

## **Dance Behind the Screen in the Social Media Era: Saying NO to the BOX with the kNOwBOX dance Film Festival**

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### **Abstract:**

kNOwBOX dance is a female founded digital dance company co-created in 2018. Later, the kNOwBOX Film Festival (NBFF) was founded in 2019. NBFF screens national and international dance films that challenge the possibilities of what dance can look like in video form. These films are curated by the kNOwBOX dance team and an international jury of award-winning filmmakers. NBFF presents multi-country live premier events followed by a screening tour. Screening venues have included Quadrivia Cholula in Puebla, México, Arts Mission Oak Cliff in Dallas, Texas, USA, Emu Artspace in Seoul, South Korea, Tin Star Theater in Dallas, Texas, USA, among other spaces both on and offline. kNOwBOX dance and the kNOwBOX Film Festival say “NO to the BOX” and seek to make, share, and connect dance-related resources and people. This chapter traces the creation and development of a dance film festival in the social media era, the impacts of a worldwide pandemic on the 2020 kNOwBOX Film Festival, digital space and trans geographical connections, women and BIPOC voices, support for artists, and audience participation. This chapter looks behind the screen of the kNOwBOX dance Film Festival and invites readers to consider the value of fostering relationships and opportunities for artists, their works, and audiences both on and offline.



## WHO IS kNOWBOX DANCE - @knowboxdance

kNOWBOX dance is a 501(c)(3) non-profit arts service organization that creates, collaborates, and discusses art with artists and the public. Through its programs, kNOWBOX dance seeks to present and engage dance-related art. As capitalized in their name - kNOWBOX dance seeks to say NO to the BOX. NB believes “that by going outside of any four cornered box they can empower dancers and creators across the globe” (“About”, 2021). kNOWBOX dance unites and empowers artists at any stage of their craft by highlighting voices from diverse backgrounds, providing educational resources, and offering opportunities for art-making and sharing.

Programming includes *Dance Behind the Screen Podcast* (DBS), *kNOWBOX dance Film Festival* (NBFF), *mixtamotus* interdisciplinary live performances and workshops, and other presentations/collaborations. kNOWBOX dance is a female-founded digital dance organization co-created in 2018 by Martheya Nygaard and YeaJean Choi. YeaJean, originally from Seoul, South Korea and Martheya, from Dallas, Texas, USA met at Texas Woman’s University while earning their Master of Fine Arts in Dance. This is where their interest in the intersection of using technology – specifically the digital space as a unique way to generate new possibilities for art making and sharing – began. Nygaard and Choi, in creating kNOWBOX dance, sought to answer the question: How can artists have access to stay connected, make new work, and share work globally? The answer to their question was centering technology and uniting and empowering dancers and creators across the digital space.

The team later expanded and fellow TWU Dance alumni Azaria Hogans and Reyna Mondragon joined as *Dance Behind the Screen* podcast co-hosts as well as the Board of Directors. Having all attended graduate school together, they later found themselves spread across the globe and took it as an opportunity to optimize their differences in geographical locations by finding guests from across the country and the world for the podcast and hosting the kNOWBOX dance Film Festival in different countries simultaneously. Underpinning all kNOWBOX dance programming is the value of fostering relationships and opportunities for artists, their works, and audiences both on and offline.

NB presents *Dance Behind the Screen* (DBS), a podcast that supports global connections and conversations related to dance in the audio space. This dance-focused show offers a unique counterpart to the film festival as it provides a platform for NBFF awarded filmmakers to share more about their film and creative practices with an expanded audience. The DBS podcast explores collaboration and curiosity to uplift the voices of dancers and creators from different backgrounds, cultures, and languages. DBS provides a never-before-heard gathering of prominent thought-leaders and creators in the dance world, all in one place, to help the listener think outside of the box. NB describes their podcast as “a conversation series with people who have dance-related careers questioning the influence of social media in dance process, production, and publicity in order to make dance education accessible to people everywhere” (“About”, 2021). DBS was launched in March of 2018 and shares new episodes regularly. The podcast has featured interviews with award-winning filmmakers and dance makers such as: Roxana Barba, Andrew Chapman, Emma Cianchi, Kelly Hargraves, Jacob Jonas, Antoine Panier, and André M. Zachery to name a few. NB programming also includes our blog archive, *mixtamotus* – a Dallas-based human-digital interface art exploration–live performances and workshops, and other presentations/collaborations.

The *kNOwBOX dance Film Festival* (NBFF) is an independent, international film festival. The mission for the NBFF is to curate dance films that explore an innovative approach to challenging the possibilities of what dance can look like in video form. The festival is a multilingual (English, Spanish, Korean) festival that is held simultaneously in Mexico, South Korea, The United States of America, and online, along with Pop-Up touring events. The *kNOwBOX dance Film Festival* was founded in 2019. From its inception, kNOwBOX dance has created enriching digitally-focused opportunities for celebrating arts and culture at the local, national, and international scale. Prior to the independent *kNOwBOX dance Film Festival*, the co-creators curated and served as creative collaborators for founding the Dallas Dance Film Festival in partnership with the Dance Council of North Texas in 2018. The Dallas Dance Film Festival and NB team recognized the need for more digital dance exposure and support for emerging and professional dance filmmakers in Dallas, Texas, USA. *Dance! North Texas* magazine wrote, “kNOwBOX serves as an exciting example of the collaborative processes that are being seen more and more in content creation, while leveraging the internet as a way to form connections” (2018, 5). The next year, in 2019, kNOwBOX dance decided to strike out on their own and develop their own dance film festival in order to serve a larger community. In creating their own independent film festival, NB focused on how to further develop best practices that center the filmmaker, such as paying honorariums to the artists. The NB team believes experiencing art – and more specifically experiencing art via dance and film – creates opportunities for understanding other perspectives.

The NBFF criteria for jury selection considers key elements including advanced knowledge in dance and filmmaking, the ability to offer unique perspectives based on individual creative practices, and inclusive representation of a wide range of abilities, cultural backgrounds, dance forms, genders, geographic locations, identities, and/or races. It is imperative to address the topic of equality in dance in the digital space as it is both a relevant and pressing issue in the current social and political climate (e.g. #BlackLivesMatter, #StopAAPIHate #Pride, etc.). From the inception of the camera, underrepresented groups have been ever-present though not always afforded the privilege to be in the forefront of these digital movements. Often overlooked, underrepresented, or uncredited, these groups have traversed the screen as directors, editors, choreographers, and performers. In the process of examining and curating, NB finds it important to acknowledge concepts of access, inclusion, power, and race in order to not reinforce some of the same structures of oppression (i.e., ableism, objectification of womxn/womyn, primitivism of people of color, the male gaze, etc.); thus, writing a more equitable future history. In order to facilitate this vision, the NB team recognized it would require diverse voices rooted in multifaceted experiences and emphasized the importance of selecting a guest jury panel in conjunction with the NB team jury. The films received are often reflective of experiences of people from all walks of life.

In addition to selecting jurors based on their contributions to the field, NBFF invites the “Visionary Award” recipient (the previous NBFF awardee) to be on the jury for the festival the following year. NBFF contributes to the development of the art world by presenting dance-related films in many ways including the following:

1. NBFF centers the filmmaker throughout all levels of producing the festival. The festival offers affordable and accessible ways for filmmakers to submit in various categories via FilmFreeway. NBFF provides social media and website features that highlight the official selection across online platforms with extended reach. Awards are then delivered to selected

filmmakers. These awards include monetary stipends, laurels, multilingual transcriptions, and interviews on the Dance Behind the Screen podcast. The festival provides encouraging feedback (upon request) to filmmakers whose works were not selected.

2. NBFF facilitates opportunities for interested artists to be involved in the festival as guest curators by serving as a compensated jury panelist, hosting the NBFF Pop-Up tours (as a location host), or participating in festival receptions.

3. NBFF highlights and encourages audiences to connect with the filmmakers by including their social media handles in the program, hosting #MEETTHEMAKERS (a free behind the screen conversation with the filmmakers), and the NBFF Pop-Up tours which brings the festival to various communities all over the world.

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Social media platforms such as Facebook (2004), Vimeo (2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006), Pinterest (2010), and blog sites have been social networking and community gathering spaces since public access in the early two-thousands, and more recently platforms such as Instagram (2010), WeChat (2011), and TikTok (2020), have increased users' dependency on social networking for human connection. Similarly, organizations and event marketing strategies rely heavily on social media to reach artists and audiences. In 2020, the influx of dance offerings shifted to predominantly online programming for peak community engagement during the pandemic. As an experiment for connection and hope during COVID-19, kNOwBOX dance created the *kNOwBOX dance Summer Short Series* (NBSSS). This mini online festival was created in order to engage audiences at home through the social media channels of Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube in spite of people being confined to their homes. The parameters for the *kNOwBOX dance Summer Short Series* were to invite artists to submit sixty-second dance films. These films were optimal for sharing on social media due to the ease in uploading short-form videos and meeting platform specifications. The conceptual theme for NBSSS was "Connection." Connection included interpretations of finding relationships between sight, sound, and movement as well as bringing together people who were feeling discouraged because of the influx of bad news and the virus circulating globally.

NB wanted to expand the jury outside of the NB team and reinforce their value of diverse voices and expertise for dance in the digital space for NBSSS. NB invited Joy-Marie Thompson, a self-described "dancer, movement practitioner, and certified ANIMAL FLOW© instructor based in Osage Land, otherwise known as Pittsburgh, PA" ("Home", n.p.), to the NBSSS jury. She founded @issadancelook, an Instagram account with nearly five-thousand followers and has created many award-winning dance films. Thompson's combined social media savvy and filmmaking expertise supported the online festival and the filmmakers. NBSSS featured her co-created film "LINKt," "a dance short film about the relationship between a Black woman and a white woman" ("About", 2021) as the finale to the free online social media screening.

NBSSS received submissions from thirty different countries and the jury selected eight dance films of both national and international filmmakers from Iceland, Mexico, South Africa, and the United States. These films were a representation of the worldwide events of 2020. In a similar vein to the NBFF #MEETTHEMAKERS, NB facilitated a Q&A on Instagram Live with the selected filmmakers

and jury panelist Joy-Marie Thompson. Proceeds made from film submissions were donated to the Artist Relief Tree in an effort to financially support artists who were affected by cancellations due to COVID-19.



Image 1: Scan the QR code for access to the promotional video, artist profiles, and learn more about the jury panel

NBSSS Juror Joy-Marie Thompson states in correspondence with kNOwBOX dance: “kNOwBOX dance provided me a space to share work when I thought all options went out the window due to COVID-19. They managed to build a supportive platform for dance artists during an emergent time and it's inspiring to witness.”

The impacts of COVID-19 have been complicated and far-reaching especially for those in the performing arts. After deep consideration and caution with regard to the worldwide pandemic, kNOwBOX dance felt the need to continue with live screenings of the *kNOwBOX dance Film Festival* in 2020. They imagined a safe way to come together and enjoy the creative works and voices of national and international artists. To bring this idea to life, the *kNOwBOX dance Film Festival* offered a drive-in screening at the Tin Star Theater in Dallas, Texas, USA and a socially distanced intimate screening at emuARTSPACE in Seoul, South Korea. As an additional benefit in producing the festival, kNOwBOX dance provided jobs for local musicians, photographers, and technicians, many of which experienced loss of work because of the pandemic.

In hosting a live event during the pandemic, safety for all was a priority. In Dallas, Texas, USA, the drive-in Tin Star Theater was an ideal site for the festival in order to follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s recommendations. The Tin Star Theater team, under the direction of Nolan DeMarco McGahan, offered experience and expertise for executing this event at the drive-in theater. In this format, audiences could stay socially distant from the comfort of their cars, enjoy the nostalgia of a drive-in experience, and synchronously connect with the community by attending a live event. Audiences not only tuned into the radio for the sound of the films, but also had the opportunity to enjoy live music from a local musician.



Image 2: kNowBOX dance Film Festival 2020 Drive-In Screening, Credit: Corey Haynes

On the other side of the world, the *kNowBOX dance Film Festival* had a South Korea premiere at emuARTSPACE. emuARTSPACE is an arts and culture complex that includes an art gallery, performance hall, book cafe, cinemas, and a roof garden. Located in the center of Seoul, this venue was conducive for NBFF 2020 for many reasons such as the cinema being well versed in safety protocols for audience members and offering large spaces to maneuver safely before and after the screening. This intimate cinema offered a suitable place to invite a small socially distanced audience to gather in person while following COVID-19 social distancing regulations in South Korea.

emuARTSPACE is recognized as a supportive cultural center for audiences and creators where they share mainstream and art movie screenings. While emuARTSPACE has screened movies such as Academy Award Best Picture Film, *Parasite* (2019), this was the first time dance films were screened in this cinema. Sang-min Kim the CEO of emuARTSPACE said, “It was a precious time to watch international dance films which is not an opportunity that is easily available in Seoul. It was impressive how kNowBOX dance prepared for this festival and I am looking forward to the next step of this company.” The screening of NBFF was relevant to both emuARTSPACE and the Seoul community due to the discourse of topics explored in the films. NBFF Co-Creator and location host, YeaJean Choi expressed, “the issue of racial discrimination through dance film is a topic not often seen or discussed in South Korea.”



Image 3: kNOwBOX dance Film Festival 2020 emuARTSPACE Screening, Credit: Jung Yoon Choi

Audience member HyunSang Chang states to kNOwBOX dance: “성지순례 [which means Pilgrimage in English] was a very memorable dance film which shows the journey of day to night through dance with singing. The director’s intention was delivered very well through body, costumes, scenery and sound, and it gave me time to think about the way to create the beautiful story beyond texts.

The NBFF 2020 received over one hundred and forty-five submissions from thirty different countries, and the official selection featured twenty international dance films from Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Romania, Scotland, South Korea, The Netherlands, and The United States. NBFF 2020 films responded to the call for submissions in creative and powerful ways amidst the uncertainty related to COVID-19 by evoking hope for humanity, arts, dance and film, and the future. These films were poignant and presented an engaging experience for viewers familiar and new to dance film.





Image 4: kNOwBOX dance Film Festival Logo



## NEXT STEPS FOR EXPANDING POSSIBILITIES OF NBFF

With the onset of a global pandemic in 2020, most of the dance world was forced to flock to the digital space in order to maintain connection and keep creating. With the fast-paced and evolving nature of research on technology and the digital landscape, the ability to connect trans-geographically continues to climb. Rapid innovations in technology and the World Wide Web have influenced dependency on digital tools as a primary form of human function, productivity, and connection. Digital dance can be framed as a category where dance is generated, stored, or processed via screens or the World Wide Web regardless of geographical boundaries.

The digital space is charged with a multitude of positive and negative forces including collaboration, cultural appropriation, matters of accessibility, media prowess, misinformation, misrepresentation, networking, political and monetary power, racism, sexism, and platforms for artistic creation. The art of dance on film provides artists, curators, and audiences opportunities to engage with various representations of dance in relation to a multiplicity of topical discourses. Dance film festivals can provide opportunities and cultural exchange between creators, venues, and audiences, while also supporting the growth of a cultural ecosystem. The kNOwBOX dance organization is dedicated to creating a more equitable and inclusive dance field for all by fostering trans-geographical networking, highlighting diverse and underrepresented voices (e.g., Black, indigenous, people of color, LGBTQIA+, people with disabilities, and women), creating opportunities for artists, and engaging audiences both on and offline via their programming.

As kNOwBOX dance looks towards the future, the festival plans to continue to hold simultaneous festivals in many countries and show dance films in diverse and experimental venues in order to expand the flexibility and creativity of curating an international dance film festival. kNOwBOX dance and the *kNOwBOX dance Film Festival* were able to overcome and acknowledge the hurdles around community gathering even in the face of a pandemic. The pandemic simply exposed the quintessential importance of community organizing and bringing people together both in person and online. This community engagement allows the maintenance of long lasting and meaningful connections for not only dance on and behind the screen, but also basic human survival and wellbeing. While the pandemic was not ideal, it enabled many dance organizations to consider optimizing social and digital media practices to further engage with artists and audiences in the social media era. The dance community also had to grapple with the loss of live performances and events, which was devastating for all involved. However, moving forward, dance organizations can choose to explore social media practices, interactive experiences, and other multimedia and interdisciplinary formats to create new possibilities for dance. The next step for NBFF is refining the interconnectedness of these two modes – digital and face-to-face—to be able to reach people where they are and keep the appreciation of dance alive. By saying “NO” to the boxes of limitations, boundaries, and confines that limit connection, they enable themselves to say “YES” to fostering innovative possibilities, facilitating trans-geographical connections, supporting artists and audiences, and highlighting underrepresented and diverse voices.

**End Note:** This paper was originally written in 2020. Since then, kNOwBOX dance has undergone significant growth and transformation. Our mission, vision, and programming have evolved to further center dance artists, embrace technology, and expand our global reach. Through our continued work in film festivals, podcasts, and international collaborations, we remain dedicated to pushing the boundaries of dance and fostering a more inclusive and innovative future for the art form.

## REFERENCES

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