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Blending Art Forms, Blending Realities

A Study in the Possibilities of Dance Film

Overview

In the process of my research on dance and film for my senior distinction project, I created a dance film series: *The Wind is on us Here, Turning*. The series consists of three films for the Internet, one installation film, and one film for a theatre screen. The films are inspired by humans' relationship to the environment. The Internet films are hosted on the blog www.eshofunifuturenow.com. The theatre based films premiered at the Experimental Media and Movement Arts Lab (EMMA) in the Advanced Computing Center for Art and Design (ACCAD) on April 11th-13th, 2013. Please refer to the Appendix on page 12 for a list of the films with their titles.

Concept Development

When I first began to imagine the films that have become *The Wind is on us Here, Turning*, I knew that I had to share the absurdity that I kept seeing and feeling- the apathetic attitude of myself and others, towards global climate change. I learned the scientific and historical background of climate change while studying at OSU, and I compared this with my observations of our society. I am still amazed and worried at how easily the human race is collectively harming the environment, even when we know the dire consequences and when we have means to change our ways.

I wanted to make films that honed in on this surreal apathy. Although the films critique our current relationship to the environment, I did not want the films to be public service announcements or "inconvenient truths." In April of 2012, I attended the Sustainability Summit at the Ohio Union. David Orr, a leader in environmentally sustainable practices working in

Oberlin, spoke about his top five goals towards a more sustainable world. His second goal was to include the arts in the sustainability movement, in order to facilitate an emotional and visceral connection to something that is most prominently represented through scientific data. When I heard Orr, a scientist and scholar, deem artists the number-two solution to better the environment, I realized that dance film has the power to bring awareness, involvement, and change to sustainability. I chose to leave scientific facts out of the films, instead I focused on feelings conjured by consumerism, apathy, stagnation, and then insight, awakening, and acting.

I was able to access these emotional places through images that were tied into a loose abstract narrative. I received advice on image and storytelling from Dan Archer, an artist who makes graphic novels that report the news. Archer uses image-metaphors in his work, and he advised me to find ways to incorporate them into the story I was telling. He suggested I have dancers represent things related to the environment, such as wind turbines or weather patterns. I implemented this idea by casting Erin Kerr, one of the dancers in my project, as the nature figure. Her slow, ongoing, circular arm movements set her apart from the other three dancers. Archer's expertise in visual storytelling inspired me early on as I began storyboarding.

Meanwhile, I was reading *Conversations Before the End of Time* by Suzi Gablik, which is filled with artists' interviews about their work and their role in environmental activism. One of the artists, David Plante, referred to Anton Chekov's writing when he spoke of image and meaning in his interview with Gablik:

“For example, in a description of a room where a murder has taken place, he [Chekov] creates the space completely by having a bowl of boiled potatoes fall off the table into a puddle of blood on the floor. So you've got these white potatoes absorbing

the blood. It's an amazing image.... It's the search for an image which will most evoke what can't be said, what can't be defined." (Gablik 162)

This example was powerful for me in the early stages of *Here, Turning*. Climate change is defined by words and statistics, but images stir up known truths and emotions that cannot be summoned with words. I cleared my mind each day and focused on the black that I saw when I closed my eyes, and I waited for images to appear there. I saw a faucet running and running. Then I saw empty jars, empty jugs, and empty basins. Drained of water, empty of earth, spilled of all grains and natural resources. The image of the empty jar held a hollow sadness for me. I added many layers as I continued to work on the project throughout the year, but the image-metaphor of the jar remained a steadfast theme of *The Wind is on us Here, Turning*.

I assembled a series of events, involving a group of four dancers, around the image of the jars. First the group would empty the jars of a resource such as soil or grain, and then the group would sit amongst the destruction that they caused- broken jars, empty jars, etc. They would sit at a table drinking coffee, apathetic towards the destruction. Finally, the group would snap out of their apathy to reconnect with nature by moving and jumping through an expansive, natural area.

Structure of the Series

In Video Art class, Dan Shellenbarger challenged us to experiment with narrative by lifting it from a linear timeline and/or dividing it amongst multiple mediums. For example, he proposed that we use film in the theatre, film on the Internet, Podcasts, and even snail mail, to tell one cohesive story in interspersed parts. I latched onto this idea, as is evident from my journal entry after class on January 23rd, 2012:

“The technology available today allows us to inject art and dance into everyday aspects of people's lives! ... Send video footage with music from the show so when

they hear it during the show, they will have memories of the song already. This flips the narrative of the performance so that the present [the Internet film] is referencing the future.... You could even heighten this to create a mystery in promos that is solved in the theatre show.”

I followed through and made Internet films released before the theatre films. Two of the Internet films are part of the storyline, and the other film, *Here, Turning*, is a non-traditional promo. I released the promo on March 6th, about a month before the show. It is the only film in the series that blends the three sections; Clara Martinez, one of the four dancers, is the through-line of the promo; it is a flurry of what Clara goes through in the three places. The other two Internet films, *Then, Spent*, and *Then, Stacked*, make up part one. The film installation, *Now, The Warehouse*, is part two, and part three is *Next Spring*, which is a film for a large theatre screen. Although the narrative remained linear in the order that I presented the films: Internet films first (emptying the jars), Installation (sitting with the destruction), and theatre film (reconnecting with natural surroundings), the films can be seen in any order. There are temporal breaks between viewing each part, and many audience members saw the Internet films after the theatre film.

Past, present, and future became ways to structure the three parts, which included “then,” “now,” and “next,” in the titles. I was inspired by multiple ideas in David Abram’s book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. One of the concepts he writes about is ancient cultures’ acknowledgement of the connection of time and the earthly landscape, and modern Western cultures’ separation of time and space into two distinct entities. Abram explains that many cultures relate the past with underground, and the future with the horizon. Industrialization and globalization have historically founded how our world works today- so metaphorically they are below us. I shot the Internet films from “then,” the past, predominantly with high angles looking down on the

dancers. The viewer peers down into the past, and the dancers are small-scale and far below. In *Now, The Warehouse*, the shots are mostly at eye level, and the phrasing became the main indicator that the film is oriented in the present. The piece is a monotonous loop with long pauses interrupted by sudden, direct shifts of the group around the table. Just as our present unfolds continuously, the piece runs on. While the first two sections represent past and present, the last section, *Next Spring*, is a look into the possibilities of the future, where our heightened awareness of the environment frees us from stagnation. I chose not to connect *Now, The Warehouse* and *Next Spring* like I originally intended, because the step between these two films is what is missing in our reality, and I wanted to raise the question: how did the dancers get from sitting at the table to leaping in the grass?

By the time I was configuring the structure of the series, I had received an OSU scholarship for Undergraduate Research in the Arts. I formulated my research to investigate audience reception of dance film on theatre screens versus Internet screens. I was amazed at the way the Internet makes it possible to *immerse the art* into the audience's lives, with the ability to watch videos on YouTube and Vimeo. This is the opposite of traditional theatre; where the performances fully *immerse the audience* into the art, with dimmed house lights, surround sound, and proscenium seating. Richard Wagner defined the concept of "total theatre," he used the devices of a theatre venue to present his multidisciplinary opera productions.

Through production of the films, I discovered that the type of screen not only influences the audience; it also greatly influences the creative process itself, demanding screen-specific choices about scale, duration, and pacing. For example, in order to highlight the smaller screens of laptops and smart phones, I shot wide angles for the Internet films. I edited short, fast paced films for the Internet, where brief videos are customary, whereas I used longer takes and gradual

shifts for the theater screen to influence the state of a theatre audience. In the process of my research, I discovered that making dance film requires an explicit awareness of the type of screen being used. This awareness should be present from the start of a creative process and should be taught in dance film courses. Attentiveness to the specific type of screen in dance film creation increases originality, clarity, and audience access to the work.

The two driving forces of *The Wind is on us Here, Turning*, are its division onto different types of screens, and its inspiration from humans' relationship to the environment. By experimenting with Internet based films, I brought dance film into the audience members every day life, possibly making it more relatable to their immediate experience and intertwining their memories of the film with those of their normal routine. By creating sensory focused films on our connection to the environment, I made the usually distant topic of environmental awareness more relatable. So there is a connection between the two main themes of my project: they are both working to make something that is removed from personal life more relatable to the individual.

Upon reflection, I realize I could have made more obviously contextualize the films in an environmental cause. I created the blog, *Esho Funi* "finding art in sustainability," In August 2012, in order to contextualize the films. I updated the blog frequently with posts ranging from scientific articles about climate change in the news, to reviews of other current artwork dealing with the environment. I publicized the blog and the films with a Facebook page, and I used QR codes to connect people to the site. Empty jars with QR code labels hung from the ceiling near *Now, The Warehouse*. Although I loved the look and the concept of the jar installation, only a few audience members knew how to use QR codes, so the blog remained more segregated from the theatre films than I intended. If I showed the installation again, I would make it easier to use

the QR codes by passing around a code and instructions for each person or assigning a few people walk around the crowd with iPads to assist audience members in watching the films. When building an online presence, I found that riding the division between publicity and spam made PR an art form in itself. Internet audiences are unpredictable and impatient, and the seemingly simple act of showing films on the blog required more effort to promote than I anticipated.

I see now that I placed a large responsibility on the audience to engage with the blog, watch the films online, find patience with the installation, and watch the series with an inquisitive eye. Although this may have decreased easy access to the work and its themes, it is inherent to the *interactive*, multi-media series. I received enthusiastic feedback from audience members who participated by actively reading the blog and sifting through their personal memories of the films. The layers, subtleties, and possibilities of personal connections outweighed the risk of losing audience members who did not engage with the series. In future endeavors, I will work on increasing the number of audience members who choose to participate by making the means of participation more accessible. For example, I could use iPads in an installation space instead of QR codes, I could open an online subscription to a film series, and I could incorporate text on environmental issues in an audio tour of a space showing the films.

Production of the Series

I learned a whole other set of lessons from the actual projection of the films. I met with the musician, Brian Rhodus, before I began rehearsals with the dancers. Brian's collaboration was integral to the project, he contributed to conceptual development, he improvised live music during rehearsals and film shoots, and he studio produced an original score for *Then, Spent*. He planned to compose scores for all the films, but we ended up using the sound of him playing live

on set because the sound was perfect- raw and real. Brian's music created an atmosphere for the dancers while we filmed.

The dancers were able to perform with a genuine presence on film because I created a community for our group from the beginning of the project. During the first rehearsal, we took a short walk around Mirror Lake and we noticed what we noticed: wind, temperature, birds, plants, reflection off the water, insects, the sky, etc. From there we each created movement inspired by our experience, and connected all of our movement into a common phrase. Exercises such as this one helped us form a community. I used what I was learning in Noa Zuk's composition class to coach the dancers. Noa said the choreographer's role is to constantly feed the dancers the energy, intention, and physicality of the movement, with as much emphasis as the spatial patterns and the timing of the movement. I worked with Erin specifically to dance with fluidity and serenity. The other three dancers in *Now, The Warehouse* did an improvisational score that we built together in rehearsals. I prompted the dancers to move their limbs like logs falling with the force of gravity; we called this score "scaffolding." We rehearsed the score each week with the table and chairs, props, and the camera.

We were prepared for the film shoots because we had practiced with the camera during rehearsals in order to get used to camera and dancer interaction. We filmed *Next Spring* first, and I learned that much of the choreographed sections did not translate well to the camera once we were on location, because they looked very staged. After reviewing the footage of the set choreography outside, I decided to direct the dancers in improvisation on our second film shoot. Overall, I found that smaller sections of choreography with more detail created a stronger image than long sections of choreography with a number of moves. I was always prepared with a shot list, but I also allowed myself to follow my intuition and get shots that presented themselves in

the moment. The filming days were incredibly rewarding for our group, and I look forward to working as a camera operator and director in the future.

The post- production process was a steady presence in my life this year because I edited almost every day for at least an hour. I approached editing like I was weaving a patterned blanket by hand; little by little the daily practice produced an intricate product. I gained renewed inspiration whenever I tested my footage out at EMMA. I experimented with projecting through jars, projecting the installation in multiple areas, and arranging audience seating on the stage floor. It was crucial to try the films out in the theatre space to gain perspective of what I wanted for the final product.

Conclusion

The interactive structure of my senior distinction project was set up for the audience to participate personally with the film series. I experienced the challenges of creating accessibility to interactive art, and I learned that I was making work for an educated audience that was ready to thoughtfully engage with the work. This decision inevitably left some viewers behind, or blocked them from connecting to the concept of the work. The level of responsibility I place in the audience, and the amount of guidance I place in interactive projects are factors I will continue to consider in future endeavors.

I experimented with the possibilities of dance film by producing the films on different screens, and I learned that the type of screen influences the process of creating the film. By striving to expand the possibilities of dance film, I also expanded my own knowledge and experience of the creative process. I gained experience in choreography, directing, cinematography, camera operation, editing, blog management, publicity, and producing. This

research project was an invaluable opportunity for me to grow as a complete artist in our modern digital world, able to collaborate and create across artistic mediums.

It was satisfying to find similarities between my interests in technology, nature, and dance, and to share these interests with others. I brought awareness and personal connections to environmental causes through the project, even if on a small scale. I will continue to follow this cause in future projects, and I will continue to manage the blog, Esho Funi. *The Wind is on us Here, Turning*, is woven from collective memories of our past, present, and potential future interactions with our environment, our “*here*.”

Appendix of Series

Title of Film	Method Screening	Date of Release	Length of Film
<i>Here, Turning</i> (promo)	Internet; Vimeo & blog	March 9 th , 2013	1:38
<i>Then, Stacked</i>	Internet; Vimeo & blog	March 28 th , 2013	1:23
<i>Then, Spent</i>	Internet; Vimeo & blog	April 5, 2013	0:50
<i>Now, The Warehouse</i>	Installation; Projection in Lobby of ACCAD	April 11 th , 2013	6:45, on a loop
<i>Next Spring</i>	Theatre film; Projection on large screen in the EMMA lab at ACCAD	April 11 th , 2013	7:21

Credits

Performances by: Josh Hines, Erin Kerr, Clara Martinez, and Elyse Morckel

Original Music by: Brian Allen Rhodus

Emma Supervision and Advisory: Oded Huberman

Funding

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