Katie Phelan

Independent Project Paper

Professor Daniel Fine

Continuum:

“A continuous sequence in which adjacent elements are not perceptibly different from each other, although the extremes are quite distinct.” (The Oxford American College Dictionary)

My project intention was to create a screendance that is filmed in a single shot. Within this idea I wanted to focus on investigating risk and live performance qualities in screendance. Focusing on the process of choreographing the camera's movement to influence, and be influenced by, the body's movement in the frame, I wanted to observe the relationships between camera and dancer, while building a score for the final iteration. This project worked with Kara Bouck, Emily Gumal, Katherine Shamdin, and Emily Trapnell as dancers and collaborating choreographers. I placed myself in the roles of choreographer, videographer, director of photography, editor, and performer within this work.

Movement Choreography

Is the camera observing or instigating?

Within the rehearsals, I used the camera to view the dancer’s movement and to consider what choreography, of body or camera, might enhance the moment I was viewing. Most of the danced phrase work was created in collaboration with the dancers in this process. For one specific exploration, I had the dancers use the idea of negative space to set duets phrases. These investigations involved one dancer in the foreground creating a frame with their body inside the frame of the camera. A second dancer in the background would investigate how to manipulate the negative space of the foreground dancer through movement and body. We enhanced this exploration by shifting from stagnant, held poses to moving, danced relationships. When the foreground dancer shifted, the background dancer had to find new ways of fitting into the negative space. I added an extra layer onto this process by implementing the camera’s role as a documenter or interactor in the phrase. Still questioning if the camera is observing or instigating, I rotated both roles within these experiments. By instigating what the camera’s pathway was, the dancers, again, had to shift their understanding of framing which also changed their choices. The foreground dancer found the difficulty in remaining in the camera’s frame, which also created a ripple effect to the background dancer of staying within the foreground dancer’s frame. This idea became a continuous theme through the work and expanded into the large scope of framing the body within architecture and space.

There was a large learning curve to my viewership in process and decision making. Many of my findings were not digested until I could review footage at home on a large screen and new intrigue would come in the next rehearsal. I considered what I was viewing and how I could make changes in the camera’s choreography or the body’s movement to deepen what I was seeing. While reviewing in post-rehearsal time, I questioned how I could make these observations in real time to allow for changes to progress quicker in rehearsal time.

The research within these ideas expanded when we moved rehearsals into Art Building West, Room 250, The Media Lab. Within this space, I could use the television monitors to display what the camera was seeing in real-time. This allowed the dancers to understand the visual role of the camera outside of their own body’s experience of the movement. With the dancers, I investigated ideas of flocking movement that were not determined by the dancer’s spectatorship but instead the influence of what they were observing the camera capture. By displaying the camera’s view on the monitor, the dancers could use this viewing as real-time information. In this way, the camera and monitor were acting as a mirror does in a traditional studio space for the dancer’s choice making and awareness.

Building the Track

I reached the point in the semester where I chose to invest in building a product from the collections of research investigations. In this case, I began cultivating the sequence of continuous choreography of body, camera, space, and time that would become a single-shot film. There was a part of me that believed the research would stop when I moved into establishing the product. However, through the process of building, my research continued in areas of choreographic consideration: pedestrian vs. technical movement, influence of space, and the choreography of the camera in relationship to the moving bodies and shifting space. When our rehearsal process moved out of the studio and around Art Building West, I found the sequence evolving each week. The question, “are we changing anything this week?” became a joke among our working collective. Yes, I did change this piece every week. These evolutions came to be through processes of trial and error while in the rehearsal space, in addition to many reflective reviews of the footage.

As the piece developed, movement qualities of pedestrian and technical dance started to co-exist. The reason for this came from asking why the camera is moving from one event to another, leading to investigations of transition. How could someone walk through the frame, “catch the camera’s eye,” and transition the spectator to the next section? These choices began to implement a more pedestrian quality into the film and gave the piece continued momentum forward by acting as transitions between danced moments.

I started viewing the investigations of transition as shifts of tangents. The camera is guiding the spectator’s perspective, but the main character is always shifting in unpredictable ways. In the example of Katherine Shamdin entering the elevator, I felt the spectator was most expecting the dancer and camera to ride the elevator together - this being the first choice I made as well. However, wanting to divert the spectator from a predictable outcome, I chose to exit the elevator and return to the trio on the first floor. It was in this choice that I had to consider, why the camera is leaving the elevator from a perspective of spectatorship. In response, I chose to place Emily Trapnell’s hand holding the elevator door to act as an escort out of the elevator and transition the viewer to the next moment.

While the camera was an integral part of the piece, I wanted to maintain the illusion that that camera was not there. For example, I wanted to avoid seeing the camera in the reflection of glass windows or seeing the shadow of the camera due to the sun. While there are moments of imperfection in the final work, I feel I was successful in the achieving this because of the established objecting during the process of choregraphing. One of the biggest changes in this context happened two takes before we achieved the last version. Originally, the camera and I were set to follow Trapnell through the back door while viewing her back. However, we had never rehearsed this on a sunny day, and I did not realize if I followed Trapnell into the building, there would be a shadow of me with the camera from the sun behind me cast onto Trapnell’s back. Noting this changed the course of the sequence at the last minute - literally. I re-choreographed this part so I could enter the building first, walking backward with the camera viewing Trapnell from the front.

Choreography of Camera

Within this research process, the camera’s choreography was one of the most important aspects. This project placed a higher responsibility on my abilities as a filmmaker than I had expected. I struggled with the limits of my own skills and questioned if it would be better to put someone else in the role of videographer. I decided against this because I concluded that no one else held such an adept relationship to the choreography mapped in this process, nor possessed my unique dual knowledge of both the body and the camera.

Being part of the research investigations gave me the ability to understand the large scope of choreography from the inside. While the dancers were mentally plotting their next move, I was thinking about the camera’s next move. Through the lens I interpreted visual cues and responded with rapid decision making to advance the composition of the ascending sections. An example of this occurs during Trapnell’s solo. At this point in the piece, Kara Bouck transitioned behind me to move to her next spot without being seen by the camera. Bouck’s pass was my cue to step backwards away from Trapnell, which offered space for Shamdin to walk into the frame and lead us toward the elevator. Even though my peripheral vision allowed me to see her coming, I had to maintain a heightened patience until the camera saw her. These sequences of nonverbal cueing allowed the components of the choreography to unfold. A sustained awareness of these exchanges between bodies was the means by which I was able to carry out the choreography, and how the group came to understand the work collectively.

As a performer in this piece, my body was highly engaged in this work. In test runs, I noticed the sound of my own footsteps was very loud, which I considered to be distracting. For the final filming attempts, I took my shoes off and walked the choreographic track in my socks. With this change, I found a sense of grounding throughout the space. Additionally, I would like to note the non-normative bodily practices that I engaged with as a videographer because of my dancing body’s history. In the case of tracking Bouck’s swaying movement on the outside deck, the camera had to be low to the ground and shift from left to right. I would assume most videographers would capture such a moment by lowering the camera with their upper body and using their arms to shift from side to side. My approach to this method was to plié in a broad and low, turned out second position, while shifting my weight between my feet and keeping the camera tight to my core. In the same way many dance techniques feature suspended weight baring partnerships, where bodies find moments of levitation through the close proximal relationship to another’s support, I stabilized my equipment with a careful closeness to my body’s center. In these ways, modes of my choice making became expanded through the acculturation of my body. Repetition of these tactics resulted in my unique choreographies of the camera.

Larger Scope of Choreography and Spectatorship

From my perspective, the beauty of this piece is in the considerations outside of what the spectator sees in the film. The choreographic choices included movement and events happening outside of the frame. This required me to stage transitions to define a dancer’s track through the full shoot: from when they leave the frame, to how they stay out of the frame, to where they go to set up for their next entrance back into the frame. These considerations went into the building process of the full sequence. Problem solving, like how Shamdin would open the door for Trapnell without being seen, became one major methodology in this structure process. Choreographing the behind-the-scenes happenings was equally considered in my choice-making. The timing of danced movement, pedestrian movement, movement of the camera, and movement of the set were factors in this discovery process. When I ran into an issue, I first proposed a solution, and then ran through the unseen transitions and labor to make the solution achievable.

The only behind-the-scenes choreography that does not line up is Shamdin ending at the top of the stairs if we were to set up for a second loop through the track. For the purposes of this project, I ended the footage at this point and crossfaded with the beginning to make a perfect loop. I will say the perfect loop was not the intention of the work and I would like to acknowledge this as an advisement proposal that I was not interested in immediately. After sitting with the idea and allowing the possibility into my process, it became one of my favorite aspects of the work. Also notable would be the consideration, if it were an original intention, to have the ending choreography account for Shamdin’s reappearance at the bottom of the stairs.

As part of my initial proposal, I wanted to invite an audience to attend the filming. This would hold the intention of risk accountable and I wanted to consider what a live experience of this work might be. If a spectator were watching this piece being filmed, they would be witnessing the behind-the-scenes choreography of the work - like the audience seeing choreography of a quick change in the wings. The spectator has a wide range of perspective choices when watching the work being filmed. I wondered how this might relate or contrast to the viewing of the work through a screen, which has a clear, decided perspective choice made for the viewer. What knowledge would the spectator gain by viewing the work from behind-the-scenes before seeing it on screen. Does this change their relationship to the film on screen? Alternatively, if the spectator watches the film first, what curiosities do they bring to the live viewing? Are questions answered within their live viewing experience?

The Essence of Live Performance

There is an assumption in screendance that perfection can be achieved through re-filming and editing. So, artists working in this medium strive to achieve this perfection. This project sought to ask what happens when we look at the filming of dance as a live performance whose spectator is the camera lens? Through this framing, I found the value of perfectionism to lessen in comparison to the value of completing the performance.

I am not saying my filming process did not have trial upon trial to achieve a “perfect” single-shot film, because we did try many times. However, when we finished the take that became the final version, there was a mutual agreement among us that the performance was above the other attempts. We sat down to review the footage before investing our emotions into a completed mission. While reviewing the footage, I noticed moments of hiccups that could lead to the idea of an imperfect take. I found myself in negotiation between the achievability of perfection and achieving the goal of a completed single-shot film. When a hiccup was presented, I asked myself what is the value of this hiccup in relation to the full film? I determined these hiccups had similar ephemeral value to concert dance and live performance. There was an opportunity to re-film this and buff out the rough areas. But was this an opportunity to be presented with new, different hiccups?

The residual feeling among the five of us in this filming process was referenced to “as stressful, adrenaline pumping, and exciting as performing a live work on stage in front of an audience.” I believe this is due to the risk that was established throughout the process. Once the camera was rolling, the show had to go on. If we messed up and called it quits for that attempt, the take felt wasted. It would never been seen by audience, never viewed as archive, never edited into the final work as a *good clip*. The performance delivered was gone.

Ephemeral Components

While considering the labor behind screendance, it is important to note the uncontrollable recapitulation of labor due to the desire of perfection. This perfectionism is most traditionally achieved by screendance’s ability to refilm and edit out the imperfect. In the case made above, the footage from ‘failed’ takes could have been used by editing out the bad and keeping the good. However, this project’s intention is rooted in avoiding that ability. By doing this it places more value on the ephemeral nature of live performance.

In this project’s proposal, I wanted to film this work with a live audience present. I was interested in the accountability, the unseen labor, and the choreographic tracks of individuals and architecture outside of the camera’s frame. Considering a live audience as a source of accountability – this intention would hold true. In this method of production, the value of the live audience would be higher than the final filmed version. The stigma of “whatever happens, happens,” would be embodied and the final film would include mistakes and unplanned moments. Due to protocols surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, this aspect of the process was not able to be realized. However, the hiccups that are now engrained in the final film still hold this ephemeral value.

Conclusion

I set out to create a screendance that is filmed in a single shot; establish risk and ephemeral qualities in filmed dance; and focus on influence of instigation in dance and film. I believe I did that. However, I never predicted that I would receive this level of investment within the process. I am proud of this work and excited by the process and the product. I find myself wanting to invest in this research and methodology more in the future, potentially as a series of investigations. This work has developed some interesting groundwork as I prepare for my thesis next year. I conclude this project with the feelings of satisfaction and gratefulness.

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Cited

Oxford University Press. The Oxford American College Dictionary. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2002.