and practices contemporary dance. My hypothesis for *failure/repeat (compose)* therefore, was that most people would do the same, that they would be influenced by their previous knowledge and experiences. I wanted to study the performers' dialects of movement as an ethnographer might study culture, and became interested in the connections between, derivatives of and evolution of movement disciplines. I constructed a simple diagram showing how some disciplines may be related (see below), but the possibilities are infinite. I discovered that when performers are given relative freedom to improvise, they still asked for direction, so I developed constraints in the form of instructions that they could interpret.

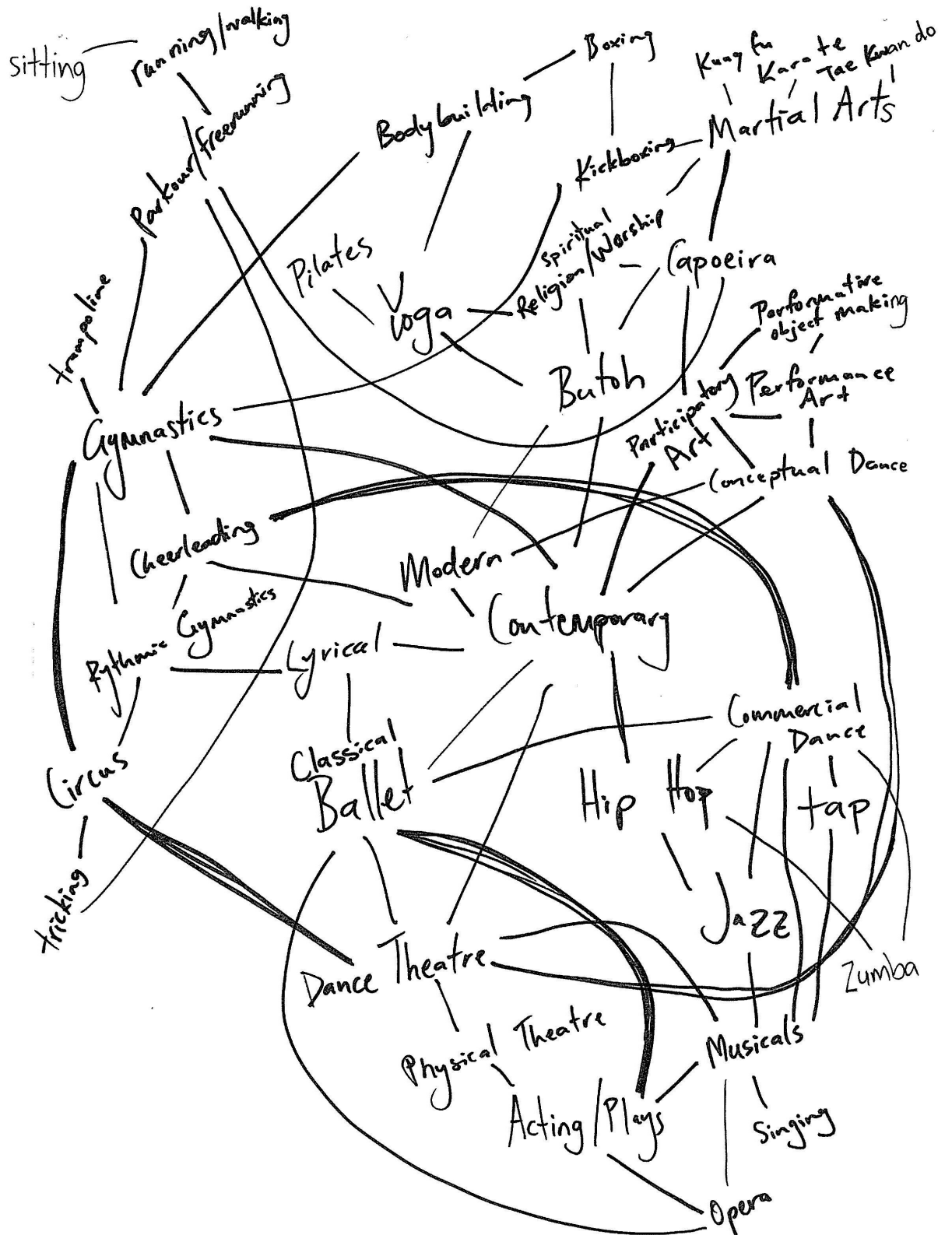


Figure 7: Map showing links between some styles of movement.

Participation/Collaboration/Interpretation

Interpretation is not a new concept. For example Allan Kaprow is considered to be the instigator of a movement of 'Happenings', artworks which consisted of the audience following written instruction. His philosophy, as written at the opening of his 1956 book *'Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings'*, is that "the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible" (Kaprow, 1956). I aim to explore the possibility of this 'fluidity' with the challenge of mediation.

In *failure/repeat (compose)* there is a level of participation involved, not so much with the audience as with Kaprow, but with individuals from dance or sport communities. In her lecture *Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?*, art historian and critic Claire Bishop describes the act of participation in an art practice as, "voluntary subordination to the artist's will" i.e. unpaid labour (Bishop C. , 2011). My collaborators fall into this category. What is their motivation? I agree with artist Sophie Calle's observation articulated in her 2009 interview at Whitechapel Gallery that "If you ask something that's not expected, like 'Would you sleep in my bed?'... Their answer is, 'Why not?' which leads to 'Yes', so I think, generally, people always will accept to play" (Calle, 2009). In her 2007 work *Take Care of Yourself*, Calle asks 107 women of varying interpretive occupations to analyse a break-up email she received two years earlier. The exhibited form this work takes is an assortment of remnants of the project, including photographs, video, and text. I used this model to gather performers for my project, through word of mouth, email and social networking to invite people to use their skills in an unusual way. Performers perhaps are particularly open to opportunities to perform.

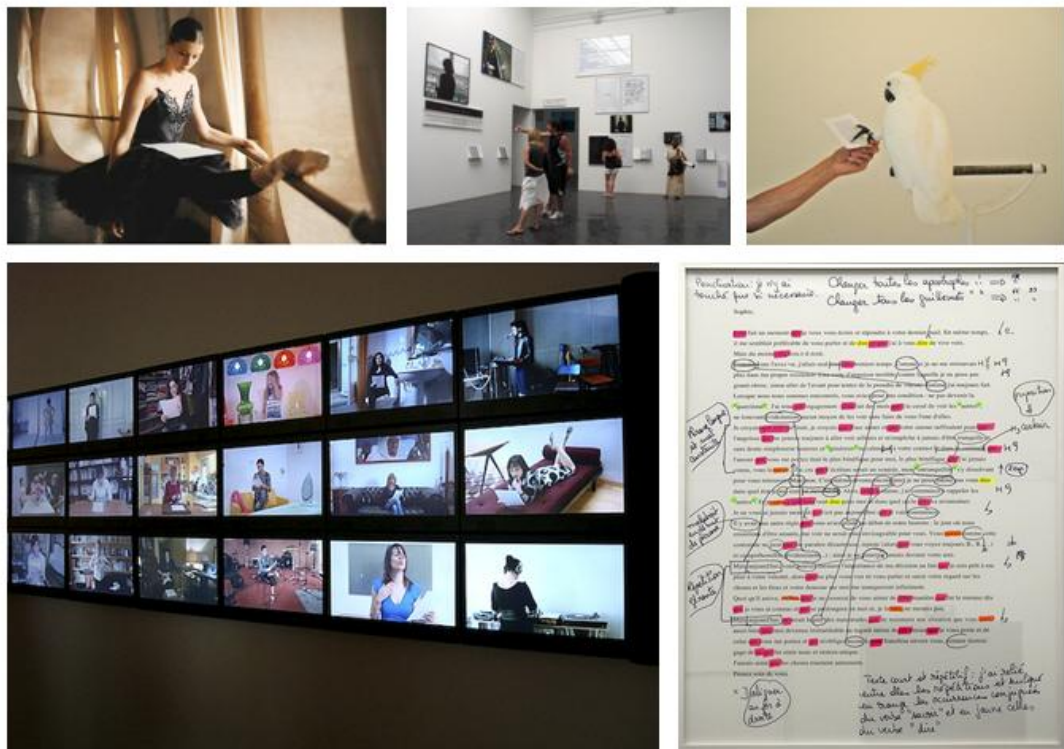


Figure 8: Assortment of installation views and images from Sophie Calle, *Take Care of Yourself* (2007)

When asking another person to interpret your instructions, you rely on a degree of serendipity. You are leaving many aspects to chance; the performance is uninhibited and leaves room for spontaneity. Examples of such uncontrolled events in *failure/repeat (compose)* include the performer's physical struggle with the terrain, and quotidian elements entering the videoed space (as several passing walkers do in one shoot), and sounds of a team's football training do in another. My work may also tend towards a more controlled interpretation however; I work with unrehearsed performers, and therefore it could be seen as a collaborative process of interpretation. I discuss with the performers the issues raised in my work as well as the simple instructions and we work together to develop the performance/recording. Furthermore I am interpreting my own instruction subject to the performer's discipline, as even the instructions are changed slightly between each participant.

Entertainment

Phil Collins is another artist who asks individuals to perform and interpret as part of several of his works. In his 2004 work *They Shoot Horses*, Collins asks two separate groups of young Palestinians to take part in a seven hour dance marathon. The work is in direct reference to 1969 Sydney Pollack movie '*They Shoot Horses, Don't They*', about the desperation of a group of dance marathon competitors. While acknowledging the social and political issues evident in this work, the discussion of body, endurance, culture and camera are key to my practice. In a catalogue for his exhibition at Wexner Centre for the Arts at the Ohio State University, Collins is quoted as saying that;

"When we think about Palestine it never seems to be in reference to modernity, or culture; in fact it is relentlessly positioned as uncivilised. The disco dance marathon would indeed be a way of looking at beauty under duress, entertainment in a place of routine indignities."
(Phil Collins: *They Shoot Horses*, 2005)



Figure 9: Stills from Phil Collins, *They Shoot Horses* (2005). Retrieved from <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/phil-collins-they-shoot-horses>

Each person has their own level of endurance and style of dance. Collins describes this performance as entertainment. Is he talking about the subjects' entertainment, or the reading audience's? Watching others move is often considered a form of entertainment, whether it is a theatre performance, or simply a local rugby game. Alluding again to the entertaining nature of sports, a representation of success is in most cases thought to be more entertaining than that of failure. When thinking about the role of entertainment in *failure/repeat*, the playful nature of the performances deem them a form of entertainment. The contemporary audience may also want to be entertained due to the increasing prevalence and sophistication of video art pieces. Perhaps, especially with video, as artist Francis Alys suggests in his 2008 interview for Tate: "the art industry is moving more and more towards the entertainment industry" (Alys, TateShots Issue 3 - Francis Alys, 2008).

The Body as a Tool

French choreographer and artist Jerome Bel's works often critique the entertainment industry from within. He creates performances which challenge audience roles, and place quotidian movements on stage. In 2005, Bel choreographed a work for retiring sujet (French for subject) dancer Veronique Doisneau. The performance (which I viewed via a video recording) consists of both monologue and dance. Her occupation is a very mid-level one; she dances both corps de ballet and soloist roles. Doisneau performs or imitates her everyday life, giving the audience a behind the scenes perspective on the ballet world, a kind of eulogy of her career. During the performance, she discusses her life, how boring it is performing as 'human decor' on stage, her dreams of being a star and musings on why she wasn't, dances her aspired roles, and watches her favourite dancer enact a piece. Bel encourages awareness of the often static corps de ballet dancer, something general audiences may assume takes little effort or skill. As a reader, I feel sadness and disappointment when thinking about this performance; Doisneau retired not having achieved some of her greatest goals. She did not become a star, even though she was physically at the level of skill required. (Bel, 2005)

One thing about this performance, a contentious issue in the world of professional dance in particular, is the struggle to find a balance between a healthy, pain free body, and one which is going to perform. The implications of failure for people in professional endeavours of a physical nature range from being required to perform with a niggling pain or to losing their job or career. *The Body as a Tool: Professional Classical Ballet Dancer's Embodiment* is a recent research paper supported by the Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences in Greece. George Alexias, a sociologist and Elina Dimitropolou, a psychologist and retired professional dancer studied 20 professional classical ballet dancers and their attitudes towards body image and pain. The aim was to understand behaviours such as eating disorders and encourage "a more positive attitude towards embodiment" (Alexias & Dimitropolou, 2011, p. 100). Patience and endurance is necessary for success, but pain is more often considered an "unnecessary evil". Finding the physical limits of their body is important in maintaining it, however often this line is crossed, with the possibility of grievous consequences. There are many elements to physical performance which can result in pain. Over-worked and under-prepared bodies damage easily, and many movements involve a certain degree of risk. This could also range from a simple sprain to a career-ending injury. Movement, for people such as these professionals, can become a way of being. Dance informs their identity, and an injury can be an attack on their recognition of themselves. (Alexias & Dimitropolou, 2011).

Completing the movement phrase is not the same as completing it either to the best of one's ability or at the expected level of control/skill. I may have one idea of what success might be for a skill I am recording with a performer in *failure/repeat (compose)*, but they may have an opinion of failure due to a detail which my unskilled eye might not pick up. This is the same of a secondary audience; I cannot assume any degree of knowledge of the discipline. In *failure/repeat (collapse)*, I am appalled at my lack of strength and frustrated that I do not finish the task, but others may be unable to assume the primary position.



Figure 10: Melissa Irving, Still from *failure/repeat (collapse)* (2013)

I am interested in the ways audiences react to the small failures such as stumbles and collapses depicted in the videos. Sharp intakes of breath and tensing muscles are some of the involuntary reflexes I have anticipated. The aim here is for the audience to relate the performer's body with their own, in theory experiencing the same failures virtually as the recorded performer did at another point in time. If the viewer does not relate their own body to the performer in these works, the element of failure alongside the peculiarity of the movement or pose in its mundane environment could become slightly comedic.

In both components of *failure/repeat*, I take the dual role of performer and camera operator. In *failure/repeat (compose)*, due to the fact my concentration is primarily focussed on the screen of the hand-held camera, my own skills are compromised, and I find myself stumbling. This could be received as slapstick (though initially unintended), as opposed to the reaction of sympathy or disappointment that an audience might have while witnessing the other performer fail. The reason it may be considered humorous could be because there is less suspense, less importance attached to my performance, therefore the tension is released and the audience becomes aware of the idiosyncrasy of the situation. It could also be that my lack of coordination gives the audience what they want: an unexpected twist in the narrative drama that is the other performer's quest for excellence.



Figure 11: Melissa Irving, Still from *failure/repeat (compose)* (2013).

Failure/Endurance, and Success vs. Desired Outcome

In *failure/repeat (compose)*, I am setting the performer, myself and the audience several obstacles to overcome. My own body is struggling with multitasking, and faced with unpredictable terrain, and I have set the performer a task at which they tire or fail. Many of these obstacles and challenges have a Sisyphean result. In brevity, Sisyphus is the myth of a king who was sentenced for eternity to push a rock up a mountain, only to have it fall back down.

In Belgian artist Francis Alys' video performance piece *Paradox of Praxis 1, (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* (1997), the artist pushes a knee-high block of ice through Mexico City on a sunny day, the block of ice slowly diminishing. In post production, 9.5 hours of performance is condensed to 4:59 minutes, to make it a more achievable task to watch (Alys, *Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Doing Something Leads to Nothing)*, 1997). Like Cunningham and others, this is a performance made for camera; the only audience member being the cameraman, and the passersby acting more as witnesses as they had no intention of being there; they came across the performance by happenstance. Alys is playing on the fact that success in this work (i.e. pushing the block of ice until it melts) eventuates with failure (i.e. the block of ice is no longer).

In another work of Alys', *Rehearsal*, 2001, a VW Beetle car attempts to go up a hill in Tijuana, set to a recording of a local band's rehearsal. As the band plays, the Beetle drives forward, but if the conductor calls a stop to the practice, the Beetle's engine is cut and the vehicle rolls back down the hill. The car never reaches the top of the hill. The band is in theory improving, while the Beetle never reaches its goal.

Failure in both components is not merely an error, but more of an experiment. I purposefully set my performers up for failure. I intended to set each of the performers (including myself in *failure/repeat (collapse)*) an unachievable task, like that of Sisyphus, but found that this was a model that needed to be adapted to each act. Success is not just subjective to the individual, but also to the discipline. A ballet dancer may be focussed on finish and control, while a boxer is focussed on strength and endurance. I found that performers will achieve the task, but not to the expected level of expertise, which differs between themselves, my expectations, and that of any member of the secondary audience.

The discussion of body limits and endurance are elements which surface repeatedly in my practice (see Appendix I for a description of my 2011 work *"Solo Suite in Space and Time", after Merce Cunningham*). I am interested in the point of collapse, whether it is the muscles or the mind which succumbs. In *failure/repeat (collapse)*, I repeatedly attempt to scale a small mound while walking in a bridge position. Though more flexible than the average person, and reasonably strong, I am not at the level of physical condition which the manoeuvre requires. During each attempt I reach a point of exhaustion, where strength or coordination fails and my body slumps to the ground. At what point does one give up?



Figure 12: Melissa Irving, Still from *failure/repeat (collapse)* (2013)

Repetition/rehearsal/practice

Repetition of failure suggests practice. Practice is attempting a task several times, often failing, but the repetition of the move builds our strength and manipulates our coordination to allow our body to complete the task. Motivation for practice derives often from frustration, desire to be something or do something but which is currently out of reach. We persevere due to a knowledge that it is possible to perfect the move, otherwise why bother? If we take the position that performance is a movement completed before an audience to the expected level of skill, there may be a level of self belief needed before practice and rehearsal no longer takes place. Therefore the performers and I must surely have some self belief that we can actually achieve what we are practicing. Possibly practice is all there is, as a performance is just another repetition of the same movement.

This repetition creates a tension in my work where you expect the subject to fail, but are not sure at which point they will do so. In a sense I have given the performers (and myself) a task at which they could possibly succeed at, but in the interests of art I have made it Sisyphean. The audience wants the performer to succeed. By including flaws the work denies the viewer of that want. This is frustrating, but also intriguing. Then we think about the audience giving up. By engaging with the work, they are unwittingly setting themselves a challenge. When do they stop watching? Success may be watching the entire video (assuming a fixed time) or watching until each body succeeds. The videos play for an undetermined period of time. By endlessly looping the work it becomes impossible for the audience to achieve this. In the context of a gallery, however, videos are often displayed using the looping device for convenience. This may mean that, especially in *failure/repeat (collapse)*, the audience does not even expect a beginning or end. The audience may not be aware, or even care about watching the entire video.

In contrast to this, if the work is shown in the context of a theatre or cinema (*failure/repeat (collapse)* will be part of a film festival in March 2013) the audience has different expectations; they are usually seated, the lighting is controlled (usually the audience is in darkness, the performance/screen lit) and they are in a context for which they often pay, therefore expect to be entertained. The viewing time is predetermined; therefore they often know exactly when they will be leaving the allocated audience space, and the video has a beginning and end.

Time

The passing of time is an issue intrinsic to using the medium of video and even more so when concerning movement. As dancer and choreographer William Forsythe said in a 2006 interview, "In order to represent time, we cannot avoid language about changing place." (William Forsythe interviewed by Thierry de Mey, 2006).

Time in *failure/repeat* is manipulated and experimented with in several ways. The passing of time between each performance in *failure/repeat (compose)* is evident due to the editing of the video itself. The separation of clips suggests practice; we see the same day, and the performers are wearing the same clothes, proving the clips happen in succession. We then suppose and occasionally are given evidence of the exhaustion of the performer over time. The simultaneity of the camera recordings creates a kind of parallel in time, as does the pas-de-deux between my body and that of the performer. In *failure/repeat (collapse)* there is evidence (in the form of changing weather, framing and attire) that each attempt is made on a different day, which suggests in turn that I am practicing and training in between recordings. Even if this is true, we do not see chronological improvements, and not once do I achieve the supposed desired outcome.

Video acts both in the present and also as an archival tool. It is a record of the level of skill achieved at the time of recording, and of the performer (and artist) moving within the boundaries of the camera frame.

Chapter Three: Camera

Mediated view through technology

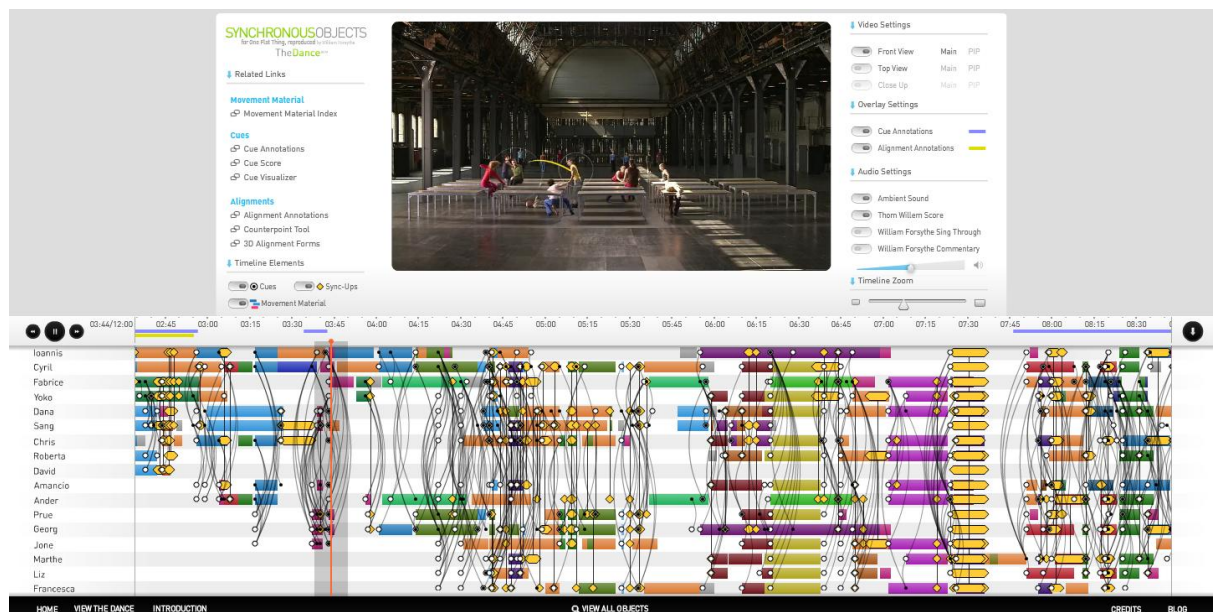


Figure 13: William Forsythe, Still captured from the Synchronous Objects website, (2009)

Failure/repeat consists of performance specifically made for camera; however the camera itself also performs. This could mean either by placement of the object in space and time, or by the internal technical processes. William Forsythe is a dancer and choreographer who, though trained in classical ballet, has had a significant influence on contemporary choreography. He has made several pieces which experiment with and often are reliant on the use of technology. Forsythe's project *Synchronous objects* exists in many forms; a stage dance, video dance and online interactive website. In the dance itself, called *One Flat Thing: Reproduced* (2000), the choreography of performative bodies is central, and everything else is made to adapt. Unlike another of Forsythe's collaborative works *Wherever No No No Nohow No: Airdrawing* (Welz & Forsythe, 2004), which utilised the camera as part of the choreography, *One Flat Thing: Reproduced* was not choreographed specifically for camera. However filmmaker Thierry de Mey in collaboration with Forsythe choreographed the camera in such a way that the video provides perspectives not seen by a physical audience. For example, at the start of the video version of the dance a man is standing in the middle of the floor where the dance is about to take place, and we see him clap a clapperboard. At the end of the performance the camera rolls for a few extra seconds, and we see the dancers relax. This makes the audience aware that the performance, though not choreographed for camera, is taking place for the purpose of recording it. During the performance we see dancers interact with each other and with purpose-built tables, making patterns or alignments of movement. The movements were broken down geometrically and converted into data which is then analysed by specially designed computer programs, including one which converts movements into objects. These are demonstrated and explained via an interactive website titled *Synchronous objects: Visualising choreographic structure from dance to data to objects* (Forsythe, Synchronous Objects, 2009).

Aspects of this work such as the processing of information using a computer and the inclusion of fabricated sound initially acted as a dominant influence. Now it seems these elements are not so relevant to my practice. What is still important is the communication between performance and camera. In *failure/repeat* the performances interact with technology, but I am not taking data from movement and subjecting it to a technological process.

In *failure/repeat* the camera in effect proves that the performance took place, however here the first bodily audience is the reading audience. There was no physical audience present at the time the performances were enacted, except the camera and the artist (who also takes the role of performer). The primary audience is therefore part of the performance. One might say though, that a performance suggests taking place before others. I would take the opinion of Philip Auslander, as quoted in Mechthild Widrich's article *Can Photographs Make It So? Repeated Outbreaks of Genital Panic Since 1969*. He says "The act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such" (Auslander, P. in Widrich, 2011). This suggests that the presence of a recording device, which mediates a view and then records that view, verifies the event as being of importance.

Documentation of performance/ontology of camera

Clare Bishop acknowledges that we can never eliminate the audience, it is impossible to involve everyone, and there is always going to be a secondary audience, whether it be a repeat performance or via a recording device (Bishop C. , Claire Bishop's "Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?," Presented as part of *Living as Form*, 2011). Some performance artists embrace visual documentation, for example Francis Alys, whose video documentation of his actions are considered the work, and aforementioned Merce Cunningham's collaborations with filmmakers in which the dance is choreographed and performed solely for camera. Here there is only one perspective: that of the camera.

Artist Tino Sehgal, however, has a strong opposition to this; he does not allow video or photographic documentation of his works. Claire Bishop responds to this rejection in her 2005 article for *Artforum* magazine, saying that "the more determined the artist is to enforce a media blackout around his work, the more energy he invests in frustrating its reproduction, the more 'buzz' he creates for himself and, therefore, the more press his work generates. (Talk about viral marketing!)" (*No Pictures, Please: Claire Bishop on the Art of Tino Sehgal*, 2005). Sehgal's participatory performances are experienced differently by every participant. And of course there are variations in each re-performance. This I assume is one argument for the ban on documentation. Attempts to find visual information depicting Sehgal's works on the internet often frustratingly result in a notice such as "this photo/page/video is no longer available due to a copyright claim by Tino Sehgal". Most of what we do experience if we are unable to attend in person is other peoples written accounts of the time they spent interacting or absorbing Sehgal's work, such as Adrian Searle's article in *The Guardian* (*A piece of performance art set in darkness made me see the light*, 2012).

I participated in *This Variation* while at Documenta in Kassel, Germany. I walked into a dark room, completely disorientated, into a writhing mass of movement. By disadvantaging the dominance of sight, Sehgal extends his audience's sensory awareness. As time went on, I noticed a distinction between the audience and the singing, dancing and conversing performers. Throughout the time I was there, the performance changed dramatically, from wild dancing and loud acappella renditions of pop songs, to quietly sitting in close proximity to a participant having rehearsed but rather

intellectual conversations. The duration of the performance was indeterminable, and required the performers to be present (possibly in shifts) all day, but was divided into 'variations', which were named and dated. Occasionally members of the public would join the dance, or sing if they knew the words, but rarely would they interact. I stayed in the room for an hour and a half, not just because I was interested in the work, but because it was a relaxed, festive atmosphere. While I was moving to their rendition of Timberland's *The Way I Are*, a performer approached me and proceeded to dance with me. After the song ended, the performer hugged me as he started to beat-box the next 'variation'. While I felt privileged to have this unique experience, it didn't seem as if physical interaction was the focus of this work. It was more about the presence of those bodies and those voices in the space, along with that of other members of the public and entering an unfamiliar situation. Physical contact didn't need to be made.

Unlike participants of Sehgal's work, my audience is denied the celebratory moment, the sense of being there. I do, however, attempt to bring the audience closer to the situation by providing multiple perspectives and including my own body and the recording equipment visually. In the making of my work I am aiming for the recording via video camera to be proof of presence. I would like the audience to build an experience of the performance in their mind from the visual and aural evidence I give.

Writer, critic, curator, and historian Amelia Jones makes her opinion concerning recording of performance clear in her writings. In her 1998 book *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Jones refers to Carolee Schneemann's 1975 work *Interior Scroll*, saying that,

"Having direct physical contact with an artist who pulls a scroll from her vaginal canal does not ensure "knowledge" of her (as individual and/or artist and/or work of art) any more than does looking at a film or picture of this activity, or looking at a painting that was made as the result of that action." (Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, 1998)

Here her opinion seems quite closed. This would be a rather confronting performance to experience firsthand, and the camera would distance the secondary audience from this. However, the year before she wrote *Body Art: Performing the Subject* she states in an *Art Journal* article;

"It is my premise here, as it has been elsewhere, that there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product, including body art. Although I am respectful of the specificity of knowledges gained from participating in a live performance situation, I will argue here that this specificity should not be privileged over the specificity of knowledges that develop in relation to the documentary traces of such an event." (Jones, "Presence" in *Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation*, 1997)

These 'specificities' could include more choices concerning the reading of information being available to the audience in a live event, and every member being in a slightly different position. This is especially apparent of the control of their senses. The senses of smell and touch are eliminated in video documentation, and sight and sound are dictated by the camera operator. Video also regulates the experience, giving every viewer the same information. Jones is also arguing that the live event itself is mediated. Every experience is subjective, and live audience may also adhere to suggestions from the artist, such as environment or instruction.

In *failure/repeat* the only primary audience members are also performers, therefore the performance may only be viewed by others through the recording device. I am not arguing the

superiority of videoed performance over first person experience, or even its equality. I am simply exploring its place in the art world, and attempting to create a performance of which the video documentation is the only variation. In Francis Alys' video documentation of his actions we might of course argue that the art was in the moment of the events or performances he creates, but the video documentation or the "making of" is what is sold and exhibited in galleries. Acknowledging that contemporary audiences often take the moving visual image for granted, I attempt to remind audiences of the mechanisms of the moving image.

Camera formats and techniques

The technical format of the moving image influences how we read a text of this kind too. I have chosen to utilise two very different formats of digital video in *failure/repeat (compose)*. Each has their own associations, as well as being different from the other in both resolution and frame ratio.

High Definition or HD has a 1920x1080pixel resolution, and a "widescreen" aspect ratio of 16:9. This is currently the more common frame size, and the ratio at which most new televisions are made. High definition video is the format that most filmmakers who choose to use digital video work in. Because of this and the widescreen ratio, this format is associated with cinema. Audiences expect a very controlled atmosphere. They expect the position of the camera to be static or smoothly panning and the images to be carefully composed and lit. I attempted to achieve this cinematically refined aesthetic.

Standard Definition or SD has a resolution of 640x480 and an aspect ratio of 3:4 which is the square format of older televisions. SD was also, until recently, the most common format used in digital handycams, the sort that one might have to record family events. It is associated with a shaky handheld home video aesthetic. The fast paced, unprofessional recording is what I aimed for in order to represent a more bodily approach to the recording of performance. The handycam becomes what Marshall McLuhan might call an "extension", this being as Todd Koppelman summarises: "when an individual or society makes or uses something in a way that extends the range of the human body and mind in a fashion that is new" (Marshall McLuhan: "The Medium is the Message", 2001). Though recognisably handheld, the camera is primarily an extension of the eye. The video camera may, using McLuhan's counterpart to the term "extension", be considered an "amputation" of the need to experience a performance firsthand.

Multiple perspectives

Francis Alys has an ongoing fascination with the failing action of a man being tripped over by a dog. In *Choques* (2005-06) to use the description written on the 2008 Sydney Biennale website,

“The artist records different perspectives on the same incident – a man trips as he walks down the street. Filmed from nine different points of view and displayed on separate monitors throughout the space, the fragments we witness can only be perceived individually and at different moments during our walk through the exhibition galleries.” (Biennale of Sydney, 2008)

Where a viewer would normally get one camera's limited perspective, Alys gives us nine, however as these views are displayed in different locations throughout the galleries, the reading audience is required to connect the separate pieces in their mind. Although I am making it a lot easier for my viewers by having only two perspectives which are displayed adjacent to each other, they are still asked to construct a complete space in their mind. In both Alys' and my work, the audience members imagine a three dimensional space informed by multiple two-dimensional representations of an event.



Figure 14: Francis Alys, *Choques* (2005-6), Retrieved from http://artbasel.insideguidance.com/42/images_large/1.1302303.jpg

Due to the HD footage's constructed, cinematic aesthetic captured on a tripod, and the SD's frantically shaky handheld camerawork, the eye of the viewer is drawn quickly to SD, but may find it hard to watch. The audience needs the calmer HD to rest their attention on, just as the performances need the camera in general to be understood.

Conclusion

In *failure repeat (compose)*, disciplines of movement such as dance, martial arts, and circus are explored by skilled performers, with documentation providing a means to study their physical limits and the points of difference between each discipline. Repetition of these challenges create a cyclic, unresolved narrative structure which is common in art practice but not in cinema. Responding to the unfamiliar environment, a process of collaboration between artist and performer took place, interpreting simple instructions which resulted in a series of very different performances. The artist is employed in multiple roles, which is made apparent by the use of dual perspectives, and gives the reading audience an awareness of the process undertaken to provide documentation.

In *failure/repeat (collapse)* I interpret the same instructions myself, again taking the role of both performer and camera operator. My perpetual failure gives the viewer a refined understanding of the aspect of failure in *failure repeat (compose)*, creating a sense of suspense prior to the moment of collapse.

I have explored ways of making video which reveal and transcend the distance in time and space between the event of a recording of a performance and the secondary audience, while generating frustration and empathy towards a repeatedly failing performer of a range of disciplines.

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Appendices

Appendix I: *"Solo suite in space and time", after Merce Cunningham.*

At the beginning of 2012 I had the opportunity to show a video work I made in 2011; *"Solo suite in space and time", after Merce Cunningham*. This work was a critique of the classic dance image of a body 'frozen' in time and space, often mid-flight; a position impossible to hold. It consisted of 10 clips of solo dancers holding a static pose for as long as possible in the same busy public space (Wellington's Left Bank, off Cuba Mall). The dancers and camera provided a disruption to the everyday, and we observe the reactions of the general public which are often humorous. I aimed to bridge the gap between still and moving image, producing something which is to be viewed with no time constraints, and which depicts a dynamic environment. Everything I could control or select, i.e. the dancers, camera and architecture was static (or close to) however this was contrasted by the frantic flow of pedestrians.

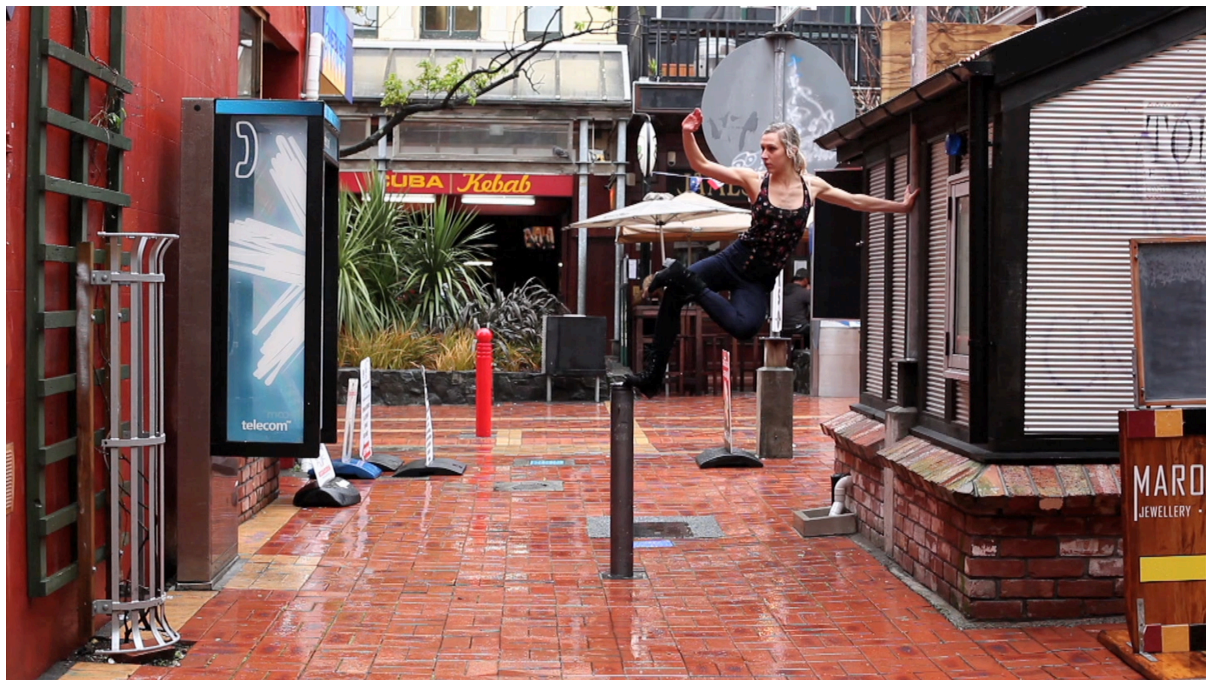


Figure 15: Melissa Irving, Still from *"Solo Suite in Space and Time" after Merce Cunningham* (2011)

What was most exciting about getting the opportunity to show my work was the fact that it was shown in the same location that the performances took place. My screendance was projected onto a screen further up the grungy alleyway than actually shot; however the majority of the audience walked through the recorded space prior to viewing the work, where their body was facing the same direction as the camera had been. Audience reactions to this particular showing fascinated me. People thought the work was being filmed live, and felt a stronger comparison between their own bodies and those of the dancers, better understanding the strength and discipline required to perform these poses. These reactions lead me to make another work intended to be shown in situ; *Being-here*.

Appendix II: *Being-here*

In *Being-here* I introduce a dancer to the inside foyer space of the New Zealand Film Archives where, with instruction from me, she improvises dance movement. This is a response to the architecture, everyday use of the space (as a café, gallery and archive), and the outside city bustle of passing pedestrians and traffic. Passers-by are forced into the roles of both oblivious performer or subject of the camera's gaze as well as audience. Frequent users of the Film Archive may not recognise the stage-like qualities of the architecture, which I have framed to emphasise this. I have attempted to depersonalise and objectify the body by obscuring the identity of my dancer using the technique of silhouette.

I asked the dancer to make a very literal exploration of the camera space, her body changes scale within the screen as she moves closer and further from the lens. She teases the viewer by moving in and out of the camera frame; however we are always aware of her body, and the invisible presence of the camera operator.



Figure 16: Melissa Irving, Still from *Being-here* (2012)

Appendix III: *Pine Needles Tests*

This series of tests are so named due to the large number of pine needles stuck in my clothes as a result of these performances. They were my first response to the location of Wellington's town belt. I came across the specific location while walking as was drawn off the marked track by an interest in the structures used to create mountain biking jumps and ramps. I soon discovered the moulding of earth which created guides, ramps and counter turns for bikers. I experimented with my own body, playing with the contours of the land, gravity, speed and physics. I tried skills I had learnt at gymnastics and found I was not as strong or as flexible as I was when I trained twice a week.



Figure 17: Melissa Irving, Still from *Pine Needles Tests* (2012)

Appendix IV: *Shadow play*

This work was recorded on the same day as I performed my pine needles tests, but takes a different strain. The video is of one of the jump mounds used for mountain biking. The light is soft, but we become aware of some movement off camera. It becomes apparent that there is a body (mine) moving outside the recorded camera space, dancing and casting a soft shadow. Twice we see a fleeting hand, but never a significant part of the body. This work makes an indirect image of the camera operator.



Figure 18: Melissa Irving, Still from *Shadow Play* (2012)



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